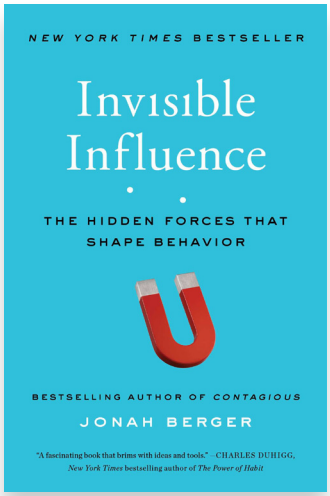

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Invisible Influence

THE SUMMARY

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Introduction

Think about a choice you made recently. Any choice. Which breakfast cereal to buy, movie to see, or place to have lunch. Or even a more important decision: which person to date, political candidate to support, or career to pursue.

Why did you make that choice? Why did you pick the particular option you ended up choosing? It seems like an easy question. While various idiosyncratic reasons come to mind, in general, they all point to the same direction: you. *Your* personal tastes and preferences. *Your* likes and dislikes. Which potential mate *you* found funny or attractive. Whether the candidate's policy matches *your* own. The notion that our choices are driven by our own personal thoughts and options seems so obvious that it is not even worth mentioning.

Except that it's wrong. Ninety-nine-point nine percent of all decisions are shaped by others. It's hard to find a decision or behavior that isn't affected by other people. This book is about the simple, subtle, and often surprising ways that others affect our behavior.

CHAPTER ONE: Monkey See, Monkey Do

There are thousands of books, movies and songs vying for everyone's attention, but no one has the time to read every book jacket or listen to every sample clip. Most people don't have the bandwidth to check out even a small percentage of the options.

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So we use others as a helpful shortcut. A filter. If a book is on the bestseller list, we're more likely to skim the description. If a song is already popular, we're more likely to give it a listen. Following others saves us time and effort and (hopefully) leads us to something we're more likely to enjoy.

Does that mean we'll like all those books or songs ourselves? Not necessarily. But we're more likely to check them out and give them a try. And given the thousands of competing options out there, this increased attention is enough to give those items a boost.

Knowing others like something encourages people to give it the benefit of the doubt. Appearing on the best-seller list provides an air of credibility. If that many people bought it, it must be good.

But when trying to persuade others or convince them to do something, people tend to default to rewards or punishments. The employee of the month gets $100 and his name up on the wall. Kids are told to eat their vegetables or they won't get ice cream for dessert. While rewards or punishments are effective in the short term, they often undermine what they set out to achieve.

Kids make inferences about ice cream and vegetables. They like ice cream, and while they might not love vegetables, the ice cream reward undermines any positive feelings they might have had. After all, if vegetables were good in the first place, why would they need a reward to eat them?

An ice cream reward also sends out a subtle signal that vegetables aren't worth eating on their own—that kids need to be paid (in ice cream) to eat them. When parents stop paying, kids will stop eating. Whenever they get the opportunity to make their own food choices, vegetables will be tossed to the side. The same goes for employees. They start to infer that the only reason to be on time and give good service is because they'll get paid more, not because they care about their job.

Using social influence is more effective because people mimic other people's choices and actions. If their parents can't seem to get enough broccoli, kids will follow suit. Unfortunately, many parents signal to their kids that vegetables are not tasty. Parents don't put many vegetables on their own plate, and they eat the steak first. So, if their parents aren't eating vegetables, why would the kids want to?

But if broccoli is the first thing on their parents' plate, and the first thing their parents eat, kids will do the same. The more kids see their parents eating something—and liking it—the more likely they'll be to do the same.

Mimicry is also a helpful tool. Research shows that when a waiter repeats your order back to you, word-for-word, copying the exact thing you said—instead of "okay" or "coming right up!"—this mimicry will increase the waiter's tip by seventy percent.

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Whether trying to win a contract, or attempting to get someone to do something, subtly mimicking people's language and mannerisms is an easy place to start. Even something as simple as mimicking their greeting style (e.g., "Hey," "Hi," or "Hello") in e-mails increases affiliation.

