

THE BIG IDEAS

Know Thy Triggers

One thru six.

Influence Yourself

Get your foot in the door.

Commitment

Write it. Share it. (WOOP it!)

Shocking Truth

Meet Professor Milgram.

Stand Up

And push back. Exert your influence.

Influence

The Psychology of Persuasion, Revised Edition

BY ROBERT B. CIALDINI · HARPER BUSINESS © 2006 · 336 PAGES

“One aspect of what I learned in this three-year period of participant observation was most instructive. Although there are thousands of different tactics that compliance practitioners employ to produce yes, the majority fall within six basic categories. Each of these categories is governed by a fundamental psychological principle that directs human behavior and, in so doing, gives the tactics their power. The book is organized around these six principles, one to a chapter. The principles—consistency, reciprocity, social proof, authority, liking, and scarcity—are each discussed in terms of their function in the society and in terms of how their enormous force can be commissioned by a compliance professional who deftly incorporates them into requests for purchases, donations, concessions, votes, assent, etc. ...

Each principle is examined as to its ability to produce a distinct kind of automatic, mindless compliance from people, that is, a willingness to say yes without thinking first. The evidence suggests that the ever-accelerating pace and informational crush of modern life will make this particular form of unthinking compliance more and more prevalent in the future. It will be increasingly important for the society, therefore, to understand the how and why of automatic influence.”

~ Robert B. Cialdini from *Influence*

This is the classic text on the psychology of persuasion.

Robert Cialdini is a professor of both psychology and marketing at Arizona State University.

In addition to decades of lab experiments, Robert also spent three years in “participant observation”—aka embedding himself as a sort of spy in various organizations to learn the tricks of their trade. He tried everything from selling cars and vacuums to becoming a bus boy at a restaurant so he could learn how waiters do their thing.

The book is simultaneously kind of a consumer protection guide (how not to be duped) AND a manual for marketers (how to sell your stuff!). :o (Get a copy [here](#).)

It’s packed with fascinating research and stories. I’m going to focus on pulling out some practical ideas we can apply to our lives today. I hope you enjoy!

INFLUENCE: KNOW THY TRIGGERS

“How ridiculous a female turkey seems under these circumstances: She will embrace a natural enemy just because it goes ‘cheep-cheep,’ and she will mistreat or murder one of her own chicks just because it does not. She looks like an automaton whose maternal instincts are under the automatic control of that single sound. The ethologists tell us that this sort of thing is far from unique to the turkey. They have begun to identify regular, blindly mechanical patterns of action in a wide variety of species.”

*“Everything should be made as
simple as possible, but not
simpler.”*

~ Albert Einstein

"Depending on the motives of the person wishing to use them, any of the compliance techniques discussed in this book can be employed for good or for ill."

~ Robert B. Cialdini

Robert kicks the book off with a story of a mother turkey and her chicks.

Get this: A mother turkey responds to her baby chicks as they "cheep-cheep." No "cheep-cheep" (a signal that the baby is healthy), and no attention from mom.

Now, a polecat is a natural enemy of the turkey. So, if one cruises over, the mother turkey will go nuts attacking it and trying to get it to go away. You can even put a stuffed polecat on a string and bring it toward the mother turkey and she'll attack it immediately and furiously.

But... If you put a little "cheep-cheep" sound inside that same stuffed polecat guess what happens? The mother turkey will gather it underneath her and embrace it as its own. (Turn the "cheep-cheep" recording off and the attack resumes!)

Robert tells us that these behaviors are known as "fixed-action patterns" and can involve a range of behaviors across a range of species. They are set in action by what are known as "triggers." "Click" a certain button and "whir!" a certain tape will play.

Guess what? You and I are more like the turkeys than you may suspect.

Give us the right trigger and we'll do some pretty unnatural things. :)

The book walks us through six of the key triggers we are most influenced by. It's important to note that automatically responding to these triggers is USUALLY adaptive. But, we want to be aware of when these mechanical responses may be triggered by individuals with less than benevolent intentions so we can stop them in their tracks and choose a more rational approach.

