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24 KARAT SUCCESS



GOLDEN RULES FOR A
FULFILLED AND SUCCESSFUL
LIFE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Karat 7: Pledge yourself

Commitment as a tool

The life of the lower working class in Latin America is by no means easy. It is hard enough to earn money for food and clothing. But having your own roof over your head is almost impossible. Cement companies in the region also find life tough: a large proportion of their potential customers can't afford to build houses.

What's to be done? Should cement companies lower their prices to make the product more affordable? Can customers somehow save enough money? CEMEX, the largest cement manufacturer in the region, found a solution. It realized: "We are not actually selling these ugly grey bags of cement. No sir, we are selling a dream – the dream of owning your own house. And people are ready to do a lot to turn this dream into reality."

So, CEMEX set up a program called *Patrimonio Hoy*¹⁴⁹, which provides building materials, microfinance, technical assistance and logistical support for people on low incomes who aspire to decent housing. People who are interested register and join a three-member cell. This cell then assumes responsibility for collecting weekly payments, which entitle its members to the help. The support even includes architectural advice, which leads to more attractive and valuable houses.

Participants in the program are able to build their houses in one-third of the time and at 80 percent of the cost that would be required without this assistance. More than 500,000 families in Latin America have already participated in *Patrimonio Hoy* – and CEMEX profits from a demographic segment that was previously considered extremely unattractive.

The secret of this success? People's commitment to themselves and to others. As a member of a cell in the *Patrimonio Hoy* 'Club' each member commits themselves to the entire club *and*, very personally, to the other two members of their cell. This makes it considerably more difficult for individuals to waste their money and not pay their contribution.

Weight Watchers and Alcoholics Anonymous are further examples of this kind of commitment. The weekly meetings help people to stick to what they have committed to in the group even once they are at home and alone with the fridge and the bottles.

The effectiveness of this kind of public commitment became obvious during the Korean War.¹⁵⁰ Between 1950 and 1953, the Chinese fought on the side of North Korea, the Americans on the side of South Korea. About 7,000 US soldiers ended up as prisoners of war in Chinese camps. After their release, the American government was appalled at how many of the soldiers now subscribed to communist ideas. Worried, they hired psychologists to find out what had happened. They expected to uncover torture or direct indoctrination, but instead they found something much more powerful and lasting.

During their time in the camps, the prisoners time and time again had to attend meetings, in which, time and time again, the leader of the meeting, a Chinese party soldier, would ask: "Is everything perfect in America? Really? Everything?" Finally, one of the Americans (let's call him John), ends up getting so irritated that he bursts out: "No, of course not everything is perfect." The Chinese party soldier replies: "Interesting John, please explain it to us in more detail." John then probably talks about the economy, the health system or racial discrimination. Several questions later John is asked to repeat all of this. In front of everyone. Asked to write it down. Asked to read it out at the morning roll call. Last but not least, hear his speech broadcast on camp radio, with his full name as the author.

In addition, articles published in the camp newspaper were rewarded with treasures such as fruit and cigarettes – and communist-oriented contributions stood a greater chance of being published.¹⁵¹

The American psychologists quickly realized that they were dealing with effective self-indoctrination. The underlying issue here is that people want to like themselves. Yes, we do! That is why we very much appreciate when we can speak and act in line with our beliefs ('cognitive harmony') – and hate having to say or do anything that we really do not believe in ('cognitive dissonance'). Especially in public. There is one exception: if we can claim that we only said (or did) something in order to survive. But the Chinese had blocked this excuse because although the prizes for the essays were coveted, they were by

no means necessary for survival. Consequently, no one could claim to others, let alone to themselves, that they had written a pro-communist piece to save themselves from certain death.

So the prisoners squared the circle by actually *believing* what they had said in public. They overcame 'cognitive dissonance' – thinking one thing and saying another – by becoming increasingly communist. Some even chose to go and live in China after their release.

The same principle often leads people to stick to decisions regardless of any new facts that come to light which actually change the picture.

A study from the 1950s sets the standard for this entire field of research.¹⁵² (Older studies can be as valuable as new ones. Some fields have already been researched so extensively in the early years that there is simply no point in scientists and psychologists wasting brain power on replicating well-known findings. This study is an example.) The participants were asked to estimate the length of lines. One group wrote their answer on a piece of paper and handed it to the test administrator. The second group had a kind of magic pad on which to write the answer: they wrote on a piece of transparent foil, which, when lifted, left no trace of the writing. And the third group was asked to take the decision in their heads, and write nothing down. The three groups were then given new information about the lines, and again asked to estimate the lengths of the lines. Members of the group that had written nothing down changed their opinion frequently (as they told the researcher afterwards), while those in the other two groups hardly changed their estimates at all.

This means that not only the public confession (Group 1 on paper), but also the confession only to themselves (Group 2 on the magic pad), was enough to cause people to completely and utterly reject new information and stick to their original assessment.

How does this principle apply in everyday life? Car insurers use it. For example, to prevent policyholders from deliberately underestimating their mileage, they ask them to sign a statement on the first page: "I confirm that the information I provide is true." And immediately the fraud rate plummets.¹⁵³ Once we have confirmed that we are providing truthful information, we are much more likely to adhere to it. A signature at the end of the document, on the other hand, is a far less effective deterrent.

With Patrimonio Hoy, members made the commitment several times: to Patrimonio Hoy, to their own cell and to themselves. A most productive threesome!

7th golden rule

To stick with it, commit to it!

If people make a commitment to themselves or to others, they are prepared to fully internalize whatever they have committed to and to persistently hold on to it.