By understanding why people imitate, we can also learn to be less susceptible to influence ourselves. When a focus group meets to share an opinion, or a committee forms to decide who to hire—whoever speaks first has a big impact on the outcome. Group members who are on the fence tend to conform, and unless someone has strong objections, they tend to keep their opposition to themselves. Without much of a peep, the group quietly goes one way when they could have just as easily gone the opposite.

Consequently, eliciting everyone's individual information is vital. Aggregating these pieces can lead to better decisions than any person could have made alone. So how does one do that? Just having another dissenting voice makes people feel more comfortable in expressing their own personal opinion—even if they don't agree. That dissenting voice changes the nature of the discussion. No longer is it right versus wrong, or "with the group" versus "against the group." Now the answer is a matter of opinion. And if it's clear that there are different opinions, everyone feels much more comfortable sharing theirs.

To encourage dissenting views, some managers explicitly give one person the job of constantly voicing an opposing perspective. Not only does it encourage people who hold that particular perspective to speak up, it encourages other alternative viewpoints as well.

If people can't see, or observe what others are doing, there is no way for those others to influence them. Consequently, another way to break the influence of influence is to make choices or opinions private. Using written ballots rather than a show of hands at meetings encourages independence and helps avoid groupthink.

If one wants to influence others, going first is an easy way to shape a discussion. While not everyone may agree, it provides a gravitational attraction, encouraging neutral others to glom on. Alternatively, rather than trying to sway a whole room, it's much easier to build consensus by going around to each person individually beforehand. By starting with others who agree, it's possible to build a small coalition that can later help win over those who are on the fence.

If one wants to avoid people influencing his decisions, keeping them private helps. That is why expectant parents often keep their baby's name a secret until the child is born.

CHAPTER TWO: A Horse of a Different Color

While social influence can push people to imitate others, it also seems to push some to distinguish themselves from others. Firstborn children tend to do better academically. They have higher GPA'S,

score higher on the SAT, and have higher national merit scores. They are more likely to go to college and attend more selective schools.

Born into this environment, younger siblings are faced with a choice: they can try to do well in school, like their older brother or sister, or they can seek a different niche. They can follow the trodden path, or they can break out and blaze a new one.

Consistent with this notion, younger siblings tend to do better in sports. Not only are "laterborns" overrepresented among elite athletes, they're overrepresented among successful athletes in general. Good high school and college athletes tend to have older siblings. Whether they had one sibling or three or four didn't seem to matter. What mattered is that they had at least one older brother or sister. Firstborns were less likely to be varsity athletes and only children were even less likely.

Firstborn children also tend to hold more conservative political and social beliefs. They're less likely to support abortion or endorse casual sex. Laterborns, however, tend to be more liberal. They're less likely to attend religious services and more likely to admit to cheating on a test or drinking beer in high school.

It's important not to overgeneralize from these relationships, but siblings serve an important function. They are not only playmates and confidants, they shape the environment one grows up in as well—both as role models and as points of differentiation.

Outside of the family, if anything, we would expect people to imitate others, because other people's choices provide information. The more people pick something, the better that thing must be. Otherwise, why would so many people pick it? If popularity signals quality, people would pick whatever is popular. But sometimes people don't want to be the same as everyone else. Sometimes people want to be different.

Two consumer psychologists posed as waiters conducting a beer tasting. They offered groups of patrons sitting together the opportunity to sample one of four house beers. Free beer? Most people were more than happy to participate. For half of the tables, the waiters went around the table, one by one, asking people which beer they wanted. The patrons at the other tables ordered privately, writing their selection on paper and handing them in so that no one could see what they ordered.

Everyone received the same information and the same choice of beers. The only difference was half the people knew what the others had selected before making their own choice, and the other half didn't. When the researchers analyzed the data they discovered the patrons who knew what others had ordered were much less satisfied with the beer they chose, and they were three times more likely to regret their choice. Why? Because many had switched their order to be distinct. They picked a different option than they would normally to avoid ordering the same beer as someone else.

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People often avoid things when too many other people like them—the so-called "snob effect." The more other people own or use something, the less interested new people are in buying or using it.

Most people don't want to be the only one doing something, but if too many people are doing it, they go ahead and do something else. When kale or quinoa becomes too trendy, there's a backlash. When everyone starts talking about how dots are the new stripes, some of the initial dot wearers move on even if it means giving up something they like because others like it as well.

