

# **The 5 Common Mindsets That TRAP Your Clients**

A Guide to Help Your Clients  
Overcome Negative Habits



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## Author's Note

Written for a very special audience in mind, this guide book is for professionals who are paid to change other people's behavior and want to have great impact. Whether you call yourself a coach, consultant, speaker, or trainer, if you are in the business of helping people change, this book is for you.

I wrote this e-book because so many subject matter experts have powerful interventions that can really help people...if the people they serve would only fully embrace and internalize these lessons. From our experience, the only thing stopping these professionals from making a lasting and permanent change in their clients lives is a deeper understanding of the science of behavior change.

This guide is dedicated to helping these professionals. Our hope is that once they understand the common beliefs that are holding people back from making permanent changes.

It doesn't matter what your subject matter is—as you attempt to change behavior, most likely, these mindsets will trap and affect your clients and prevent the needed adjustment in conduct. You can apply these powerful lessons in this guide book to almost any behavioral challenge, from losing weight to increased emotional intelligence and you will have a deeper, more profound, and longer lasting impact on your clients.

How do you know if these methods are for you? Well, if you are in the business of helping people develop, grow, and change, then, yes, this book is definitely for you.

You really need this guide if your clients experience:

- A cycle of shame centered around the inability to stop negative behaviors
- Frustration, anxiety, or depression surrounding their bad habits
- Weeks, months, or years of wanting to change with no discernable progress
- Learned helplessness or a feeling of not being in control
- A strong desire to be or act different but there is no actual behavior change
- Repeated “fresh starts” that evaporate after a short time
- Lack of grit or resilience

And you really, really need this guide if you have great content—but very few of your clients experience permanent change.

You see, the symptoms described above—the emotional pains, the quitting early, the lack of persistence, and the lack of real change—are all symptoms of a larger issue. Your clients (and most everyone in the world) probably have habit management issues. They likely struggle to permanently abandon negative habits or permanently internalize positive habits.



It sucks. I know. There are so many negative emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual repercussions that stem from our poor ability to create good habits and abandon poor habits.

And the vast majority of people struggle with that one issue.

It is why the U.S. weight loss industry is a \$66 billion industry. (That's billion with a B. Not million. BILLION. That's a lot of zeros behind that 66.)

It is why 3 out of 10 people have quit their New Year's Resolutions within two weeks of the new year.

It is also the reason why people hire you. They need and want someone to help them make permanent and lasting changes.

And it is why you need this guide.

# About this Guide

This guide is an introduction to the mindsets that typically prevent people from making actual changes to their behavior. It is important to know that when I say actual change, I mean lasting change.

To show you what I mean by lasting change, let's look at two hypothetical seminar attendees, Reanna and John. Both attend a training on servant leadership and learn how to lead through service. They come away with great insights and an action plan on how they can improve their leadership.

Reanna immediately puts to action what she learned. She starts to treat her employees with more respect, fulfilling their emotional needs, and putting her employees first. She keeps this up for months and years. Eventually, being a servant leader is so habitual to Reanna that it simply is who she is. She can't imagine acting any other way. Reanna has become a servant leader.

John was just as inspired by what he learned as Reanna. He ran back to his office, wrote out his servant leader goals, made a plan, and, just like Reanna, started acting like a servant leader. He started really strong with a lot of promise, but slowly his enthusiasm waned, his discipline faded, and he eventually lost all the progress he had made. He was back to square one.

Both John and Reanna changed. But only Reanna made actual change. She is the only one who created lasting habits from what she learned.

What distinguishes Reanna from John? Why such divergent outcomes from two people who received the same training, insights, desire and motivation?

The answer--one developed habits from what they learned and the other did not.

It is beyond the scope of this guide to completely teach you how to start, nurture, and eventually internalize habits. However, if that is of interest to you, reach out to us at Habit Technologies. Our contact information is on our website [mondaystrong.com](http://mondaystrong.com) and at the end of this guide.

