Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Influence Is Your Superpower with Zoe Chance

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Andy Luttrell:
One of the big reasons I got interested in psychology was a guy named Derren Brown. He sometimes calls himself a "psychological illusionist," but he's a performer in the UK who presents magic and mentalism alongside displays of hypnotism, skeptical thinking, and psychology. As a young magician 15 years ago or so, I started watching the shows he was making, and the questions he raised about psychology set me down a path to where I'm at today.

And one of the skills that Derren is known for is influence. He could apparently get people to make certain decisions, to think of certain things, to act in certain ways…all without the person quite knowing why they were doing it.
And he's really escalated it. Here's the premise of his 2006 TV special:

Derren Brown [video clip]:
Can I get any of them to steal 100,00 pounds in what they believe is a genuine armed robbery? That's the show. This is The Heist.

Andy Luttrell:
And you might have seen his 2018 special on Netflix, where he takes the same kind of premise to new heights…

Derren Brown [video clip]:
Can we be manipulated through social pressure to commit murder?

Andy Luttrell:
And even though you never really know what's actually psychology and what's a deceptive magic trick, Derren's work has inspired lots of people like me who are interested in human behavior. For example, I recently talked to David McRaney—host of the popular podcast You Are Not So Smart. You'll hear my full conversation with him in a month or so, but he was telling me that his whole You Are Not So Smart empire started with Derren Brown…

David McRaney:
And at first it was just sharing YouTube videos. The very first one was the Derren Brown Person Swap experiment, which is a theatrical version of change blindness.

Andy Luttrell:
In the video, Derren walks up to people on the street and asks for directions.

Derren Brown [video clip]:
Do you know how to get to Trinity Church from here?

Man [video clip]:
Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:
While the guy is giving directions, someone walks by holding a giant poster—like the size and shape of a door—and cuts right between Derren and the guy giving directions. The guy carries on giving directions. But the thing is, he's not giving directions to Derren anymore. When the poster cut through, a new guy swapped places with Derren…but the guy giving directions never noticed. Classic psychological biases out in the world. And David McRaney couldn't get it out of his head. He's written books about cognitive biases and is now even endorsing Derren's work.

David McRaney:
He blurbed my first book. I just blurbed one of his recent books, which is a really wild come-full-circle thing.

Andy Luttrell:
Someone else who's been inspired by Derren Brown is today's guest, Zoe Chance.

Zoe Chance:
For me, the initial thing was paying with paper.

Derren Brown [video clip]:
I shall exploit my anonymity and try some daylight robbery in the financial capital of the world with a wallet full of blank paper. This is a little cheeky…

Andy Luttrell:
In the video, he goes to shops and using some mix of influence, misdirection, and confidence, uses blank paper to pay for things.

Zoe Chance:
And my daughter and I tried to replicate it, and we failed, but I was like, "Oh my god. This man is magic!"

Andy Luttrell:
Okay, so other than this just being a love letter to Derren Brown, which it is, my point is really that he stands as what feels like a mythical figure, capable of wielding influence and employing psychology in ways that feel like a superpower. But as my guest Zoe Chance argues, yes, influence is a superpower. But it's one that anybody can master.

You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell. And as I mentioned just a minute ago, my guest today is Zoe Chance. She's an assistant professor of marketing at the Yale School of Management. There she teaches an elective on Mastering Influence and Persuasion, and MBA students flock to it. The course proved so popular that she started to write up its insights into a book, and on February 1st, you get to read it. It's called Influence Is Your Superpower: The Science of Winning Hearts, Sparking Change, and Making Good Things Happen. And it's a fun read! I talked with Zoe not just about our mutual Derren Brown fandom, but also about her unique path to becoming a business school professor, how she started teaching this course on influence, and how she hopes her new book will inspire a new generation of influencers.