Let's take a quick look at each then we'll dive into a few in more detail.

1. **Reciprocation.** This is the basic law of give and take. When someone gives us something, we feel (powerfully!) obliged to reciprocate. Of course, this is awesome in an authentic, trusting relationship. Not so much when used by Hare Krishnas in an airport or other people looking to manipulate.
2. **Commitment and Consistency.** Once we make a commitment or take action in a given direction, we really (!) like to be consistent. (More on this in a moment.)
3. **Social Proof.** We are strongly influenced by the behavior of others. This is why "best-selling!" is such a powerful phrase. Again, this is typically a helpful shortcut to know what's a wise choice, but when manipulated, it's not so cool. (Or, of course, when the herd is going in the wrong direction. :)
4. **Liking.** We are drawn to people we like—which, again, makes sense. But when people are able to pull triggers to make us like them a LOT in a very short period of time, we'd be wise to step back and see if the substance of the exchange merits our behavior or if we're being unduly influenced by our "liking."
5. **Authority.** We trust people in positions of authority. This is usually good. But when, for example, the American Heart Association sells its "Heart healthy!" seal of approval to Trix and Cocoa Puffs, we'd be wise to step back and pause.
6. **Scarcity.** "Act now!" "Limited time only!" Yep. Scarcity sells. (And people marketing it are ubiquitous.) Notice how you get hooked by it, slow down, decide wisely.

"There is no expedient to which a man will not resort to avoid the real labor of thinking."

~ Sir Joshua Reynolds

INFLUENCE YOURSELF: TINY STEPS —> BIG STEPS

"The tactic of starting with a little request in order to gain eventual compliance with related larger requests has a name: the foot-in-the-door technique. Social scientists first became aware of its effectiveness in the mid-1960s when psychologists Jonathan Freedman and Scott Fraser published an astonishing set of data. They reported the results of an experiment in which a researcher, posing as a volunteer worker, had gone door to door in a residential California

"It is easier to resist at the beginning than at the end."

~ Leonardo da Vinci

neighborhood making a preposterous request of homeowners. The homeowners were asked to allow a public-service billboard to be installed on their front lawns. To get an idea of just how the sign would look, they were shown a photograph depicting an attractive house, the view of which was almost completely obscured by a very large, poorly lettered sign reading DRIVE CAREFULLY. Although the request was normally and understandably refused by the great majority (83 percent) of the other residents of the area, this particular group of people reacted quite favorably. A full 76 percent of them offered the use of their front lawns.

The prime reason for their startling compliance has to do with something that had happened to them about two weeks earlier: They had made a small commitment to driver safety. A different volunteer worker had come to their doors and asked them to accept and display a little three-inch-square sign that read BE A SAFE DRIVER. It was such a trifling request that nearly all of them had agreed to it. But the effects of that request were enormous. Because they had innocently complied with a trivial safe-driving request a couple weeks before, these homeowners became remarkably willing to comply with another such request that was massive in size."

That's from Chapter #2: Commitment and Consistency.

We talked about this wacky research study in our Note on Robert Mauer's [One Small Step](#).

Quick re-cap: Ask people to put a huge, horrible (!) looking "DRIVE CAREFULLY" sign on their front lawns and they'll (understandably) refuse 83% of the time.

BUT... If you first get them to take a tiny little baby step by displaying a little three-inch-square sign to "BE A SAFE DRIVER" then 76% will comply.

17% without the first tiny step. 76% with that little step. That's FOUR TIMES more compliance. Nuts.

Two morals of the story here for us:

1. Be very mindful of taking even a tiny step in a direction you aren't certain you want to head. (Either for yourself or in a relationship or in support of a cause, etc.)
2. DO take that tiny step in the direction of goals/installing habits you decide are important. Although the first step may seem small, you're built-in tendency to stay consistent will help you keep moving in the right direction!

We talk about the habit-building benefits of tiny steps in [Habits 101](#) and in our Notes on [Mini Habits](#) + [Superhuman by Habit](#). Check those out for more.

For now, what's the #1 habit you'd like to install in your life? (Think about it!!)

