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## PART II: DEFENSIVE TRAPS

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The seventeen traps described in Part II change our perception or give us ways to sidestep our guilt and shame, setting us up for repeated unethical behavior. Although some of these traps can cause us to behave unethically, they usually affect us *after* our wrongdoing.

## ANNIHILATION OF GUILT

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WE ALL SEE OURSELVES as above average morally. When we get caught in one of the traps described in Part I, we commit an immoral transgression. This causes us to feel guilt and shame. These feelings are painful. One way we reduce our negative feelings is by using Traps 25 through 37 in this section. There are also more fundamental ways that we annihilate guilt.

### TRAP 21: ANGER

Researcher Martin Hoffman “argues that the roots of morality are to be found in empathy.” The capacity for being able to feel what others are feeling, to see through the eyes of others, impels us to maintain high moral standards.<sup>1</sup> Hoffman defines empathy as “the involuntary, at times forceful, experiencing of another person’s emotional state.”<sup>2</sup> Hoffman defines guilt as an empathic response to someone’s distress (feeling some of the same distress that the other feels) along with the awareness that one is the cause of the person’s distress.<sup>3</sup> A lack of guilt, then, seems to be tied to a lack of empathy.

Hostility and excessive *anger* seem to squelch empathy and guilt. Paul Miller and Nancy Eisenberg from Arizona State University reviewed a large body of research and concluded in their summary that people high in empathy are low in hostility and vice versa: people who are hostile are low in empathy.<sup>4</sup>

In relationships, unless blatant abuse is going on, *anger* is most

often a cover-up emotion. *Anger* is a secondary emotion that hides more vulnerable feelings. The vulnerable emotions are the motors for the *anger*. People get angry to protect themselves, to cover up their vulnerability. This process happens so quickly that people are usually unaware that their *anger* is obscuring other emotions.

Some of the most important, vulnerable emotions in relationships are *anxiety* (I'm going to lose you); *shame* (I blew it again, something's wrong with me); and *helplessness* (No matter what I do or say, I can't influence you). Robert Hoyk, coauthor of this book, is a psychologist who sees a fair share of couples in private practice. When Dr. Hoyk is working with couples, the trick is to find these vulnerable emotions underneath the *anger* and help the couple express them. In so doing, communication is reestablished. The vulnerable emotions are the tender feelings—the substance of empathic awareness. *Anger* is a powerful emotion and quickly obliterates these more tender emotions. *Anger* covers up or annihilates our more vulnerable emotions, thus destroying our capacity for empathy—which in turn annihilates our guilt.

Three years ago, the front page of *The New York Times* had an article by Kurt Eichenwald about the plea bargain of Richard Causey, former chief accounting officer at Enron. Causey had pleaded guilty to securities fraud and faced up to seven years in prison.

At a top-level Enron management meeting in September 2001, a red-faced Richard A. Causey, the chief accounting officer, pounded the table after hearing his colleagues label the company's accounting practices as "aggressive." According to executives in the room, Mr. Causey fumed that he considered such criticism a personal affront. . . .

Yesterday, more than four years later, Mr. Causey entered a Houston courtroom and pleaded guilty. . . .<sup>5</sup>

It's plausible that the *anger* Causey expressed in Enron's management meeting annihilated his deeper feelings of guilt and shame.

#### TRAP 22: GOING NUMB

In a therapy session, Susan was telling Dr. Hoyk how her father had beaten her as a child. Tears welled up in her eyes. Dr. Hoyk could see that her breathing was shallow. She covered her face with her hand as her head dropped forward. "I remember him grabbing me by the hair

and throwing me against the wall!" She began to sob deeply. Suddenly she looked up and uncovered her face, eyes wide, and quickly looked down. The sobbing had abruptly stopped.

"What's happening Susan?" Dr. Hoyk asked gently.

"I don't know. I—it's gone. I don't feel a thing. I'm numb."

People who have experienced trauma often shut down painful feelings. How are they able to do this? Usually, it's something they've learned as children and it's become so automatic that they're not even aware they do it. Most often they make it happen by tensing the muscles in their upper bodies and shifting their mental attention quickly to something else.

