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TRAP II

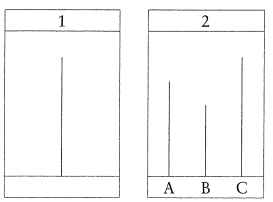
IMAGINE YOU'VE VOLUNTEERED to be a subject in another scientific experiment. The year is 1951. You meet with an assistant of Dr. Asch on the campus of Harvard University. The assistant gives you a name tag to pin on your shirt and leads you into a conference room. She gestures for you to sit in a vacant chair on the far right of eight other subjects. You nod and smile to the other participants, and a few of them respond in kind.

You're seated in a semicircle. The subject next to you is fidgeting with his pen. Two walls of the room are decorated with large, framed posters of Monet's work. On the wall behind you is mounted a projection screen with the same thin, black frame that surrounds the posters.

Dr. Asch enters and remains standing on the opposite side of the dark conference table and places a briefcase in front of him.

"Good morning. This is an evaluation of judgment," says Dr. Asch. "I'm going to test your visual perception."

Dr. Asch removes two large cards from his briefcase and holds them up for you and the other subjects to see.



"On Card 1 is a single line. On Card 2 are three lines of different lengths. You are to choose which line on Card 2—A, B, or C—is the identical length as the line on Card 1," says Dr. Asch. "Any questions?" Dr. Asch gestures to the first subject on his far left. "Bob, let's start with you and go around the table. Each of you in turn will announce your answer out loud."

One by one, each participant calls out, "Line C."

You are the last person to make a choice and also select the correct line.

Dr. Asch shows a second set of cards that are similar to the first set except the lines are different lengths. All the subjects, including you, choose the same matching line.

You glance across the table at Bob and notice he's slumped in his chair. His face is tight and his chin quivering—desperately trying to suppress a yawn. You quickly look at Dr. Asch and clear your throat so as not to laugh.

On the third trial, Dr. Asch again shows a different set of cards.

I hope there's some point to this, you think. It is more than obvious that line A is the correct response with this new set of cards.

"Line C," calls out Bob.

You quickly turn your head to the right. Bob has a poker face. He must be really bored, you think.

"Line C," calls out the next participant. You raise your eyebrows. Are they joking?

"Line C," states the next subject. You glance at Dr. Asch with a smile. Dr. Asch doesn't notice your glance.

"Line C," says the next participant.

You start becoming agitated. You run your fingers through your hair and put your hand under your chin with an elbow on the table.

Each new subject calls out line C. You suddenly become aware that everyone is looking at you. You look up at Dr. Asch. Maybe . . .

"We're waiting for your response," says Dr. Asch.

Dr. Asch's face is stone serious. You dart your eyes around the table and feel sweat on your palms. You feel your face flushing.

You clear your throat and stammer, "Line C." You sit back in your chair.

Dr. Asch shows another new set of cards. It's line B, you think. There's no way it could be another line.

"Line A," calls out Bob.

"Excuse me, Dr. Asch?"

"Yes."

"We're supposed to choose which line on Card 2 matches the line on Card 1 is that correct?" you ask.

"That's correct," says Dr. Asch quickly. "Larry, what's your choice?"

"Line A," calls out Larry.

You rub your forehead. Is my lack of sleep affecting me? You look at the cards again.

"Line A," states the next participant.

Do I need glasses? Is this an optical illusion? you think. Is there something wrong with me? Maybe I'm stupid.

"Line A," calls out the next.

"Line A," says the next.

You start grinding your teeth. If I answer B, I'll embarrass myself.

"Line A."

It's happening too fast, you think. What is Dr. Asch going to think of me if I answer B?

"Line A."

"Line A."

Dr. Asch looks directly at you. It's your turn.

You pause. You feel nauseous. "Line A," you answer softly.

Abruptly, Dr. Asch pulls a chair over and sits down. "I think that should be enough," says Dr. Asch.

Dr. Asch looks at you and says, "I'd like to introduce you to my colleagues. These men actually work for me. They're hired actors. They're all trained for the part. They're all confederates."

You suddenly understand; you laugh nervously. "Ah, that's what this is all about."

TRAP 11 is *conformity*. In this study, subjects conformed to the answers of the group 37 percent of the time and 75 percent of subjects conformed at least once!

