

## Resisting Influence

*This is a shortened version of the original which was prepared by Dr. Philip Zimbardo and Cindy X. Wang. You can view the full Resisting Influence Guide here: <http://www.lucifereffect.com/guide.htm>*

Our daily lives are wrought with compelling social tensions. Many of us hope that we are immune to compliance tactics, have the courage to resist unjust authority, and would never abandon our core beliefs and principles in the face of social pressures.

This document was created for learning how unwanted and unjust influence can impact your daily life and to better equip you to resist these forces. By understanding the contexts of influence and social compliance, we hope you will be able to identify the principles and strategies that professional agents of influence may use to gain your compliance.

We will look at frameworks to understand social influence and identify how you can apply these ideas to your own life, we will discuss ways to utilize your new understanding of the principles of social influence for positive social change, and finally we provide hints from Dr. Z on how to resist unwanted influences.

## Varieties of Influence

We listen to a debate with each side presenting seemingly compelling reasons to endorse one or another point of view. We get messages from advertisers, from the government, from assorted authorities to take particular actions, like buy a product, vote for a candidate, give blood, avoid impending disasters, and more. Such attempts to influence our attitudes, values or actions are considered forms of persuasive communication. "**Do as I say,**" is the persuasive motto.

Other times the influence comes not dressed up in words in persuasive messages or visually appealing ads, but simply when the members of a group you are in, or want to belong to, act in a particular way. They don't have to tell you what to do; they simply exhibit the behavior or the style of action that is expected of "good team members." That form of social influence is known as conformity. "**Do as we do,**" is the conformity motto.

Go along with the majority and be accepted. Refuse to dress as they do, talk like they do, value what they value, or act in ways that are the accepted social norm for this group, and you are rejected, isolated, expelled, ridiculed. The power of groups in our lives to influence our thoughts and actions can be enormous, especially when we desperately want to be accepted by the group. But you don't need a group to put pressure on you to act as they expect you to do; in fact, much social influence comes from a singular source - another person.

Compliance is a form of influence in which direct pressure is put on individuals to take some specific action, such as doing a favor or buying a product. The influence agent doesn't want to change your mind, only to get you to act on his or her request. Sometimes the request is pro-social, like donating blood, but more often than not, the request is to get people to purchase products that they might not need or even want initially.

All of these sources of social influence are external; they are imposed from the outside of you through influence agents (people who work hard to convince you to think a certain way).

One of the most powerful forms of influence is self-persuasion, which encourages individuals to engage in personal thought and decision processes. One tactic for inducing self-persuasion comes from role-playing positions that are contrary to one's beliefs and values. When we engage in public behavior that does not follow from our personal beliefs, cognitive dissonance is created. To the extent that we come to believe we made that commitment freely, without (awareness of) external situational pressures, we rationalize it and convince ourselves that it was the right action and the right position to hold.

What can you do to weaken or counter each of these varieties of social influence? Knowledge of how these influence settings work and what you can do to resist them is the first step in becoming a wiser consumer of

social influence. You have to be continually vigilant and continually put into operation these resistance tactics for you to inoculate yourself against their insidious power.

## How We Are Persuaded

Communicators are most effective if they are perceived as Credible, meaning they have both expertise relevant to their message and are trustworthy - honest, and unbiased.

Communications come in many forms: some rational, some hit at our emotions, some inform us of the action we should take, and others leave the action hidden. Some messages are simple, others complicated, some lead with the request, others build up to it. Ideally, we need to process communications systematically, that means taking the time to figure out what is being requested, what evidence is being presented, and how contrary views are dealt with. Too often, we take short cuts and process the information only peripherally: too focused on the packaging and not the product. We may give excessive value to the speaker's tone of voice, or his or her good looks; and too little to what they are actually hawking. Always try to figure out who the message is intended for and what action are they requesting.

