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# INFLUENCE

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*Science and Practice*

THIRD EDITION

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Compositor: BookMasters, Inc.  
Printer and Binder: R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company  
Cover Printer: The Lehigh Press, Inc.

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*Influence: Science and Practice*, Third Edition

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## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cialdini, Robert B.

*Influence : science and practice* / Robert B. Cialdini.—3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-673-46751-1

1. Influence (Psychology) 2. Persuasion (Psychology)

3. Compliance. I. Title.

BF774.C53 1993

153.8'52—dc20

92-26230

CIP

 HarperCollins College Publishers

97 98 99 00 01 14 13 12 11

the contrast principle, placing the smallest donation figure between two larger figures is an effective tactic to prompt more and larger donations.

3. What points do the following quotes make about the dangers of *click-whirr* responding?

"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."

Albert Einstein

"The greatest lesson in life is to know that even fools are sometimes right." Winston Churchill.

# 2

## Reciprocation

*The Old Give and Take . . .  
and Take*



*"Pay every debt, as if God wrote the bill."*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

A few years ago, a university professor tried a little experiment. He sent Christmas cards to a sample of perfect strangers. Although he expected some reaction, the response he received was amazing—holiday cards addressed to him came pouring back from people who had never met nor heard of him. The great majority of those who returned cards never inquired into the identity of the unknown professor. They received his holiday greeting card, *click*, and *whirr*, they automatically sent cards in return (Kunz & Woolcott, 1976).

While small in scope, this study shows the action of one of the most potent of the weapons of influence around us—the rule of reciprocation. The rule says that we should try to repay, in kind, what another person has provided us. If a

woman does us a favor, we should do her one in return; if a man sends us a birthday present, we should remember his birthday with a gift of our own; if a couple invites us to a party, we should be sure to invite them to one of ours. By virtue of the reciprocity rule, then, we are *obligated* to the future repayment of favors, gifts, invitations, and the like. So typical is it for indebtedness to accompany the receipt of such things that a phrase like "much obliged" has become a synonym for "thank you," not only in the English language but in others as well.

The impressive aspect of reciprocity with its accompanying sense of obligation is its pervasiveness in human culture. It is so widespread that, after intensive study, Alvin Gouldner (1960), along with other sociologists, report that all human societies subscribe to the rule.<sup>1</sup> Within each society it seems pervasive also; it permeates exchanges of every kind. Indeed, it may well be that a developed system of indebtedness flowing from the rule of reciprocity is a unique property of human culture. The noted archaeologist Richard Leakey ascribes the essence of what makes us human to the reciprocity system. He claims that we are human because our ancestors learned to share food and skills "in an honored network of obligation" (Leakey & Lewin, 1978). Cultural anthropologists Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox (1971) view this "web of indebtedness" as a unique adaptive mechanism of human beings, allowing for the division of labor, the exchange of diverse forms of goods and different services, and the creation of interdependencies that bind individuals together into highly efficient units.

It is a sense of future obligation that is critical to produce social advances of the sort described by Tiger and Fox. A widely shared and strongly held feeling of future obligation made an enormous difference in human social evolution because it meant that one person could give something (for example, food, energy, care) to another with confidence that the gift was not being lost. For the first time in evolutionary history, one individual could give away any of a variety of resources without actually giving them away. The result was the lowering of the natural inhibitions against transactions that must be *begun* by one person's providing personal resources to another. Sophisticated and coordinated systems of aid, gift giving, defense, and trade became possible, bringing immense benefits to the societies that possessed them. With such clearly adaptive consequences for the culture, it is not surprising that the rule for reciprocity is so deeply implanted in us by the process of socialization we all undergo.

<sup>1</sup>Certain societies have formalized the rule into ritual. Consider for example the Vartan Bhanji, an institutionalized custom of gift exchange common to parts of Pakistan and India. In commenting upon the Vartan Bhanji, Gouldner (1960) remarks:

*It is . . . notable that the system painstakingly prevents the total elimination of outstanding obligations. Thus, on the occasion of a marriage, departing guests are given gifts of sweets. In weighing them out, the hostess may say, "These five are yours," meaning "These are a repayment for what you formerly gave me," and then she adds an extra measure, saying, "These are mine." On the next occasion, she will receive these back along with an additional measure which she later returns, and so on.*

I know of no better illustration of the way reciprocal obligations can reach long and powerfully into the future than the perplexing story of \$5,000 of relief aid that was exchanged between Mexico and Ethiopia. In 1985, Ethiopia could justly lay claim to the greatest suffering and privation in the world. Its economy was in ruin. Its food supply had been ravaged by years of drought and internal war. Its inhabitants were dying by the thousands from disease and starvation. Under these circumstances, I would not have been surprised to learn of a \$5,000 relief donation from Mexico to that wrenchingly needy country. I remember my feeling of amazement, though, when a brief newspaper item I was reading insisted that the aid had gone in the opposite direction. Native officials of the Ethiopian Red Cross had decided to send the money to help the victims of that year's earthquakes in Mexico City.

It is both a personal bane and a professional blessing that whenever I am confused by some aspect of human behavior, I feel driven to investigate further. In this instance, I was able to track down a fuller account of the story. Fortunately, a journalist who had been as bewildered as I by the Ethiopians' actions had asked for an explanation. The answer he received offered eloquent validation of the reciprocity rule: Despite the enormous needs prevailing in Ethiopia, the money was being sent to Mexico because, in 1935, Mexico had sent aid to Ethiopia when it was invaded by Italy ("Ethiopian Red Cross," 1985). So informed, I remained awed, but I was no longer puzzled. The need to reciprocate had transcended great cultural differences, long distances, acute famine, many years, and immediate self-interest. Quite simply, a half-century later, against all countervailing forces, obligation triumphed.

## HOW THE RULE WORKS

Make no mistake, human societies derive a truly significant competitive advantage from the reciprocity rule and, consequently, they make sure their members are trained to comply with and believe in it. Each of us has been taught to live up to the rule, and each of us knows the social sanctions and derision applied to anyone who violates it. Because there is a general distaste for those who take and make no effort to give in return, we will often go to great lengths to avoid being considered a moocher, ingrate, or welsher. It is to those lengths that we will often be taken and, in the process, be "taken" by individuals who stand to gain from our indebtedness.

To understand how the rule of reciprocity can be exploited by one who recognizes it as the weapon of influence it certainly is, we might closely examine an experiment conducted by psychologist Dennis Regan (1971). A subject who participated in the study rated, along with another subject, the quality of some paintings as part of an experiment on "art appreciation." The other rater—we can call him Joe—was only posing as a fellow subject and was actually Dr. Regan's assistant. For our purposes, the experiment took place under two different conditions. In some cases, Joe did a small, unsolicited favor for the true subject. During a short rest period, Joe left the room for a couple of

minutes and returned with two bottles of Coca-Cola, one for the subject and one for himself, saying "I asked him [the experimenter] if I could get myself a Coke, and he said it was OK, so I bought one for you, too." In other cases, Joe did not provide the subject with a favor; he simply returned from the two-minute break empty-handed. In all other respects, however, Joe behaved identically.

Later on, after the paintings had all been rated and the experimenter had momentarily left the room, Joe asked the subject to do *him* a favor. He indicated that he was selling raffle tickets for a new car and that if he sold the most tickets, he would win a \$50 prize. Joe's request was for the subject to buy some raffle tickets at 25 cents apiece: "Any would help, the more the better." The major finding of the study concerns the number of tickets subjects purchased from Joe under the two conditions. Without question, Joe was more successful in selling his raffle tickets to the subjects who had received his earlier favor. Apparently feeling that they owed him something, these subjects bought twice as many tickets as the subjects who had not been given the prior favor. Although the Regan study represents a fairly simple demonstration of the workings of the rule of reciprocation, it illustrates several important characteristics of the rule that, upon further consideration, help us to understand how it may be profitably used.

### The Rule Is Overpowering

One of the reasons reciprocation can be used so effectively as a device for gaining another's compliance is its power. The rule possesses awesome strength, often producing a yes response to a request that, except for an existing feeling of indebtedness, would have surely been refused. Some evidence of how the rule's force can overpower the influence of other factors that normally determine compliance with a request can be seen in a second result of the Regan study. Besides his interest in the impact of the reciprocity rule on compliance, Regan was also investigating how liking for a person affects the tendency to comply with that person's request. To measure how liking toward Joe affected the subjects' decisions to buy his raffle tickets, Regan had them fill out several rating scales indicating how much they had liked Joe. He then compared their liking responses with the number of tickets they had purchased from Joe. There was a significant tendency for subjects to buy more raffle tickets from Joe the more they liked him. This alone is hardly a startling finding, since most of us would have guessed that people are more willing to do a favor for someone they like.

