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you are not a gentleman: the principles of influence

“The saddest thing about any man is that he be ignorant, and the most exciting thing is that he knows.” – King Alfred the Great

I was barely awake when the phone rang. The urgent voice at the other end of the line claimed that Microsoft had found a serious problem with my computer. The caller insisted that I log in, immediately: otherwise, the malware would destroy my machine and everything on it. He sounded deeply concerned.

I tapped in the letters as he dictated them. A list of over a thousand errors and warnings scrolled down the screen. Yes, I had noticed that the computer had been slowing down. Yes, so many error messages were indeed worrying. “You see,” he said, “your computer is about to die.” I was having a little difficulty making out his accent; I was concentrating on understanding, rather than on the significance of the call itself.

But I was beginning to wake up. “Did you say you’re with

Microsoft?” I asked.

“No, we’re partners. We’re Microsoft certified. Look on your screen.”

Sure enough, there was a window with “Microsoft Gold Certified” right there, on the screen. Again, he insisted that my computer would die, *today*, if I did not let him install software to quarantine the many infections. A new window flashed on the screen. For £149 (about \$200), he would save my computer, and the protection would last for a year, but for another hundred pounds, if I bought the software immediately – today – he would extend the protection to five years.

“How do I know that you’re Microsoft certified?” I asked, stifling a yawn.

“Look at your screen,” he responded.

“Yes, but you can put whatever you want on the screen. Who can I contact at Microsoft, in the UK?”

The address for Microsoft in London flashed on the screen. “But the London office won’t know who we are,” he said.

“How did you get my number?” I asked.

“If you don’t do this right now, your computer will die. What difference does it make to me? I’m paid my salary whether you take my advice or not. I don’t work for a commission. You’ll lose everything on your computer. It’s no skin off my nose.”

“How did you get my number?” I asked again.

“You are not a gentleman!” he said. “I’m trying to help you.” He sounded genuinely frustrated.

“Hang on a minute,” I said. “I’m not going to let you call me names, just because I want to be sure that your offer is genuine.”

“It’s no skin off my nose,” he repeated.

“I want to talk to your supervisor,” I said.

The supervisor came on the line and apologized for the slur. He then repeated the assertion that my computer would die, and I would lose everything on it, if I didn’t act *immediately*. “Listen. We’ll do the work for free. If you’re happy, you can pay us. If not, you can simply walk away without paying a penny.”

I put the phone down as my computer went through various changes before my eyes. I called my brother. “Switch your machine off, immediately,” he urged. “It’s a scam. Several of my friends have been caught by it. They leave ransom-ware on the machine, so every few months; you have to buy new add-ons to repair it.”

I had already pulled the plug. The phone rang again. It was the supervisor. “You’ve dropped your Internet connection. You are not a gentleman!”

“I *am* a gentleman and *you* are a scam artist. A criminal.” He wanted to argue the point. I hung up.

Luckily, my son is a computer expert and later that day he cleaned the machine thoroughly. “Watch out for any pop-ups,” he recommended.

I have spent a lifetime studying tricks and scams. I can recite the litany of names used by experts to describe these manipulative methods. And yet, I almost fell for this rather obvious confidence trick. There are even web pages warning about this particular company.

I didn’t buy the fake fix, and no ransom-ware was left in my computer. I’ve never sent money to a Nigerian with an inheritance offering to share his good fortune with me if I just provide

him with a few dollars to collect. I have never sent a “registration fee” to collect my winnings from the Dutch lottery. When a gorgeous Malaysian girl claimed to lust after my ageing body, I did realize it was a scam (though only after exchanging emails for a couple of hours).

It is not just the Internet that is rife with scams. Trickery is an aspect of human nature, and it reaches back long before the advent of the worldwide web. Indeed, some students of animal behavior say that lying is the first stage in the evolution of intelligence. Californian jays have been observed pretending to bury food, and then quickly concealing their actual stash, while their rivals scabble about in the false hiding place.



A Confidence Trick

Pride does indeed come before a fall. If there is one lesson that we should all learn, and relearn, as often as necessary, it is that no one is invulnerable to unethical persuasion. Not even those of us who make it our life’s work. Indeed, it is confidence in our invulnerability that makes us so vulnerable.