## Why We Conform: The Power of Groups

Whenever we change our behavior, views, and attitudes in response to the real or imagined presence of others, we are experiencing conformity. Two main types of conformity have been studied: *informational* and *normative*. **Informative conformity** often occurs in unfamiliar situations when we are likely to shape our behavior to match that of others. The actions of others inform us of the customs and accepted practices in a situation: what is right to do, how to behave.

**Normative conformity** occurs when we want to be liked or approved of by the group. This is the dominant form of social conformity. Though we may disagree secretly with the group opinion, we may verbally adopt the group stance so that we seem like a team player rather than a deviant.

Both of these pressures impact us everyday. A staple of a functioning society is that people follow social norms such as obeying traffic laws, respecting others' property, and diffusing aggression in non-violent ways. However, conformity can have deleterious effects if one conforms automatically without questioning of the validity of social norms. In Nazi Germany, many ordinary people did not dissent to the ongoing atrocities because few other people resisted.

In our daily decisions, we should also examine whether our reasons justify our actions. In an unfamiliar situation, first ask yourself whether the actions you observe others performing are rational, warranted, and consistent with your own principles before thoughtlessly and automatically adopting them.

Similarly, in a situation in which you want to impress and be accepted by others, ask yourself whether the action conflicts with your moral code, and consider whether you would be willing to compromise your own opinion of yourself just so others would have a higher one of you. Ultimately, you are the only one who has to live with your actions. Be sure to take a time out to find out the correct information.

## Cialdini's Principles of Social Influence

Having begun to understand the strength of social influence, we now move on to the principles of influence studied by social psychologist Robert Cialdini; a renowned social psychologist that has done extensive research on the domains in which social influence is most powerful. The following principles play on fundamental human instincts and can be exploited both intentionally and unintentionally.

Many of these may seem like obvious tactics that advertisers and influence agents will utilize to sway our opinion. However, when we are not prepared to scrutinize and resist them, these principles will often work subliminally and quite powerfully. An important part of resisting these influence tactics is awareness of their operating principles, contexts in which they are provoked, and methods to avoid falling prey to them.

We hope that by learning about these principles of persuasion, you will be better able to recognize the situations you are in that may lead to act against your will and then to have the tools to resist unwanted

social influence. There are six basic principles, and each one is set in a specific Context. When you are aware of the Context, or the behavioral Setting, you will better recognize the principal at work, when you see the principal operating, you will understand the Context in which it is embedded

### **Reciprocity [Context: Obligation]**

The rule of reciprocity requires that one person try to repay, in kind, what another person has provided. Supports the giving of favors since repayment is expected from the recipient

#### *The Basics*

- Sense of future obligation makes it possible to develop continuing relationships and exchanges
- We are trained from childhood to abide by the reciprocity rule or suffer social disapproval

#### *How It's Exploited*

- Rule can spur unequal exchanges
- "Door-in-the-face" – relies on persuader making an outrageous, extreme request first, then conceding to a comparatively small request (one desired all along) that will likely be accepted because it appears to make a concession

#### *Best Defense*

Reject initial offers, favors, concessions; redefine them as tricks and refuse to feel obligated to respond reciprocally

### **Consistency [Context: Commitments]**

#### *The Basics*

- People desire to look consistent within their words, beliefs, attitudes, and deeds
- Consistent conduct provides a beneficial approach to daily life and is highly valued by society
- Shortcut through complex decision-making reduces processing time in future decisions

#### *How It's Exploited*

- Profiteers exploit the principle by inducing people to make an initial commitment, take a stand or position that is consistent with requests that they will later ask of them
- Commitments are most effective when they are active, public, effortful, and internally motivated.
- If they are successful, abiding by this rule may lead to actions contrary to one's best interests

#### *Best Defense*

- Do not be pressured into accepting requests that you do not want to perform.
- Be sensitive to situational variables operating on your decision

