

Become the Expert

The main source of a persuader's power is her authority. You know what you are talking about, what you are doing, and how you can solve your audience's challenges. Authority power is based on how other people perceive your expertise. You have authority over others when they believe you have greater clout or strength than they do. Authority allows those in a power position to persuade others to comply with them because of their status, position, background, or rank. CEOs of large corporations carry this form of power. Police officers are another excellent example of this type of power holder: you feel compelled to comply with police based on their position of authority.

We can't be blamed for our natural urge to follow authority. We have been taught since childhood to believe and follow proper authority. It started when our parents taught us that disobedience to authority is wrong and has consequences. We are taught to listen to our teachers, our parents, or political figures. Often, we submit to authority figures in an effort to avoid pain and punishment. Disobedience can lead to stiff penalties.

Exercising authority power does not mean being arrogant or condescending. Your audience has certain expectations that you have the ability to help, serve, and advise them. Your audience has a need, and they want it fulfilled. They want to be led in the right direction by a competent and knowledgeable person. Think of a time when you were faced with an important buying decision. Do you think that an apologetic and insecure persuader, one who was constantly wringing his hands, would have made you feel more positive and confident about your purchase? Probably not. In fact, you probably would have found his behavior annoying, maybe even disturbing. Have confidence and demonstrate your expertise.

Great persuaders look at the persuader–persuadee relationship as a student–teacher relationship. Think of yourself as a consultant or an advisor; you are the teacher. When you look at the persuasion process this way, you are practically under obligation to conduct yourself as an authority figure. When you can demonstrate that you are proficient, skilled, and capable, you gain additional authority power. People value and

admire those who know their job and thus they submit to your input, suggestions, and counsel.

Authority power can be further subdivided into the following categories: authority by position, uniform, title, public opinion, or external characteristics. You will see with the following examples that authority power can have a very persuasive influence on an individual.

Authority by Position

Those who have authority based on the position they hold within the community have positional authority. Such authority figures include a boss, the U.S. President, or a judge. A landmark study conducted by Stanley Milgram at Yale University illustrates just how powerful positional authority can be. Milgram had some participants pose as "teachers," while others portrayed the "learners." The teachers were told that they were going to help the researcher test the learners' learning levels by giving the learners progressively more intense shocks each time they answered memory questions incorrectly.

Of course, no real shock was administered, but the teachers did not know this, and the learners were instructed to act as though the pain were real. The purpose of the study was to see how far the teachers would go in obeying the head researcher's authority, even if it meant inflicting great pain on another human being. Many of the labels on the switches warned "Danger: Severe Shock." The results were astounding. Two-thirds of the subjects delivered as much pain as they could (450 volts), pulling all thirty of the shock switches, even when the acting learners pleaded, begged, and even screamed for them to stop the experiment.

This experiment strikingly demonstrates several key points concerning positional authority. First of all, the teachers were noticeably uncomfortable with what they were doing. In fact, they hated it. Many of them asked the researcher to please end the experiment. But when he refused, they continued on, trembling, perspiring, and sometimes even laughing nervously. In spite of their extreme discomfort, almost all of

the teachers continued to obey the head researcher until the experiment was over. When the teacher left the room and started to give the instructions by phone, however, only 23 percent went on to deliver the maximum shock. This result demonstrates the importance of the face-to-face component of positional authority.

The converse is also revealing. When the scripts were reversed and it was the learners who were ordering the teachers to deliver more shocks while the researcher protested, not even one single person obeyed! In this scenario, 100 percent of the teachers refused to obey the learners over the researcher. After obtaining the shocking results of this experiment, Milgram wrote, "It is the extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority that constitutes the chief finding of the study."

When someone has more authority than you do, you may automatically assume that whatever that person says must be true. An FAA study illustrates this point. It found that many errors by flight captains were not challenged or corrected by other members of the crew. This blind obedience to position and authority resulted in catastrophes. One airline, concerned about this evidence, tested their own flight crews via flight simulators. Specifically, they created conditions that would lead to mental overload and emotional stimulation. The captains often made fatal mistakes at a critical moment. The airline was shocked to find that 25 percent of the flights would have crashed because the subordinates did not take corrective action and challenge the position of the plane's captain.

Authority by Uniform

Does it matter how you dress? Do great persuaders actually think about what they wear? Do clothes really "make the person?" In most instances, the answer is yes. When you wear a uniform to play a certain role, that uniform evokes authority and prestige. Now, when I say uniform, I am including business attire in that definition. Business attire is considered the uniform of power persuaders. People create vital impressions of power

with what they wear. When you wear the right clothes for the situation, you can persuade without even speaking.

Think of what a police uniform says. Imagine a police officer trying to clear a riot situation in street clothes. The uniformed officer will get our immediate attention because we respond and respect uniforms. Now what about negotiating a big deal in jeans and a faded T-shirt? Even clergy who wear their robes command more respect and are able to persuade and influence better than they can when wearing street clothes. We see a doctor in a white coat and automatically assume he is a medical professional who knows exactly what to prescribe. Likewise, when a businessman shows up in a \$1,500 suit and polished shoes, we automatically assume he is in charge or is the decision maker.