Despite decades of immersion in the world of hucksters, I, too, can still be charmed, cajoled, and led like a lamb to the slaughter.

Years ago, I finished my interview with a teenager who had escaped from an authoritarian group only weeks before. He grinned and said, “The great thing is, Jon, that we’ll *never* be conned again.”

I shook my head, “No, the great thing is that I realize I’m gullible. And that’s my only defense. Whenever I’m caught up with enthusiasm and ready to reach for my wallet, I try to stop myself and analyze the evidence. Sometimes that saves me money and embarrassment.”

A few years ago, when Amazon contacted me to say I’d won a thousand pounds in their Wishlist lottery, I didn’t believe it. And the disbelief did me no harm; it actually made it sweeter when the credit appeared in my account.

the huckster’s sales kit

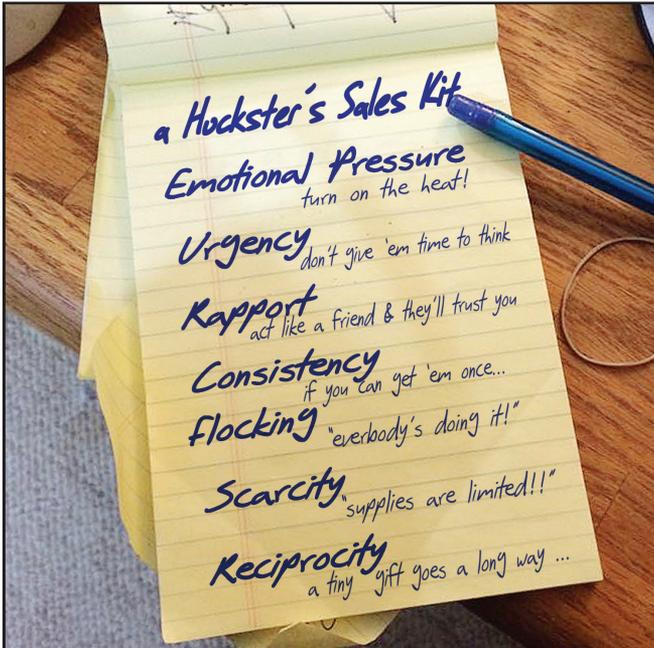
The phone huckster – and his colleagues in a boiler room somewhere in Kolkata or Delhi – went through a tried-and-tested script that exploited normal feelings and responses. First, he created fear: your machine will die. *Emotional pressure always reduces the capacity to reason.* Language can be crafted to direct you away from thinking: psychologists have found that certain words and phrases by-pass our reasoning processes altogether – “buy now”, “new and improved”, and “every penny counts”, for instance.

Next, he created a sense of urgency: he wanted me to act immediately, so that I would have no time to think. This is the “buy now” mechanism, which slips past reasoning. When we are buying anything – from computer software or a second-hand car,

to a business training program, to a new religion – it is important to take our time. This mechanism is recognized legally in some countries, where there is a “cooling off” period in which you can cancel a contract to fit double-glazing or anything else you have been pressured into buying.

If you must “buy now,” don’t buy at all.

A good scam artist creates *rapport*. Here the phone scammer failed. He was too urgent, and he was rude. Often as not, when challenged, hucksters protest too much. How could I doubt his word? This is actually a way of generating rapport in reverse. He was suggesting that we had made a connection and that I had violated it by distrusting him. Whenever I hear the phrase: “You can trust me,” a voice in my mind whispers: “You can trust me; I’m a con artist.”



A Huckster's Sales Kit

Rapport is an essential aspect of sales and recruitment. We are far more likely to buy from someone who has become a friend. Instant friendship is usually a trap. Real friendship takes more than one meeting, just as love at first sight is often simply a matter of psychological projection. We find what we are searching for in the other person, whether it is there or not: *expectation conditions experience*.

From rapport comes *authority*. We believe our friends, but we also believe people who agree with us, and share our view of the world. Flattery usually works very well at creating rapport, and when someone has shown us that they have the discernment to appreciate our superior qualities, we are open to their opinions about other matters, too.