### **Social Proof [Context: Consensus]**

#### *The Basics*

- A means to determine what is correct by finding out what other people think is correct
- Principle can be used to stimulate a person's compliance by informing the individual that many other individuals have been complying (compliance by famous or authoritative people is very effective)
- A shortcut for determining how to behave – while making us vulnerable to persuasion experts
- Most influential under two conditions:
  - Uncertainty – situation is ambiguous; more likely to accept the actions of others as correct
  - Similarity – people are inclined to follow the lead of similar others

#### *How It's Exploited*

- The Bandwagon effect – everyone who is anyone is doing it, why not YOU?
- The "In Crowd" has it right, do you want them to accept you or not? So act like them

#### *Best Defense*

- Develop counterarguments for what people are doing; their actions should not form yours
- Be aware that the others may have a biased reason for the action they are advocating
- Be aware that the others may be misinformed
- Remember the entire group might be wrong-headed because the leader has biased their opinions

**Liking [Context: Friendship]***The Basics*

- People prefer to say “yes” to individuals they know and like
- We want people to like us and we like those who show that they like us

*How It's Exploited*

- Persuasion experts manipulate factors that influence their likeability.
- Features that influence liking:
  - Physical attractiveness – attractive people are more successful in getting requests granted
  - Similarity – we like people who are like us; we more willing to say “yes” without thinking
  - Praise – compliments generally enhance liking and compliance
  - Familiarity – repeated contact with a person or thing normally facilitates liking
  - Association – making connections to positive things
  - Shadowing - persuader exhibits behaviors that match those of the target individual

*Best Defense*

- Developing a special sensitivity to suspicious and undue liking from the requester
- Separate the requester from the request, and make decisions based solely on the merits of the offer – not your feelings about the requester.

**Scarcity [Context: Competition]***The Basics*

- People assign more value to opportunities when they are less available—if there are fewer resources and less time to get them, we want them more
- Principle holds true for two reasons:
  - Things that are difficult to attain are typically more valuable
  - As things become less accessible, we lose freedoms and want them more than before
- Optimizing conditions for scarcity principle:
  - Value newly scarce items more than items that have been restricted all along
  - Most attracted to scarce resources when we must compete with others for them

*How It's Exploited*

- Use of this principle can be seen in compliance techniques as ‘limited number’ and ‘deadline’ tactics

*Best Defense*

- Step back and assess the merits of the opportunity, the value of the item, and why/if we want it
- Give an objective evaluation of its personal value; not overvalue it because it appears to be scarce

**The Science of Social Influence – Anthony Pratkanis**

Anthony Pratkanis has meticulously studied social influence tactics and and classified numerous methods that humans utilize to manipulate and change the attitudes and beliefs of others.

**Landscaping (Pre-persuasion tactics)**

The following methods are some of the ways influence agents can have contexts working for them even before you know you're being influenced.

1. Define and label issue in a favorable manner
2. Association
3. Set expectations
4. Agenda setting
5. Establish a favorable comparison point or set
6. Control the flow of information
7. Limit and control the number of choices and options

**Tactics that rely on social relationship (Social credibility and social rules)**

One of the most important elements of convincing arguments is a reputable source. We are constantly bombarded by commercials that report experts such as dentists support a brand of toothpaste or professional athletes eat certain breakfast cereals. These tactics are surprisingly effective! By utilizing the following traits and characteristics, people can play on social relationships in order to persuade.

### Tactics that rely on social relationship (continued)

1. Authority
2. Attractiveness
3. High Status
4. Similarity – “just plain folks like you”
5. Role-play
6. Social modeling
7. Social reinforcement
8. Multiple sources
9. Arguing against one’s own self-interest
10. Draw on well-being of friends and family

### Effective message tactics

Effective communication depends on the strength and logic of the message. Here, we cite a few examples of how messages can induce the target to generate reasons for adopting recommended action:

1. Self-generated persuasion – give the target a chance to persuade themselves
2. Vivid appeals – emotionally interesting or compelling
3. Let the message recipient draw his or her conclusion
4. Rhetorical questions
5. Pique interest in message
6. Message fit with pre-existing beliefs, experiences, knowledge
7. Placebic reasons – arguments that appear to make sense but actually lack information
8. Defusing objections – acknowledging objections and refuting them before a target can raise them
9. Asking for small contributions initially
10. Message length = message strength
11. Repetition of message
12. Primacy effect – order of presentation

### Emotional tactics

Emotions are often thought to infringe on our rationality and better judgment. Pratkanis presents this set of emotional tactics that take advantage of our subjective feelings, arousal, and tensions as the basis for securing influence.