How can you break that down into the *tiniest* little thing you could do daily?

For example: If you want to do 100 burpees per day, you could decide to do ONE burpee per day—even if it's step back and modified so it's super easy.

If you want to eat a pound of raw greens per day (one of my new habits), you could start by committing to eating one leaf of lettuce per day.

If you want to get 8+ hours of sleep, try to go to bed 1 minute earlier tonight.

Those micro habits may seem inconsequential but they're surprisingly powerful. You remove initial resistance while building energy in a desired direction. <— Which is a very wise idea.

Remember our turkey momma. "Cheep-cheep." Pull the trigger. *Click. Whir!*

COMMITMENT: WRITE IT. SHARE IT.

"The finding that we are truest to our decisions if we have bound ourselves to them publicly can be put to good use. Consider the organizations dedicated to helping people rid themselves of

"The evidence is clear that the more effort that goes into a commitment, the greater is its ability to influence the attitudes of the person who made it."

~ Robert B. Cialdini

bad habits. Many weight-reduction clinics, for instance, understand that often a person's private decision to lose weight will be too weak to withstand the blandishments of bakery windows, wafting coking scents, and late-night Sara Lee commercials. So they see to it that the decision is buttressed by the pillars of public commitment. They require their clients to write down an immediate weight-loss goal and *show* that goal to as many friends, relatives, and neighbors as possible. Clinic operators report that this simple technique works where all else has failed."

Here's one more idea on the power of commitment.

In addition to that blurb about weight-loss, Robert walks us through some research on how committed people are to certain ideas depending on whether they wrote it down or not. Short story: Writing something down increases your level of commitment.

Therefore, want to give yourself a much higher likelihood of achieving an important goal?

Write it down.

And... Share it with as many friends, relatives, and neighbors as possible.

We're wired to be consistent. Public commitments help us with that.

What are YOU committed to? _____

With whom will you share it? _____

Write it down. Share it. Rock it. (Repeat with next goal.)

P.S. While you've got your pen out, WOOP it!!! Get fired up but don't think it's going to be easy. Identify the challenges you'll face. Know how you'll address them IN ADVANCE = wise formula.

Check out our Notes on Gabriele Oettingen's [*Rethinking Positive Thinking*](#) for an introduction to/refresher of the WOOP concept. For now:

What's your **W**ish? (Your goal?)

What's your **O**utcome? (The benefits you'll experience?)

What're your **O**bstacles? (What will get in the way?)

What's your **P**lan? (How will you deal with those challenges? If this happens, then I'll do)

WOOP that! Write it down. Share it. Get your commitment strong.

THE SHOCKING TRUTH ABOUT INFLUENCE

"The explanation that Milgram's subjects were a twisted, sadistic bunch not at all representative of the average citizen has proven unsatisfactory as well. The people who answered Milgram's newspaper ad to participate in his 'memory' experiment represented a standard cross section of ages, occupations, and educational levels within our society. What's more, later on, a battery of personality scales showed these people to be quite normal psychologically, with not a hint of psychosis as a group. They were, in fact, just like you and me; or, as Milgram likes to term it, they *are* you and me. If he is right that his studies implicate us in his grisly findings, the unanswered question becomes an uncomfortably personal one: What could make *us* do such things?

"When all are alike, no one thinks very much."

~ Walter Lipman

Milgram is sure he knows the answer. It has to do, he says, with a deep-seated sense of duty to authority within us all. According to Milgram, the real culprit in the experiments was his subject's inability to defy the wishes of the boss of the study—the lab-coated researcher who urged and, if need be, directed the subjects to perform their duties, despite the emotional and physical mayhem they were causing."

In the chapter on "Authority," Robert tells us about the shocking experiments (literally and figuratively) conducted by Stanley Milgram.

As you may know, Milgram brought people into his lab for a "memory" experiment that was, ostensibly, all about seeing how people learn. But, the study was really all about how people conform to pressure from an authority figure.