The interesting finding of the Regan experiment, however, was that the relationship between liking and compliance was completely wiped out in the condition under which subjects had been given a Coke by Joe. For those who owed him a favor, it made no difference whether they liked him or not; they felt a sense of obligation to repay him, and they did. The subjects who indicated that they disliked Joe bought just as many of his tickets as did those who indicated

that they liked him. The rule for reciprocity was so strong that it simply overwhelmed the influence of a factor—liking for the requester—that normally affects the decision to comply.

Think of the implications. People we might ordinarily dislike—unsavory or unwelcome sales operators, disagreeable acquaintances, representatives of strange or unpopular organizations—can greatly increase the chance that we will do what they wish merely by providing us with a small favor prior to their requests. Let's take an example that, by now, many of us have encountered. The Hare Krishna Society is an Eastern religious sect with centuries-old roots traceable to the Indian city of Calcutta. Its spectacular modern-day story occurred in the 1970s when it experienced a remarkable growth, not only in followers, but also in wealth and property. The economic growth was funded through a variety of activities, the principal and still most visible of which is society members' requests for donations from passersby in public places. During the early history of the group in this country, the solicitation for contributions was attempted in a fashion memorable for anyone who saw it. Groups of Krishna devotees—often with shaved heads, and wearing ill-fitting robes, leg wrappings, beads, and bells—would canvass a city street, chanting and bobbing in unison while begging for funds.

Although highly effective as an attention-getting technique, this practice did not work especially well for fund raising. The average American considered the Krishnas weird, to say the least, and was reluctant to provide money to support them. It quickly became clear to the society that it had a considerable public-relations problem. The people being asked for contributions did not like the way the members looked, dressed, or acted. Had the society been an ordinary commercial organization, the solution would have been simple—change the things the public does not like. The Krishnas are a religious organization, however, and the way members look, dress, and act is partially tied to religious factors. Since religious factors are typically resistant to change because of worldly considerations, the Krishna leadership was faced with a real dilemma. On the one hand were beliefs, modes of dress, and hairstyles that had religious significance. On the other and, threatening the organization's financial welfare, were the less-than-positive feelings of the American public toward these things. What's a sect to do?

The Krishnas' resolution was brilliant. They switched to a fund-raising tactic that made it unnecessary for their targets to have positive feelings toward the fund-raisers. They began to employ a donation-request procedure that engaged the rule for reciprocation, which, as demonstrated by the Regan study, was strong enough to overcome dislike for the requester. The new strategy still involved the solicitation of contributions in public places with much pedestrian traffic (airports are a favorite), but, before a donation was requested, the target person was given a "gift"—a book (usually the *Bhagavad Gita*), the *Back to Godhead* magazine of the society, or, in the most cost-effective version, a flower. The unsuspecting passersby who suddenly found flowers pressed into their hands or pinned to their jackets were under no circumstances allowed to give them back, even if they asserted that they did not want them. "No, it is our



KRISHN KRISHNA

Figure 2.1 Taking disguise to its limits but still employing the reciprocity rule as an ally, these Krishna members were arrested for soliciting without a license when they pressed candy canes on Christmas shoppers and then made requests for donations.

gift to you," said the solicitor, refusing to take it back. Only after the Krishna member had thus brought the force of the reciprocity rule to bear on the situation was the target asked to provide a contribution to the society. This benefactor-before-beggar strategy has been wildly successful for the Hare Krishna Society, producing large-scale economic gains and funding, the ownership of temples, businesses, houses, and property in 321 centers in the United States and abroad.

As an aside, it is instructive that the reciprocity rule has begun to outlive its usefulness for the Krishnas, not because the rule itself is any less potent societally, but because we have found ways to prevent the Krishnas from using it on us. After once falling victim to their tactic, many travelers are now alert to

the presence of robed Krishna Society solicitors in airports and train stations, adjusting their paths to avoid an encounter and preparing beforehand to ward off a solicitor's "gift." Although the society has tried to counter this increased vigilance by instructing members to be dressed and groomed in modern styles to avoid immediate recognition when soliciting (some actually carry flight bags or suitcases), even disguise has not worked especially well for the Krishnas. Too many individuals now know better than to accept unrequested offerings in public places such as airports.

As a result, the Krishnas have experienced a severe financial reversal over the past 10 years. In North America alone, nearly 30 percent of their temples have been closed for economic reasons, and the number of devotees staffing the remaining temples has plummeted from a high of 5,000 to an estimated 800. The Krishnas are a resilient group, though. Officials admit that the organization is struggling to maintain its long-standing presence in North America, but they report that it is thriving in the newly opened "markets" of Eastern Europe—where, apparently, people haven't yet caught on to the Krishnas' strategic benevolence.

It is a testament to the societal value of reciprocity that even those of us who know what the Krishnas are up to have chosen to avoid them or to deflect their flowers rather than to withstand the force of their gift giving directly by taking the flower and walking away with it. The reciprocity rule that empowers their tactic is too strong—and socially beneficial—for us to want to challenge head-on.

**Politics** Politics is another arena in which the power of the reciprocity rule shows itself. Reciprocity tactics appear at every level:

- At the top, elected officials engage in "logrolling" and the exchange of favors that makes politics the place of strange bedfellows, indeed. The out-of-character vote of one of our elected representatives on a bill or measure can often be understood as a favor returned to the bill's sponsor. Political analysts were amazed at Lyndon Johnson's success in getting so many of his programs through Congress during his early administration. Even congress-members who were thought to be strongly opposed to the proposals were voting for them. Close examination by political scientists has found the cause to be not so much Johnson's political savvy as the large score of favors he had been able to provide to other legislators during his many years of power in the House and Senate. As President, he was able to produce a truly remarkable amount of legislation in a short time by calling in those favors. It is interesting that this same process may account for the problems Jimmy Carter had in getting his programs through Congress during his early administration, despite heavy Democratic majorities in both the House and Senate. Carter came to the presidency from outside the Capitol Hill establishment. He campaigned on his outside-Washington identity, saying that he was indebted to no

one. Much of his legislative difficulty upon arriving may be traced to the fact that no one there was indebted to *him*.

- At another level, we can see the recognized strength of the reciprocity rule in the desire of corporations and individuals to provide judicial and legislative officials with gifts and favors and in the series of legal restrictions against such gifts and favors. Even with legitimate political contributions, the stockpiling of obligations often underlies the stated purpose of supporting a favorite candidate. One look at the lists of companies and organizations that contribute to the campaigns of *both* major candidates in important elections gives evidence of such motives. A skeptic, requiring direct evidence of the *quid pro quo* expected by political contributors, might look to the remarkably bald-faced admission by Charles H. Keating, Jr., who was later convicted on multiple counts of fraud in this country's Savings & Loan disaster. Addressing the question of whether a connection existed between the \$1.3 million he had contributed to the campaigns of five U.S. senators and their subsequent actions on his behalf against federal regulators, he asserted, "I want to say in the most forceful way I can: I certainly hope so."
- At the grass-roots level, local political organizations have learned that a principal way to keep their candidates in office is to make sure they provide a wide range of little favors to the voters. The "ward heelers" of many cities still operate effectively in this fashion. But ordinary citizens are not alone in trading political support for small personal favors. During the 1992 presidential primary campaign, actress Sally Kellerman was asked why she was lending her name and efforts to the candidacy of Democratic hopeful, Jerry Brown. Her reply: "Twenty years ago, I asked ten friends to help me move. He was the only one who showed up."

**The Not-So-Free Sample** Of course, the power of reciprocity can be found in the merchandising field as well. Although the number of examples is large, let's examine a pair of familiar ones. As a marketing technique, the free sample has a long and effective history. In most instances, a small amount of the relevant product is given to potential customers to see if they like it. Certainly this is a legitimate desire of the manufacturer—to expose the public to the qualities of the product. The beauty of the free sample, however, is that it is also a gift and, as such, can engage the reciprocity rule. In true jujitsu fashion, a promoter who provides free samples can release the natural indebteding force inherent in a gift, while innocently appearing to have only the intention to inform.