Andy Luttrell:
So, your story I think is very interesting to me, because on paper it seems like you were crushing it in the business world and then you said, "You know what? Let's do some PhD program research on behavioral science." And so, I'm curious kind of like what is it that got you to that initial interest in the world of business and then what transitioned you into this new chapter of your life?

Zoe Chance:
So, what you're talking about in the world of business, I definitely didn't feel like I was crushing it. I was a junior manager in an MBA job at a very large company, Mattel, but because I was working on a very large brand… I was working on Barbie. It still is, I guess, the number one girls' brand in the world. It was a $2 billion brand and the segment of it that I was managing was a $200 million segment of it, so it's this big business, but I was like… There was the president, and then five people between the president and me, or something like that.

But I was thriving. I was happy. I loved my job. But that was never where my heart had been. It was basically accidental that I had ended up there in the first place, but it was also just for me, as someone who is curious, and kind, and intellectually curious, I couldn't get excited about selling stuff, and it didn't matter that it was Barbie dolls. It could have really been anything else. I was working in marketing for medical devices before that. And working on Barbie, we were selling two Barbie dolls a second, and I'm asking myself, "So, what does success look like? Is that what if I could have us sell three Barbie dolls a second?" Where is the satisfaction in that? And girls were receiving on average five Barbie dolls a year. What if I could get them a sixth Barbie doll a year? She cuts the hair, chops off the head, and then it goes into a landfill.

It just wasn't enough and just being a super nerd, I would get frustrated with people not behaving in rational ways, and I really wanted to understand why are you making weird decisions and going with your gut when I did all this complicated analysis, so I thought I could help people make better decisions when I went to a PhD. And of course, what I discovered is just that people will always make irrational decisions, but if we understand a little bit more about how their mental processes work, then we have some hope of influencing those decisions.

Andy Luttrell:
How familiar were you with the behavioral science, behavioral economics world before you started? Or was this truly just like a, "Well, they'll tell me what I need to know," and then you discover as soon as you get there kind of what that world looks like?

Zoe Chance:
I was under a vast misapprehension, I would say. And the same thing was true when I did my MBA. So, I wanted to be an entrepreneur, started a small business, and it failed spectacularly, but it was exciting, and I wanted to do more, but better. So, I thought that you go to business school to learn business and be an entrepreneur. That in itself was a terrible decision because if you want to be an entrepreneur, you probably shouldn't go to business school. And then from business school, I did informational interviews because I didn't know… when I ended up realizing all the entrepreneurs I meet are unhappy and overworked, I guess can't be an entrepreneur because I really don't have the chutzpah that it takes to succeed, so I did informational interviews with all these other people and then I interviewed my professors, and my professors hated their jobs.

They were like, "Don't do it. If there's anything else you can do in the world, do that other thing. The politics are terrible. The competition is fierce. Blah, blah, blah." And I was married at the time and my husband said, "Yeah, so we moved to California for you to be in school for a couple of years. You going to school for five more years right now is like… No. Go back to work, girl." And I don't blame him. I would have said the same thing.

So, I didn't know what I was doing when I got to business school, but then I took all these business school classes where you read cases, and HBR pieces, and book chapters, and real-world stuff, and I thought that's what I would be doing if I went and did a PhD and did a business school professor myself. And I really hadn't read very much academic research and I hadn't conducted any academic research, so the academic research was a total shock. And this is back, I don't know, more than 15 years ago now when I was applying to get my PhD, so things have changed so much, and there's no way that you can not know what academic research is and not have done academic research, let alone read academic research.

So, I was dumb, I guess.

Andy Luttrell:
I did not see that conclusion coming. I think you made a reasonable decision at the time given the resources. So, in terms of the actual work that you were doing, my impression is that a lot of the research work that you've done is in the interest of healthy lifestyle nudges. I don't know what percentage of it you would say that it is, but certainly research you've done that has had that kind of impact, so how did you sort of find yourself in that part of the behavioral economics world, and what are the kinds of insights that came from that work?