Every emotion has an affiliated physical sensation. When we tense our muscles we kill our physical sensations. When we rapidly shift our mental attention, we extinguish the beliefs and thoughts associated with the emotion.

With time, Dr. Hoyk discovered that Susan would tighten the muscles in her solar plexus until they became "like a rock." She would often shift her thinking to something in the room or to thinking about plans for later in the day.

Early in his career as a psychologist, Dr. Hoyk worked on the "front lines," in several crisis centers and with the homeless population (he often called for police backup). Many times he treated people who had criminal records. These clients frequently had an uncanny ability to shut down their feelings. They had been in dangerous or unlawful situations that demanded they show no emotions.

It's not only "street people" or people who have suffered trauma that shut down their feelings. Many of us do this, especially if we were raised in families in which certain emotions weren't tolerated. If you were raised in a family that didn't express sadness, fear, or hurt—or worse, in a family that would actively discourage these emotions—it's likely that you've learned to shut down your feelings to some extent.

Tensing our muscles and shifting our mental focus, then, can be another way we annihilate our guilt.

#### TRAP 23: ALCOHOL

In research, when subjects have been asked to write an essay that supported an opinion that was completely opposite to their moral

values—for example, an essay opposing more funding for handicapped facilities—and given the opportunity to drink *alcohol* after writing the essay, they usually would.<sup>1</sup>

*Alcohol* is an efficient way of extinguishing our feelings of guilt. The number one cause of relapse in alcoholics is negative emotions. One of the main reasons people become addicted to *alcohol* is to manage their bad feelings.

Although “power lunches” in the business world are a thing of the past, *alcohol* is still laced through the long hours and stress of the corporate environment. Bernie Ebbers, CEO of WorldCom, sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for an \$11 billion accounting fraud, “was known to stay up drinking half the night with colleagues, even before board meetings.”<sup>2</sup> It’s possible that Ebbers deadened his feelings of guilt with *alcohol*.

#### TRAP 24: DESENSITIZATION

Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind, in their book *The Smartest Guys in the Room*, write about one of the tricks that Enron used with their accounting. In the following excerpt, Richard Causey, chief accounting officer, meets with an executive in an attempt to “delay recording losses.”

At one meeting, an executive recalled, Causey kept coming back to a dead deal and asking: Was it possible the deal was still alive?

It wasn’t, responded the executive.

“So there’s no chance of it coming back?”

No.

“Is there even a *little* bit of a chance of it coming back?” asked Causey. “Do you want to look at it again?”

Finally the executive would take the hint—and the deal was declared undead. Enron deferred the hit for another quarter. “You did it once, it smelled bad,” says the executive. “*You did it again, it didn’t smell bad.*” [Italics added.]<sup>1</sup>

Notice that the second time the executive resurrects a deal, it doesn’t “smell bad.” Over time, with repeated exposure, we emotionally habituate to any type of distress—including guilt.

If a psychotherapist is working with a client who has experienced trauma, one of the techniques he or she uses is to have the client retell

the story over and over so the client becomes desensitized to the fear and anguish that is stimulated by the memory. You see a horror film once, it’s scary. You see it six times, and it loses its punch. The same pattern is true for guilt. You commit a transgression once, it engenders guilt; you commit the transgression again and again, your guilt is deadened.

## M I N I M I Z I N G

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**M**IINIMIZING makes unethical transgressions seem smaller. The person who minimizes admits that he or she did something wrong but states, “It’s not that big of a deal.” *Minimizing* is one of the most common ways we reduce our feelings of guilt and worthlessness resulting from transgressions.

