

# The Science of Leadership

## WEAPONS OF INFLUENCE-CONSISTENCY

by

**Joseph H. Boyett, Ph.D.**

**Boyett & Associates**

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transformational leaders understand that the desire on the part of most people to be consistent and to avoid cognitive dissonance is a powerful tool for acquiring and maintaining followers' commitment to a vision. They know and follow the rules for making this weapon of influence work: Make it active, public, voluntary and effortful. Followers get caught in a slippery slope. The small concession or favor the leader asks of them today leads to even larger requests tomorrow. Soon they are trapped in a consistency of their own making. Perhaps Emerson's admonition should be taken as a warning. A foolish consistency is a hobgoblin, or at least should be.

In his famous essay "Self-Reliance," Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote:

*A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall.*<sup>1</sup>

Emerson goes on to advise us not to worry about being inconsistent even to the point of being misunderstood.

Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day—"Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood."—Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of how you feel about Emerson's advice, I'll bet that you would find it very hard to follow. Just about all of us would. The reality, which has been proven by hundreds of studies, is that most of us genuinely want to be consistent in our words and actions. In fact, we feel extreme psychological discomfort whenever we are inconsistent. Researchers call this discomfort "cognitive dissonance" and provide evidence that most of us will go to great lengths to avoid it. Transformational leaders use our discomfort with inconsistency to gain and maintain our commitment.

Copyright (c) 2006 by Joseph H. Boyett. All Rights Reserved.

For permission to copy, distribute or post to your web site send an e-mail by clicking on "CONTACT" on the authors's website: <http://www.jboyett.com>.

## The Desire to Avoid “Cognitive Dissonance”

Leon Festinger and James Carlsmith conducted the classic study of cognitive dissonance in the late 1950s at Stanford University.<sup>3</sup> Students in an introductory psychology class were asked to perform a highly boring and repetitive task while an experimenter timed their efforts with a stopwatch. At the end of the experiment, the students were thanked for their participation and told that the real purpose of the experiment had been to compare the performance of two groups of students. One group, like themselves, would be told nothing about the experiment in advance. Another group would be told in advance that they would find the experiment interesting, intriguing, and exciting. The idea, said the experimenter, was to see if the performance of the students who had been led to expect that the experiment would be exciting would be different from the performance of students who had been told nothing.

At that point, the experimenter asked for a favor. He said that a student who was to be in the second group was waiting outside and he needed someone to tell the waiting student that the experiment was fun, exciting, interesting and so on. The experimenter offered to pay for this little deception. Some students were offered one dollar. Others were offered twenty dollars. A final “control group” of students weren’t asked to help the experimenter but were just thanked for their participation. Afterward, all students were interviewed and asked how enjoyable they found the experiment.

As expected, two of the groups of students reported that they found the dull and boring experiment dull and boring. However, one group said that they found the experiment enjoyable.

**Question:** Which group said they found the experiment enjoyable?

- A. The control group that had not been offered money to engage in the deception.
- B. The students who had been offered **one dollar** to engage in the deception.
- C. The students who had been offered **twenty dollars** to engage in the deception.

If you answered, “the **one dollar** group” you’re right.

Presumably all of the students, regardless of group, found the experiment dull and boring when they participated in it. After all, the experiment was designed to be exceedingly dull and boring. However, students who received a dollar for lying about their true feelings to a fellow student actually changed their opinion about the experiment. They persuaded themselves that the dull and boring experiment had indeed been enjoyable.

The researchers concluded that their experiment had generated a classic case of cognitive dissonance in the one-dollar group. Faced with an inconsistency between their experience (dull and boring) and what they said about their experience (interesting and enjoyable), they felt uncomfortable. Since they couldn’t change the experiment, they changed their perception of the experiment. They simply convinced themselves that the lie was not a lie at all. “I told the student it was enjoyable, so it must have been.”

Now, you may be asking, if students in the one dollar group changed their perception of the experiment because of cognitive dissonance, why didn’t students in the twenty dollar group do the same? Good question. Researchers think the answer has to do with the amount of money the students got paid. One dollar wasn’t very much, even in the 1960s. It’s pretty hard to justify lying for a measly dollar. On the other hand, students who got twenty dollars for telling a fib could justify their inconsistent behavior by saying to themselves It was just a small fib. It didn’t do any harm. And, I really needed the money. In short, the one-dollar group found it much harder to explain away their actions. The only way to remove the dissonance and restore consistency was to change their attitude.

