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An Influential Lesson From Old Ben: Borrow Books

By Mary Pat Campbell



Editor's note: In the Leadership & Development Section's Leadership Inspiration Contest, entrants were asked to tell us what inspired them to be better actuarial leaders. Here is the winning entry for best overall submission.

When Ben Franklin drops a secret on how to influence people, it pays to listen. Of all the Founders, he was the one best known for his persuasive powers.

In 1736, Franklin was appointed clerk of the General Assembly in Philadelphia. This not only gave him a reliable income but also a way to get to know the members of the Assembly better. All these were prominent men, and this networking also led to further business for his printer's shop.

So you can imagine that Franklin was miffed the next year when a new member of the General Assembly made a long speech against re-appointment of Franklin as clerk. But rather than trying for some sort of revenge, Franklin thought of a way to get the man to his side. Let Old Ben tell his tale:

Having heard that he had in his library a certain very scarce and curious book, I wrote a note to him, expressing my desire of perusing that book, and requesting he would do me the favour of lending it to me for a few days. He sent it immediately, and I return'd it in about a week with another note, expressing strongly my sense of the favour. When we next met in the House, he spoke to me (which he had never done before), and with great civility; and he ever after manifested a readiness to serve me on all occasions, so that we became great friends, and our friendship continued to his death.¹

As many have remarked, the "Ben Franklin effect"² seems opposite of what people expect. Surely, doing favors for others, not asking for favors, makes them like you. And yet, research seems to prove the effect.

There are several lessons I've taken from this passage, not only with regard to borrowing books from people (though the important part, which many people forget, is *giving the book back*). One lesson Franklin specifically mentions: If you can, it helps to get people on your side, rather than seeking to get back at those who stood in your way.

Here are two more lessons:

1. **Make the favor asked specific to the person.** If Franklin had asked for any old book, it would not have been as effective; Franklin asked for a hard-to-get book this man owned—and the man felt more valued as a result.
2. **Learn how people actually behave when you want to influence them.** Focusing on how people "should" act as opposed to how they do act isn't productive.

These two items ultimately boil down to the same thing: Pay attention to people. That's the real lesson—if you cultivate a real interest in others as individuals, you find them more persuadable. ■



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Franklin, Benjamin. *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Chapter 10. (New York, 1916; Project Gutenberg, 2006) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/20203/20203-h/20203-h.htm>.
- 2 Wikipedia, s.v. "Ben Franklin Effect," accessed Sept. 21, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Franklin_effect.