# Episode 61: "Are You an Influencer? The Answer May Surprise You"

*with Vanessa Bohns, Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Cornell University*

*Vanessa Bohns is a social psychologist whose research shows that we often have more influence on others than we think we do. Vanessa explains how this can be good (giving a compliment really does brighten someone's day) and bad (asking for a favour can make it hard for someone to say no). To do better, Vanessa suggests that both influencers and influencees should be mindful--mindful of how we ask and how we answer requests.*

*Transcript:*

KIRSTIN APPELT, HOST: Welcome to this edition of Calling DIBS. I'm your host, Kirstin Appelt, Research Director with UBC Decision Insights for Business and Society, or DIBS for short. Today, we're calling DIBS on Vanessa Bohns.

Vanessa is a social psychologist and Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Cornell. She's written extensively in both academic articles and popular media, including her excellent first book, "You Have More Influence Than You Think". Vanessa received her PhD from Columbia University, where she and I had the best time being grad students in Tory Higgins' social psychology lab and exploring New York City on grad student budgets.

It's been years since we've lived in the same place, but luckily, we keep finding opportunities like these to connect. It's the highlight of my week to get a chance to chat with the one and only Vanessa Bohns. So welcome to the podcast, Vanessa.

VANESSA BOHNS, GUEST: Thank you. It's so good to be here.

APPELT: Why don't we start by having you tell us a little bit about yourself. I probably know some of the answers, but they'll be new for our other listeners.

BOHNS: Let's see. I grew up in a farm in New Jersey, I guess on a farm, not in a farm, and kind of fell in love with psychology pretty early on. But I didn't really realize it was psychology that I was falling in love with. So, I interned when I was really young in high school for an advertising agency and wound up making my own ads that were published in the little local paper and thought that in my future I wanted to work in advertising.

And so, I went to college at Brown, and I studied psychology, which I eventually learned was kind of touching on a lot of the things I found interesting, interestingly, about advertising. But when I was there, I worked in a sleep lab and discovered how much I loved neuroscience and kind of this other side of psychology. And so, for a little while there, I thought I wanted to be a sleep researcher.

But if you're going to be a sleep researcher, you have to stay up late at night, which I was not a big fan of. And so, I decided it was better for my mental health and sleep hygiene to not be a sleep researcher. I went and worked in advertising for a while and eventually found my way back to graduate school because when I

entered advertising, when I was officially in sort of a big firm in New York City, Ogilvy and Mather, I realized I didn't like a lot of the different aspects.

The one aspect I loved, though, was market research. And all the people in the market research department had PhDs and knew how to do research. And so, I kind of was inspired to go back and do that. And so, I wound up, with you, in Tory Higgins' lab studying social psychology. And actually, I initially thought maybe I'd even go back to like neuroscience stuff and considered working in a circadian rhythm lab at Columbia. But then I realized you had to do hamster surgery there, and that was not for me. So, I decided to study people.

APPELT: And we did not have to perform any surgeries for anyone wondering.

BOHNS: Luckily, for anyone who would have received the surgery.

APPELT: Yeah. So, it's interesting because a lot of people we talk to have very winding paths. But yours was fairly, there were some turns, but yes, was pretty direct from advertising to psychology. So, the thing I wanted to focus on is that during the pandemic, while most of us were bingeing Netflix shows, you actually wrote a book that I would say is, unbiasedly, very good that I read voraciously. So first off, congratulations on writing a book that's not only accessible but evidence based, which I think is a really tricky balance, too, to have both those pieces.

And what I wanted to ask about is your book is about the “power of influence”, but more specifically, it focuses on this idea of the asymmetry between how influential we think we are versus how influential we actually are. So, can you tell us a bit more about that and how you discovered the asymmetry?

BOHNS: Sure. And thank you so much. You're being modest, too. As you know, you were my second editor on that book and had so many amazing suggestions. But yeah, you know, so as you said, my book focuses on sort of a different side of influence than is traditionally looked at. Most books and most research on influence is on how you get people to do things. So how to be more or less influential, whereas I'm really interested in our intuitions about that, what we think someone will do if we ask them, you know, what our intuitions are about how to be more or less influential and whether they turn out to be accurate.

