

Authority by External Characteristics

Some people perceive a person to be powerful because of her/his physical characteristics. For example, being tall can emit a feeling authority over another person, even before you've spoken to her/him. If you look back through history, presidential elections in the United States have been won by the taller candidate twenty out of twenty-three elections since 1900. Another example of how height scores points is apparent in the battle for romantic affection. Research suggests that women are significantly more responsive to a man's published personal ad when he describes himself as tall. A final example of how physical characteristics portray authoritative qualities is exhibited in our natural response to someone who has a deeper speaking voice. That is, we subconsciously respond to deeper voices as more commanding and authoritative.

Recognize that many of the things we physically possess serve as status symbols. Moreover, the more we have, the more "rich and powerful" we may be perceived by others. One study that was conducted in the San Francisco Bay area showed that people who drove expensive cars received better treatment from other drivers than those who drove more modestly priced cars. For example, researchers found that motorists waited significantly longer before honking at a new luxury car that was lingering at a green traffic light than they did at an older economy model doing the same thing. What's more, nearly all the motorists honked their horns impatiently more than one time at the cheaper car. In the case of the luxury car, 50 percent of the motorists waited respectfully, never honking at all.

Another external item of authority is exuded by our surroundings. In one study, the appearance of a professor's office changed the way a student perceived that professor. As the experiment unfolded, the students were told to meet their professor in his office. When they arrived, they found that the professor was not yet there. They were asked to wait for five minutes in his office. Some students waited in a clean and organized office, while other students waited in a dirty and disorganized office. After the five minutes had passed, the student subjects were told that the professor could not make the appointment. Later in the study, the students were asked to rate the professor based on his lecture.

Researchers found that the visit to the office had a dramatic influence on the students' overall perception of their professor. More specifically, the students who visited the disorganized office rated their professor as less authoritative, less open, less trustworthy and less friendly than their peers who had visited the organized office did. Bottom line: Appearance affects your authority.

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