Social Engineering Vulnerability Evaluation and Recommendation (SEVER) Instructions

Disclaimer

I seldom take responsibility for my own actions so I will certainly not be responsible for yours. I created this with the intention of helping the millions of defenseless people who are subjected to these techniques each day. If you choose to use this knowledge for malicious purposes then you should prepare for the consequences.

Preface

By distilling thousands of pages of theory into a simple form the SEVER project hopes to:

1) Provide the fastest means of training novices about complex social engineering concepts.
2) Provide penetration testers with a methodology that minimizes their effort while increasing their chance of success. However, this has been written with the goal of protecting victims so some of the concepts herein are too harsh for professional use. You will need to determine what is appropriate for your purposes.

The overall process is simple and logical. You will begin by defining requirements, then brainstorm solutions, and then subject your ideas through multiple phases of refinement. Each phase increases in detail to allow you to identify "show stoppers" as soon as possible. This will help you avoid wasting time working on a plan that is not going to succeed. If an idea makes it through the entire process and you still feel good about it then you should have a reasonable chance of success.

The best format for this content would be an electronic form with a lot of context-sensitive notes. Since there is currently no effective, portable way of accomplishing that I decided to split the content into two PDF files – the SEVER Worksheet and the SEVER Instructions which you are reading right now. Go through these instructions while you fill out the form until you have a thorough understanding of how the form works. If you cheat and try to do one before the other (or skip these instructions altogether) you will miss things which will make failure more likely.

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Introduction

There are a lot of definitions for the term "social engineering", including "tricking someone into giving you their password" and "the act of lying until you get what you want." I don't like any of them so I will make up my own definition:

Social engineering is the art of covertly enticing someone to behave in a manner that they wouldn't have otherwise, usually in a way that is in your favor and not in theirs.

Note that you are not required to lie, and there is no inherent need to trick your target into behaving in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable. A key point is that you are modifying their behavior without them being aware of what you are doing.

Grab your SEVER Worksheet and let's get started.

Objective

The objective should be your ultimate goal. You are beginning a formal project so be as specific as possible since the objective will be used to measure your success. It will also help you determine when you can end your operation.

To provide you with the greatest flexibility in designing a solution, the objective should be worded in a way that states what you need to have done without mentioning how you will go about doing it.

Bad example:

"Obtain the password for the online banking account of Leeroy Jenkins".

Better example:

"Anonymously withdraw money from the account of Leeroy Jenkins before he goes shopping for Christmas gifts".

Due Dates

Optimal

This is the best realistic date that the objective might be achieved based on your needs. It may not be the earliest date.

Acceptable

If you can't have the optimal date, what is your second choice? This date is largely determined by cost-effectiveness instead of your needs. If Leeroy has only $1,000 in his account then you probably don't want to spend six months on this endeavor.

This date may not be necessary in some situations so don't feel bad if it is blank.

Drop Dead

What is the latest possible date? If you haven't accomplished your objective by this time you will give up.

Some scenarios are not date sensitive so you may have cases where any time before the Drop Dead date is acceptable.

Is social engineering really the best way to achieve your objective?

At this point we have very little information but you can already make an important decision. Are there other ways you can succeed without using social engineering? Social engineering is difficult which means you probably suck at it, so you should consider any alternate ways of achieving your objective before you continue this process.

Brainstorm attack scenarios on another piece of paper, and then continue with your favorite.

Who has what you want, and how might you get it from them? If you come up with a plan that is appealing to you we can begin to work out the details in the next section.

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Attack Feasibility Analysis

This section is intended to help you quickly determine the cost-effectiveness of your plan. If you can't afford to do it then you should bail now before you devote time to more difficult tasks.

You may notice that I determine general cost-effectiveness without asking for any costs. Most people are horrible at math, and do not understand causality, so they often consume a lot of resources in reaching wrong conclusions. Therefore I propose we bail on trying to teach people logic and frame the problem as an emotional one instead.

Humans are very good at detecting things that seem dangerous so my line of questioning is designed to identify the things that may be painfully costly. If you get to the "What will you need to do it?" section and think, "Ouch – I'll need a non-linear junction detector," then that is probably all you need to know in order to make an appropriate decision. It is unlikely that knowledge of the exact price of the device will change your mind.

Attack Overview

This is a general overview of this plan. A simple title may work best as this will help you keep track of things if you are working on several plans at once. You will have room for details later.

Who is the target?

Name the person whose weaknesses we will analyze later. I haven't figured out a good way to deal with multiple targets so if you have more than one then consider partially filling out the worksheet for each of the others.

Who will you need to help you?

Does this plan require skills that you do not possess? If so, you will need help from others, but keep in mind that involving others is a "double-edged sword". You will be performing a covert operation and the addition of personnel increases the possibility that your cover will be blown and you will fail.

On the other hand, with proper planning your helpers can also be used to shield you from risk. A "fall guy" is simply someone who doesn't understand what they are doing and doesn't know who to blame when they get caught, and it is not terribly difficult to put the other members of your team into such situations.

What will you need to do it? Include defensive measures.

Will you need an untraceable phone, anonymous email, a party dress, or a fire truck? List everything you will need even if you already own it.

Where is the best place for the target to be?

Some physical locations may be more advantageous for you. Don't put too much thought into this now since we can come back to it later if everything else works out.

Where is the best place for you to be?

This can vary, but your goal will often be to remain anonymous so if you can avoid direct contact with the target then that is probably the way to go.

What are their obvious defenses against this type of attack?

We haven't spent a lot of time on your specific target yet, but you can probably assume their security controls are similar to others in the same situation. For example, banks are heavily regulated so they tend to have the same security controls.

What might be "red flags" to them?

If you were the one being attacked via your method what would tip you off that something was wrong?

How might you maximize the effect of things you want the target to see?

How might you minimize the effect of things you do not want the target to see?

If you can do both of these then that is great. If you can only do one then that is often acceptable depending on the circumstances. If you can't do either then you may need to come up with a better plan.

Once again do not worry about providing a lot of detail at this point – the important thing is whether you can control one or both of them. By putting your subconscious to work on the questions now you will probably have many answers by the time we need them.

What is needed to sustain deceptions after your objective has been met?

The fact that you have won doesn't mean you can stop playing the game. There are cases where you may need to maintain your cover for decades after the end of your operation. A lot of folks jump into a social engineering attack without considering this step and later find their expenses are far greater than what they expected.

If you get caught, what might happen to you?

This step is not intended to scare you into giving up by making you determine all of the worst case scenarios. It is simply a good point in this process to get an idea of what the consequences of your actions might be.

Risk Time Line:

When it comes to risk humans feel compelled to give things a single label of "High", "Medium", or "Low". There are usually variables that affect risk, however, so if your risk assessment does not have any variables then it is probably wrong.

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For social engineering the most important variable is usually time, so this section allows you to denote your risk at whatever points it might change. Were you to financially affect a business, your time line might look something like this:

Face to face with target	Medium
End of day processing	High
End of month processing	Medium
End of year processing	High
External audit	High
After successful audit	Low

To complete this section list your important dates on the lines provided in chronological order. Then fill in the bar that corresponds to the risk, be it Low (L), Medium (M), or High (H). Also fill in any bars to the left, for example, if your risk is Medium then both "L" and "M" should be filled in. If your risk is High then you should do all three.