1. Fear
2. Guilt
3. Embarrassment
4. Threat of insult
5. Flattery
6. Empathy
7. Reciprocity
8. That’s not all – sweetening the deal
9. Commitment trap
10. Low-balling
11. Bait-and-switch
12. Scarcity
13. Anticipatory regret
14. Door-in-face – ask for a large favor, retreat and ask for a much smaller favor
15. Foot-in-the-door – ask a small request than ask for a larger request

## Defensive and Offensive Tactics for Resisting Influence

**Defensive** – learn how to detect propaganda

1. Play devil’s advocate
2. Generate questions to ask
3. Be prepared to debunk bogus appeals
4. Practice how to respond to propaganda attacks

**Offensive** – steps that will identify common propaganda forms and stop them at their source

1. Know the ways of persuasion and know that you personally may be the victim of propaganda
  - o Distinguish source credibility
  - o Realize your level of personal vulnerability
2. Monitor your emotions
  - o If you’re having an emotional response to a communication, ask yourself why
  - o Look for things that induce false emotions of fear, guilt, reciprocity
3. Explore the motivation and credibility of the source: what does the source have to gain and is it an overly manufactured image?
4. Think rationally about any proposal or issue: What is the issue? Arguments for and against?

### Defensive and Offensive Tactics for Resisting Influence (continued)

5. Attempt to understand the full range of options before making a decision; relate to your values
6. If you hear something repeatedly, ask why it is being repeated
7. If the deal looks too good to be true, it probably is such as free gifts and time-sensitive offers
8. Develop counterarguments to propaganda and compare performance with advertising
9. Support efforts to prevent vulnerable groups against exploitative persuasion
10. Avoid being dependent on a single source of information
11. Separate news from entertainment (FS note: The 'news' often consists of entertainment 'news'.)
12. Use 'communication style' as one criteria in making decisions and judgments
13. Increase your personal involvement, knowledge, and awareness in important issues; take some time to find out more on your own

### Positive Social Influence and Civic Virtue

While most psychological research is focused on the negative aspects of social influence, principles of social influence can be used for good, to enhance basic social and political values. Making sensible adjustments and achievable objectives can help us reach goals that improve on our lives and those near us. Moral behavior can be cultivated by rewarding positive behavior. Government, education, and social institutions can be re-designed to facilitate critical thinking and responsible conduct. The following highlights some ideas that we can bring into our own lives and those of our children.

1. Supporting critical thinking abilities. Asking Why? How does this relate to my values? Resist living on mindless "auto-pilot" and instead reflect on details of the immediate situation; think before acting!
2. Rewarding moral behavior: Social recognition for good deeds; acknowledge bravery
3. Encouraging respect and appreciation for diversity and human variability reduces biases and discrimination.
4. Not allowing stereotyping and dehumanization of other people
5. Changing social conditions that make people feel anonymous; support conditions that encourage people to feel valuable, special and worthy
6. Encouraging admission of mistakes, accepting error in judgments – to reduce justification for continuing wrong, immoral behavior and motivation to minimize dissonance
7. Promoting personal responsibility and accountability of one's actions. Blaming others is a disguise for one's own role in the consequences of actions.
8. Supporting independence over group conformity; recognize when conformity to the group norm is counter-productive and when independence should take precedence despite possible rejection
9. Reducing poverty, inequities, and entitlements of the privileged
10. Never sacrificing freedom for promised security
11. Discouraging even small transgressions: cheating, gossiping, lying, teasing, bullying

