

considered *an* authority, such as pest-control experts. It's instructive that both forms of authority worked.

---

## ***Clothes***

A second kind of authority symbol that can trigger our mechanical compliance is clothing. Though more tangible than a title, the cloak of authority is every bit as fakeable. Police files bulge with records of con artists whose methods include the quick change. In chameleon style, they adopt the hospital white, priestly black, army green, or police blue the situation requires for maximum advantage. Only too late do their victims realize the garb of authority is hardly its guarantee.

A series of studies by social psychologist Leonard Bickman indicates how difficult it can be to resist requests from figures in authority attire. Bickman's basic procedure was to ask passersby on the street to comply with some odd request (for example, to pick up a discarded paper bag or stand on the other side of a bus-stop sign). In half of the instances, the requester, a young man, was dressed in ordinary street clothes; in the rest, he wore a security guard's uniform. Regardless of the type of request, many more people obeyed the requester when he was wearing the guard costume. Similar results were obtained when the requester was female.

In one especially revealing version, the requester stopped pedestrians and pointed to a man standing by a parking meter fifty feet away. The requester, whether dressed normally or as a security guard, always said the same thing to the pedestrian: "You see that guy over there by the meter? He's overparked but doesn't have any change. Give him a dime!" The requester then turned a corner and walked away so that by the time the pedestrian reached the meter, the requester was out of sight. Nonetheless, the power of his uniform lasted, even after he was long gone. Nearly all the pedestrians complied with his directive when he wore the guard costume, but fewer than half did so when he was dressed normally.

It is interesting that, later on, Bickman found college students guessed with some accuracy the percentage of compliance that occurred in the experiment when the requester wore street clothes (50 percent versus the actual 42 percent); yet the students greatly underestimated the percentage of compliance when he was in uniform, 63 percent versus the actual 92 percent.

Less blatant in its connotation than a uniform, but still effective, is another kind of attire that has traditionally indicated authority status in our culture: the business suit. It, too, can evoke a telling form of deference from total strangers. In a study conducted in Texas, researchers arranged for a thirty-one-year-old man to cross the street against the light, against the traffic, and against the law on a variety of occasions. In half of the cases, he was dressed in a freshly pressed business suit and tie; on the other occasions, he wore a work shirt and trousers. The researchers watched from a distance and counted the number of pedestrians who followed the man across the street; three-and-a-half times as many people swept into traffic behind the suited jaywalker.

Noteworthy is that the two types of authority apparel shown by these studies to be influential, the guard uniform and the business suit, are combined deftly by con artists in a fraud called the *bank examiner scheme*. The target of the swindle can be anyone, but elderly persons living alone are preferred. The con begins when a man dressed in a properly conservative business suit appears at the door of a likely victim. Everything about the con man's clothing speaks of propriety and respectability. His white shirt is starched, wingtip shoes glow darkly, and suit is classic. The lapels are three inches wide, no more, no less; the cloth is heavy and substantial, even in July; the tones are muted—business blue, business grey, business black.

He explains to his intended victim—perhaps a widow he secretly followed home from the bank a day or two earlier—that he is a professional bank examiner who, in the course of auditing the books of her bank, has found some irregularities. He thinks he has spotted the culprit, a bank officer who is regularly doctoring reports of transactions in certain accounts. He says that the widow's account may be one of these, but he can't be sure until he has hard evidence; therefore, he has come to ask for her cooperation. Would she help by withdrawing her savings so a team of examiners and responsible bank officials can trace the record of the transaction as it passes across the suspect's desk?

Often the appearance and presentation of "bank examiner" are so impressive that the victim never thinks to check on their validity with even a simple phone call. Instead, she drives to the bank, withdraws all her money, and returns home with it to wait with the examiner for word on the trap's success. When the message comes, it is delivered by a uniformed "bank guard" who arrives after closing hours to announce that all is well—apparently the widow's account was not one of those being tampered with. Greatly relieved, the examiner offers gracious thanks and, because the bank

is now closed, instructs the guard to return the widow's money to the vault, to save her the trouble of doing so the next day. With smiles and handshakes all around, the guard leaves with the funds while the examiner expresses a few more thanks before he, too, exits. Naturally, as the victim eventually discovers, the “guard” is no more a guard than the “examiner” is an examiner. What they are is a pair of bunco artists who have recognized the capacity of carefully counterfeited uniforms to *click* us into mesmerized compliance with “authority.”