We love to talk about it--you could say it is our business :). We are always happy to talk with you, strategize with you, and help you in any way we can. We also have technology that can support you and your clients too in their change journey, and we offer periodic trainings and webinars to teach coaches, consultants, speakers, and trainers how to make change last.

What I will do in this guide is teach you the most common beliefs--I call them mental traps--that stop people from actually forming lasting habits. Knowing these mental traps and taking precautions against them in your coaching, consulting, and teaching will go a long way to helping your clients experience permanent change.

# About the Author

You know those people who are incredibly talented and successful, the ones where everything is so easy for them? The ones where a radioactive, ultra-productive spider bit them and they gained the super-human ability to get more done before 6 a.m. than the rest of us get done in a week?

That's the type of person that typically writes books and blogs about habits, success, weight loss, fitness, and so on. And they drive me crazy. They always share their secrets to success but neglect to tell us that a radioactive spider bit them and now have the DNA of a superhuman.

I'm not one of those people. The only thing that bit me was my three-year-old son and all I got from him was a bunch of slobber on my arm.

When people ask me what my hobbies are, I like to joke and say "Netflix." Except I'm not joking.

I am naturally a very lazy person. I come by bad habits incredibly quickly and it takes me eons to gain any good habits. I love TV, sugar, diet soda, not working, and procrastination. If you've seen the movie Wall-E, you know who I am.

Or at least, who I could be.

But that is not who I choose to be. It is not how I choose to live my life. It may be my natural disposition--the inner "id" Ryan just waiting to get out--but it is not who shows up in the real world.

In the real world, I have a doctorate in Psychology from a Top 10 Psychology program--and I was first in my class to graduate. I've published original research in the best academic journals in my field. I was a consultant and researcher for the leading employee engagement consulting firm in the world. As a leadership and employee engagement consultant I've advised multiple Fortune 500 companies, like Wells Fargo, Hampton Inn, Regions Bank, and many other clients, who, while not as recognizable, are awesome in their respective fields.

I helped develop the most popular and respected Strengths Coaching certification program to date and facilitated the very first public Strengths Coach training. I've been a Professor in both graduate and undergraduate programs, teaching subjects like Positive Psychology and Behavior Change.

And I could go on, but writing this is starting to make me sick. I hate bragging.

I share this with you so that you understand that even if you or your clients are not the type of person who is naturally productive and successful, there is still hope.

You can have the same natural work ethic as a giant panda and still be successful.  
(Pandas are having problems procreating because apparently, they are too lazy to have sex. That is what you call an extremely bad work ethic.)

I've spent my career studying, researching, and applying the principles of behavior change. I've applied these principles to my own life and used it with them with my many clients.

All that research and experience has led to one undeniable fact--anyone can build the habits of success.

That is not to say that most of us will. Most people are probably more like me than like the super-achievers. For us, good habits don't develop easily. We have to build them the hard way.

And build them we will. And we will start by avoiding the most common traps that stop us short of reaching our goal--permanently ingrained great habits.

# TRAP #1

## Believing In Short Cuts and Quick Fixes

If you scan the advertisements in the self-help industry, you will come to one simple conclusion:

You can do anything in 30 days.

30 days to a better body.

30 days to your new novel.

30 days to 6-figures.

30 days to a new you.

30 days, 30 days, 30 days!

(I bet February just feels bad about itself.)

While it is possible to make dramatic changes in a short period of time, the majority of these claims are just marketing. People are trying to sell products and they know that most people want immediate results that require little or no work. People ALWAYS want a quick fix.

Unfortunately, the quick fix is a myth. In the field of behavior change, there is no such thing as a shortcut. Change happens through very predictable ways, none of which we would describe as “easy, short, or quick”

Martin Seligman, the founder of Positive Psychology and former head of the American Psychological Association, nicely sums up the the effect of relying on shortcuts:

“The belief that we can rely on shortcuts to gratification and bypass the exercise of personal strengths and virtues is folly. It leads...to legions of humanity who are depressed in the middle of great wealth and are starving to death spiritually.”