Once we have sent the first few dollars to the Nigerian heir, the Dutch lottery official or the gorgeous young Malaysian woman, the next tranche of cash comes more easily. Against the protests of her family, one seventy-year old squandered her every last cent – some \$300,000 – on a telephone scammer. She lost her home and ended her days on welfare, after alienating her whole family. The power of persuasion is far greater than we like to admit.¹

Once we have committed to a course of action, we tend to continue. It is the *inertia* of “throwing good money after bad.” Somehow by continuing to fund the Nigerian’s lifestyle, we believe that everything will work out. History is littered with such scams.

confidence tricks of the past

In the early eighteenth century, the Mississippi Company, owned by the French Royal Bank, offered investors the chance to make enormous rewards by buying shares in the new Louisiana

Territories in America. The currency of France came to depend on the illusory trade of this company. Many French people lost everything they owned to the fraudulent Mississippi Company, and the French currency collapsed. At the same time, British investors were gulled into buying shares in the South Sea Bubble. The Panama Canal scam bankrupted investors in the Victorian era. Clever, wealthy and accomplished people lost everything.



A contemporary illustration showing investors in the South Sea bubble falling like over-ripe fruit into the sea

Dishonest dealings also factored in the Wall Street Crash that precipitated the Great Depression in the 1930s. Share prices were

inflated in an ever-increasing spiral. With the Crash, the banks, which had poured investors' money into this illusion, were forced to foreclose on mortgages; property prices collapsed. Later on, the same trickery happened on a grand scale with the banking crash at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Bankers really believed that they could package up "sub-prime" debts and so give them value. Two economists were awarded Nobel prizes for "proving" that the economy would never collapse again. Trillions of dollars leached out of the economy because of this belief. Once the mind is convinced, it continues in the same direction – *inertia*, the commitment of consistency, bedevils human belief.

This highlights another innate problem of such scams: if other people flock to invest, we will be tempted to follow suit.

Any examination of history shows that people can be brought to believe almost anything. So, Germans voted away the right to vote and put all power in the hands of a scruffy, diminutive, dark-haired, brown-eyed Austrian, who proclaimed the era of the neat, tall, blond, blue-eyed Aryan superman. Fifty million people died in the aftermath of this group delusion. There is *no safety in numbers* when it comes to belief, and joining the crowd often leads to catastrophe.

Scarcity is another well-known aspect of confidence trickery. This can be the insistence that we "buy now" (or the computer will die) or the precious rarity of a "limited edition" of 10,000 coins, stamps or porcelain mice.

We also tend to feel obliged to offer something in return. Charities will send a free ballpoint pen, a couple of cardboard table coasters or some name-tags along with a request for donations. This is the *reciprocity principle*. The supervisor who almost managed to scam me said he would fix my computer for free, and I should only pay if I was satisfied. The truth is that many people

will pay up, after this seemingly friendly gesture, which is yet another way of building rapport.

cults in our midst

The techniques of the scammer have been elevated to new heights in destructive, authoritarian or *totalist* groups, which are also commonly known as *cults*. The term “totalist” or “totalitarian” refers to dictatorial leadership which allows no disagreement and has “total authority”. My concern is for any authoritarian group or relationship, wherever it fits on the spectrum between autonomy and totalism.

There is no democracy in an authoritarian group. These groups have proliferated in our society. Experts list as many as three thousand dangerous authoritarian groups in the US alone. Some claim to be religious or philosophical, some are political or offer supposed therapy, others promise revelations leading to wealth or success in relationship, yet others promise eternal life. There are many more “family” groups that cluster around an abusive individual, who has total authority. The smallest authoritarian group consists of a single follower in an intimate relationship with an authoritarian partner. The dynamics of manipulation or undue influence are broadly the same: all create authoritarian or even totalist relationships.

This definition of a totalist cult – which can be applied to any authoritarian group or relationship – was arrived at by a group of experts under the direction of Professor Louis Jolyon West, MD:

*“A group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing, and employing unethical, manipulative or coercive techniques of persuasion and control designed to advance the goals of the group’s leaders, to the possible or actual detriment of members, their families or the community.”*²

There is a general belief that only weak people are taken in by these authoritarian groups, but this simply isn't true. Authoritarian groups have no interest in recruiting incapable followers; they want the smartest and most capable. According to research, most members are "fairly well educated" and come from "normal, functioning families."³ It is not uncommon to find scientists, doctors and lawyers in an authoritarian group.

Susceptibility has nothing whatsoever to do with intelligence or education.