Find any "show stoppers" yet? If so, bail now.

In the next step you will begin putting much more effort into this plan. If you already know this is not likely to succeed then you should give up now and invest your time in brainstorming new attack scenarios.

Determining target weaknesses

This is where the fun begins. In this section you must evaluate how sensitive your target is to each attribute. Whether they are positively or negatively affected by it doesn't really matter – the important thing is determining if they are simply sensitive to it.

This may initially seem like a lot to ask of you. Your target is probably a complete stranger so how could you possibly know such details about them? There are several things that can help:

1) Many weaknesses can be determined through visible behavior. You may not want to be seen watching your target for extended periods of time so video cameras are often helpful.
2) People usually want to appear to be morally superior to others. This is visibly displayed in the extent to which they are judgmental. If you ask a few probing questions about inflammatory topics such as abortion or taxes people will often give you adequate insight into how sensitive they are on the topics.
3) Many weaknesses are culturally influenced. You may be able to determine how influenced your target is by their culture and assume certain behaviors based on that.
4) You can often force your targets into situations that will test their sensitivity. For example, how angry do they get when they receive three phone calls during a meeting?

As you did for the risk timeline, fill in the circle that corresponds to their sensitivity be it Low (L), Medium (M), or High (H), and fill in any to the left of the one you selected.

IMPORTANT: You should first fill out the entire "Determining Target Weaknesses" section as quickly and honestly as possible, and don't spend much time on the ones you are not sure about. Then you can continue reading these instructions to figure out what it all means.

Strong Forces

"Strong forces" are things that tend to evoke a visceral response that is very difficult to consciously overcome. Sensitivity to them is usually caused either by biological factors or by psychological programming during childhood.

Anger/Aggression

Humans exist today, in part, because anger helped our ancestors adequately defend themselves against physical threats. Now anger is almost always used inappropriately so it has lost much of its

evolutionary utility. Something as innocent as forgetting to clean the dishes or failing to use your turn signal can send others into a rage.

It is very easy to make someone feel angry and it is very difficult for them to recover, so enraging your target can be a wonderful way to cognitively overload them. You typically do not want to be the cause of their anger so if you can't perform the task covertly then you will need someone else to make them mad.

Note that a great deal of anger is caused by expectations not being met. After all, if something occurs that was expected then that just makes sense. Instead of angering them by causing something to happen you may want to prevent what is expected from occurring.

Keep in mind that anger is best used to motivate your target to perform a physical action. It can also be used to elicit information from them if you really know what you are doing. Anger is not appropriate to get them to reach a logical conclusion.

Anxiety

Anxiety can help lead your target to anger, or it can invoke other responses such as despair and withdrawal. A high level of anxiety reduces your targets ability to deal with the real world.

Biological Maladies

Social engineering may involve the "software" of a human being but you can't forget about the "hardware". If someone suffers from constant pain or fatigue then that will affect how they behave. Or if they have had a stroke they may respond to your techniques in unpredictable ways.

A thorough understanding of their medical situation can help you feign empathy, whereas a blatant disregard for their condition can help you agitate them. You should choose only one of the approaches to avoid confusing your target but there may be times you will want to team up with

someone to do both. By using the "good cop, bad cop" method you could have your partner be very insensitive to your target which will make you appear even more compassionate when you approach them afterwards.

Cognitive Overload

Cognition involves the mental perception and processing of information, so cognitive overload simply means someone is receiving more information than they can handle. Putting people in such situations is one of the best ways to circumvent security controls.

Most people increase their vulnerability to this method themselves, especially those who have a difficult time telling others "no". Pay particular attention to those who are frantically unproductive. If your target expends a lot of time and energy in producing nothing useful then they are delusional. This in turn means they are not trainable from a security perspective which is great news for you.

The methods you use to cognitively overload your target are limited only by your imagination but I will provide several examples throughout the remainder of this document.

Compulsiveness

Compulsive people are among the easiest to manipulate because when they are faced with a certain situation they are compelled to behave in a predictable manner. By altering the environment of your target you can directly control how they behave, and controlling their behavior is what social engineering is all about.

Note that this category is not just for those who wash their hands too often. I would also classify things like obsession, racism, and prejudice as compulsive disorders. It also includes those who are slaves to instant messaging. If your target allows an incoming text message to interrupt something important like a meeting then you know you can use their compulsiveness to distract them.

Control

This is another aspect we inherited from our ancestors. Most social groups have an uneven distribution of power, and someone who is powerful in one group may become subordinate in another. For example, you might be "calling all of the shots" at work but you may be forced to yield to your spouse when you return home.

It may surprise you, but it doesn't really matter how much control your target possesses. What is more important is whether they are satisfied with their current level of control and how much they fear losing it.

It is also helpful to know if your target has unreasonable expectations regarding control. For example, lot of people think that their job title gives them far more power than it actually does so by merely correcting them as to the nature of their duties you can trigger a loss of control response in them.

Culture

Cultural influences can be very important to your target. Cultural mores can be researched relatively easily so spend a little time on this one so you don't make a mistake.

If your target is new to the area you may be able to fool them into behaving in certain ways in order to conform to "local customs".

Depression

Many of those suffering from depression feel they deserve to be a victim, and they are concerned with very little. As long as you can "keep them down" they will probably be incapable of maintaining their security controls.

Desperation

If one lacks food, clothing or shelter they will be open to just about any idea. This is why those with financial problems are among the easiest to recruit as spies.

College graduates can be very sensitive to desperation. They may have never worked a day in their life, and by the time they graduate they could amass a debt of over a quarter of a million dollars. Since they are often ready to get married and have children after they leave school their stressors can quickly become unbearable.

Once again you need to select from two possibilities based on your requirements. If you need them to hate you then make their situation worse. If you want them to love you simply offer a way out of their predicament.

Disgust

Some people hate spiders. Others can't stand the sounds and smells associated with the butchering of a goat. There may be occasions where you would want to subject your target to something they find disgusting, like to make them run to the restroom so you can look at their phone. But most of the time you want to make sure you avoid things they find revolting since their recoil makes it impossible for them to absorb your propaganda in the manner you intend.

Drug Use

We consume drugs all day long, and regardless of whether we consume them intentionally or not most of them can create situations that are advantageous to a social engineer:

1) Many of them are stimulants which can increase things like anxiety or anger.
2) Many impair motor skills and cognition which can be helpful if you need to slip past a security guard of if you want to increase the chance of your target getting into a car accident.
3) Many have serious side effects that can create biological maladies in your target which can later be exploited.

Some drugs are socially acceptable and even socially promoted so you can often entice your target to consume them even if they would rather not.

Drugs that are not socially acceptable (those that have been deemed illegal as well as many prescription ones) have an additional benefit. The consumption of illicit drugs by your target increases their social risk which can be exploited in two ways. If you choose to consume the drugs with them, you can quickly gain their trust since you both share the same "dirty secret". Or if you can obtain proof of their illicit drug use you can threaten to blackmail them.

Don't forget that while the consumption of drugs has predictable consequences so does their unexpected withdrawal. Interrupting a target's supply can provide quick results.