Zoe Chance:
Sure. I'm happy to share something specifically from some of the work that I've done on health and healthy eating and stuff. I've also done work on… a bunch on self-deception, some on charitable giving, and debt repayment, volunteering. So, most of what I've done, except for self-deception, self-deception is the dark side, and mostly what I've been studying is how to help people lead happier, healthier lives, and self-deception would be the obstacle to that. And I have been fascinated, like a whole lot of other people, with nudges and this idea that you could influence people's behavior without having to change their mind, so maybe that's an opposite path to the one that you took. I don't know.

I'm certainly now interested in changing minds, as well, but it's so incredibly difficult and often more difficult to change minds than change behavior. And additionally, of course, as you know, it's often not necessary to change minds to change behavior. So, I guess I'm a practical person at heart, and if behavior change is the goal, then behavioral interventions just make a lot of sense.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. It harkens… I noticed when I was looking at your website. I wrote it down somewhere here that for the good influencers of today and tomorrow, the secret lies in understanding that we cannot change people's minds, but we can influence behavior when we learn how the mind works. So, maybe you could just sort of expand on that a little bit in terms of what is it about changing minds that is just not worth the trouble, right? I mean, this statement is a little bolder than the one you just made, which is that you can't do it versus it's just more difficult maybe.

Zoe Chance:
What I meant is that you can't change the way somebody's mind works, right? You have some hope of influencing their opinions, or influencing their preferences, or their hopes. These things are really hard, right? And if what you want to change is their behavior, then the question to ask is what's the most direct route to changing their behavior. What's the low-hanging fruit and do I have to try to change their opinions? That's so difficult to try to change people's minds, and people are so resistant when they perceive that we're trying to change their minds that they put up all of these defenses, right?

So, yes, we need to learn about the defenses. We need to learn about opinions, and how and when they can shift, and when do we not have to shift them? So, you asked about some of the health research that I did, and I did a bunch of work with Google that I write about in this book that I have coming out, and this has been on things like mindless snacking to help people be effortlessly healthier. Because you can't just tell people you're not allowed to eat, say M&Ms, which were their favorite things at Google at the time when we were doing the research, and you can't just take them away because you are going to have a revolution. Definitely. Even little, tiny interventions end up with lots of curse-laden emails going to HR.

So, but you can nudge people's behavior in a healthy direction, which is in line with most people wanting to eat healthier than we do, as long as you're not saying, "You have to eat healthier, and you're not allowed to have dessert ever." But doing things like what we found was in one study that was super simple, it was just an observational study, we didn't even have any intervention, but we were just looking at when people were taking a drink from one of two beverage stations in this breakout room that was either closer or farther from the snack bar, what was the likelihood they would take a snack? And they were 50% more likely to take a snack when they took a drink from the coffee machine that was close to the snacks. It's not surprising that they would be more likely to grab a snack when it's closer, but 50% more likely is quite a lot.

And this was an intervention that when we presented it at Google, someone from the architecture firm that was designing these breakout rooms happened to be in the room, and he goes back and calls his boss during lunch at this conference and says, "Listen, we have to redesign the way that we're creating breakout rooms at all of our other clients to separate the drinks and the snacks." And this is… It's not rocket science, right? It's so incredibly simple. But that's the beauty of it, as

well, and in my own house I implemented something a little bit like this, where we had some junk and stuff in the house, like we didn't have a perfectly clean house, and wanted to eat less of it. We had cookies and whatnot.

And so, we just put an opaque box with the cookies in our cabinet and literally what started happening is they were molding before we ate them because we just forgot that they were there.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. More and more I am convinced that ease, which you write about in the book too, is just like… It's not revolutionary but it's so powerful, right? You can go down the rabbit hole of all the cute and clever interventions that you can dream up, but at the end of the day, if I just put it a little further away, or I throw it in a box in the cupboard, that's doing most of the work that I need to do.