A favorite place for free samples is the supermarket, where customers are frequently given small amounts of a certain product to try. Many people find it difficult to accept samples from the always smiling attendant, return only the toothpicks or cups, and walk away. Instead, they buy some of the product, even if they might not have liked it very much. A highly effective variation on this marketing procedure is illustrated in the case, cited by Vance Packard in *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), of the Indiana supermarket operator who sold an as-



BUENOS NACHOS

Figure 2.2 Some food manufacturers no longer wait until the customers are in the store to provide them with free samples.

tounding 1,000 pounds of cheese in a few hours one day by putting out the cheese and inviting customers to cut off slivers for themselves as free samples.

A different version of the free-sample tactic is used by the Amway Corporation, a rapid-growth company that manufactures and distributes household and personal-care products in a vast national network of door-to-door neighborhood sales. The company, which has grown from a basement-run operation a few years ago to a \$1.5 billion yearly sales business, makes use of the free sample in a device called the BUG. The BUG consists of a collection of Amway products—bottles of furniture polish, detergent, or shampoo, spray containers of deodorizers, insect killers, or window cleaners—carried to a customer's home in a specially designed tray or just a polyethylene bag. The confidential Amway Career Manual then instructs the salesperson to leave the BUG with

the customer "for 24, 48, or 72 hours, at no cost or obligation to her. Just tell her you would like her to try the products. . . . That's an offer no one can refuse." At the end of the trial period, the Amway representative is to return and pick up orders for the products the customer wishes to purchase. Since few customers use up the entire contents of even one of the product containers in such a short time, the salesperson may then take the remaining product portions in the BUG to the next potential customer down the line or across the street and start the process again. Many Amway representatives have several BUGS circulating in their districts at one time.

Of course, by now you and I know that the customer who has accepted and used the BUG products has been trapped by the reciprocity rule. Many such customers yield to a sense of obligation to order the products that they have tried and partially consumed—and, of course, by now the Amway Corporation knows that to be the case. Even in a company with as excellent a growth record as Amway, the BUG device has created a big stir. Reports by state distributors to the parent company record a remarkable effect:

Unbelievable! We've never seen such excitement. Product is moving at an unbelievable rate, and we've only just begun. . . . Local distributors took the BUGS, and we've had an unbelievable increase in sales [from Illinois distributor]. The most fantastic retail idea we've ever had! . . . On the average, customers purchased about half the total amount of the BUG when it is picked up. . . . In one word, tremendous! We've never seen a response within our entire organization like this [from Massachusetts distributor].

The Amway distributors appear to be bewildered—happily so, but nonetheless bewildered—by the startling power of the BUG. Of course, by now you and I should not be.

The reciprocity rule governs many situations of a purely interpersonal nature where neither money nor commercial exchange is at issue. Perhaps my favorite illustration of the enormous force available from the reciprocation weapon of influence comes from such a situation. The European scientist Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1975) provides the account of a German soldier during World War I whose job was to capture enemy soldiers for interrogation. Because of the nature of the trench warfare at that time, it was extremely difficult for armies to cross the no-man's-land between opposing front lines, but it was not so difficult for a single soldier to crawl across and slip into an enemy trench position. The armies of the Great War had experts who regularly did so to capture enemy soldiers, who would then be brought back for questioning. The German expert had often successfully completed such missions in the past and was sent on another. Once again, he skillfully negotiated the area between fronts and surprised a lone enemy soldier in his trench. The unsuspecting soldier, who had been eating at the time, was easily disarmed. The frightened captive, with only a piece of bread in his hand, then performed what may have been the most important act of his life. He gave his enemy some of the bread. So affected was the German by this gift that he could not complete his mission.

He turned from his benefactor and recrossed the no-man's-land empty-handed to face the wrath of his superiors.

An equally compelling point regarding the power of reciprocity comes from an account of a woman who saved her own life, not by *giving* a gift as did the captured soldier, but by *refusing* a gift and the powerful obligations that went with it. In November 1978 Jim Jones the leader of Jonestown, Guyana, called for the mass suicide of all residents, most of whom compliantly drank and died from a vat of poison-laced Kool-Aid. Diane Louie, a resident, however, rejected Jones's command and made her way out of Jonestown and into the jungle. She attributes her willingness to do so to her earlier refusal to accept special favors from him when she was in need. She turned down his offer of special food while she was ill, because "I knew once he gave me those privileges, he'd have me. I didn't want to owe him nothin'" (Anderson & Zimbardo, 1984).

### The Rule Enforces Uninvited Debts

Earlier we suggested that the power of the reciprocity rule is such that, by first doing us a favor, strange, disliked, or unwelcome others can enhance the chance that we will comply with one of their requests. However, there is another aspect of the rule, in addition to its power, that allows this phenomenon to occur. A person can trigger a feeling of indebtedness by doing us an uninvited favor. Recall that the rule states only that we should provide to others the kind of actions they have provided us; it does not require us to have asked for what we have received in order to feel obligated to repay. For instance, the American Disabled Veterans organization reports that its simple mail appeal for donations produces a response rate of about 18 percent. But when the mailing also includes an unsolicited gift (gummed, individualized address labels), the success rate nearly doubles to 35 percent. This is not to say that we might not feel a stronger sense of obligation to return a favor we have requested, but such a request is not necessary to produce our feeling of indebtedness.

If we reflect for a moment about the social purpose of the reciprocity rule, we can see why this is the case. The rule was established to promote the development of reciprocal relationships between individuals so that one person could *initiate* such a relationship without the fear of loss. If the rule is to serve that purpose, then an uninvited first favor must have the ability to create an obligation. Recall, also, that reciprocal relationships confer an extraordinary advantage upon cultures that foster them and that, consequently, there will be strong pressures to ensure that the rule does serve its purpose. Little wonder, then, that influential French anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1954), in describing the social pressures surrounding the gift-giving process in human culture, says that there is an obligation to give, an obligation to receive, and an obligation to repay.

Although an obligation to repay constitutes the essence of the reciprocity rule, it is the obligation to receive that makes the rule so easy to exploit. An obligation to receive reduces our ability to choose those to whom we wish to be

indebted and puts the power in the hands of others. Let's reexamine a pair of earlier examples to see how the process works. First, in the Regan study, we find that the favor causing subjects to double the number of raffle tickets purchased from Joe was not one they had requested. Joe had voluntarily left the room and returned with one Coke for himself and one for the subject. There was not a single subject who refused the Coke. It is easy to see why it would have been awkward to turn down Joe's favor: Joe had already spent his money; a soft drink was an appropriate favor in the situation, especially since Joe had one himself; it would have been considered impolite to reject Joe's thoughtful action. Nevertheless, receipt of that Coke produced a feeling of indebtedness that became clear when Joe announced his desire to sell some raffle tickets. Notice the important asymmetry here—all the genuinely free choices were Joe's. He chose the form of the initial favor, and he chose the form of the return favor. Of course, one could say that the subject had the choice of refusing both of Joe's offers, but those would have been tough choices. To have said no at either point would have required the subject to go against the natural cultural forces favoring reciprocation.

The extent to which even an unwanted favor, once received, can produce indebtedness is aptly illustrated in the soliciting technique of the Hare Krishna Society. During systematic observation of the Krishnas' soliciting strategy, I have recorded a variety of responses from target persons. One of the most regular was as follows:

An airport visitor—a businessman—is hurriedly walking along through a densely peopled area. The Krishna solicitor steps in front of him and hands him a flower. The man, reacting with surprise, takes it.<sup>2</sup> Almost immediately, he tries to give it back, saying he does not want the flower. The Krishna member responds that it is a gift from the Krishna Society and that it is the man's to keep . . . however, a donation to further the Society's good works would be appreciated. Again the target protests, "I don't want this flower. Here, take it." And again the solicitor refuses, "It's our gift to you, sir." There is visible conflict on the businessman's face. Should he keep the flower and walk away without giving anything in return, or should he yield to the pressure of the deeply ingrained reciprocity rule and provide a contribution? By now, the conflict has spread from his face to his posture. He leans away from his benefactor, seemingly about to break free, only to be drawn back again by the pull of the rule. Once more his body tilts away, but it's no use; he cannot disengage. With a nod of resignation, he fishes in his pocket and comes up with a dollar or two that is graciously accepted. Now he can walk away freely, and he does, "gift" in hand, until he encounters a waste container—where he throws the flower, with force.

<sup>2</sup>Surprise is an effective compliance producer in its own right. People who are surprised by a request will often comply because they are momentarily unsure of themselves and, consequently, influenced easily. For example, social psychologists Stanley Milgram and John Sabini (1975) have shown that people riding on the New York subway were twice as likely to give up their seats to a person who surprised them with the request, "Excuse me. May I have your seat?" than to one who forewarned them first by mentioning to a fellow passenger that he or she was thinking of asking for someone's seat (56 versus 28 percent).