Fear

Fear is another thing to which humans have become maladapted. We have the capacity to fear things that have never threatened us and we can even be afraid of fear itself. People are willing to follow nearly anyone who promises to reduce their level of worry.

Greed

Some people are truly never satisfied. They may finally reach the top of the "corporate ladder" only to develop a taste for collecting entire companies. Once they possess a number of companies they develop a desire to run for a government office.

You can manipulate such people by once again deciding if you would like to be the "good guy" or the "bad guy". You can provide them with an opportunity that they will readily accept (which unbeknownst to them may ultimately lead to their downfall). Or you can threaten to take away the things for which they have worked so hard to obtain.

News Media

Just as prison can be the best way to train a criminal, watching the news can be a great way to train a social engineer. Simply assume that everything that is being said is wrong and then figure out what might be motivating them to tell you such rubbish.

If your definition of a "fact" is, "a truth known by actual experience or observation," then you are probably aware that most media contains very few of them. Many news stories are based on opinion, speculation, or outright deception so if your target is sensitive to the media then they will never have enough facts to make an intelligent decision about anything.

Pain

You should include a fear of pain here instead of in the previous Fear category since an aversion to pain is slightly different, especially from an offensive perspective. You may feel comfortable exploiting many fears but not a fear of pain.

Phobias

Phobias are a wonderful tool for social engineers. By definition they are irrational fears so it may be incredibly easy to torment your target because that which causes their anguish probably doesn't bother you.

Regret

Regret is one of my favorites because as far as I can tell it is the only trait that is uniquely human.

We all suffer from regret to some extent. We can regret what we did wrong or what we didn't do. We can regret things that happened or things that never will. Each of these battles exists only in our own brains so others can't do anything to save us.

To take advantage of regret you need to exacerbate the natural conflict within your target, perhaps by using things such as opportunity, scarcity and value. Would they feel bad if they missed their "big chance"?

Religion

Religion is a great tool for manipulating others for several reasons:

1) There are well defined rules for behavior so people behave very predictably. Comply with the rules and the others will like you – violate them and you will soon become hated.
2) Fanaticism makes you more respected and fanaticism is relatively easy to feign. If you can recite portions of a religious text it may make people ignore many of your shortcomings.
3) New people means new money, so you can walk in off of the street and a religious group will usually love you by default. All you have to do is avoid screwing up and you will succeed.
4) An individual's history with a religion often dates back to their childhood so they are very reluctant to do anything that might jeopardize their relationship with their group.
5) The fact that you have become a member of a specific religion automatically makes everyone else your antagonist. More on this later.

Self-Deception

It can be difficult to deceive your target, but luckily your target is probably prone to deceiving themselves. Among the key indicators that your target suffers from self-deception are:

1) They are quick to explain the behavior of others even when they lack sufficient evidence to make an intelligent assessment.
2) They frequently assume that the accidental behavior of others is intentional.
3) They claim a single cause for something occurring when there are multiple causes. Reality is very complex so there are relatively few cases of direct causality.
4) They have double standards. They feel it is acceptable for them to do something they consider is wrong for others to do.

5) They go out of their way to do the wrong thing. People often expend more effort in covering up their mistakes than it would take to fix everything.
6) They watch Fox News.

Sex

Sex is a powerful biological force that can cause a lot of the weaknesses that I have already mentioned. Few can resist what appears to be a riskless sexual encounter so this is another great way to recruit spies.

One's sensitivity to sex is usually visibly obvious, but if for some reason it is not then it is an aspect that is particularly easy to test.

Social Class

It doesn't matter that the concept of social class is ridiculous. If it is important to your target then you will need to behave appropriately.

Presenting yourself as a higher class than your target should be used only if authority is required to force them to behave in a certain manner. It is a difficult technique to pull off because people are constantly looking for any inconsistencies or weaknesses in the behavior of those in higher classes.

If you need to logically convince your target to behave in a specific way then it is best to be of the same social class as them. Attempts to reason with members of another class may fail solely due to prejudice and not due to a flawed argument.

If you are a member of a lower class than your target then you are obviously an idiot. This can allow you to "play stupid" and use all kinds of techniques to distract them while other members of your team accomplish their tasks.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping is not a character flaw – it is how a healthy human brain normally works. The trick is to figure out whether your target typically stereotypes others correctly or not. Something that is equally important is how quickly they change their stereotype when they are presented with contradictory information, if it possible for them to change it at all.

I'll tell you why stereotyping is important later. I hate to leave you hanging but the overall process works better that way.

Weak Forces

"Weak forces" involve behavior that may be relatively consistent but could be faked fairly easily. They can be dangerous in a social engineering situation because you may not be able to receive accurate feedback from your target.

Anthropomorphism

People often give human attributes to inanimate objects. We say that steel will "fatigue" over time and we can't get it wet because it would "hurt" it. After we use such terms we tend to treat the objects as though they have feelings. We then avoid certain behaviors due to the supposed feelings of the inanimate objects.

Anthropomorphism can work well with complex or intimidating technologies. For example, if you need your target to reboot their computer in order to complete your malware installation simply call them and say it needs to be shut down over the weekend because it has been running for a while and it's "tired".

Arrogance

I have seen people with practically no skills base their entire careers on nothing but arrogance. If your target is particularly arrogant then you may have no need for logic, or technical merit, or anything else. To win them over you just need to support their ego in a nonthreatening manner.

Authority

The last time you received a prescription from your doctor did you go straight home and research the side effects of the medication? Probably not. You most likely filled your prescription and began popping pills based on nothing more than the authority of your doctor.

There are some who never question an authority figure so they will cave in to absolutely any idea that is presented. Try Googling "Officer Scott McDonald's hoax" for just one example of how far you can go using nothing but authority.

The restricted availability of uniforms was once helpful in reducing attacks that leverage authority but now you can obtain absolutely anything you need online. If you must ensure that your purchase is completely anonymous you might be amazed at what you can find at things like municipal auctions and thrift stores.

Very often all you need to feign authority is unwavering confidence.

Automaticity

If you perform a task enough times you will eventually be able to do it without thinking much about it. This is what gives you the ability to stop your car at a red light even if you aren't paying attention.

Social engineers take advantage of automaticity quite frequently. Ticket takers, security guards, accountants, armored car drivers and numerous other professions often have repetitive tasks that can

be completely mind numbing. When your target is "running on autopilot" they probably aren't paying attention to what you are doing.

Blackmail

If your target has a secret that they do not want to be publicly revealed then they are sensitive to blackmail. But how can you tell if they have such a secret?

One way is to see if any of the aforementioned Strong Forces have ever driven them to behave in a shameful manner.

If your target is financially well-off then find out how they obtained their money. Being an honorable human being does not pay very well so if they have a lot of money then they have probably taken advantage of someone else. If you can identify their victims then you can threaten to reveal how they swindled their fellow human beings.

Commitment

Have you ever known someone who was involved in a horrible marriage yet refused to get a divorce solely because of their religion? Some, especially those from any rural area, feel very strongly about commitment so they will go to great lengths to behave consistently.

I can think of at least two ways you can leverage commitment against your target. You can either question their commitment in order to make them angry, or lure them into a situation that causes them to violate their commitment so you can subsequently blackmail them.