Most people join a totalist or authoritarian group at a time of transition, such as after a bereavement or break-up, or a move to a new town or a new job. Students in their first year away from home are particularly susceptible, as they are also making the important transition from adolescence into adulthood. When familiar habits and routines are disrupted, we become more open to new ways, and, when those ways come in a friendly, welcoming package, it is easy to accept them without sufficient reflection.

There is a very broad range of groups that create dependence among members. Some derive from traditional religions; others – such as the Teachers or the Sullivanians – are therapy-based. Some claim to be business trainers, like est or The Forum, but they also attempt to sell "self-realization."

These groups have long since penetrated everyday life: today, many major corporations use some of the training methods of these authoritarian groups. While these less than ethical approaches may be marketed as "team building" or "assessment", they derive from the control techniques used by authoritarian leaders, and are ultimately designed to over-ride critical thinking.

In this new century, the most notorious form of authoritarianism is the terrorist group, but the dynamics of authoritarian behavior are also found in gangs, pedophile rings, among human

traffickers and even in some of our most beloved institutions. The horrifying child abuse scandals that have recently rocked the UK show how authority and unethical influence have often been used to maintain criminal and immoral activities within organizations directed by both the church and state. This is possible because the same dynamics apply to all human behavior, and, until we are familiar with those dynamics, we will continue to fall prey to them.

recommended reading:

Robert Cialdini, *Influence*

Pratkanis and Shadel, *Weapons of Fraud*

Check your understanding:

1. True or false - Some people are immune from the effects of undue influence.
2. True or false – An examination of history shows that people can be influenced to believe almost anything.
3. True or false – There is no democracy in an authoritarian group
4. True or false – Only weak and uneducated people are seduced into joining authoritarian groups?
5. True or false – Most people join an authoritarian group in a time of transition.
6. What are the seven steps in a scam (unethical persuasion)?
7. In the last 100 years, what may well be the most costly example of the negative effects of undue influence, as measured by the loss of human lives
8. What is an authoritarian/totalist group?
9. The most notorious form of authoritarianism can be found in: a.) terrorist groups, b.) gangs, c.) pedophile rings or d.) high-control religious groups.

Apply your learning:

10) Imagine you receive a call from a Microsoft representative about your computer, like the author in the beginning of this chapter. How would you respond and deal with the situation?

11) Re-visit the 'huckster's sales list'.

a) Can you think of any examples in your own life where someone else has used these methods on you?

b) How did you respond in those situations and what was the outcome?

c) If you were able to do a do-over, would you respond differently now that you have learned more about scams? If so, how?

12) One way to protect yourself against future scams is to practice spotting the signs in 'the huckster's sale kit' and to learn from our past, if we have ever fallen victim to a scam. Next time you are in a situation where someone tries to persuade you into doing or buying something, use the following table to take notes.

Who was the persuader? Where did this occur?	What did they want you to do?	How did you feel?	How did you respond?	If you were to do a do-over, would you respond differently?
Example: I went out with friends after work.	Example: My friends tried to persuade me to drink alcohol, even though I had arrived with my car.	Example: I felt annoyed that my friends were pressuring me to drink but at the same time, I also felt that I might disappoint them or they might be less likely to hang out with me again if I didn't drink.	Example: I gave in and had a couple of beers. When we left, I decided to take a taxi home and collect my car the next day.	Example: I would like to be more assertive, making it clear to my friends that I wasn't drinking if I had arrived by car. I could perhaps offer others a ride home at the end of the night. And if I wanted to drink, I would hire a taxi beforehand so that I don't have to drive.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Pratkanis & Shadel, *Weapons of Fraud*, AARP, Seattle, 2005.
- 2 Definition formulated, in 1985, at a Conference on Cults and Society arranged by the American Family Foundation, chaired by Professor Louis Jolyon West, M.D., cited by Singer & Addis, *Cults, Coercion, and Contumely*, published in eds. Kales, Pearce & Greenblatt, *The Mosaic of Contemporary Psychiatry in Perspective*, Springer-Verlag, NY, 1992. Also cited in West & Martin. See Singer & Lalich, *Cults in Our Midst*, for a thorough definition of “cult” attributes.
- 3 Margaret Singer and Janja Lalich, *Cults in Our Midst: The Hidden Menace in Our Everyday Lives*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1995, p.17.