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Negotiation Theory and Application – Critical Book Review

of

“Influence: Science and Practice” by Robert B. Cialdini

by

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Alfred Whitehead stated, “Civilization advances by extending the number of operations we can do without thinking about them.” In his book “Influence: Science and Practice,” Robert Cialdini warns us to be wary of how, why and for whom we decide to perform our operations. The amount of information being produced and made available and the pace of modern life are rapidly accelerating. Because of the amount of data that must be sorted, Cialdini shows how we often use mental shortcuts to aid us in making our decisions. While these shortcuts Cialdini calls *judgmental heuristics*, allow us to simplify and speed up our thinking and decision making, they can be exploited, leading us to make bad decisions. In “Influence”, Cialdini proposes that some people, whom he calls “compliance professionals,” try to manipulate our decision-making by using six categories of “compliance tactics.” These tactics pervert our shortcuts in order to get us to comply when we normally would not. He closes each chapter by telling the reader how to recognize and combat these tactics.

Cialdini is a professor of psychology at Arizona State University and has been studying the subject of influence and judgmental heuristics for over 20 years. The 5th edition is the current edition of the “Influence” and was published in 2008. “Influence: Science and Practice” is based on Cialdini’s much older work, “Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion,” which was first published in 1984. Much of the scholarly research referenced in the book dates from the 1960’s through the 1980’s, with only 16 references dated between 2006 and 2008. Consequently, many of the references and examples in the current edition seem somewhat dated (e.g. Tupperware parties). However, that did not generally detract from the validity of the cited research or how the author used it to support his thesis, that the accelerated pace of life and information make our susceptibility to the six influence tactics – reciprocation, consistency,

social proof, liking, authority and scarcity – more likely in the future. Each of these six tactics is also related to several of the concepts used in understanding the nature of negotiations.

Cialdini opens the book by giving background on how animals use fixed action patterns and trigger features to determine their behavior and then he immediately shows how humans can also be slaves to automatic reactions by relating the details of a compliance experiment. He then quickly transitions to the next chapter and begins the bulk of the work detailing the six “weapons of compliance,” beginning with reciprocation. The basic concept of reciprocation is simple – when someone does a favor for you, you want to do a favor for them in return. As Cialdini explains it, this is due to deeply seated psychological and cultural factors that make us uncomfortable with not repaying a favor. He goes on to say that the favor does not even have to be a gift or action. A mere concession, such as being offered a lower price item after rejecting a higher priced item, is enough to trigger a decision to comply (or buy). The implication for negotiations is that a small concession given by one side can naturally trigger compliance or concession on an issue of equal or even greater value by the other side. Additionally, negotiators are more likely to comply with a lesser demand or position after a larger or even extreme demand has been made and then given up (as is often seen in labor negotiations). Cialdini believes this rule is overpowering and, as with most of the tactics he outlines, believes awareness is the key to combatting it. So, while give and take is often seen as the nature of distributive bargaining, negotiators using a Cooperative strategy should also be alert for this tactic, lest they feel trapped by their urge to reciprocate and the once cooperative strategy takes a wrong turn. In the end, the savvy negotiator will realize that the “gift” was not a gift but a tactic and then he or she can feel unencumbered by the psychological push to return the favor and rationally decide whether to reciprocate or not.

Negotiators must also be aware of the consistency rule, which can be a double edged sword during negotiations. Although acting consistently normally is valued in negotiations because it builds trust between the parties, it can also be used to trigger an unwanted compliance decision. The basic premise of the consistency rule is that people make decisions based on their prior actions and decisions. Cialdini states this is due to a person's psychological need to have their words and actions match and to continue to act consistently with previous actions. The danger to the negotiator is that seemingly trivial commitments can add up to a "momentum of compliance" and sometimes even a shift in self-concept that can lead to their compliance on much larger or even unrelated issues. Cialdini's examples of how the Chinese used these tactics against U.S. POWs during the Korean War were sobering. The key once again is recognition and a critical thought process that looks at the reason for the initial small request and the greater order consequences of the initial compliance. This peek into the future will help the negotiator decide whether or not that first small step or "foot in the door" is worth the consequences.

