

Speaker 1:

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Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

On behalf of the Society of Critical Care Anesthesiologists and Women in Critical Care, I'd like to welcome you to our podcast miniseries. This Stanford Medcast miniseries is dedicated to women in critical care medicine, but it's really for all physicians and working professionals out there who may be listening. This miniseries, you'll also hear from my co-host Dr. Amanda Schilling, a critical care physician and anesthesiologist at Tucson Medical Center. Our ultimate goal is to provide professional development content that puts a new lens on how we define success and "having it all." We'll talk with leaders in a wide range of fields, including organizational psychologists and experts in physician wellbeing. In these dynamic conversations, we hope to support and nourish the multiple roles that we play in our day-to-day lives.

In our first episode, we speak with Professor Vanessa Bohns. Professor Bohns is a social psychologist and professor and chair of organizational behavior at Cornell University. She holds a PhD in Psychology from Columbia University and an AB from Brown University. Her research areas include social influence, compliance, consent, help seeking, and self-conscious emotions. Professor Bohns is author of the book, *You Have More Influence Than You Think*. Her research has been published in top academic journals and has been covered by media outlets such as The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Atlantic, the Economist, and NPR. She has also written in a number of popular publications such as The New York Times and the Harvard Business Review. I'm so excited to be here with Professor Vanessa Bohns. Thank you so much for being here.

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

Thank you so much for having me. It's great to be here.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

I'm so thrilled to meet you and I have so many questions, so let's just dive right in. As women in medicine and I'm sure is the case for women in all professional arenas, we're often told that we are our own worst enemies and we just need to get out of our own way. I guess it's said to us as a form of encouragement, we're told that we just underestimate ourselves. We underestimate our influence. We just aren't asking for that raise or not negotiating hard enough. I was looking for the science behind these perceptions, which is what led me to your work. Could you tell us the story behind how you ended up focusing on this in your work?

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

Sure, and as you mentioned, my work is on influence, but it's a different way of approaching influence than a lot of other people. So it's not the typical, how do you get people to do stuff kind of influence? What are our perceptions about how we get people to do stuff and how likely they are to do things for us and are they accurate? And so I tend to find in my research that we tend to underestimate how likely people are to do things for us.

And I started out exploring influence from a more traditional perspective. And so I was doing studies looking at if you asked for something this way as opposed to this way, was someone more likely to say yes or more likely to go along with whatever you're presenting? And I was doing one of those studies in graduate school back when I was at Columbia in New York City and a professor I was working with at Columbia Business School at the time, Frank Flynn, he and I were looking at something which I don't even remember the details of, but it was some sort of manipulation where it was like, okay, ask this way or that way.

And so we wanted to test this manipulation on a group of people who were not just like students at Columbia, but also more diverse. And so I would go down to Penn Station to run this study and I would take the subway down there every day, go down with this little stack of questionnaires and go up to people and ask them to fill out these questionnaires. And I did this day after day and found it incredibly painful to go up to people and ask for things. And so when the study was over, I was just totally relieved to be done with it and was happy to bring all the data back up to Columbia. And we took a look at it. And when we looked at the data and analyzed it turned out that our original study did not work. And it was particularly devastating to me because I had gone through what was a traumatic event.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

A trauma.

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

... to collect this data. And science studies don't work, it happens. But I was particularly bummed. And so I was talking to Frank about just how upset I was because it was so hard to do this thing. And as I was describing how awful this experience was of asking people for things, he was looking at the data and I had recorded how many people said yes to me, and I had recorded any comments that they made. And he was like, you're describing this horrible experience where it's just awful asking people for things. And the way you describe it, I would think that no one was saying yes to you. And when they said no, they were being really mean.

But when I'm looking at the data, actually most people are saying yes to you and I don't see any rude comments. Were people really rude? And I was like, well, no. They were actually really kind and many people did say yes. And it was this moment of insight for both of us and the difference between how something is going in your head and this negativity bias that we have and how it's going in objective reality and that we may in fact have this self-conscious, over fraught sense of how interactions are going, that's really not true to how they're actually going, and they're actually going much better than we think.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

That's so interesting because even as you're living it, as people are saying yes and filling out your questionnaires, your memory of it is still the trauma and the anxiety of the whole experience.