What does the “30 days to a new you” mindset get us? Anxiety, shame, and depression are the most common emotional outcomes. On the behavioral side, we get a lack of grit, resilience, a shame spiral of starts, stops, and fake new beginnings, which in the long run only make the problem worse.

Quick fix diets are a classic example of a psychological trap that hurts more than it helps. In the last year alone, 30-50% of U.S. adults tried to lose weight. The majority of those attempted a

“fad” diet like keto, low-carb, low-fat, among others. On average, people on these diets lose about 5-10% of their weight, which is great--if it lasted. Unfortunately, for the vast majority of people, weight loss after a diet is only temporary.

A review of weight loss programs found that most participants regained the weight they lost within year. Fully a quarter of dieters end up gaining more weight than they shed. After reviewing all the studies of the effects of “diets” on weight loss, Dr. Garner and Dr. Wooley, both esteemed physiologists, concluded that “it is only the rate of weight regain, not the fact of weight regain, that appears open to debate.”

We can only draw one conclusion from this research--there is no shortcut to permanent change. Permanent change only occurs after a long, sustained period of time.

### **Simple Steps to Defeat the Shortcut Mindset**

Part of defeating the shortcut mindset is to help your clients understand the importance of the journey and helping them de-emphasize the finish line. I will discuss this more in Trap #2.

Another method of overcoming the quick fix mindset is called reality testing, which is when you help the client think through the difference between the actual world, their own past history, and the world that they created in their minds. You want them to examine the potential and most likely consequences of their behaviors.

For example, in helping a client overcome the shortcut mindset to weight loss, you would discuss their past efforts in losing weight. Help them see when, where, and why that accompanied their failures in the past.

The purpose of this exercise is to help them understand that change is not easy. You want to help them realize that hard work is essential and then help them commit to putting in the required effort.

You should combine this intervention with an implementation intention exercise, which is a simple intervention in which clients describe a situation and their positive responses to it. These are often called “if-then” exercises. If X happens, then I will do Y.

This intervention will help them to overcome the shortcut mindset and focus on the real work and strategies that will make their desired change last.

## TRAP #2

# Focusing on Finish Lines Instead of the Journey

For years, the self-improvement industry focused on helping people set and achieve goals. Google “goal-setting techniques” and you will get almost 9 million results, many of which are articles written on how to set better goals.

SMART goals, probably the most well-known goal setting technique, is a great example of how we teach clients about goals. A SMART goal is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant/Realistic, and Time-bound. Many coaches and consultants use this system or some variation of it with their clients. The common belief is that a good coach or consultant will help their clients visualize the finish line and make concrete plans on how to get there.

And that is the problem--we focus our clients on a finish line. We give them a, “complete these steps and you are done,” attitude.

It is why dieters will lose 20 pounds, reach their goal weight...and regain all that weight and more within a year. It is why organizations will make tremendous strides in employee engagement, reach their goal of becoming an employer of choice...then slip back into their old ways when the program stops.

We focus so much on crossing the finish line that we forget the actual objective is to permanently change behavior. The finish line doesn't matter--it is the process and the habits that get you there that matter.

Let me give you a personal example of how damaging the “finish line” attitude can be. A few years ago, I set the goal of running a marathon. It is an achievement that I've always wanted to accomplish but never really had the courage to attempt. When a couple of my friends told me they were planning on running a marathon, I decided to finally reach for my dream.

My goal checked all the right boxes--it was specific (marathon), measurable (26.2 miles), achievable (found a training guide online to help me build up to it), realistic (had a great training guide that showed me how), and time-bound (I had exactly 5 months to train). So with my new SMART goal in hand, I went out and started training.

I'll be honest, it was hard, especially in the beginning. I couldn't even run a complete mile without stopping from being winded. I dreaded my running days. They were hard, embarrassing, and they just kept coming!

But I followed my goal plan and kept going. Day after day, I would follow my plan and run. And day after day, I got a little stronger, a little faster, and ran a little farther. Before long, I was doing 8 and 10 mile runs. Then I was doing 12 and 15. Then 20 and 22.