And I really got involved in that in graduate school when I was initially studying that sort of more traditional side of influence. I was working on a project with Frank Flynn, who was at Columbia Business School at the time, now he's at Stanford, and we were studying something, I don't remember the exact details, but we were basically trying to see if you ask people to do something one way versus another, you know, are they more likely to agree to do this?

And to do that, we decided we needed a diverse adult participant pool. You know, we didn't want to just do this on the Columbia campus. And so, I would go down to Penn Station every day with my little packet of surveys and go up to people and ask them to fill them out. And so, I would walk up to, you know, one person after another. I'd be like, “Will you fill out my survey?”. And the process was so painful to me. It was like traumatic. I still go to Penn Station and have this just visceral reaction to walking through the doors.

And so eventually, you know, it was over and I had collected all the data we needed and I brought the data back to Frank and we were looking at it and our prediction didn't pan out. So, our original thought that, you know, this would be more influential than this turned out not to work. And, you know, ordinarily that's not a big deal. As you know, lots of things don't work in science. But it was so painful to collect that data that it was devastating to me.

And so I wound up describing to Frank just how awful it was. You know, like, “I can't believe it didn't work after all I've been through”. But he, you know, had access to sort of the objective data. He was looking at this data saying, “You know, you're describing this awful experience that, you know, sounds like it's just full of rejection and just incredibly, you know, awkward and you felt so anxious and uncomfortable. But I'm looking at this data and it looks like most people were saying yes to you. And I don't see anyone being really mean to you. I mean, did you record any, like, rude responses?”. And I was like, “No, actually, you know, most people did say yes, most people were pretty nice”.

And so, it was through that realization in that conversation that we realized that what we imagined in our heads, the effect we imagined we're having on other people, is often different from the actual effect that we're having. And we tend to be a lot more negative and harsh and pessimistic when it comes to our experience compared to the reality. And so that's kind of what I've studied ever since is comparing what's in your head to the reality.

APPELT: And so, one of the things I like in your book is that you move from these like light hearted examples of asking to borrow a phone or asking for directions to really serious and timely topics around compliance and consent. Can you explain what the connection is between this idea of the asymmetry and compliance and consent?

BOHNS: Yeah. So, you know, following this experience in Penn Station, Frank and I wanted to see, you know, if other people would have a similar experience. And so, we started running a series of studies where we had people go out and ask strangers for things, just like I had done in Penn Station. And before they did this, they had to predict how many people would say yes. Then they kept track of how many people actually said yes.

And we found that people tended to underestimate how likely people were to agree to a whole wide range of requests, you know, filling out surveys, asking to borrow someone's phone, asking for donations. And one question we had was, you know, “Are people just a lot nicer than we think?”. And so, there's been some research that suggests that that's true, and that's certainly what our participants were saying.

We would tell our participants to go out and ask people for things, and they would just immediately, they would hate us, essentially, like they were so upset about this thing that we were asking them to do, but then they would go out and do it and they would kind of bound back into the lab feeling so much happier than they expected.

It was just so much easier than they expected. And so their conclusion was really like “People are just so much nicer than I thought”. And so, we wondered if that was the case. And as we kind of drilled down on this effect, we discovered that, at least in our studies, even though people in many situations are nicer than we think and more pro-social than we think, but in many of our studies, there's something else going on, and that is that people are agreeing more than we expect because it's really hard for them to say no.

And so if you kind of put yourself instead of being in the perspective of our participants asking for things, if you put yourself in the perspective of like the people I was asking at Penn Station or the strangers on campus that our participants were asking, and you imagine someone coming up to you, and asking you for this favour, you know, looking into someone's face, trying to come up with the words to say, “No.”, it's hard.

We feel bad, we feel awkward, we feel guilty. You know, we can't find a good excuse. And so, it's actually really hard to say no. And that's the thing that we often overlook when we ask for things. And so that sort of realization that that was driving our effects is what took our research away from sort of just ask for things. You

know, you could get all the help and positive things that you need more than you think, to focus more on the kind of dark side of the equation.

