

The Business Brain

Manipulating the charitable mindset

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Let's call it corporate givernance.

By this time of year, about 80 per cent of large Canadian companies have launched their annual charitable fund-raising campaigns, the explicit goal being to spur a big pot of pooled donations from their employees. Behind the scenes, there is also the hope that raising money together will foster group cohesion and motivate people to work better as teams. So what if there's in-house competition for resources and recognition? At least there's this common cause, so pony up!

But can you really manipulate people's mindsets to prompt them to give more?

Apparently, you can. A research team of Stéphane Côté and Bonnie Hayden Cheng of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, along with several psychologists from the University of California, Berkeley, recently published two studies that suggest that the key to encouraging more empathetic and charitable behaviour is to make people feel like the underdog - if only temporarily.

In one study, published this month in *Psychological Science*, subjects were shown a picture of a 10-rung ladder and told to think of this ladder as representing where people stand in society. Half were randomly assigned to the lower-status group; they were asked to compare themselves with people at the top of the ladder, those accorded society's highest kudos by virtue of their education, income and the most-respected jobs. The other half, randomly assigned to the higher-status group, were told to compare themselves with those at the bottom, those with the least education and resources.

After instilling these feelings of relative inferiority or superiority, the researchers then tested the subjects' ability to read subtle emotions expressed in photos of people's faces, a standard measure of empathy.

While both groups scored in the average range, those who were temporarily made to feel as if they were lower on the ladder were better at reading faces: They had a higher empathy score. And this artificially boosted level of empathy is linked to higher levels of charitable giving, according to the researchers.

How did they make this connection? Let's look at another of the research team's studies, published in July, which also used the ladder technique to manipulate subjects' judgments about their relative social standing. The subjects were asked to imagine themselves interacting with someone on a different rung. They were then asked to allocate the percentage of their annual earnings they thought should go to charitable donations.

The researchers found that people who imagined being lower class allocated 40 per cent more to charitable causes than those who tried on the role of top dog. "The temporary mindset of being in a lower social class elicits more empathy and giving behaviours," Prof. Côté explained.

That's the theory. In reality, those earning \$80,000 or more contribute at least three times as much to charity as those in lower-income brackets, according to Statistics Canada. But even if better-educated, higher-income earners donate the most money, the percentage of income given to charitable causes drops precipitously as income rises, according to Steven Ayer, a researcher at Imagine Canada, which tracks charities and non-profits.

And that picture jibes more closely with what these studies tell us about the donor mindset: If you want to spur people of all backgrounds to dig deep, make them feel like they have much less, if only for a moment.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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