Purely by accident, I happened to witness a scene which demonstrates that the Krishnas know very well how frequently their gifts are unwanted by the people who receive them. While spending a day observing a soliciting Krishna group at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport a few years ago, I noticed that one of the group members would frequently leave the central area and return with more flowers to resupply her companions. As it happened, I had decided to take a break just as she was leaving on one of her supply missions. Having nowhere to go, I followed her. Her journey turned out to be a garbage route. She went from trash can to trash can beyond the immediate area to retrieve all the flowers that had been discarded by Krishna targets. She then returned with the cache of recovered flowers (some that had been recycled who knows how many times) and distributed them to be profitably cycled through the reciprocation process once more. What really impressed me about all this was that most of the discarded flowers had brought donations from the people who had cast them away. The nature of the reciprocity rule is such that a gift so unwanted that it was thrown away at the first opportunity had nonetheless been effective and exploitable.

The ability of uninvited gifts to produce feelings of obligation is recognized by a variety of organizations besides the Krishnas. How many times has each of us received small gifts through the mail—personalized address labels, greeting cards, key rings—from charitable agencies that ask for funds in an accompanying note? I have received five in just the past year, two from disabled veterans' groups and the others from missionary schools and hospitals. In each case, there was a common thread in the accompanying message. The goods that were enclosed were to be considered a gift from the organization; and money I wished to send should not be regarded as payment but rather as a return offering. As the letter from one of the missionary programs stated, the packet of greeting cards I had been sent was not to be directly paid for but was designed "to encourage your [my] kindness." If we look past the obvious tax advantage, we can see why it would be beneficial for the organization to have the cards viewed as a gift instead of merchandise: There is a strong cultural pressure to reciprocate a gift, even an unwanted one; but there is no such pressure to purchase an unwanted commercial product.

## The Rule Can Trigger Unfair Exchanges

There is yet another feature of the reciprocity rule that allows it to be exploited for profit. Paradoxically, although the rule developed to promote equal exchanges between partners, it can be used to bring about decidedly unequal results. The rule demands that one sort of action be reciprocated with a similar sort of action. A favor is to be met with another favor; it is not to be met with neglect and certainly not with attack; however, considerable flexibility is allowed. A small initial favor can produce a sense of obligation to agree to a substantially larger return favor. Since, as we have already seen, the rule allows one person to choose the nature of the indebteding first favor *and* the nature of



the debt-canceling return favor, we could easily be manipulated into an unfair exchange by those who might wish to exploit the rule.

Once again, we turn to the Regan experiment for evidence. Remember in that study, Joe gave one group of subjects a bottle of Coca-Cola as an initiating gift and later asked all subjects to buy some of his raffle tickets at 25 cents apiece. What I have so far neglected to mention is that the study was done in the late 1960s, when the price of a Coke was a dime. On the average, subjects who had been given a 10-cent drink bought two of Joe's raffle tickets, although some bought as many as seven. Even if we look just at the average, though, we can tell that Joe made quite a deal. A 500 percent return on investment is respectable indeed!

In Joe's case, though, even a 500 percent return amounted to only 50 cents. Can the reciprocity rule produce meaningfully large differences in the sizes of the exchanged favors? Under the right circumstances, it certainly can. Take, for instance, the account of a student of mine concerning a day she remembers ruefully.

About one year ago, I couldn't start my car. As I was sitting there, a guy in the parking lot came over and eventually jump-started the car. I said thanks, and he said you're welcome; as he was leaving, I said that if he ever needed a favor to stop by. About a month later, the guy knocked on my door and asked to borrow my car for two hours as his was in the shop. I felt somewhat obligated but uncertain, since the car was pretty new and he looked very young. Later, I found out that he was underage and had no insurance. Anyway, I lent him the car. He totaled it.

How could it happen that an intelligent young woman would agree to turn over her new car to a virtual stranger (and a youngster at that) because he had done her a small favor a month earlier? Or, more generally, why should it be that small first favors often stimulate larger return favors? One important reason concerns the clearly unpleasant character of the feeling of indebtedness. Most of us find it highly disagreeable to be in a state of obligation. It weighs heavily on us and demands to be removed. It is not difficult to trace the source of this feeling. Because reciprocal arrangements are so vital in human social systems, we have been conditioned to feel uncomfortable when beholden. If we were to ignore the need to return another's initial favor, we would stop one reciprocal sequence dead and make it less likely that our benefactor would do such favors in the future. Neither event is in the best interests of society. Consequently, we are trained from childhood to chafe, emotionally, under the saddle of obligation. For this reason alone, then, we may be willing to agree to perform a larger favor than the one we received, merely to relieve ourselves of the psychological burden of debt.

There is another reason as well. A person who violates the reciprocity rule by accepting without attempting to return the good acts of others is disliked by the social group. The exception, of course, occurs when a person is prevented from repayment by reasons of circumstance or ability. For the most part, however, there is a genuine distaste for an individual who fails to conform to the

## off the mark by Mark Parisi



### GUILT-EDGED EXCHANGE

Figure 2.3 Even the stingiest people feel the pull of the reciprocity rule.

dictates of the reciprocity rule.<sup>3</sup> Mocher and welsher are unsavory labels to be scrupulously shunned. So undesirable are they that people will sometimes agree to an unequal exchange in order to dodge them.

In combination, the reality of internal discomfort and the possibility of external shame can produce a heavy psychological cost. When seen in the light of this cost, it is not so puzzling that, in the name of reciprocity, we will often give back more than we have received. Neither is it so odd that we will often avoid asking for a needed favor if we will not be in a position to repay it (De Paulo, Nadler, & Fisher, 1983; Greenberg & Shapiro, 1971; Riley & Eckenrode, 1986). The psychological cost may simply outweigh the material loss.

<sup>3</sup>Interestingly enough, a cross-cultural study has shown that those who break the reciprocity rule in the reverse direction—by giving without allowing the recipient an opportunity to repay—are also disliked for it. This result was found to hold for each of the three nationalities investigated—Americans, Swedes, and Japanese (Gergen, Ellsworth, Maslach, & Seipel, 1975).

The risk of still other kinds of losses may also persuade people to decline certain gifts and benefits. Women frequently comment on the uncomfortable sense of obligation they can feel to return the favors of a man who has given them an expensive present or paid for a costly evening out. Even something as small as the price of a drink can produce a feeling of debt. A student in one of my classes expressed it quite plainly in a paper she wrote: "After learning the hard way, I no longer let a guy I meet in a club buy me a drink because I don't want either of us to feel that I am obligated sexually." Research suggests that there is a basis for her concern. If, instead of paying for them herself, a woman allows a man to buy her drinks, she is immediately judged (by both men and women) as more sexually available to him (George, Gournic, & McAfee, 1988).

The rule for reciprocity applies to most relationships; however, in its purest form reciprocity is unnecessary and undesirable in certain long-term relationships such as families or established friendships. In these "communal" relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979; Mills & Clark, 1982), what is exchanged reciprocally is the willingness to provide what the other needs, when it is needed (Clark, Mills, & Corcoran, 1989). Under this form of reciprocity, it is not necessary to calculate who has given more or less but only whether both parties are living up to the more general rule (Clark, 1984; Clark & Waddell, 1985; Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986). Still, it appears that persistent inequities can lead to dissatisfactions, even in friendships. One study done about elderly widowed women (Rook, 1987) found that those who gave about the same amount of help to their friends as they received were the happiest. Those who either gave more help than they got or got more than they gave were the most lonely and dissatisfied.

## RECIPROCAL CONCESSIONS

There is a second way to employ the reciprocity rule to get someone to comply with a request. It is more subtle than the direct route of providing that person with a favor and then asking for one in return, yet in some ways it is much more effective than the straightforward approach. A personal experience I had a few years ago gave me firsthand evidence of just how well this compliance technique works.

I was walking down the street when I was approached by an 11- or 12-year-old boy. He introduced himself and said he was selling tickets to the annual Boy Scouts Circus to be held on the upcoming Saturday night. He asked if I wished to buy any tickets at \$5 apiece. Since one of the last places I wanted to spend Saturday evening was with the Boy Scouts, I declined. "Well," he said, "if you don't want to buy any tickets, how about buying some of our big chocolate bars? They're only \$1 each." I bought a couple and, right away, realized that something noteworthy had happened. I knew that to be the case because (a) I do not like chocolate bars; (b) I do like dollars; (c) I was standing there with two of his chocolate bars; and (d) he was walking away with two of my dollars.