The possibility that people might also find it harder to say no to other things like unethical things like romantic requests. Situations where you would really want someone to either feel free to say no or truly consent to something. We may also underestimate how hard it is for people to say no in those situations. And therefore, we may see consent when someone else is sort of merely complying.

APPELT: That makes sense. So, would you say that compliance and consent are two sides of the same coin, or how would you distinguish those concepts?

BOHNS: Yeah, I think compliance is really pretty simple. Compliance is just a behaviour. It's like someone agreeing to something that you asked for, just someone going along with something. The way I think about consent is that's the meaning underlying that person's agreement or the meaning behind the compliance.

And so, you know, consent has a lot of different meanings in the world. We use it colloquially. You know, we use it a lot when we talk about like “MeToo” situations and sexual consent. It also has legal meaning, right? So, you know, did you actually consent when you signed that contract? Did you understand what you were agreeing to?

And so, you know, depending on sort of who is interpreting it, whether it's that individual of like, “Okay, I agreed to that willingly. I agreed to it knowing what I was getting into. I agree to it, you know, in sound mind. I was competent to agree. And I feel like I truly agreed to that thing voluntarily.”. You know, as an individual you can feel like, “Okay, I consented to that thing”. But at the same time, if we're looking at like legal consent, you need to look at what an objective third party would say. Like, you know, “Does this person appear to have agreed voluntarily? You know, were there any sort of clear threats that I could identify? Did this person appear to be intoxicated? Did this person appear to be informed?”

And one of the things we found is that different perspectives in a situation can view consent differently. Like one person may feel like “I don't feel like I consented to that”. But an objective observer may say like, “But I don't see any reason to say that you didn't”. And so, everyone sees the compliance, right? Everyone says like “You agreed, you signed the contract, you did the thing, you went along with whatever.”. But, whether or not that agreement, that compliance was truly consensual can vary depending on the way people interpret that behaviour and like the underlying sort of subjective feelings that that person was experiencing.

APPELT: Wow. There is so much nuance there about when is compliance or consent. So, let's say you are in the position of being an influencer, having an influence on someone. How do you balance those concerns where you want compliance and you also want to make sure it's consensual? How do you tackle that?

BOHNS: I think that that's a great question because so often, you know, we put sort of the onus on the other person to say “No” and decide what they're comfortable saying “Yes” and “No” to. And what my research shows is really that it's really hard, harder than we realize, for people to say no.

And so, it kind of puts some of the responsibility on the position of the influencer, the person who's asking for something. And I think if you sort of really want someone to consent to something that you're asking if you really want their buy-in you want, you know, their voluntary agreement, you want to give them as much space and time as possible to process and think about and be able to say “No” in the way that they want to, to whatever requests that you're making.

So, you know, for example, with my graduate students, if I have a project I'd like them to work on, but I also want them to be sure that they have time to do it and that they're not feeling overburdened, I'll describe it to them in person because asking for something in person is much more effective and it does sort of add all these nonverbals and it creates sort of a trust and a social connection. But then I'll say, “You know, go back and think about it and get back to me and just send me an email if you want to do this.”.

It gives them time to process. It gives them a way to respond to me over email where they don't feel put on the spot face to face. And that way I know that, you know, they're not going to just agree to something because they're looking me in the eye and feeling like they can't say “No”.

There are cases where, you know, that's okay. Like if you're asking someone for a favour or something, that is going to benefit everybody. Asking in person, face to face, putting them on the spot in that way sometimes is the best way to ask to get a “Yes”, although there are also times when that means you'll get a “Yes” and then someone will bail on you, you know, a week later when they actually have to do the thing.

APPELT: Yeah. It's really interesting because you think of the variety of situations, the places where it's a non consequential decision and so you want to give lots of latitude or in the case of, you know, things have been happening in the world like vaccination and you want someone to consent, but you also want to present a strong argument. So, do you approach it differently depending on what the ask is and what the kind of cost-benefit trade-off is, both for the individual and society?

