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Creating a Persuasive Argument

Part Three of "What's in It for Me?"

In the first two parts of this series, we dealt with the concept of the subconscious mind and the role that commitment plays in an individual's decision making. You will remember that the conscious mind's decision to commit to a course of action is used over and over again to handle like situations, especially at times when the mind is under stress. This action simplifies the burden on the conscious mind by providing shortcuts to make our lives simpler and more manageable. Implicit in this shortcut is the absolute trust of the idea, since the individual, himself, determined the choice.

Plus, we also considered the difficulty of altering a person's choice once a public commitment has been made to a position. In each case the mind strives for a consistency that helps limit the need to rethink a position, instead returning unquestioningly to the previously decided. However, this can be a positive in the interview if it is managed properly. Once the individual commits to the belief that their wrongdoing has been discovered and that cooperation is desirable, the subject now seeks an acceptable reason to explain his participation in the incident.

Besides commitment and consistency, there are other laws of persuasion at work in the interview as well. Another of the most powerful is social proof.

Social Proof

Interviewers have illustrated rationalizations using stories of peer pressure, those times when the actions of others shaped our own desires. None of us has to think very long or hard to remember incidents where our own behaviors were altered by the decisions of others. The clothes we chose, music we listened to, or television shows we watched were influenced by those around us. The recommendations of others is a powerful deciding factor in what we do.

Pick up a paper and look at the movie ads. They are filled with quotes. "Hilarious!" "Best film this year." "Winner of 7 Oscars." "Performance of a lifetime." Each of these quotes constitute subtle evidence of what others think...social proof of the film's excellence. The critic's opinion or an award, in part, shapes the moviegoers decision how their entertainment dollars will be spent. Remember saying, "*Everyone says it's just great. I can't wait to see it.*" Hmmm. This sounds suspiciously like a commitment. A commitment made, as a result of others'

actions, and to be consistent we *will* have to carry out that public commitment to see the film.

Social proof can also be found in the laugh tracks of television comedies. Unthinkingly, we conclude it must be okay to laugh and enjoy ourselves, other people are. Celebrity's hangout with other celebrities; the beautiful people with the beautiful people; each providing the other social proof of their special status.

So, it is evident that social proof has an impact on how we think and come to decisions, but how does this work in the interview? The crowd begins to move toward an exit, students close up their books near the end of class, and we found ourselves following along.

The use of stories allows the interviewer to maintain a neutral credibility, while focusing the person's attention on the resolution of the issue, rather than the consequences.

In times of stress and indecision, we look to others for direction. There is certainly no more stressful time than having to decide whether to confess or not. "Which way should I go?" "What have others done here?" The subject is looking for direction and will take a cue from the stories illustrating the rationalizations. In these stories individuals find someone like themselves; someone who has made a decision when confronting a problem similar to their own.

But why should we use stories, rather than offer advice to the uncertain subject?

Trust

Initially, it is all about trust. "Can I trust the person that I am talking with?" The interviewer who cares so much about getting a confession is trying too hard to sell the confession and actually harms his credibility. Those of us who attended last year's National Retail Federation loss prevention convention had an opportunity to hear noted negotiator and author Herb

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Cohen speak. The speech revolved around the theme of his book, *Negotiate This! By Caring, But Not T-H-A-T Much*.

While the subject is looking at the situation asking, "What's in it for me?", he is also wondering about the interviewer, "What's in it for you? Can I trust what you are saying?"

Interviewers who proclaim omnipotence... "There is nothing you can tell me that I don't know."...actually harm their credibility. Even a small mistake by the interviewer destroys the relationship and the trust built between the two.

But when an individual perceives another as having his best interest at heart, his credibility is accepted, because he cares, but not that much. Think about the waiter who steers you away from the special because, "It isn't that good tonight." He may suggest a more expensive item now which results in a larger tip, but we trust him because he cares, but not that much.

When the interviewer points out a weakness in the investigation in general terms, he actually increases his credibility in the eyes of the subject. This gives the interviewer greater authority and expertise in the subject's mind. It effectively inoculates the interviewer against an attack on his and the investigation's credibility. It is the powerful who admit weakness, and the weak who claim power.

The use of stories allows the interviewer to maintain a neutral credibility, while focusing the person's attention on the resolution of the issue, rather than the consequences. Stories told about others give the interviewer an opportunity to evaluate the person's response to the story before he agrees with its point himself. If the person does not like the point, the interviewer can distance himself as well, since he was merely relating an event in someone else's life, not offering his own personal experience.

Stories

Stories are powerful conveyors of ideas. They are memorable, lasting years while the staleness of statistics disappears from our consciousness. A simple story can tap into our basic emotions by allowing the individual to feel them through the experience of another. Stories can take complex problems and distill them to the basics; taking abstract thoughts and make them concrete for the listener. Finally, stories grab the attention of the listener, giving them something that they can relate to in a very personal way.

The story gives the interviewer an opportunity to incorporate social proof into the conversation while remaining neutral. Here are people who have had to deal with problems and have taken a course of action to resolve it. Social proof can be even more powerful when the person in the story is biographically similar to the subject, for example, a single parent struggling to raise children without the financial resources to make ends meet and the difficulties faced with nowhere to turn for help. "This is someone, like me, who has similar problems. What did they do in this situation?"