### TRAP 25: REDUCTION WORDS

In the winter of 2002, Martha Stewart, the CEO of a \$250 million company, was indicted with obstruction of justice regarding insider trading. Stewart had sold her holdings of ImClone stock right before the value of the stock plummeted. Stewart had lied to investigators; she denied having received incriminating information from her broker’s assistant, Douglas Faneuil. The day Stewart had sold her stock, Faneuil had called and told her that he had been on the phone all morning with the family of Sam Waksal, the former ImClone CEO. The Waksals were urgently trying to sell their ImClone stock prior to new regulations. Stewart was not charged with insider trading but was indicted for lying.<sup>1</sup>

Stewart’s indictment hit major newspapers and magazines throughout the nation. She was quoted as saying that her sale of ImClone stock was “*a small personal matter*.<sup>2</sup>

In the preceding example, Stewart used the word *small*. Following is a list of words that we often use to minimize unethical behavior:

- sort of
- at most
- barely
- no big deal
- not more than
- only a little
- merely
- all I did was
- kind of
- once
- just
- maybe
- hardly
- I might have<sup>3</sup>

### TRAP 26: RENAMING

*Renaming* is the use of benign or benevolent words to replace words that have negative connotations. A common *renaming* in the politics of war is the use of the phrase *collateral damage*. We all know that this phrase signifies death and physical injury to civilians, but using the words *collateral damage* removes us from the horror of its meaning. *Renaming* camouflages unethical transgressions. Sometimes *renaming* can even give a transgression a wholesome connotation.<sup>1</sup>

Audiotapes released by the Snohomish County Public Utility District in the State of Washington testify to the use of *renaming* by employees of Enron. In one transcript, two employees, Greg and Shari, are talking about preparations in relation to a future contract with Snohomish County.

Greg:[I]t’s all how well you can weave these lies together, Shari.

Shari: I feel like I’m being corrupted now.

Greg: No, this is marketing.

Shari: O.K.<sup>2</sup>

Notice how Greg renames *lies* as *marketing*. This begins the process of changing his and Shari's perceptions about what they are doing. *Reduction words* and *renaming* influence our thinking and perceptions; they help maintain a positive view of ourselves.

#### TRAPS 27 AND 28: ADVANTAGEOUS COMPARISON AND ZOOMING OUT

Albert Bandura, one of the most respected researchers in psychology today, has conceptualized a strategy that he calls "advantageous comparison." *Advantageous comparison* allows the individual who has committed an unethical transgression to lessen his guilt by comparing what he has done to something worse. For example, "Damaging some property is no big deal when you consider that others are beating people up."<sup>1</sup>

The contrast doesn't necessarily have to be something worse—it can simply be a contrast with the big picture. We call this particular type of contrast *zooming out*.

*Zooming out* is like the function of a computer program that zooms out from a small, specific area of a map so that the view progressively encompasses more and more area—from a street intersection, to a view of a city, to a view of a county, to a view of several counties, and so on. Then the person contrasts the big picture with the street intersection and realizes how trivial the small area is in comparison to the larger view.

Michael Lewis in his book *Liar's Poker* writes about his days as a trader for Salomon Brothers in London. In Lewis's first few months after joining the firm, an experienced trader takes advantage of his naiveté and directs him to sell a large inventory of AT&T bonds to one of his new customers, a German investment banker. Unbeknownst to Lewis, the inventory belongs to the Salomon Brothers and is losing money. In the sale of the bonds, the losses are transferred to Lewis's client. When he realizes what has happened, Lewis uses *zooming out* to appease his guilt. He writes:

There was a convenient way of looking at this situation . . . Anyway, who was hurt besides my German? . . . The German's bank had lost sixty thousand dollars. The bank's shareholders, the Austrian Government, were therefore the

losers. But compared with the assets of the nation as a whole, sixty thousand dollars was a ridiculously small sum.<sup>2</sup>

#### TRAP 29: "EVERYBODY DOES IT"

Thomas Gabor, professor of criminology at the University of Ottawa, interviewed employees who had illegally stolen equipment and materials from their jobs. A common rationalization was exemplified by the following employee's statement: "We are as good as management. They commit employee theft. Everybody does it. If I don't take it, someone else will."<sup>3</sup>

Psychologists call this type of rationalization the *False Consensus Effect*. When we do something that is unethical, we appease our guilt by falsely assuming that it's something everyone does. It's another way we minimize our transgressions—it's not that bad, it's something that happens all the time! The insidious thing about the False Consensus Effect (as with most other traps) is that we actually believe our own self-deception.

