

Author Talks: Vanessa Bohns on our hidden potential to persuade

Social psychologist Vanessa Bohns discusses why failing to recognize our ability to influence can lead us to miss opportunities or misuse power.



In this edition of *Author Talks*, McKinsey's Eleni Kostopoulos chats with Vanessa Bohns, a professor of organizational behavior at Cornell University, about her book, *You Have More Influence Than You Think: How We Underestimate Our Power of Persuasion, and Why It Matters* (W. W. Norton, September 2021). The award-winning researcher and teacher offers science-based strategies for observing the effect we have on others, reconsidering our fear of rejection, and, sometimes, pulling back to use our influence less. An edited version of the conversation follows.

Why did you write this book?

If you look at the messaging on influence, you'll see that there are so many books, articles, and seminars on how to gain influence and how to get people to do what you want. And if you take that at face value, along with the popularity of that message, you would think that people are hopelessly lacking in influence. Basically, they need all these sorts of bells and whistles and training to be able to get influence. But as a social psychologist who's been studying influence for more than 15 years now, I see in my research all the time that people have tons of influence.

So I really wanted to write a book that reflected that piece. I like to think of it as a sort of influence audit. And it's showing all the influence that we have but fail to see and the blind spot that we have for that influence.

I talk about the cognitive biases that lead us to overlook the extent to which people notice us, listen to what we have to say, and will do things for us. The basic idea is to make people more mindful of the influence they have already, before they start seeking to gain influence.

Was there anything that surprised you in the research, writing, or response?

This whole book is an account of all the things that have surprised me in my research over the years. My collaborators and I typically come up with these experimental paradigms where we have our participants go out and try to influence people in different ways.

And each time we design a new paradigm, we say to ourselves, there's no way our participants are going to get people to do this. For example, we've had participants ask people for pretty big favors. We've had participants ask other strangers to lie for them or vandalize library books.

And each time we come up with this task, we say, "I bet nobody's going to do this." But our participants go out, and they make these requests, and it turns out that just by asking, you can make it hard for people to say no, so they wind up doing these things much more frequently than our participants think and much more frequently than we ever think. So that's been incredibly surprising, time after time.

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Let go of your inner Mr. Magoo

How are we like Mr. Magoo?

Mr. Magoo is a cartoon character from back in the '40s or '50s, and he walks through life not paying attention to the impact he has on anybody else. He refuses to wear his glasses, he's incredibly near-sighted, and when he walks through these scenes, everybody in the room turns to focus on him, and he causes all sorts of chaos. And he never has any idea that he's the one causing all this chaos.

To a large extent—as I talk about in the book—this reflects how we are as well. This blind spot we have for our own influence makes us all a little bit like Mr. Magoo. We walk through our lives, and we don't realize how many people notice us and, because they notice us, how many people might imitate our behavior, or change their behavior because of something we did or said. And so we also have this sense of obliviousness at times about the trail of chaos or trail of positivity that we leave behind us.

What are the risks of being either overconfident or underconfident, and how can we strike a balance?

One of the interesting things that research shows is that we're overconfident in a lot of ways. We think that we're smarter than the average person; we think that we're more moral than the average person. But more recent research shows that we actually tend to be underconfident in a lot of other ways.

And this tends to be about things like winning friends and influencing people. We tend to be underconfident in these more interpersonal domains. That can lead to people who are super overconfident in what they believe—because they think they're smart, and they think that they're moral, and they know what's right—but really underconfident in whether other people will actually buy what they believe, and whether they can actually sell it to them.

So, in the end, that combination of things can lead people to shout and to be overly aggressive because they're so confident in what they believe that they think that they really have to shout to get people to believe it as well.

How does this apply to workplace dynamics?

A lot of research shows that people in power are particularly bad at taking the perspective of people who are in a lower power position from them.

If you have power, you don't need to understand what's going on in the heads of people who don't have power, as much as the reverse relationship. Because you just don't need them as much to get ahead and to make things happen. So when you're in a position of power, you tend not to put yourself in the other person's perspective.

That means that if I'm someone's boss and I ask them on a date, or I ask them to do something unethical or something they feel uncomfortable with, or even if I just ask them to stay late at work or to work over the weekend, or something they really would rather not do—I may think that they'll just say no if they don't want to do that. And we fail, when we're in that position, to put ourselves in the heads of the other person, to take that person's perspective and realize they're not going to say no to you, because you're their boss.

So even if they really don't want to go on a date with you, or do this unethical thing, or work on the weekend, they're going to find it really hard to say no, and you may never actually realize that.

You're not as invisible as you think

How can people get out of their own way?

When I feel particularly invisible or ineffective, or I worry about asking someone for something because I think that they might say no, or I walk out of a meeting feeling like I made some sort of gaffe or said something stupid, I've always comforted myself with the research that's out there.

The research shows that people are paying attention to you more than you realize, that you're not invisible—that you're actually more effective than you think and that people are more willing to do things for you than you think. And we're a lot harder on ourselves when we evaluate an interaction after it happens than other people tend to be.

‘In many cases, you’re being harder on yourself than you really need to be, and no one else is being as hard on you as you’re being on yourself.’

So what I’ve always done in those moments is remind myself that I’m probably being harder on myself than other people are being on me. One thing that I really hope that people take from this book is that same sense of comfort, that, in many cases, you’re being harder on yourself than you really need to be, and no one else is being as hard on you as you’re being on yourself. And then the other piece is to be more mindful of the influence that we have. Because if that’s true, if people will do things for us more than we realize, if we’re more effective than we realize, if people are paying attention to us more—even if we feel like the little guy—then I think all of us try to make that a positive influence.

Is there anything dangerous about not recognizing how much influence we have over others?

The book really has sort of two stories. One is this happy story, which is that we have more influence than we think, and that should make us all more confident when we ask for things. But the same dynamics that make us underestimate our positive influence also have this dark side, which really speaks to a lot of what we see these days.

For example, it speaks to aspects of the #MeToo movement, where people really don’t realize how their comments, their requests, and things like that might be perceived by other people and how their words might impact other people.

It also speaks to the cacophony of voices that we see and all the shouting that we see in today’s discourse. Because a lot of the time, people shout because they feel like they’re not being heard, and they feel like they’re speaking into the void.

One thing that my book talks about is not only gaining influence and using influence when you have it but also recognizing when maybe you should just pull back. Maybe you should be a little bit more gentle in a situation. Maybe you shouldn’t make that request.

And it’s pretty rare to see that sort of message in the influence landscape. That actually, you don’t always need to use your influence. Sometimes knowing that you have it should make you think twice and kind of take a step back.

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