Something truly remarkable happened during this process—I actually began to love running. I loved the exhilaration of exertion. I loved my new running stamina. I loved being awake in the early mornings before people and traffic, just alone in beautiful places and nature. It was awesome.

The race day eventually came. I laced up my shoes and started running. And running. And running. I ran the entire 26.2 miles. I had, after 5 months of intense training, finally completed a marathon. I was as proud of myself as I have ever been when I crossed that finish line. I truly felt I had done something cool. And I had. I had achieved what my potty math colleagues call a “big ass” goal.

That part of the story is complete success.

What happened next is the sad part and it is the trap into which most people will fall.

I stopped running.

I had reached a goal and since I didn’t plan on running another marathon, I stopped running. I let a lot of time pass before I put on my running shoes again and when I finally did, I had lost all the stamina and strength that I had developed over months of training. I was back to the beginning.

All the gains I made, were lost.

And I had actually really loved running when I was training. It had become one of my favorite activities.

But the whole time, I viewed it as a means to a end. I was running to achieve my goal. What I failed to realize, that becoming a “runner” should have been the real objective. My obsession with goals and the finish line prevented me from making permanent changes, from developing a habit that would last a lifetime.

### **Simple Steps to Focus on the Journey**

Instead of asking your clients to set goals around accomplishments, help them set goals around habits. If they are pursuing certain accomplishments, like my marathon, explore why it is important to them. For most people, the underlying desire to accomplish something is because the accomplishment is a signal of success. Constructively challenge this assumption.



Help your clients learn to value the journey and the process of change by celebrating habits and not just accomplishments. Focus on repeated behaviors rather than one and done's.

Use positive self-construct language to help your clients internalize behaviors. For example, instead of saying, "You are going to run a marathon," say, "You are a runner." It works on most behaviors. (You are not dieting, you are becoming a healthy person. You are not developing leadership skills, you are becoming a leader.) This language will help your clients to view their new habits as part of their self-construct, and their new habits will become intrinsically motivating because they reinforce this positive view of themselves.

## TRAP #3

# Not Understanding Cause and Effect

One of the biggest traps that people fall into when they are trying to change their behavior is not understanding the root cause of their behavior. Some people falsely believe there is no reason for their behavior; others have false beliefs about what is causing their behavior.

It is critically important that your clients understand that nothing is random. Things don't just happen, "because." Every effect you see has a cause.

Causality--that every effect is preceded by a cause--is the basis of all natural science. Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Geology, and all understanding we have on the natural world rest on cause and effect. We see something fall, we know the cause is gravity. If something can fly, we know the cause is lift and thrust. We feel an earthquake, we know it is because earth's plates are moving (or something like that, I'm not a geologist ;). We understand that plants need water, light, and soil nutrients to grow-- and so on. Everything you see in nature, has a cause.

Cause and effect is what allows us to understand the world around us. It is also what allows us to understand and study the world within us (i.e., psychology).

You are a part of the natural world. You do not act for no reason. There is a cause for every action that you take. The cause may not be readily obvious--many of our "causes" are internal states like feelings and drives--and the cause may be complicated, but nevertheless, every action has a cause. Every behavior has a reason.

In order to change a behavior, we have to have a complete understanding of that behavior. We have to understand the effects of the behavior (i.e., what are the consequences when I act a certain way) and the causes that lead to that behavior.

There is an old stereotype about therapists who just want to talk about your mother. However, there is an element of truth to the categorization. . What therapists know is that your current state is a product of something; there is a cause for the way you feel and act. They ask questions about your childhood and your past because they want to discover the root cause(s) of your problems. Once they know the reason(s), they can actually start helping you solve the problem. But until they know the cause, all their "solutions" are just band-aids on a problem.

Only when we and our clients understand the cause of their behaviors can we make a permanent change to their behavior.

A client with an anger management issue is most likely reacting to an internal script that tells them that "someone" is attacking them and the only way to get what they want is by aggressive

action. By helping your client see the cause, in this case a false belief, you help them control their reaction(s).