Gina Agostinelli, at the University of New Mexico, conducted an interesting experiment that validated the False Consensus Effect. Two hundred and thirty-five subjects were participants in her study. Subjects had been randomly assigned to either of two conditions: a *failure condition* or a *neutral condition*. Agostinelli administered to the subjects a test that was described as a "decision-making problem that many career centers use to help companies hire employees . . . a valid indicator of future job success that measured general problem-solving abilities under time pressure." Following the test, subjects in the failure condition were given false feedback: your "score is poor and indicates that you are not good at solving problems under time pressure and cannot make important decisions efficiently." Subjects in the neutral condition were given no feedback.

All subjects were then given a questionnaire that asked them to estimate how well the general public would do on the problem-solving test.

The magnitude of the False Consensus Effect was impressive. In the neutral condition, 40 percent of subjects estimated that the public would be successful with the problem-solving test. In the failure condition, subjects estimated that only 15 percent of the public would be

successful! Subjects who “failed” the test estimated that a large number of people would also fail the test. “If I fail, most people would.”<sup>2</sup>

#### TRAP 30: “WE WON’T GET CAUGHT”

When the risk of getting caught for an ethical or legal transgression is low, our perception of wrongdoing is often minimized. Joseph Badaracco, professor of ethics at Harvard Business School, in his book *Business Ethics* presents the case study of Don Taylor, a new employee of the International Drilling Corporation (IDC) who witnessed the use of this type of minimization.

In October of 1971, Taylor was present at a meeting with the president of the company, Jeff Williams, and a vice president, Brian Rosenberg. Rosenberg informed Williams of specific actions by the company which had happened in the previous year that violated the securities laws. Rosenberg told Williams not to worry—the company’s “tracks were covered.” Taylor’s superiors advocated that they do nothing because their chances of being caught were low.<sup>1</sup>

When we were children, most of our moral decisions were made based on our desire to avoid punishment and to gain rewards. As adults, we’re more apt to base our moral decisions on other factors. But after we’ve committed a transgression, our early conditioning is an undercurrent that influences our perception. When the chance of being punished is low, the sting of unethical behavior seems less serious and we tend to minimize the importance of the transgression.

#### TRAP 31: “WE DIDN’T HURT THEM THAT BAD”

A particular type of minimization is *minimizing* the harm done by one’s unethical behavior.

Timothy Brock and Arnold Buss’s experiment, which we described in the section on *justification*, explored this type of minimization. To review, subjects were run through the experiment one at a time. Upon arrival, a participant met up with what he or she thought was another subject (actually a confederate). The real subject was given the role of the *experimenter* and the confederate played the *student* role.

The subject was to deliver shocks to the “student” when that person responded incorrectly to a verbal test. There were ten levels of shock intensity. Unbeknownst to the subjects, half of them had been

preassigned to a *high-shock condition* and the other half to a *low-shock condition*. Those in the high-shock condition were told to use shock intensities of 6 to 10 and those in the low-shock condition to use shock intensities of 1 to 5.

Results from questionnaires taken at the end of the experiment demonstrated that those subjects in the high-shock condition estimated that “injury” to the student was significantly less compared to estimates of harm from subjects in the low-shock condition!<sup>1</sup>

The higher the shock intensities used, the more apt the subject was inclined to minimize the harmful consequences. The more injury our unethical behavior causes, the more we’re likely to minimize our perception of harm done.

Remember the example in “Advantageous Comparison and Zooming Out”? Trader Michael Lewis used the technique of *zooming out* to minimize his guilt. The focus of his *minimizing* was the amount of harm incurred. When referring to the “Austrian Government” as the loser, he writes, “But compared with the assets of the nation as a whole, sixty thousand dollars was a ridiculously small sum.” In other words, “we didn’t hurt them that bad.”

#### TRAP 32: SELF-SERVING BIAS

The *self-serving bias* is what causes us to say “Yes, what happened was wrong, but it wasn’t my fault.” It’s our tendency to take credit for success and to attribute failure to external causes. When we externalize blame—more often than not—it’s not a lie, it’s something we actually believe.

