

SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

Nudging: Effectively Influencing School Student, Staff and Community Behaviours

A nudge is an intervention that maintains freedom of choice but steers people in a particular direction. Generally, nudging is a study in less-directive leadership, and variations slide along the hard power-soft power continuum.

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There are gentler ways of guiding people in the desired direction.

A leadership strategy that school leaders and teachers use both overtly, and intuitively is the action of *nudging*. In the repertoire of leadership strategies hard power, soft power and smart power, nudges are designed to bring about changes in staff performances. Dr Ray Boyd, Jim Thompson, and Dr Neil MacNeill (2023) addressed the issue of soft power, smart power, and soft power/softskills, which extended the work done by Dr Melinda Harris and Dr Neil MacNeill (2022) on softskills, and the development a creative school culture.

In this paper we examine the concept of *nudging* that is designed to bring about behavioural change in students and staff that effectively fits across aspects of the hard and softskills dichotomy. Teachers, as effective communicators, use nudges to great effect, and the strength of this strategy is that individuals, and specifically students, being nudged often perceive that they have independent agency in the decision-making process.

The McKinsey writers, Fusaro and Sperling-Magro (2021), interviewed Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, who created the concept of nudging, about the release of their new book and they asked the authors to define nudge:

Cass Sunstein: A nudge is an intervention that maintains freedom of choice but steers people in a particular direction.... A warning is a nudge: “If you swim at this beach, the current is high, and it might be dangerous.” You’re being nudged not to swim, but you can. When you’re given information about the number of fat calories in a cheeseburger, that is a nudge.

Sunstein and Thaler reasserted that nudging fits a perceived *choice architecture*, and respondents are not being instructed to conduct an action, which is the strength of this strategy.

Nudging is not always effective with every individual, and the nudger needs to take into account the quality of the motivation, before finessing this strategy. It is obvious that when there is no interpersonal relationship, or moral imperative, nudging may not achieve its desired effect. The BBC published a paper by Magda Osman (2022) who enquired if the effect size of nudging had been overstated, as the problem was the belief that nudging could be applied effectively in any situation. This is not the case, and she noted:

A better way forward would be to focus on building an evidence base showing which combinations of nudges and other approaches *work together*. For example, as I have shown, combinations of nudging methods together with changes in taxation and subsidies have a stronger effect on sustainable consumption than either being implemented alone. This takes the burden off nudge being solely responsible for behavioural change, especially since alone it doesn't do much.

The current trend in nudging research is *moral nudging*, which is seen because of what Engelen and Nys (2024) claimed was a reaction to the initial paternalistic versions of nudging: “,, we ask whether the deliberate design of people’s choice environments can actually promote genuine moral thinking, feeling and acting”.

Choice Architecture

Generally, nudging is a study in less-directive leadership, and variations slide along the hard power – soft power continuum. In Figure 1 (below) where the respondents are highly sensitive to low-level nudging, they respond at different levels of enthusiasm based on the interpersonal relationship equation. However, for this same group, when the instructional directness is reactant (the respondents experience a threat to their freedom of choice) then the respondents respond with low levels of compliance.

There are degrees of directness in the nudging process, and past discussions and events all influence the nudging perception. In uneven relationships where a school leader has previously shown annoyance at curtains in the meeting-room blowing because the window is open, distracting staff, may simply say, “Oh no, the curtains are blowing again.” This can be interpreted in several ways:

- (a) A literal statement of fact that the curtains are blowing; or
- (b) An unstated request/instruction to shut the window based on the listeners’ previous experiences.

In this case, the nudger knows exactly how to shape a nudge based on the personnel, and contextual factors at play.

Figure 1
The Interaction Between Directness of Nudging and Independent Respondents' Responses



Teachers Nudging Students

Except in dangerous situations requiring immediate action, most *clever* classroom teachers use nudging strategies with their students:

“Ibrahim, the wind coming through that door is very cold.”

“Kossiah, none of us can go to recess until all of the Lego blocks are packed away.”

And the tone of the teacher’s voice shapes students’ responses.

In such cases, the teachers don’t use an imperative style of nudging, and secondly, the teachers reinforce the moral relationships, by adding, personal pronouns. This personalisation changes the nature of the nudge, and this invokes the complex transactional trust equation that underwrites the teacher-student relationship.

Table 2
Nudging Directness and Independent Agents' Responses

Directness of Nudging and Independent Respondents' Responses	Nudging Statements to Students
High Direction- High Compliance	"Shut that door please, James?" (James chooses to shut the door.)
High Direction- Low compliance	"Someone shut that door!" (Who is going to shut the door?)
Low direction- High compliance	"James, the wind coming through the door is spoiling students' work." (James closes the door.)
Low direction- Low compliance	"It is really windy in here." (No-one shuts the door.)

The School Leaders' Playbook of Nudging

What is strategic about nudging is that it is a process that is predicated on the quality of relationships and the consequences. In any employee-boss relationship it is always preferable to hear: "Do you think that you can finish that report for me today, Jane?" than, "I need that report by 5 PM, today!" In such cases, most school leaders don't use an imperative style of nudging, and secondly, the interaction reinforces the relationships, by adding, "For me."

Data Driven Nudging

With the emergence of the philosophy of the science of teaching, the term *data driven* has become a guide to the efficacy of a pedagogic action. The data driven nudging strategy can be effective in either of these situations:

- (a) The school has carried out pre-tests and post-tests across key areas of responsibility. A very subtle nudge is effected when the school leader gives the data to the teachers of the same year levels and asks them to analyse the results, and the between-class differences.
- (b) A high direction-high compliance data nudge occurs when the school leader asks Teacher X to explain why Teacher X's class's educational gains are not as good as those of teacher Y's class.

At a personal level, it is possible for teachers to develop self-reflective nudges when self-analysing data.

(a) Moral Nudging

The moral nudges are influenced by pro-social behaviour rather than egoistic reward. Capraro et al. (2019) elaborated: "... from the point of view of creating societal benefit, are those mechanisms that can change people's behaviour without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives – the so-called "nudges". So, school leaders who promote pedagogic change by invoking the terms "evidence based", "benefits all students", "optimises student learning", and "improves students' educational trajectories" are grabbing the high-moral, nudging grounds.

In classrooms, teachers wisely use moral nudges as an important part of students' social learning by referring to the welfare of the student body.

"So, Damien do you think that your friends in the class will want to sit at that desk with all the gluing splashes?"

"Let's leave the room nice and tidy for the next class coming into the Music Room."

Teachers use moral nudging intuitively, and this subtly reinforces key aspects of social emotional learning in an informal context.

Discussion

Becoming aware of nudging makes one realise that this is one of the most effective strategies that school staff use in their communications. The employment of the architecture of choice engages participants in a non-threatening manner and constantly strengthens pro-social behaviour and language.

In shaping a school culture, it is useful to undertake staff professional learning on nudging strategies because it changes the shape of relationships, in a step towards creating warm – demander teachers (Kleinfeld, 1972).

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