The third compliance tactic Cialdini mentions which the negotiator also should consider is social proof. The rule of social proof is that in uncertain or ambiguous environments, people will look to the actions of others, especially similar others, to get their cues for action. This rule has the most applicability in the context of the Trust-Information-Power-Options (TIPO) model. When trust is low between parties, they look for information in order to strengthen or expand their options. In this environment, the party seeking compliance may offer social proof such as statistical data or similar previous agreements or negotiations. To defend against an automatic compliance response, negotiators must ensure that any data or other "proof" presented is both accurate and relevant in order to avoid being duped by erroneous social proof.

The next tactic the author discusses is simply called “liking.” The concept is very simple. People tend to agree with (and by extension comply with) others that they like. Cialdini shows this liking can happen for several reasons, each of which can have an impact on negotiations. Physical attractiveness, while sometimes distracting in the opposite sex, is not typically seen as an influence on negotiations under the various models. However, research shows that regardless of sex, attractiveness can create a halo effect which can subconsciously affect the negotiations by conferring perceived power or expertise that may not actually exist. We also have a tendency to like people that are similar to us. Negotiators should be aware that if the person across the table looks, dresses and sounds like them, has a similar background or even name, it may not be by accident. Likewise, a compliment as simple as “I like you” has the ability to exert influence on someone’s compliance tendency because we like people that like us. Additionally, if you had a previous successful outcome or shared a positive event with an opposing negotiator, don’t be surprised to see them again. They may be capitalizing on the tactic of conditioning and association which states that we like people who we associate with good or positive feelings. We also tend to like similar others more if we have frequent casual contact with them and even more if we have cooperated with them on some common goal. Negotiators must be aware of the liking tactic because it is an attempt to increase the relative power of one of the parties where no actual power exists. The critical defensive question to ask is, why do I like this person and how is that affecting my decision to comply?

Respect for authority is necessary for the proper function of normal, modern society. Without authority, society could quickly break down into anarchy. However, Cialdini warns the reader to be cognizant of authority that is not warranted. Symbols matter and with examples and research, Cialdini demonstrates how titles (e.g. judge, Dr.), clothes and uniforms, and even

luxury cars can afford a “compliance professional” authority when it isn’t warranted. These tactics can also be used to convey expertise or authority during negotiations, in an attempt to give one party an advantage in expert, legitimate or referent power over the other. The author states that the best defense is awareness, which can be gained by asking a few simple questions. First, is this person an expert? The sub-questions are, does he have credentials and, if so, are they relevant in this situation? The next question is tougher to explore and answer. How honest can we expect this expert to be? Cialdini suggests that we should consider what the expert stands to gain from our compliance and be alert for arguments against their own position in an effort to show impartiality or trustworthiness.

The final tactic the author discusses is scarcity. The scarcity rule is often used by “compliance practitioners” in the sales world under the guise of the “limited supply” or “one time offer.” By implying scarcity, they try to trigger an automatic compliance reaction (in this case to buy) by using our natural cultural tendency to react against actions that limit our freedom to make choices. The scarcity tactic is also seen in negotiations as the “limited” or “one time” offer. Within the TIPO model this would be an obvious attempt by one party to manipulate information in order to change the other party’s perception of the available options and thus drive an automatic compliance response. Cialdini says one way to defend against this tactic is to realize that rare cookies don’t taste any better. That is, scarcity may make an item more desirable, but it does not make it more useful. In the same way, a time limited offer does not make an agreement better, more durable or executable. In the negotiation situation, the way to defend against the “one time” or “final offer” is preparation. A negotiator’s solid understanding of his or her interests, BATNA and WATNA, and those of the other party, will help keep the

limited offer from looking like a better offer and make compliance in the face of this insist strategy less likely.