In one experiment, a man would stop pedestrians in New York City. The experimenter would point to another man nearly fifty feet away, telling them that “the man had over parked and didn’t have change to put in the parking meter.” He would then tell them to go give the man the necessary change. Researchers watched to see how many people complied with the experimenter's request when he was dressed in normal street clothes versus when he was dressed as a security guard. After giving the command, the experimenter would turn a corner so he was out of the pedestrian's sight. Incredibly, almost all of the pedestrians obeyed when he was dressed in uniform, even after he was gone! When he was dressed in street clothes, however, less than half of the pedestrians complied with his request.

In another study, Lawrence and Watson found that individuals asking for contributions to law enforcement and healthcare campaigns gathered more donations when wearing sheriffs' and nurses' uniforms than when they just dressed normally. The experimental conclusions prove that dressing the part increases your power and authority over others.

Authority by Title

We are all suckers for titles because they create power. For example, the titles "president," "CEO," "esquire," "manager," or even "boss" create certain expectations of authority and respect. When we hear "doctor" in front of a name, it automatically registers in our mind that this person is important, powerful, or intelligent. We don't even ask if he or she graduated at the top of his or her class. In the medical profession, the doctor is the head decision maker. We love to hear "two out of three doctors recommend . . ." or "nine out ten dentists use . . ." Our tendency to follow such recommendations is all based on title authority power.

In one particular case, researchers wanted to test to see if the power of authority by title won out over established rules and regulations. They were looking to determine whether nurses would administer an unauthorized drug to a patient when requested to do so by a doctor they didn't know. A researcher would call a nurse on the phone and tell her he was a doctor and that he wanted a 20 mg dose of a particular drug to be administered to a certain patient. He instructed her to do it as soon as possible so the drug would have time to take effect by the time he arrived. He further stated that he would sign the prescription upon his arrival.

The experiment intentionally violated four rules: first, the hospital forbade prescriptions to be made over the phone; second, the drug was an unauthorized one; third, the dosage was dangerously excessive—in fact, double the amount specified on the label; and fourth, the order was given by a doctor whom the nurse had never met or even heard of. In spite of these red flags, a whopping 95 percent of the nurses headed straight for the medicine cabinet and on to the patient's room. Of course, researchers intervened before they actually administered the drug. A subsequent study asked nurses to remember a time when they had obeyed a doctor's order that they felt was potentially harmful to the patient. When asked why they had complied anyway, 46 percent said the doctor was the expert and authority figure in the matter.

Your title is important. When you hold a title that projects power, respect and attention are directed toward you, and your ability to persuade others is strengthened. Think about it—when you are upset with a company or a persuader, you want to talk to the boss, the manager, or even the president. I was amazed when I was hired to do sales for a local company and my business card read "regional sales manager." Although I was just a rookie, I did notice that the title on the card garnered respect. Find a title that is appropriate for you and your work. For example, "vice president," "senior partner," "managing director," or "account executive" might work for you.

Authority by Public Opinion

Authority by public opinion occurs when a person has power or authority not directly because of experience or expertise, but simply because of his or her reputation. An example of this type of power can be seen in scholarly journals, which are more likely to publish articles written by people who are established and renowned within their respective fields versus people who are virtually unknown. What has your audience heard about you, your product, and your company? What is the public perception about you? Very often, public opinion carries more weight than facts.

Here is another great example of public opinion authority. An error in Intel's Pentium chip was detected in 1994. News spread quickly about the flaw, and public outcry exploded as Intel tried to downplay the issue. Reality was the average user would never be affected by this flaw. There was only a one in a nine billion chance of getting an inaccurate result. It wasn't long before Intel was flooded with e-mails and phone calls requesting a no-questions-asked return policy on the microprocessor. In the heat of the whole mess, complaints peaked at 25,000 in one day! In spite of the huge public outcry, Intel refused to offer the requested return policy. Not surprisingly, the press got hold of the story, and Intel's stock dropped dramatically. Finally, Intel was forced to adopt a new return policy. What was the result of resisting public opinion for as long as they had? A mere \$475 million write-off. In just a matter of weeks, public opinion had influenced the value of the entire company, and ignoring public opinion proved a very costly mistake indeed.

Authority by External Characteristics

Great persuaders command authority. Like it or not, some people view others as powerful simply because of their physical characteristics. For example, being tall can emit authority over another, even before you've spoken to that person. 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 1900.¹¹ Height also scores points in the battle for affection. Research suggests that women are significantly more responsive to a man's published personal ad when he describes himself as tall. Another example of how physical characteristics portray authority is exhibited in our response to someone who has a deeper speaking voice. We subconsciously respond to deeper voices as more commanding and authoritative.

Recognize that many of the physical characteristics we possess (or strive to possess) serve as status symbols. The more positive physical attributes we have, the more we tend to be perceived as "rich and powerful." One study conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area showed that people driving expensive cars received better treatment from other drivers than those driving more modestly priced cars. For example, motorists waited significantly longer before honking at a new luxury car that was lingering at a green traffic light than 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 waited respectfully, never honking at all.

Another determinant of external authority is our surroundings. In one study, the appearance of a professor's office changed the way a student perceived that professor. The students were shown pictures of different professor's offices. Some were clean and some were cluttered and disorganized. Researchers found that the photographs of the office had a dramatic influence on the students' overall perceptions of the professor. In particular, the students who saw the cluttered and disorganized office rated the professor as less conscientious, less agreeable, less competent, and not as friendly.

Appearance affects your authority. External objects and environment also affect perceptions of power. It is therefore wise for all of us to check out our appearance and surroundings to make sure we're sending the right message.

© 2009 Kurt W. Mortensen