Dr. Asch later set up the experiment so that one of the confederates went against the majority; the dissenter continually made the most blatantly wrong choices. Subjects in this experiment only conformed 9 percent of the time—only one dissenter decreased the pressure to conform substantially.[1]

Because of *conformity*, it takes courage to be the one who dissents first. Leo Brickman, who was later to become the national director of quality assurance at Johnson & Johnson, was hired as a chemist for Monsanto in the early 1940s. He was employed to work five days a week. He soon discovered that everyone in his group worked Saturday mornings—and that this extra half-day was expected. Dr. Brickman came in on Saturday and asked his colleagues if they were paid for the extra hours. When he received an answer of "No," he took his hat off the hat rack, put on his coat, and left—never to return on the weekend. Later, everyone in his group followed suit. The norm of working on Saturdays was broken by the dissention of one individual.

TRAP 12:
CONFORMITY PRESSURE

COWORKERS and especially managers can use sarcasm and punishment to enforce *conformity*. Employees who break *conformity* by not following established norms or who play devil's advocate during a team discussion often meet sharp opposition.

In the 1980s, an employee who worked in the research department of Beech-Nut Nutrition Corporation expressed concerns about the ingredients of the company's "100% pure" apple juice. In reality, the apple juice contained "nothing more than sugar water and chemicals." Because the fake apple juice was 25 percent cheaper, it allowed management "to meet cost-control goals." When the researcher began raising concerns, "he was accused of not being a team player and of acting like 'Chicken Little.' His judgment, his supervisor wrote in an annual performance review, was 'colored by naiveté and impractical ideals.'"[1]

TRAP 13:
"DON'T MAKE WAVES"

"DON'T MAKE WAVES" or "don't rock the boat" are common aphorisms. Established norms can also enforce the pressure to conform.

William Whyte, in his book *The Organization Man*, writes about GE's basic training school in the 1930s: "Students spend four months eagerly studying a battery of communication techniques and psychological principles which General Electric tells them will help them to be good managers. (Sample principle: '*Never say anything controversial.*')" [Italics added.][1] Although this reference to establishing norms that reinforce *conformity* is quite dated, remnants of this principle are still seen in today's corporations—especially in boardrooms.

Jay Lorsch and Elizabeth MacIver, professor and former research associate at Harvard Business School, published a study of American boards of directors in 1989. They wrote, "The norms of polite boardroom behavior discourage directors from openly questioning or challenging the CEO's performance or proposals. . . "[2]

The chairman of the board is often the CEO and the directors are frequently the CEO's "friends and associates."[3] In many corporate boards, dissent is viewed as detrimental or unneeded.

The corporate culture in the boardrooms of Enron and Tyco "discouraged debate and disagreement instead of cultivating it." Directors repeatedly yielded to company executives without disputing them.

For example, almost every vote by Enron's board of directors was unanimous.[4]

Dick Thornburgh, bankruptcy court examiner, referred to WorldCom's boardroom as an environment in which "Critical questioning was discouraged and the board did not appear to evaluate proposed transactions in appropriate depth. . . ."[5]

Healthy decisions are made by debate and critical analysis. The fog of false consensus maintains and strengthens the trap of *conformity.*

TRAP 14:
SELF-ENHANCEMENT

MOST OF THE TIME, we rate ourselves in comparison to others as above average. We perceive ourselves as better than the average person in our work performance, persistence, originality, friendliness, reliability, tolerance, intelligence, honesty, health, ability to get along with others, concern about social issues. We do this to feel good about ourselves. The question is—how can all of us be above average?

The majority of people in business rate themselves as above average on ethical behavior. A national survey posed the question, "How would you rate your own morals and values on a scale from one to 100 (100 being perfect)?" Half of the businesspeople responded with a rating of 90 or greater. A meager 11 percent responded with a rating of 74 or smaller.[1]

We all need to maintain our *self-enhancement*. The persons who suffer from mild depression rate themselves more accurately in regards to their own abilities, performance, and self-attributes than the normal person who is not depressed. The rosy view we have of ourselves provides protection against depression and failure. The danger is that our inflated views of self can distort our perceptions.

