
The Problem With Being Too Easy-going



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Failure to express your preferences in everyday situations can make you seem less likeable and even slightly less human.

When choosing where to go for lunch with a colleague or what movie to see with a friend, do you often say you have no preference, thinking that it would make the decision easier and make you appear more easy-going? At work, do you keep your personal preferences, hobbies and opinions to yourself, hoping this would make you appear more neutral and open to the needs and preferences of your co-workers?

If you answer yes to either of these questions, you may want to rethink your laidback approach. Across three separate papers **featured** in *Harvard Business Review*, we uncover the downside of withholding personal preferences in various interpersonal situations. People who do so are viewed as less likeable, especially by those who make the decision for them (e.g., the person who has to pick the lunch spot or movie).

In fact, we found that people who don't express a preference in innocuous contexts, such as not indicating their favourite food or music in professional profiles, are "dehumanised" or seen as robotic. This can make it harder for others to relate to and coordinate with them at work. For individuals whose jobs require creativity and a human touch, withholding preferences can harm perceptions of their work quality and hurt their hiring prospects.

Want to be likeable? Be more upfront

In our [first paper](#), we approached pairs of friends walking together and randomly selected one of them to text the other an invite to dinner, along with a request to pick between two restaurant options. We asked the requester to tell us privately whether they would want their friend (the responder) to pick a specific restaurant or not. We found that whereas requesters almost always wanted the responder to pick a specific restaurant, responders often said they would be fine with anything (even though they told us privately that they did have a preference).

We found this mismatch in multiple other experiments, involving a total of 2,000 participants, examining a broad range of other situations such as going to the movies or to a museum.

Why did this mismatch happen? We found that requesters are more focused on making a decision as easily as possible, whereas responders are more focused on appearing easy-going and hence likeable. As a result, responders express their preferences much less frequently than requesters want them to, claiming they have no preference when they in fact have one.

Unfortunately, these white lies can lead to unintended consequences, such as the requester picking a restaurant neither party likes. Requesters are also less inclined to initiate future outings with "easy-going" responders.

But there is hope: In one study, we found that if the requester explicitly said they disliked choosing, responders were almost twice as likely to indicate their preference.

Double whammy

Our [second paper](#) looked to build on these findings, by further exploring people's attitudes towards those who express no preference, as well as other implications of this communication strategy.

We theorised that when someone claims that they don't have a preference, it might seem like they are actually hiding it for some reason – in other words, people don't believe it when others say they have no preference. If this is the case, then the person tasked with making the decision may pick the option that they reckon is closest to their companion's preferred option, even when the choice is far from their own favourite. Effectively, the decision maker ends up with a double whammy of decision stress and a lacklustre experience.

Our hypotheses were supported by six studies involving more than 2,500 participants. In one study, participants were asked to imagine that they and a friend were trying to pick one of three nearby restaurants for dinner. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: Either their friend expressed no preference (e.g., "Let's go where you want" or "You decide") or explicitly expressed their preference (e.g., "I'm leaning towards option A" or "Let's go to option A").

Participants in the no-preference condition reported significantly greater decision difficulty compared to those in the explicit-preference condition. They were also more likely to believe that the friend in fact had preferences that they were not disclosing.

In other studies, participants had to choose snacks to eat or games to play with a partner. When the partner said that they didn't have a preference, participants assumed that they must like something different to them – and ended up choosing an option that no one preferred. In addition, echoing the findings from the first paper, participants liked the partner less when they expressed no preference.

Dehumanised and devalued

In a [third paper](#), across six experiments involving more than 2,900 participants, we found that people are dehumanised by others when they fail to express preferences in innocuous contexts, like food and music. This is because holding a preference is an expression of a person's individual, distinct identity.

For example, participants rated a person who was indifferent to various massage options or to a variety of ice-cream flavours as less distinct and less human than a person who indicated a preference between these offerings. People with preferences, regardless of whether the preference was positive

or negative (i.e., having a “favourite” or “least favourite” option), were perceived as more distinct, and thus more human, than those who lacked a preference.

Importantly, we also found that lacking preferences has implications for evaluations of workers and their work. In one of our studies, participants were less satisfied with an interior designer who indicated no preference about his favourite food and music. They also evaluated a room he designed less positively than one designed by a designer with personal preferences, despite viewing identical pictures of a room.

Express yourself and everyone benefits

The fact that people tend to mispredict the consequences of withholding their preferences in social situations means they can mistakenly think they are being helpful and contributing to a collaborative workplace. Employees may believe they come across as agreeable by not expressing themselves; managers may believe that they are creating an environment with less conflict.

However, our findings suggest such reticence can weaken the quality of relationships among colleagues and compromise evaluations of our work. Both managers and employees should alter the way they present themselves and interact with colleagues, expressing their preferences as a way to achieve better team morale and better professional reputations.

Our research points to inexpensive solutions for eliciting expressions of preferences in the workplace. The key is making members of an organisation aware of the potentially negative impact of staying silent and leaving decision making to others. For example, managers could administer surveys prior to meetings to draw out inputs from employees who would otherwise hold back from contributing to joint decision-making situations. Managers could also consider conducting team building exercises that help individuals overcome any professional concerns and be more open and honest about their personal preferences.

Taking this concept further, our research reinforces the value of creating a company culture that actively encourages input from all employees. Managers, in particular, should be more honest about their own likes and dislikes rather than worrying about alienating other employees.

New workplace norms

In fact, this strategy may have particularly strong benefits for C-suite executives, who are often considered cold and aloof. By being open about their preferences, colleagues and employees will perceive them as more human and more likeable, which should in turn engender greater support and collaboration among their team members. Modelling the desired openness would also help establish new workplace norms where voicing personal preferences is expected, explicitly encouraged, and rewarded.

An internal company website that publishes employees' hobbies and tastes as "fun facts" could go a long way towards making the rank and file feel more comfortable actively voicing their preferences in the workplace. Similarly, organisations – especially those in the creative industries where creativity is deemed to be important to success – could take this idea further and highlight employees' preferences in areas such as food, music and vacations to potential clients.

Finally, job applicants could include information about their hobbies and lifestyle preferences on their resumes. Our research suggests that this may be a particularly effective signal for jobs requiring communication, warmth and likeability (e.g., sales).

Whether it's social interactions or workplace communications, expressing a clear preference is a win-win. Not only does it help the person seeking your feedback, it also makes you come across as more likeable, human and, in some situations, more competent.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/problem-being-too-easy-going>

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About the research

"Where Do You Want to Go for Dinner? A Preference Expression Asymmetry in Joint Consumption" is published in *Journal of Marketing Research*.

"You Must Have a Preference: The Impact of No-Preference Communication on Joint Decision Making" is published in *Journal of Marketing Research*.

"A preference for preference: Lack of subjective preference evokes dehumanization" is published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.