We all have the tendency to blame others when we fail or do wrong. Seventy scientific studies involving 6,949 subjects have verified the *self-serving bias*.<sup>1</sup> When we blame others for our transgressions, we maintain a positive view of ourselves—we annihilate our guilt. Sometimes the person we blame is responsible for some of the wrongdoing, but we shift *all* the blame onto them to uphold our innocence. In some instances, “victims get blamed for bringing suffering on themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

We all see ourselves as above average morally. When we act unethically, our behavior becomes a threat to the positive view we have of ourselves. Besides feelings of guilt and worthlessness, one of the

predominant emotions that we experience from this threat to our integrity is feeling irritated all the time.<sup>3</sup> Irritation (that is, *anger*) is an emotion that automatically shifts our attention externally. The threat is no longer within but without—we quickly latch onto outside causes for our distress.

In August of 2000, 6.5 million Firestone tires on Ford Explorers were recalled in response to allegations that the tires caused fatal accidents. Following the recall, the Ford Motor Company began an analysis of approximately 13 million Firestone tires that were still being utilized on Ford Explorers and trucks.

In May of 2001, Ford met with Firestone to talk “about tire safety.” Firestone didn’t want to talk about tire safety but wanted to talk about the Ford Explorer: “We told them our concerns, asked them again to please look at the vehicle. They said no.”

After publicly blaming each other, Firestone ended its business relationship with Ford—a relationship that had been ongoing for ninety-five years. Ford announced that it “did not have confidence in the tire” and replaced the thirteen million tires still in use.<sup>4</sup>

*Minimization* is the most common defensive trap. When we act unethically, we trivialize the wrongdoing. One way we do this is by putting the blame on someone or something else just like Firestone did about their tires.

Sometimes we blame the situation instead of others. As we’ve already seen, many of the Primary Traps are situational in nature. Therefore, ironically, the situation may actually be the true culprit. For example, “I was running so fast because there was so much pressure to meet my deadline. I wasn’t even aware that an ethical dilemma existed!” (Trap 15) Even though this assertion may be correct, blaming circumstances can be another manifestation of the *self-serving bias*, one more way we try and minimize transgressions in an effort to reduce our guilt and shame.

## T R A P   3 3 : A D D I C T I O N

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**I**N 1961 the Federal District Court in Philadelphia sent seven top executives from the electrical industry to prison for price-fixing. It was the largest antitrust case in the history of the United States. Attorney General Robert Kennedy publicly stated, “I regard the price-fixing of the electrical industry as a major serious threat to democracy.” Led by General Electric and Westinghouse, the conspiracy involved twenty-nine corporations. Author John Fuller, in his book *The Gentlemen Conspirators*, writes:

Forty-five executives of some of the country’s outstanding corporations got together over a long period of years in conspiratorial meetings. They set the meetings up from public phone booths, or by letters on blank stationery signed by coded names. They never permitted themselves to be seen together in public dining rooms or hotel lobbies. They often registered in hotels as individuals, rather than as company representatives. . . . The conspirators were required to destroy immediately any written communications . . . to cover up their tracks with falsified expense accounts. . . . The extent of the criminal practices was so widespread in the industry that they affected nearly every generator, every electrical distributor, every utility, power plant, dam, power-line pole, and power transformer, and thus every home and industry in the country.<sup>1</sup>

In an interview, one of the key people in the conspiracy, a General Electric vice president, stated that he knew the price-fixing was wrong, but while he was involved, he kept telling himself that he was “going

to quit" after profits "stabilized." He'd say to himself, "I'll start next week on educating the boys, on warning them of the dangers of keeping this up. I'll slowly guide them out of this, so that we can forget it ever happened." Needless to say, he never did stop. Like a heroin addict, he kept telling himself, "*I'll stop tomorrow.*"

Why do people become addicted? Dr. Hoyk, the primary author of this book, treats addiction problems in his private practice. He always asks addicts, "What do you like about the drug? What does it do for you? How does it help you?" Most people become addicted to a substance or an activity because of short-term benefits. The activity or drug often solves a problem in the short term, even if it makes the problem worse in the long term.