To try to understand precisely what had happened, I went to my office and called a meeting of my research assistants. In discussing the situation, we began to see how the reciprocity rule was implicated in my compliance with the request to buy the candy bars. The general rule says that a person who acts in a certain way toward us is entitled to a similar return action. We have already seen that one consequence of the rule is an obligation to repay favors we have received. Another consequence of the rule, however, is an obligation to make a concession to someone who has made a concession to us. As my research group thought about it, we realized that was exactly the position the Boy Scout had put me in. His request that I purchase some \$1 chocolate bars had been put in the form of a concession on his part; it was presented as a retreat from his request that I buy some \$5 tickets. If I were to live up to the dictates of the reciprocation rule, there had to be a concession on my part. As we have seen, there was such a concession: I changed from noncompliant to compliant when he moved from a larger to a smaller request, even though I was not really interested in *either* of the things he offered.

It was a classic example of the way a weapon of influence can infuse a compliance request with its power. I had been moved to buy something, not because of any favorable feelings toward the item, but because the purchase request had been presented in a way that drew force from the reciprocity rule. It had not mattered that I do not like chocolate bars; the Boy Scout had made a concession to me, *click*, and *whirr*, I responded with a concession of my own. Of course, the tendency to reciprocate with a concession is not so strong that it will work in all instances on all people; none of the weapons of influence considered in this book is that strong. However, in my exchange with the Boy Scout, the tendency had been sufficiently powerful to leave me in mystified possession of a pair of unwanted and overpriced candy bars.

Why should I feel obliged to reciprocate a concession? The answer rests once again in the benefit of such a tendency to the society. It is in the interest of any human group to have its members working together toward the achievement of common goals. However, in many social interactions the participants begin with requirements and demands that are unacceptable to one another. Thus, the society must arrange to have these initial, incompatible desires set aside for the sake of socially beneficial cooperation. This is accomplished through procedures that promote compromise. Mutual concession is one important such procedure.

The reciprocation rule brings about mutual concession in two ways. The first is obvious; it pressures the recipient of an already-made concession to respond in kind. The second, while not so obvious, is pivotally important. Because of a recipient's obligation to reciprocate, people are freed to make the *initial* concession and, thereby, to begin the beneficial process of exchange. After all, if there were no social obligation to reciprocate a concession, who would want to make the first sacrifice? To do so would be to risk giving up something and getting nothing back. However, with the rule in effect, we can feel safe making the first sacrifice to our partner, who is obligated to offer a return sacrifice.

## REJECTION-THEN-RETREAT

Because the rule for reciprocaton governs the compromise process, it is possible to use an initial concession as part of a highly effective compliance technique. The technique is a simple one that we will call the rejection-then-retreat technique, although it is also known as the door-in-the-face technique. Suppose you want me to agree to a certain request. One way to increase the chances that I will comply is first to make a larger request of me, one that I will most likely turn down. Then, after I have refused, you make the smaller request that you were really interested in all along. Provided that you structured your requests skillfully, I should view your second request as a concession to me and should feel inclined to respond with a concession of my own—compliance with your second request.

Was that the way the Boy Scout got me to buy his candy bars? Was his retreat from the \$5 request to the \$1 request an artificial one that was intentionally designed to sell candy bars? As one who has still refused to discard even his first Scout merit badge, I genuinely hope not. Whether or not the large-request-then-small-request sequence was planned, its effect was the same. It worked! Because it works, the rejection-then-retreat technique can and will be used *purposely* by certain people to get their way. First let's examine how this tactic can be used as a reliable compliance device. Later we will see how it is already being used. Finally we can turn to a pair of little-known features of the technique that make it one of the most influential compliance tactics available.

Remember that after my encounter with the Boy Scout, I called my research assistants together to try to understand what had happened to me and, as it turned out, to eat the evidence. Actually, we did more than that. We designed an experiment to test the effectiveness of the procedure of moving to a desired request after a larger preliminary request had been refused. We had two purposes in conducting the experiment. First, we wanted to see whether this procedure worked on people besides me. (It certainly seemed that the tactic had been effective on me earlier in the day, but then I have a history of falling for compliance tricks of all sorts.) So the question remained, "Does the rejection-then-retreat technique work on enough people to make it a useful procedure for gaining compliance?" If so, it would definitely be something to be aware of in the future. Our second reason for doing the study was to determine how powerful a compliance device the technique was. Could it bring about compliance with a genuinely sizable request? In other words, did the *smaller* request to which the requester retreated have to be a *small* request? If our thinking about what caused the technique to be effective was correct, the second request did not actually have to be small; it only had to be smaller than the initial one. It was our suspicion that the critical aspect of a requester's retreat from a larger to a smaller favor was its appearance as a concession. So the second request could be an objectively large one—as long as it was smaller than the first request—and the technique would still work.

After a bit of thought, we decided to try the technique on a request that we felt few people would agree to perform. Posing as representatives of the "County Youth Counseling Program," we approached college students walking on campus and asked if they would be willing to chaperon a group of juvenile delinquents on a day trip to the zoo. This idea of being responsible for a group of juvenile delinquents of unspecified age for hours in a public place without pay was hardly an inviting one for these students. As we expected, the great majority (83 percent) refused. Yet we obtained very different results from a similar sample of college students who were asked the very same question with one difference. Before we invited them to serve as unpaid chaperons on the zoo trip, we asked them for an even larger favor—to spend two hours per week as counselors to juvenile delinquents for a minimum of two years. It was only after they refused this extreme request, as all did, that we made the small, zoo-trip request. But presenting the zoo trip as a retreat from our initial request, our success rate increased dramatically. Three times as many of the students approached in this manner volunteered to serve as zoo chaperons (Cialdini, Vincent, Lewis, Catalan, Wheeler, & Darby, 1975).

Be assured that any strategy able to triple the percentage of compliance with a substantial request (from 17 to 50 percent in our experiment) will be used often in a variety of natural settings. Labor negotiators, for instance, often use the tactic of making extreme demands that they do not expect to win but from which they can retreat and draw real concessions from the opposing side. It would appear, then, that the procedure would be more effective the larger the initial request, since there would be more room available for illusory concessions. This is true only up to a point, however. Research conducted at Bar-Ilan University in Israel on the rejection-then-retreat technique shows that if the first set of demands is so extreme as to be seen as unreasonable, the tactic backfires (Schwarzwalder, Raz, & Zvibel, 1979). In such cases, the party who has made the extreme first request is not seen to be bargaining in good faith. Any subsequent retreat from that wholly unrealistic initial position is not viewed as a genuine concession and, thus, is not reciprocated. The truly gifted negotiator, then, is one whose initial position is exaggerated just enough to allow for a series of small reciprocal concessions and counteroffers that will yield a desirable final offer from the opponent (Thompson, 1990).

It seems that certain of the most successful television producers, such as Grant Tinker and Garry Marshall, are masters of this art in their negotiations with network censors. In a candid interview with *TV Guide* writer Dick Russell (1978), both admitted to "deliberately inserting lines into scripts that a censor's sure to ax" so that they could then retreat to the lines they really wanted to include. Marshall appears especially active in this regard. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from Russell's article:

But Marshall . . . not only admits his tricks . . . he seems to revel in them. On one episode of his [then] top-rated "Laverne and Shirley" series, for example, he says, "We had a situation where Squiggy's in a rush to get out of his apartment and meet some girls upstairs. He says: 'Will you hurry up before I lose my lust?' But in the



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#### RIGHT AND WRONG WAYS TO USE THE REJECTION-THEN-RETREAT TACTIC

Figure 2.4 The extreme request has to go first, and it can't be too extreme.

script we put something even stronger, knowing the censors would cut it. They did; so we asked innocently, well, how about 'lose my lust?' 'That's good,' they said. Sometimes you gotta go at 'em backward."

On the "Happy Days" series, the biggest censorship fight was over the word *virgin*. That time, says Marshall, "I knew we'd have trouble, so we put the word in seven times, hoping they'd cut six and keep one. It worked. We used the same pattern again with the word *pregnant*."

I witnessed another form of the rejection-then-retreat technique in my investigations of door-to-door sales operations. These organizations used a less engineered, more opportunistic version of the tactic. Of course, the most important goal for a door-to-door salesperson is to make the sale. However, the training programs of each of the companies I investigated emphasized that a second important goal was to obtain from prospects the names of referrals—friends, relatives, or neighbors, on whom the salesperson could call. For a variety of reasons, which we will discuss in Chapter 5, the percentage of successful door-to-door sales increases impressively when the sales representative is able to mention the name of a familiar person who "recommended" the sales visit.

