

LAW 31

CONTROL THE OPTIONS: GET OTHERS TO PLAY WITH THE CARDS YOU DEAL

JUDGMENT

The best deceptions are the ones that seem to give the other person a choice: Your victims feel they are in control, but are actually your puppets. Give people options that come out in your favor whichever one they choose. Force them to make choices between the lesser of two evils, both of which serve your purpose. Put them on the horns of a dilemma: They are gored wherever they turn.

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW I

From early in his reign, Ivan IV, later known as Ivan the Terrible, had to confront an unpleasant reality: The country desperately needed reform, but he lacked the power to push it through. The greatest limit to his authority came from the boyars, the Russian princely class that dominated the country and terrorized the peasantry.

In 1553, at the age of twenty-three, Ivan fell ill. Lying in bed, nearing death, he asked the boyars to swear allegiance to his son as the new czar. Some hesitated, some even refused. Then and there Ivan saw he had no power over the boyars. He recovered from his illness, but he never forgot the lesson: The boyars were out to destroy him. And indeed in the years to come, many of the most powerful of them defected to Russia's main enemies, Poland and Lithuania, where they plotted their return and the overthrow of the czar. Even one of Ivan's closest friends, Prince Andrey Kurbski, suddenly turned against him, defecting to Lithuania in 1564, and becoming the strongest of Ivan's enemies.

When Kurbski began raising troops for an invasion, the royal dynasty seemed suddenly more precarious than ever. With émigré nobles fomenting invasion from the west, Tartars bearing down from the east, and the boyars stirring up trouble within the country, Russia's vast size made it a nightmare to defend. In whatever direction Ivan struck, he would leave himself vulnerable on the other side. Only if he had absolute power could he deal with this many-headed Hydra. And he had no such power.

Ivan brooded until the morning of December 3, 1564, when the citizens of Moscow awoke to a strange sight. Hundreds of sleds filled the square before the Kremlin, loaded with the czar's treasures and with provisions for the entire court. They watched in disbelief as the czar and his court boarded the sleds and left town. Without explaining why, he established himself in a village south of Moscow. For an entire month a kind of terror gripped the capital, for the Muscovites feared that Ivan had abandoned them to the bloodthirsty boyars. Shops closed up and riotous mobs gathered daily. Finally, on January 3 of 1565, a letter arrived from the czar, explaining that

he could no longer bear the boyars' betrayals and had decided to abdicate once and for all.

The German Chancellor Bismarck, enraged at the constant criticisms from Rudolf Virchow (the German pathologist and liberal politician), had his seconds call upon the scientist to challenge him to a duel. "As the challenged party, I have the choice of weapons," said Virchow, "and I choose these." He held aloft two large and apparently identical sausages. "One of these," he went on, "is infected with deadly germs; the other is perfectly sound. Let His Excellency decide which one he wishes to eat, and I will eat the other." Almost immediately the message came back that the chancellor had decided to cancel the duel.

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Read aloud in public, the letter had a startling effect: Merchants and commoners blamed the boyars for Ivan's decision, and took to the streets, terrifying the nobility with their fury. Soon a group of delegates representing the church, the princes, and the people made the journey to Ivan's village, and begged the czar, in the name of the holy land of Russia, to return to the throne. Ivan listened but would not change his mind. After days of hearing their pleas, however, he offered his subjects a choice: Either they grant him absolute powers to govern as he pleased, with no interference from the boyars, or they find a new leader.

Faced with a choice between civil war and the acceptance of despotic power, almost every sector of Russian society "opted" for a strong czar, calling for Ivan's return to Moscow and the restoration of law and order. In February, with much celebration, Ivan returned to Moscow. The Russians could no longer complain if he behaved dictatorially—they had given him this power themselves.