Zoe Chance:
Yeah. Especially when you're talking about resisting temptations, because you just can't expect yourself to have the willpower every single time, or some other person to have the willpower every single time. And whether we're talking about grabbing a cookie or we're talking about getting the work done that we're supposed to get done, or staying up and watching Netflix, or staying in bed and not getting up when we're supposed to, all these temptations that we're resisting all the time… Kathleen Voss's work that I'm sure you've read finds that we're resisting temptations about 30% of the time and that's a freaking lot.

And we get exhausted and the more… Well, the later it gets in the day, and the more decisions we've made, and stress, and blah, blah, hunger, just lead us to be more susceptible to temptation, so clearly what we need to do is just get the temptations away from us as much as possible and make structural changes.

Andy Luttrell:
To transition into the book a little bit more deliberately, the book that's coming out is modeled after a class that you teach at Yale, right? And so, I'm curious. Was this a class that was sort of on the books, you got the job at Yale, and they said, "Ah, you get to take this class." Or was this something that you really from the ground up engineered as something that you wanted to do?

Zoe Chance:
This was something that I made up and I encourage everybody to make up your job whenever you get the opportunity. To make up the job that you can do better than any other job and you can do better than any other person that does as much good as possible for whoever it is that you're serving. The job that I was offered, the teaching part of it was teaching consumer behavior and nonprofit marketing, and this was Yale trying to be really nice to me and saying, "Hey, you were a brand manager and you're interested in this do-gooding kind of stuff, so why don't you do that?" And I was like, "Oh, thanks, but how about I do something completely different and here's my proposal." And I just wrote up a three-page thing and I was really lucky that I had senior colleagues who were willing to even let me spend the time developing a class that didn't exist. Because of course, it's a ton of time to do that.

Andy Luttrell:
So, why did you want to do this, right? Why did you say, "Those are all fine and good. This is the thing I want to teach."

Zoe Chance:
I had been an MBA student myself and I loved it, I had a blast, and I also felt like when I graduated with my MBA and went to go take a corporate marketing job, everything helpful that I learned about the job was on the job itself, and almost nothing I had learned in business school actually helped me in this role. I hope that that's not true for every person, every job, every school. I don't think that it was my school. I went to USC and my experience there was great. It was a great school. And they had the number one entrepreneurship program in the country at that time. But so much of what we were learning was very theoretical and everything that I needed to do was very practical.

And what I found that was frustrating to me as a brand manager is that I was spending 50% of my time trying to influence my colleagues and my bosses, and only 50% trying to influence customers. So, when I developed this course, it's called Mastering Influence and Persuasion, it's become the most popular course at the business school, I absolutely love it. It's super fun to teach, which is I guess part of the reason that it's fun for students to take, and life changing for some of them. But was to say, "What would it take to influence people you actually care about?" And you can't necessarily use the same influence strategies with your friends, partners, colleagues, collaborators, anyone that you know and care about that, that you might use to sell a Barbie doll or to sell a car. The kinds of standard influence techniques that we learn from say books like Cialdini's book, Influence, which I loved, and was part of my inspiration for coming to academic research in the first place, but it's a model for transactional sales that's just not applicable for leadership.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. My takeaway from the book, too, was it is unique in the breadth of topics that it covers in a way that I would not have anticipated as sort of like a psychologist who does persuasion and influence work. There's a lot of… In addition to all those kinds of nuts-and-bolts things, things that are squishier, like charisma, and those sorts of topics, and so I'm kind of curious. Was like 2012-ish? Do I have my chronology right? When this class would have started?

Zoe Chance:
I think it was 2012. It might have been 2013. But it was around there. Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:
So, it's been around a while, and so I'm curious, how has it changed over time? Like you wrote a three-page proposal back then. Does that proposal look like the class you teach now, or has it changed in ways?