When coauthor Robert Hoyk was in graduate school, his professor of social psychology, Dr. Dalenberg, told him of an experiment she had conducted that was related to Milgram's study on *obedience to authority* (Trap 1). In an introductory class of psychology, Dalenberg

had lectured on Milgram's experiment. She related all the details of the study and talked to the students about its moral implications—that Milgram had devised the study to understand the horrors of the Holocaust. Following her lecture, she passed out a simple questionnaire. The students were asked the following question: "If you had been a subject in Milgram's study, without prior knowledge of the experiment, do you think you would have been one of the subjects that would have administered shocks up to the highest level?"

Three months later, she passed out a request for volunteers to be in several studies that might be planned for the following term. The students were to indicate their level of interest. The key study was an experiment that was somewhat unethical; the experimenters were going to deceive the subjects and trick them into doing behavior that would violate their own moral standards. (In reality, the study was not going to be conducted.) As they filled out the request, the students had long forgotten about the first questionnaire. Dalenberg then correlated the questionnaire and the request.

The results were surprising. On the average, the students who claimed that they would never have administered shocks up to the highest level were the students who were more likely to agree to participate in the "grey area" study—a study devised to sound less than ethical.

One way of interpreting this is that those of us who see ourselves as more moral are less apt to protect ourselves from the influences of the situation: "I'm a very moral person. A situation like Milgram's experiment would not break my moral convictions."[2] The central theme of this book is that the situation often does overpower our ethical values. It's possible then, that the more we believe we are above average ethically, the more likely we are to fall prey to the situational traps described in this book.

TRAP 15: TIME PRESSURE

ANTHONY PARINELLO, *The Wall Street Journal* best-selling author, writes that top executives "will do virtually anything to avoid being placed in a situation in which they have no choice but to waste time."[1] When referring to presidents, CEOs, owners, board members, and partners of companies he writes that on any given day, in addition to their scheduled appointments, these important top officers "will be faced with over 128 unscheduled activities that include but are by no means limited to: emergency meetings, telephone calls, last-minute presentations, planning sessions, reading reports and other documents, interruptions, message slips, post-it notes, email . . . listening and responding to a barrage of voice mail messages . . ."[2]

Lynne Jeter writes in her book *Disconnected: Deceit and Betrayal at WorldCom* about a top-level executive at WorldCom who quit because of *time pressure* during the company's rapid growth: "We were all running at 100 miles per hour, but that's what it took to get the job done. The people that couldn't stand it needed to get out of the way because there simply wasn't another option. That's why I got out of the way. Let someone else with energy do the job. Working 18 to 20 hour days? I didn't want to sacrifice that much."[3]

Good ethics take time. You might have noticed that we have referred to unethical behavior in this book as "taking short cuts." Executives who are running a hundred miles per hour take short cuts when it comes to taking the time to make good ethical decisions and even to be aware that there might be a potential ethical dilemma. In corporations for which time is money, ethical awareness is minimized because of *time pressure*.

Most of us are familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan—a story that is equated with high moral standards. Psychologists John Darley and Daniel Batson at Princeton University devised an experiment using the paradigm of the Good Samaritan that demonstrated how *time pressure* interferes with ethical decisions.

Sixty-seven seminary students participated in the study. They were told that it was a study on "religious education." Subjects were run through the experiment one at a time.

The subject was met by an assistant in a small office and informed that he would be giving an impromptu talk on the story of the Good Samaritan that would be recorded by another assistant in a building nearby. The assistant then drew a map to direct the subject to the other building.

Unknown to the subjects, there were three different experimental conditions. A third of the subjects were given a "low-hurry" message by the assistant: "It'll be a few minutes before they're ready for you, but you might as well head over. If you have to wait over there, it shouldn't be long." A third of the subjects were given an "intermediate-hurry" message: "The assistant is ready for you, so please go right over." And the remaining third were given a "high-hurry" message: "Oh, you're late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago . . . better get moving. The assistant should be waiting for you so you'd better hurry. It shouldn't take but just a minute."

The subject walked through an alley on the way to the other building. The researchers had planted a "victim" in the alley. He was "sitting slumped in a doorway, head down, eyes closed, not moving. As the subject went by, the victim coughed twice and groaned, keeping his head down." The researchers were interested in whether the subject would stop and offer help to the victim.