Never as a sales trainee was I taught to get the sales pitch refused so that I could then retreat to a request for referrals. In several such programs, though, I was trained to take advantage of the opportunity to secure referrals offered by a customer's purchase refusal: "Well, if it is your feeling that a fine

set of encyclopedias is not right for you at this time, perhaps you could help me by giving me the names of some others who might wish to take advantage of our company's great offer. What would be the names of some of these people you know?" Many individuals who would not otherwise subject their friends to a high-pressure sales presentation do agree to supply referrals when the request is presented as a concession from a purchase request they have just refused.

#### Reciprocal Concessions, Perceptual Contrast, and the Watergate Mystery

We have already discussed one reason for the success of the rejection-then-retreat technique—its incorporation of the reciprocity rule. This larger-then-smaller-request strategy is effective for a pair of other reasons as well. The first concerns the perceptual contrast principle we encountered in Chapter 1. That principle accounted for, among other things, the tendency of a man to spend more money on a sweater *following* his purchase of a suit than before: After being exposed to the price of the larger item, he sees the price of the less expensive item as *appearing* smaller by comparison. In the same way, the larger-then-smaller request procedure uses the contrast principle to make the smaller request look even smaller by comparison with the larger one. If I want you to lend me \$5, I can make the request seem smaller than it is by first asking you to lend me \$10. One of the beauties of this tactic is that, by first requesting \$10 and then retreating to \$5, I will have simultaneously engaged the force of both the reciprocity rule and the contrast principle. Not only will my \$5 request be viewed as a concession to be reciprocated, it will also look like a smaller request than if I had just asked for \$5 straightaway.

In combination, the influences of reciprocity and perceptual contrast can present a fearsomely powerful force. Embodied in the rejection-then-retreat sequence, they are jointly capable of genuinely astonishing effects. It is my feeling that they provide the only really plausible explanation of one of the most baffling political actions of our time: the decision to break into the Watergate offices of the Democratic National Committee that led to the ruin of Richard Nixon's presidency. One of the participants in that decision, Jeb Stuart Magruder, upon hearing that the Watergate burglars had been caught, responded with appropriate bewilderment, "How could we have been so stupid?" Indeed, how?

To understand how enormously ill-conceived an idea it was for the Nixon administration to undertake the break-in, let's review a few facts:

- The idea was that of G. Gordon Liddy, who was in charge of intelligence-gathering operations for the Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP). Liddy had gained a reputation among administration higher-ups as somewhat of a flake, and there were questions about his stability and judgment.
- Liddy's proposal was extremely costly, requiring a budget of \$250,000 in untraceable cash.

- In late March, when the proposal was approved in a meeting of the CREEP director, John Mitchell, and his assistants Magruder and Frederick LaRue, the outlook for a Nixon victory in the November election could not have been brighter. Edmund Muskie, the only announced candidate the early polls had given a chance of unseating the President, had done poorly in the primaries. It looked very much as though the most defeatable candidate, George McGovern, would win the Democratic nomination. A Republican victory seemed assured.
- The break-in plan itself was a highly risky operation requiring the participation and discretion of ten men.
- The Democratic National Committee and its chairman, Lawrence O'Brien, whose Watergate office was to be burglarized and bugged, had no information damaging enough to defeat the incumbent President. Nor were the Democrats likely to get any, unless the administration did something *very, very* foolish.

Despite the obvious counsel of the previously mentioned reasons, the expensive, chancy, pointless, and potentially calamitous proposal of a man whose judgment was known to be questionable was approved. How could it be that intelligent, accomplished men such as Mitchell and Magruder would do something so *very, very* foolish? Perhaps the answer lies in a little-discussed fact: The \$250,000 plan they approved was not Liddy's first proposal. In fact, it represented a significant concession on his part from two earlier proposals, of immense proportions. The first of these plans, made two months earlier in a meeting with Mitchell, Magruder, and John Dean, described a \$1 million program that included (in addition to the bugging of the Watergate) a specially equipped communications "chase plane," break-ins, kidnapping and mugging squads, and a yacht featuring "high-class call girls" to blackmail Democratic politicians. A second Liddy plan, presented a week later to the same group of Mitchell, Magruder, and Dean, eliminated some of the program and reduced the cost to \$500,000. It was only after these initial proposals had been rejected by Mitchell that Liddy submitted his "bare-bones" \$250,000 plan, in this instance to Mitchell, Magruder, and Frederick LaRue. This time the plan, still stupid but less so than the previous ones, was approved.

Could it be that I, a longtime patsy, and John Mitchell, a hardened and canny politician, might both have been so easily maneuvered into bad deals by the same compliance tactic—I by a Boy Scout selling candy and he by a man selling political disaster?

If we examine the testimony of Jeb Magruder, considered by most Watergate investigators to provide the most faithful account of the crucial meeting at which Liddy's plan was finally accepted, there are some instructive clues. First, Magruder (1974) reports that "no one was particularly overwhelmed with the project"; but "after starting at the grandiose sum of \$1 million, we thought that probably \$250,000 would be an acceptable figure. . . . We were reluctant to send him away with nothing." Mitchell, caught up in the "feeling that we should leave Liddy a little something . . . signed off on it in the sense of saying,

'Ok, let's give him a quarter of a million dollars and let's see what he can come up with.' " In the context of Liddy's initial extreme requests, it seems that "a quarter of a million dollars" had come to be "a little something" to be left as a return concession. With the clarity afforded by hindsight, Magruder has recalled Liddy's approach in as succinct an illustration of the rejection-then-retreat technique as I have ever heard. "If he had come to us at the outset and said, 'I have a plan to burglarize and wiretap Larry O'Brien's office,' we might have rejected the idea out of hand. Instead he came to us with his elaborate call-girl/kidnapping/mugging/sabotage/wiretapping scheme. . . . He had asked for the whole loaf when he was quite content to settle for half or even a quarter."

It is also instructive that, although he finally deferred to his boss's decision, only one member of the group, Frederick LaRue, expressed any direct opposition to the proposal. Saying with obvious common sense, "I don't think it's worth the risk," he must have wondered why his colleagues, Mitchell and Magruder, did not share his perspective. Of course, there could be many differences between LaRue and the other two men that may have accounted for their differing opinions regarding the advisability of Liddy's plan. But one stands out: Of the three, only LaRue had not been present at the prior two meetings, where Liddy had outlined his much more ambitious programs. Perhaps, then, only LaRue was able to see the third proposal for the clunker that it was and to react to it objectively, uninfluenced by the reciprocity and perceptual contrast forces acting upon the others.

### Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't

A bit earlier we said that the rejection-then-retreat technique had, in addition to the reciprocity rule, a pair of other factors working in its favor. We have already discussed the first of those factors, the perceptual contrast principle. The additional advantage of the technique is not really a psychological principle, as in the case of the other two factors. Rather, it is more of a purely structural feature of the request sequence. Let's once again say that I wish to borrow \$5 from you. By beginning with a request for \$10, I really can't lose. If you agree to it, I will have received from you twice the amount I would have settled for. If, on the other hand, you turn down my initial request, I can retreat to the \$5 favor that I desired from the outset and, through the action of the reciprocity and contrast principles, greatly enhance my likelihood of success. Either way, I benefit; it's a case of heads I win, tails you lose.

The clearest utilization of this aspect of the large-then-small-request sequence occurs in the retail store sales practice of "talking the top of the line." Hence the prospect is invariably shown the deluxe model first. If the customer buys, there is frosting on the store's cake. However, if the customer declines, the salesperson effectively counteroffers with a more reasonably priced model. Some proof of the effectiveness of this procedure comes from a report in *Sales Management* magazine, reprinted without comment in *Consumer Reports*:

If you were a billiard-table dealer, which would you advertise—the \$329 model or the \$3,000 model? The chances are you would promote the low-priced item and hope to trade the customer up when he comes to buy. But G. Warren Kelley, new business promotion manager at Brunswick, says you would be wrong. . . . To prove his point, Kelley has actual sales figures from a representative store. . . . During the first week customers . . . were shown the low end of the line . . . and then encouraged to consider more expensive models—the traditional trading-up approach. . . . The average table sale that week was \$550. . . . However, during the second week, customers . . . were led instantly to a \$3,000 table, regardless of what they wanted to see . . . and then allowed to shop the rest of the line, in declining order of price and quality. The result of selling down was an average sale of over \$1,000. (1975, p. 62)

Given the remarkable effectiveness of the rejection-then-retreat technique, one might think that there could be a substantial disadvantage as well. The victims of the strategy might resent having been cornered into compliance. The resentment could show itself in a couple of ways. First, the victim might decide not to live up to the verbal agreement made with the requester. Second, the victim might come to distrust the manipulative requester, deciding never to deal with that person again. If either or both of these events occurred with any frequency, a requester would want to give serious second thought to the use of the rejection-then-retreat procedure. Research indicates, however, that these victim reactions do not occur with increased frequency when the rejection-then-retreat technique is used. Somewhat astonishingly, it appears that they actually occur *less* frequently! Before trying to understand why this should be, let's first look at the evidence.