## The Foot-In-The-Door Technique

Cognitive dissonance and its impact on getting people to change their attitudes and beliefs has been extensively researched since Leon Festinger and James Carlsmith published their original study. However,

Copyright (c) 2006 by Joseph H. Boyett. All Rights Reserved.

For permission to copy, distribute or post to your web site send an e-mail by clicking on "CONTACT" on the authors's website: <http://www.jboyett.com>.

one of the largest and most successful experiments demonstrating the power of consistency was conducted before the Festinger/Carlsmith study and was not conducted by researchers. The Chinese government carried it out.

During the Korean War many American prisoners of war found themselves being held captive by the Chinese instead of the North Koreans. In one respect they were lucky. Whereas the North Koreans used exceeding harsh punishment to secure obedience from their captives, the Chinese adopted a much more subtle, “humane” and significantly more successful approach. The American soldiers were loyal to their country and had been trained to resist collaborating with the enemy but most of them did just that. They signed “peace” petitions, made radio appeals sympathetic to the Communist cause, informed on fellow prisoners, divulged confidential military information, and engaged in a whole series of other behaviors helpful to the enemy. More importantly, the American soldiers did these things voluntarily. The chief of the neuro-psychiatric team that examined the soldiers after the war noted that if you measured the success of the Chinese in gaining the hearts and minds of their captives in terms of “defection, disloyalty, changed attitudes and beliefs, poor discipline, poor morale, poor esprit, and doubts about America’s role, their efforts were highly successful.”<sup>4</sup> Why were the Chinese so successful? The answer is that they leveraged the power of consistency.<sup>5</sup>

Here is an example of one of the ways the Chinese got the soldiers to comply and ultimately change their attitudes and opinions to ones that were more favorable to the Chinese.

[P]risoners were frequently asked to make statements that were so mildly anti-American or pro-Communist that they seemed inconsequential (“The United States is not perfect.” “In a Communist country, unemployment is not a problem.”). Once these minor requests had been complied with, however, the men found themselves pushed to submit to related, yet more substantive, requests. A man who had just agreed with his Chinese interrogator that the United States was not perfect might then be asked to indicate some of the ways in which he thought this was the case. Once he had so explained, he might be asked to make a list of these “problems with America” and to sign his name to it. Later he might be asked to read his list in a discussion group with other prisoners. “After all, it’s what you really believe, isn’t it?” Still later, he might be asked to write an essay expanding on his list and discussing these problems in greater detail.

The Chinese might then use his name and his essay in an anti-American radio broadcast beamed not only to the entire camp but to other POW camps in North Korea as well as to American forces in South Korea.<sup>6</sup>

By starting small and building the Chinese were able to get most American soldiers to collaborate. It started innocently enough. “Okay, I’ll admit, the U.S. isn’t perfect.” Soon the soldiers found themselves making even more extreme statements and undertaking acts that were even more helpful to the enemy. How could they reconcile the inconsistency? After all, the Chinese didn’t force them to make the statement, draw up the list, or write the essay. They did these things voluntarily. What to do?

Many of the soldiers relieved the psychological tension by changing their attitude. Like the student in the “lying” experiment we discussed earlier, the soldiers decided that since they couldn’t undo what they had already done, then maybe what they had done wasn’t so wrong after all. The boring experiment wasn’t really that boring. The collaboration was not really collaboration; it was just being truthful. Sure, communism might not work in the United States but it might not be so bad in Asia.

The “foot-in-the-door” technique for securing attitude change has been extensively researched. In fact, social psychologists have discovered some basic rules for when it is more effective. Here are a few:

### **Rule #1: Make it active**

The Chinese got the American soldiers not only to make pro-communist statements but also to write them down. The act of writing the statement down seems to be particularly important because we look to our

own behavior as a way of judging the kind of person we are. If I wrote the essay or signed the list, then the behavior of writing or signing is a strong signal to me concerning what I believe. Why would I have written the essay if I didn't believe what I was writing? Cialdini notes that charitable organizations and advocacy groups frequently make use of this "active commitment" rule to secure commitment to their cause. You signed the petition, now will you allow us to put up a sign in your front yard? You allowed us to put up a sign, now would you be willing to make a donation?

