The Science of Leadership

WEAPONS OF INFLUENCE-SOCIAL PROOF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transformational leaders understand and employ the power of social proof. They know that most of the time most people operate in a kind of skimming/mindless mode when it comes to considering what action to take. When people are in such a mode of thinking (really non-thinking), they aren't interested in logic. They are looking instead for quick cues concerning how to behave and look to others, particular others that seem like them, for those cues. The leader's modeling of correct behavior is a powerful cue as are the behaviors of others in the group. Leaders do not have to win all their followers over to their viewpoint at once. Only a few obedient followers who willingly serve as examples may be sufficient, particularly if the situation is ambiguous and people are not sure what to do.

Leaders use rituals, symbols, jargon, shared goals, shared feelings, sharing of specialized and exclusive "in the know" information and enemies lists to quickly create and identity for and define the social reality of their followers who would otherwise just be a collection of strangers. They know that most people want to belong to a group-any group-that they will willingly "join up" and become quickly and fully committed to the group even when the group is just a "granfallon"--essentially a meaningless association.

I present the following facts and findings for your consideration. What, if anything, could they have in common?

❑ Homicides in the United States have been found to increase by 12 percent or more in the days immediately following highly publicized heavyweight championship flights. For example, in the three days following the famous Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier "thrilla in Manila" in 1975, homicides increased by nearly one-third.[1]

❑ Suicides were 12 percent higher than normal in the month following the widely publicized suicide of actress Marylyn Monroe in 1962.[2]

❑ Fatal auto accidents on California highways have been found to increase by over 9 percent in the days after well-publicized suicides and multi-vehicle passenger deaths increase dramatically after highly publicized murder-suicides.[3]

❑ In the region of Basle, Switzerland suicides assisted by the right-to-die society EXIT increased substantially during the two years following the wide spread press coverage of a 1995 double suicide of a prominent couple from the local area.[4]

❑ In an emergency situation where a stranger appears to be having a medical crisis such as a seizure, bystanders are more likely to come to the stranger's aid if they are alone rather than part of a group.[5] A review of 56 studies comparing the helping behavior of people alone versus people in groups found that victims received help 75 percent of the time when their crisis occurred in the presence of a single individual versus less than 53 percent of the time in the presence of a group.[6]

❑ Equity analysts employed by investment banks have been found to be more likely to initiate and cease coverage of firms on the NASDAQ stock market if other analysts had already done so. [7]

The Principle of Social Proof

So, what do these facts and findings have in common? They illustrate the power of what Robert Cialdini calls "the principle of social proof." It goes like this:

> We view behavior as correct in a given situation to the degree that we see others performing it. Whether the question is what to do with an empty popcorn box in a movie theater, how fast to drive on a certain stretch of highway, or how to eat the chicken at a dinner party, the actions of those around us will be important guides in defining the answer.[8]

Can murders, suicides, and other forms of violence we inflict upon others and ourselves be linked to social proof? Donald Phillips who has conducted perhaps more research on the effects of imitation on social behavior than anyone thinks so and argues that there is a fundamental psychological process at work.

> It is an elementary principle of' human learning that reward and punishment shape future behavior, not just for the person who is rewarded or punished but for others as well; hence the insistence of seasoned grade school researchers on "making an example" of troublemakers. But in what sense has a suicide victim's behavior been conspicuously rewarded? For one thing, the victim has received attention even pity. And acquaintances may tend to dwell on his positive characteristics during the period of mourning, giving him a social standing higher than any he enjoyed while alive. To those who are severely depressed to begin with, such praise and pity may seem seductively attractive even if posthumously granted. Moreover, a person who decides to commit suicide after reading of someone else's suicide has almost certainly been contemplating the possibility, for some time. In laboratory experiments, psychologists have shown that people contemplating an act that is generally frowned upon are more likely to commit it after "disinhibition"—after seeing others commit it, after reassurance that they are not alone.[9]

Social proof also seems to have an impact on our willingness to help a stranger in need. Researchers offer two plausible explanations for this bystander inaction. First, when we are in a group we don't feel as much individual responsibility for taking action. Neither do the others in the group. We all wait for someone else to take the first step toward lending aide. Consequently, no aide is offered. Second, we don't act because we aren't sure if what we are witnessing is indeed a true emergency. Is the person really sick or just behaving strangely? We look to others to see how they are reacting. If the others don't seem to be treating the situation as an emergency then we don't either. Of course, while we are looking at them, they're looking at us and all of us are reaching the same conclusion. No one is treating this situation as an emergency so it isn't one.

