

Understanding Influence Within the Project Community

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An Online Continuing Education Course for Engineers

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Understanding Influence within a Project Community



2 PDH

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Overview

First, let me explain the big picture of our topic (emphasis by course author):

- **Influence** is *“The capacity or power of persons or things to be a compelling force or produce effects on the actions, behavior, opinions, etc., of others.”ⁱ*
- *“A **project** is a temporary group activity designed to produce a unique product, service, or result. [It is] temporary in that it has a defined beginning and end in time, and therefore defined scope and resources. And a project is unique in that it is not a routine operation, but a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal. So a project team often **includes people who do not usually work together – sometimes from different organizations and across multiple geographies.**”ⁱⁱ*

This *temporary community of people who do not usually work together* can be especially susceptible to clever application of influence by others specifically because they do not share enough common history that would tend to immunize them in more long-term settings.

This course rests on the model of a large-project* setting in which there are budget, schedule, planning, and delivery deadlines creating enormous pressures on team members every day. It is not about the typical examples of influence – i.e., who you know - but rather the more subtle situations that are around us every day and that we often overlook. Life teaches us about patterns and repetition. Those lessons provide the temptation to use mental shortcuts in familiar situations (or what we think is familiar) to act based on what we have experienced before, save a little time, and get a little more done instead of analyzing each situation as if it were never seen before.

These mental shortcuts – **if (that condition)... then (this result)** – can be helpful when we are correct but dangerous when we are wrong. We will examine many of these if-then shortcuts and help the student learn ways to recognize them to increase their project productivity while reducing their risk of project or career disaster.

*The author is using “large-project” to mean fifty or more people devoted exclusively to a single project for its duration. There is nothing magic or special about the number fifty. We simply use it as a size reference so students can view the course material from the same perspective as written the course author.

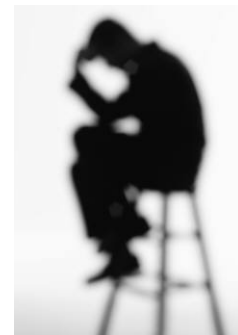
Introduction

Messages from radio, television, friends, and family bombard us daily trying to influence our behavior. These have evolved from overt attempts more than a century ago to sell strange products like lozenges that will [“kill worms in delicate children.”](#) to the iconic image of [longevity and staying power](#) – the Energizer Bunny, to more subtle suggestions appealing to [male vanity](#) via the “Marlboro Man.”

As children, our mothers tried to influence our appearance with questions like, “...*you’re not going out dressed like THAT are you?*” or urged us to not cry when we got hurt and “*to act like a big boy or girl!*” We acted differently around our friends due to the influence of peer pressure than we did at home. Now that we are adults, the subconscious influence of body language, subtle inflections in speech or cultural customs drive many of our reactions to those we encounter providing the clues we need to respond appropriately and facilitate the interactions between us.

The large-project community is a microcosm of the greater world from which we came before assignment to the project. The amplified project pressures of budget, schedule, and productivity deadlines while learning to work with strangers means that we must focus hard on maintaining sociability for project harmony while constantly exposed to behaviors, sights, or sounds that trigger automatic reactions within us that may or may not be appropriate.

The greater our awareness of the behavioral, stimulus-response triggers we encounter and the attempts by others to influence our actions, the greater the likelihood we will think before acting and then act in a way that either helps us or at least does not harm us. Collectively, the more that we can think before acting will improve the project’s overall harmony and the less career damage those actions will pose for us.



The Concept of Stimulus-Response

This course relies heavily upon the concept of stimulus-response famously identified by the Russian scientist, Ivan Pavlov. When his laboratory dogs heard a bell that signaled feeding time, they would begin to salivate as lab technicians filled their bowls with food. Soon, they associated the sound of the bell with eating and began salivating even without the food being present. They became conditioned to respond in a predictable way associated with the particular stimulusⁱⁱⁱ

As humans, we, too, are conditioned to various social stimuli and (usually) respond in a socially acceptable or predictable manner.

- A socially acceptable response is our attempt to fit in with others by acting in a manner that shows them our awareness of social customs and fitness to reside within the community.
- A socially predictable response is the attempt by others to get us to react in a predictable manner – like Pavlov’s dogs - usually to their advantage. Please note that something to their advantage does not necessarily mean it is to our disadvantage.

If someone picks up something we have dropped and hands it to us, we will demonstrate our social skills and fitness for community membership by smiling and saying, “thank you.”

If someone in a crowded elevator wants us to consider him or her as non-threatening, he or she will smile at us.

We will predictably (in most cases) smile back briefly and visibly lose a little tension in our stance or face while waiting for the doors to open.

We broadly group these stimulus-response principles into six categories:

1. **Reciprocation** – I do something first with the expectation that you will do something I want or can expect in return
2. **Consistency** – We feel a need to be perceived by others (and ourselves) as consistent and reliable in our actions.
3. **Social proof** – A means to demonstrate that our actions are aligned with the community around us or to gain insight into desired actions by observing the community around us.
4. **Affinity** – A liking of something or someone and/or a desire to be liked by others in return. A desire to ‘fit in.’

5. **Authority** – We tend to follow the directions (whether explicit or implied) of those we perceive as authority figures.
6. **Scarcity** – We tend to act more quickly if we believe the time available to act or the available stock of a product we desire is running out.^{iv}

Here are some common situations of influence that exist in many large-project settings. Remember, using these does not mean that a person is up to no good and a manipulator; it can mean they are very aware of human nature and adept at applying their influential skills to make their work a little easier. (No one ever said that project work has to be hard, it just needs to be correct, timely, and within budget.)

As we mentioned [earlier](#) about Pavlov's dogs and salivation, when a trigger event happens, there is a resulting behavior that almost always follows. When we hear our name mentioned (the trigger or cause) within the general conversational buzz of a break during a meeting, we automatically tone out all the chatter around us and focus on what the speaker says about us (the effect). When an attractive stranger smiles at us across a room (the cause), we typically smile back (the effect). This is not rocket science; it is behavior as old as humanity.



An example of someone for whom the time available will determine the scientific study. The chances for

The classical study about people waiting in line to use a copier at a library. She asked, "Excuse me, I only have five

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The simple act of asking you know the 'asker' they desire. However, know them, the **reason for doing it.**^v

people waiting in line, she asked, 60% of the time.