Compassion

Some people are instinctively concerned about the well-being of others, whereas some could not care less. People who feel strongly one way or the other are most attractive to a social engineer.

Those who are compassionate can be easily lured into performing whatever tasks another poor soul needs to have done.

Those who are not compassionate may have experienced a traumatic event and their lack of concern for others is just a resulting symptom. By mentioning the event or its current consequences you can easily enrage them.

Consistency

Some can be very sensitive to things that are different so you don't want to make any abrupt moves. You may need to slowly change their perception of what is "normal" as part of your operation. For example, if your attack will cause a large amount of network traffic then you will want to progressively increase the amount of traffic over time so they are unable to detect a difference when you launch your actual attack.

A helpful feature is that people assume consistency by default which is why many believe that history is predictive. I have seen even the best intelligence analysts rule out potential reasons for a country's behavior simply because the country has never behaved in that manner before. The stock market is another place where this can be painfully evident. The fact that the price of a certain stock has consistently increased for 100 years does not prevent the company from going bankrupt tomorrow.

Cynicism

Personally I love cynicism because I have found that when dealing with real-life issues it significantly increases the chance of my being correct. It can also be a great way to bond with your target if your cynicism causes you to share a unique perspective with them.

Some people go too far and are reflexively negative about everything that is presented to them. It may seem difficult to influence such people in any way, but since they behave predictably it means

they can still be manipulated. If they are excessively cynical they will likely shoot down the first idea that you give them, so first present an option that you would like to fail. After they explain all of the reasons why your suggestion is stupid you can then propose your alternative (the idea you want them to approve). If you are lucky they may even propose your desired option as part of their response.

Deceit

This can be a tricky one to navigate. Some people assume everyone is lying until they prove otherwise. Others tend to trust everyone, but as soon as they catch someone in a lie they will never trust them again. Many are bad at detecting deception altogether.

Desire to be liked

Some will do whatever it takes to make you like them, or some may feel bad if they cause you to like them less. Either of these types can be manipulated by a social engineer. The only ones that are not helpful are those who truly don't care what you think of them.

Diffusion of Responsibility

There are many who can only think in terms of their own personal risk. If you can show them a way to shift the blame to others then they be happy to do perform the task that you want This method is often used to make a target perform an action that is not in the best interests of their employer.

Claiming that "no one will know" is usually not good enough. You should provide them with specific names of others they can blame.

Fashion

Your appearance is very important, especially during your first contact with your target. You must always dress appropriately for your role (don't forget your social class) so you don't attract unwanted attention.

Fashion faux pas can be quite dangerous so you need to pay attention to details like brand names. If it is common for a group to wear Carhartt pants then you may not want to show up in Dickies coveralls.

Also make sure your clothing has the appropriate level of wear and tear. If you are forced to acquire clothing for your operation then it may appear too new which might tip off your target.

Group Think

Group think is the tendency for groups to come to an agreement on issues without critically analyzing the facts. They tend to instinctively reject any evidence that is contrary to their opinion, and they will stubbornly cling to any evidence that supports it. Such groups are wonderful for a social engineer because they require little maintenance as far as deceptions are concerned. Once you get them to agree on your message they will maintain the deception themselves.

Lighting

It may sound crazy, but even lighting can be useful to a social engineer. Try dimming the lights a little and see how much your target slows down. By making them brighter you may be able to trigger migraines which will either incapacitate them or make them go home.

Loneliness/Isolation

Some people are energized when they come into contact with others, whereas some become physically drained by the same situation. The anxiety of either type of person can be increased by placing them in situations that are the opposite of what they find comfortable.

Mirroring

Mirroring is the tendency for someone to mimic the actions of someone with whom they are interacting. For example, if the person they are talking to leans forward in their chair then they will lean forward as well.

This behavior might only appear to be entertaining but there is more to it. Our physical expressions are obviously driven by our emotional state; if I am feeling sad then I frown. The cool thing is the process also works in reverse. If you can entice your target to pose in specific ways then it will change their emotional state! If you smile while you are talking and they mirror your behavior then they will actually feel happier. Or if you open your eyes more widely while you speak you will cause them to do the same which will make them feel more excited about what you are saying.

Moral Duty

Moral duty is a feeling to do what one thinks is morally right. I won't discuss the origins of moral duty because it will make far too many people mad at me. But I will say that this is another case where inflexibility causes a weakness that can be exploited.

Those with a strong sense of moral duty seldom have a need for logic. They use emotions or the opinions of others to force everything into categories of "right" and "wrong" and they have difficulties with all of the things that can't be neatly labeled as one or the other. This leaves them vulnerable to social engineers who can help them define all of the problem stuff between the two extremes. If you can make them see how something will help their family, their employer, or their country they will love it forever. Or if you can frame something as a threat to one of them then they will never like it.

Music

Do you remember which song was playing during that boss fight in Final Fantasy? Probably not, but your heart rate increased in response to it.

Since you probably already know all of the ways that music might affect your target this is just a reminder to include it in your attack if it will be helpful.

Novelty

Do cool, new things distract your target? I wonder how much productivity declines after a new cell phone is released...

A hot new secretary is still the best way to distract an entire office.

Odor

Pleasant scents can help your target relax. Or if you would like to ensure that few people are nearby then try to schedule your attack while the septic tank is being cleaned.

Physical Touch

Becoming a caring person in the eyes of your target can be as simple as placing your hand on their shoulder while you speak to them. Be very aware of cultural influences here. In many societies people experience very little physical human contact so anything more than a handshake can upset them.

Politics

Politics has existed for thousands of years but it obviously hasn't solved all of our social issues yet. Politics tends to perpetuate problems so if your target is sensitive to it then you will have an endless source of topics with which to either annoy or bond with them.

Praise

Most people are stuck in personally or professionally thankless positions so a simple compliment can go a long way.

Don't go too far with praise. It is a common mistake to use excessive flattery when you are trying to manipulate someone. If you do it too much you will be quickly labeled a "suck up" which will erode your credibility. Flattery should be used only for psychological emphasis, as infrequently as an exclamation mark in writing.

Reciprocation

You are unlikely to continue to help someone if they never do anything for you in return, so most people are "scorekeepers" to some extent.

Some "scorekeepers" are a bit obsessive and can't tolerate having a negative balance. If you proactively perform a favor for them they will be compelled to pay you back as soon as possible. This makes it more likely that they will do the next thing you ask of them.

Risk

Some people jump into risky situations, either because of the excitement or because they are delusional. Whatever the reason, those who dive into risky situations without considering the consequences are attractive targets to a social engineer.

There are a considerable number of people with the opposite problem – they are risk averse. They may fail to consider an opportunity simply because it involves some level of risk. This means they are making decisions without considering the benefits which makes them as ignorant as the blind risk takers. If you simply stir up the FUD (fear, uncertainty and doubt) about a subject then it will ensure that such a target decides against it.

Sensation Seeking

This is Marvin Zuckerman's concept of seeking excitement. I treat it separately from the previous risk takers since it is my opinion that risk is not necessarily required to produce excitement.

To determine if your target is sensitive to this, Google "Zuckerman sensation seeking scale" and complete the test on behalf of your target.

Silence

Ask someone who has a toddler how powerful silence can be. If their child makes no noise for 30 seconds then the parent knows that something is wrong.