A situation similar to this happened to me not long ago. I was sitting in an airport lounge waiting to get on our plane when the security alarm began to sound. The high pitch, near-deafening sound continued for a full ten minutes until a security guard arrived to shut it off. What was strange about the event is that it occurred during the height of one of the numerous terrorist alerts after the attack on the World Trade Center

in 2001. In spite of the heightened security concerns, no one in the lounge, including the airline employees, took any action. We all sat where we were, looked at each other and did nothing. We never discovered what caused the alarm. As far as I know, no one in the lounge ever asked. Social proof had kicked in. None of others saw any social proof of a terrorist problem so we assumed none existed.

Why We Seek Social Proof

Why do we seek social proof? Some researchers think it has to do with the way humans think. They argue that there is considerable evidence that humans don't like to think very hard because serious thinking is…well, hard. They cite research that measured the brain waves emitted by people. People working on a hard-thinking problem, such as a difficult math problem, emitted brain waves very similar to those emitted by people who had plunged their hands into buckets of ice water. Their minds responded to hard thinking just about the way they did to physical pain. As far as the mind is concerned, thinking hurts and is to be avoided whenever possible. Also, hard thinking has been shown to be exhausting. We burn about three times the calories thinking hard as we do when we are just cruising along mindlessly.[10]

> TRY THE "THINKING DIET"
>
> Breakfast: **Solve one very difficult math problem.**
>
> Lunch: **Study quantum mechanics for an hour.**
>
> Dinner: **Provide a logical explanation for G.W. Bush's foreign policy.**

Since thinking is hard work, our brains seek relief. We drop into a kind of mindless/skimming mode most of the time. Instead of thinking hard about our actions, we take cues from our surroundings, particularly from what other people are doing. We reserve hard thinking for the few issues that really matter to us. For example, if we are about to make a major purchase such as, for example, buying a house, we might really think about our decision. But, if the issue is what brand of soap to buy we might take the easy way out and just pick the most popular brand.

Social proof—looking to others for cues concerning what action to take—works most of the time. It saves us considerable brain energy, but it can also get us into a lot of trouble. We can end up making bad decisions, even decisions that cost our lives or those of our loved ones. Robert Cialdini thinks that is part of what happened at Jonestown, the worst mass murder of American citizens in history prior to September 11. 2001. You will recall the story of Jonestown from my article "Weapons of Influence-Reciprocity. In November 18, 1978, Jim Jones, the leader of the Peoples Temple cult ordered his followers to kill themselves and their children. Most of Jones' followers did as he instructed. Over 900 cult members, including 276 children died, most by consuming a grape drink laced with cyanide. Cialdini says social proof had much to do with the tragedy.

> What was right for a member of the [Jonestown] community was determined to a disproportionate degree by what other community members--influenced heavily by Jones--did and believed. When viewed in this light, the terrible orderliness, the lack of panic, the sense of calm with which these people moved to the vat of poison and to their deaths seems more comprehensible. They hadn't been hypnotized by Jones; they had been convinced--partly by him but, more importantly, by the principle of social proof that suicide was the correct conduct. The uncertainty they surely felt upon first hearing the death command must have caused them to look around them for a definition of the appropriate response.
>
> It is worth particular note that they found two impressive pieces of social evidence, each pointing in the same direction. The first was the initial set of their compatriots, who

quickly and willingly took the poison drafts. There will always be a few such fanatically obedient individuals in any strong leader-dominated group. Whether, in this instance, they had been specially instructed beforehand to serve as examples or whether they were just naturally the most compliant with Jones's wishes is difficult to know. No matter; the psychological effect of the actions of those individuals must have been potent. If the suicides of similar others in news stories can influence total strangers to kill themselves, imagine how enormously more compelling such an act would be when performed without hesitation by one's neighbors in a place like Jonestown. The second source of social evidence came from the reactions of the crowd itself…Each Jonestowner looked to the actions of surrounding individuals to assess the situation and--finding calmness because everyone else, too, was surreptitiously assessing rather than reacting--"learned" that patient turntaking was the correct behavior. Such misinterpreted, but nonetheless convincing, social evidence would be expected to result precisely in the ghastly composure of the assemblage that waited in the tropics of Guyana for businesslike death.[11]