Results of the experiment were very robust. In the "low-hurry" condition, 63 percent offered help. In the intermediate condition,

45 percent offered help. In the "high-hurry" condition, *only 10 percent offered help*!

On the basis of questionnaires given to subjects following their impromptu talks, Darley and Batson discovered that subjects in the high-hurry condition were often not aware that the man slumped in the doorway was a potential ethical dilemma. When asked on the questionnaire, "When was the last time you saw a person who seemed to be in need of help?" these subjects reflected back on the victim in the alley as someone in distress. But at the time, they had not come to this realization. *Time pressure* had diminished their awareness. They were so preoccupied about being on time for their impromptu talk that they failed to recognize a victim in need.[4]

TRAP 16: DECISION SCHEMAS

As mentioned, in the 1970s the Ford Motor Company pushed through the production of the Pinto compact, all the while knowing that the gas tank was defective. Many deaths and severe burn injuries resulted from this unethical action.

Dennis Gioia was Ford's field recall coordinator in 1973. Gioia was in a position within the Ford Motor Company to influence the recall of the Pinto. He failed to do so. In an article in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, he wrote, "My own schematized (scripted) knowledge influenced me to perceive recall issues in terms of the prevailing decision environment and to unconsciously overlook key features of the Pinto case, mainly because they did not fit an existing script."[1]

Creating schemas (or scripts) is a way our brains organize information. A "schema" is a unit of past information that gives us rules and expectations about a particular theme. We have schemas for everything. We have schemas within schemas. An example of a schema is the "movie schema." When a friend says, "Let's go to the movies," you know exactly what to do and to expect: you get into a car, drive to a movie theater, park, buy tickets, maybe buy some popcorn, go into a large dark room, sit down and watch a movie for about two hours.

It is said that the anthropologist Margaret Mead presented a wooden chair to a tribal chief who had never seen a chair before. He

had no schema for "chair." With great puzzlement, he looked at the chair for a long time and finally turned to Margaret Mead and called it a "funny piece of firewood."

Schemas help us organize huge amounts of information from our daily lives so that we can act quickly and efficiently in the future. If we had to relearn what to do each time we went to a movie, our daily functioning would be overwhelming.

Dennis Gioia wrote that he was so overloaded with information, *so pressured about time*, that he naturally developed schemas to help him screen cases. When a new case would present itself, Gioia would automatically look for specific red flags and ignore other information. The routine or habitual way he processed information became "second nature." The problem was, when a case didn't present with the specific red flags in Gioia's decision tree (schema), he would quickly dismiss its validity.[2]

In the beginning of the Pinto scandal, before Gioia had access to data from crash tests "there were actually very few reports" coming in on the Pinto. Gioia writes, "Was there a problem? Not as far as I was concerned. My cue for labeling a case as a problem either required high frequencies of occurrence or directly traceable causes." Later, Gioia did recommend that the Pinto be reviewed at his departmental level. The Pinto was discussed but the vote went against recall because "it did not fit the pattern of recallable standards."[3]

Schemas are automatic ways of responding based on the past. They solidify over time and encompass situations that are common. The problem is that most ethical dilemmas are uncommon, novel situations—liable to be excluded from habitual styles of screening.[4]

TRAP 17: ENACTING A ROLE

DAVID MYERS, in his textbook *Social Psychology*, writes that in any "career, as teacher, soldier, or businessperson, we enact a role that shapes our attitudes."[1]

In 1971 at Stanford University, Philip Zimbardo was trying to understand the brutality that often erupted in prisons. He speculated that the environment and the "institutional roles" of the prison guards might be a stronger influence on their behavior than who they were as people. To prove his idea, Zimbardo knew that he had to set up an experiment that used subjects who had never seen the inside of a prison. He also knew that he had to randomly assign subjects to play the roles of guards and prisoners. Using this methodology, any brutality that erupted in the experiment could be attributed to the environment and the roles enacted.

In the basement of the psychology department, Zimbardo and his colleagues constructed a realistic prison. College students volunteered for the experiment. With the "flip of a coin," students were assigned to be either guards or prisoners. The guards were given uniforms and job descriptions. The prisoners were told that within the next week a police car would arrive at their apartment sometime in the middle of the night. They would be handcuffed and then taken to the prison, where they would be photographed, fingerprinted, given prison garb to wear, and put behind bars.

