Researchers test strategies for eliciting an authentic 'yes'

January 25 2024, by Mary Catt

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When making a request of someone, would you like them to answer honestly? Try giving them a script.

That is one recommendation from researchers at the ILR School and University of Michigan, who developed strategies to evoke authentic responses from people—even if it's a hard "no"—instead of acquiescence motivated by awkwardness or guilt.

"Giving People the Words to Say No Leads Them to Feel Freer to Say Yes" published Jan. 5 in *Scientific Reports*. The co-authors are Rachel Schlund, M.S., doctoral student in organizational behavior; Vanessa Bohns, professor and chair in the Department of Organizational Behavior; and Roseanna Sommers, assistant professor of law at Michigan.

"Employees and organizations benefit when people agree to requests freely rather than feeling pressured or coerced, which can lead to resentment and backlash," Schlund said. "However, requests are inherently difficult to refuse."

Previous work from the researchers focused on people's reactions to requests and included tactics they can use to feel more comfortable with refusing. Still, those interventions placed the burden of saying "no" on the request's "target" (i.e., the person being asked), Schlund said.

For their new paper, Schlund, Bohns and Sommers decided to shift that burden.

"We tested an intervention that requesters can use to solicit consent in ways that are experienced as less coercive, shifting some of the burden of saying 'no' off the target," she said.

The research paper is based on two studies conducted through the ILR School's Experimental Psychology and Organizations Lab over a two-year period that involved 535 participants.

Giving targets a specific way to decline is particularly effective, the researchers said. The studies included scripts such as: "Before we begin the study, can you please unlock your phone and hand it to me? I'll just need to take your phone outside of the room for a moment to check for some things. If you'd like to refuse, please say the words, 'I'd rather not.' Refusing will not affect your payment or participation in the study."

In the studies, a small basket was held out for participants to hand over their phones, if they chose to do so.

"We hypothesized that one reason it is so hard for targets to say 'no' is that it is difficult to find the words to do so in the moment," Schlund said. "For this reason, we tested an intervention in which requesters provided targets with an explicit script to refuse as part of their ask. This intervention—telling targets how to say 'no'—was more effective at increasing targets' feelings of freedom to say 'no' to an invasive request than simply telling targets they could say 'no.'"

More information: Rachel Schlund et al, Giving people the words to say no leads them to feel freer to say yes, *Scientific Reports* (2024). DOI: 10.1038/s41598-023-50532-3

Provided by Cornell University

Citation: Researchers test strategies for eliciting an authentic 'yes' (2024, January 25) retrieved 29 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2024-01-strategies-eliciting-authentic.html