The information the author presented on the six “compliance tactics” was informative, useful and complemented many of the concepts and models used in understanding negotiations. The strategies Cialdini described were all designed to achieve compliance, so it follows that under the Negotiation Style Preference conflict management model, they have the most applicability within the Comply and Insist strategies. This makes sense, since these strategies, along with Compromise are the most often used in zero-sum bargaining, which is where compliance tactics are most often seen. Compliance tactics would generally not be consciously used in a true Cooperative Negotiating Strategy. Parties in a CNS negotiation would not need to use these forms of undue influence to gain power and if they did, it would destroy trust and immediately cause a shift by both parties to another strategy. However, because they are so effective, negotiators must still be aware of these compliance tactics to ensure they are not used consciously or unconsciously and the negotiation remains truly cooperative.

The compliance tactics outlined in “Influence” definitely complemented the TIPO model and power concepts of negotiations. Compliance tactics are so effective because the underlying mechanisms are built on trust. A person’s judgmental heuristics are a tried and true method that they have used to save time while making decisions and have worked time and time again. They aren’t just a method, but a *trusted* method. It is when this trust is broken by the manipulation of our compliance instincts that the heuristic fails. As a consequence, even though the mechanism is trusted, it adversely affects the negotiator’s perception of their available information and relative power. They are left with a limited set of options which often results in a less than optimal choice to comply.

The author fell short in a couple of areas. As previously mentioned, older research and slightly tired examples detracted slightly from the book. What was more of a concern was the author's tendency to infer causation instead of correlation. Human decision making is a very complicated process which is influenced by innumerable factors. To imply a simple causal relationship between willingness to complete a survey and cultural imperative to honor a prior agreement, without exploring or at least mentioning other possible factors, stretched the bounds of logic a little. However, in general, Cialdini did an excellent job of providing several diverse examples for each of the six major categories and their subcomponents. Additionally, he used relevant research from several sources to strengthen his arguments, all of which were well documented.

I enjoyed several different aspects of "Influence". I thought the book was written in a logical sequence that flowed well and had chapters whose concepts built upon each other and supported the author's main thesis. The author also discussed how the "compliance tactics" do not operate in a vacuum and can be combined to make the "compliance victim's" urge to comply even stronger. Additionally, the author's use of examples was generally very good. Not only did he use examples from history, research and "current" events, but he also used anecdotes that were sent in by friends, students and others who had read the book. This gave the book a very real and down to earth feel to which I could easily relate. While reading each chapter, I found myself engrossed in the examples and then reflecting on the times in my life where I had encountered, and sometimes been a victim of, someone's knowing or unknowing use of the compliance tactics. He even encouraged readers to send him their own stories to be used in his research and possibly in a future edition. Finally, the instructive tone of the book was very useful. "Influence: Science and Practice" is substantially the same as "Influence: the Psychology

of Persuasion.” The major difference is that the former was written as a textbook. As such, each chapter ended with a comprehensive summary followed by review questions and questions designed to spur critical thinking. I found these very useful and enlightening and added to the educational quality of the book. All these factors combined to give the book an almost interactive timbre.

Cialdini’s proposition that information and the pace of life are rapidly accelerating is even truer today than it was when he wrote his first edition almost 30 years ago. The speed of life and the information which inundates even the average person can considerably hamper decision-making unless people continue to use the mental shortcuts that have worked so well for so long. Unfortunately, the use of these heuristics opens decision makers up to the attempts of others to manipulate their processes. Cialdini opens up our eyes to the influence tricks of the compliance professional and tells us how to defend against them so we can continue to make good decisions and keep our heuristic shortcuts intact for future use. These lessons in awareness and defense are not only for the person interested in buying a used car who wants to avoid being swindled. They apply in the world of negotiations too, where one party may try to manipulate another into complying with a request or agreement by limiting the opposing side’s options using compliance tactics. Awareness is the key to defense and this book is an excellent first step. “Influence: Science and Practice” is a well written, informative book with an almost interactive quality that will certainly benefit the negotiator and the average person in defending themselves against unwarranted influence.