At the beginning of his career, Dr. Hoyk was employed in an outpatient clinic for drug addiction in which he led a weekly group. One of his clients, Jim, would rarely say anything. Jim was a bright, handsome man who had a good job in a hospital. One evening at the end of the group meeting, he came up to Dr. Hoyk when everyone had left and told him his story. He said, "Dr. Hoyk, I have a hard time speaking up in the group." As he spoke his voice wavered. "I get very anxious speaking in front of others—I'm really shy. I'm anxious even speaking to you now. But you know, when I shoot up, I love myself. I'm so confident. When I'm high, I can sit down on a public bench and lead a conversation with a total stranger for an hour—I love who I am." Jim's problem of chronic shyness disappeared when he used drugs. The dramatic, short-term benefits of the drug kept him coming back for more.

The benefits the GE executive received—status, security, a large salary, a profitable company—also kept him addicted to price-fixing. The executive stated that he faced vicious demands to keep annual profits up, and if he failed to do so, there was no doubt in his mind that he'd lose his job.

It's often painful to make decisions for the long term. A vice president of GE, George Burens, resisted the price-fixing. He was transferred, and his "salary was cut from \$127,000 in 1958 to \$40,000 in 1960." Later, Burens was forced to resign.

Burens was able to make difficult—but healthy—long-term decisions. Though tempted, he didn't allow himself to become addicted to immoral behavior. When he said to himself, "*I'll stop tomorrow,*" he did.

## T R A P 3 4 :

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### C O W O R K E R R E A C T I O N S

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**I**F OUR FELLOW COWORKERS ignore, justify, or condone our unethical behavior, it supports our view that we didn't do anything wrong or that if we did, it's not that big a deal.

Ervin Staub, psychology professor at the University of Massachusetts, has written about the origins and prevention of genocide: "Research on individual behavior in emergencies . . . as well as the behavior of bystanders in actual life situations, like the rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe . . . has demonstrated the great power and potential of bystanders to influence the behavior of other bystanders, and even of perpetrators."<sup>1</sup>

An experiment by Donna Gelfand at the University of Utah demonstrated how often we let transgressions slide. Subjects (180 men and 156 women) were adult shoppers in two drugstores in Salt Lake City. A shoplifter, a twenty-one-year-old confederate, gained the attention of an unsuspecting shopper by dropping a store item. The confederate was given a signal (from a hidden observer via a concealed radio communication) when the shopper was looking at her. She then stole several items, placing them in her handbag, and left the store in a hurry without stopping at the cash register. Shoppers were later questioned about the incident. All of the subjects had seen the shoplifting but *only 28 percent* of them had reported it!<sup>2</sup>

If 72 percent of people don't report an illegal behavior by a total

stranger, imagine the percentage of people who ignore transgressions in a business environment in which people work together as a team, especially if the transgressor is your boss, who has the power to fire you—whistleblowing can be “career suicide.”<sup>3</sup>

## T R A P 35 : E S T A B L I S H E D I M P R E S S I O N S

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LEE ROSS at Stanford University discovered that our *established impressions* of others (and it doesn’t take a lot to establish these impressions) tend to endure even if we are convinced later that our impressions are wrong.

In Ross’s experiment, subjects who took on the role of a “student” were given a verbal test one at a time and then given fake results as to how well they scored. At the end of the test, a third of the subjects were told that they had scored exceptionally well compared to the average person (“success condition”); another third were told that they scored way below the average (“failure condition”); and the final third were told that they scored equal to the average person (“average condition”). *At the end of the experiment, the researcher then told the subjects that the results were bogus—that is, that they had been given fake test scores.*

Unbeknownst to each “student” taking the test, there was another subject who was observing the experiment through a one-way mirror. The observer’s task was to document the student’s answers and speed of response, and rate the student’s confidence in answering the test questions. Of course, the observer heard the initial scores of the student and later, at the end of the study, heard the experimenter tell the student that the feedback was false.