### Here's My Blood, and Do Call Again

A study published in Canada (Miller, Seligman, Clark, & Bush, 1976) throws light on the question of whether a victim of the rejection-then-retreat tactic will follow through with the agreement to perform a requester's second favor. In addition to recording whether target persons said yes or no to the desired request (to work for two hours a day without pay in a community mental health agency), this experiment also recorded whether they showed up to perform their duties as promised. As usual, the procedure of starting with a larger request (to volunteer for two hours of work per week in the agency for at least two years) produced more verbal agreement to the smaller, retreat request (76 percent), than did the procedure of asking for the smaller request alone (29 percent). The important result, though, concerned the show-up rate of *those who volunteered*; and, again, the rejection-then-retreat procedure was the more effective one (85 versus 50 percent).

A different experiment examined whether the rejection-then-retreat sequence caused victims to feel so manipulated that they would refuse any further requests. In this study (Cialdini & Ascani, 1976), the targets were college students who were each asked to give a pint of blood as part of the annual campus blood drive. Targets in one group were first asked to give a pint of blood

every six weeks for a minimum of three years. The other targets were asked only to give a single pint of blood. Those of both groups who agreed and later appeared at the blood center were then asked if they would be willing to give their phone numbers so they could be called upon to donate again in the future. Nearly all the students who were about to give a pint of blood as a result of the rejection-then-retreat technique agreed to donate again (84 percent), while less than half of the other students who appeared at the blood center did so (43 percent). Even for future favors, the rejection-then-retreat strategy proved superior.

### The Sweet, Secret Side Effects

Strangely enough, then, it seems that the rejection-then-retreat tactic not only spurs people to agree to a desired request but actually to carry out the request and, finally, to volunteer to perform further requests. What could there be about the technique that makes people who have been duped into compliance so likely to continue to comply? For an answer, we might look at a requester's act of concession, which is the heart of the procedure. We have already seen that, as long as it is not viewed as an obvious trick, the concession will likely stimulate a return concession. What we have not yet examined, however, is a little-known pair of positive by-products of the act of concession: feelings of greater responsibility for and satisfaction with the arrangement. It is this set of sweet side effects that enables the technique to move its victims to fulfill their agreements and to engage in further such agreements.

The desirable side effects of making concessions during an interaction with other people are nicely shown in studies of the way people bargain with each other. One experiment, conducted by social psychologists at UCLA, offers an especially apt demonstration (Benton, Kelley, & Liebling, 1972). A subject in that study faced a "negotiation opponent" and was told to bargain with the opponent concerning how to divide between themselves a certain amount of money provided by the experimenters. The subject was also informed that if no mutual agreement could be reached after a certain period of bargaining, no one would get any money. Unknown to the subject, the opponent was really an experimental assistant who had been previously instructed to bargain with the subject in one of three ways. With some of the subjects, the opponent made an extreme first demand, assigning virtually all of the money to himself and stubbornly persisted in that demand throughout the negotiations. With another group of subjects, the opponent began with a demand that was moderately favorable to himself; he, too, steadfastly refused to move from that position during the negotiations. With a third group, the opponent began with the extreme demand and then gradually retreated to the more moderate one during the course of the bargaining.

There were three important findings that help us to understand why the rejection-then-retreat technique is so effective. First, compared to the two other approaches, the strategy of starting with an extreme demand and then

retreating to the more moderate one produced the most money for the person using it. This result is not very surprising in light of the previous evidence we have seen for the power of larger-then-smaller-request tactics to bring about profitable agreements. It is the pair of additional findings of the study that are more striking.

**Responsibility** The requester's concession within the rejection-then-retreat technique not only caused targets to say yes more often, it also caused them to feel more responsible for having "dictated" the final agreement. Thus the uncanny ability of the rejection-then-retreat technique to make its targets meet their commitments becomes understandable: A person who feels responsible for the terms of a contract will be more likely to live up to that contrast.

**Satisfaction** Even though, on the average, they gave the most money to the opponent who used the concessions strategy, the subjects who were the targets of this strategy were the most satisfied with the final arrangement. It appears that an agreement that has been forged through the concessions of one's opponents is quite satisfying. With this in mind, we can begin to explain the second previously puzzling feature of the rejection-then-retreat tactic—the ability to prompt its victims to agree to further requests. Since the tactic uses a concession to bring about compliance, the victim is likely to feel more satisfied with the arrangement as a result. It stands to reason that people who are satisfied with a given arrangement are more likely to be willing to agree to similar arrangements.

## DEFENSE

Against a requester who employs the rule for reciprocity, you and I face a formidable foe. By presenting us with either an initial favor or an initial concession, the requester will have enlisted a powerful ally in the campaign for our compliance. At first glance, our fortunes in such a situation would appear dismal. We could comply with the requester's wish and, in so doing, succumb to the reciprocity rule. Or, we could refuse to comply and thereby suffer the brunt of the rule's force upon our deeply conditioned feelings of fairness and obligation. Surrender or suffer heavy casualties. Cheerless prospects indeed.

Fortunately, these are not our only choices. With the proper understanding of the nature of our opponent, we can come away from the compliance battlefield unhurt and sometimes even better off than before. It is essential to recognize that the requester who invokes the reciprocity rule (or any other weapon of influence) to gain our compliance is not the real opponent. Such a requester has chosen to become a jujitsu warrior who aligns himself or herself with the sweeping power of reciprocity and then merely releases that power by providing a first favor or concession. The real opponent is the rule. If we are not to be abused by it, we must take steps to defuse its energy.

## Rejecting the Rule

How does one go about neutralizing the effect of a social rule like the one for reciprocity? It seems too widespread to escape and too strong to overpower once it is activated. Perhaps the answer, then, is to prevent its activation. Perhaps we can avoid a confrontation with the rule by refusing to allow a requester to commission its force against us in the first place. Perhaps by rejecting a requester's initial favor or concessions to us, we can evade the problem. Perhaps; but then, perhaps not. Invariably declining a requester's initial offer of a favor or sacrifice works better in theory than in practice. The major problem is that when it is first presented, it is difficult to know whether such an offer is honest or whether it is the initial step in an exploitation attempt. If we always assume the worst, it would not be possible to receive the benefits of any legitimate favors or concessions offered by individuals who had no intention of exploiting the reciprocity rule.

I have a colleague who remembers with anger how his 10-year-old daughter's feelings were terribly hurt by a man whose method of avoiding the jaws of the reciprocity rule was to refuse her kindness. The children of her class were hosting an open house at school for their grandparents, and her job was to give a flower to each visitor entering the school grounds. The first man she approached with a flower growled at her, "Keep it." Not knowing what to do, she extended it toward him again, only to have him demand to know what he had to give in return. When she replied weakly, "Nothing. It's a gift," he fixed her with a disbelieving glare, insisting that he recognized "her game," and brushed on past. The girl was so stung by the experience that she could not approach anyone else and had to be removed from her assignment—one she had anticipated fondly. It is hard to know whom to blame more, the insensitive man or the exploiters who had abused his tendency to reciprocate a gift until his response had soured to a refusal. No matter whom you find more blameworthy, the lesson is clear. We will always encounter authentically generous individuals as well as many people who try to play fairly by the reciprocity rule rather than to exploit it. They will doubtless become insulted by someone who consistently rejects their efforts; social friction and isolation could well result. A policy of blanket rejection, then, seems ill advised.

Another solution holds more promise. It advises us to accept the offers of others but to accept those offers only for what they fundamentally are, not for what they are represented to be. If a person offers us a nice favor, let's say, we might well accept, recognizing that we have obligated ourselves to a return favor sometime in the future. To engage in this sort of arrangement with another is not to be exploited by that person through the rule for reciprocity. Quite the contrary; it is to participate fairly in the "honored network of obligation" that has served us so well, both individually and societally, from the dawn of humanity. However, if the initial favor turns out to be a device, a trick, an artifice designed specifically to stimulate our compliance with a larger return favor, that is a different story. Our partner is not a benefactor but a profiteer; and it is here that we should respond to the action on precisely those terms. Once

we have determined that the initial offer was not a favor but a compliance tactic, we need only react to it accordingly to be free of its influence. As long as we perceive and define the action as a compliance device instead of a favor, the giver no longer has the reciprocation rule as an ally: The rule says that favors are to be met with favors; it does not require that tricks be met with favors.