Zoe Chance:
It's changed a whole lot and I've been fussing with it every year to try to make it better based on what I learn from the students, and they keep a journal for the class where they record their private reflections on their challenges, and their thoughts about influence, and that's what's helped me understand how people think about influence a lot better than I did before and have better

conversations with them. But one of the topics is charisma, that it didn't occur to me that I would be teaching charisma, or anything related to public speaking when I first started teaching this class. It was basically leadership, sales, marketing, negotiations, combination of that kind of thing all with a practical goal.

And when I asked people just open-endedly, "What is the number one charisma skill you would like to master?" The most common answer was charisma. And so, I went, "Oh, God. How would anybody possibly teach charisma?" And then I worked on researched it, tested stuff, workshopped things, and figured out some low-hanging fruit hacks for understanding and then practicing some tools to be more charismatic.

Andy Luttrell:
So, this is part of like an assessment, like a routine check of what are you looking for from a class like this. Has anything come out of that kind of like… It sounds like a lot of stuff has, but any other examples come to mind of ways in which students were wanting certain things out of a class like this that you hadn't appreciated when you were designing it?

Zoe Chance:
Yeah. Well, the whole flavor of it was far more transactional at the beginning, which I just didn't understand. I didn't even notice that I was doing that. And by the end, it has become definitely not transactional. Definitely focused on relationships and long-term influence. Even if it's a conversation focusing on types of strategies that feel comfortable on both sides, because students, and these are also executive workshops, executives in the workshops I teach, kept telling me, "That feels manipulative. I don't want to do that thing that comes from the science because I would feel manipulative and inauthentic if I did that."

So, it's been a long path of figuring out what are the kinds of strategies, tools, ideas, mindsets, that come from the perspective of treating another person with respect, like a human being, instead of like a means or an obstacle to you getting what you want.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. I think maybe I anticipated a little more of like a, "Here are a bunch of specifically empirical strategies," which there are plenty of. But it's not exclusively the perspective, right? Certain things like presentation skills are not like, "Well, here's a study from 1972 that says lift your chin up." But instead, it's sort of just advice that comes from people who know what they're doing. So, how do you think about that balance between the sort of skills that are just experiential skills and skills that are really coming from the scientific literature?

Zoe Chance:
Yeah. It's definitely a mix. And I wish that there were far more researchers studying this stuff and publishing studies. It would be great if every single piece of advice or question could have, "Well, in this study, 20% of people did this and 89% did that," because I love empirical, evidence based, here's the science. But the more you get granular in giving practical advice, the less research you have available to you. So, I've been working now for a long time myself, but for more than a decade with other people who are studying and practicing these things, so what I end up doing is

I'll hear a piece of advice from somebody and then I'll workshop it with students and we'll test it out, and we'll see if it works.

So, we have this informal lab classroom situation that happens. And it's not just that granular techniques don't have a basis in research as much as I wish they did. There's a lot. There's just lots of gaps, as well. And it's also, though, my philosophy of influence that I'm teaching is a path of self-development and it's you practicing tools, and techniques, and ideas, and mindset shifts to become a more influential person, to become someone that people want to say yes to, and eventually on this path, when you get through the kludgy, uncomfortable clunkiness that feels inauthentic of, "I'm using a strategy now," you feel like it just doesn't feel right. But it's not like you're being manipulative, but it's like you're learning a second or third language where you have to be thinking consciously and you're not just easily making friends with someone until you get more fluent in that language.

And then as you get further down this path, you actually don't need to use very many of these skills when we're talking about interpersonal kinds of interactions. The most important thing is that they want to say yes to you and then you have a collaborative conversation about how that might happen, and whether it might work out, and if it's not now, maybe it's in the future. And you become influenceable as you become influential, and you're never gonna just press your wishes on other people and have them comply with you and become influential that way in the long run. But you become someone that people really want to collaborate with, and they want to help, and they're happy when you're happy.

Like I write in the book, the penultimate chapter, where it summarizes a whole bunch of the strategies, ideas, techniques and things in one story about a former student who changed history, and this was the hardest chapter to write because he also happened to become my husband, but he's-

Andy Luttrell:
And the story was incredible, by the way. I meant to tell you that up top. That was probably my favorite part of the book, was this story.