Quick recap: Subjects were assigned the role of "Teacher." An individual who appeared to be another subject but was actually an actor was assigned the role of "Learner." The lab-coat wearing Researcher directed the experiment.

Imagine responding to an ad for a memory experiment, walking into a lab, meeting another subject and the lab-coat wearing Researcher. You are assigned the role of Teacher. Your job is to read the test questions to the Learner and, if they answer incorrectly, administer a shock.

After helping the Researcher strap the Learner into a chair and fitting him with electrodes, you sit down in another room with the Researcher in front of a "wicked-looking shock generator."

In the beginning, the shocks you administer are mild. But, with each incorrect answer, the shocks get stronger. Long story short, the potential (supposed) shocks go all the way up to 450 volts—to be administered after the Learner has been begging for mercy.

When asked how many people would administer this potentially lethal shock, leading psychologists predicted that only 1 to 2% of the subjects would do so.

The actual results?

Nearly TWO-THIRDS of the participants issued the highest potential shock (after ignoring the screaming pleas from the Learner) when instructed to do so by the Researcher.

These were all normal people (like YOU AND ME!!!) who, under the pressure of an authority figure performed acts they would *never* do independent of that authority figure's demands.

Bottom line: Respecting legitimate authority is, of course, adaptive for society. And... We need to be aware of just how easily we let go of our sense of what's right in the face of such authority.

P.S. This is, in part, the essence of our Notes on [Iconoclast](#). Step 1 in becoming an iconoclast is to challenge the dominant, accepted view of society. Then you need to create an alternative view and cultivate courage in the face of opposition while building social skills such that you can actually INFLUENCE people to accept your way of thinking. (Check out Notes for more...)

STAND UP

"I don't consider myself pugnacious by nature, but I actively advocate such belligerent actions because in a way I am at war with the exploiters—we all are. It is important to recognize, however, that their motive for profit is not the cause for hostilities; that motive, after all, is something we each share to an extent. The real treachery, and the thing we cannot tolerate, is any attempt to make their profit in a way that threatens the reliability of our shortcuts. The blitz of modern daily life demands that we have faithful shortcuts, sound rules of thumb to handle it all. These are not luxuries any longer; they are out-and-out necessities that figure to become increasingly vital as the pulse of daily life quickens. That is why we should want to retaliate whenever we see someone betraying one of our rules of thumb for profit. We want that rule to be as effective as possible. But to the degree that its fitness for duty is regularly undercut by tricks of

"We should not be surprised, then, when research shows that parents who enforce discipline inconsistently produce generally rebellious children. ... The wise parent provides highly consistent information."

~ Robert B. Cialdini

"I personally feel driven by more than the aversion to being duped. I bristle at the thought of being pushed into an unacceptable corner by those who would undermine one of my hedges against the decisional overload of modern life. And I get a genuine sense of righteousness by lashing out when they try. If you are like me, so should you."

~ Robert B. Cialdini

a profiteer, we naturally will use it less and will be less able to cope efficiently with the decisional burdens of our day. We can't allow that without a fight. The stakes have gotten too high."

Those are the final words of the book—written WAY before our modern assault of click-bait, push notifications and other incessant demands of our attention.

It's time for us to STAND UP to the exploiters—the manipulative marketers who are pulling our triggers, knowing we're wired to automatically comply when certain conditions are met and too busy to stop and contemplate every little decision.

We engage in this battle as both consumers and creators. Let's create cool stuff and promote it in a way that builds trust each step of the process. And, let's quit supporting the companies we know are engaging in "tricks of the profiteer."

For me/our family: Creator-wise, I'm committed to embodying the virtuously ideals I believe are inherent to an optimal business—giving the best to the most for the least, sharing our stuff with the world in a straight-forward, respectful way while delivering astonishing value.

I don't consume content on sites with click bait. We don't consume TV shows promoting junk food to kids or consume the foods created by those companies that spend \$10 billion to kids as the adolescent obesity rate soars. Etc. Etc.

How about YOU? Let's remember that we're voting with every hour we invest into our work and with every click we make and with every dollar we spend.

Let's choose to influence ourselves and others wisely!

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.