Differentiation is something everyone feels to some degree, albeit in varying shades. It helps establish a sense of identity, delineating both who someone is and isn't. Being aware of how distinction shapes behavior can lead to more satisfying decisions. When ordering food in groups, an individual will probably be happier if he sticks to his preferred option, even if someone else selects it as well. He won't feel unique, but he can easily order a different drink or focus on how he is different on some other dimension. Then, rather than being stuck with something he likes less, he'll have the rest of the meal to enjoy what he chose. Another option is to try to be the first one to order by signaling to the waiter. They'll offer to take his order first and then he won't have to worry about other's choices affecting his own.

Design choices, and choice environments, also allow people to distinguish themselves. Apple produces the iPod in a wide range of colors. Some people might prefer blue or red to grey, but colors like orange and yellow go beyond catering to personal preference. (Few people report yellow as their favorite color.) By creating so many variants, Apple enables customers to feel distinct even though the product is hugely popular and essentially the same for everyone. Your friend can have a green one, your co-worker can have a purple one, your mom can have a blue one, and you can still feel unique because yours is red. It's yours and yours alone.

Distinction also helps explain the success of places like Starbucks. Sure the beans might be a little better or the atmosphere might be a little nicer, but it's still three to four times the price of McDonalds. So why are people so happy to pay the higher price? Starbucks isn't just selling coffee. It's selling a personalized experience. Anyone can get his order customized exactly how he wants it. His Starbucks coffee isn't just the same as the guy or gal who is in front of him in line. It's tailored to his specific unique tastes, with his (mostly) unique name written on the side. It's a four-dollar reminder that he is special and different and not like everyone else. That's a small price to pay for feeling distinct.

CHAPTER THREE: Not If *They're* Doing It

Paying famous people to wear clothes from a certain brand is a standard marketing tactic. Actresses receive huge sums to wear dresses from particular designers at the Oscars. Tiffany & Co paid host Anne Hathaway $750,000 dollars to wear their jewelry at the Academy Awards. The expectation is that such placement will increase sales. Seeing items on their favorite stars will make people want them more.

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In 2010, Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi, one of the breakout stars of the MTV reality show *Jersey Shore*, received a $900 Gucci bag—one of the hottest that season—as a gift from one of Gucci's competitors. That same year, her co-star, Mike "The Situation" Sorrentino, was offered a significant sum of money by Abercrombie & Fitch—to *not* wear their clothes. Why? Abercrombie was worried what would happen if the wrong celebrities started wearing the brand because if lots of *Jersey Shore* wannabes started wearing Abercrombie, then the clothes might stop signaling preppy WASP and start signaling something else. If that happened, people who wanted to look like preppy WASPS might abandon the brand. People don't just care about whether others are doing something, or how many others are doing it, they also care about *who* those others are.

Like an amateur Sherlock Holmes, we try to deduce things about the people around us based on their choices. Cars and clothes serve more than just a functional purpose. They act as a silent communication system, signaling information to others. We use people's choices as signals of who they are and what they're like. Someone who wears a North Face jacket might be outdoorsy. Someone who uses an Apple laptop might be creative.

In some ways, these inferences seem silly. Does what ice cream someone bought (Haagen-Dazs? Generic?) really provide all that much information about whether they'd be a good babysitter? Not really. But from another perspective, it makes a lot of sense. Without making these, and many similar inferences, life would be a lot more difficult. How else could we get a sense of which person at a party we might enjoy talking to, or which job applicant might be a better fit?

Signals provide an easy shortcut; a way to simplify decision-making. We use observable characteristics like how someone dresses, how she talks, or what she drives as a clue to more unobservable characteristics, like whether she'd be fun to grab a beer or go to dinner with. We piece together clues to help us solve the puzzle.

But signals aren't set in stone. They can be revised with new information. Furthermore, we don't just make inferences about others, we also choose things based on *who* they are associated with.

People diverge to avoid communicating undesired identities. Students ate less candy when they saw an obese person eating a lot, and professionals stopped calling their children *Jr.* once the practice was adopted by the working class. Minivan sales tanked when they became associated with soccer moms, and tech CEOs wore hoodies rather than suits to avoid looking like, well, a suit.