Zoe Chance:
Oh, really?

Andy Luttrell:
Where yes, everything came together, but it was just this… I was almost like, "How have I not heard about this before?" It seems like such a big story.

Zoe Chance:
It's a huge deal. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. I'll tell him and he'll be so happy. So, and what the topic of this is is he is on this journey of influence, planning, creating, and making happen the first ever presidential debates in the Arab world, and he's a social entrepreneur. So, he is one of the many people I know and adore who have been down the path of practicing the techniques, studying influence, reading a ton, taking classes like mine, which is how we met, but ultimately becoming

someone who is so inspiring and so delightful to be around that he literally has people shoving giant piles of money at him, just saying like, "Hey, we love your vision. Can we be on your team?"

And it's not like his life is suddenly easy. He works super hard still. But it's not like he's strategizing, "Oh, I will use this kind of ask in this situation and I'll handle resistance in this way in that situation." It's much more organic and it flows. So, you will become almost effortlessly influential in the long run. It just takes effort to get there.

Andy Luttrell:
It sort of connects to something I was gonna ask in terms of the… Again, the theme of the book is… The title is Influence is Your Superpower-

Zoe Chance:
Yes.

Andy Luttrell:
I might be getting a couple of the words wrong. But bold claim to think of this as a superpower and in the book, you write that the psychology of influence is the secret to happiness, success, and saving the world, so again, not shying away from some claims. But the question is why is it this impactful, right? So, we started by saying this class is in a business school. You might think of it as like a sales class. But really, it's become more of an approach to living your life and being a person who has influence in the world. What does influence mean that makes it this sort of all-encompassing characteristic that has these important outcomes?

Zoe Chance:
So, yes, it's bold, but it's absolutely factual. There's no subjective dimension here. It is your superpower. The reality is that just about everything that you want to do in life, with the possible exception of spiritual enlightenment, and I just don't know anything about what it takes to get there, but just about everything else requires that you influence the behavior of yourself or some other person. And interpersonal influence is all that we had to survive when we were tiny, when we were born. We influence other people to take care of us, help us live, and it's how we have managed as a human species to survive, and thrive, and span the world as we have.

We just for some reason haven't always, and most of us have never, appreciated that what it takes to make our dreams come true is to understand how to move other people and to then go and put that knowledge into practice. And when we don't do that, then we're leaving power in the hands of the power-hungry people who do do that.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah, so let's jump into a couple of the things that come up in the book itself, one of which is a theme that unites a lot of ideas, which folks who have dived into psychology before will be familiar with, which is the distinction you make between gators and judges as the voices in our heads. So, could you just sort of give a general taste of what the gator and the judge are and why it's important to think of those as two separate voices?

Zoe Chance:
Sure. And I think most of your listeners will probably be familiar with system one and system two from other reading and listening that they've done, and for anyone who's not, this is the foundational distinction of behavioral economics, and the idea is that there is one system that's unconscious, fast, intuitive, automatic, and responsible for all of our habitual behavior. This, I use the analogy of like an alligator, just because it's easy to remember, and system one and system two as I've taught behavioral economics, they're easy to forget and mix up.

So, I just give a simple analogy that's visual, visceral, and system one or gator friendly. System two, or I use the analogy of the judge, is conscious, slow, deliberate, effortful, seemingly rational, and seemingly objective. And we observe ourselves and experience ourselves as being in that domain. We think of ourselves as being just conscious decision makers who are carefully making choices and then rationally following through, but that's because we can't experience these unconscious forces on our thinking and behavior, and these unconscious forces are vastly more powerful than the conscious ones, and you can't put a number on it. You can't quantify it. You can't empirically study that. But people who study unconscious influences on behavior estimate that maybe they account for like 95% of our behaviors. It's certainly most of them.