---

## **READER'S REPORT 5.2**

### ***From a Florida-based physician***

The title MD carries significantly more authority when placed in the visual context of a white coat. At first, I hated to wear white coats but later in my career came to understand that the garment carries power. On multiple occasions when I started work in a new hospital rotation, I made it a point to wear the white coat. Without fail my transition went smoothly. Interestingly, physicians are highly aware of this and have even created a pecking order assigning medical students the shortest white coats, while residents in training get medium length coats, and attending physicians have the longest white coats. In hospitals where nurses are aware of this hierarchy, they rarely question the orders of “long coats”; but when interacting with “short coats,” hospital staffers make alternative medical diagnosis and therapy suggestions openly—and sometimes rudely.

**Author's note:** This report makes an important point: in hierarchical organizations, not only are those with authority status treated respectfully, but those without such status are often treated disrespectfully. As we saw in the reader's account, and as we will see in the next section, the symbols of status one displays can signal to others which form of treatment seems appropriate.

---

## ***Trappings***

Aside from its function in uniforms, clothing can symbolize another type of status. Finely styled and expensive clothes carry an aura of economic standing and position. Mall shoppers were more willing to comply with a request to participate in an unpaid survey, homeowners contributed more

## ***From a financial adviser in Michigan***

A big problem in my business is getting clients to change their long-held financial goals and strategies when turns in conditions, like in their personal situations or in the economy, make those moves the right thing to do. After reading the chapter on Authority in your book I switched from just basing my advice to these clients on my own opinion to including the stated opinion of a financial expert on the subject. A lot of times this would be the chief economist of my company which is a big brokerage firm with hundreds of offices around the country. But sometimes it would be a TV expert from one of the financial channels like Bloomberg and CNBC or the author of a published article on the subject. That worked, getting me about 15 percent to 20 percent more agreement than before. But honestly from what I read in your chapter I expected better results. Am I doing something wrong that if corrected would give me stronger results?

**Author's note:** This is an unusual Reader's Report. For multiple reasons, I rarely respond to appeals for personal advice, which can range from assistance on a college student's influence-related homework to counsel on how to persuade a wayward spouse to end an affair "once and for all." But this reader's request is different, principally because it makes contact with a pair of issues of general relevance to other readers. First, when people such as those the reader is trying to change have a long-standing commitment to particular goals and approaches, it's difficult to get any movement from them at all, so a 15–20 percent improvement in compliance strikes me as pretty good. There will be more to say about this in [chapter 7](#), on commitment and consistency. Second, there *is* something I can recommend to enhance the impact of an expert's advice—multiply it. Audiences trust and follow the advice of a set of experts more than that of any one of them (Mannes, Soll, & Larrick, 2014). Thus, a communicator who does the work of collecting and then pointing to support from multiple experts will be more successful than a communicator who settles for claiming the support of just one.