Interpretation

Ivan the Terrible faced a terrible dilemma: To give in to the boyars would lead to certain destruction, but civil war would bring a different kind of ruin. Even if Ivan came out of such a war on top, the country would be

devastated and its divisions would be stronger than ever. His weapon of choice in the past had been to make a bold, offensive move. Now, however, that kind of move would turn against him—the more boldly he confronted his enemies, the worse the reactions he would spark.

The main weakness of a show of force is that it stirs up resentment and eventually leads to a response that eats at your authority. Ivan, immensely creative in the use of power, saw clearly that the only path to the kind of victory he wanted was a false withdrawal. He would not force the country over to his position, he would give it “options”: either his abdication, and certain anarchy, or his accession to absolute power. To back up his move, he made it clear that he preferred to abdicate: “Call my bluff,” he said, “and watch what happens.” No one called his bluff. By withdrawing for just a month, he showed the country a glimpse of the nightmares that would follow his abdication—Tartar invasions, civil war, ruin. (All of these did eventually come to pass after Ivan’s death, in the infamous “Time of the Troubles.”)

Withdrawal and disappearance are classic ways of controlling the options. You give people a sense of how things will fall apart without you, and you offer them a “choice”: I stay away and you suffer the consequences, or I return under circumstances that I dictate. In this method of controlling people’s options, they choose the option that gives you power because the alternative is just too unpleasant. You force their hand, but indirectly: They seem to have a choice. Whenever people feel they have a choice, they walk into your trap that much more easily.

THE LIAR

Once upon a time there was a king of Armenia, who, being of a curious turn of mind and in need of some new diversion, sent his heralds throughout the land to make the following proclamation: “Hear this! Whatever man among you can prove himself the most outrageous liar in Armenia shall receive an apple made of pure gold from the hands of His Majesty the King!” People began to swarm to the palace from every town and hamlet in the country, people of all ranks and conditions, princes, merchants, farmers, priests, rich and poor, tall and short, fat and thin. There was no lack of liars in the land, and each one told his tale to the king. A ruler, however, has heard practically every sort of lie, and none of those now told him convinced the

king that he had listened to the best of them. The king was beginning to grow tired of his new sport and was thinking of calling the whole contest off without declaring a winner, when there appeared before him a poor, ragged man, carrying a large earthenware pitcher under his arm. "What can I do for you?" asked His Majesty. "Sire!" said the poor man, slightly bewildered. "Surely you remember? You owe me a pot of gold, and I have come to collect it." "You are a perfect liar, sir!" exclaimed the king "I owe you no money" "A perfect liar, am I?" said the poor man. "Then give me the golden apple!" The king, realizing that the man was trying to trick him, started to hedge. "No. no! You are not a liar!" "Then give me the pot of gold you owe me, sire." said the man. The king saw the dilemma, He handed over the golden apple.

ARMENIAN FOLK-TALES AND FABLES, RETOLD BY CHARLES
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OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW II

As a seventeenth-century French courtesan, Ninon de Lenclos found that her life had certain pleasures. Her lovers came from royalty and aristocracy, and they paid her well, entertained her with their wit and intellect, satisfied her rather demanding sensual needs, and treated her almost as an equal. Such a life was infinitely preferable to marriage. In 1643, however, Ninon's mother died suddenly, leaving her, at the age of twenty-three, totally alone in the world—no family, no dowry, nothing to fall back upon. A kind of panic overtook her and she entered a convent, turning her back on her illustrious lovers. A year later she left the convent and moved to Lyons. When she finally reappeared in Paris, in 1648, lovers and suitors flocked to her door in greater numbers than ever before, for she was the wittiest and most spirited courtesan of the time and her presence had been greatly missed.

Ninon's followers quickly discovered, however, that she had changed her old way of doing things, and had set up a new system of options. The dukes, seigneurs, and princes who wanted to pay for her services could continue to do so, but they were no longer in control—she would sleep with them when she wanted, according to her whim. All their money bought them was a possibility. If it was her pleasure to sleep with them only once a month, so be it.

