A single word will help your persuasion.



Let's think about waiting in line. Whether you're at a bank, a supermarket, or an amusement park, waiting in line is probably not your idea of fun. Under what circumstances would you be willing to let another person cut in front of you? Is it possible that just a single word from a requester could drastically increase the likelihood that you'd say, "Yes, go ahead?"

Yes, and the word is *because*. Behavioral scientist Ellen Langer and her colleagues decided to put the persuasive power of this word to the test. In one study, she arranged for a stranger to approach someone waiting to use a photocopier and ask, "Excuse me. I just have five pages. May I use the machine?" In this situation, 60 percent of the people agreed to allow the stranger to go ahead of them. However, when the stranger followed the request with a reason ("because I'm in a rush") almost everyone (94 percent of the people) complied. Then Langer repeated the experiment. This time the stranger also used the word *because*, but followed it with a completely meaningless reason ("because I have to make copies"). Even with this meaningless reason, 93 percent agreed to let the stranger go first.

This study demonstrates the unique motivational influence of the word *because*.

Of course like most things, the power of *because* has its limits. In the previous study the request was small — five copies. Langer repeated the experiment, but told the person to ask to make 20 copies. This time, when the stranger did not use the word *because*, only 24 percent agreed, and when the meaningless reason was added, this produced no increase in compliance at all. However, when the request was made with a good reason, 50 percent of the people asked agreed.

These findings serve as a reminder to always be sure to accompany your request with a rationale, even when you think the reasons might be pretty clear. Too often we mistakenly assume that other people understand the reasons behind our requests. Rather than telling your children to "come to the table for dinner now" or "go to bed immediately," a more effective strategy would be to provide a reason why you are asking them to take that action — and not just "because I said so."

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