---

## ***The Credible Authority***

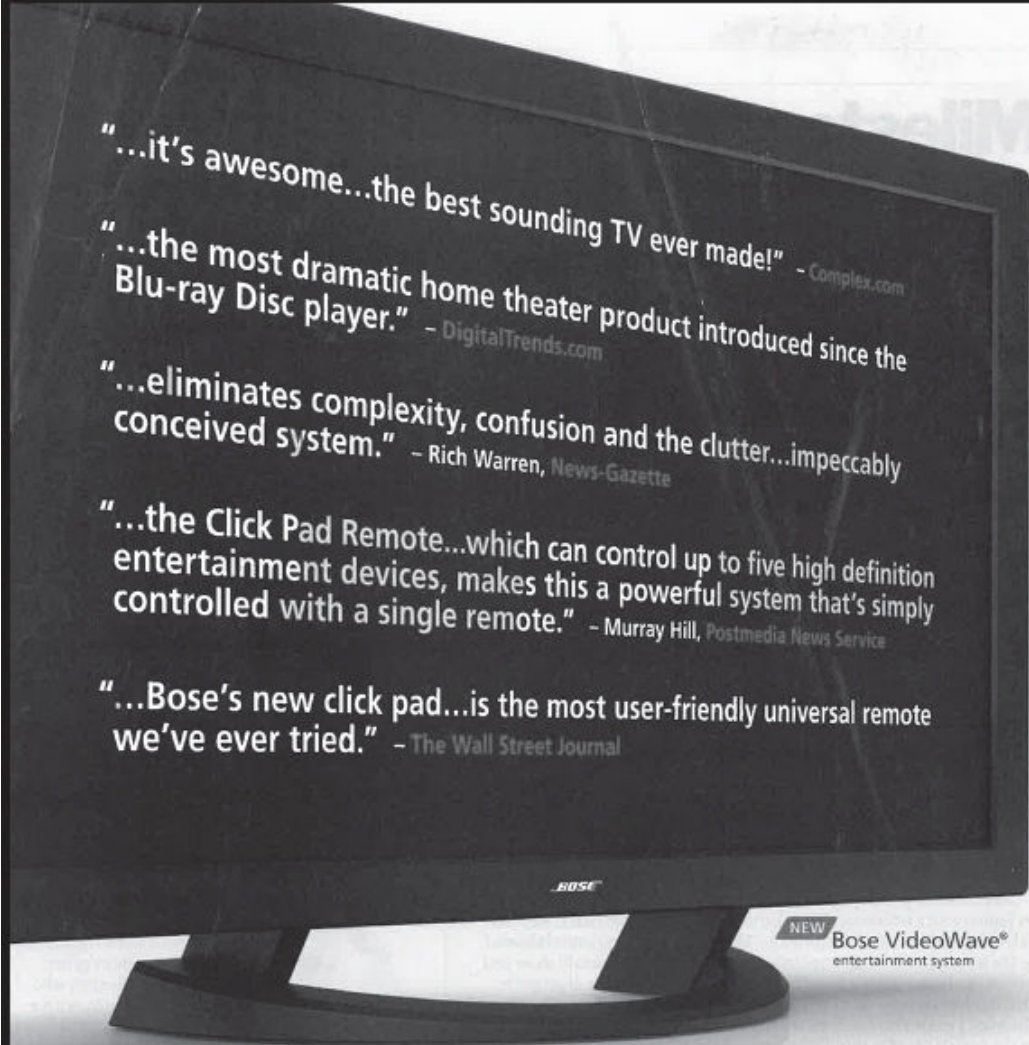
So far, we've seen that being viewed as either in authority or an authority leads to increased compliance. But the first of these types, merely being in charge, has its problems. As a rule, people don't like being ordered to do things. It often generates resistance and resentment. For this reason, most business schools teach prospective managers to avoid "command and control" approaches to leadership and embrace approaches designed to promote willing cooperation. It's in this latter respect that the second type of authority, being viewed as highly informed, is so useful. People are usually happy, even eager, to go along with the recommendations of someone who knows more than they do on the matter at hand.

The potent propensity to follow the lead of an expert is aptly illustrated in a story told by modern-art specialist Michel Strauss of being caught in a bidding war at an auction of a painting by Egon Schiele, a renowned Expressionist. Although the painting was originally estimated to bring between \$200,000 and \$250,000, Mr. Strauss found himself bidding far above that figure against a well-known Schiele expert, thinking the man knew something he didn't. Finally, at \$620,000, Strauss dropped out. When he later asked his rival about the painting, the man confessed he had bid so high only because he thought Strauss knew something *he* didn't. Let's focus, then, on the methods and outcomes of being perceived as *an* authority.

### ***Expertise***

Research distinguishes a particularly convincing such authority, the credible one. A credible authority possesses two distinct features in the minds of an audience: expertise and trustworthiness. Because we have already chronicled the ability of expertise to exert significant influence, it's not necessary to review the point extensively. Still, to ensure this first pillar of credibility is given its due, we can register some instructive additional evidence. For example, expertise appears to create a halo effect for those who possess it; a therapist's office with multiple diplomas and professional certifications on the wall produces higher ratings not only of the therapist's proficiency but also of his or her kindness, friendliness, and interest in clients. And *just one* newspaper Op-Ed piece written by an expert has large and lasting influence over readers' opinions—lifting agreement with the

expert's opinion among general readers by 20 percentage points in one set of studies; moreover, this was the case irrespective of the sex, age, and political leanings of all readers.