Silence can be helpful in meetings. If you are going to make a particularly poignant remark then precede it with an uncomfortable pause to get everyone's attention.

Stacking

This is often called "card stacking" but folks get confused with the analogy so I will just call it stacking. There are two ways to do it and either may work for you.

The first one causes an error by omission and is often used in advertising. In it the target is presented with numerous positive facts that are all absolutely true. It is up to the target to find any negative information on their own. Most people are either lazy or ignorant so they never seem to get around to researching the issue. Therefore the only data they have to cognitively work with is the positive information they were given.

The other method causes a logical flaw through association and is often used in politics. You simply string together a series of statements to which your listener will obviously agree and then insert your propaganda among them. For example:

The common man suffers at the hands of dictators.

Society should not allow children to go hungry.

Everyone deserves an education.

If I am elected then your life will improve.

Superstition

Superstitions are so overwhelming for some that they will violate their own religious convictions. For example, the act of knocking on wood for good luck seems to have originated from the rapping on a tree to summon its spirits. This makes it a pagan ritual which the monotheistic religions should consider blasphemous.

You need not rely solely on the superstitions currently held by your target. Superstitions are learned behaviors so you are free to teach your target new ones.

Sympathy

There are not a lot of people who are genuinely sympathetic, but those who are have a difficult time ignoring the cries for help from others. Some, like the clergy and public safety workers, are professionally obligated to help everyone who asks for it.

Temperature

People usually prefer temperatures of 60 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit (15.5 to 26.5 C). Anything outside of this range makes people irritable.

People are also sensitive to abrupt changes in temperature. If you have several days of snow and then have a day where it reaches 65 degrees then practically everyone will be in a good mood. Likewise if you have several days of beautiful weather followed by a day at 105 degrees then people may be more aggressive than they would be if they had previously experienced a series of 100 degree days.

Time

Most people are sensitive to time to some extent. It is best used to cause your target to get angry by making things take too long. Causing them to miss their bus or a meeting can ruin their entire day.

Remember that you probably do not want to be the focus of their anger. Make sure you have a good reason as to why things are taking so long. Computer problems are one readily accepted explanation.

Uncertainty

Humans have an odd need to appear to know everything. We come up with theories to explain what hasn't yet proven scientifically, and anything that we are too ignorant to theorize about we simply attribute to God.

Uncertainty can pose a problem for your target if they feel it is important to "save face". Reality will continue to behave in ways your target can't predict which will be a constant reminder that they do not have all of the answers. They will always fear that their inadequacies might be discovered and will go to great lengths to rationalize their behavior. To agitate them all you have to do is "poke them with a stick" by hinting that you know that they don't know.

People spend trillions of dollars on intangible things that appear to reduce uncertainty. If you claim to sell things like insurance or credit default swaps your target will gladly trade their hard-earned money for a piece of paper.

Ignore the ones that are rated Low. Of the forces you rated either Medium or High circle the names of the ones you or your team are particularly good at exploiting.

This obviously tells you which aspects you should focus on when you develop your attack.

Developing a Plan

In this section we will work out most of the details of your plan.

What is your plan of attack based on what you know now?

Figure out a way to achieve your objective by exploiting the forces that you have circled and try to use the strong forces if at all possible. Writing out your entire plan may seem like a lot to ask of you this early in the process, but if you have really worked through the previous steps you may be pleased to find you have already worked out much of it.

If you can't come up with an improved plan try leveraging sleep by putting this away for a few days.

What else do you need to learn about the target?

Now that you have a partial plan it may become obvious that you need more information such as:

1) Spouse, kids, and pet names
2) Home and work address
3) Phone numbers
4) Email addresses

What are your target's goals and needs? If you were to fulfill them would it help achieve your objective?

Helping your target with something they really need to do can be a great way to increase a target's affection for you. For example, if you help your target while they have a family member in the hospital it will be very difficult for them to decline your request for assistance after their crisis is over.

Helping your target can be particularly effective for your first contact with them.

Can and should you leverage an existing conflict? If so, how?

Human beings are inherently conflicted so it makes sense to attempt to use it against them. This can be done a couple of ways.

The most universal method is to utilize one's conflict with their self. If you are unable to win your target's favor by offering a way to remove the source of their anxiety then you can at least claim to suffer from the same problem, thereby becoming a member of the "same team".

Another way is to leverage their existing conflicts with others. Once again you can use the situation as a tool to help bond with your target by siding with them, but it can also be a great diversionary tactic. If you covertly exacerbate their conflict with others your target will be forced to focus their attention on their situation and not on what you are doing. One way to increase conflict between others is to complete a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) on behalf of each of those involved and then put those with opposite personality types in situations where they must face each other.

Can and should you break up the attack into smaller pieces that are less noticeable?

People must judge events as they relate to other events, so if you try to do too many things at once it may arouse suspicion. If you can distribute your activities throughout time and/or space you can decrease the possibility of being detected. For example, you may want to install a hidden camera while your target's building is under construction instead of trying to plant it when you meet them for the first time.

At what points can you safely make them rush?

Generally speaking, the more time you can devote to something the better you can secure it, so you can often reduce the effectiveness of security controls simply by making people hurry.

You are probably most familiar with the technique of forcing the target to take an action before they can properly evaluate their risk, but there is at least one other advantage to this method. By making

them rush you are also impairing their cognition which makes it less likely that the events will make it to their short term memory, and if something doesn't make it to their short term memory then it can't make it to their long term memory. Therefore by making them act swiftly you can force them to forget what happened.

At what points should you delay?

This is another method of increasing the forgetfulness of your target and it is particularly effective against information technologies. Most people retain logs and backup tapes for a relatively short period of time so if you do nothing more than wait the evidence of your activities may disappear.

Can and should you make the attack multifaceted to increase legitimacy?

The concurrent use of differing media can improve the credibility of your propaganda. So instead of simply sending your target an email message, consider also making a phone call or writing a letter as well. Making it appear that the communications are coming from different people can also help.

Note that this technique can increase your risk because it produces more evidence as to your identity. For example, you may take adequate steps to make your email message untraceable but your physical mail message may include identifiable information.

List the feedback channels that will be available throughout to gauge your success.

As you work to create a reality for your target you will need a means of monitoring their behavior so you can determine the effectiveness of your methods.

The best feedback channels feature all of the following:

1) Based on physical evidence of the actions of the target.
2) Ability to be monitored by you without being detected.
3) Resistance to the influence of other factors (high diagnosticity).
4) Not based on what the target says.

You will sometimes find that there aren't any useful feedback channels. In these cases you will need to create your own. You may even need to add steps to your plan that in no way influence the behavior of your target but serve only to provide feedback to you.

What are possible indicators of the failure of your plan? What will you do if they occur?

As I already mentioned, arrogance is a flaw that all humans possess. We believe our brilliant plans are certain to work as intended and we don't even consider the possibility of failure, but you are certain to fail at times so you need to begin preparing for it.

The problem is that your target is unpredictable and there is no guarantee that your logical plan will have the desired effect on them. You may even discover that your target is completely insane which could force you to change your plan entirely.

So this step is not about the flaws in your plan – it is about the flaws in your target. Damage control should be engineered in advance.

