

The Art of Self-Persuasion

My first *ISHN* article of 2001 (last month) reviewed a basic principle of behavior-based safety. Namely, that our behavior influences our thinking and defines our self-perception – our mental script regarding who we think we are. In other words, we act ourselves into having certain opinions about ourselves. And this opinion or self-label affects the quantity and quality of subsequent behavior.

However, my January article on behavior and self-perception also introduced a caveat. The context in which our behavior is performed determines whether it influences our self-perception. Sometimes we separate our overt behavior from our covert thoughts, and don't allow one to influence the other. At other times, we see an obvious connection between our behavior and our inner self. Our behavior reflects our values, and vice versa.

Understanding the conditions or contingencies that make or break a perceived connection between behavior and self-perception is critical to sustaining involvement in a safety improvement effort. When interventions to improve safety-related performance facilitate a connection between behavior and self-perception, the desired activity has a chance of continuing after the intervention is removed. These are interventions that persuade people to change their own behavior. This article examines intervention conditions with regard to their ability to facilitate self-persuasion and thereby sustain participation over the long term.

Direct Persuasion

Advertisers use direct persuasion. They show us people enjoying positive consequences or avoiding negative consequences by using their product. As such,

they apply the ABC contingency of behavior analysis to sell their product. The activator (or “A” of the ABC contingency) announces the availability of a reinforcing consequence (the “C” of the ABC contingency) if the particular purchasing behavior is performed (the “B” of the ABC contingency).

Advertisers also apply research-based principles from social psychology to make their messages more persuasive. Specifically social scientists have demonstrated prominent advantages in using highly credible communicators and in arousing an audience’s emotions. Therefore, sales pitches are typically given by authority figures and often attempt to get viewers emotionally involved with product-related issues.

Note, however, these attempts at direct persuasion are not asking for behavior that is very inconvenient or effortful. Usually, the purpose of an advertisement is to persuade a consumer to select a certain brand. This boils down to merely choosing one product over another at the retail store. While shopping the consumer only needs to move a hand a few inches from one product to another. This is hardly a major change in lifestyle.

Safety-related behavior is usually more inconvenient and effortful than switching product brands at a supermarket. It often requires significant adjustment in a highly practiced and regular routine at work, at home, or on the road. Thus, adopting a safe way of doing something might first require the elimination of an efficient and convenient at-risk habit. And participation in a safety-promotion effort usually requires the regular performance of several inconvenient safety-related behaviors.

Bottom line: Long-term participation in a safety-related work process is far more inconvenient and lifestyle changing than the consumer behavior targeted by advertisers.

Therefore, direct persuasion is often not the best approach to increase safety-related behavior or participation in a safety process.

Self-Persuasion

Direct attempts to persuade people to make inconvenient changes in their lifestyle have often yielded disappointing results. For example, communication strategies have generally been unsuccessful when designed to persuade smokers to quit smoking, vehicle drivers to stop speeding, bigoted individuals to cease their prejudicial behavior, homeowners to conserve water or insulate their hot-water heaters, or sexually active people to use condoms. I can quote rigorous research to support each of these failures of direct persuasion. But you probably don't need research results to convince you that direct persuasion has less than desirable impact when it comes to sustaining participation in a safety-improvement effort. Your own experience has likely been your best teacher of this principle.

The problem with direct persuasion is that it's direct. It comes across as someone else's idea. And it could give the impression that the behavior is actually for someone other than the performer. This causes a disconnect between the behavior and self-perception. There is no self-persuasion.

Self-persuasion is more likely to occur when the motivational strategy is less obvious. Have you ever received flattery or a favor from someone and thought, "that person is only trying to impress me." In this case, your self-perception will not change because you're suspicious of the other person's intentions. You might think "She doesn't really mean that, she's only trying to win my support or goodwill."

Behavioral research has shown, for example, that compliments regarding a person's performance are more powerful when indirect than direct. Your personal experience probably verifies this. Consider that you overhear a person tell someone else about your superb achievement on a particular assignment. Or, suppose a friend gives you secondhand recognition by sharing what another person said about your special talents. Both of these situations reflect indirect commendation, and would likely have more influence on your self-perception than a direct interpersonal statement of praise. Why, because the direct approach is tainted by the possibility the flattery is given for an ulterior motive.

The Reverse-Incentive Effect

Now 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 obscure the connection between behavior and self-perception. 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 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 facilitated more self-persuasion, presumably because these subjects had less external motive to call a dull task fun. As a result, they provided internal motivation or justification for their 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 about the task 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 by Eliot Aronson and Judson Mills support this conclusion in 1959 by finding that students who went through a severe initiation to become a member of a special discussion group rated the group’s sill 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 said something like, “It is wrong to play with that toy.” An additional statement was 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 left the room and stepped behind a one-way mirror to record whether the subject played with the forbidden toy or with a number of other less attractive toys which were 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 tested which condition produced the most self-persuasion by assessing the children’s -----of 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 22 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 experimenter scored the test, she 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, Lepper (1971) 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 introduced the process of self-persuasion and its role in sustaining long-term behavior change. Situations most likely to facilitate self-persuasion are those which limit the salience of direct outside control. Bottom line: the more obvious the external control or accountability the greater the disconnect between behavior and self-

perception and the less self-persuasion and sustained participation when the intervention is removed.

To define the kinds of interventions that are more likely to facilitate self-persuasion, I described 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.

Consequently, whenever resources are insufficient to keep sufficient incentives or disincentives in place to sustain desired effortful behavior over the long term, then it's necessary to promote self-persuasion. Which means, the ABC contingency 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.

Defining intervention conditions that can make this happen is not easy, but start by asking yourself whether the situation promotes individual choice, ownership, and personal accountability. Does the context in which safety participation is needed contribute to connecting or disconnecting the link between what people do and what

they think of themselves? Are the safety activities only activities or do they stimulate supportive cognitive activity or self-persuasion? I hope this article helps you begin the challenge of answering these critical questions for the varied and diverse circumstances and contingencies in your work culture.

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