Misidentification is costly. Wearing a shirt with an indie band like Asian Spider Monkey emblazoned across the front is a great signal. It helps you meet other people who like the same music and maybe even find the perfect mate. ("You like them, too?!") But if fashionistas start wearing the shirt because they've heard the band is the next big thing, the T-shirt loses its value as a signal. Not only is the wearer no longer unique, but observers don't know whether someone wearing the shirt is an indie rock fan or a fashionista, or whether he loves guitar riffs or Prada's new spring collection. As a result, indie rock fans who wear the shirt may be ignored by potential mates and friends.

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Misidentification leads us to miss out on desired interactions and endure undesired ones. Even worse, it may lead people to think someone is a wannabe who copies the style of a subculture but isn't part of it.

Not all misidentification, though, is equal. The greater the dissimilarity, the greater the cost of misidentification. It's never ideal to be thought of as someone you're not, but the more dissimilar the mistake is, the worse it gets. Most twenty-five-year-olds don't want to seem like they're thirty, but they really don't want to seem like they're thirty-five (or seventeen).

The further the mistaken identity, the higher the cost. Seeming that much younger may lead to missed promotions and not being taken seriously. And seeming that much older may lead to being left off party invitations or emails to join that new kickball league. The further the perception is from reality, the more detrimental.

The Hoffbrau Steakhouse chain in Texas offered two Smoked Sirloins—the twelve-ounce cut and the eight-ounce Ladies cut. Around eighty percent of women chose the Ladies Cut steak. Ninety percent of men chose the larger steak, because they were worried about being perceived as less masculine. When the smaller steak was relabeled "Chef's Cut," men were more than happy to choose the smaller size.

Women make up almost sixty percent of college graduates, but they make up only twenty-four percent of the science, technology, engineering, and math workforce. Research finds that one reason is the identity they associate with these fields. Women think of computer science as dominated by geeky guys who love *Star Trek* and video games.

One study observed that black students in a low-income area school who got good grades or took advanced courses were often ridiculed by their peers for "acting white." Spending time in the library, studying hard, or trying to get good grades was labeled as "white," and thus unacceptable. Many black students had the ability to do well in school, but stopped working hard because they didn't want to be ostracized by their peers. Students who did perform well worked to camouflage their success by pretending to be dumb or acting like class clowns so no one could claim they were trying too hard.

Some signals endure. The more costly a signal is, the more likely it is to retain its value as a clear and accurate signal. Observers can be pretty sure that someone who owns a yacht is rich and that someone who rides a fixie knows her bikes. This is because the more costly it is, the less likely outsiders will be to poach it. Eyebrow piercings make it hard to get a high-paying office job. Washboard abs require hundreds of sit-ups and skipping dessert. The Mohawk has retained its value as a signal of outsider culture because most people would love to seem a little edgy, but they're not willing to shave both sides of their head to do it.

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CHAPTER FOUR: Similar but Different

In some ways, our emotional reactions are a bit like Goldilocks from Goldilocks and the Three Bears. In the children's tale, each of the bears has its own preference for bedding and food. One bear has a firm bed, one bear has a soft bed, and one has a bed somewhere in the middle. One bear likes his porridge hot, one likes it cold, and one likes it somewhere in between.

Goldilocks tries each, but is always turned off by the extremes. The firm bed is too firm and the soft bed is too soft. The hot porridge is too hot and the cold porridge too cold. But the middle bed and the middle porridge? Well, those are just right.

When something is new, people initially feel slightly negative (or neutral). Then, after repeated exposure, things become more familiar and they start to feel more positive. Eventually, after too many exposures, boredom kicks in and liking declines. So too novel and it's unfamiliar. Too familiar and it's boring. But in between and it's just right.

Moderately discrepant things also tend to garner more attention. Take an infant who has just learned a set of expectations about what a dog looks like—how many legs, that it has fur, the range of sizes. Seeing a dog picture they've seen before is less interesting because it is wholly familiar, and seeing something that looks completely different from a dog (a whale, for example) is so unfamiliar as to be confusing and incomprehensible. But seeing something that is moderately discrepant from their existing knowledge or expectations (a hairless dog) should be particularly intriguing because it doesn't fit with their existing notion of what a dog should be. It's similar enough to be comprehensible, but different enough to evoke interest and exploration.