At the beginning of the experiment, the students had a good time enacting their roles. But soon, the line between role-playing and reality became blurred. "The guards began to disparage the prisoners, and some devised cruel and degrading routines. The prisoners broke down, rebelled, or became apathetic." Zimbardo stated there was a "growing confusion between reality and illusion, between role-playing and self-identity . . . This which we had created . . . was absorbing us as creatures of its own reality."[2]

The experiment was planned to last two weeks. After only six days, Zimbardo cancelled the experiment due to the psychological stress and "pathology" he witnessed in the student-subjects.[3]

We all know what the bottom line is in business: making money. If you're an executive, *your role* is to push your workers to produce quicker, more efficiently, and less expensively. This role is an automatic reflexive response. When we put on our executive hats we become that role.

Laura Nash, senior research fellow at Harvard Business School, writes that there are different definitions of "corporate goodness." There is a definition of a good corporation as in a "good man." This definition refers to a sense of high morality. Another definition is similar to the analogy of a "good martini." This definition refers to a corporation that is effective and efficient with its bottom line, the gain of profits irregardless of the means.[4]

Jeffrey Skilling, the former CEO of Enron, was a bottom-line executive. While he was still a student at Harvard Business School, one of his teachers, John LeBoutillier, asked him "what he would do if his company were producing a product that might cause harm—or even death—to the customers that used it." The young scholar replied, "I'd keep making and selling the product. My job as a businessman is to be a profit center and to maximize return to the shareholders. It's the government's job to step in if a product is dangerous."[5] (Skilling denies this ever happened.[6])

TRAP 18: POWER

POWER IS ANOTHER INFLUENCE that fortifies our role reflex. Psychologist David Kipnis in his book *The Powerholders* reports on a series of experiments he conducted that demonstrated how *power* influences and changes the powerholder. Results indicated that (1) the more the powerholder has at his disposal the means to punish and reward, the greater the temptation to use this *power* (power is more expedient; instead of spending time and effort persuading his employees, the powerholder becomes more and more directive: "Do this and I'll give you a bonus," "Do that or else!"); (2) the more the powerholder uses his *power*, the more he attributes the successes of his employees to his own leadership ("My orders and influence caused the workers to perform effectively"); (3) over time, the more the powerholder attributes the success of his employees to his own leadership, the more he begins to devalue his employees ("*It was my success! Not theirs! They were just following orders.*"); and (4) the more the powerholder devalues the worth of his employees, the more emotional distance is created, which results in a lack of empathy toward his employees.[1]

Undervaluing the worth of their employees coupled with poor empathy makes it painless for managers to enact their functional, bottom-line role. They can push harder and harder for their workers to produce quicker, more efficiently, and less expensively. *The result can*

lead to unrealistic expectations that in turn lead employees to take short cuts, that is, act unethically.

Lynn Sharp Paine, professor of business administration at Harvard Business School, writes how the managers of Sears, Roebuck & Company created unrealistic expectations for their employees in its Auto Centers that led to blatant, ethical transgressions. In 1992, "attorneys general in more than 40 states had accused the company of misleading customers and selling them unnecessary parts and services, from brake jobs to front-end alignments."[2]

What happened? Due to diminishing profits and a market that had become more competitive, management had given the service departments high, unrealistic sales quotas. If the workers failed to meet the quotas, they could be transferred or have their hours reduced. These unrealistic expectations, coupled with the threat of lower salary or dislocation, pressured employees to push products that customers didn't need.[3]

Power can cause executives to devalue their employees. When this happens, the executive's reflexive role that necessitates making profit may become unchecked; the executive pushes his or her employees too hard and too fast. To cope with the pressure, employees may then take unethical short cuts.