And when we're trying to influence other people, what that means is the most important thing is that we think about the influencing their unconscious, that immediate, emotional, visceral reactions, their habitual behavior with interventions like ease, or these nudges that we're talking about, and we only plan later for system two.

So, system one, gator, is the first responder. System two, judge, is the second guesser, but only sometimes. And what happens is that our unconscious mind exerts a lot of influence on our conscious mind, and we end up using our conscious mind to rationalize the preferences, emotions, and assumptions, stereotypes and things, of our unconscious mind. And the influence doesn't go the other direction. And this is even true, or at least it's played out in our neural anatomy. Although what I'm talking about are analogies. It's not anatomy.

Andy Luttrell:
So, the insight there for someone would be to say that you're probably overlooking this part of another person that is actually hugely influential, which is the sort of automatic, unconscious, feeling-oriented system, and we often think that influence means speaking to the judge when sure, you could try that, but you might have an easier time speaking to the gator.

Zoe Chance:
Yeah, and so starting with speaking to the gator, and this can be as simple as just understanding that what you know and a lot of your listeners will know already, but maybe aren't thinking of it so much in the domain of influence, is our two main dimensions of social judgments are warmth and competence. And warmth judgments happen immediately, spontaneously, they're more powerful, they're stickier, and if somebody doesn't like you, it doesn't matter if you're competent. If somebody likes you, they can make a lot of excuses for your imperfections. So, when you're trying to influence someone, thinking about, "All right, one of their gator brain judgments, reactions, is just going to be do they like me. And so, what can I do? How can I express warmth?

And critically, how can I like that person?" Because if I'm just trying to fakely manipulate them in some way, I'm not likely to be successful unless I'm a sociopath and super talented.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. I have always thought of alligators as being very discerning of the warmth of others.

Zoe Chance:
You know what? So, touché. Absolutely. But you know what's really weird? They're so much less vicious and actually so much more kind to each other than one would expect, so alligators stay with their moms for up to four years. They're one of the only reptiles that the moms take care of the young. And they do so much less gnarly hunting and fighting than we would expect. They eat on average a couple pounds of meat per week. However, they can go up to three years without any food at all. So, basically they're just chilling. They spend most of their life just chilling and running away from bigger alligators if they're tiny.

And the chilling, though, ignoring almost everything that comes across their radar, also reflects our dominant response to all of these influence attempts in the world, because so many people are trying to get our attention, get us to buy now while supplies last, or get what they want from us, and we just want to tune them out. Which is basically what an alligator does.

Andy Luttrell:
So, this is perfect, because my secret motive for mentioning the gator versus judge was because I had an inkling that you were a secret alligator nerd, because the metaphor that you give in the book makes sense, but it's like that is a very specific thing to know about alligators. To characterize a system of the mind as a gator. Is it true? Do you have like a secret penchant for alligators? Or did it just… Mainly, my question is how did this metaphor occur to you?

Zoe Chance:
So, the story that I share in the book about Gatorland in Orlando, Florida, really is how I formed my judgments, going to visit this alligator capital of the world, which I guess turned me into a gator nerd, learning a lot about alligators and being so surprised at how lazy they were. And I write about that being one of the main characteristics of the gator brain and this is why ease is so, so, so important. And we think… I had all these predictions about these alligators, but no. They're so lazy, super lazy, and they just chill. Even when you're throwing pieces of raw meat and it's landing a couple inches away from them and they're just sitting there and waiting for a bird to pick it up.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. Yeah. Speaking of the where do you put the drinks in the boardroom, this sounds like… Yeah, if you want to avoid getting eaten by an alligator, just put something else closer than yourself to the alligator.

Zoe Chance:
You know what? No. You don't have to do anything. You're not gonna be eaten by the alligator because if you're not in their bite zone, which… They don't move their body. They will thrash their nose to their tail, but if they had to move their body, like if they had to step forward one inch,

you're completely safe. They're just not going to get you. That's how lazy they are. It's crazy. It's crazy.

