

Examples of Obligation

The Law of Obligation can be used to eliminate animosity or suspicion. In one study, researcher Dennis Regan had two individuals try to sell raffle tickets to unsuspecting workers. One individual made a conscientious effort to befriend the workers before attempting to sell any tickets. The other individual made a point of being rude and obnoxious around the workers. While on a break, the individual who had previously been rude to his prospects bought them drinks before trying to get them to buy tickets. The results of the study showed that the rude individual actually sold twice as many raffle tickets, even though the other had been so much nicer and more likable.

On another occasion, a man was stranded on the side of the road because his car had run out of gas. A young man pulled over and identified himself as a friend of the man's daughter. He took the man to get gas and then brought him back to his car. Of course, feeling indebted, the man said, "If you ever need anything, just ask." Three weeks later, capitalizing on the offer, the young man asked if he could borrow the man's expensive car. The man's best judgment screamed, "Are you crazy? I don't know if I trust this kid to get it back to me in one piece!" But the mental pressure to satisfy his obligation to the young man won out over his better judgment and he loaned the young man his car.

The pressure to reciprocate is strong enough that when people *don't* return the favor, they are viewed with contempt and disgust. Accepting gifts or favors without attempting to return them is universally viewed as selfish, greedy, and heartless. It is often strictly due to this internal and external pressure that people conform to the rule of reciprocity.

In the early '80s, the Hare Krishna religion encountered difficulty in raising funds through their traditional means. The rebellion of the '60s had given way to the more conservative '80s, and the Hare Krishna were now almost considered an affliction to society. To counteract negative public opinion, they developed a new approach that utilized the Law of Obligation. Their new fundraising strategy worked because it prompted a sense of obligation that outweighed the dislike or negativity felt toward the Hare Krishna or their movement.

The new strategy still involved solicitation in crowded, public places, but now, instead of just directly asking for a donation, the potential donor was first given a free gift – a flower. If someone tried to turn it down, the Krishna follower would, under no circumstances, take it back and insist that it was the recipient's free gift to keep. The Krishna gift giver might say, "Sir, this is a free gift, and we welcome donations." Often the gifts just ended up in the trash cans, but overall, the strategy worked! Even individuals throwing the gifts away, in most cases, donated *something*. Even though lots of people were extremely annoyed by the high-pressure gift-giving, their sense of obligation to reciprocate won out!

A pair of the religion's followers was working together to raise funds. They looked like your normal, energetic college students. As an incentive to donate, this time around they were handing out books. People graciously accepted the offer then realized they were

deep into obligation. Playing on their sense of indebtedness, the requester would then ask them for a donation. The process worked like a charm. Some would try to give the book back, but being a gift, the Krishnas would not take it back. Others would leave upset but the pair would follow them in hot pursuit. I observed that most of the people felt an obligation to donate money in exchange for the free gift presented to them, whether or not they wanted it.

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