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Reactance

**Why We Will Do the Opposite if
Pushed Too Hard**

September 2024

What is Reactance?

Reactance is what happens when you push a request too hard and get the opposite of what you expected or asked for. Reactance is theorised to occur as a result of desiring to reclaim a freedom that was perceived as restricted by the imposition. This can happen both consciously and unconsciously.

For example, if you ask someone to stop drinking, they might respond by ordering another drink. Or if you get told to wait to have a freshly baked cookie, are you not going to really want to sneak one? This is reactance in action.

What's important to notice here is that reactance is a result of a perceived freedom restriction. So, if the request doesn't feel like a restriction, people are less likely to respond by doing the opposite.

For example, saying 'calm down' to someone who perceives their reaction to a situation proportionate is likely to result in that person feeling a lot less calm than before they were asked to be. However, if you request that person 'calm down,' and they perceive themselves genuinely in need of calming down, they will likely make some effort to do so.

All Reactance is not Equal

All occurrences of reactance are not equal in intensity. There are several factors that can affect the size of a reactance response:



Level of the perceived injustice: The level of reactance is proportional to the perceived injustice. In other words, the less fair a request or rule is, the more likely the person will do the opposite of what is asked of them, and the more likely for this reaction to be bigger. Conversely, if a request or rule is not perceived as unjust or unfair, the level and likelihood of reactance are lower, and if it does happen, then it is likelier to happen more subtly.

Perceived Importance of the Freedom:

Similarly, the level of reactance will also be proportional to the perceived importance given to the freedom. Reactance is more likely to occur and occur more intensely if the freedom that is being infringed upon is valued highly. For example, the level of reactance we can expect to see from a law mandating that everyone become pescatarian will be much higher compared to a law requiring car passengers to wear seatbelts. This is because the former is a restriction of dietary choice, a freedom that is valued highly, whereas the latter is a restriction that is not prioritised in favour of personal safety, making it a less important freedom.



The quantity of restricted choices:

Finally, the number of freedoms that are perceived to be infringed upon also affects the level of reactance observed. For instance, an HOA that bans three different plants from being grown in front yards will have a smaller reactance response compared to an HOA that bans 50 different plants from being grown, regardless of their popularity prior to the rule being established.

Reactance is everywhere

As you may have already noticed, we have used the words “freedom” and “choice” interchangeably, as well as “request” and “rule” and “law”. This is because reactance occurs across the full spectrum of areas from our lived experience, in any situation where an individual feels that someone or something is trying to control the way they can respond or behave, which can cause an equally broad range of opposing responses or behaviours.

These behaviours and restrictions can take the form of rules, laws, requests, behaviours, opinions, people, values, desires, beliefs, thoughts and many others. In summary, reactance is a behavioural phenomenon that is directly relevant to a lot of areas in our life, which leads into our next section quite well.

Why is Reactance Important to Understand?

Reactance Affects Everyone

An area particularly important to understand the role of reactance in, is our own lives. You know how we mentioned earlier that the behaviours and restrictions can take on any form? Well, you might have already recognised that this includes plans that you make by yourself, for yourself. The reactance response here is likely to be a sort of self-sabotage or procrastination, and can be extremely de-railing when it comes to the plans our past selves have benevolently set for us. To avoid this type of de-railing as much as possible, it's important to understand what reactance is and how it works.

When the moment comes to do the things that we planned for ourselves and we start feeling procrastination or avoidance inching in, it's likely because we don't feel as though we are the ones making that decision in the moment. This is why being intentional and reminding ourselves of why we want to complete the things we set out to do can be helpful in regaining that feeling of control. This simple reframing of the task and ourselves as willing enactors can reduce our experience of reactance.



Reactance in Others Affects You Too

Of course, reactance is not just something that only affects us, but also those around us. Since humans are social creatures and we live intricately inter-connected lives with one another, reactance in others can be frustrating yet necessary to manage.

As mentioned previously, reactance can occur in a wide range of contexts, including at work and at home. You might need a co-worker to finish their task so you can start yours, or get your child to finally clean their room, or your friend to please come on time this time. Sometimes, we all need someone else to do something because it impacts us, but it can be a hard task to accomplish if a request is met with reactance.

Primarily, it is always important to keep in mind that reactance is often not 'on purpose', but rather an automatic motivational response, so you should try to respond to reactance with care and kindness.

Here are some tips to reduce others' reactance when you need them to do something based on what we know about it:

- Frame your request as a request, not a demand. This will help reduce the pressure of the request and return the option of choice to the individual, making them less likely to experience reactance. However, this is less likely to work for things like rules, so the following point can help.
- Explain to the person why you need a task to be done or for a rule to exist. This can help them to choose to do the task or follow the rule based on their own decision-making process. Indeed, it is well documented that giving someone an explanation for a request increases the chances of that request being fulfilled!
- Try to limit the number of requests or rules you make or impose at any one time to reduce the likelihood and severity of a reactance response. The fewer things there are to object to, the better!
- Ensure you provide adjustment time. If you are about to make some big changes that would require people to change the ways in which they do things, it is always good practice to allow them some warning time with a heads up. The more drastic the change, the more time for adjustment is needed. This can help people mentally warm to the demand, and decrease the risk of reactance at a critical moment.
- If you are limiting one freedom, then it is good to provide other options where an individual can exercise their freedom instead. For example, you may need to have bed time for your child a little earlier today, so after letting them know, you can offer them the choice of a bedtime snack or to read a story together before bed. This way, even though you are limiting the person's choice, you are also giving them the freedom to exercise control in a different way.
- Encourage autonomy. Through encouraging autonomy and open communication, you provide both yourself and others with the freedom to take responsibility for themselves and their actions. This can help people feel like they want to do something, as opposed to needing to do something.