Your managerial client that has a problem(s) connecting/engaging with their team is also doing so for a reason. The motive could be situational, as in they don't have time for "feelings," or emotional, in that they experience anxiety about how the team views them. However, it could be cognitive, meaning they have false beliefs about what it takes to be an involved manager. Helping your client become an engaging leader will require them to understand the cause of their behavior and then an intervention plan? targeted at that cause(s).

It is important to note that if you don't understand the cause, your intervention won't have a lasting impact.

Let's examine the client who has issues engaging their team. If the actual cause of their behavior is anxiety about feeling judged, and your intervention is targeted at helping them understand that a good leader is more than just a good manager, you will help them. For a little while. After all, everyone can improve by learning what a good leader does. But that intervention does not address the actual problem--their social anxiety. Pretty soon, the real problem will rear its ugly head and your manager will again have engagement issues. The only way to permanently help this client is to treat the actual problem.

It's like giving Tylenol to someone with a broken arm. The Tylenol will help them feel better for a little while, but until you treat the arm, you can't permanently take away the pain.

### **Simple Steps to Help Clients Understand Cause and Effect**

Both of the following interventions are effective in helping clients understand the causes of their problem behaviors. We typically use both interventions with our clients.

#### *Intervention 1*

Start by having your clients identify a problem behavior that they want to change. Have them describe in detail the last time they engaged in that behavior. Ask probing questions about the circumstances surrounding the behavior. Make sure that you dive deeply and explore all potential causes.

Potential causes to explore include but are not limited to:

- People that were around (or weren't around) when the behavior occurred
- Time of day
- Physiological state (e.g., hungry or tired)
- Location and physical surroundings
- Ambiance of the location
- Their feelings
- Their thoughts

- What happened previously in the day
- What happened immediately before the behavior

Repeat this line of questioning for another time that they engaged in the problem behavior. Help them spot any patterns in the circumstances surrounding their behavior. Finish by asking them to identify the root cause of their behavior.

### *Intervention 2*

Give your client(s) a take home assignment to create an event log (journal) of their problem behavior. Every time they engage in the behavior, ask them to write down what happened and then describe their surroundings (including people they are around), time of day, physical, mental, and emotional state right before the problem behavior occurred.

## TRAP #4

# Underestimating the Power of the Situation

One of the pitfalls that your clients will fall into is not protecting themselves and their habits from the negative influence that their surroundings can have upon them. Situations are incredibly powerful and shape human behavior in every domain that social scientists have studied.

According to famed Stanford Professor Walter Mischel, situations are so powerful that if we examine an individual's behavior across a number of situations, personality has close to zero influence on behavior. Almost all of their behavior is accounted for by the situation.

On the surface, Dr. Mischel's claim seems ridiculous, but there are both scientific and logical arguments that indicate that the situations are so compelling, they can overwhelm personality, desire, and willpower.

Before we go on, let me ask you a rather morbid question. Would you be willing to electrocute an innocent, kindly old man to death? No, he has not done anything wrong, he is not terminally ill, and no, he does not want to die.

You wouldn't do it? What if I told you you had to? Still no, huh? Okay, what if I were wearing a lab coat? Doesn't matter, you say.

We'll see.

Dr. Henry Milgram, of Yale University, actually conducted an experiment just like the one I described. Participants, just like you, were told by a lab manager wearing a white lab coat that you had to deliver lethal levels of electric shock to an old, kindly man with a heart condition because he failed to learn the correct order of a few random words. They were not offered any money, threatened or compelled in any way. A man in a lab coat simply said, "You have no other choice, you must."

Want to know how many people did it? How many people would knowingly deliver a lethal 450-volt shock to an old, man with a heart condition?

65%. Fully  $\frac{2}{3}$  of people were willing to kill someone else for no other reason than they were told to do so by an authority figure.

That is the power of the situation.

That is what you and your clients are up against--overpowering, suffocating, debilitating pressure from their environment.

How, if situations are so controlling, can we ever hope to change our behavior?