If you run into trouble at a specific point how will it affect the effectiveness of methods you may use in the future?

If your target catches you trying to scam them with a fake sweepstakes entry then they probably won't fall for the same trick again, but sometimes the effects are not so direct. If the target finds your malware on their PC then they may no longer trust the entire device which may affect other things you were planning on doing via their computer.

Can you discreetly test their vulnerability to any of the methods you intend to use?

Let's say you would like to determine the flexibility of your target's morning schedule. You might make it appear as though a raccoon discovered your target's trash can. As they leave for work you can monitor their level of distress as they discover they must perform the unplanned task of cleaning up the trash strewn across their entire yard.

List any date or time restrictions.

List any dates or times that may be a problem for either you or your target. You need vacations, too.

List any advantageous dates or times.

There are numerous times that may provide you with an opportunity, such as:

1) During a disaster recovery exercise
2) During your target's menstrual cycle
3) After a new employee is hired
4) During or immediately after end of month processing

Focus on things that cause a depletion of resources. For example, thunderstorms bother me not because of the lightning but because the thunder triggers burglar alarms. When the police are tied up responding to false alarms then they are not available for legitimate calls.

How might you manipulate their perception of trust cues?

Things like your physical appearance, facial expressions and tone of voice can affect your trustworthiness in the eyes of your target. If you are a poor speaker you may want to minimize the number of perceptible trust cues by communicating in writing. If you are an excellent actor then feel free to meet your target in person.

How can you modify your language to improve your results?

If you have a need to confuse your target then language is a great way to do it. English in particular is constantly changing so you can never be certain that your words will be perceived as you intended.

The following are a just few ways that language is currently being mangled:

1) "Life in prison" no longer means that a convict will spend the remainder of their life in prison.
2) Thanks to Facebook a "friend" can now be someone you have never met.
3) If your electricity is provided by a coal burning power plant then your "green" electric car is still harming the environment.

A simple example of the creative use of language would be to claim that someone "told" you something via email. Your target may later only recall that you were "told" the information which may lead them to assume you spoke to them. Eventually this might make them think you must have met with them in person.

What resources might serve as a means of amplifying your efforts?

What can you do that will create a large effect for little effort on your part? For example, some news programs do nothing more than read online blogs so making a news anchor read your propaganda on the air can be as easy as submitting an anonymous posting. Militant and religious organizations can be quite excitable so a simple email message to them can have a significant impact.

What is your pretext?

Create a plausible reason why you are behaving the way you are. For example, if you are "dumpster diving" simply dress and behave like a homeless person because it completely justifies what you are doing.

This is also the point where you should consider how you are going to create a fictitious identity, or better yet, hijack someone else's. Luckily the Internet gives you countless ways of accomplishing this.

Here is one experiment you can do: Consider your peers from High School. Determine which ones do not yet have Facebook accounts and create factually accurate ones for them. You should soon receive invites from their old friends to which you can respond as you see fit.

Using layers of disparate people and systems can also help hide your identity, but keep in mind that complexity decreases your security. Once again the more resources you use the more evidence you create.

You may need to create multiple pretexts in order to cover different parts of your plan.

How might they try to confirm your pretext?

What will they do to validate your story? They will probably start by searching for your name on Google so you need to confirm they won't find anything unusual when they try. They may also have other things like surveillance video at their disposal.

How might they do a "reality check"?

As you are creating an alternate reality for your target, how will they try to confirm things? For example, they may be uncomfortable with technology so they may have a habit of consulting with their children on technical matters. Therefore you may need to include their kids in your deception.

How might they try to throw you off of your script?

Security is all about anomaly detection, so the easiest way for your target to bust you is to make you behave in a way that is inconsistent with how you "should" behave.

Increasing your level of stress is arguably the most common technique your target will use to make you fail. They will try different ways of agitating you until they find something that works, including:

1) Stalling. They will seldom be the cause of the problem so they may blame the delays on something else.
2) Asking you open-ended questions instead of ones with simple yes/no answers. This imposes a far greater cognitive load on you which makes it very difficult to maintain your deceptions.

3) Increasing your stakes. Your attack is subject to your budget, so if they create an unexpected expense it is likely to upset you. They can also increase your exposure to risks other than financial ones.
4) Trick you into an obvious lie. For example, they may say, "Didn't you hate that fire drill yesterday? We had to stand in the cold for half an hour!" You will be inclined to agree with them since you are unprepared for their question. There may have been no fire drill.
5) Make you focus on your own stress. A simple phrase like, "You look stressed, Bob" tends to make an attacker feel worse, while it would make an innocent person feel better since they would appreciate the fact that someone noticed their suffering.

If you think stress may be an issue for you, consider behaving agitated throughout your contact with the target so they will be unable to detect any increase in your anxiety.

General Recommendations

There are several things that are very important but they didn't seem to fit earlier in the process.

Ways to make your target remember your message:

Be repetitive.

The more frequently your target is subjected to your propaganda the more likely they will believe it. You won't be forgetting the term "weapons of mass destruction" any time soon, will you?

Arouse them.

Strong emotional states can reduce the decision making abilities of your target and can make them more easily remember any information you may want to feed them, both of which are useful to a social engineer.

Things like drugs and fear can be used to increase their heart rate, however lust still works the best so try to use an attacker that your target considers sexually attractive.

Give them a stereotype.

The human brain is compelled to use stereotypes. Even if you consciously avoid stereotyping someone your memories of them will become increasingly stereotypical over time.

Since people base numerous decisions on stereotypes it is critical that they categorize you correctly. Fortunately your target will try to stereotype you as quickly as possible and it will be difficult for them to change their mind later. During your first contact with your target you must make it obvious as to how they should stereotype you.

Give them a sound bite.

One weakness of our brain is that it does not retain details well so a way to ensure that your target remembers important information is to use unique and poignant sayings. In America practically everyone knows the phrase, "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit."

Your sound bites do not need to be in the form of a statement and they need not even be true – you can later admit your quote is false to avoid being caught in a lie. Consider the fictitious news story, "Does bath water cause colon cancer?" After several minutes of sensationalism the reporter is free to admit there is no evidence that links bathing with cancer. Their audience will tend to remember the title and not the conclusion, however, so if you later ask someone if bath water is dangerous they may respond, "I think it is – I remember seeing something about that. "

The producers of the animated series South Park have come up with hundreds of great sound bites ("Look at the monkey.", "Go ahead – apologize", etc.) so if you would like more examples then go watch television.

Use the good name of someone else.

I suspect that this is why Colin Powell was chosen to speak to the United Nations about Iraqi aluminum tubes. The speech would have been significantly less believable if someone else had delivered it.

You don't necessarily need to make your "tool" state your message right now. Politicians and business people often have a history that includes their support of practically every possible position of an argument. Simply find old footage that shows them supporting your view.

Of course such people often need to be disposable. If you ruin their good name then you will be unable to use them again.

Other general tips:

Make things appear to be their idea.

People don't like your ideas but they will drive themselves into bankruptcy in order to defend their own. So instead of presenting your target with a concept and then attempting to talk them into agreeing with you, try to structure your discussion in a manner that makes them propose your idea to you.

Give them instant gratification.