## **Rule #2: Make it public**

It wasn't enough just to get the soldiers to make a list or write an essay. The Chinese showed the list and essay to other soldiers. They went public with it. The act of going public with one's beliefs has a powerful impact on one's commitment to those beliefs. Remember, we want to be consistent. Once everyone knows where we stand then it becomes difficult for us to change where we stand.

Two interesting studies confirm the power of going public on securing the average person's commitment to a position. In the first, researchers asked people to estimate the length of a line.<sup>7</sup> One group was asked simply to remember their estimate. A second group was asked to write down their estimate but then to erase it before anyone could see what they had written. The final group was asked to make their estimate public by writing them down on a sheet of paper, signing the paper and turning it into the experimenter. Later the three groups were provided with information that strongly suggested that their initial estimates were wrong.

**Question:** Which group do you think was **least** willing to change their mind about the accuracy of their estimate? Was it the group that simply made a mental note of their estimate; the group that wrote down but then quickly erased their estimate; or the group that wrote down their estimate and made it public?

If you said the group that had to go public with their estimate was the most stubborn, then you are right.

The second study had to do with measuring the impact of public commitments on jurors' ability to reach a decision.<sup>8</sup> The experimenters wanted to know if there would be a significant difference in the number of hung juries if the jurors' initially indicated their verdict publicly by a show of hands or by secret ballot. By now, you probably have already guessed the answer and know how to avoid a hung jury. Make sure you use a secret ballot.

## **Rule #3: Make it voluntary**

One of the ways the Chinese sought to control the behavior of their captives was to sponsor political essay writing contests. Prisoners competed for a small prize such as a pack of cigarettes or a piece of fruit in return for writing political essays that were at least mildly pro-communist or anti-American. Many American prisoners participated in these contests for a very good reason. The cigarettes and fruit were valuable commodities to cold, lonely, and often hungry prisoners. Obviously in line with Rule #1 the Chinese expected that the action of writing the essay would have an important and pro-communist impact on the men's beliefs. The questions of interest here, as Cialdini notes, is not why the Chinese sponsored the contests but why they didn't offer more valuable prizes, such as warm blankets or special privileges, in order to encourage more prisoners to participate?<sup>9</sup>

For the answer, we need to go back to the "lying" experiment discussed earlier. You will recall that the students who were offered only one dollar for lying felt significantly more dissonance than the students who were offered twenty dollars. Students offered twenty dollars could explain away their behavior as nothing more than the product of bribery. Students offered only a single dollar had no such luxury. One dollar just wasn't much of a bribe. The Chinese were smart enough to realize that prisoners who wrote essays to compete for something as small as a single pack of cigarettes were much less likely to attribute their essay writing to bribery than if the prize had been truly significant. "I must have meant at least some of what I wrote. After all, I wrote it with seeking nothing more in return than a chance of winning one lousy pack of cigarettes." The action was voluntary therefore I must have meant it.

Copyright (c) 2006 by Joseph H. Boyett. All Rights Reserved.

For permission to copy, distribute or post to your web site send an e-mail by clicking on "CONTACT" on the authors's website: <http://www.jboyett.com>.

### Rule #4: Require effort

In my article on reciprocity as a weapon of influence I discussed the tragic story of the mass murders at Jonestown where men and women took their own lives and those of their children, all to please their leader. A similar incident occurred in 1993. This time 75 members of the cult Branch Davidians died along with 23 of their children in a fire which according to the official U.S. government report on the incident was most likely started by cult members themselves.<sup>10</sup> While the government report's conclusion concerning who started the fire is controversial, there is no disagreement with the fact that the Branch Davidians compound had been under siege for nearly two months and that in the days prior to the fire the situation had become increasingly tense and dangerous. Some members of the cult took their children and left. Many more stayed.

The question is why so many of the Branch Davidians remained in the compound and committed to the cult in spite of the danger to themselves and their children. One possible explanation says Kenneth Bordens and Irwin Horowitz, co-authors of *Social Psychology* has to do with cognitive dissonance:

Joining the cult was no easy feat. At first, few demands were made, but after a while, members had to give more. In fact, members routinely turned over all of their possessions, including houses, insurance policies, and money. Once in the group, life was quite harsh. Koresh enforced strict (and changeable) rules on every aspect of members' lives, including personally rationing all their food, imposing celibacy on the men while taking women as his wives and concubines, and inflicting physical abuse. In short, residents of the compound had to expend quite a bit of effort to be members.