Those who did not want to be what Ninon called a *payeur* could join the large and growing group of men she called her *martyrs*—men who visited her apartment principally for her friendship, her biting wit, her lute-playing, and the company of the most vibrant minds of the period, including Molière, La Rochefoucauld, and Saint-Évremond. The *martyrs*, too, however, entertained a possibility: She would regularly select from them a *favori*, a man who would become her lover without having to pay, and to whom she would abandon herself completely for as long as she so desired—a week, a few months, rarely longer. A *payeur* could not become a *favori*, but a *martyr* had no guarantee of becoming one, and indeed could remain disappointed for an entire lifetime. The poet Charleval, for example, never

enjoyed Ninon's favors, but never stopped coming to visit—he did not want to do without her company.

As word of this system reached polite French society, Ninon became the object of intense hostility. Her reversal of the position of the courtesan scandalized the queen mother and her court. Much to their horror, however, it did not discourage her male suitors—indeed it only increased their numbers and intensified their desire. It became an honor to be a *payeur*, helping Ninon to maintain her lifestyle and her glittering salon, accompanying her sometimes to the theater, and sleeping with her when she chose. Even more distinguished were the *martyrs*, enjoying her company without paying for it and maintaining the hope, however remote, of some day becoming her *favori*. That possibility spurred on many a young nobleman, as word spread that none among the courtesans could surpass Ninon in the art of love. And so the married and the single, the old and the young, entered her web and chose one of the two options presented to them, both of which amply satisfied her.

Interpretation

The life of the courtesan entailed the possibility of a power that was denied a married woman, but it also had obvious perils. The man who paid for the courtesan's services in essence owned her, determining when he could possess her and when, later on, he would abandon her. As she grew older, her options narrowed, as fewer men chose her. To avoid a life of poverty she had to amass her fortune while she was young. The courtesan's legendary greed, then, reflected a practical necessity, yet also lessened her allure, since the illusion of being desired is important to men, who are often alienated if their partner is too interested in their money. As the courtesan aged, then, she faced a most difficult fate.

Ninon de Lenclos had a horror of any kind of dependence. She early on tasted a kind of equality with her lovers, and she would not settle into a system that left her such distasteful options. Strangely enough, the system she devised in its place seemed to satisfy her suitors as much as it did her. The *payeurs* may have had to pay, but the fact that Ninon would only sleep with them when she wanted to gave them a thrill unavailable with every other courtesan: She was yielding out of her own desire. The *martyrs'* avoidance of the taint of having to pay gave them a sense of superiority; as members of Ninon's fraternity of admirers, they also might some day experience the ultimate pleasure of being her *favori*. Finally, Ninon did not force her suitors into either category. They could "choose" which side they preferred—a freedom that left them a vestige of masculine pride.

Such is the power of giving people a choice, or rather the illusion of one, for they are playing with cards you have dealt them. Where the alternatives set up by Ivan the Terrible involved a certain risk—one option would have led to his losing his power—Ninon created a situation in which every option redounded to her favor. From the *payeurs* she received the money she needed to run her salon. And from the *martyrs* she gained the ultimate in power: She could surround herself with a bevy of admirers, a harem from which to choose her lovers.

The system, though, depended on one critical factor: the possibility, however remote, that a *martyr* could become a *favori*. The illusion that riches, glory, or sensual satisfaction may someday fall into your victim's lap

is an irresistible carrot to include in your list of choices. That hope, however slim, will make men accept the most ridiculous situations, because it leaves them the all-important option of a dream. The illusion of choice, married to the possibility of future good fortune, will lure the most stubborn sucker into your glittering web.

J. P. Morgan Sr. once told a jeweler of his acquaintance that he was interested in buying a pearl scarf-pin. Just a few weeks later, the jeweler happened upon a magnificent pearl. He had it mounted in an appropriate setting and sent it to Morgan, together with a bill for \$5,000. The following day the package was returned. Morgan's accompanying note read: "I like the pin, but I don't like the price. If you will accept the enclosed check for \$4,000, please send back the box with the seal unbroken." The enraged jeweler refused the check and dismissed the messenger in disgust. He opened up the box to reclaim the unwanted pin, only to find that it had been removed. In its place was a check for \$5,000.

