



# Traversing the virtual landscape of a knowledge citizen

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## Introduction

In May 2008, *Time Magazine* published a list entitled the 'Time 100', that is, a list of 100 of the most influential people in the world. In his editorial, the managing editor, Richard Stengel, categorically states that while the Time 100 is not a list of the most powerful or the most talented – it is a thoughtful and sprightly survey of the most influential individuals in the world. Stengel acknowledges that the concept of influence is *per se* subjective and, as such, *Time* has attempted to measure it in terms of the *effect that these individuals have had on the world*.

The matter of influence is significant in a knowledge citizen's world, who by virtue of his or her character and behaviour is deemed to have an influence on the world or at the very least, on his or her immediate environment.

The following discussion highlights three of the Time 100's influential personalities, three individuals that on the surface characterize the behaviour and nature of the knowledge citizen archetype.

The author further highlights two of the six principles of influence as researched by social psychologist, Robert Cialdini (Cialdini 2001), which includes reciprocation, commitment and consistency. The remaining four principles, social proof, liking, authority and scarcity, are discussed in Part II of this article, to be printed in the next issue. The discussion offers the knowledge citizen insight into behaviour that often contributes to our effectiveness both as influencers as well as recipients of influential behaviour.

## Defining influence

Influence can be defined as the capacity or power of persons or things to be a compelling force on or to produce effects on the actions, behaviour and opinions of others. The remarkable feature about influence is that there need not be a personal connection to the influencer, that it may be the influencer's actions in his or her own life that cause the influence on a third party.

The concept of influence is particularly powerful when considering the characteristics and behaviour of a knowledge citizen. By embracing lifelong learning and displaying knowledge sharing behaviour, a knowledge citizen can be influential on those around him or her without purposefully persuading others to embrace his or her belief and behaviour.

## Time 100 influencers

As mentioned above, the Time 100 list does not imply a list of the most powerful or the most talented, although the examples below will highlight two individuals with remarkable talent notwithstanding. However, all three influencers highlighted have managed to change attitude and behaviour around the world by demonstrating a penchant for lifelong learning and very clearly embracing global knowledge sharing behaviour. The highlighted influencers are:

- **Lance Armstrong**, a remarkable athlete who has taught cancer patients how to resist and persist in their personal fight against cancer. Armstrong won the Tour de France, cycling's premier event, seven times during the years 1999 to 2005. Albeit a champion today, in 1996, Armstrong was battling life threatening cancer and, despite grim verdicts from health professionals, Armstrong survived and went on to claim victory. Armstrong has subsequently spearheaded a foundation which made a yellow plastic loop a statement for resistance and strength across the world. The foundation advocates for those living with cancer, funds research, inspires the cancer community to support each other and is collectively stronger than any one of us could be alone.
- **Randy Pausch**, a 47-year-old computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University is dying of pancreatic cancer, but he is using the experience to give life lessons, also known as the 'last lecture' to millions of people worldwide. Pausch is using YouTube to share a message about following your dreams, dealing with ones that don't come true and having fun along the way. His last lecture, which was intended superlatively as a message for his children, has been viewed by more than 6 million people and he has co-authored a book and testified before the American Congress about pancreatic cancer.
- **Lorena Ochoa**, a 26-year-old Mexican golfer who closed out the 2007 LPGA tour season with eight wins, including a \$1 million first prize finish at the season ending ADT championship. Lorena inspires not only golfers in Mexico but she gives back in ways that extend far beyond the game of golf. Ochoa has used her fame to improve education and drop-out rates in her country by creating a foundation and funding an elementary school, soon to be followed by an adjacent high school in her hometown.

These three influencers have made an impact on the world through their generosity of spirit, their desire to share their experience and knowledge with others and a desire to continue learning from their personal journeys.

## **Influence – science and practice**

Research by social psychologist, Robert Cialdini, reveals that there are six basic principles that govern how one person might influence another. These are: reciprocation; consistency and commitment; social proof; authority; liking; and scarcity. We elaborate on two of the six principles and highlight some to their applications in the archetype of the knowledge citizen.

### *Reciprocation*

One of the most widespread and basic norms of human culture is embodied in the rule of reciprocation. The rule requires that one person will try to repay in kind what another has provided. By obligating the recipient of an act to repayment in the future, the rule for reciprocation allows one individual to give something to another with confidence that it is not being lost. This sense of future obligation within the rule makes possible the development of various kinds of continuing relationships, transactions and exchanges that are beneficial to society. Consequently, all members of the society are trained from childhood to abide by the rule or suffer serious social disapproval.

The decision to comply with another's request is frequently influenced by the reciprocity rule, that is, to give something before asking for a return favour. The exploitability of this tactic is due to three characteristics of the rule of reciprocation:

- The rule is extremely powerful, often overwhelming the influence of other factors that normally determine compliance.
- The rule applies even to uninvited first favours, thus reducing our ability to decide whom we wish to owe and putting the choice in the hands of others.
- The rule can spur unequal exchanges, that is, to be rid of the uncomfortable feeling of indebtedness, an individual may agree to a request that is a substantially larger favour than the one he has received.

To avoid the pressure of reciprocity does not imply that we should systematically reject the initial offers of others but to accept initial favours or concessions in good faith. However, we should be ready to redefine what the favour meant, in order that we don't feel obliged to reciprocate unduly.

The principle of reciprocity is key in a knowledge citizen's world in terms of the knowledge sharing behaviour. It appears that knowledge citizen's are willing to share knowledge and experience as they believe they will gain more by sharing with others than by retaining knowledge. In addition, they intrinsically believe that their generosity will be reciprocated by fellow knowledge citizens in the future.

### *Commitment and consistency*

Research shows that most people desire to be and look consistent regarding their words, beliefs, attitudes and needs. This tendency for consistency is fed from three sources:

- Firstly, good personal consistency is highly valued by society.
- Second, aside from its effect on public image, generally consistent conduct provides a beneficial approach to daily conduct.
- Thirdly a consistent orientation affords a valuable shortcut through the complexity of modern existence, that is, by being consistent with earlier decisions, one reduces the need to process all the relevant information in future similar situations, instead, one merely needs to recall the earlier decision and to respond consistently with it.

Securing an initial commitment is the key. After making a commitment, that is, taking a stand or position, people are more willing to agree to requests that are in keeping with the prior commitment. It is common practice for influencers to induce people to take an initial position that is consistent with a behaviour they will later request from these people.

Commitments are equally effective when they are active, public, effortful and viewed as internally motivated or un-coerced.

To recognize and resist the undue influence of consistency pressures on our compliance decisions, we should listen for signals coming from two places within us, namely our hearts and our stomachs. Stomach signs indicate that we are being pushed by commitment and consistency pressures to agree to requests we know we don't want to perform. Heart of heart signs indicate when it is not clear to us that an initial commitment was wrong and begs the question: if we could go back in time, would we make the same commitment?

'Walking the talk' is characteristic of a knowledge citizen's behaviour. It is one thing to make a commitment to fellow citizens but it is equally important to live up to a commitment made to others. A community of practice (CoP) offers key insights into this principle. The CoP facilitator would be remiss to demand commitment and consistency of a member if he or she did not personally demonstrate this behaviour.

## **Conclusion**

The Time 100 highlights individuals who have made significant impact on the world globally, through personal influence. However, it would be remiss only to recognize influence that appeared in a global magazine or that had been made across oceans. Influence is a powerful phenomenon that knowledge citizens can employ every day in their own environments to make a difference to their world.

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ISSN 1560-683X

Published by [InterWord Communications](#) for Department of Information and Knowledge Management, University of Johannesburg