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

Yeah, it's interesting, and I get asked that a lot in the end, if we test out these things and we discover that actually it's not that bad, why is it that we don't update our ideas about these things? And the truth is that it's just really, really sticky. We look back at all the things that were difficult or hard or the few times that we did get those nos and we focus on them and they just color the whole interaction and our

belief system about that particular task. And so it is a hard thing to update, but I think that through practice and experience we can.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

That's so interesting. Just as an aside, I just love the parallel story just about science and research and how while you were looking for one thing and that research study didn't necessarily work out, it was actually the impetus for a lot of exciting and interesting work, which was to follow. So then after that observation that your mentor made, what was the next step? How did you turn that into your next kind of phase of research?

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

We had this thought that this felt like it resonated with our experience that, yeah, we tend to focus on the likelihood that someone's going to say no to us when we're asking for something and maybe that's overblown. And so we thought, let's see if our intuition is correct. Let's see if it was my unique experience in Penn Station or if this is a more generalizable kind of phenomenon. And so we brought participants into the lab and we had them basically do the exact thing that I had done in Penn Station. So we brought them into the lab, we gave them a stack of questionnaires. And we said, you're going to go out and get strangers to fill out these questionnaires. And before you go, we said we're going to have you make a guess about how many people will say yes. So the way we phrase it exactly was you're going to get five people to say yes to these questionnaires. How many are you going to have to ask before you actually get five people to agree?

Then they went out and did this and they made the request and they kept track of how many people agreed and they came back to the lab and we took a look at the data and it turns out that they overestimated by twice as much the number of people they were going to have to ask before five people would agree. So they thought they were going to have to ask around 20 people, but they actually only had to ask around 10 people, and it was such a clear cut phenomenon. People would come into the lab and we would tell them what they had to do and they would just be so afraid and annoyed and scared and they would ask us questions, what if nobody says yes? What do I do? What if it takes all day?

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

I would be like, I'm not doing it.

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

And some people did say that. Some people just left because they were like, I'll never be able to do that. And then they would go out and do it and when they came back they had these big smiles and they would be like, people are so nice. That was so much easier than I thought, and it was just so clear that this was real before we even looked at the data and saw that big overestimation.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

That's so interesting. It's like not only could you quantify it, but viscerally you could feel that effect in play when they were coming back to the lab. I think I heard you speak about this. In this particular context, your lab participants are asking strangers to do something just like a simple favor and you could reason it out that everyone can benefit in some small way. So in this pro-social dynamic, it makes sense that maybe it's just an easy ask, but could you talk about how you were able to replicate these findings in the context of more unethical requests or even romantic advances?

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

Yeah, so we replicated those findings, as you said, with pro-social requests a bunch of times. We had our participants ask to borrow people's phones and asked for donations, asked for directions and things like that. And again and again we kept finding these results and one of our questions was what's driving them? Is it that people are just nicer than people think, which is a real finding and that happens. We wondered also if it was that or if it was something more. Is it just that people are nicer or is it actually that people are finding it really hard to say no to these people when they go up to them? And so if you imagine the situation from the other side, someone comes up to you and they're like, "Hey, I need help with something." What are you going to say? You feel like a jerk if you say no, you want to help somebody out.

You don't know the words to let them down easily. And so we feel this pressure to agree to things. And so that led us in the direction of, well, if people feel pressure to say yes, and that's something that we're missing when we ask for things, then maybe we would make the same mistake when we asked for unethical things, not just pro-social things. It's not just about being nice. So we did a study where we sent our participants out and we had them ask people to basically tell a lie for them. So we said, you're going to tell people that you're supposed to be giving this pitch for a new course on campus, but you don't want to do it. Can you just have them sign here and they'll lie saying that you actually gave this pitch that you didn't actually give. And so we had them do the same thing as we did before.

How many people do you think you'll have to ask before three people will agree to this? And they went out and they actually recorded how many people agreed. And we found that even when they were asking people to lie for them, they still overestimated how many people they would have to ask to get three people to agree by about twice as much. So it looked very similar to our pro-social requests. And look at that and say, you could reinterpret that as pro-social. They could be like, let me help this person out so that they don't have to make this pitch. That seems annoying, but small. No harm, no foul. And so we wanted to come up with a task that was very clearly unethical that no one could code as pro-social. And so we took a bunch of books off my bookshelf and we made them look like library books on campus.

And then we brought our participants into the lab. We gave them a library book, purported library book and a pen. And we said, you're going to go into libraries and ask people to vandalize a library book. And we gave them a script. We said, you're going to go up to a stranger and say, "Hey, I'm playing a prank on a friend, but they know my handwriting. Will you just quickly write the word pickle and pen in this library book?" And so we had them guess again, how many people do you think you're going to have to ask before three people agreed to this? They went out and they did it. And then they kept track of how many people agreed. And of course they thought most people would say no. So on the whole they thought it was something like 25% of people would agree to this request.