### Dr. Z's Hints About Resisting Unwanted Influences On You

1. Let go of illusions of "personal invulnerability". If it can happen to them, it can happen to you.
2. Be modest in self-estimates – it's better to perceive yourself as vulnerable and take precautions.
3. Engage in life as fully as possible, yet be prepared to disengage and think critically when necessary.
4. Be aware of Cialdini's contexts and principles of compliance; look to the relevant context being manipulated on you and pull back.
5. 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." Dissonance and consistency go limp in the face of self-honesty.
6. Separate your ego from your actions; maintain a sense of positive self-esteem, that is independent from the occasional failure and your stupid actions at times (Laugh at yourself once a day.)
7. Separate the messenger from message in your mind, be aware of mental fatigue, wanting simple answers or short cuts, and giving in to non-verbal tricks. There are no free lunches and no quick paths to anything worthwhile – sloth and greed breed gullibility.
8. Insist on a second opinion; think about opportunities, contracts, proposals and requests for commitments away from the situation; never immediately sign on the dotted line.

9. Develop mental and intuition systems that acknowledge your vague feelings of something wrong.
10. Try playing devil's advocate, be the deviant in a positive way! Assess the reactions against you when the influence agent says he/she is only doing this for your good.
11. In all authority confrontations: be polite, individuate yourself, describe the problem objectively, do not get emotional, state clearly the remedy sought, and the positive consequences expected.
12. Never allow yourself to be cut off emotionally from your familiar and trusted reference groups of family, friends, neighbors, co-workers – do not accept putdowns against them.
13. Remember all ideologies are abstractions used for particular political, religious, social, economic purposes – always relate these to your values and question if the means justify the ends.
14. Think hard before putting abstract principles before real people in following other's advice to act in specific ways.
15. Trust your intuition and gut feelings. When you sense you are becoming a target of influence, put up your counter-arguing mentality and dig down for sources for resistance.
16. Rules are abstractions for controlling behavior and eliciting compliance and conformity - consider when, where and why we have rules. Ask: who made the rule? What purpose does it serve? Who maintains it? Does it make sense in this specific situation? What happens if it is violated?
17. When trying to figure out reasons for unusual behavior - yours or others - start by considering possible situational forces and variables vs. judging the behavior as "character".
18. Imagine Dr. Z as your conscience, your personal Jiminy Cricket (from Pinocchio) sitting on your shoulder and saying be cool, be confident, be collected - to avoid becoming a Jack Ass.

## A Ten-Step Program to Build Resistance and Resilience

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 S's-- **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.

Consider how many years the Vietnam War continued long after officials knew that the war could not be won. How many thousands of lives were lost, when acknowledging failure and error could have saved them? It is more than a political decision to 'save face' - it is a moral imperative to do the right thing.

### **"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. 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. 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. Imagine scenarios of future consequences of current practices. Reject simple solutions as quick fixes for complex personal or social problems. Support critical thinking and become vigilant about deceptive ads, biased claims, and distorted perspectives. 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 determine our actions or opinions 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. Always imagine a future time when today's deed will be on trial and the judge and jury will not 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 individuality; 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 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. 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; I question 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 openly exposed to critical evaluation. We must play more active roles in critical differentiation. We should be polite and courteous when such a stance is justified, yet be wise by resisting those authorities that do not deserve respect. Doing so, will reduce mindless obedience to self-proclaimed authorities whose priorities are not in our best interests.

**“I will balance my Time Perspective.”**

We can be led to do things that are not within our values when we allow ourselves to become trapped in an expanded present moment. 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. Situational power is weakened when past and future combine to contain the excesses of the present.

**“I can oppose unjust Systems.”**

Individuals falter in the face of the intensity of some systems and resistance may involve physically removing one's self from a 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. 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.

**“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. 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.

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

The power of the 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. Pressure to be a “team player,” to sacrifice personal morality for the good of the team, are nearly irresistible. We must 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.”**

The way issues are framed influence us without our being conscious of them, and they shape our orientation toward the ideas or issues they promote. 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.

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.