

12@12
Small Ways to Have a Big Influence
January 22, 2014

If you are like me there are many times during the week in which you need to influence someone towards some end. Perhaps you need to influence a client to buy a product. Maybe you need to influence a co-worker to provide better output. Maybe you want to see a salesperson give you a better deal or you want a friend to go to a movie with you. Perhaps you, would like to see your own children get better grades or have someone join you in a new exercise routine. All throughout our lives we find ourselves in positions that test our ability to influence people. So wouldn't it be nice if there were ways—simple ways—that could help us increase the possibility of our efforts bringing about the behavior in others that we are seeking.

It's not unusual for people to ask me where I get my material for 12@12. I get it from a variety of places from many years of reading in many different disciplines and from a variety of experience. But generally when I craft a talk like this I lean heavily on one or two resources. Today, I am going to lean on the work of Noah Goldstein, Robert Cialdini and Steve Martin, all of whom have done extensive research, teaching, and consulting in the science of influence. In other words, it has been their aim to discover those things that makes a person much more likely to get a desired response out of others. They share their research in a book called *The Small Big*.¹ In it they share over fifty small actions we can take, that can make a big difference in the way we influence others. Today, I will share with you a few of them.

Last week I told you about an effort on the part of Britain's royal tax collection agency to increase compliance. Too many citizens simply weren't paying their taxes on times. In fact, only 57%. To change this, a consulting firm suggested adding a single sentence to the collection letter. The sentence "simply (and truthfully) informed the recipients of the large number of citizens who actually do pay their taxes on time." And the results were astounding. The inclusion of this simple sentence increased the collection rate to 86%.² One simple sentence added to a letter, a sentence that did not cost any extra money to print, and millions more pounds came into Her Majesty's coffers. How is that possible?

The authors of *The Small Big* tell us the reason is *social proofing*, that is when we hear that others are involved in something that often provides the proof we need that something is worthwhile to join in ourselves. In other words, tell people that many others are doing something and people are more likely to join in, whether it means trying a new restaurant or attending a continuing ed class.

I had the opportunity to put this particular influencing tip to work a couple of weeks ago. We hosted a marriage seminar by a very well-respected speaker and author. About 12 days out we only had 37 couples signed up. So I sent out an email to our congregation. In that letter I said that a good number of other couples had already signed up, and it would be great to have them join us. Within one week, I had over 100 couples signed up. Now, I think there were some other factors at play, but I can't help but think that the single line in the email helped contribute to the uptick.

I would guess that all of you have had times when you have sent out an invitation. Perhaps it has been an invitation to be part of a corporate brainstorming session or perhaps it has been an invitation to a Super Bowl party. Being the prepared person that you are, you sent the invitation out in plenty of time, and you provided people with a good healthy length of time to RSVP. You did your best to make the invitation attractive and meaningful to the recipient, but you may do one thing that shot your plans in the foot. You gave people too long to reply.

Research consistently shows that more people will respond when the time to respond is shorter than greater. Take, for example, one study in which people were asked to evaluate the likelihood they would use a gift card that would allow them to receive coffee and cake at a local bakery in the next three weeks and the likelihood that they would use the same card with a two month expiration date. Seventy percent of participants said they were likely to use the second card, but only 50 percent said they would use the card with a shorter expiration date. But this is where it gets interesting. Although participants said they were more likely to use the card with the longer expiration date than the shorter one, when participants were actually given the cards, those who were given 3-week cards used the cards at a rate five times greater than the ones who had been given the two month cards!³ Now, certainly, shorter response times won't always have such dramatic differences in

results, but again the research is consistent, if you want to influence people to join in, you are actually better off giving a shorter time to respond than a greater time. And if you add a little precision to your response deadline—such as, “please respond by 4:30 on Thursday—you will probably do even better.

Precision can also come in handy in price negotiations. We don’t live in a culture where there is a lot of haggling done over the price of products, but there are certainly times when we need to negotiate a price. And when we negotiate prices, we are better off making an offer that uses a precise number rather than a rounded number. If, for, example you want to buy a car, don’t offer a price of \$15,000, offer a price of something like \$14,894. A precise offer gives people the impression that you have done your homework and will often produce a counteroffer that’s twice as close to your offer than if you started with a round number. I think you would agree that giving a precise offer is just a little change in doing things, but it can have a big influence on others.⁴

Now, let me give you a final idea regards to influencing others, and it’s a tip that could turn your potential into reality. All of us have been taught that when seeking new employment opportunities we should highlight our past experiences, the things we have accomplished, and degrees we have earned. That all sounds good; it certainly would make sense to hire someone with a good, solid track record over one that does not. But interestingly enough, research indicates that potential rather than past achievement garners more interest from others.

For example, one study asked participants to evaluate one of two different applications for a senior finance position in a big company. One application included the fact that the candidate had a B.A. in economics from Cornell University with a strong GPA, had earned an MBA from NYU, had two years of strong banking experience, and scored a 92 out of 100 on a test called the Assessment of Leadership Achievement. The other application stated the candidate as having a similar educational background, but no work experience. The participants were also told that the second candidate had recently received a score of 92 out of 100 on a test called the Assessment of Potential Achievement. Due to the work experience indicated on the first application, the first candidate was clearly more qualified from an objective standpoint. Nonetheless participants in the study favored the

second candidate because of the score on the Assessment of Potential Achievement, even though they were told that the both assessments measured how well a candidate would do over the next two years.

And this was not the only study that showed this kind of result. People may want to know you have experience doing certain things, but what really catches their interest is your potential. What this means is that if you are applying for a new job or perhaps trying to sell your services to a new client, you will likely be more effective by first highlighting the potential you bring to the table rather immediately ticking off your past experience. While this doesn't promise you'll get what you want, doing so could increase the chances that you will gain the interest of and even influence your audience in giving you a new job.⁵

You might be surprised that people are more interested in potential than current experience, and in some ways I am too. But in other respects I am not. I am, as a pastor, in the business of souls, you might say. It is my desire to see people know God and enjoy a life following him. And no doubt I have found people attracted to the here and now results that a walk with God might bring about. Perhaps walking in his ways brings about a better marriage, a better work ethic, or a more peaceful demeanor. But I have always found that as great as those factors may be, and as many people as there are who are attracted to them, there are probably a good number more who are attracted not by what God has done in the past, or even by what he may do for people today, but by what he offers down the road for a life that is so fleeting. That is, people are attracted by the potential he offers. That makes me wonder if God might know a thing or two about influencing others in a big way too!

¹ Steven J. Martin, Noah J. Goldstein, and Robert B. Cialdini, *The Small Big* (Hachette Book Group, 2014).

² *Ibid.*, Chapter 1: "What Small Big Can Persuade People to Pay Their Taxes on Time."

³ *Ibid.*, Chapter 18: "What Small Big Can Reduce People's Tendency to Procrastinate? (And yours too!)"

⁴ *Ibid.*, Chapter 36: "Could Precision Be the Small Big When It Comes to Better Bargaining?"

⁵ Ibid., Chapter 20: “What Is the Small Big that Could Turn Your Potential into Reality?”

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