So the vast majority would say no. But when they went out and actually did this, most people said yes. So we found that 64% of people actually agreed to vandalize this library book. And the most interesting piece is that it's not like they didn't care about it. It's not like they thought that this was no big deal. They would protest. They would say things like, "I don't know if we should do this. This isn't right, this is vandalism." But they felt so uncomfortable saying no, that they did something they were uncomfortable with rather than actually go through make the effort to say no and make it weird with this person who was asking them for this thing.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

So in some ways, your work demonstrates how we underestimate our influence when we're making a request. But on the flip side, you're also highlighting how hard it is to say no. Why do you think that

happens? What factors are leading people to say yes to requests that they feel really uncomfortable with?

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

A lot of it is evolutionary. We are evolutionarily wired to stick with the group and to not do socially risky things that put us at risk of being ostracized from the group. Because for most of human history, we needed the group to survive. And so this idea of saying, no, it's a risk because it says I'm rejecting you, so I'm pushing you away. You might think I'm a jerk for saying no, so it might hurt my reputation. I might make you feel bad, so I might hurt our relationship in some way. And so all those things are just risky that it's a really hard thing to do. And if we were to say no, I'm sure many of us can relate to this. We want to say it in a way where we express all that it's not you. It's not me, it's not a relationship.

I'm a good person, you're a good person, we're all good, but I just want to say no. And it's hard to come up with the words in the moment to say that. It's just easier to just go along with it. And you mentioned before in romantic requests too. So this is also a dynamic that plays out. And so when people ask someone out who's not interested in them, they can also feel this pressure to agree even if they want to say no. And that can be particularly true for women because women are conditioned to not rock the boat and to not make a scene. And so there's even more pressure to say yes and not reject somebody.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

Yeah. And I think it's so relevant just in the context of the Me Too movement in the last few years and that dynamic between the person making the request being seemingly unaware of how hard it is for that other person to say no. We saw that kind of narrative playing out and a lot of the Me Too and things that ended up in the media, and it was just interesting that you were able to describe that in your research.

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

It's interesting because we started this work prior to the Weinstein revelations. So when all of that came out, it was like, oh, wow, now everybody's talking about this experience here in the lab. But I would say there are these sort of monstrous examples where this person clearly knows their power and they're taking advantage of it. And those are not the kinds of situations that we're studying. So we're much more interested in these commonplace situations that are often referred to as like he said, she said, they're just like these misunderstandings. So a big one that came up in the media was Aziz Ansari. So there was a woman that he had taken home after a date and he had pressured her to have sex, and she wound up feeling very pressured and leaving and texting him the next day saying, "That wasn't cool. You were really pressuring me."

And he was totally taken aback by this and his telling, he felt like the whole night was very consensual. And so this story, she under a pseudonym told it to a website that published it and it blew up because it really described these dynamics that were so familiar, and yet we didn't have a good way to describe them. Is this really a Me Too story or is this just a bad date? So a lot of people are having that debate. And one thing we wanted to show in our research was that it's not just these sort of one-off he said she said kinds of contexts, that there's actually a broader systematic bias that when we are in the position of being interested in someone and asking them out romantically, that we fail to realize how hard it is for that person to say no to us, that actually it's really uncomfortable to say no to someone.

And so in our scenarios we have people, for example, imagine asking a coworker out and that person turns out not to be interested in you. And so you're working late and you're like, "Hey, I'd love to take

you out for dinner." And they say no. And so we ask that person, how hard was it for that person to say no? How awkward did they feel saying no? And then we have people who are randomly assigned to another condition. Imagine that scenario from the opposite perspective. Imagine you're working late and a colleague asks you out and you're not interested in them and you say no, how hard was that for you? And how awkward was that? And we find that people report it being much more awkward and difficult to say no when they're imagining them being the person who's actually doing it. And in some additional studies where we've done surveys or we've asked people about real life experiences of this, we also find differences in the downstream consequences.

So people who were pursued by someone at work who they weren't interested in, they wind up avoiding that person, sometimes avoiding projects that they might be interested in just to avoid that person. Sometimes at the extremes they even consider switching careers or switching labs. It was a STEM lab sample that we looked at this in. But on the flip side, the person who pursued them and was rejected is like, well, they said no, no big deal. And I'm sure that didn't affect their behavior that much. And so they report very low levels of expecting them to have changed their behaviors in all these different ways.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

And in that dynamic, like in the STEM lab situation, did the effects that you find fall along gender lines or was the effect found across genders?