The answer is surprisingly simple. Alcoholics Anonymous figured it out. Lots of dieters know the solution. Heck, most of your clients, deep down, know the answer.

To overcome the awesome influence of the individual's environment, you must change the environment.

Simple as that. Whatever the compulsion or negative habit is, if environmental pressures are pushing you to do it, then changing the environment will drastically improve your chances of resisting the urge. If you can't resist alcohol, then don't be around alcohol. If you can't resist sweet treats, don't be around sweet treats.

It is more than simply not having the negative pressures around, you can also use the environment to your advantage. Surround your clients with positive influences. Put them in places and around people that will "pressure" them towards positive habits. Use the awesome and terrifying power of the situation to your advantage.

Just remember, situations are powerful. Underestimating them is one of the primary reasons people don't change.

### **Simple Steps to Conquering the Power of the Situation**

Begin by first identifying the causes of one's behavior. Start with the same intervention you used for Trap #3. Have your client identify the negative behaviors that they want to change. Then ask them to identify when these behaviors are most likely to occur. Look for a pattern of times, places, situations, people, and internal thoughts and feelings that these negative behaviors seem to occur around. These are most likely the situational pressure points that encourage the negative behavior.

After you identify the negative situational pressures, discuss whether it is possible to completely avoid these triggers. For example, if your client struggles with procrastinating work whenever someone in the house turns on a TV, ask them if it is possible to keep the TV off until the work is done.

If it is not possible to avoid the negative situational pressures, then you need to help them make a plan to minimize the influence of the situation. There are many ways to do this, and you should experiment to see what actually works for your client. Some particularly effective interventions are using imagery to practice positive responses ahead of time, attaching a strong reward for not engaging in the behavior, or attaching a particularly adverse consequence to engaging in the negative behavior.

## TRAP #5

# Believing That It Will Be Easier Tomorrow

We have all heard it from our clients. Heck, we have heard it from ourselves.

“I’m going to start tomorrow. Today is my last day.”

“I’ll start over tomorrow.”

“I’m waiting until tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow it will be easier.”

It does not matter how it is said, the myth of tomorrow is destroying your ability to make reach change.

Believing that a future version of themselves, the one that is in this ideal “tomorrow land,” is somehow stronger, more courageous, and more capable of making the right choices is a mind trap that will eat your clients alive.

The reality is that the person that will wake up in their bed tomorrow is the same person that went to sleep in that bed. That tomorrow self will have all the same strengths, weaknesses, virtues, and faults. That tomorrow self will feel the exact same desire to give into temptations and distractions. That person is just as likely to put off real change until their tomorrow finally comes.

Sadly, if you are not strong enough to make the change today or to take appropriate steps to combat future obstacles, there is little likelihood that you will successfully make the change tomorrow.

This is where we as change experts can really help our clients! We can help them bust up the myth of tomorrow and realize that today is their day! Today is the day that they are going to be their best selves. And instead of putting all the heavy work of trying to change on their future selves, we are going to help them make it easier for their future selves to succeed.

### **Simple Steps to Busting Up The Myth of Tomorrow**

First, have your clients identify the obstacles, temptations, and distractions that stop them from abandoning their bad habits and replacing them with positive habit and behaviors.

Instruct your client(s) to rate each item on how much it influenced their behavior in the past and how likely it is to influence their behavior in the future. If there is any difference between these

two ratings, your client is probably experiencing a mindtrap. They think that their tomorrow selves will somehow, magically be stronger. Take this opportunity to discuss the problems that arise from this belief (e.g., anxiety, stress, shame, and lack of determination).

With the myth busted, it is time to help them actually be stronger tomorrow. You are going to do that by helping them make good choices easier for their future selves.

Use the same intervention we used when we were trying to overcome the power of the situation. Why? Because it works and it works really well.

Ask your client to identify the times, situations, and internal thoughts and feelings that give rise to each roadblock. These are the triggers that elicit the problem behavior.