TRAP 19: JUSTIFICATION

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, moral *justification* has been used to sanction acts of evil. Torture and murder have been committed for the sake of protecting one's family or honor, purifying the race, safeguarding a way of life, serving God, and so on. For example, in Rwanda in 1994, under the *justification* of "Hutu Power," approximately seventy thousand Tutsis were brutally killed.[1]

As mentioned in the section "Tyranny of Goals," B.F. Goodrich became embroiled in a scandal when it landed a contract with the U.S. government to provide brakes for fighter planes and pushed defective brakes through quality assurance to meet contract deadlines. Kermit Vandivier, who worked in the Goodrich test laboratory, testified against the company at a government hearing in 1969. He later wrote an expose of the scandal in *Harper's Magazine* in 1972. Vandivier's job description entailed issuing a "formal qualification report" following successful testing. The defective brakes had gone through testing on thirteen separate occasions—each time failing to pass government requirements. Halfway through the fourteenth attempt, it was obvious that the brakes would fail again. At this point, engineer Searle Lawson asked Vandivier to begin to prepare "engineering curves and graphic displays that were normally incorporated in a qualification report." Vandivier refused and went to his boss, Ralph Gretzinger, and told him about the situation. Gretzinger was furious and went to his

boss. An hour passed and Gretzinger returned. Looking dejected, he said to Vandivier, "I've always believed that ethics and integrity were every bit as important as theorems and formulas, and never once has anything happened to change my beliefs. Now this . . . *Hell, I've got two sons I've got to put through school.* . . ." [Italics added.][2]

Notice how Gretzinger's *justification* is a *conflict of loyalty* (Trap 10). *Conflicts of loyalty* are often used as *justifications*. A common one in business is, "We have to do this to safeguard the company and the jobs of our employees" (to the detriment of shareholders).

After his *justification*, Gretzinger continued to talk to Vandivier. In a hoarse voice he said to him, "The way it stands now, we're to go ahead and prepare the data and other things for the graphic presentation in the report, and when we're finished, someone upstairs will actually write the report. After all . . . we're just drawing some curves, and what happens to them after they leave here—well, we're not responsible for that."[3] Do you recognize this trap? It's *indirect responsibility*, Trap 3.

In 1964 researchers Timothy Brock and Arnold Buss conducted an experiment that tested the influence of *justification*. Eighty subjects participated in the study. Subjects were run through the experiment one at a time. Upon arrival, participants met up with what they believed to be another subject (actually a confederate). Unbeknownst to the subjects, half of them had been preassigned to a "justification condition." Subjects in this condition began the experiment by taking a short test titled "California Aptitude Test for Supervisors, Trainers, and Teachers." Upon completing this test, regardless of their actual scores, subjects were told, "Your score shows that your aptitude for training and supervising others is very high, higher than 90 percent of others who have taken this test according to national norms. . . . Since the task today involves training another person, I am going to ask you to be the experimenter."[4]

The "experimenter" was to deliver shocks to the "student" (the confederate) when he responded incorrectly to a verbal test. The subject and confederate were separated visually by a screen. Ten levels of shock intensity were used and the confederate would loudly gasp each time the intensity level was six or greater. (Of course, no shock was actually delivered to the confederate.) Prior to commencing, the subject received the first five levels of shock to get a feeling for how painful they actually were.

At the end of the experiment, subjects filled out a series of questionnaires. Results indicated that subjects who had been given the *justification* that they were "superior supervisors" felt less guilt about the delivery of the "shocks" and estimated the "injury" to the confederate as significantly lower than the subjects who did not receive a justification.[5]

TRAP 20:
OBLIGATION

OBLIGATION is a particular type of *justification*. The dictionary definition of "obligation" is fulfilling a promise or commitment. Unethical behavior is readily given a moral connotation with the use of *obligation*: "I needed to keep my commitment, to do what I promised. My word is who I am."

In the Brock and Buss experiment described in the previous section, subjects were also preassigned to either a *high-shock condition* or a *low-shock condition*. Those in the high-shock condition were told to administer shock intensities of 6–10 to the "student" (confederate) and those in the low-shock condition to use shock intensities of 1–5 when the "student" made errors.

Results from the questionnaires taken at the end of the experiment demonstrated that those subjects in the high-shock condition felt much more "obligated" to continue with the experiment compared to subjects in the low-shock condition.[1] Subjects used *obligation* as a *justification* for harming others. The more harm they inflicted, the more "obligated" they felt.

Obligation can often be a *justification* that results from *obedience to authority* (Trap 1). "My boss told me to do this and I said yes. I'm obligated to follow through—I won't break my commitments."