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

The thing that was interesting is that there was a huge gender effect in terms of being pursued by someone you weren't interested in. So women were much more likely to say that they were the target of an interaction where someone had asked them out who they weren't interested in than men were. But then once we took that gender difference out of the equation and just looked at, okay, given that gender difference, now that the people who actually were the people pursuing someone else, did they underestimate how hard it was for the person to say no. We didn't find gender differences there. So it seems like this impacts women more than men as targets of these unwanted romantic advances. But when women are in the position of being the pursuer, they still make this mistake.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

So it's just our N is larger as women that we end up being the targets of unwanted advances, but that lack of awareness or perception of the ask or the person making the request, both men and women are making that mistake of underestimating the anxiety that the other person is feeling or the discomfort.

Yeah, I mean I feel like as you're speaking, I see examples of this dynamic playing out in so many different ways, in similarly dark ways in terms of sexual advances, but also in other maybe more benign ways. So for example, as junior faculty, there's this sense that we have to say yes to all these opportunities, and I'm putting opportunities in air quotes because there's this fear that if we say no, that the offers and opportunities will stop coming or you don't want to not seem like a team player. You're trying to build a good reputation early on, and it's exhausting. You just feel like you are not allowed to say no. But given your work showing how much we struggle with saying no, is it on us to build that no muscle or is it the people doing the asking or the people with the seniority who have to be more mindful of the requests? How do we build this into organizational culture? How do we implement this in the workplace now that your research has highlighted the dynamic?

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

Yeah, absolutely. And I think a lot of the advice tends to be directed towards the individual, here's how to get better at saying no. And there's some good tips like taking your time, not just agreeing to things on the spot, being more mindful about what you agreed to, keeping a list of all the things that you're doing and the things you might want to do. So you recognize that sort of saying yes to one thing is saying no to something else.

So there are all these great tips to help you decide and actually make the effort to say no. But I think there's way too much put on the individual to say no and much less attention put on, as you said, the organizational culture to be a culture that really allows people to maintain boundaries and to say no. And also the people asking. So part of it is managers keeping track of how much different people have on their plate, but it's also asking in ways where they're really not putting people on the spot.

And one of the suggestions for saying no is to take a beat and respond on your own time once you've had some time to consider it and maybe even respond over email where you could write out your no in a way you feel really comfortable with. But on the flip side, that means that when you're asking someone for something, you don't want to put them on the spot and ask them face-to-face right then and make them make a decision right then. Often what I try to do when I'm trying to model this, for example, if I'm asking a graduate student to do something, but I really want to make sure that they want to do it, I'll ask them in person, maybe I'll say like this opportunity as you said came up, are you interested in it? But I'll say, don't tell me now. Think about it, and then just send me an email once you've had enough time to think about it. And so that takes the pressure off of them.

It also allows them to tell me through email instead of right there to my face if they want to say no. And it's a lot easier to say no over email. So that's one way. Another thing, we've been running some studies in the lab trying to figure out how you can ask in ways that people feel more comfortable to say, no, it's actually been really hard and a lot of things we've tried haven't worked, but recently we found one thing that works really well and that's actually giving them the how to say no. So not just telling them it's okay to say no, and that's often what many of us will default to.

It's okay to say no, but you're like, okay, I still need to find the words for that. I still need to find the excuse. But actually telling them, if you can't do this, just say this. We call it the safe word project. It's almost like you're giving someone a safe word. You say this and the question is off the table, and we actually get twice as many people so far in the data we've collected saying no if they're told how to.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

It's almost like you're just making the interaction more transparent and making the no less risky or consequential because you're saying, I'm asking you if you'd like to do this, but here are the options. Because I think sometimes you feel like no isn't even an option, but now you're actually explicitly saying, no, it's okay if you say no and this is how you can do it. You're alluding to not responding right away. And I saw that you had done some work on how we overestimate the urgency to respond to an email. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

Yeah. I love this project and it definitely relates to boundaries. So my colleague Laura Jirja and I have this paper where we identify something we call the email urgency bias, and this is the tendency, as you said, when we receive an email, especially during non-work hours, we feel like a response needs to be made immediately. We overestimate how quickly the other person expects a response. So when we asked in a series of studies people about an email that they sent outside of work hours and how quickly they expected the person to respond to it, and then we asked them about receiving an email outside of work

hours and how quickly they thought the other person expected them to respond to it. We found this pretty big disconnect, which is the bias that we tend to have. Again, we didn't want to put the onus on the person responding.