"...it's awesome...the best sounding TV ever made!" - Complex.com

"...the most dramatic home theater product introduced since the Blu-ray Disc player." - DigitalTrends.com

"...eliminates complexity, confusion and the clutter...impeccably conceived system." - Rich Warren, News-Gazette


"...the Click Pad Remote...which can control up to five high definition entertainment devices, makes this a powerful system that's simply controlled with a single remote." - Murray Hill, Postmedia News Service

"...Bose's new click pad...is the most user-friendly universal remote we've ever tried." - The Wall Street Journal

**NEW** Bose VideoWave® entertainment system

**"...you owe it to yourself to experience the VideoWave Entertainment System. It's a true breakthrough."** - DigitalTrends.com

Visit your nearest Bose® Store for an experience we believe you will never forget! And enter to win a VideoWave entertainment system. For store locations, visit [Bose.com/Experience](http://Bose.com/Experience) or call 1-800-308-2073.



The new Bose click pad remote.

**BOSE®**  
Better sound through research®

©2011 Bose Corporation. No purchase necessary. Sweepstakes ends 12/31/11. Open to legal U.S. residents, 18 or older. Visit [www.Bose.com/rules](http://www.Bose.com/rules) for complete official rules. Citations: The Wall Street Journal, 10/20/10; 2010/10/20; C\_009771

#### **Figure 5.4: Outsourced credibility**

The persuasive elements of this ad come entirely from (1) authorities on the topic, thereby affirming their knowledge, (2) who have no allegiance to the company, thereby establishing the trustworthiness of their comments.

*Courtesy of Bose Corporation USA*

### ***Trustworthiness***

Besides wanting our authorities to give us expert information, we want them to be trustworthy sources of the information. We want to believe they are offering their expert advice in an honest and impartial fashion—that is, attempting to depict reality accurately rather than to serve their self-interests.

Whenever I've attended programs designed to teach influence skills, they've stressed that being perceived as trustworthy is an effective way to increase one's influence and that it takes time for that perception to develop. Although the first of these claims remains verified by research, a separate body of research indicates that there is a noteworthy exception to the second. It turns out a communicator can rapidly acquire perceived trustworthiness by employing a clever strategy. Rather than succumbing to the tendency to describe all the most favorable features of a case upfront and reserving mention of any drawbacks until the end of the presentation (or never), a communicator who references a weakness early on is seen as more honest. The advantage of this sequence is that, with perceived truthfulness already in place, when the major strengths of the case are then advanced, the audience is more likely to believe them. After all, they've been conveyed by a trustworthy source, one whose honesty has been established by a willingness to point at not just positive aspects but negative ones as well.

The effectiveness of this approach has been documented in (1) legal settings, where a trial attorney who admits a weakness before the rival attorney points it out is viewed as more credible and wins more often; (2) political campaigns, where a candidate who begins with something positive to say about a rival (such as, "I am sure my opponent has the best of intentions with that proposal, but . . .") gains trustworthiness and voting preferences; and (3) advertising messages, where merchandisers who acknowledge a drawback before highlighting strengths often see large increases in sales. After Domino's "NEW DOMINO'S" campaign of 2009 admitting to the past poor quality of its pizza, sales went sky high; as a consequence, so did Domino's stock price.

The tactic can be particularly successful when the audience is already aware of the weakness; thus, when a communicator mentions it, little additional damage is done, as no new information is added—except, crucially, that the communicator is an honest individual. A job candidate might say to an interviewer holding her résumé, “Although I am not experienced in this field, I am a very fast learner.” Or an information-systems salesperson might say to an experienced buyer, “While our setup costs are not the lowest, you’ll soon recoup them because of our superior efficiencies.”

Warren Buffett, who with his partner Charlie Munger has led the Berkshire Hathaway investment company to astounding levels of growth and worth, is widely recognized as the greatest financial investor of our time. Not content to rest on his expertise laurels, Buffett consistently reminds current and potential stockholders of the other component of credibility he possesses: trustworthiness. Near the start of his annual reports, usually in the first page or two of text, he describes a mistake he’s made or a problem the company has encountered during the past year and examines the implications for future outcomes. Rather than burying, minimizing, or papering over difficulties, which seems to be the tack taken all too frequently in other annual reports, Buffett demonstrates that he is, first, fully aware of problems inside the company and, second, fully willing to reveal them. The emergent advantage is that when he then describes the formidable strengths of Berkshire Hathaway, readers are ready to trust in them more deeply than before—because they are coming from a *manifestly* trustworthy communicator.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of Buffett’s zeal for demonstrating his transparency by admitting his shortcomings appeared in his annual report of 2016, a banner year in which his company’s share-price increase doubled that of the S&P 500 and in which there were no investing missteps to report. What did Buffett do to ensure that evidence of his openness and honesty would remain at top of mind for shareholders? On the report’s second page of text, he noted a *previous* year’s investing mistake that he described as the “particularly egregious error of acquiring Dexter Shoe for \$434 million in 1993. Dexter’s value promptly went to zero.” Immediately thereafter, he detailed what he’d learned from the fiasco: he had not only misjudged the future worth of Dexter but made the mistake of paying with Berkshire Hathaway stock, something he promised shareholders he would never do again: “Today, I’d rather prep for a colonoscopy than issue Berkshire shares.” It’s clear to me that Buffett knows more than how to be an