The right blend of familiarity and novelty also drives what becomes popular. Hit fashion styles, such as skinny jeans, often take something we all know well (jeans) and add novelty (a new cut). Things that catch on, then, whether in music, fashion, or any other domain, often hits this Goldilocks range: similar enough to what is already out there to evoke the warm glow of familiarity, but novel enough to seem new and not just derivative of what came before. Similarity shapes popularity because it makes novel things feel familiar.

Pry open a DVR and a VCR (if you can find one), and the guts are completely different. A VCR is like an old film camera. Digital video recorders are actually a computer. Even though there was no need for the device to look anything like a VCR, by using the familiar form of a black, rectangular device, people were made comfortable adopting this radical innovation.

The opposite also holds. Design can be used to make incremental innovations feel more novel. When Apple introduced the iMac in 1998, it featured only minor technological improvements. But from a visual standpoint it was radically different. Rather than the same old black or grey box, the iMac was shaped like a gumdrop and came in colors like tangerine and strawberry. The device was hugely successful, because design, rather than technology, created the needed sense of difference that encouraged people to purchase.

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Integrating similarity and difference is particularly important when managing innovation. How should a new product like the Swiffer be described? Is it a revolutionary mop? A new cleaning tool? And how should it be designed? Should seats in driverless cars face forward because that is what people are used to, even if that is no longer required? A new product or technology can be light-years ahead of the competition, but its success hinges on consumer perception. If the product seems too similar to what's already out there, people aren't compelled to purchase. If the innovation is too radical, other issues arise. Consumers don't know how to categorize it (what is a Swiffer, anyway?); they don't understand what it does and they can't tell if they really need it. Both extremes are dangerous, and carefully navigating the sweet spot in between requires effectively blending similarity and difference.

Some cars look similar to other cars on the market. The Volkswagen Jetta, for example, looks like a lot like many other cars out there. It has the same standard-looking grill and lightly sloping headlights. One could easily confuse it with a Toyota, Nissan, or a number of other available options. Other cars look more different. The Volkswagen Beetle looks unlike anything else on the market. It's actually built on the same chassis as the normal-looking Volkswagen Golf and has the same technology, but its appearance is quite distinct. These differences in visual appearance predict sales. Whether looking at economy or more premium cars, and even controlling for things like price and advertising, models that look more similar to other cars on the market, sell better.

Similarity increases evaluation (and sales) for the same reason that mere exposure works. Just as the more we see something, the more we like it, the more we see something, the more we like *other* things that share similar features.

Part of the reason similar things look or sound better is familiarity. If you've seen something before, it's easier for your brain to process. The mind doesn't have to do as much work to figure out what it is, and this reduced effort generates a positive feeling that we interpret as familiarity.

The lure of the familiar has evolutionary benefits. It helps children bond with their caregivers, guides animals toward plants that are safe to eat, and helps spouses stay together through mood swings, dirty clothes on the floor, and other bumps in the road.

Imagine if every time you encountered something, you had to figure out if it was safe. Simple actions we don't even code as decisions would become arduous. Eating cornflakes for breakfast wouldn't just be habit, it would be a life-and-death decision. You'd have to pop one flake in your mouth, and then wait to see what happened before eating any more.

This ease of processing, in turn, is coded positively. It's the warm glow of familiarity. Importantly, this warm glow doesn't just affect things we've actually been exposed to. It also extends to things that share features with what we've seen or heard previously.

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Similarity makes difference feel more palatable. Many digital actions today visually evoke their analog ancestors. We click on the icon of a floppy disk to save documents and drag digital files to be thrown away in what looks like a waste bin. High-end cars use fake wood grain on the dashboard. Veggie burgers often have grill marks.

CHAPTER FIVE: Come On Baby, Light My Fire

Whether competing or not, people who biked at the gym with others cycled twenty to thirty seconds faster per mile. Racing together seems to improve performance. Many studies have found the same pattern. The mere presence of others changes performance. People tend to do better when others are around.

