

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Resisting Influence

From *The Lucifer Effect* by Philip Zimbardo www.lucifereffect.com

The key to resistance lies in development of the three S's-- Self-Awareness, Situational Sensitivity, and Street Smarts.

People are both products of their different environments and producers of the environments they encounter. Human beings are not passive objects simply buffeted about by environmental contingencies.

People usually select the settings they will enter or avoid, can change the setting by their presence and their actions, influence others in that social sphere, and transform environments in myriad ways. More often than not, we are active agents capable of influencing the course of events that our lives take and also of shaping our destinies.

Social situations often exert much greater power over human actions than has been generally acknowledged. Sensitivity to situational determinants of behavior signals alerts for avoiding or changing situations likely to engender vulnerability to their power.

Several related issues come to the fore when we emphasize situational determinants of behavior. First, we should be aware that a range of apparently simple situational factors could impact our behavior more compellingly than seems possible.

Social psychological research points to the influential forces of roles, rules, group pressures to conform, emergent group norms, group identity, uniforms, anonymity, social modeling, authority presence, symbols of power, time pressures, semantic framing, stereotypical images and labels, among many others.

Second, the Situationist approach should encourage us all to share a profound sense of humility when we are trying to understand "unthinkable," "unimaginable," "senseless" acts of evil-- violence, vandalism, suicidal terrorism, torture, or rape.

It becomes imperative to constrain the immediate moral outrage that seeks vengeance against wrong doers and rather instead, to uncover the causal factors that could have led them in that aberrant direction. Even if from the selfish motive of wanting to know what went wrong so we don't step again in the same mess.

Third, our system of criminal legal justice over relies on common-sense lay views held by the general public about what things cause people to commit crimes. It is time for the legal justice system to take into account the substantial body of evidence from the behavioral sciences about the power of the social context in influencing behavior, criminal actions as well as moral ones.

1. Do not maintain an illusion of "personal invulnerability" – It can happen to you!
2. Be modest in self-estimates – it is better to perceive yourself as vulnerable and take precautions.
3. Engage in life as fully as possible, yet be mindful and aware and prepared to disengage and think critically when necessary.
4. Be ready to say the three most difficult phrases in the world: "I was wrong", "I made a mistake", and "I've changed my mind." Accept immediate loss of money, face, etc. that could lead to bigger long term losses.
5. Separate your ego from your actions; maintain a sense of positive self-esteem that is independent from the occasional failures and stupid actions. (Laugh at yourself once a day!)
6. There are no free lunches and no quick and dirty paths to anything worthwhile.

7. Insist on a second opinion; never immediately 'sign on the dotted line'.
8. Develop 'Discrepancy Detectors,' alerting mental and intuition systems that stem from vague feelings of something wrong.
9. When the influence agent says he/she is only doing X for your good, try playing devil's advocate to assess the reactions against you.
10. Avoid 'Total Situations' where you lose contact with your social support and informational networks.

"I made a mistake!"

Let's start out by encouraging admission of our mistakes, first to ourselves then to others. Accept the dictum that to err is human. You have made an error in judgment; your decision was wrong. You had every reason to believe it was right when you made it, but now you know you were wrong. Say the six Magic words: "I'm sorry"; "I apologize"; "Forgive me." Say to yourself that, you will learn from your mistakes, grow better from them. Don't continue to put your money, time, and resources into bad investments. Move on. Doing so openly reduces the need to justify or rationalize our mistakes, and thereby to continue to give support to bad or immoral actions. Confession of error undercuts the motivation to reduce cognitive dissonance; dissonance evaporates when a reality check occurs. "Cutting the bait" instead of resolutely "staying the course" when it is wrong has immediate cost, but it always results in long-term gain. Consider how many years the Vietnam War continued long after top military and administration officials, like Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, knew that the war was wrong and could not be won. How many thousands of lives were lost to such wrong-headed resistance, when acknowledging failure and error could have saved them. How much good could come to all of us were our political leaders able to admit their similar errors in Iraq? It is more than a political decision to "save face" by denying errors instead saving soldiers' and civilian lives—it is a moral imperative.

Establishing prosocial behavior and promoting civic virtue highlight the positive aspects of social influence. Support social climate change by trying the following ideas:

1. Support critical thinking abilities...especially in children.
2. Reward moral behavior through social recognition for good deeds.
3. Promote critical thinking by not living on mindless "auto-pilot". Thinking before you act!
4. Encourage respect for human diversity and appreciate variability to reduce biases and discrimination.
5. Do not tolerate stereotyping and dehumanization of any people.
6. Support social conditions that make people feel special and cultivate a sense of personal value and self-worth. Discourage anonymity and encourage engagement!
7. Encourage admission of mistakes, accept error in judgments and disallow justification for continuing wrong, immoral behavior.
8. Promote personal responsibility and accountability of one's actions.
9. Support independence over group conformity when the situation requires this, despite possible rejection.
10. Reduce poverty, inequities, and entitlements of the privileged.
11. Never sacrifice freedom for promised security.
12. Discourage all transgressions: cheating, gossiping, lying, teasing, bullying .