impressively successful investor; he knows how to communicate impressively about being an impressively successful investor.<sup>6</sup>

---

## **EBOX 5.2**

The persuasiveness of online reviews is also influenced by perceived trustworthiness. The Spiegel Research Center at Northwestern University, which provides information about the effectiveness of marketing communications, published a summary of evidence of the power of online reviews to shape customer behavior (<https://spiegel.medill.northwestern.edu/online-reviews/>). Among their findings were three directly related to perceived trustworthiness:

- **Five stars is too good to be true.** The more stars assigned to a product, the higher is the likelihood of purchase—but only up to a point. When the average rating moves past the optimal 4.2 to 4.7 range, purchasers become suspicious that the ratings are phony and are less likely to buy.
- **Negative reviews establish credibility.** Consistent with the Center's contention that near-perfect ratings undermine trustworthiness, the presence of a negative review adds credibility to product evaluations. In fact, if a site includes some negative reviews, the conversion rate jumps by 67 percent.
- **Verified buyers are gold as reviewers.** Verified buyers, who have been confirmed to be previous online purchasers (rather than paid reviewers), are viewed as more credible. Accordingly, their presence on a site increases sales measurably.

**Author's note:** In addition to insights from the Spiegel Research Center, a separate set of researchers (Reich & Maglio, 2020) supported an online reviewer version of Warren Buffett's "mention a prior error" practice. If a reviewer confessed to making a previous mistake in his or her purchasing history, customers were more likely to buy a product recommended by the reviewer.

It is important to recognize what I am *not* suggesting here—that at the start, a marketer or salesperson state, "Before we begin, let me tell you all the things that are wrong with me, my organization, and our products and services." Rather, I am suggesting two things. First, if there is a drawback to be acknowledged, it should be presented relatively early in a message so the credibility it provides will color the rest of the appeal. Second, within a persuasive communication, there is an ideal place for one's strongest argument or feature, which can undercut or overwhelm the downside. It is in the moment

immediately following the admission of a shortcoming of one's case when, bolstered by resulting source credibility, the highly favorable element is likely to be processed most deeply and accepted most fully.

---

## ***Defense***

One protective tactic we can use against authority status is to remove its element of surprise. Because we typically misperceive the profound impact of authority (and its symbols) on our actions, we become insufficiently cautious about its presence in compliance situations. A fundamental form of defense against the problem, therefore, is a heightened awareness of authority power. When this awareness is coupled with a recognition of how easily authority symbols can be faked, the benefit is a properly guarded approach to authority-influence attempts.

Sounds simple, right? And in a way it is. A better understanding of the workings of authority influence should help us resist it. Yet there is a perverse complication—the familiar one inherent in all levers of influence. We shouldn't want to resist authority altogether or even most of the time. Generally, authority figures know what they are talking about. Physicians, judges, corporate executives, and the like have typically gained their positions through superior knowledge and judgment. As a rule, their directives offer excellent counsel.

Authorities are frequently experts. In most cases, it would be foolish to try to substitute our less informed judgments for those of an expert, an authority. At the same time, we have seen in settings ranging from street corners to hospitals that it would be foolish to rely on authority direction in all cases. The trick is to recognize without much strain or vigilance when authority directives are best followed and when they are not. Using the twin components of a credible authority—expertise and trustworthiness—as a guide, posing two questions to ourselves can help determine when authority directives should and should not be followed.

## ***Authoritativeness***

The first question to ask when confronted with an authority figure's influence attempt is, Is this authority truly an expert? The question focuses our attention on two crucial pieces of information: the authority's credentials and the relevance of those credentials to the topic at hand. By turning to the *evidence* for authority status in this simple way, we avoid the major pitfalls of automatic deference.

