

EMILY AND LAURENCE ALISON

# PERSUASION AND INFLUENCE OR GENUINE CONNECTION AND RAPPORT

Perhaps the most frequent question psychologists get asked after, 'are you analysing me?' is 'can you make other people do things for you?'

Seminal psychology papers on influence are often referred to in advertising, and techniques derived from these classic works are often used in corporate contexts and elsewhere to persuade others. Just occasionally, these techniques are used to persuade people to do things that they might not otherwise consider. Some of the techniques are covert, for example mere frequency of exposure to an idea makes it more palatable, whilst other techniques are more overt, such as using authority and perceived credibility to persuade someone.

However, in law enforcement and security contexts we must consider the legal acceptability of a technique as well as whether it actually generates the truth. We must be mindful of any technique in which the influencer, rather than the 'target', has either deliberately or unwittingly generated the account.

We must also be wary of generating an account from a vulnerable target. Consider, for example, the seemingly benign theory of reciprocity in which in offering the target something I can expect that the person then feels obliged to give me something in return. This technique may generate a false account designed to please rather than something which is either useful or true.

Are there, then, alternatives that ensure we don't cross the legal line whilst remaining powerful means to extract information from an individual doing something that we want without any force, influence or persuasion? Happily, there are and they come from an area of research and practise that might not be immediately obvious.

Our research is based on the examination of thousands of hours of real police interrogations with high value targets. What seemed to work best was quite different from some techniques such as pre-suasion (see Robert Cialdini and Steve Martin on page 4 in this issue) and had far more in common with psychologists such as Carl Rogers, William Miller and Stephen Rollnick who take a humanistic approach, which emphasises empathy and the good in human behaviour. This approach is client-centered and requires that the client takes an active role in their own treatment. This approach also requires that the interviewer in the interactions shows 'unconditional positive regard', which entails accepting others without judgment or evaluation.

These therapeutic approaches have long been established as particularly effective means by which to encourage behavioural change, such as violence reduction, more healthy lifestyles and a reduction or abstinence from alcohol or drugs. However, when we observed similar approaches used by interviewers, even though not trained in any of these methods, the outcomes included: (i) a reduction in aggressive and resistant detainee behaviours; (ii) an increase in detainee engagement and willingness to talk and; (iii) the production of more information, intelligence and evidence.

Critically, because these approaches do not rely on any aspect of covert or overt persuasion or influence, they should protect the innocent and put only internal pressure on the detainee when there genuinely is (i) some guilty knowledge and (ii) a degree of conscience or at least ambivalence about what they have done or intend to do.

There are some basic tenets about this approach that we found especially relevant to investigative interviews.

## FOCUS ON VALUES AND BELIEFS

Those interviewers that didn't simply rattle off questions or seek facts throughout, but instead showed an interest in the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of the detainee fared better in the long run at establishing what they wanted to know. We have argued that individuals are not simply fact-giving machines that if asked will simply respond. Instead, interviewers that genuinely showed an interest in an individual's unique perspective were far more successful.

## NON-JUDGEMENTAL QUESTIONING

Interviewers that leaked any judgement either about the individual in front of them, or in any way insinuated they already knew the facts were far less successful. Instead those that demonstrated an open mind, curiosity and seeking all sides of the narrative were more successful.

## EMPATHY AND REGARD

We found that showing empathy and positive regard resulted in both more engagement from the detainee and more information. Although rare, it also was also more likely to generate admissions of guilt. In contrast, a lack of empathy, distance or indifference towards the individual generated less information and could lead to no comment or silence. Importantly, faking empathy or simplistic displays, or trick empathy was readily seen through and backfired. As such, it is not enough to 'try' empathy, one has to make a genuine effort to show positive regard.

## AUTONOMY AND PERSONAL CHOICE

Most importantly those interviewers that reinforced the detainee's choice to talk or not were more likely to develop a dialogue with the detainee. This may seem counter intuitive but at the very heart of client centered therapeutic interventions is the notion that it is not the therapist's wishes that matter. As much as the therapist may desire the client to abstain from alcohol, stop being violent, eat more healthily etc, humanistic approaches recognise that these are the personal choice of the individual. In the same way, although an interviewer may want an interviewee to talk, it is that interviewee's choice. In some cases we saw that the individual's legal advisor appeared to suggest that the most important thing for the individual to do was stay silent. It seemed to be more important that the interviewee conform to the legal advisor's desire for the client to stay silent that mattered most. However, right at the heart of humanistic approaches is the notion that it is up to the individual.

Intriguingly what this tells us is that in many cases individuals do want to talk. It is their right to say nothing and the legal duty of their solicitor to advise them to if they feel it is in the client's interest. However, it is also their right to talk, and neither the the police nor the lawyer should seek to influence them either way – the ethical and more productive approach is to help the individual decide for themselves. Our research is directed at engaging in an authentic and genuine rapport based relationship. This doesn't necessarily mean friendship or warmth – it means a genuine effort to connect, to understand – not to corner, manipulate or persuade. In our view interviewers should endeavour to help and understand not trick, influence or manipulate the truth out of interviewees.

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