Defense Against the Dark Arts of Influence: Crash Course Business Soft Skills #2

Crash Course: Business - Soft Skills
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How do con artists manage to scam millions? Why do people choose to follow great leaders, or horrible ones? How do CEOs get better deals in the boardroom? Influence; it goes by a lot of names: emotional intelligence, manipulation, social skills. Influence is an important tool that drives business decisions and social interactions, but, like all those Spider-Man reboots have taught us, with great power comes great responsibility. ...Uncle Ben.

Influence has a dark side, too, and can be used to pressure people into making some pretty bad decisions. So, this is basically our "defense against the dark arts" episode. Except, instead of Avada Kedavra, we're going to fend off some "Influencias Malus," and teach you how to use influence for good.

I'm Evelyn from the Internets, and this is Crash Course Business: Soft Skills.

[Intro]

Last time, we talked about the rational reasons for trusting other people. But, you also trust people because of emotional reasons, like your gut instinct when you first meet them. Sometime, emotional cues can match up with cognitive trust. Maybe someone's giving you really bad vibes, and when you scroll down their Twitter feed, your suspicions are confirmed. I'm not about to get dragged on "Black Twitter" with you. Or, your gut might be trying to get you out of a situation that feels dangerous. In the words of My Favorite Murder, if you're freaked, pepper spray first, apologize later.

Then, there's the flip side. You might feel good about someone who turns out not to be trustworthy, that smooth-talking ex, for example, or a quirky professor who was actually hiding Voldemort on the back of his head the whole time.

Influence relies heavily on charisma. If someone's more likeable, they tend to be trusted more easily and can influence others. As we've seen from the Me Too Movement, or really anytime a popular person does a horrible thing, having charisma does not mean someone has a good character or is good at their job.

Charisma isn't always nefarious, though. It can be used as a force of good- to help you make a great first impression or give a persuasive public speech. And, it's not some magical gift that's bestowed upon you. Charisma is a skill you can build over time with the personality traits you've got. Tons of factors play a role, but, to keep it simple, here are three things that leading organizational psychologists say can make you more likeable: confidence, praise, and optimism. That's it, three things. You got this. Plus, they can also help you think about why you're trusting a charismatic person, and whether or not you should.

Confidence is the number one way to build charisma and emotional influence. It makes you seem more relaxed and capable in high-pressure situations. Capable people aren't always as confident as they could be. Maybe you're shy or you have impostor syndrome, and you're afraid you don't belong at your job. Well, we've got your back. You deserve to be recognized for your achievements, and there are ways to make yourself shine (black girl magic).

For example, you can avoid uncertain language like "maybe," "in my opinion," "I think," or "I could be wrong." Sure, if you're a journalist trying to separate your opinion and a citation, these phrases can be helpful; but, in business writing, they can make it seem like you doubt yourself. And, if you know it, show it! Simple things like using good posture, projecting your voice, and making direct eye contact can signal confidence. Some people use power posing, and, hey, if striking a pose in the bathroom mirror pumps you up, keep at it. But, there's no solid proof that this actually builds confidence. In general, faking it 'till you make it is pretty solid advice. But, if you aren't sure what you're talking about, you can leave things to experts instead of risking your credibility.

All of these tips can also help you analyze why someone else might seem confident, so you don't misplace your trust. Leslie Knope was confident, but she also really knew her stuff and had the policy proposals, experience, and binders to prove it. On the other hand, Bobby Newport had a ton of rich, white man confidence, but he was full of air. So, avoid being influenced just because someone acts like they know what they're doing. Look for cognitive cues like competence, intent, and integrity, too.

But, charisma isn't just about confidence. It's also about how you interact with other people, which involves way more than just being polite. Praise is a powerful motivator. It's why seeing a gold star on a report card always felt so good. Sometimes people underestimate the importance of intrinsic motivators, like recognition, and they overestimate extrinsic motivators, like money or time off. Don't get me wrong, equitable pay is a real thing that needs to happen. None of this "working for exposure or Instagram followers" stuff. You need to put food on the table, and bonus checks are valuable.

But, on top of having the time and money to live comfortable, positive feedback can make sure people feel that their work is valued throughout the year. Too much praise can make you come across as fake, though. And, watch out for people who only say nice things when they want a favor- they might seem trustworthy at first glance, but it's manipulative.

Positive feedback makes others feel good. Optimism can make you feel good, which shows. While no one can be Chris Traeger, trying to adopt a positive attitude will literally make you more charismatic. This can work wonders for your vibe, your motivation, and your career.