When Reactance Becomes Reverse Psychology

Remember how we said not all reactance is equal? Well, that's also true for whether reactance is desired or not in a specific situation. Sometimes, you might actually want and expect reactance!

If you are in a situation where you would like to convince or persuade someone to do something, and you know the individual is likely to not be welcoming to your suggestions, then it might be the perfect case for you to engage in reverse psychology, and have reactance come to the rescue. In this case, it's important to know how reactance works so you can use it to your advantage.

You can demand that an individual do something (that you absolutely do not want them to do) and reap the rewards, however you must be sure that the individual is very likely to do the opposite of what you ask first, or the situation can get messy. This works best if you know the person well. For example, as a child, I would often publicly proclaim my preference for a specific toy, that I did not want, just so my little sister would lose interest in the one I actually did want.

That said, reactance is not just a positive when we can use it to get others to do what we want. It's also great because it acts as a built-in indicator that lets us know if we are being asked of too much. If we agreed to every single thing that was asked of us, I'm not sure we would be living in a better world. Being aware that reactance can be a natural response to demands that are too large can help us only engage in the tasks we think are important and avoid being taken advantage of.

Reactance En Masse

Reactance becomes particularly important to understand if you work in the public sector and are making decisions, influencing policy and laws, and communicating with the public. This is because reactance does not just occur on an individual level, but also on a larger scale.

For example, when developing COVID guidelines, medical professionals were as a group largely surprised by the mass wave of reactance that occurred. Requests for behaviour like wearing masks, staying home, and maintaining personal distance were met with a demonstrative absence of masks and individuals hosting large get-togethers and parties.

This example easily comes to mind, however other issues like treatment adherence, eating a healthy diet, drinking alcohol, and smoking are all areas of public health that are affected by reactance. Consequently, reactance is not just something that those in public sectors cannot ignore, it is above all something that needs to be given priority to and have measures in place for. So, messaging that is employed to communicate public policies across sectors therefore needs to be planned and considered carefully.

While public policy is an area that is particularly affected by reactance, it is not the only area to be affected. Reactance also has implications for mass advertising and marketing. A technique that has become popular, especially with travel and booking providers, is the creation of false urgency using messages like "Just 3 rooms left!" or "Sale ends in 2 hours!" While they are still somewhat effective, such messages are increasingly perceived as marketing tactics and are viewed as a demand, leading many potential customers to avoid websites with such notices and choosing alternative options. So, it is equally important to consider the potential of a reactance response when creating marketing content, as well as other areas that we will expand on in the following section.



Examples of Reactance from Real Life

Reactance can come in many shapes and sizes, and while the following list is certainly not exhaustive, it could be a good starting point for raising awareness of the different ways reaction shows up in your life.

- **Child rearing and development** – Needing to manage reactance is perhaps the most common during the teenage years of your child, but is certainly not restricted to that period of time.
- **Public health** – As mentioned previously, this is an area that especially requires care to minimise reactance as much as possible. Apart from pandemics, diet, and harmful substance use, areas like vaccination messaging and medication or treatment adherence are also especially vulnerable to reactance. This is because matters of public health often fall under the freedoms that we are most likely to value, and on which any infringement is likely to be met with resistance.
- **Self-management** – Managing your time and tasks is an important facet throughout our lives, and it's no surprise that this is an area that lends itself well to reactance.

Child rearing and development



The workplace

- **The workplace** – Reactance can happen at many levels and functions, however some areas that are especially prone to eliciting reactance are any change management operations that involve adopting new ways of doing things. Additionally, it's good to be aware that reactance is particularly prone to occurring under conditions of micromanagement. So, adopting techniques that engage employees' autonomy and make clear their value are good places to start to avoid reactance.
- **Education** – As with other organisations, schools often have a long list of requirements given to students, which can range from exams and assignments to dress code and conduct. Each of these areas can give rise to reactance if not approached carefully.

- **Romantic relationships** – Yep! Even our romantic personal lives aren't excluded from all the areas that reactance touches. Some areas where reactance can rear its head include conversations regarding commitment, as well as the daily humdrum that makes up the little moments – like leaving the dirty dishes in the sink.
- **Consumer behaviour** – Apart from our previous example of scarcity marketing, reactance can also affect consumer behaviours like the purchase of goods or services in response to marketing or sales tactics that are 'too pushy,' even if the individual was earlier interested in buying the product. Excessive data collection requests during e-shopping can evoke a similar response, with consumers refusing to provide any data at all or quitting the website altogether.
- **Legal and political contexts** – Things like censorship and regulations can absolutely backfire by spreading the restricted content further than it would otherwise have gone, just because people were told the content is now restricted. Just think about the prohibition and the number of speakeasies that opened up in response!



Romantic relationships

Conclusion

As you can see, reactance appears in many areas of our lives, and can affect us in innumerable ways. It's a concept that we are all familiar with on some level, but can easily fall out of consideration when we go about our daily lives. This is why truly understanding what reactance is and how it works can be incredibly beneficial to your life, your work, and your personal life. The best bit? Even though reactance manifests differently according to context, the main underlying principles run across most instances of reactance and can therefore be relied on to help you manage reactance in both yourself and others no matter what your situation.

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