

When people feel powerful, they ignore new opinions, study finds

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Don't bother trying to persuade your boss of a new idea while he's feeling the power of his position – new research suggests he's not listening to you. “Powerful people have confidence in what they are thinking. Whether their thoughts are positive or negative toward an idea, that position is going to be hard to change,” said Richard Petty, co-author of the study and professor of psychology at Ohio State University.

The best way to get leaders to consider new ideas is to put them in a situation where they don't feel as powerful, the research suggests.

“If you temporarily make a powerful person feel less powerful, you have a better chance of getting them to pay attention,” said Pablo Briñol, lead author of the study and a social psychologist at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid in Spain. Briñol is a former postdoctoral fellow at Ohio State.

The study was published in a recent issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

This research looks at an issue that has been largely ignored by social scientists, Petty said. Many studies have looked at how the power of a person delivering a message impacts those who receive it. But this appears to be the first study that looks at how the power of the message recipient affects persuasion.

In several related studies, the researchers told college students they

would be participating in two supposedly separate experiments. In one experiment, the students role-played in a situation in which one was a boss – in other words, had a position of power – and the other was an employee who simply took orders.

In the second experiment, the participants viewed a fake advertisement for a mobile phone. The ad was designed to see if participants were paying attention to the message, so half the participants received ads with particularly weak arguments for buying the phone (for example, touting that it had a broad currency converter), while the others received strong arguments (the phone could be recharged in just 5 minutes). Participants were then asked to rate how favorably they viewed the phone.

When the role-playing exercise was conducted before viewing the phone ad, those who played boss were more likely than those playing employees to rate the phone similarly -- whether they received the strong or the weak arguments.

“The strength of the argument made no difference to those who played the boss – they obviously weren’t paying attention when they felt powerful,” Petty said. “Those who played the employee, who were made to feel powerless, paid a lot more attention to the arguments. They weren’t as confident in their own initial beliefs and weighed the arguments more carefully.”

In a related study, the order of the experiments was essentially reversed. Participants first read the mobile phone ads, and were presented with either the strong or the weak arguments, and wrote down their thoughts while reading it. However, before they actually rated the phones, the same participants took part in the role-playing exercise in which some were the boss and some the employee. Later, they went back and rated the phones.

The results showed that the bosses in the role-playing exercise were now more influenced by the quality of the arguments in the ads.. Those who were low-power employees were not as influenced by the ad quality.

“When power was experienced after the ads had been processed, it gave people confidence in their most recent thoughts, so if they read strong arguments, they rated the phones more favorably. If they read weak arguments, they were much more negative toward the phone,” Petty said.

“Those who were feeling less power weren’t as confident about the validity of their thoughts to the ads, so the strength of the arguments didn’t matter as much.”

What this all means is that it matters when people are feeling powerful – before or after they receive a persuasive message. If the message comes right after their power is made relevant to them, then powerful people will be difficult to persuade because they are confident in their existing opinions. However, if people can be made to feel powerful right after a strong persuasive message, attitude change is more likely because powerful individuals will feel confident in the positive thoughts they generate to the message, Petty said.

For example, if you have strong arguments to get a raise, try not to ask the boss in her office, where she is surrounded by the trappings of power. Bring up the topic in a lunch room or somewhere where there aren’t reminders of who is in charge.

But if you do have to talk in the boss’s office, try to say something that shakes his or her confidence.

“Our research shows that power makes people more confident in their beliefs, but power is only one thing that affects confidence,” Petty said. “Try to bring up something that the boss doesn’t know, something that

makes him less certain and that tempers his confidence.”

But once you do make your argument, assuming it is cogent, it is good to remind the boss that he is in charge.

“You want to sow all your arguments when the boss is not thinking of his power, and after you make a good case, then remind your boss of his power. Then he will be more confident in his own evaluation of what you say. As long as you make good arguments, he will be more likely to be persuaded,” Petty said.

Petty said the research casts doubt on the classic assertion that power corrupts people and leads them to negative actions. Instead, what power does is make people more likely to unquestionably believe their own thoughts and act on them, he said.

Both low- and high-power people may have negative thoughts at times, and think about doing something bad. But because high-power people are more confident in their thoughts – and less susceptible to countering views – they are more likely to follow through into action.

“A lot of people may have a momentary thought about doing something bad, but they don’t do it because they can inhibit themselves. A powerful person is more likely to follow through on the negative thoughts,” Petty said.

By the same token, if a powerful person has a positive, pro-social thought, she may be more likely to follow through on that thought and turn it into reality.

“Powerful people are more likely to act on what they are thinking – good or bad – without second guessing themselves,” Petty said.

Source: Ohio State University

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