After dismissing the student, the researcher joined up with the observer and gave a pencil-and-paper questionnaire to the observer to fill out. The questionnaire asked the observer to estimate the student's actual score on the test, the score of an average person, and how well the student would have scored on another, similar test.

Results indicated that observers rated the students in accordance to their initial impressions that had been established before the students were told that they had received false feedback. In other words, even after the observers knew that the results of the students' tests were bogus, they rated the students in the success condition as being more capable and rated the students in the failure condition as being much less capable!<sup>1</sup> Our *established impressions* often stick even in the face of contradictory evidence.

ROBERT HARE, one of the foremost experts in the area of *psychopathy*, gives an example in his book *Without a Conscience* of a psychopath in the business world. The example was made available by Paul Babiak, an industrial psychologist in New York.

Dave is described as an employee who was originally liked by his immediate coworkers in his department, but after working with him for two years, his colleagues mistrusted him. He frequently displayed "disruptive," angry "outbursts," was "self-centered, unreliable," "irresponsible," and "manipulative." Some of his coworkers stated that "virtually everything he said was a lie and his promises were never to be believed."

When Babiak interviewed Dave, he talked about "himself as a hard worker, a strong leader, a 'team builder,' honest, intelligent, the guy responsible for really 'making' the department."

Dave's direct supervisor was exasperated by his behavior. The supervisor arranged a test of honesty with an executive of the company. The two of them decided that Dave's supervisor should relay specific information to Dave and then the executive should meet with Dave individually. When the executive met with Dave and asked him how the meeting went with his supervisor, Dave replied with information that was completely "distorted." The executive was persuaded that Dave was indeed dishonest.

But reprisal for Dave's behavior was thwarted by top executives; "those higher up in the organization had been convinced—by Dave—of his management talent and potential. Despite clear evidence of dishonesty, they were still 'charmed' by him."<sup>2</sup>

Even though coworkers in Dave's department over time had learned to mistrust him due to his blatant, repetitive dishonesty, the favorable, *established impressions* of upper management endured in the face of contradictory evidence.

## T R A P 3 6 :

### C O N T E M P T F O R T H E V I C T I M

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**T**HROUGHOUT THE HISTORY of humanity, religious, gender, and racial minorities have often been regarded as subhuman by those in power. They have been labeled as “gooks,” “savages,” “cockroaches,” and worse. When we dehumanize others we lose our empathy toward them and see them as objects without hopes or feelings.<sup>1</sup> When we lose our empathy for others it is easier to harm them without feeling guilt.

An ingenious experiment was conducted by Albert Bandura at Stanford University in 1975. (This study is the same experiment as the one cited in the section “Lost in the Group.” Here we’re emphasizing results not written about in this earlier section.) Each time the experiment was run, a group of three subjects played the role of “supervisors.” The task of the subject-supervisors was to “punish” a small group of decision makers—located in an adjacent room—by shocking them when they made poor decisions. (The decision makers didn’t really exist.)

After explaining the purpose of the experiment, the researcher left the subject-supervisors, telling them he was going to the adjacent room where the decision makers were and that he would further communicate via intercom. Later the subject-supervisors heard the experimenter over the intercom make a descriptive comment about the decision makers to his lab assistant after “accidentally” leaving his microphone on.

Subjects (“supervisors”) had been randomly divided into three different conditions. A third of the subjects heard at this point the experimenter commenting that the decision makers seemed like “an animalistic, rotten bunch” (“dehumanized condition”). Another third of the subjects heard the experimenter comment that the decision makers seemed like a “perceptive” and “understanding” group (“humanized condition”). And the last third of the subjects heard no comment from the researcher (“neutral condition”).

Results indicated that the subjects in the “dehumanized condition” shocked the decision makers with the greatest intensity! Subjects in the “neutral condition” shocked the decision makers with less intensity and in the “humanized condition” subjects used very little intensity!<sup>2</sup>

Michael Lewis in his book *Liar’s Poker* writes vividly about his days as a trader for Salomon Brothers in London. In the culture of trading, customers were referred to as “victims,” “fools,” “stupid,” or “ducks . . . that were trained to fly repeatedly over the same field of hunters until shot dead.” Traders were trained “to exploit the weakness in others.” “If people were scared or desperate, he [the trader] herded them like sheep into a corner, then made them pay for their uncertainty.”