The best way to keep someone working is to reward them immediately and frequently. In video games there are often boring tasks that players would want to avoid, but as soon as you reward the player with a funny icon and call them "achievements" the tasks somehow become fun.

It is not what you think that matters.

In social engineering even reality doesn't matter. It is all about what your target thinks and how they behave. When you say that your target "should have acted differently" it is indicative of a failure in you and not them. You didn't understand them well enough.

Learn when to stop pushing.

Sometimes the smallest thought planted in a targets head will produce a marvelous result if you just leave things alone. Don't force things unless you must.

Pay attention to the small things.

People often have unusual quirks that you must accommodate. Some will freak out if you walk on the opposite side of a pole from them. If you walk slowly then others may think you are not important since you apparently don't need to be anywhere. Or people may kick you out of a meeting if you fail to bring a pen and paper because you obviously don't expect to learn anything or be assigned any tasks.

If you have ever been in a position where you had no idea as to why someone hated you then you may have violated one of their unknown quirks. Their behavior may not be reasonable to you but it makes sense to them.

In order to discover your target's quirks you will need to test them. One great way is to watch for the mere presence of someone else to disgust them. Then put yourself in a position to overhear the conversations that occur as soon as the source of their agitation leaves. Your target will probably complain about them at the first opportunity.

This may seem like a lot of work but it can be very worthwhile. Such knowledge can allow you to not only avoid making them mad at you, but you may be able to quickly gain their favor should you pretend to have the same idiosyncrasies they do.

Put the target in a group with others who will behave favorably.

It is very difficult for people to contradict everyone else around them. Keep in mind that you can affect your target's behavior only while they are a member of that group, and the group can't make

your target feel good about their actions. If you go too far your target may suffer regret to the point that they overcorrect what they did while they were in the group. This may make the situation worse than it was initially.

Plausible deniability only works in politics.

Your target does not need to prove that you intend to harm them. Mere suspicion can cause them to change their behavior in a way that completely invalidates your plan.

Gender and age have associated threat.

Someone needs to do a study on this concept because it is based entirely on my limited experience.

It seems to me that those with the least perceived threat would tend to be towards the top of this list:

female child

old female

male child

old male

effeminate male

middle aged female

masculine female

middle aged male

female teens through twenties

male teens through twenties

This does not necessarily mean that someone higher in the list will be a better social engineer. If you intend to leverage sex then the last two are actually the best.

Social engineer yourself.

It is very difficult to tell a convincing lie. If lying is part of your plan then you will need to come up with several reasons that justify to yourself what you are doing so you can avoid displaying any deception cues. If that isn't good enough then you will need to literally brainwash yourself into truly believing the crap you will be feeding to your target.

Negative/disconfirming evidence can be just as important as positive results.

We are very visual creatures and often look for direct evidence that something has occurred, but sometimes direct evidence is not available. Sometimes you need to infer that your hypothesis is true either because something did not happen or because things happened that wouldn't have if your hypothesis were false.

Let's say there is a couple that I suspect may be considering a divorce but I can't confirm it since I have no idea what goes on behind their closed doors. If one of them should quit their day job in order to run for a public office then that may be a good indication that they expect their family situation to remain stable for the near future.

Social groups are about exclusion, not inclusion.

People often join a social group to have more intimate relationships with others but it usually has the opposite effect. Many types of groups are mutually exclusive so becoming a member of one immediately makes those in the other groups not like you. This is why people are less affectionate as soon as they discover you are a citizen of a different country.

Humans are well known for violently defending their social groups, and they are very hesitant to leave them. Such inflexibility can be very useful to a social engineer. But largely due to the Internet, people are beginning to realize that social groups no longer make much sense. If your target is one of these enlightened few then you must use caution because they may become upset if you try to force them into a particular group.

Use their delusion.

Delusion is the most significant cause of all security problems.

Attackers, including social engineers, do little more than take advantage of the disparity between how the world really works and how their target thinks that it works. After all, if the target really knew how everything works then anything that an attacker might do could be anticipated.

The further your target is removed from reality the easier your job will be. If your target chooses to spend their time becoming increasingly ignorant by watching the news or reality television shows then you should be thankful that you have an opportunity to take advantage of them before they succumb to natural selection.

Techniques that should be "red flags" to your target but they will probably work anyway:

All of the following are blatant social engineering techniques. The methods continue to be used every day so they apparently still work but they will probably not be effective on a security professional.

Allow me to restate this so I am perfectly clear:

THE FOLLOWING ARE ALL OBVIOUS SOCIAL ENGINEERING TACTICS. WHENEVER YOU SEE THEM YOU CAN BE CERTAIN THAT SOMEONE IS TRYING TO MANIPULATE YOU. IF YOU USE THEM ON A FELLOW SOCIAL ENGINEER THEY WILL THINK YOU ARE AN IDIOT.

Focus on the symptoms.

This is a diversionary tactic intended to keep people busy so they can't think about the real cause of a problem. This allows the source of the problem to persist indefinitely.

This document was originally written at the time of the tsunami in Japan which is a perfect example of this technique. Everyone was talking about radiation leaking from nuclear reactors and about car manufacturers being unable to sell their products because they could no longer obtain parts. The real issue is that humans have chosen to live on active volcanoes with no natural resources. This has predictable consequences. If the inevitable causes an immediate problem for you then that is your fault.

Promise of a large reward for little effort.

"Road apples" are one example of this. They are enticing things that are left behind to be found by your target. It could be something like a USB flash drive with "Accounting" written on it. When your target plugs it into their PC in order to take a peek at the data it can also install your malware.

A more common example is outright lying. If you would like to obtain your target's credit card number you might call them and claim that thousands of dollars of fraudulent charges have been made to their account. By stating, "Just give me your credit card number so I can confirm your identity and I will be happy to apply your refund to it" you can give your target the impression they can avoid losing a considerable amount of money by simply revealing their sixteen numbers.

Prohibition from talking to others.

"Bouncing an idea off of others" is a great way to avoid making mistakes so you definitely don't want your target to consult with their peers. Suggesting that they keep quiet "for national security reasons" or "for their own safety" often works.

This simple technique significantly helped Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme. He forced his investors to agree to never mention his name.

Something is wrong because it is on someone's "agenda".

An agenda is simply a list of items which has nothing to do with validity or malice. People who possess the correct answers use lists, too.

Reverting to authority.

When your father said, "Eat your vegetables because I say so" you knew that he had no valid proofs to support his position so there was no point in asking, "Why?" Likewise, if the only way someone can get you to agree with them is to threaten to shoot you then they probably do not have a valid basis for their opinions.

The fact that someone is forced to flaunt their authority indicates that they are probably wrong. This is another behavior exhibited by Bernie Madoff.

False choices.

This is where you are given a list of choices that contains neither the right answer nor all of the possibilities. The list contains only answers that are obviously wrong and the one you want your target to select. For example, who should be the next president of the United States?

1) A bar stool
2) Richard Milhous Nixon
3) Particle Bored (the author of this document)

A bar stool does not meet the requirements for a presidential candidate, and Nixon died in 1994 so that isn't the right answer, either. Because of the way the question is designed our target must select the third answer.