Practical Lessons for Leaders and Followers

Leaders: Most of the time people operate in a kind of skimming/mindless mode when it comes to considering what action to take. When they are in such a mode of thinking (really non-thinking), they aren't interested in logic. They are looking instead for quick cues concerning how to behave and look to others, particular others that seem like them, for those cues. Your modeling of the correct behavior is a powerful cue as are the behaviors of others in the group. You do not have to win all your followers over to your viewpoint at once. Only a few obedient followers who willingly serve as examples may be sufficient, particularly if the situation is ambiguous and people are not sure what to do. Remember what happened at Jonestown. The few followers of Jones who quickly and willingly drank their cup of poison may have provided the social proof for others to do the same. Consider how things might have been different if the first few to act had publicly and forcefully rejected the poison and abandoned the camp.

Followers: Beware of the impact of social proof on your behavior. Social proof can save you brain energy and serve you well but there are times when it can be extremely damaging. Be particularly cautions in situations of uncertainty. When you are in doubt as to what is happening or how to behave in a situation you are prone to look to others, particularly others who seem to be somehow like you, for cues concerning how to behave. Under such circumstances Cialdini urges you to be cautious and to look out for people who are trying to exploit the power of social proof for their own interests. Beware of testimonials, particularly from people who are "just like you." Ask yourself is this real or just a trick? Is this legitimate social proof or something counterfeit?

Power of The "Granfallon"

The great comedian Groucho Marx once sent the following telegram to the exclusive Hollywood Friar's Club where he was a member:[12]

Groucho may not have cared to belong to a club that would accept him as a member but most of us do not feel the same. That may be one reason social proof is so important. In contrast to Groucho, most of us want to be part of groups—almost any groups. Groups are important to us.[13]

❑ Groups help us meet our biological needs. It's easier to survive in a group than alone.

❑ Groups provide us with social support and insulate us from loneliness.

❑ Groups help us deal with stress.

❑ Groups provide us with social proof. (See our earlier discussion of social proof.)

❑ Groups help us make sense of the world and the people around us. "You're in my group. You're not."

❑ Groups are important in shaping our sense of self-worth, self-identity and self-esteem. Groups are a source of pride.

Groups are so important to us psychologically that they are surprisingly easy to create. A classic demonstration of this was provided by British social psychologist Henri Tajfel. Tajfel brought complete strangers into his lab and divided them into two groups based upon nothing more than a coin toss—heads you're in this group, tails you're in that one. In short, Tajfel created what Kurt Vonnegut in his novel *Cat's Cradle* called *granfalloons*—essentially meaningless associations.[14]

In their book *Age of Propaganda*, Anthony Prtkanis and Elliot Aronson note that what was interesting about Tajfel's granfallons is how the people in these groups began to behave after the groups were formed.

> What makes Tajfel's research so curious are the results that are often obtained. Despite the fact that the subjects were total strangers prior to the study, that they had never interacted with one another and never would, and that their actions were completely anonymous, they acted as if those who shared their meaningless label were their good friends or close kin. Subjects indicated that they liked those who shared their label. They rated others who shared their label as more likely to have a pleasant personality and to have produced better output than out-group members. Most strikingly, subjects allocated more money and rewards to those group members who shared their label and did so in a competitive manner--for example, subjects were more likely to prefer giving fellow group members $2 and the "other" group $1 rather than giving their group $3 and the other group $4.[15]

Granfalloons are a favorite tactic of advertisers, politicians, televangelists, and propagandists of every stripe who wish to quickly create an identity for and define the social reality of what would otherwise just be a collection of strangers. Pratkanis says the following are essential to the success of a granfallon and telltale signs that one is being created.

(a) rituals and symbols (e.g., a dowser's rod, secret symbols, and special ways of preparing food): these not only create an identity, but provide items for sale at a profit.

