


While engaged in online research for a presentation regarding the psychology of rule breaking, I came across a 1993 press release from the Stanford University News Service titled, "Psychology Assignment Lets Students Break the Rules." The press release described an introductory social psychology course designed to provide students with an overview of current research

experienced by the Stanford University students is something that all of us have experienced and is an exceedingly powerful force in regulating behavior. It is the "invisible hand" that makes civilization possible, and it is a force that compliance and ethics officers must not only take into account, but learn to wield in their efforts to induce and/or compel compliant and ethical behavior in their organizations.

ensure the "invisible hand" continues to push in the right direction.

However, there may be situations in which the invisible hand is working strongly against you because cultural norms have been established, by society at large, or in a particular department or group of employees that run contrary to the law and/or corporate behavioral expectations. Typical examples of such undesirable cultural norms are:

- "Imperial" CEOs, senior managers, or board members who think the rules do not apply to them;
- Endemic discrimination against certain social groups (e.g., the cast system in India);
- Locations/departments where commercial bribery (kickbacks) are an expected business practice; and
- Locations/departments where payoffs to government officials are a way of life.

In many cases, the pressure of the invisible hand is amplified by internally and externally driven expectations to succeed and the ever-present gravitational pull of self-interest and greed. It is in these areas that compliance and ethics officers should target the majority of their resources because significant and sustained intervention will be required to induce and/or compel desired behaviors in such circumstances. The object of such efforts should not be just to oppose the force of the invisible hand, but to wield it by reversing its direction. In doing so, you take advantage of its considerable power to create a self-sustaining culture of compliance that works to discourage rather than encourage non-compliant or unethical behavior. 

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Wielding the Invisible Hand

BY JIM NORTZ

on attitudes and persuasion, social influence, conformity, altruism, norms and roles, aggression, and the psychology of good and evil. In this course, students were required to pick an unwritten social rule and break it for a whole day and then write a paper about their experience. The only requirements were that they not harm anyone (including themselves), and that they don't tell anybody why they are behaving strangely.

The press release described some of the behaviors selected by the students. One student ate like a dog—without using his hands. Another shaved his head, rented a monk's robe, and sat cross-legged in a trance for three hours at the Stanford Shopping Center. One wore a plastic barrette in his hair. My favorite was the student who chose to just smile all the time "like the joker in Batman." The social reaction to these antics was about what you would expect—immediate and negative. People called the students names, avoided eye contact, and ostracized them.

This social pressure to conform

When beginning to think about how to use our universal compulsion to "fit in" as a tool in your compliance and ethics program, it is important to recognize that this invisible hand is already doing most of the heavy lifting. If your organization is like most, the vast majority of your employees, including your senior managers, have not taken the time to even read the company policies and procedures, let alone think deeply about how to conform their behavior to their precepts. Nevertheless, the vast majority of your employees are likely to comply with company policies anyway. I submit that the reason for this is that the majority of your company's policies are merely a codification of behaviors mandated by existing social norms like those that command us not to steal, hurt others, be rude, dress like a clown, be late for work, ignore what the boss says, cheat, or lie. If this hypothesis is true, one focus of your compliance and ethics program should be to merely reinforce what is already being well-regulated by social pressures to



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