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KEYS TO POWER

Words like “freedom,” “options,” and “choice” evoke a power of possibility far beyond the reality of the benefits they entail. When examined closely, the choices we have—in the marketplace, in elections, in our jobs—tend to have noticeable limitations: They are often a matter of a choice simply between A and B, with the rest of the alphabet out of the picture. Yet as long as the faintest mirage of choice flickers on, we rarely focus on the missing options. We “choose” to believe that the game is fair, and that we have our freedom. We prefer not to think too much about the depth of our liberty to choose.

This unwillingness to probe the smallness of our choices stems from the fact that too much freedom creates a kind of anxiety. The phrase “unlimited options” sounds infinitely promising, but unlimited options would actually paralyze us and cloud our ability to choose. Our limited range of choices comforts us.

This supplies the clever and cunning with enormous opportunities for deception. For people who are choosing between alternatives find it hard to believe they are being manipulated or deceived; they cannot see that you are allowing them a small amount of free will in exchange for a much more powerful imposition of your own will. Setting up a narrow range of choices, then, should always be a part of your deceptions. There is a saying: If you can get the bird to walk into the cage on its own, it will sing that much more prettily.

The following are among the most common forms of “controlling the options”:

Color the Choices. This was a favored technique of Henry Kissinger. As President Richard Nixon’s secretary of state, Kissinger considered himself better informed than his boss, and believed that in most situations he could make the best decision on his own. But if he tried to determine policy, he would offend or perhaps enrage a notoriously insecure man. So Kissinger would propose three or four choices of action for each situation, and would present them in such a way that the one he preferred always seemed the best

solution compared to the others. Time after time, Nixon fell for the bait, never suspecting that he was moving where Kissinger pushed him. This is an excellent device to use on the insecure master.

Force the Resister. One of the main problems faced by Dr. Milton H. Erickson, a pioneer of hypnosis therapy in the 1950s, was the relapse. His patients might seem to be recovering rapidly, but their apparent susceptibility to the therapy masked a deep resistance: They would soon relapse into old habits, blame the doctor, and stop coming to see him. To avoid this, Erickson began *ordering* some patients to have a relapse, to make themselves feel as bad as when they first came in—to go back to square one. Faced with this option, the patients would usually “choose” to avoid the relapse—which, of course, was what Erickson really wanted.

This is a good technique to use on children and other willful people who enjoy doing the opposite of what you ask them to: Push them to “choose” what you want them to do by appearing to advocate the opposite.

Alter the Playing Field. In the 1860s, John D. Rockefeller set out to create an oil monopoly. If he tried to buy up the smaller oil companies they would figure out what he was doing and fight back. Instead, he began secretly buying up the railway companies that transported the oil. When he then attempted to take over a particular company, and met with resistance, he reminded them of their dependence on the rails. Refusing them shipping, or simply raising their fees, could ruin their business. Rockefeller altered the playing field so that the only options the small oil producers had were the ones he gave them.

In this tactic your opponents know their hand is being forced, but it doesn't matter. The technique is effective against those who resist at all costs.

The Shrinking Options. The late-nineteenth-century art dealer Ambroise Vollard perfected this technique.

Customers would come to Vollard's shop to see some Cézannes. He would show three paintings, neglect to mention a price, and pretend to doze off. The visitors would have to leave without deciding. They would usually come back the next day to see the paintings again, but this time Vollard

would pull out less interesting works, pretending he thought they were the same ones. The baffled customers would look at the new offerings, leave to think them over, and return yet again. Once again the same thing would happen: Vollard would show paintings of lesser quality still. Finally the buyers would realize they had better grab what he was showing them, because tomorrow they would have to settle for something worse, perhaps at even higher prices.

