Context, Contingencies, and Self-Persuasion

The theme of my first *ISHN* articles this year has been self-persuasion. I define self-persuasion as an internal dialogue or mental script that supports our ongoing behavior and motivates continued participation in the absence of external contingencies. Such behavior is self-directed (as opposed to other-directed) and self-motivated.

All safety-related behavior starts as other-directed, meaning the safe way of doing something is told or showed through instructional manuals or training sessions. We continue to practice the more inconvenient but safe way of doing something because someone is holding us accountable (behavior is still other-directed), or because we are holding ourselves accountable (the behavior has transitioned to self-directed).

Obviously, when it comes to injury prevention, self-directed behavior is more desirable than other-directed behavior, because in this state individuals choose the safe way when they perform alone. Consequently, it's important to define situations and contingencies that promote self-persuasion and a transition from other-directed to self-directed behavior.

This article discusses the role of incentives and disincentives in facilitating or inhibiting self-persuasion and self-directed behavior. The research-based conclusions suggest that some standard ways of promoting safe work practices leave much to be desired. They hinder self-persuasion and self-directed behavior.

The Reverse-Incentive Effect

Consider that someone offers you a large sum of money – an incentive – to do something for safety. While the likelihood you'll perform the desired activity will increase, the incentive is apt to stifle self-persuasion and a self-directed state. You will be less likely to persuade yourself that the behavior is a reflection of your personal values than if you did the safety-related behavior for little or no external incentive.

The scenario outlined above has been evaluated in numerous experiments, and the results demonstrated the superior influence of small over large incentives. The classic study in this domain was conducted by Leon Festinger and Merrill Carlsmith in 1959. They paid college students $20 or $1 to tell another student a boring task they just performed was actually fun. Afterwards, they were asked to offer their personal opinion of the task.

Which group was more likely to develop a self-perception consistent with their verbal behavior? In other words, which incentive condition influenced more self-persuasion that the task was not as boring as it seemed? Yes, the lower incentive contingency facilitated more self-persuasion, presumably because these subjects had less external motive to call a dull task fun. As a result, they provided themselves internal motivation or justification for their verbal behavior. With only minimal incentive to tell a lie, they convinced themselves the task was really not that boring. In contrast, the $20 group had an excuse for lying and thus did not need to change their perception of the task.

The same kind of self-persuasion occurs when we put a lot of effort into a special assignment without extra compensation. Without external reinforcement for our behavior, we move inside our heads for justification. We persuade ourselves the effort

is especially worthwhile, and deserves our "blood, sweat, and tears." Analogously, the more we need to go through to join a group (as in the infamous fraternity "Hell Week"), the more self-persuasion will occur to convince ourselves it was worth it. Research in 1959 by Eliot Aronson and Judson Mills supported this conclusion by finding that students who went through a severe initiation to become a member of a special discussion group rated the group's silly and boring discussion as significantly more interesting than did students who gained admission to the same group with only a mild initiation.

Severe vs. Mild Disincentives

Now let's consider the use of a disincentive or threat to motivate behavior. Should the threat be severe or mild? You know the answer to this question. If you want self-persuasion to occur consistent with the desired behavior, you should use the smallest disincentive needed to initiate the behavior you want. Then through self-persuasion, the behavior has a chance of continuing when the intervention is no longer available.

The superiority of a small over a large disincentive to prevent undesirable behavior has been demonstrated in a series of experiments referred to as "the forbidden toy studies." Children are asked not to play with an attractive toy and then are given either a mild or severe threat of punishment for disobeying.

In the Mild Threat condition the experimenter says something like, "It is wrong to play with that toy." An additional statement is added in the Severe Threat condition, like "If you play with that toy, I shall be very angry and will have to do something about it." Then, the experimenter leaves the room and steps behind a one-way mirror to record

whether the subject plays with the forbidden toy or with a number of other less attractive toys that are available.

Regardless of the disincentive condition, very few children played with the forbidden toy. That's a critical point. The mild threat was sufficient to prevent the undesirable behavior. Then, the experimenter tests which condition produced the most self-persuasion by assessing the children's preference for the toys or providing them an opportunity to play with the forbidden toy later without the disincentive.

In a study published by Jonathan Freedman in 1965, for example, another experimenter returned to the school where 44 boys had participated in a Mild or Severe Threat condition six weeks earlier. The experimenter took the boys out of class individually, and with no reference to the prior study, instructed each boy to take a drawing test. While the scoring the test, the experimenter told the boy he could play with any toy in the room. The same five toys from the previous study were available, including the forbidden toy.

Of the boys from the Severe Threat condition, 17 (77%) played with the forbidden toy, compared to only 7 (33%) from the Mild Threat condition. Presumably, more children given the mild disincentive adopted a self-perception consistent with their avoidance behavior during the earlier session. Through self-persuasion, they developed a personal rationale for avoiding the previously forbidden toy in the absence of an external punishment contingency.

In an instructive follow-up experiment in 1971, Marc Lepper tempted young boys (with an attractive prize) to falsify their scores on a test he gave them. Three weeks earlier in another setting, these same subjects had resisted playing with the forbidden

toy following a mild or severe threat. Those boys who had earlier received the mild threat were significantly less likely to cheat than those who had received the severe threat. Apparently, the boys who earlier complied with only a mild threat were more likely to develop the self-perception that "I'm a good boy who resists temptation," and this internal dialogue or self-persuasion influenced resistance to temptation to cheat three weeks later.

In Conclusion

This article followed up my discussion last month about self-persuasion and its role in sustaining participation in safety-related efforts. I defined certain kinds of interventions that are more likely to facilitate self-persuasion, by describing a few experimental situations. Obviously, this is only a sample of the variations in intervention context that could affect degree of self-persuasion.

To decide how a particular situation might influence your own or another person's self-persuasion, try this. Imagine you're watching the individual (either yourself or another person) performing a particular behavior under a given set of circumstances or accountability system. Then ask this question. Are there sufficient external consequences to justify the amount of effort demonstrated? If yes, then the performer does not have to develop an internal justification for the behavior. If your answer is no, then you could assume some internal dialogue or self-persuasion has occurred or is occurring.

Bottom line: It's necessary to promote self-persuasion and self-directed behavior whenever resources are insufficient to keep sufficient incentives or disincentives in place to sustain desired effortful behavior over the long term. This means, the ABC

contingency (activator-behavior-consequence) of behavior analysis must be strong enough to get the behavior started but not powerful enough to provide complete justification for the effort. This allows for self-persuasion and maintenance of participation when an external accountability system is not available.

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