Let's reexamine the highly successful Vicks Formula 44 commercial in this light. If, rather than responding to his TV MD association, people had focused on the actor's actual status as an authority, I am confident the commercial would not have had so long and productive a run. Obviously, the TV doctor did not possess a physician's training or knowledge. What he did possess was a physician's *title*, MD. Plainly, it was an empty title, connected to him in viewers' minds through the device of playacting. Everyone knew that; but isn't it fascinating how, when streaming along, what is obvious often doesn't matter unless we pay specific attention to it?

That is why the "Is this authority truly an expert?" question can be so valuable. It moves us effortlessly away from a focus on possibly meaningless symbols toward a consideration of genuine authority credentials. What's more, it forces us to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant authorities. The distinction is easy to forget when the push of authority pressure is combined with the rush of modern life. The Texas pedestrians who hustled into city traffic behind a business-suited jaywalker are prime examples. Even if the man were the business authority his clothes suggested he might be, he was no more an authority on crossing the street than were those who followed him into traffic.

Still, they did follow, as if his classification, authority, overwhelmed the difference between relevant and irrelevant forms. Had they asked themselves whether he represented a true expert in the situation, someone whose actions indicated superior knowledge, I expect the result would have been far different. The same process applies to the TV doctors in the Vicks ads, who were not without expertise. They had long careers with many achievements in a difficult business. But their skills and knowledge were those of actors, not doctors. If, when viewing the famous commercial, we focused on the actor's true credentials, we'd quickly realize he should be no more believed than any other actor claiming that Vicks Formula 44 is an excellent cough suppressant.

In one research project, my colleagues and I demonstrated that training participants to focus on the true credentials of a spokesperson in an ad did, in fact, make them better evaluators of ads they experienced much later. They became not only *less* persuaded by subsequent ads featuring spokespeople with no relevant credentials (an actor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, promoting a type of internet technology, and a game-show host, Alex Trebek, touting the health properties of milk) but also *more* persuaded by spokespeople with relevant credentials (an MD director of a

pain institute, recommending a pain reliever, and a CEO, describing his company's years of good experience with a brand of business insurance).

The lesson? To defend ourselves against misleading appeals containing ersatz authorities, we should always ask, Is this authority truly an expert? We shouldn't presume we are too smart to be tricked by mere symbols of authority. Those symbols operate automatically on us. In my team's research, it was only the participants who, recognizing their susceptibility to this automatic process, were able to disrupt it by questioning communicators' *relevant* expertise. And it was only those participants who weren't fooled.

### ***Sly Sincerity***

Suppose, though, we are confronted with an authority whom we determine *is* a relevant expert. Before submitting to authority influence, we should ask a second simple question: How truthful can I expect the expert to be? Authorities, even the best informed, may not present their information honestly to us; therefore, we need to consider their trustworthiness in the situation. Most of the time we do. We allow ourselves to be swayed more by experts who seem to be impartial than by those who have something to gain by convincing us; research has shown this to be true around the world and in children as young as second-graders. By wondering how an expert stands to benefit from our compliance, we give ourselves another shield against undue and automatic influence. Even knowledgeable authorities in a field will not persuade us until we are satisfied their messages represent the facts faithfully.

When asking ourselves about an authority's trustworthiness, we should keep in mind the tactic compliance practitioners often use to assure us of their sincerity: they argue somewhat against their own interests. Correctly practiced, this approach can be a subtle yet effective device for "proving" their honesty. Perhaps they will mention a small shortcoming in their position or product. Invariably though, the drawback will be a secondary one that is easily overcome by more significant advantages—Avis: "We're #2. We try harder"; L'Oréal: "We're more expensive, and you're worth it." By establishing their basic truthfulness on relatively minor issues, the compliance professionals who use this practice can then be more believable when stressing the important aspects of their argument.

It's crucial to distinguish between honest and dishonest versions of the practice. There is nothing inherently wrong with a communicator revealing a



Besides its capacity to combat the perception of grade inflation, a weakness can become a strength in a variety of other situations. For example, one study found that letters of recommendation sent to the personnel directors of major corporations produced the most favorable results for job candidates when the letters contained one unflattering comment about the candidate in an otherwise wholly positive set of remarks (Knouse, 1983).