Lewis described a cultural “policy of screwing investors.” If the company held a position (for example a large inventory of AT&T bonds) that was losing money, the company would, at times, sell the position to a trusting customer, thereby transferring the losses to the customer.<sup>3</sup> The culture of *dehumanizing customers* made this “policy” easier to do with less guilt, thus reinforcing a practice of unethical behavior.

Dehumanizing others seems to be cyclical. In other experiments, after subjects administered electric shocks to a victim (once again to a confederate who acted as if he was being shocked), the subjects later had a tendency to degrade him. Subjects knew the victim had done nothing wrong but needed to persuade themselves that he somehow deserved the punishment—thus, they derogated him.<sup>4</sup> In the experiment that was described in Trap 1, “Obedience to Authority,” the researcher Stanley Milgram writes:

Many subjects harshly devalued the victim *as a consequence* of acting against him. Such comments as, “He was so stupid and stubborn he deserved to get

shocked," were common. Once having acted against the victim, these subjects found it necessary to view him as an unworthy individual, whose punishment was made inevitable by his own deficiencies of intellect and character.<sup>5</sup>

So the more we dehumanize others, the easier it is to harm them, and the more we harm them, the more we dehumanize them.

T R A P 37:  
D O I N G I S B E L I E V I N G

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**R**EMEMBER TRAP 17, "Enacting a Role"? Students put on the role of prison guards and after six days in a realistic prison setting began to "disparage" the prisoners (other students) and devise "cruel and degrading routines." Often what we do is what we become. Frequently, we observe our own behavior (what we do or say). In so doing, we influence our attitudes (negative or positive feelings about our action). Social psychologist David Myers writes, "Hearing myself talk informs me of my attitudes; seeing my actions provides clues to how strong my beliefs are."<sup>1</sup>

When coauthor Dr. Hoyk was in graduate school, his professor of social psychology, Dr. Dalenberg, told his class that early in her career, she had considered walking up and down the aisles of the classroom during exams to catch students cheating. She ultimately decided not to do this. Why? She knew that after a while, her behavior would shape her attitudes—she would probably become—to some degree—more suspicious of her students.

Eric Storch at Columbia University administered a questionnaire to 244 students. Answering the questionnaire anonymously, the college students were asked how often they had copied other student's work, plagiarized, and cheated on exams. The questionnaire also asked the students to rate their approval on a scale of 1 to 5 ("strongly disapprove" to "strongly approve") of these three transgressions.

Results indicated that students who reported more academic dishonesty gave significantly higher approval ratings of their dishonesty!<sup>12</sup> When we act unethically, we automatically begin to view our transgressions in a less negative way.

In 2001, Enron deceived California customers during the energy crisis. The federal government had ordered power plants to maintain full output capacity. Enron created false electrical shortages by shutting down plants and in so doing ran up prices. The company made billions of dollars from the illegal scam. The main players in the scam were the West Coast energy traders who bought and sold electricity and scheduled its delivery. “The attitude was, ‘play by your own rules,’ says a former trader. We all did it. We talked about it openly . . . We took *pride* in getting around the rules.” [Italics added.] Notice in this example that unethical behavior became so frequent that traders were proud of their actions. It’s possible that one of the reasons why they “took pride in getting around the rules” is that they became trapped in *doing is believing*.<sup>3</sup>

*Doing is believing* doesn’t happen if we’re ordered to do something. It only works when we feel like we have freely chosen to act. If your boss orders you to lie and you obey, your attitudes about your lying won’t change. You’ll say to yourself, “Lying isn’t something I usually do. I did it because my boss pressured me to do it.”

If we choose to act unethically, the act itself will shape our beliefs and attitudes about our transgression. It’s possible—to some degree—that we will begin to see the transgression as more acceptable.