We like and trust people who are similar to ourselves and have faced like challenges. Going with what seems popular or what others have done overcomes the individual's feeling of insecurity and makes for a more comfortable decision.

Words are Powerful

Certainly, words are capable of causing hurt and insult. Every interviewer has been taught to avoid those harsh terms that recreate the seriousness of the incident. Words like "steal," "theft," "crime," and "police" focus ones attention on the consequences of the action rather than its resolution. Using these types of words counteracts the effectiveness of the rationalization and dilutes the power of the stories.

Words that label can also be counterproductive unless the person accepts the label. When telling a story, does its point require that the person's involved be identified by racial or cultural characteristics? Is the story's point made more profoundly by saying, "There was this white guy..." or "There was this guy..." In most instances, the more simply and ambiguously a story is told, the more positively it is accepted.

The ambiguously told story allows the individual to fill in details that make sense to him, rather than try to fit the interviewer's details into the image created in his mind's eye. For example, which of the following examples creates a better, more favorable image for you?

- Think about a wonderful meal of liver and onions, lightly sautéed and cooked rare, set out in front of you. Or...
- Think about your favorite meal, cooked just how you like it.

That smell that just tells you how wonderful it will taste.

If you happen to be one of the few who find a dinner of liver and onions appealing, then the first example will work just fine. However, if that does not appeal to you, it will be ineffective in creating a positive mental image. The second example allows the hearer to think of whatever his favorite meal is, inserting his own details to form perfect communication between himself and the teller.

Another powerful word is "because." Parents often use the word as a defense against children, but researchers have discovered it has important applications to persuasion.

Psychologist Ellen Langer performed several experiments around the use of the word "because." Researchers approached people in line to use a copier saying, "Excuse me. I have 5 pages. May I use the copy machine because I am in a rush." An amazing 94 percent allowed researchers past them to use the machine.

To test whether it was the word "because" having the impact, they did the experiment again, this time deleting the words "because I am in a rush." The rate of compliance dropped to 60 percent. When they used the previous approach and reintroduced "because" followed by the words "I have to make copies," the compliance rate rose to an astounding 93 percent compliance rate even though the reason to pass was to make copies.

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above, usually my students confirm exactly what these many years of research have discovered. Namely, examples set by managers are critical in establishing the ethical tone of the workplace. In fact, the impressive knowledge and unique insight that these young people possess about the nature of the retailing workplace will probably keep me supplied with material for columns for years to come. You see, these 18- to 25-year-olds virtually all work in retail stores and restaurants. (And I would guess that these University of Florida students are not significantly different from many other young people across the country. So, don't run out and close all of your stores in Gainesville, Florida.)

Although the students' comments about their work usually emphasize a consistent theme, I still learn something unique from these young people each time we hold this discussion. For example, the other day I discovered a particularly articulate young man who was not ashamed to confess that he had often stolen at work and even bragged about his dishonest exploits at a local fast food restaurant to the entire class. He reported that he hated his immediate supervisor so much that he wanted to get her fired. His logic was that if he ate enough food, gave away store merchandise to his friends, and even skimmed from the cash register on a daily basis, eventually the restaurant that he worked at would become so unprofitable that the manager would have to be replaced. This is not the first time that I have heard my students talk about specific examples of reciprocal or parallel deviance in the retail workplace. I would imagine that

many readers of this column have heard similar stories, hoping that these are the exception, not the norm.

A Formula for Winning

Therefore, employee attitudes about their managers and immediate supervisors are critically important to creating a "culture of honesty" in the workplace. Even if we select the best people available and train them properly, subsequent interactions with unfair, incompetent, and insensitive managers may unintentionally give the already disgruntled employee the reason that they need to justify and rationalize dishonesty, deviance, and theft against your company.

If this isn't "shooting oneself in the corporate foot," I am not sure what would constitute a better example. Bad managers have to be identified, retrained, or replaced to create the most positive, supportive, and profitable work environment possible. Preventing dishonesty is just "icing on the cake."

But don't just take my word for it. In his best selling new book, *Winning*, former General Electric CEO Jack Welch makes essentially the same argument. Even if you may disagree with Welch's personality and management style, it is nice to see that the critical importance of hiring and keeping good managers is well supported and understood even by those outside the loss prevention community. ■

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It seems then that the reason offered by the interviewer following the word "because" is less important than using the word. It would appear that the mind simply expects that there is an acceptable reason, since that is what always follows that word. Since the conscious mind must work to deal with logic, it may be that during times of stress or sensory overload, the mind reverts to what it has learned previously that good reasons follow the word "because." Therefore, it is unnecessary to carefully examine what was really being said, or unconscious compliance.

Pause

Mark Twain once said, "There is nothing so powerful as the rightly timed pause." Using the pause allows information to be absorbed by the person and lets them internalize the point of the story. Talking slowly and using pauses allows the individual to maintain his attention and follow the point of the story even though he may be in an internal dialogue with himself.

The pause can be used before or after a word, sentence, or topic to add emphasis or to draw attention to a point. Consider these examples:

- "Can you even imagine how that would make someone feel?" (pause)
- "Which one do you feel better about?" (pause)
- "The most important thing is...(pause)...the person's reason."
- "I think you know exactly what I am talking about." (pause)

Sometimes a pregnant pause tells a story all its own. With that said, we shall pause to continue in the next issue. ■

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