*Doonesbury 1994 G. B. Trudeau. Universal Press Syndicate. All rights reserved.*

Hoping to find out how they operate, years ago I applied for a position as a waiter at several fairly expensive restaurants. Without experience, though, the best I could do was to land a busboy job that, as things turned out, provided me a propitious vantage point from which to watch and analyze the action. Before long, I realized what the other employees already knew: the most successful waiter in the place was Vincent, who somehow arranged for patrons to order more and tip higher. The other servers were not even close to him in weekly earnings.

I began to linger in my duties around Vincent's tables to observe his technique. I quickly learned his style was to have no single style. He had a repertoire of approaches, each ready for the appropriate circumstances. With a family, he was effervescent, even slightly clownish, directing his remarks as often to the children as to the adults. With a young couple on a date, he became formal and a bit imperious in an attempt to intimidate the young man into ordering and tipping extravagantly. With an older married couple, he retained the formality but dropped the superior air in favor of a respectful orientation to both members of the couple. Should the patron be dining alone, he selected a friendly demeanor—cordial, conversational, and warm.

Vincent reserved the trick of seeming to argue against his own interests for large parties of eight to twelve people. His technique was veined with genius. When it was time for the first person, normally a woman, to order, he went into his act. No matter what she picked, Vincent reacted identically: his brow furrowed, his hand hovered above his order pad, and after looking quickly over his shoulder for the manager, he leaned conspiratorially toward the table to report in hushed tones for all to hear: "I'm afraid that is not as good tonight as it normally is. Might I recommend, instead, the . . . or the . . . ?" (At this point, Vincent suggested a pair of menu items that were slightly less expensive than the dish the patron had selected.) "They are both excellent tonight."

With this single maneuver, Vincent engaged several important principles of influence. First, even those who did not take his suggestions felt Vincent

had done them a favor by offering valuable information to help them order. Everyone felt grateful, and consequently, the rule of reciprocity worked in his favor when it came time to decide on his gratuity.

Besides hiking up the percentage of his tip, Vincent's ploy also placed him in a position to increase the size of the party's order. It established him as an authority on the current stores of the house: he clearly knew what was and wasn't good that night. Moreover—and here is where seeming to argue against his own interests comes in—it proved him to be a trustworthy informant because he recommended dishes slightly *less* expensive than the one originally ordered. Rather than having appeared to try to line his own pockets, he seemed to have the customers' best interests at heart.

To all appearances, Vincent was at once knowledgeable and honest, a combination that gave him great credibility. He was quick to exploit the advantage. When the party had finished giving their food orders, he would say, "Very well, and would you like me to suggest or select wines to go with your meals?" As I watched the scene repeated almost nightly, there was a notable consistency to the customer's reaction—smiles, nods, and, for the most part, general assent.

Even from my vantage point, I could read their thoughts from their faces. "Sure," the customers seemed to say, "You know what's good here, and you're obviously on our side. Tell us what to get." Looking pleased, Vincent, who did know his vintages, would respond with some excellent (and costly) choices. He was similarly persuasive when it came time for dessert decisions. Patrons who otherwise would have passed up the dessert course or shared with a friend were swayed to partake fully by Vincent's rapturous descriptions of the baked Alaska and chocolate mousse. Who, after all, is more believable than a demonstrated expert of proven sincerity?

---

#### ***READER'S REPORT 5.4***

##### ***From a former CEO of a Fortune 500 company***

In a business school class I developed for aspiring CEOs, I teach the practice of acknowledging failure as a way to advance one's career. One of my former students has taken the lesson to heart by making his role in a high tech company's failure a prominent part of his résumé—detailing on paper what he learned from the experience. Before, he tried to bury the failure, which generated no real career success. Since, he has been selected for multiple prestigious positions.



**Author's note:** The strategy of taking due responsibility for a failure doesn't just work for individuals. It appears to work for organizations too. Companies that take blame for poor outcomes in annual reports have higher stock prices one year later than companies that don't take the blame have (Lee, Peterson, & Tiedens, 2004).