Use the power of situations to your advantage and make a plan to avoid the triggers. For example, if your client struggles with keeping a cool demeanor, or “losing their temper” when a certain topic comes up, help them make a plan to avoid that subject.

If the triggers are impossible to avoid, then your plan should address what they can/should do if/when they encounter the trigger. Imagery is a powerful tool to help in “practicing” their positive responses ahead of time.

# Final Thoughts

I heard a woman recently say to another, "I was going to wait until tomorrow..."

I couldn't help but think she was at a crossroad. She could follow that sentence up with, "instead I started now." By completely embracing the now she could start becoming the person she wants to be. Living and working with strength, present in the moment. Happy today.

I

Or she could follow that sentence up with, "but I missed my chance," which is what happens to 90% of us. We put off living until tomorrow. We say that tomorrow will be the day that we start enjoying life/being productive/dieting/exercising/being the person we are supposed to be. But then the moment passes us by leaving us with missed opportunities and regrets.

The funny thing about tomorrow is...it never comes. All we have is today.

So today, let's help our clients be their best selves. Let's help them cast off the mindsets that are trapping them. Let's make real change.

## **Appendix A: A Little More about Milgram**

Okay, so you are still hung up on the Milgram study, huh? Want to know more? Here is the story in full.

After World War II ended, Yale psychologist Dr. Henry Milgram embarked on a series of experiments to explain why so many Germans would go along and even participate in the horrors of the holocaust. His theory was that the German population was not evil, but rather that humans have a natural and, at times, overbearing tendency to be obedient to authority.

To test his theory, Dr. Milgram invited people to his laboratory for experiments in “learning.” When his study participants arrived at the lab, they waited a few minutes in a waiting room. In the room, was another participant, a kindly, elderly man who complained of “heart problems.” Unbeknownst to the study participants, the elderly man was an actor and part of the experiment.

Eventually, a lab manager in a white lab coat entered the room and explained to the study participants and the actor that the staff were evaluating the effects of punishment on learning. The lab manager assigned the actor to the role of the “learner,” took him to a room, and assigned the study participants to the role of the “teacher,” and directed them to a separate room.

The teacher’s job was to read a series of words to the learner and ask him to repeat back the words. If the old man made a mistake or failed to repeat the words, the teacher was to deliver a punishment...in the form of an electric shock. With each succeeding mistake the elderly gentleman made, the teacher was to increase the voltage of the shock.

While there was no actual shock delivered, the teachers did not know that. Placed in front of them was a “shock panel” with triggers to deliver shocks ranging from a slight shock of 5 volts all the way up to a lethal 450 volts. Their instructions were to start at 5 volts and move their way up to stronger volts each time the oldster made a mistake. (There is a lesson here about escalating commitment but that will have to wait for another time.)

Once the experiment began, it was apparent that the old man was in trouble. He would often make mistakes when repeating back the memorized words. Every time, the lab manager would tell the teacher to shock him. The old man would scream in pain, demand to be let out, plead for them to stop, but the lab manager would insist that the experiment continue.

Almost all of the study participants would continue giving the old man shocks with each mistake. However, some would verbally rebel and plead the old man’s case, but when the lab manager would respond with commands like, “you must continue,” they would go right back to shocking the old man.

Eventually, the old man would yell about his heart, a loud thud would come from the other room, and then the old man's voice would go completely silent. To all observers, it appeared he was either dead or severely injured.

Did this stop the experiment? Did the participants finally resist and go to aid the old man? Some did. But very few. Two-thirds of the participants would continue the experiment, shocking the now silent and possibly dead old man with more and more volts, until finally, they reached the volts marked lethal and delivered the final shock.

Throughout this whole experiment, the lab manager did nothing except to insist that the experiment continue. In fact, the lab manager only said 4 phrases, though he repeated them often throughout the experiment. "Please *continue*." "The experiment requires that you *continue*." "It is absolutely essential that you *continue*." "You have no other choice, you *must* go on." Those simple words, an air of authority, and the unbelievable power of the situation were all it took for regular people to harm and possibly kill another human being.