

Flattery won't get you everywhere

Andrew Colman

"Every woman is infallibly to be gained by every sort of flattery, and every man by one sort or another." Lord Chesterfield expressed this rather dogmatic opinion in a letter to his son in 1752, and his sentiments have been shared by numerous subsequent writers. Dale Carnegie, the author of the best-selling book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, recommended the unstinting use of flattery as part of his formula for "How to make people like you instantly." He believed that this policy would invariably yield positive results. Recent experiments at the University of Leicester, however, have revealed that things are not quite so simple, and that there are circumstances in which flattery is likely to cause a *decrease*, not increase, in liking for the flatterer.

The background to these experiments was provided by the work of Edward Jones in the United States during the 1960s. Jones and his colleagues were curious about all the various tactics, collectively called *ingratiation tactics*, which people sometimes adopt to make themselves appear more attractive to others. They carried out a series of experiments in which people were given a chance to get acquainted with strangers. Various ingenious methods were devised to get subjects to behave ingratiatingly. The usual method was to engineer a situation in which the subjects had something to gain by making themselves attractive to the strangers.

The subjects persuaded to behave ingratiatingly usually did so in a way which was clearly distinguishable from that of other subjects, who were given no particular incentive to ingratiate themselves. They used four main classes of ingratiation tactics. First, they usually tried to present themselves to the strangers in a biased manner. They emphasised what they thought were their more attractive qualities and played down their weak points. Secondly, they generally pretended to share the strangers' attitudes and opinions on important issues. Thirdly, they often offered unsolicited favours to the strangers. Finally, they very often used flattery.

An unexpected finding about vanity and self-deception emerged from these experiments. When the ingratiation tactics succeeded in eliciting liking from the recipients, even the most candid subjects were later unwilling to admit to others, or to themselves, that they had taken any active steps to enhance their attractiveness. They seemed to have convinced themselves that the strangers had liked them for no other reason than their inherent likeableness.

These early experiments were investigations of the *active* features of ingratiation. My colleagues and I, on the other hand,

have been investigating the *responsive* aspects of ingratiation—that is, the way in which one particular kind of ingratiation, namely flattery, influences a recipient's liking for the flatterer.

There are two main theories about how effective flattery is in influencing liking for the flatterer. There is the "self-enhancement" theory, and the "cognitive consistency" theory. Although they are both quite simple and almost commonsense, it is interesting that the two theories lead to conflicting predictions about what will happen in certain circumstances.

The self-enhancement theory is based on elements of Carl Rogers's theory of personality and on the concept of "need satisfaction." The fundamental assumption is that people have a powerful need to evaluate themselves favourably. Flattery helps to satisfy this need. It is always reassuring, according to this theory, to be told that one is likeable; it satisfies a basic human need, and evokes reciprocal liking for the flatterer.

The cognitive consistency theory, on the other hand, is based on a different kind of human need. It is the need to organise one's thoughts, feelings and behaviour in a way which has meaning and is harmonious. People therefore usually like those who share their attitudes and opinions on matters of importance to them. Since a person's attitudes towards himself clearly fall into this category, cognitive consistency theory predicts that flattery will cause the flatterer to be liked only when the flattery supports the recipient's own self-image. One of R. D. Laing's poetic "knots" makes this point:

I am good
You love me
therefore you are good.
I am bad
You love me
therefore you are bad.

It is interesting to see what happens when a person who has very low self-esteem is flattered, or when a compliment is delivered on some personal quality which the recipient believes he is lacking. According to cognitive consistency theory, this type of flattery is liable to backfire and cause a poor impression of the flatterer, since it is cognitively inconsistent. Self-enhancement theory, on the other hand, predicts that this kind of flattery will be most effective in eliciting liking for the flatterer. This is because the recipient's need for reassurance is strongest where he lacks self-esteem.

To test these two theories against each other, we recently carried out an experiment on subjects who had been specially selected by means of a standard questionnaire for their very high or very low self-esteem. Each subject was interviewed separately for

ten to 15 minutes in a laboratory fitted with a one-way screen. The interview covered biographical details, relations with other people, problems with work, incidents the subject was proud or embarrassed to recall, and so on. The subject was told that he was being observed through the one-way screen by a psychologist, who would later provide an expert character analysis.