BOHNS: I think so. Yeah. I think it's you know, it's kind of what I talk about in my class on morality at work, always these sorts of competing motivations and concerns like one is for individual rights and autonomy and one is for the collective and the group. And I do think that, you know, depending on whether in a particular request or in a particular influence attempt, you think that the most important thing is preserving this person's autonomy and their right to say “no”, you might ask in a different way and a less sort of assertive, forceful way in a, you know, over an email potentially.

But then if you feel like this is actually really important for the group and for the collective, and I'm actually willing to put you in a place where maybe you don't have as much autonomy because that's for the group, you know, it's good for the group. Then I think it's okay to go ahead and ask in these more assertive ways and these ways that put people on the spot a little bit more.

APPELT: And I forget where I read this, because I've read a lot of your work, but I was reading recently that you had these exercises in class and that it's also just part about not always about the decision you make, but about feeling like you've taken the time to make the decision that you're comfortable with in terms of how you pose the question. You might end up with a different decision, different times. But that process of evaluating so that you’re aware of the influence you’re having is really important. Does that accurately capture that idea?

BOHNS: I think so. I think in general, this sense of having been mindful about how you approached something, being mindful about the way that you tried to influence someone. And also on the other side, you know, for those of us who find it hard to say “No”, being mindful of the decisions that we're making, you know, taking time to actually think about whether we want to agree to things or making a decision is really helpful.

And as you said, I recently did come across and write about this research suggesting that whatever decision we make, we feel better about it if we feel like we came to it through a process we feel good about. And so, I think my being mindful as opposed to feeling like you were put on the spot or you didn't give it a lot of thought is generally sort of a better way to make decisions.

APPELT: So, what I'm hearing is that mindfulness is really important for both parties, the influencer and the influenced. If both parties are mindful, then it's more likely that they will both feel good at the end of the day about how the situation resolves. Beyond mindfulness, what other advice do you have for people who are in the influence position being subject to another person's influence?

BOHNS: Yeah. I think a lot of it is kind of the reverse of the advice you would give for an influencer. If you sort of want to make sure that you are making a decision about whether or not to agree to something, for example, more mindfully, you want to slow down the process and you want to take the time that you need to be able to process the information you're getting, and make a decision based on that information.

And so, if someone is asking you something face to face or trying to convince you of something face to face, you can listen to that. And at the end of the conversation, you know, you don't have to decide right there or concede right there. You can say, you know, “I need a little time to think about that” and tell the person you'll get back to them over email or you'll get back to them at a different time.

And that allows you to take the time to process. It also allows you to come up with a way to let the person down or reject them, which is really hard for a lot of us to do, especially if we have to come up with the words right there on the spot. So, if you can think about, you know, “I'll feel okay saying no to this if I can remind this person, you know, of all these other things that I have going on, of the fact that, you know, I really care about them and the relationship. This isn't indicative of anything about them or our relationship or the fact that I'm not like a team player.”

If you can kind of find the words that make you feel good about saying no, which is really hard to do on the spot, you know, that again can make you feel better about the decision to say “No” ultimately.

APPELT: Absolutely. I think also for me, it's often the distinction between being in that hot state where you're excited about the idea and you're thinking more of the pros. And then when you take a step back and you have that time to reflect, to be mindful, you also think of the cons and some of the other pressures. So, it gives you, like you said, slowing down the process gives you the chance to be mindful and make sure you're making the decision that makes sense.

BOHNS: Yeah, I think that's a really good way to think about it.

APPELT: So, when you think about the incredible power of influence and you think about all these different examples, like the examples in your book, like defacing a library book to things like the “MeToo” movement, there's so much in this space. When you think about influence, what worries you?

BOHNS: You know, the thing that worries me the most isn't so much the influence itself. It's this ignorance that so many people seem to have of the influence that they have. And so, I feel like what that does, that is if you feel like, you know, “If I post this thing, no one's really paying attention to my social media account. No one's going to notice it.”. You may put things out there that actually do get noticed and reach much further than you realize and could have negative effects, you know, if you're not actually being mindful and kind of vetting the things that you're putting out there.

