

Resisting Influence

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A Ten-Step Program to Build Resistance and Resilience
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(<http://www.lucifereffect.com>)

If we consider some of the social psychological principles that fostered the evils we saw during the course of our journey into the heart of darkness. We can use variants of those principles to get people to accentuate the good and to eliminate the negatives in their lives. Given the range of different types of influence, it is necessary to tailor resistances to each type. Combating wrong dissonant commitments requires different tactics than opposing compliance-gaining strategies used on us. Confronting persuasive speeches and powerful communicators forces us to use different principles than we need for dealing with those who would dehumanize us or deindividuate us. Ways to undercut groupthink are also different than ways to modify the impact of intense recruiters. In the previous sections of this Resistance Guide I have offered some specific suggestions of how to resist different types of social influence.

Here is my 10-step program toward resisting the impact of undesirable social influences, and at the same time promoting personal resilience and civic virtue. It uses ideas that cut across various influence strategies and provides simple, effective modes of dealing with them. The key to resistance lies in development of the three Ss-- Self-Awareness, Situational Sensitivity, and Street Smarts. You will see how they are central to many of these general strategies of resistance.

“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.

“I am mindful.”

In many settings smart people do dumb things because they fail to attend to key features in the words or actions of influence agents and fail to notice obvious situational clues. Too often we function on automatic pilot, using outworn scripts that have worked for us in the past, never

stopping to evaluate whether they are appropriate in the here and now. Following the advice of Harvard researcher, Ellen Langer, we must transform our usual state of mindless inattention into “mindfulness,” especially in new situations. Don’t hesitate to fire a wake-up shot to your cortex; even when in familiar situations old habits continue to rule even though they have become obsolete or wrong. We need to be reminded not to live our lives on automatic pilot, but always to take a Zen moment to reflect on the meaning of the immediate situation, to think before acting. Never go mindlessly into situations where angels and sensible people fear to tread. For the best result add “critical thinking” to mindfulness in your resistance. Ask for evidence to support assertions; demand that ideologies be sufficiently elaborated to allow you to separate rhetoric from substance. Try to determine whether the recommended means ever justify potentially harmful ends. Imagine end game scenarios of the future consequences any current practice. Reject simple solutions as quick fixes for complex personal or social problems. Support critical thinking from the earliest times in a child’s life, alerting them to deceptive ads, biased claims, and distorted perspectives being presented to them. Help them become wiser and warier knowledge consumers.

“I am responsible.”

Taking responsibility for one's decisions and actions puts the actor in the driver's seat, for better or for worse. Allowing others to compromise their own responsibility, to diffuse it, makes them powerful back-seat drivers, and makes the car move recklessly ahead without a responsible driver. We become more resistant to undesirable social influence by always maintaining a sense of personal responsibility and by being willing to be held accountable for our actions. Obedience to authority is less blind to the extent that we are aware that diffusion of responsibility merely disguises our individual complicity in the conduct of questionable actions. Your conformity to anti-social group norms is undercut to the extent that you do not allow displacement of responsibility, when you refuse to spread responsibility around the gang, the frat, the shop, the battalion, or the corporation. Always imagine a future time when today’s deed will be on trial and no one will accept your pleas of only following orders, or everyone else was doing it.

“I am Me, the best I can be.”

Do not allow others to deindividuate you, to put you into a category, in a box, a slot, to turn you into an object. Assert your individually; politely state your name and your credentials, loud and clear. Insist on the same behavior in others. Make eye contact (remove all eye-concealing sun glasses), and offer information about yourself that reinforces your unique identity. Find common ground with dominant others in influence situations and use it to enhance similarities. Anonymity and secrecy conceals wrongdoing and undermines the human connection. It can become the breeding ground that generates dehumanization, and, as we now know, dehumanization provides the killing ground for bullies, rapists, torturers, terrorists, and tyrants. Go a step beyond self-individuation. Work to change whatever social conditions make people feel anonymous. Instead, support practices that make others feel special, so that they too have a sense of personal value and self worth. Never allow or practice negative stereotyping—words and labels can be destructive.

“I respect Just Authority, but Rebel against Unjust Authority.”

In every situation, work to distinguish between those in authority who, because of their expertise, wisdom, seniority, or special status, deserve respect, and those unjust authority figures who

demand our obedience without having any substance. Many who assume the mantle of authority are pseudo-leaders, false prophets, confidence men and women, self-promoters, who should not be respected, but rather disobeyed and openly exposed to critical evaluation. Parents, teachers, and religious leaders should play more active roles in teaching children this critical differentiation. They should be polite and courteous when such a stance is justified, yet be good, wise children by resisting those authorities that do not deserve their respect. Doing so, will reduce mindless obedience to self-proclaimed authorities whose priorities are not in our best interests.

“I want group acceptance, but value my independence.”