Each subject, in fact, received one of two standard evaluations. One was very flattering ("He creates a very favourable impression. He's the kind of person I enjoy talking to . . . He shows healthy psychological adjustment"), the other was neutral ("He creates a fair impression . . . there's nothing really outstanding to say"). After receiving the flattering or the neutral evaluation, each subject was given a plausible pretext for giving his impressions of the evaluator.

When praise backfires

The results provided clear support for the cognitive consistency theory. The high self-esteem subjects generally ended up with a much more favourable impression of the evaluator when he flattered them than when he offered neutral comments. But subjects who had a low opinion of themselves preferred the neutral evaluator to the flatterer—that is, the flattery backfired when it was used on these subjects. These results suggest that flattery succeeds in eliciting liking from the recipient only when it confirms the latter's self-image. People who have low opinions of themselves are not merely impervious to flattery, but they react *against* it by disapproving of the flatterer.

We have also carried out a more subtle experiment to try to discover some of the limits of cognitive consistency theory. In this experiment, instead of selecting subjects for high and low overall self-esteem, we capitalised on the fact that nearly everyone has qualities in themselves which they like and qualities which they dislike. A person may, for example, possess high aesthetic self-esteem (she may think she is beautiful), but low intellectual self-esteem (she may think she is unintelligent). In this case, a compliment on her good looks would be an example of what we called *valid flattery*, and a compliment on her brightness would be *phony flattery*. The nature of flattery—whether it is valid or phoney—is therefore defined from the viewpoint of the recipient rather than that of the flatterer.

According to the cognitive consistency theory, only valid flattery will elicit liking for the flatterer because it satisfies the need for consistency, whereas phoney flattery generates inconsistency. The self-enhancement prediction is precisely the reverse: phoney flattery will elicit more liking than valid flattery as the recipient's need for reassurance is greatest in those areas where he has low self-esteem.

We expected the outcome would depend upon the status differences between the flatterer and the recipient. When a low-status person delivers phoney flattery to someone of relatively higher status, commonsense suggests that the recipient will



reject the flattery in order to maintain cognitive consistency. For example, "He says I sing beautifully, but he doesn't know what he's talking about." Compliments from a flatterer of relatively higher status, on the other hand, are likely to seem more authoritative and to carry more weight even if they are phoney ("He says I sing beautifully of all things. Well, what about that!")

We accordingly introduced the evaluator in this experiment to each undergraduate subject either as a relatively high status person (a postgraduate student) or as a relatively low-status person (a school dropout). In addition the flattery was individually tailored to each subject's self-image, which had been carefully assessed by a previous paper-and-pencil test. We expected that both valid and phoney flattery would result in increased liking for the high status flatterer, but that only valid flattery would succeed with the low status flatterer.

The results partly confirmed our predictions. Status alone had no effect on liking: when they refrained from flattery, the high status and low status evaluators were equally liked by the subjects. When they indulged in flattery, however, the high status flatterers became much *more* attractive, and the low status flatterers became much *less* attractive to the subjects. As expected, it made little difference whether the high status evaluators used valid or phoney flattery. However, subjects disliked the low status evaluators most strongly when they indulged in phoney flattery. Unexpectedly, even valid flattery tended to backfire when used by the low status evaluators.

These results suggest that all kinds of flattery are liable to fail when used by an evaluator of lower status than the recipient, and that phoney flattery is liable to fail dismally in such cases. When used by a high status evaluator, on the other hand, flattery seems to evoke liking whether it is valid or phoney. The explanation for these different status effects probably lies in the apparent insincerity or flattery delivered by a lower status evaluator. Praise from a lowly quarter may often suggest not only that the flatterer's opinion is of little worth, but that he is trying to gain some advantage. This is particularly likely if the flattery seems phoney. Praise from someone whom we admire or respect is less easy to reject as worthless, and we are less likely to attribute manipulative intentions to such a flatterer.

The results of the second experiment support both self-enhancement and cognitive consistency effects. People seem to need both self-enhancement and cognitive consistency. Depending on the circumstances, one or other gains ascendancy.

Flattery which is inconsistent with a recipient's self-image may create positive and negative reactions simultaneously: the flatterer may be liked at an emotional level, but regarded as a fool from a more rational point of view. This helps account for some of the conflicting results of the experiments.

In the case of flattery, conventional ideas seem to contain more than a grain of truth. But there is obviously more to flattery than most people realise.