Similarly, if you think like “No one really cares what I have to say” and you make a comment that is hurtful, you know, you could negatively impact someone because we all have sort of negative comments from all sorts of different people that float around in our heads and just reverberate in our heads for a long time to come.

And on the flip side, you know, we may hold back from saying positive things or putting opinions that are really important to us on topics that we really care about out there because we kind of discount ourselves and take ourselves out of the conversation when really our voices are more valued there than we think.

APPELT: That's a really great point. I like the way you phrased that. On the flipside of what worries you about influence, what makes you hopeful about influence?

BOHNS: I think the thing that makes me hopeful is seeing when I talk to people about the fact that we do have more influence than we think, I see people feel really reassured. Like, I think there's a general sense that, you know, people feel like they don't matter in the world and to other people as much as kind of they wish that they did.

And when we talk about influence, that usually, you know, people think of this like salesy, very formal kind of influence. They think of people like trying to convince someone of a political opinion or trying to get someone to, you know, buy something they're selling. And we think of it in this really kind of formal, almost like skeezy kind of way.

But the thing that I really try to drive home is this idea that influence is also just the impact we have on other people all the time. I consider compliments and the impact they have on how good they make someone feel to be a form of influence. And so, I think once people start seeing influence in this broader way, it really does make them feel like, “Oh wait, this idea that I have influence means that I actually matter to other people and sort of in the world more than I might have realized”.

APPELT: Yeah, it's like in some ways, influence has a bad rap because it's associated with certain types of influence. But if we zoom out and see all the different facets that influence can take, then we realize, like you said, its kind of about mattering and connection at the end of the day.

BOHNS: Yeah, exactly.

APPELT: So, if people walk away from your research with one takeaway about the power of influence, what do you want that to be?

BOHNS: I'd say my favourite sort of takeaway is to not assume that other people's default is to be disagreeable. To say “No” to you. To kind of jump on you and explain all the ways you're wrong. That actually, you know, people's default is to maintain social connections and to be prosocial and agreeable because we all want to stay connected to one another.

You know, we all want to be part of the group. It's baked into our DNA because we're social creatures, but we seem to have this sort of deep false sense that everybody else, you know, we have to get past “No.”, and that people are just primed to disagree with us.

I'd really like people to sort of take away from this and from all my work, this idea that actually that's not people's default, right? That people actually are out there, kind of ready to agree with you. They want to hear the things you have to say and they want to believe them, right? And they won't always. But this kind of opposite assumption that they're defaulting to kind of this disagreeableness, I just think is not true.

APPELT: That's such a wonderful takeaway. We don't need to approach situations like “How do I push past no”, but rather start with the more positive, more charitable assumption that people want to help. I think that's a really great message, especially in today's often antagonistic kind of discourse. Well, I love hearing

about what you've been working on, but I'm also super curious to hear what's next? What future research directions are you excited about?

BOHNS: I really have sort of focused mostly on the compliance side on, you know, “Here's all the ways that people will do things for you more than you think and all these different contexts and kind of expanding that and looking at moderators of that”. But I really have just been completely fascinated by this other aspect of consent that we were talking about.

A lot of my recent work focuses primarily on that, trying to understand the sort of systematic biases we have to see consent more often when other people maybe feel like they're just complying. The ways in which we can ask for things, where we still get 'yes'es, but they're more consensual, they don't feel like forced.

We have some new studies that are kind of in process right now where we show that telling someone that they can say “No”, which is a strategy a lot of us try when we want to make sure that someone feels like they can say “No” and saying like “You can totally say no to this” is not as effective as telling them how. And again, it's part of that, you know, being put on the spot, not knowing what to say, to say “No”. So even if I know that I'm allowed to say “No”, I don't know how to do that. I don't know what to say.

And so, we have these studies where we ask people for a sensitive request, a request we've used in a lot of my studies to unlock their phones and search through them, which is something people don't want us to do, but they find it really hard to say “No” to.