This technique can work very well over time since the question and answer tend to merge in the targets mind. The target will forget what the two wrong answers were, and the information will

ultimately be stored in their brain as, "Particle Bored should be the next president of the United States".

Perpetual changes.

In this one the target is sold on the idea that change itself will fix a problem. When changes are made and everything fails again then it becomes obvious that "we must need more change".

In politics it is impossible to agree with your opponent which is why you hear, "the last guy sucks – we need change" in every single campaign. However, if a politician does things differently than their predecessor that does not mean they will do things correctly.

This technique is often used in complex technologies. There are many perfectly capable products that fail solely because of a poor implementation. Those responsible for the failure claim it must have been the fault of the product so they suggest that something different be deployed to correct the issue. This not only shifts the blame away from the implementer but it also creates a new project on which they can work.

Contradiction posing as reason.

If 95 percent of the population has a particular belief then pitting one of them against a member from the remaining five percent does not necessarily result in a "fair and balanced" discussion. It simply legitimizes the position that is obviously wrong. Once the abnormal opinion is perceived as a valid it can be used to slow the progress of the vast majority who possess the right answer.

Inflammatory language.

This is often the easiest way to cognitively overload your target. By calling them names or claiming they are unpatriotic you can work them into a frenzied state. A simple technique is to begin your response to their comments with the word "no".

Seeing only in hindsight.

Some politicians do nothing during a crisis yet afterwards they are quick to point out all of the things that their opponent did wrong. This misleads people into believing they would have done the right thing if they were in their opponent's position.

Removal of valid options.

This is a means of "taking options off of the table" so your target is forced to choose from your limited remaining options.

A common example would be a project meeting where a specific solution is not considered due to inappropriate reasons such as, "our employees don't understand that technology". If the discarded product is the right answer then someone needs to read a book so it can be deployed.

Conclusions made without the facts.

Is a tire swing with a frayed rope dangerous? Not if the rope has broken completely and the tire is just lying on the ground.

If you don't have all of the facts then you usually can't make the correct decision. A social engineer can cause this to occur by either rushing their target or by making some facts unavailable.

There are countless examples of people who judge something even though they are in a position that makes it impossible for them to possess all of the facts. If your neighbor is a doctor and he claims to know how our military budget needs to be leveraged then he is a bonehead. The information required to have an intelligent discussion on the subject is not available to him.

Excuses, excuses.

You probably haven't thought of it this way before, but excuses are nothing more than a social engineering technique. They are intended to change ones feelings associated with an issue without changing any of the facts.

Talkin' loud and sayin' nothing.

If cognitive overload is your goal then it is often trivial to keep your target preoccupied with complete nonsense. The following are just some of the methods you may want to use depending on your specific target:

Use of ambiguous terms

Look through a sample of advertisements and look for phrases like, "this car is the best", or our product "gives you freedom". One can waste hours deciphering what the statements might mean, or arguing against them, or attempting to resolve the confusion they inevitably create.

The "some have said" technique is one method of leveraging ambiguity. By claiming that "some have said" the opinion of your target is wrong you can force them to defend their position against someone who may not even exist.

Talk of feelings

People love the fact that you want to hear about their feelings. Once they are finished talking they will feel differently so then they can talk about that. While you were both busy talking about feelings the real world was moving on without you.

Inflammation, invention and interruption

This allows you to accuse your target of something you completely made up then prohibits them from responding. It uses several techniques at once so it is best to just give you an example:

You: "So you claim that you support sustainable energy sources."

Target: "Yes, I really like solar, and wind power works in some..."

You: "But some have said you would like to burn embryonic stem cells in order to provide mood lighting for prostitutes."

Target: "Absolutely not. That's the dumbest thing I have ever..."

You: "I don't believe you. My next question is..."

While it appears to be an interview the only one who is allowed to make a point is the interviewer.

Fortune telling

Much of what is portrayed as news is actually speculation about the future. Since the future involves numerous factors and endless possibilities one can waste a lot of time trying to predict what might happen.

Celebrities

Celebrity is often mistaken for authority which is why celebrity endorsements work even though there is no logical reason they should. Why would I buy a car just because a sports figure spoke about it?

There is a lot of psychology that explains how celebrity works but luckily you don't need to know any of it. Simply keep in mind that whenever you see a celebrity you are being manipulated.

Consulting those without credentials

Turn on the television at any point throughout the day and you will probably see evidence of someone behaving as an authority on a topic even though they obviously have no idea what they are talking about. A great example was the day of the United States invasion of Iraq. One news program created an "expert panel" consisting entirely of journalists in order to determine what the military strategy of the United States would be. What makes a journalist an expert on military strategy?

Surveys are even more worthless since they never vouch for the intelligence of those they questioned (they are also about feelings and not facts). If I survey 1,000 people and every one of them believes that Paraguay is an imminent nuclear threat does that mean I should start building a bomb shelter? No. The opinions of those surveyed are completely meaningless.

News programs that read postings from online blogs also fall into this category. Not only are they consulting those lacking credentials but they are often consulting those without valid identities.

YOUR MESSAGE HERE

What else do you need from the SEVER worksheet? Do you need a place for signatures to accommodate your approval process? Do you need room for general notes? Email me at particle.bored@kgb.to and let me know what would be useful to you.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the deal with the odd font?

It is the Dyslexie font that is designed to improve readability for those with dyslexia. You should be using it as well so refer to http://www.dyslexiefont.com/ .

2. Isn't humor an aspect that can assist a social engineer? Why didn't you mention it?

Humor is a wonderful way to manipulate a social situation but it causes some problems for a social engineer:

1) It is best done spontaneously so you can't plan for it in advance.
2) You can easily offend your target if you don't know them very well.
3) You aren't that funny.

Use humor sparingly as a "social seasoning" if you are absolutely certain you can pull it off.

3. Why isn't sadness listed as a useful aspect?

Sadness can definitely be useful for things like charity advertisements but to me sadness seems to be unreliable. It has been my experience that you can't plan on using sadness for general social engineering unless it bad enough to be labeled depression.

Social Engineering Vulnerability Evaluation and Recommendation (SEVER) Instructions

References:

Most of this material is based on stuff that I have absorbed over the last few decades so I have no idea as to who to attribute it to. Therefore, if you have ever taken the time to write about social engineering, psychology or intelligence analysis and put your work somewhere that I could find it then please accept my heartfelt thanks.

Further study:

The beautiful thing about social engineering is that absolutely anything you learn will make you better at it. You never know when your knowledge of Holley carburetors or subatomic particles might help you influence someone.

If you are a beginner then these are the topics you should probably focus on initially:

- Advertising
- Cognition
- Critical Thinking
- Espionage (My list of espionage movies is at https://kgb.to/index.php?title=Espionage_Movies)
- Intelligence Analysis
- Interrogation Techniques
- Magic

If you would like a specific book to read, check out "The Psychology of Intelligence Analysis" by Richards Heuer (available for free online) or pick up a copy of "Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds" by Charles Mackay.

Suggestions:

There are probably ways to optimize SEVER further. If you have ideas for improvements please email particle.bored@kgb.to. Be sure to let me know if I can credit you by name for your suggestions.

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Version 1.0

10 April 2011

Initial Release

Version 1.1

11 January 2015

Corrections and clarifications

Font change to Dyslexie

Copyright update