---

By combining the factors of reciprocity and credible authority into a single, elegant maneuver, Vincent inflated substantially both the percentage of his tip and the base charge on which it was figured. His proceeds from this ploy were handsome indeed. Notice, though, that much of his profit came from an apparent lack of concern for personal profit. Seeming to argue against his financial interests served those interests extremely well.<sup>7</sup>

## SUMMARY

---

- In the Milgram studies, we see evidence of strong pressures for compliance with the requests of an authority. Acting contrary to their own preferences, many normal, psychologically healthy individuals were willing to deliver dangerous levels of pain to another person because they were directed to do so by an authority figure. The strength of the tendency to obey legitimate authorities comes from systematic socialization practices designed to instill in members of society the perception that such obedience constitutes correct conduct. In addition, it is adaptive to obey the dictates of genuine authorities because such individuals usually possess high levels of knowledge, wisdom, and power. For these reasons, deference to authorities can occur in a mindless fashion as a kind of decision-making shortcut.
- When reacting to authority in an automatic fashion, people have a tendency to do so in response to mere symbols of authority rather than to its substance. Three kinds of symbols effective in this regard are titles, clothing, and trappings such as automobiles. In studies, individuals possessing prestigious forms of one or another of the symbols (and no other legitimizing credentials) were accorded more deference or obedience by those they encountered. Moreover, in each instance, those individuals who deferred or obeyed underestimated the effect of the authority pressures on their behaviors.
- Authority influence flows from being viewed as either *in* authority or *an* authority. But the first of these types, merely being in charge, has its problems. Ordering people to do things often generates resistance and resentment. The second type of authority, being viewed as highly informed, avoids this problem, as people are usually willing to follow the recommendations of someone who knows more than they do on the matter at hand.
- The persuasive effect of being seen as *an* authority is maximized by also being seen as a credible such authority—one perceived as both expert (knowledgeable on the relevant topic) and trustworthy (honest in the presentation of one's knowledge). To establish their trustworthiness,

communicators may admit to a (usually minor) shortcoming of their case, which can be swept aside later by the presentation of outweighing strengths.

- It is possible to defend ourselves against the detrimental effects of authority influence by asking two questions: Is this authority truly an expert? and How truthful can we expect this expert to be? The first directs our attention away from symbols and toward evidence for authority status. The second advises us to consider not just the expert's knowledge in the situation but also his or her trustworthiness. With regard to this second consideration, we should be alert to the trust-enhancing tactic in which communicators first provide mildly negative information about themselves. Through this strategy, they create a perception of honesty that makes all subsequent information seem more believable to observers.

## Chapter 6

# Scarcity

### *The Rule of the Few*

The way to love anything is to realize that it might be lost.

—G. K. Chesterton

A friend of mine, Sandy, is a highly successful marital-dispute-resolution attorney (read: divorce lawyer). Often she serves as a mediator between divorcing parties who want to come to agreement on the terms of their divorce without the enlarged time, trouble, and expense of a courtroom trial. Before one of Sandy's mediations begins, partners are taken (along with their legal representatives) to separate rooms to avoid the face-reddening, vein-bulging shouting matches that can occur when the contestants are in the same physical space. Each side has already submitted a written proposal to Sandy, who shuttles between the two rooms seeking compromises to produce final terms both partners will sign. She claims the process calls more on her understanding of human psychology than of divorce law. That's why she wondered if, as a psychologist, I could help with a frequently fatal deadlock that surfaces near the very end of many negotiations and is so resistant to compromise that it will sometimes torpedo the entire mediation process and send the couple into divorce court.

The issue on which the deadlock rests can be a major one, such as the terms of a custody and visitation agreement involving the children (or, fought with equivalent ferocity, the St. Bernard); it can also be relatively minor, such as the amount one person would have to pay to buy out the other's portion of a vacation time-share contract. No matter, the combatants dig in their heels and refuse to budge in any meaningful way on this last piece of the agreement, stymying all further progress. I asked Sandy what she normally says to disputants in this situation. She answered that she takes the last offer on the issue from one room to the other, presents it, and says, "All you have to do is agree to this proposal, and we will have a deal." I thought I recognized the problem and suggested a minor wording change to, "We have a deal. All you have to do is agree to this proposal."

Several months later, at a party, Sandy walked up bearing a wide smile and told me the change had been amazingly successful. "It works every time," she declared. Skeptical, I replied, "C'mon, every time?" She put her hand on my arm, and said, "Bob, every time."

Although I remain skeptical about its 100 percent success rate—we're talking about behavioral science here, not magic—I was certainly pleased with the effectiveness of my recommended change. Truthfully, though, I wasn't surprised. I had made the