

Takeaways

- * If your presentation involves decision-making, send out a handout ahead of time that has the relevant information you are going to discuss.
- * Ask people to rate how confident they are in their decision before they show that decision to others. Do this by including an activity in your presentation where they indicate their decision and how confident they are in it.
- * Once opinion-sharing starts, make sure people have enough time to discuss their disagreements. Save one-third of your overall presentation time for discussion and deciding.

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PEOPLE ARE SWAYED BY A DOMINANT PERSONALITY

Anyone who has made a decision in a group or facilitated a focus group has had the experience of seeing and hearing a dominant member of the group monopolize the conversation and the decision. Just because decisions are made in a group setting doesn't mean that the entire group really made the decision. Many people give up in the presence of one or more dominant group members and may not speak up at all.

WHY DOES THE LEADER BECOME THE LEADER?

Cameron Anderson and Gavin Kilduff (2009) researched group decision-making. They formed groups of four students each and had them solve math problems from the GMAT (a standardized test for admission to graduate business school programs). Using standardized math problems allowed the researchers to evaluate how well the group solved the problems they were given. It also allowed them to compare each member's competence by looking at their previous SAT math scores from their undergraduate admission to college.

During the problem-solving session the researchers videotaped the group conversations and reviewed them later to decide who was the leader of each group. They had multiple sets of observers view the videos to see if there was consensus about who the leaders were. They also asked the people in the groups to identify the leader of their group. Everyone agreed on who the leader was in each group.

Anderson and Kilduff were interested in why the leaders became the leaders. Before the groups started, everyone filled out a questionnaire to measure their level of dominance. As you might imagine, the leaders all scored high on the dominance measure. But that still doesn't suggest how they became leaders. Did they have the best math SAT scores? (No.) Did they bully everyone else into letting them be the leader? (No.)

The answer surprised the researchers: The leaders spoke first. For 94 percent of the problems, the group's final answer was the first answer that was proposed, and the people with the dominant personalities always spoke first.

WHAT IF YOU AREN'T THE DOMINANT PERSONALITY?

I learned the hard way what happens when you are the presenter but there is someone even more dominant than you in the room.

I was supposed to lead a 2-hour presentation for a small team of consultants. I arrived early, with my presentation all prepared. One of the first activities I had planned was for each person there to briefly share recent projects they had completed. I had asked them to come prepared with a short presentation.

I turned to the person on my left, a powerful vice president at the company, and asked if he would like to start. He attached the projector cord and proceeded to show pictures of a few of the other people in the room that he had taken off the Web, complete with goofy captions that he had written. After that he gave an hour's presentation on the work he had been doing, leaving very little time for the rest of the people to present, much less for the rest of my planned presentation.

It's not always easy to stay in charge of the presentation. Here are some of the lessons I learned from that experience, which you might be able to learn from too:

- ★ Never hand over the control of the presentation to someone else unless you don't intend to get it back. If you allow other people to present, make sure you are through with your presentation before you hand over the controls.
- ★ If other people are supposed to present, ask them to send you their slides, comments, or outline ahead of time. Discuss with them how long you have allotted for them to speak and get their agreement that that amount of time will work for them.
- ★ If you know the people who will be attending the presentation, don't start with the most dominant person. Remember that the person who talks first has a lot of power.
- ★ The higher in the organization people are, the shorter their attention spans. Do not plan long sessions where you expect high-level dominant people to sit quietly.
- ★ It doesn't matter if you are not naturally a dominant personality, or if there is someone in the room more dominant than you. If you are the presenter, you need to speak up first so that you can take a leadership role.

Takeaways

- * If you are the presenter, then you have automatic leadership, assuming you are speaking first.
- * If you are speaking on a panel or there are other speakers, ask to be the first speaker on the docket.
- * If you are asking other people to participate, be specific about what you expect from them and get their slides, handouts, or outline ahead of time.
- * If there are other dominant personalities present, don't hand them control of the meeting right away.
- * Don't expect high-level dominant people to sit quietly for more than 5 to 10 minutes.