*We hate wooden toys,
we hate wooden toys*



*Tim now knew the
plastic robot was
within his reach*

Brief story to delve more deeply into golden rule number 7

An interesting phenomenon can be observed in horse racing.¹⁵⁴ If punters queuing up to place their bets are asked how likely they think 'their' horse is to win, the answers – on a scale of 1 to 7 – are mostly around 3.5. In other words, they reckon their horse has a 50–50 chance of winning. Anything less would be astonishing, of course, because, rationally, that should prompt them to bet on another horse. And to have given the horse a higher chance would be presumptuous, because everyone knows how unpredictable victory is.

But what if you ask those who placed their bet just 30 seconds earlier? Logically, you would expect the result to be around 3.5 again. But no: players now think their horse has a better chance of winning – their answers come out at 4.8 on the scale.

This is a wonderful example of the power of commitment: "If I placed money on a horse, it must have been a truly wise and clever decision." Cognitive harmony in action!

Lessons for you personally

For work

- Negotiations on a major joint project have reached an impasse. The other side is getting more and more aggressive. Nothing is moving. What can you do? At the beginning of the next negotiation, you explain how you personally envisage the joint project, the joint office, the joint product, the joint logo, or whatever it is. Now you ask the other side: "Is that also what you have in mind?"

If the answer is yes, you can add: "I assume that you are still on board?"

The answer again will probably be yes.

"And I am assuming that, like us, you will try everything to make this joint vision a reality?"

If the other party replies in the affirmative to these and other similar questions, you should put it on record and keep stressing how good it is that everyone is working together. This public commitment makes it almost impossible for the other side to maintain its aggressive behavior.

- Your company wants to take part in a charity run that starts at 7 o'clock on a Saturday morning. Each team, including yours, is to have five runners. You are slightly worried, as your team consists of young, party-loving people, who will not take kindly to such an early rise. Use the so-called 'low-balling technique', which is based on the principle of commitment. First, ask everyone if they are willing in principle to participate in a charity run on behalf of the company. Only when you've secured their commitment do you reveal the starting time. You'll find that, by then, most people are prepared to make the sacrifice – get up at an unearthly hour!¹⁵⁵

At home

- You love DIY and would like to pass on your skills to your children. But you don't want them to hurt themselves. You certainly don't want them using the chain saw without supervision. How can you ensure this? The results of the following research study may be helpful here.¹⁵⁶ Eighty children were shown five toys, of which the robot – according to the children – was clearly the most interesting. One group of children was told: “When I leave, you can play with all the toys, except with the robot. It is wrong to play with the robot.” The other children were told: “If you play with the robot, I will get very angry and there will be consequences.” Neither group played with the robot. More than a month later, during a seemingly different study, the same children were allowed, during a break, to play with each of the five toys in the room, including, of course, the fantastic robot. The group of children who had been threatened with severe consequence now played predominantly with the robot, but none of the children in the group who had received only the mild ban went anywhere near the robot. Why? These children could not find refuge in the thought that someone else had threatened and forbidden them to play with the robot. So they created an alternative explanation: “I didn't play with the robot then because I didn't find it interesting. And I feel the same way today.” They thereby devalued the toy and were thus able to resist it not only in the first instant but also in the second situation. A ban on the use of the chainsaw, which is associated with a threat of punishment, is much more likely to stir up curiosity and prompt misuse than the

clear announcement that it is wrong to handle the chainsaw without supervision.

- You would be happy if your partner went for walks with you more often. They are athletic and active, but usually come up with some excuse – like they don't have time because they are doing another fitness activity, such as an exercise class, a run, or a bout of boxing later in the day. The following trick should help you. “Sweetheart, I read something today about the initial assessment of people. There are two types: the sporty and the unsporty. The second one is recognizable by the fact that they consider any form of physical activity boring. The athletic one, on the other hand, sees every kind of activity as positive, even like hanging-up clothes, taking out the garbage and going for a walk.” And then you ask innocently: “You do like going for walks, don't you?” They will probably reply: “Yes, of course. Generally, yes....” And this 'yes' sticks in their head and soon you will find yourself strolling together arm in arm through beautiful meadows.

For yourself

- You finally want to stop smoking? Why not follow the example of the woman cited by Robert Cialdini in his book *Influence: The psychology of persuasion*?¹⁵⁷ She wrote a card bearing the following words to each of her friends and acquaintances, to people she admired very much and to a man she had fallen in love with: “I pledge I will never smoke a cigarette again.” Whenever she wanted to smoke, she imagined what the people to whom she had written the card would think of her – and from that day on she was a proud non-smoker. In other words: Commit yourself not only to yourself, but also to others!
- You would like to be better at resisting spontaneous urges. For example, you are tormented by the longing for a bar of chocolate in the pantry. A little voice in your head is telling you not to succumb, but you know from experience that, when it comes to chocolate, resistance is futile. What can you do? When you get the craving, tell yourself: “I can eat the chocolate later in the week.” What is the point of this? Research shows that, on average, this will allow you to resist the chocolate bar for five whole days.¹⁵⁸ Why? Through this

unspecific postponement (of your own making) you have managed to devalue that which you initially craved: “Well, if I can wait a few days for it, then it is probably not as important to me as I thought it was.” And why would you get up and go to the pantry for something unimportant? Your belly will thank you for this clever act!

Five questions for reflection

1. Do you notice whether you only stick to your opinion, even to the extent of blocking out new information, because you have already shared your opinion with others?
2. How would you have to adjust your mindset to allow yourself to absorb new information even if that meant changing your mind?
3. Look around you: Where would it make sense to try to persuade people to commit themselves publicly and therefore increase their commitment?
4. Does the thought of 'manipulating' someone's position bother you? If so, why? Particularly if the 'manipulation' might be in their best interests?
5. Which projects in your life can you tackle more proactively, and with a greater chance of success, through the use of commitments?