

**Moments of Persuasive Power:
*Lessons from the guru of social influence***

For me, the general-session, keynote presentation by Dr. Robert Cialdini, titled “Influence,” was the highlight of the recent 2008 PDC of the American Society of Safety Engineers (ASSE). Of course, I had high expectations for this session because I’ve followed Dr. Cialdini’s research and scholarship for more than 30 years, and have used his classic book, *Influence: Science and Practice* in my social psychology classes.

What would the guru of social influence choose to present in a 45-minute keynote to an audience of safety leaders? The answer to this question is reviewed here

The Six Social Influence Principles

<Insert Table 1 About Here>

Saying his talk would be about persuasion, Dr. Cialdini defined the six influence principles listed in Table 1, and then focused on three: scarcity, authority, and consensus. My ISHN contributions in February 1995 and January 1996 introduced three influence principles (i.e., consensus, authority, and consistency) and linked these to the human dynamics of injury prevention.

The Value of Scarcity

Simply put, the value of things increases with perceived scarcity. For example, some sports fans camp out all night at a stadium ticket office to purchase limited front-row seats; shoppers jam into a crowded department store to take advantage of a “limited-time” bargain; and bidders at an auction pay exorbitant sums to own a one-of-a-kind “collectable”.

Dr. Cialdini claimed, “People are more mobilized by realizing what they will lose than what they might gain.” He supported this assertion with research and real-world stories. In one

study, homeowners received an energy audit and then a list of conservation strategies. Half of the residents were told they would gain an average of 75¢ per day if they followed the advice, while the others were informed they'd lose 75¢ per day if they did not make the recommended alterations. Follow-up audits indicated those with the loss-control message made significantly more changes than those with the achievement message.

Some marketing companies capitalize on this persuasive technique by emphasizing what consumers will lose if they don't try their product. For example, ads for Bose sound systems carry the slogan "Hear what you've been missing"; and consultants promote their training sessions by emphasizing there are a limited number of opportunities to receive the exclusive information provided.

This latter example uses scarcity and exclusivity, a combination Cialdini claims is especially powerful. He described research to illustrate the value of making information seem not only new and scarce, but also that the recipient is among the first to acquire it. Thus, when I later signed free copies of my new book, coauthored with Bob Veazie, I said "This book contains new and original information unavailable in any other source, and you are among the very first to receive it."

The Power of Authority

From childhood on, we learn to appreciate and follow authority figures. We proceed from "mother knows best" to "the boss knows best". Cialdini emphasized we especially look to credible others for direction when we are uncertain about appropriate behavior.

Following his theme of "persuasive communication," Cialdini discussed how to deliver information that appears credible and trustworthy. An upfront display of your credentials can make you sound like a "boastful braggart." Listeners could become suspicious of your intentions

and doubt your trustworthiness. To overcome this, Cialdini recommended stating a weakness of your case first, before specifying the strengths. Thus, it's more persuasive to state, "We have a long way to go, but I feel good about our plan," instead of "I feel good about our plan, but we have a long way to go."

Dr. Cialdini supported this "disadvantage-first" approach by referring to memorable marketing slogans such as, "We are number two, but we try harder" from Avis, and "We are expensive, but you're worth it" from L'Oréal. He refers to this weakness-first technique as a "moment of persuasive power." This suggests the safety slogan, "Injury prevention requires a lot of extra effort from all of us, but we and our families are deserving of such actively caring."

The Consensus Principle

Dr. Cialdini made us aware of how we unintentionally validate undesirable behavior through activating the consensus principle in our communication. For example, what is wrong with these statements? "We must do something, because the troublesome behavior is so widespread"; "Since so many people are cheating on their taxes, the IRS will increase its auditing program"; "We must step-up our safety-awareness program because so many of our employees are not using their PPE."

When our communication implies many others are performing the undesirable target behavior, we provide a normative excuse. Cialdini supported his point by describing research that attempted to increase the number of hotel guests who reuse their towels. First, it's obvious why a request like the following will be ineffective: "Please be more environmentally responsible than most of our guests by reusing your towels."

Dr. Cialdini and his associates counted numbers of reused towels per room following a variety of persuasive messages, and found strong support for the consensus principle. Messages

that affirmed a majority of guests reused their towels affected significantly more towel reuse than did messages appealing to sustainability or cooperation. However, the most effective message was one that stated, “Most of the guests who have stayed in this room have reused their towels.”

Cialdini claimed this message was most influential because it incorporated consensus and similarity. In other words, people are more likely to conform with those who are similar to them, and personalizing the message to a particular room could suggest a degree of resemblance or similitude. While this is a viable explanation, I believe accountability was a major factor. Specifically, a message that refers to towel reuse in one’s guest room implicates a room-by-room accountability system.

People often do the right thing when they believe their individual contribution toward a worthwhile objective is counted. This is one reason behavior-based safety programs are so successful.

Relevance to Occupational Safety

Dr. Cialdini did not directly connect the three influence principles to injury prevention, beyond suggesting ways to reframe safety-related communication. However, the impact of these social influence principles on workplace safety is obvious.

First, regarding the scarcity principle, consider the following ramifications: 1) A command-and-control approach to occupational safety can make personal freedom seem scarce and thus hinder participation; 2) Program participation can be enhanced by emphasizing a rare opportunity to implement leading-edge procedures that would set positive precedence for the entire company; and 3) Use personal stories to remind people of what they could lose if they perform at-risk behavior.

The principles of authority and consensus go hand-in-hand to influence safe vs. at-risk behavior. The assumption, “I was just following orders” reflects the impact of authority, while “everyone else does it” reveals consensus. These excuses indicate the significant impact of peoples’ behavior. Indeed, setting the safe example is one critical moment of persuasive power.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Alumni Distinguished Professor, Virginia Tech
Senior Partner, Safety Performance Solutions

Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply human dynamics to industrial safety and beyond. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has published Dr. Geller’s books on People-Based Safety, including his latest: *The Courage Factor*, coauthored by Bob Veazie. For more information, please log on to www.people-based-safety.com; call SPS at 540-951-7233, or Coastal at 1-800-767-7703, ext 3313.

Table 1: The Six Social Influence Principles Identified by Dr. Robert Cialdini

1. Reciprocity – We return favors.
2. Scarcity – We value rare opportunities.
3. Authority – We follow those who are credible and trustworthy.
4. Consistency – We keep our promises.
5. Consensus – We follow the example of others.
6. Friendship/Liking – We like those who share common goals and values.