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WHEN PEOPLE ARE UNCERTAIN, THEY LOOK TO OTHERS TO DECIDE WHAT TO DO

Has this ever happened to you? You are making a presentation at the end of which you will be asking people to decide on a plan of action. You've talked individually to all the participants ahead of time, and consensus is that people want to move ahead with the decision to act. You give your presentation, and then the discussion about the decision ensues. To your surprise, the group ends up deciding not to make a decision or take an action at this time. What happened?

UNCERTAINTY TIPS THE SCALE

In my book *Neuro Web Design: What Makes Them Click?*, I talk about the tendency to look to others to decide what to do. It's called *social validation*.

Bibb Latane and John Darley (1970) conducted research in which they set up ambiguous situations to see if people were affected by what others around them were or were not doing. Participants in the research would go into a room, supposedly to fill out a survey on creativity. In the room would be one or more other people, pretending they were also participants, but who were really part of the experiment. Sometimes there would be one other person in the room, sometimes more. While people were filling out their creativity survey, smoke would start to come into the room from an air vent. Would the participant leave the room? Go tell someone about the smoke? Just ignore it?

PEOPLE TAKE ACTION ONLY IF OTHERS TAKE ACTION

What action, if any, the participant took depended on the behavior of the other people in the room, as well as how many other people there were. The more people, and the more the others ignored the smoke, the more the participant was likely to do nothing. If the participant was alone, he or she would leave the room and notify someone. But if there were others in the room and they didn't react, then the participant would do nothing.

PHRASING MATTERS

Because people tend to do what others do, the way you word possible decisions makes a big difference. Let's say you are giving a presentation on why you shouldn't smoke cigarettes. You could say:

"In 2009, 20.6 percent of US adults 18 or over were cigarette smokers."

Or you could say:

“In 2009, 79.4 percent of US adults 18 or over did *not* smoke cigarettes.”

The latter statement would be more influential in getting people to stop smoking or not start, because it implies that most people don't smoke.

Takeaways

- * People are very influenced by others' opinions and behaviors, especially when they are uncertain. Let your audience know what others are doing or deciding if you want them to decide to take the same action.
- * The wording you use in your presentation is important. “70% of people don't litter” is not the same as saying “30% of people litter.” Whatever you tell them that most other people are doing is what will stick and influence.

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PEOPLE THINK OTHERS ARE MORE EASILY INFLUENCED THAN THEY THEMSELVES ARE

When I discuss the research on social validation (see #93) everyone in the room nods and talks about how this is true, that other people are very influenced by what others are doing, but most people I speak to think that they themselves are not very affected. I talk about how much we are affected by pictures, images, and words, and that we don't realize we're being influenced. And the reaction is always similar: “Yes, other people are affected by these things, but I am not.”

THE THIRD-PERSON EFFECT

In fact, this belief that “others are affected but not me” is so common that there is research on it, and it has its own name: the *third-person effect*. The research shows that most people think others are influenced by persuasive messages but that they themselves are not. The research also shows that this perception is false. The third-person effect seems to be especially true if you think you aren't interested in the topic. For example, if you are not currently in the market to buy a new TV, then you will tend to think that advertising about new TVs won't affect you, but the research says that it will.

WHY DO PEOPLE DECEIVE THEMSELVES THIS WAY?

Why the self-deception? It's partly because all this influence is happening unconsciously. People are literally unaware that they're being influenced. And it's also partly because people don't like to think of themselves as easily swayed or as gullible. To be gullible is to not be in control, and the old brain—the part that is concerned with survival—always wants to be in control.

DON'T GIVE UP ON YOUR PLAN TO PERSUADE

Have you ever had people come up to you before you start a presentation and say, “There might be people here who aren't familiar with your topic, but I think many people are like me—we're already familiar with the material” or “We've already made up our minds.” Of course it's possible that these statements are true, but it is also likely that the individual, and the group, is not as knowledgeable or as resistant to influence as they say they are. If you've “done your homework” about your audience, don't abandon your