And in one condition we say, “You can say no to this, and you could still, you know, participate in the study”. In another version, we say “You could say no to this and here's how. Just say these words”. And so, we give them an actual we call it a “safe word”.

They have this clear way that they can get out of it if they so choose to. And even though they know they could say “No”, in both cases, we find that telling them how makes them feel actually feel freer to say “No”, that's so interesting.

APPELT: I can't wait to hear more about that work as you continue to push it forward. Well, from research to writing, if you had to pick a topic for a next book, which no pressure, what would your next book be about?

BOHNS: I'm currently playing around with an idea which I'm not ready to share, but I have a sort of an ideal book like, which would be a third book, which again will probably focus around consent. I really like the idea.

You know, we both went to graduate school and Walter Michelle was there at Columbia and he had a book called “The Marshmallow Test”. And I know there's criticisms of The Marshmallow Test since, but I really liked that his book sort of focused around this really strong particular study, this like sticky study.

And so, I have this fantasy of having a book that's all about our phone search studies that's just called something like, you know, “Can I search your phone?”, because so many people are like, “Of course, I would never let you do that.”. And then we've run this in lots of different populations, you know, again and again.

And we get these levels of compliance where people can't say “No” to the point of like 90% of people are unlocking their phones and letting us search through them, including, you know, embarrassing things they don't want us to see, like their web browser history. And so, I just find that finding so fascinating and so strong that I would love to write a book like around that, where that's the centerpiece of the book.

APPELT: That'll be interesting. Yeah. And then it's got to, you have to have like the book have phone graphics and all. I think to see all of the puns you're going to have; it's going to be great.

BOHNS: Totally. And then ten years later, people are like, “What's that? What's a phone?”

APPELT: I know, “What's a phone? Didn't you just use your eye laser to beep it into them?”. Well, we are using up a lot of your time today, so I'll move to our last couple of questions. And one question we always like to ask is that this podcast was originally developed for our students in their certificate program is, do you have a message for folks who are newly in the applied behavioural science space?

BOHNS: I would say based on my research, my favourite sort of practical piece of advice is that when you're going to ask for something, you know, in whatever context, it might be that you're asking for a raise or a promotion or something at work, or maybe it is something with a client. Assume that you're going to get a “Yes.”. Start from that assumption because so many of us assume that we're going to get a “No.”. And that causes us to do all sorts of things that are counterproductive. So, we don't ask for something or we negotiate ourselves down before we actually ask for something, or we come out more assertive than we need to be, right? Kind of turn people off.

If you just start, instead of the default assumption of like, “Okay, I have to convince this person who's going to say, ‘No’”, just start with this person is going to say “Yes”. Now, what do I really want to ask for? And if I have the confidence to ask, because I know that they're going to say, “Yes.”, I'll definitely do it, right? I won't avoid doing it and hopefully I'll do it in a way that is just the right level of assertiveness, you know, not too meek, not too strong.

And I think if there's one piece of advice that I use all the time, it's that like my default is, “Oh, I'm so nervous to ask”. And then I tell myself, “Okay, assume this person is going to say ‘Yes’”, and all those kinds of anxieties fall into place. And I really get a good sense of like, “Well, this is what I want then”. And I can go and ask more confidently.

APPELT: That is very good advice and advice I'll use next time I try to get you to come visit. Well, any last thoughts? Questions I should have asked and didn't?

BOHNS: I mean, you could ask about Perla.

APPELT: How is the world's cutest kid?

BOHNS: She's okay. She's a little evil.

APPELT: How is the compliance consent dynamic with cats, is there a percentage difference?

BOHNS: It turns out with cats I have less influence than I think.

APPELT: Well, thank you so much, Vanessa, for joining us today. It's always fun to get to hear about your research and also just to talk about science the way we used to when we were in the lab together. So, I can't wait to read whatever you write next, whether it's a book or an article or a blog post. So, keep doing amazing work and thank you for joining us today.

BOHNS: Thank you so much. It was so fun. I missed these days of getting to hang out and talk about science. So, this is a pleasure.

APPELT: And thanks to our listeners for joining another episode of Calling DIBS.