The lure of acceptance into a desired social group is more powerful than that of the mythical golden ring in “Lord of the Rings.” The power of that desire for acceptance will make some people do almost anything to be accepted, and go to even further extremes to avoid rejection by The Group. We are indeed social animals, and usually our social connections benefit us and help us to achieve important goals that we could not achieve alone. However, there are times when conformity to a group norm is counter-productive to the social good. It is imperative to determine when to follow the norm and when to reject it. Ultimately, we live within our own minds, in solitary splendor, and therefore we must be willing and ready to declare our independence regardless of the social rejection it may elicit. It is not easy, especially for young people with shaky self-images, or adults whose self-image is isomorphic with that of their job. Pressures on them to be a “team player,” to sacrifice personal morality for the good of the team are nearly irresistible. What is required is that we step back, get outside opinions, and find new groups that will support our independence and promote our values. There will always be another, different, better group for us.

“I will be more Frame Vigilant.”

Who makes the frame becomes the artist, or the con artist. The way issues are framed is often more influential than the persuasive arguments within their boundaries. Moreover, effective frames can seem not to be frames at all, just sound bites, visual images, slogans, and logos. They influence us without our being conscious of them, and they shape our orientation toward the ideas or issues they promote. For example, voters, who favored reducing estate tax benefits for the rich, were urged to vote against a “death tax”; the tax was exactly the same, but its defining term was different. We desire things that are framed as being “scarce,” even when they are plentiful. We are averse to things that are framed as potential losses, and prefer what is presented to us as a gain, even when the ratio of positive to negative prognoses is the same. We don’t want a 40% chance of losing X over Y, but do want the 60% chance of gaining Y over X. Linguist George Lakoff clearly shows in his writings that it is crucial to be aware of frame power and to be vigilant to offset its insidious influence on our emotions, thoughts, and votes.

“I will balance my Time Perspective.”

We can be led to do things that are not really what we believe in our value when we allow ourselves to become trapped in an expanded present moment. When we stop relying on our sense of past commitments and our sense of future liabilities, we open ourselves to situational temptations to engage in “Lord of the Flies” excesses. By not going “with the flow” when others around you are being abusive or out of control, you are relying a temporal perspective that stretches beyond present-oriented hedonism or present-fatalism. You are likely to engage in a

cost/benefit analysis of actions in terms of their future consequences. Or, you may resist by being sufficiently conscious of a past time frame that contains your personal values and standards. By developing a balanced time perspective in which past, present and future can be called into action depending on the situation and task at hand, you are in a better position to act responsibly and wisely than when your time perspective is biased toward reliance on only one or two time frames. Situational power is weakened when past and future combine to contain the excesses of the present. For example, research indicates that righteous Gentiles who helped to hide Dutch Jews from the Nazis did not engage in the kind of rationalizing as their neighbors did in generating reasons for not helping. These heroes depended upon moral structures derived from their past and never lost sight of a future time when they would look back on this terrible situation and be forced to ask themselves whether they had done the right thing when they chose not to succumb to fear and social pressure.

“I will not sacrifice personal or civic freedoms for the illusion of security.”

The need for security is a powerful determinant of human behavior. We can be manipulated into engaging in actions that are alien to us when faced with alleged threats to our security or the promise of security from danger. More often than not, influence peddlers gain power over us by offering the Faustian contract: You will be safe from harm if you will just surrender some of your freedom, either personal or civic, to that authority. The Mephistophelean tempter will argue that his power to save you depends upon the people making small sacrifices of this or that little right or that small freedom. Reject that deal. Never sacrifice basic personal freedoms for the promise of security because the sacrifices are real and immediate and the security is a distant illusion. This is as true in traditional marital arrangements as it is in the commitment of good citizens to the interests of their nation when its leader promises safety at the cost of a collective sacrifice of suspending laws, privacy, and freedoms. Erich Fromm’s classic “Escape from Freedom” reminded us that this is the first step a fascist leader takes even in a nominally democratic society.

“I can oppose unjust Systems.”

Individuals falter in the face of the intensity of the systems we have described: the military and prison systems as well as those of gangs, cults, fraternities, corporations, and even dysfunctional families. But individual resistance in concert with that of others of the same mind and resolve can combine to make a difference. The next section in this chapter will portray individuals who changed systems by being willing to take the risk of blowing the whistle on corruption within them, or constructively working to change them. Resistance may involve physically removing one’s self from a “total situation” in which all information and reward/ punishments are controlled. It may involve challenging the “groupthink” mentality, and being able to document all allegations of wrongdoing. It may involve getting help from other authorities, counselors, investigative reporters, or revolutionary compatriots. Systems have enormous power to resist change and withstand even righteous assault. Here is one place where individual acts of heroism to challenge unjust systems, and their bad barrel makers, are best taken by soliciting others to join one’s cause. The system can redefine individual opposition as delusional, a pair of opponents as sharing folie · deux, but with three on your side, you become a force of ideas to be reckoned with. This 10-step program is really only a starter kit toward building resistance and resilience against undesirable influences and illegitimate attempts at persuasion. It takes your

awareness and sensitivity to such influence settings, and a willingness to think for yourself, as you practice being independent and as autonomous as is possible.