

Smiling these days



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and How to Influence People* is the veritable how-to guide of relationships, full of tips regarding interpersonal relationship ranging from how to appease the saleslady who has been on her feet all day into letting you see just one more box of shoes, to becoming a leader of your select group without raising any ire or offense, even the suspicion that you're vying for that administrative spot. The book teaches the reader about handling people, to making them like you, and to swaying people to your thinking.

Handed to me some years ago by a well-meaning adult, I thumbed through the book rather dubiously, nonetheless eager to get from it what I can. Dale Carnegie's self-help book changed my life, in that it realized more than its promise of winning me friends and influencing people - the book allowed me to see, quite clearly, that people nowadays are not so open to your smiles and your and your interpersonal maneuvering, no matter how sincere and well-meaning you may be.

Subliminal messages of kindness and camaraderie don't go too well with people these days, compared to the in-text testimonials of people from fifty years before. To paraphrase a popular saying, the road to good intentions is paved with practiced smiles and the inevitable ire you'll raise with all those smiles. Do not offend, says the book, be sincere about this. For example, the book encourages the reader to, well, smile, and do it with your heart and the purest of your intentions shining through.

Take that saleslady for example: at the end of both your days, you give her a smile, and she forgets herself and scowls at you, perhaps thinking that you are another demanding customer, before she puts up the trained facade of

fake cheerfulness and asks you, " What can I do for you, ma'am? " You attempt to finagle the cooperation of a colleague by underscoring his achievements, and then glossing over your own. Most ambitious individuals think of your praise as their right, and nod their acknowledgement, and move on, uninfluenced. It seems that any act of kindness will be misconstrued as one with dubious intentions.

It becomes more apparent than ever before how cynical, jaded and world-weary human beings have become, until you smile at their direction for no apparent reason, with no agenda in mind. You are immediately treated with speculation and doubt, that with one smile, people see a wealth of malevolent planning and less-than-decent intentions behind it. And you can't blame your skeptical audience. Practice the tenets of the book all you want, but then, you still end up following dictates regarding how to treat people better, mostly because you want something from them - be it friendship, agreement, respect or obedience.

Ironically, in our desire to reach out to people with no malice, we do so motivated by our needs and demands from them. Basically, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is the benevolent person's guide to taking over the world, in his own way. And maybe therein lies the basic flaw in my character, and in all the other people I know who say that this book has " failed" them too, that perhaps I am not well-meaning enough for this, not considerate, not kind enough. And maybe, I, too, am far too cynical to believe that this book could actually work.

But then the book can teach you to transcend this, as it claims to be a guide to making friends, to ensuring harmonious relationships between strangers,

colleagues, friends and family. It enumerates and elaborates techniques and devices, from that sincere smile, to appreciation and praise, to downplaying your own merits in order to encourage the productivity of others - it is a self-help book about proper interaction with your fellow man. And perhaps that is the book's ultimate failure, allowing us to see how cynical and jaded this world has become: that we actually need a self-help book to teach us how to be decent human beings.