### Smoking Out the Enemy

A practical example may make things more concrete. Let's suppose that a woman phoned one day and introduced herself as a member of the Home Fire Safety Association in your town. Suppose she then asked if you would be interested in learning about home fire safety, having your house checked for fire hazards, and receiving a home fire extinguisher—all free of charge. Let's suppose further that you were interested in these things and made an evening appointment to have one of the association's inspectors come over to provide them. When the inspector arrived, he gave you a small hand extinguisher and began examining the possible fire hazards of your home. Afterward he gave you some interesting, though frightening, information about general fire dangers, along with an assessment of your home's vulnerability. Finally he suggested that you obtain a home fire warning system for your house and left.

Such a set of events is not implausible. Various cities and towns have non-profit associations, usually made up of fire department personnel working on their own time, that provide free home fire-safety inspections of this sort. Were these events to occur, you would clearly have received a favor from the inspector. In accordance with the reciprocation rule, you should stand more ready to provide a return favor if you were to see him in need of aid at some point in the future. An exchange of favors of this kind would be in the best tradition of the reciprocity rule.

A similar set of events with, however, a different ending is also possible. Rather than leaving after recommending a fire-alarm system, the inspector launches into a sales presentation intended to persuade you to buy an expensive, heat-triggered alarm system manufactured by the company he represents. Door-to-door home fire-alarm companies will frequently use this approach. Typically, their product, while effective enough, will be overpriced. Trusting that you will not be familiar with the retail costs of such a system and that, if you decide to buy one, you will feel obligated to the company that provided you with a free extinguisher and home inspection, these companies will pressure you for an immediate sale. Using this free-information-and-inspection gambit, fire-protection sales organizations have flourished around the country.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>A variety of other business operations use the no-cost information offer extensively. Pest exterminator companies, for instance, have found that most people who agree to a free home examination give the extermination job to the examining company, provided they are convinced that it is needed. They apparently feel an obligation to give their business to the firm that rendered the initial, complimentary service. Knowing that such customers are unlikely to comparison shop for

If you were to find yourself in such a situation with the realization that the primary motive of the inspector's visit was to sell you a costly alarm system, your most effective next action would be a simple, private maneuver. It would involve the mental act of redefinition. Merely define whatever you have received from the inspector—extinguisher, safety information, hazard inspection—not as gifts but as sales devices, and you will be free to decline (or accept) the purchase offer without even a tug from the reciprocity rule: A favor rightly follows a favor—not a piece of sales strategy. If the inspector subsequently responds to your refusal by proposing that you, at least, provide the names of some friends he might call on, use your mental maneuver again. Define this retreat to a smaller request as what you recognize it to be—a compliance tactic. Once this is done, there would be no pressure to offer the names as a return concession, since the reduced request would not be viewed as a real concession. At this point, unhampered by an inappropriately triggered sense of obligation, you may once again be as compliant or noncompliant as you wish.

Provided you are so inclined, you might even turn the inspector's own weapon of influence against him. Recall that the rule for reciprocation entitles a person who has acted in a certain way to a dose of the same thing. If you have determined that the "fire inspector's" gifts were used, not as genuine gifts, but to make a profit from you, then you might want to use them to make a profit of your own. Simply take whatever the inspector is willing to provide—safety information, home extinguisher—thank him politely, and show him out the door. After all, the reciprocity rule asserts that if justice is to be done, exploitation attempts should be exploited.

### Reader's Report

#### *From a Former Television and Stereo Salesperson*

For quite a while, I worked for a major retailer in their television and stereo department. Continued employment was based on the ability to sell service contracts which are warranty extensions offered by the retailer. Once this fact was explained to me I devised the following plan that used the rejection-then-retreat technique, although I didn't know its name at the time.

A customer had the opportunity to buy from one to three years' worth of service contract coverage at the time of the sale, although the credit I got was the same regardless of the length of coverage. Realizing that most people would not be willing to buy three years' worth of coverage, initially, I would advocate to the customer the longest and most expensive plan. This gave me an excellent opportunity later, after being rejected in my sincere attempt to sell the

(continued)

this reason, unscrupulous pest control operations will take advantage of the situation by citing higher-than-competitive prices for work commissioned in this way.



three-year plan, to retreat to the one-year extension and its relatively small price, which I was thrilled to get. This technique proved highly effective, as I sold sales contracts to an average of 70 percent of my customers, who seemed very satisfied in the process, while others in my department clustered around 40 percent. I never told anyone how I did it until now.

*Author's note:* Notice how, as is usually the case, use of the rejection-then-retreat tactic also engages the action of the contrast principle. Not only did the initial higher request make the lower one seem like a retreat, it made that second request seem smaller, too.

## SUMMARY

- According to sociologists and anthropologists, one of the most widespread and basic norms of human culture is embodied in the rule for reciprocity. The rule requires that one person try to repay, in kind, what another person has provided. By obligating the recipient of an act to repayment in the future, the rule for reciprocity allows one individual to give something to another with confidence that it is not being lost. This sense of future obligation within the rule makes possible the development of various kinds of continuing relationships, transactions, and exchanges that are beneficial to the society. Consequently, all members of the society are trained from childhood to abide by the rule or suffer serious social disapproval.
- The decision to comply with another's request is frequently influenced by the reciprocity rule. One favorite and profitable tactic of certain compliance professionals is to give something before asking for a return favor. The exploitability of this tactic is due to three characteristics of the rule for reciprocity. First, the rule is extremely powerful, often overwhelming the influence of other factors that normally determine compliance with a request. Second, the rule applies even to uninvited first favors, thereby reducing our ability to decide whom we wish to owe and putting the choice in the hands of others. Finally, the rule can spur unequal exchanges; to be rid of the uncomfortable feeling of indebtedness, an individual will often agree to a request for a substantially larger favor than the one he or she received.
- Another way that the rule for reciprocity can increase compliance involves a simple variation on the basic theme: Instead of providing a first favor that stimulates a return favor, an individual can make an initial concession that stimulates a return concession. One compliance procedure, called the rejection-then-retreat technique, or door-in-the-face technique, relies heavily on the pressure to reciprocate concessions. By starting with an extreme request that is sure to be rejected, a requester can then profitably retreat to a smaller request (the one that was desired all along), which is likely to be accepted because it appears to be a concession. Research indicates that, aside from increasing the likelihood that a person will say yes to a request, the

rejection-then-retreat technique also increases the likelihood that the person will carry out the request and will agree to such requests in the future.

- Our best defense against the use of reciprocity pressures to gain our compliance is not systematic rejection of the initial offers of others. Rather, we should accept initial favors or concessions in good faith, but be ready to re-define them as tricks should they later be proved as such. Once they are re-defined in this way, we will no longer feel a need to respond with a favor or concession of our own.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### Content Mastery

1. What is the rule for reciprocity? Why is it so powerful in our society?
2. Which are the three features of the reciprocity rule that make it so exploitable by compliance professionals?
3. Describe how the Regan study illustrates each of the three exploitable features of the rule.
4. How does the rejection-then-retreat technique use the pressure for reciprocity to increase compliance?
5. Why should the rejection-then-retreat technique increase a compliant person's willingness to (a) carry out an agreement and (b) volunteer to do future favors?

### Critical Thinking Items

1. Suppose you wanted a professor to spend an hour helping you with a topic for a term paper. Write a script showing how you might use the rejection-then-retreat tactic to increase the chance of compliance to your request. What should you be careful to avoid when making your first request?
2. One study (Barry & Kanouse, 1987) found that, by paying physicians first, they were much more likely to complete and return a long questionnaire they had received in the mail. If a \$20 check accompanied the questionnaire, 78 percent of the physicians filled out the questionnaire and sent it back as requested. But if they learned that the \$20 check was to be sent to them after they completed it, only 66 percent did so.  
Another interesting finding concerned the physicians who got the check up front but didn't comply with the questionnaire request: only 26 percent cashed the check (as compared to 95 percent of those who had complied). Explain how the rule for reciprocity can explain both findings.
3. Explain what is meant by the term *noblesse oblige* and how the concept of reciprocity might play a role in it. Hint: John F. Kennedy once said, "For those to whom much is given, much is required."