All the requirements for membership relate directly to what we know about attitudes and behavior from dissonance theory. For example, dissonance research shows that the harder people have to work to get into a group, the more they value that group... By turning over all of their possessions, members were making an irreversible commitment to the cult. Once such a commitment is made, people are unlikely to abandon positive attitudes toward the group... After expending so much effort, questioning commitment would create cognitive dissonance... It is inconsistent to prove devotion to a belief by donating all of your possessions and then to abandon those beliefs. In other words, to a large extent, cult members persuaded themselves. [Cognitive] dissonance theory predicts that the Davidians would come to value the group highly and be disinclined to question [David] Koresh [their leader]. This is, in fact, what happened.<sup>11</sup>

The Davidians valued their group even more because of the sacrifices they had been required to make to be part of it. Joining required effort. Effort led to stronger commitment. Interestingly some studies have shown that people who have actively and openly demonstrated their commitment to a belief and who have made significant sacrifices in support of that commitment may cling stubbornly to their beliefs even in the face of undeniable proof that they are wrong. For example, studies of members of "doomsday" societies who profess belief that the world will end on a specific day often become even more committed to their group when the world **doesn't** end as expected.<sup>12</sup>

### **Practical Lesson**

Transformational leaders understand that the desire on the part of most people to be consistent and to avoid cognitive dissonance is a powerful tool for acquiring and maintaining followers' commitment to a vision. They know and follow the rules for making this weapon of influence work: Make it active, public, voluntary and effortful. Followers get caught in a slippery slope. The small concession or favor the leader asks of them today leads to even larger requests tomorrow. Soon they are trapped in a consistency of their own making. Perhaps Emerson's admonition should be taken as a warning. A foolish consistency is a hobgoblin, or at least should be.

Copyright (c) 2006 by Joseph H. Boyett. All Rights Reserved.

For permission to copy, distribute or post to your web site send an e-mail by clicking on "CONTACT" on the authors's website: <http://www.jboyett.com>.

There is no ex-Marine of my acquaintance...who does not view the training as a crucible out of which he emerged in some way more resilient, simply braver and better for the wear.

Author William Styron on the impact the “training nightmare” of Marine boot camp had on him and other Marines. Cited in Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence*, 80

As I said, one of the ways transformational leaders wield the consistency weapon of influence is by making commitments public. Once someone goes public with a commitment to a leader or cause, they feel even greater dissonance should they try to change their mind and withdraw their support at a later date. Another reason that transformational leaders make followers go public with their commitment has to do with our next weapon of influence. It is called social proof. As we will see in my next article, social proof has an extremely powerful and sometimes even murderous impact on our behavior. Yes, that is right. I said “murderous.”

Copyright (c) 2006 by Joseph H. Boyett. All Rights Reserved.

For permission to copy, distribute or post to your web site send an e-mail by clicking on "CONTACT" on the authors's website: <http://www.jboyett.com>.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance." In Norman Foerster, Norman, (Ed). *American Poetry and Prose*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), 506.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 506.

<sup>3</sup> Festinger, Leon and James M. Carlsmith. "Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance." In Lesko, Wayne A. *Readings in Social Psychology* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), 104-112.

<sup>4</sup> Cialdini, Robert B., *Influence: Science and Practice*, (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2001), 68.

<sup>5</sup> This discussion adapted from LB05 pp. 61-97.

<sup>6</sup> Cialdini, Robert B., *Influence: Science and Practice*, 64.

<sup>7</sup> Morton Deutsch and Harold Gerald (1955) in Cialdini, Robert B., *Influence: Science and Practice*, 72-73.

<sup>8</sup> Kerr & MacCoun, 1985 in Cialdini, Robert B., *Influence: Science and Practice*, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Cialdini, Robert B., *Influence: Science and Practice*, 81.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://unquietmind.com/wacoreport.pdf> for a copy of the report and for additional information on the controversy surrounding it.

<sup>11</sup> Bordens, Kenneth S. and Irwin A Horowitz, *Social Psychology (Second Edition)*, (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates 2002), 222-223.

<sup>12</sup> See Bordens, Kenneth S. and Irwin A Horowitz, *Social Psychology*, 223 for reference to one such study and five conditions that seem necessary for this to happen.