This phenomenon has been described as social facilitation, where the presence of others leads people to perform faster and better than they would otherwise. Even if people aren't collaborating or competing, the mere fact that others are present changes behavior. Interestingly though, other studies have found the opposite: that people do *worse* when others are present. So which is it? Does having others around facilitate performance or inhibit it?

Evidently it depends on the complexity of the task, or the thing on which people (or animals) were being measured. If the task was easy, or something participants had done many times before, spectators would facilitate performance. But if the task was difficult, or involved learning something new, spectators would inhibit performance.

Others make us faster at tying our own shoes, for example, but slower at tying a bow tie (at least for most of us who don't tie one often). Skilled pool players make more shots when others are watching, but unskilled players miss more. If you've ever gone to the gym with a friend, or run next to someone on the treadmill, you've probably experienced the positive impact of others. Even though you're not competing, their presence helps. You lift a little harder or run a little faster.

But if you've ever had someone watch you while you parallel park, you've also probably felt others' negative impact. Parallel parking is never easy, but other people often make it more difficult.

Whether helping or hurting performance, social facilitation happens for a few reasons. First, others can be distracting. They take attention away from parallel parking or whatever else we are trying to do. Second, others increase impression management. We want to look good to others, so we try harder. Third, in part due to impression management, others increase physiological arousal. Our heart rate quickens, our blood pumps faster, and our body readies for action.

These factors lead us to do better at things that are automatic, natural, or well learned. We feel challenged, our competitive juices start flowing, and we spring to action. Faced with something we're pretty good at (e.g., running on a treadmill or doing an exercise we've done a hundred times before), we perform even better.

But for tasks that are more difficult or require more attention, those same factors make us do worse. What are they thinking? Are they going to judge me if I park badly? We feel threatened and anxious. We're worried about failing or doing badly. And that leads us to perform worse.

In a campaign to change energy conservation behavior in Southern California, researchers focused on three overarching appeals: saving money, helping the environment, and promoting social responsibility. None of the appeals worked. The conservation messages had zero impact on energy consumption. So they tried a fourth appeal. Instead of seeking to convince people to conserve energy by pointing out different reasons to do so, they simply highlighted social norms—what other people in the community were doing. "When surveyed, 77% of your neighbors use fans instead of air conditioning to keep cool in the summer. Turn off your air conditioning and turn on your fans." Households that received this message decreased their energy use significantly. Simply telling people that their neighbors were saving energy lead them to conserve more themselves.

There are many reasons that any one basketball team might win or lose any one game: team chemistry, skill, home-field advantage, even the weather. After analyzing fifteen years of play, almost twenty thousand NBA games, it was clear that teams were more likely to win when they played at home than on the road. Better teams, as indicated by a higher season winning percentage, were also more likely to win. Not surprisingly, the further ahead teams were at halftime, the more likely they were to win. Every two points ahead at halftime increased their likelihood to win by 7 percent.

This makes sense. Winning leads to winning, except at zero. Take teams losing by a point. Everything else would suggest those teams should be about seven percent less likely to win than the teams ahead by a point. Out of one hundred games, teams losing by one point at halftime should have won seven fewer games than teams winning by a point. But they didn't. In fact, teams that were losing by a point were actually more likely to win. Not only did being behind increase a team's chance of winning (by around eight percent), but compared to their opponents, teams that were behind by one actually won *more* games. Even though they tended to be worse teams and had to score more points than their opponents to win, they came out on top more often.

Competition influences motivation by shaping people's reference points. People work harder when they think they're behind. It increases their motivation, and the motivating effect of being behind happens not only for the overall goal, it also happens for progress along the way. If the goal is to bring in ten new clients this month, and halfway through only four have been brought in, a person will feel less satisfied than if he already brought in eight. Being behind the ideal trajectory can motivate people to work harder.

But is being behind always more motivating? People get more motivated as they get closer to their goal, but in competition, it's not just about being behind, it's about *how far behind* someone is. Being down by a little is often more motivating than being down by a lot because people are closer

to achieving their goal of winning. When further back, it's harder to muster than extra motivation. Along these lines, social comparisons can decrease motivation, especially if you are expected to win. If you're so far back that the chance of winning seems remote, you begin to give up. You may even search for a way to self-handicap and have an excuse in the event of poor performance.