It's not always on them to set boundaries because I think that's a lot to ask of people, and that's a message that's out there all the time. I think it's on all of us to create a culture where people can set boundaries. And so we did an intervention on the side of the sender. And so we found that when the sender of an email, so this could be like it's just the best time to work. Work at crazy hours, and so I just happen to get emails off my plate at crazy hours. But if you tell people, this is not urgent, you can respond whenever your working hours are, that takes the pressure off the other person and then they don't exhibit the same bias. Another way to do it is to delay send, but we're actually looking into whether people would rather get the email, but know they don't have to respond right away or have someone else choose for them that they don't get the email for a couple days and trying to see if there's a trade off there.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

Yeah, I think email is so convenient in some ways, but has really demolished work boundaries. And then I think this is such interesting to help us recalibrate and redefine our boundaries in a world where we're just I think in some ways expected to be working all the time.

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

This sort of saying that people say is that email and personal devices free us from the workplace because we could work from anywhere, anytime, but instead we're working from everywhere all the time.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

All the time, right? Yeah, exactly. As chair of your department, how has your research influenced or inspired your version or style of leadership?

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

This is such a good question because I'd say one thing I've realized, so I just became chair a couple months ago, and one thing I've realized is that it's really hard to implement a lot of the things I tell people to do. And so one big one is that we all, including me, I realize, especially now, we feel like we're proving ourselves all the time and we work our way up. By the time that we are, for example, like chair of a department for a long time, we haven't been. For a long time, we've been deferring to somebody else. And so there's this sense once you've been working that way for so long and trying to show why you deserve that position and not be able to turn that off. I still need to keep showing that I deserve to be here, that I have good ideas, that I have all the answers.

And so you get into a meeting and one of the suggestions I always make to people is like when you're the person in charge, you want to talk less and listen more. You don't want to be the first person to spit out an answer because then everybody defers to you because you're the person in charge, and so you want to take up less space rather than more. But of course, I've had to fight myself to do that because I get in there and I'm like, oh my gosh, I feel like I need to prove myself. Why am I a chair now? And so I have to really try not to come up with my own ideas. We're supposed to discuss, this is what I think about it, and instead allow for uncomfortable silences and just let myself, to me, feel like I look like I don't know what I'm doing, but really it's allowing other voices to fill the space.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

Well, and I think you spend so much of your career taking up space and making sure those ideas are voiced out loud so that people know what's going on the inside. And I imagine it's a big downshift to have to flip roles and be on the receiving end of people trying to work their way up.

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

And it also helps to remember what it feels like to have to push yourself to make comments. So I try to solicit comments specifically from each individual, like everyone go around and do this because I remember it was so hard to work up the nerve to say my opinion, but if you were just going around the room and everyone's going to have a chance to give their opinion, then that's a little bit different. Then everyone's going to do it, right? So trying to remember that I don't just have to wait around for people to talk. And then the people most comfortable, and the people usually have a certain demographic too. They tend to be male, will fill up that space. Instead, it's okay, let's come up with a structured way to have this discussion so that all the voices can be heard. So that's another thing I've had to remind myself. That was helpful when I was on the other side.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

Yeah. This has been such a fun conversation and I think we've already sprinkled in actionable items and practical tips. Just to round out the conversation, now that we know we're walking around underestimating our influence, and we could probably get people to do more things than we think, what would you tell our listeners is one action item or tip that you find to be the most helpful?

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

The thing that I actually find the most helpful is when you're going to ask for something or when you want to persuade someone of something, is instead of starting from the assumption that they're primed to say no and prime to argue against you and prime to reject your going to ask if you start from the assumption that actually most people are primed, they're wired at their core to want to agree with what you have to say to show that they like you and that they want to connect with you. And because of that, that they are going to agree with you. That's not always going to be true, but if you go into interactions assuming that it sets a nice tone where you don't come in super overly assertive, when we think that someone's not going to listen to us or that we have to work really hard to get this thing.

But it also avoids the other issue of just not even trying because you assume the person won't listen or that they're automatically going to say no and not negotiating yourself down before you try to ask for something. So you actually think if this person is going to say yes to whatever it is I want to ask of them, what do I really want to ask? What do I want that yes to look like, where I won't get that yes and think, oh, I should have asked for more. And so I think thinking people are primed, they're wired to say yes, to agree with you is just a nice way to go into influence interactions.

Kirsten Steffner, MD (host):

It's just like a much more tangible way of saying be confident going into the room. I think it makes a lot of sense to me and I think would be really useful for our listeners. This has been so much fun, and I really appreciate your time and think that your work is so interesting. Thank you so much.

Vanessa Bohns, PhD (guest speaker):

Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

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Speaker 1:

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