A variation on this technique is to raise the price every time the buyer hesitates and another day goes by. This is an excellent negotiating ploy to use on the chronically indecisive, who will fall for the idea that they are getting a better deal today than if they wait till tomorrow.

The Weak Man on the Precipice. The weak are the easiest to maneuver by controlling their options. Cardinal de Retz, the great seventeenth-century provocateur, served as an unofficial assistant to the Duke of Orléans, who was notoriously indecisive. It was a constant struggle to convince the duke to take action—he would hem and haw, weigh the options, and wait till the last moment, giving everyone around him an ulcer. But Retz discovered a way to handle him: He would describe all sorts of dangers, exaggerating them as much as possible, until the duke saw a yawning abyss in every direction except one: the one Retz was pushing him to take.

This tactic is similar to “Color the Choices,” but with the weak you have to be more aggressive. Work on their emotions—use fear and terror to propel them into action. Try reason and they will always find a way to procrastinate.

Brothers in Crime. This is a classic con-artist technique: You attract your victims to some criminal scheme, creating a bond of blood and guilt between you. They participate in your deception, commit a crime (or think they do—see the story of Sam Geezil in Law 3), and are easily manipulated. Serge Stavisky, the great French con artist of the 1920s, so entangled the government in his scams and swindles that the state did not dare to prosecute him, and “chose” to leave him alone. It is often wise to implicate in your deceptions the very person who can do you the most harm if you fail. Their involvement can be subtle—even a hint of their involvement will narrow their options and buy their silence.

The Horns of a Dilemma. This idea was demonstrated by General William Sherman's infamous march through Georgia during the American Civil War. Although the Confederates knew what direction Sherman was heading in, they never knew if he would attack from the left or the right, for he divided his army into two wings—and if the rebels retreated from one wing they found themselves facing the other. This is a classic trial lawyer's technique: The lawyer leads the witnesses to decide between two possible explanations of an event, both of which poke a hole in their story. They have to answer the lawyer's questions, but whatever they say they hurt themselves. The key to this move is to strike quickly: Deny the victim the time to think of an escape. As they wriggle between the horns of the dilemma, they dig their own grave.

Understand: In your struggles with your rivals, it will often be necessary for you to hurt them. And if you are clearly the agent of their punishment, expect a counterattack—expect revenge. If, however, they seem *to themselves* to be the agents of their own misfortune, they will submit quietly. When Ivan left Moscow for his rural village, the citizens asking him to return agreed to his demand for absolute power. Over the years to come, they resented him less for the terror he unleashed on the country, because, after all, they had granted him his power themselves. This is why it is always good to allow your victims their choice of poison, and to cloak your involvement in providing it to them as far as possible.

Image: The Horns of the Bull. The bull backs you into the corner with its horns—not a single horn, which you might be able to escape, but a pair of horns that trap you within their hold. Run right or run left—either way you move into their piercing ends and are gored.

Authority: For the wounds and every other evil that men inflict upon themselves spontaneously, and of their own choice, are in the long run less painful than those inflicted by others. (Niccolò Machiavelli, 1469-1527)

REVERSAL

Controlling the options has one main purpose: to disguise yourself as the agent of power and punishment. The tactic works best, then, for those whose power is fragile, and who cannot operate too openly without incurring suspicion, resentment, and anger. Even as a general rule, however, it is rarely wise to be seen as exerting power directly and forcefully, no matter how secure or strong you are. It is usually more elegant and more effective to give people the illusion of choice.

On the other hand, by limiting other people's options you sometimes limit your own. There are situations in which it is to your advantage to allow your rivals a large degree of freedom: As you watch them operate, you give yourself rich opportunities to spy, gather information, and plan your deceptions. The nineteenth-century banker James Rothschild liked this method: He felt that if he tried to control his opponents' movements, he lost the chance to observe their strategy and plan a more effective course. The more freedom he allowed them in the short term, the more forcefully he could act against them in the long run.