When it comes to hiring, raising money, or even conserving energy, people aren't rational robots. Where they stand in relation to others affects motivation. Social facilitation can also help people reach their personal best. Whether training for a half marathon or just trying to lose a couple pounds, peers are a useful tool to help increase success. If you don't have a workout partner, then go to the gym when others are there. Pick the treadmill next to another runner rather than the one that is far away. Their mere presence should encourage you to work at 110 percent.

Conclusion: Putting Social Influence to Work

At our core, we are all social animals. Whether we realize it or not, other people have a subtle and surprising impact on almost everything we do. When it comes to our own lives, social influence is as silent as it is powerful. Just because we can't see it, doesn't mean it's not there.

It's easy to see social influence with a cynical eye and bemoan that people are mindless followers swayed by those around them. There are certainly cases where conformity is bad. People's tendency to imitate can encourage them to go along when they should dissent, or stay silent when they should speak up. But, by itself, social influence is neither bad nor good. If people follow others who are evil, it will lead to more evil in the world. If people follow others who are good, it will lead to more good.

We can choose our influence. Social influence has a huge impact on behavior but by understanding how it works, we can harness its power. We can avoid its downsides and take advantage of its benefits. We can maintain our individuality and avoid being swept up in the crowd. We can have more fulfilling social interactions, be more successful, and use others to help us make better-informed decisions. By understanding when social influence is beneficial, we can decide when to resist influence and when to embrace it.

By gaining insight into how social influence works, we can put it to work, improving our own lives, and the lives of others. Influence is a tool, like any other. If we understand it, we can design environments, shape situations, and build programs that harness the power of social influence to make the world a better place. Understanding these often-invisible influences can make us all better off.

Communicator's Corner

Familiarity and Novelty

Legend has it that president Calvin Coolidge and his wife, Grace, once visited a government farm. As much as Calvin Coolidge was shy, Grace was outgoing, and was a popular hostess at the White House.

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After arriving at the farm, the two went on separate tours of the facility. When Mrs. Coolidge passed a set of pens housing chickens, she stopped to ask the person in charge how frequently the rooster copulated. "Dozens of times a day," the man responded.

"Please tell that to the President," Mrs. Coolidge requested.

Later that day, Mr. Coolidge himself walked by the pens. He was informed about the roosters' behavior as well as his wife's comment.

"Same hen every time?" the president asked the keeper.

"Oh, no, Mr. President. A different one each time."

The president nodded. "Tell that to Mrs. Coolidge."

Identity Signaling and HIV
In South Africa, billions of dollars have been spent combating HIV and AIDS, yet every year thousands of babies are stillborn with the virus. Part of the challenge is making sure the right drugs reach remote hospitals across the country, but the most difficult challenge is psychological. Expecting mothers refuse the drugs that might save their babies' lives because they don't want to admit that they are HIV positive. Others infect their children through breast-feeding because they refuse to bottle-feed only, a signal in some regions that you have HIV. Improving public health thus requires more than good medicine. It requires the complex calculus of stigma and meaning.

Horsey Horseless
The first time people saw an automobile roll down the street without a horse in front, they were shocked. Rural Americans viewed this "Devil's Wagon" as symbolizing the decadence of the city, and introduced restrictive laws to block its intrusion. Horses, skittish to begin with, were spooked by these loud, rambling horseless carriages and were prone to run away, taking their passengers careening with them.

In 1899, a clever inventor proposed a solution to make people, and horses, feel more comfortable. Named the Horsey Horseless, it involved taking a life-size replica of a horse head, down to the shoulders, and attaching it to the front of an automobile.

The buggy had the appearance of a horse-drawn vehicle, and thus horses, and their human riders, would be less likely to be scared when it passed by. The fake head also could be used as a gas tank.

". . . successfully introducing radical innovations often involves cloaking technology in a skin of familiarity."

Convene

Invisible Influence

We Are All Social Animals

"Whether we realize it or not, other people have a subtle and surprising impact on almost everything we do. When it comes to our own lives, social influence is as silent as it is powerful. Just because we can't see it, doesn't mean it's not there."