Malcom Forbes, you know, the guy that published the fancy business magazine in waiting rooms everywhere, once said, "the key to success is not through achievement, but through enthusiasm." There are things beyond our control that can drastically affect optimism, from tough events, like the death of a loved one, to mental health conditions that may require professional treatment. Generally though, you can become more optimistic by learning from mistakes in the past, finding things to appreciate in the present, and looking forward to future opportunities. You know those inspirational posters from the '90's? "Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That's why it's called the present."

Really, optimism involves having a balanced outlook. And, sometimes, it's better to look before you leap. If someone's blindly optimistic about a situation, but you're not 100%, don't be afraid to do your own research.

Now, charisma is a powerful form of influence that works even when people don't know each other very well, but the best way to genuinely build emotional influence is to form strong relationships based on mutual honesty and respect. So, treat your co-workers like humans. Try using people's names, and pronounce them correctly. It's an easy thing to do, and makes a big impact. And, find some common ground with them. Maybe you're in the same department, in the same screenwriting class, or share the same fandom (beyhive, anyone?).

Mutual pettiness can bring people together, too. Remember when people were all about *Twilight*, and whether Bella should end up with Jacob or Edward? There were t-shirts. It was a whole thing. But, as we all know from Thanksgiving dinner, some topics can be touchy, like religion or politics. So, be thoughtful about what

conversations you bring into the workplace.

So, you know how we keep bringing up the light and dark sides of influence? Well, another huge part of that is how humans frequently judge things based on looks. Like, you'd probably trust a car from a fancy dealership more than a vacant lot with a cardboard sign saying "Carz 4 Sale Heer." So, appearances matter. It might seem superficial, but your look contributes to professionalism, which impacts promotions, job interviews, and acceptance in the workplace.

The good news is that you can control big pieces of your appearance. Do your hair. Brush your teeth. Don't show up to work in pajamas with pizza stains from your *Stranger Things* binge last night. It shows you take your job seriously if you wear clothing that fits your office and profession. Some business have dress codes, uniforms, or frown upon people wearing something drastically different. So, find ways to express yourself that fit your workplace, like wearing that vintage dress you love or trying to pull off a polka-dot bow tie.

But, remember that not all aspects of appearance are withing your control- we have messy biases based on gender, race, or even arbitrary things like attractiveness. And, yeah, a lot of time it sucks. You can't help it if you look eerily similar to someone's manipulative ex, or if your resting face is ...angry. And, sometimes what's deemed professional isn't necessarily fair, like dress code policies on natural hair. So, it's important to recognize what drives your reasoning for trust. Like, have you put too much trust in the demure old lady in pink, when really she has a horrible track record and may be entirely unhinged?

To see how all these elements tie together, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Bernie Madoff was an incredibly charismatic and well-liked businessman. He treated his employees like family. He appeared to value loyalty and honesty. Now, he's know as the "Wizard of Lies."

Madoff swindled customers and employees out of almost 65 billion dollars through one of the most costly and destructive Ponzi schemes of all time. Ponzi schemes are large-scale investment frauds, where initial investors contribute money into a fake business. They get quick returns, which lures more investors, who are all paid out of the same pot. It works for a while, until the pot runs out and everything crumbles.

Madoff's entire persona was crafted to inspire confidence. He had a well-manicured look, tailored suits, and high-end watches. And, he seemed likeable, competent, and dependable. So, some very knowledgeable investors trusted Madoff, despite seemingly impossible returns.

Which just goes to show that anyone can be susceptible to emotional influence. That's why it's so important in business (and everywhere else) to think about why you're trusting someone. Just because someone has the latest Ferrari and a custom suit, it doesn't mean they're not a snake oil salesman. Pause for a second when a confident and optimistic person seems like they're selling you something that's way to good to be true. If it feels like they're glossing over key parts of their business model, trust your gut and ask questions. And, if they start using flattery to distract you while you're questioning them, maybe reconsider who you're dealing with. Remember cognitive trust? Check their qualifications. See if they have good intent and a history of delivering on their promises. That way, you can put the puzzle pieces together to make a more complete picture of their character, and protect yourself from influential but shady people.

Thanks, Thought Bubble!

Together, your actions, attitude, and appearance can affect how others see you and the influence you have in the workplace and beyond. So, take time to think about the way you're being perceived by others, and always use your influence wisely. And, don't make anyone do something they'll regret later.

Of everything we talked about, remember these key takeaways: Number one, influence should be used responsibly, and you can use cognitive trust and emotional cues to protect yourself from people who abuse it. Number two, you can up your charisma by acting confident, praising others, and being optimistic. Number three, finding common ground is the foundation of relationships, and can increase your trustworthiness. And finally, number four, appearances do matter.

Now that we've covered the foundations of building trust and influence, we can tackle the power of communication. Next time, we'll look at written work and making sure you're sending the right message.

[Outro]

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