(b) jargon and beliefs that only the in-group understands and accepts (e.g., thetans are impeded by engrams, you are on a cusp with Jupiter rising): jargon is an effective means of social control since it can be used to frame the interpretation of events.

(c) shared goals (e.g., to end all war, to sell the faith and related products, or to realize one's human potential): such goals not only define the group, but motivate action as believers attempt to reach them.

(d) shared feelings (e.g., the excitement of a prophecy that might appear to be true or the collective rationalization of strange beliefs to others): shared feelings aid in the we feeling.

(e) specialized information (e.g., the U.S. government is in a conspiracy to cover up UFOs): this helps the target feel special because he or she is "in the know."

(f) enemies (e.g., alternative medicine opposing the AMA and the FDA, subliminal-tape companies spurning academic psychologists, and spiritualists condemning…investigators)…[16]

Practical Lessons for Leaders and Followers

Leaders Lesson: Do not overlook the power of a *granfallon,* but if you choose to create one pay attention to Pratkanis' essentials for success.

Followers Lesson: Follow Pratkanis and Aronson's five simple rules to avoid being seduced by a *granfallon*.

First, be wary, of those who attempt to create minimum groups and to define you as a member of a certain category. There are many ways to define and label a person. Ask yourself, "Why is this particular label being suggested?" Second, follow the old civil rights motto; "Keep your eye on the prize." Try linking your self-esteem to achieving an objective--be it a quality purchase at a reasonable price or a social good--rather than maintaining a self-image. Third, do not put all of your self-esteem eggs in one basket, one granfallon--it might lead to fanaticism. Fourth, look for common ground--goals that might be acceptable to both the in- and the out-group--as a means of reducing the importance of group boundaries. Finally, try to think of an out-group member as an individual, someone who may share more in common with you than you might have previously thought.[17]

At the beginning of this article, I listed certain facts. Homicides increased after heavyweight flights. Suicides went up after stories of murder-suicides appeared in the media. You probably found most of these coincidences at least mildly interesting. Well, if you found them interesting, you are going to love the beginning of my next article. I have some truly strange and odd "astounding coincidences" to share with you.

NOTES

[1] Philips, David P., "The Werther Effect," *The Sciences,* 1985/July-August, 36

[2] Ibid, 37

[3] Ibid, 38

[4] Frei, A, T. Schenker, A. Finzen, V. Dittmann, K. Kraeuchi, and U. Hoffmann-Richter, "The Werther Effect and Assisted Suicide," *Suicide & Life Threatening Behavior,* 2003/Summer/33/2, 192-200.

[5] Latane, Bibb and Steve Nida, "Ten Years of Research on Group Size and Helping," *Psychological Bulletin*, 1981/89/2, 308-324.

[6] Ibid, 321

[7] Rao, Hayagreeva, Henrich R. Greve, and Gerald F. Davis, "Fool's Gold: Social Proof in the Initiation and Abandonment of Coverage by Wall Street Analysts," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 2001/September/46/3, 502-526.

[8] Cialdini, Robert, *Influence: Science and Practice*, (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2001), 100

[9] Philips, David P., "The Werther Effect," 38-39

[10] See Rhoads, Kelton, "Mindfulness & Mindlessness" at http://www.workingpsychology.com/mindfl.html.

[11] Cialdini, Robert, *Influence,* 132-133

[12] Kaplan, Justin (Ed), *Barlett's Familiar Quotations*, Seventeenth Edition. (Boston: Little Brown, 2002), 744

[13] See Bordens, Kenneth S. and Irwin A. Horowitz, *Social Psychology (2nd Edition)*, (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erbaum Associates, 2002), 290-303 for a summary of research on the role of group membership in helping people meet basic biological, psychological and social needs.

[14] Kurt Vonnegut. *Cat's Cradle*, (Delta, 1998), 92

[15] Pratkanis, Anthony R. and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*, (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 216-217

[16] Pratkanis, Anthony R., "How to Sell a Pseudoscience," *Skeptical Inquirer*, 1995/July-August/19/4, 3-4

[17] Pratkanis, Anthony R. and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda*, 223