So, yeah, they're not like the bears, like just be faster than your friend and a bear is gonna get you. No, the gator is really just gonna chill.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. They don't have it in them to do much more work than that. The judge, though, that's who you gotta watch out for.

Zoe Chance:
That's right. Watch out for those guys.

Andy Luttrell:
So, one of the other insights that I thought was interesting when we talked about some of the ideas that sort of come from intuition and experience, I think, as opposed to the empirical record, is what you call the magic question when it comes to negotiation, which I found really compelling. So, could you give an idea of what that question is, why it's important, and where it came to you from?

Zoe Chance:
Sure. So, this is a question that my coach, Mandy, who I've been working with for over a decade, and she's responsible for about 40% of my happiness. Mandy keeps using this question on me and I was curious and interested in how and why that was so effective, so I was practicing it, and having a lot of discussions, and then drawing connections. A lot of what I do in this book is drawing connections and implications from existing research. Some of it is mine, most of it is other people's, and making some insightful guesses that you could disagree with. And that's totally fine with me if readers of the book… Actually, I'm totally happy if readers of the book will read some idea, or suggestion, or insight that's in there, and say, "Well, actually, I'm gonna go test it out, and no, I found out that it's wrong, or it's wrong for me," or, "Well, listen, for me, in my experience of my culture, company, personality, whatever that is, this other thing works better for me."

And even when we have solid research saying, "So, here are the findings," all that that's telling you is what's true on average. And so, you could still, however solid the findings are, you can still have all kinds of exceptions and it's good to test them.

So, the magic question. I love this technique and it's the favorite influence technique of lots and lots of the students and executives that I teach, and that's because it's so easy. And if you don't mind, I'll just share with your listeners a story that Gloria Steinem told me that I share in the book when she can to visit New Haven. So, she's an American feminist activist. She was focused on the problem of sex trafficking. She had gone to a conference in Zambia and after the conference, she goes to a village that's in the middle of nowhere, near a game preserve, and in that village three young women had been lost to sex trafficking in the previous year.

So, she's sitting down on a tarp in the middle of a barren field, circle of women. She's an expert, but instead of her saying, "Hey, ladies. Here's what you need to do. Let me give you the answers," she asks the magic question, and she says, "What would it take, or what would it have taken, for

those three women not to have been lost in that way?" And they tell her an electric fence. "An electric fence?" she asks. They say, "The elephants, when our corn reaches a certain height, they come, and they eat the corn, they trample the crops, and we have nothing to eat. We have nothing to sell at the market. We have no money to send our kids to school." And these young women and their families were desperate. So, Gloria Steinem says, "Okay, if I raise the money, will you build the fence?" They say yes, so she goes back home. She sends them a few thousand dollars, which is all it takes to build an electric fence.

And the way she tells it, when she comes back to this village a few years later, there's a bumper crop of corn and no young women have been lost to sex trafficking since they got the fence. The magic question is magic because it works in multiple ways. The first one being that it's respectful. So, you can use this again and again with anyone and in almost any situation, because you are acknowledging implicitly that they're the expert in this situation, they know what their obstacles are better than you do. You're also shifting their perspective from judgment, decision making, them feeling pressured by you, to collaborative problem solving. You're getting a roadmap to success. They will tell you. If there's an answer, they will absolutely tell you what it will take.

And often, what it will take is so much less than you would have expected, or so much less than you would have been willing to do, like if you, or I, or Gloria Steinem brainstormed for 100 years, we would never figure out that what's needed is a fence, because we wouldn't know that the problem is the elephants. And finally, what's not obvious but super important is that when that person or those people have given you the roadmap, what they've actually done is they have committed to helping support the outcome. So, that's why in my interpretation of this story it's not just that the electric fence magically protected all these women from sex trafficking. The women protected each other from sex trafficking when the fence went up because they said that's what it would take.

So, if you're somebody, so stepping back to the world of say business, if you're somebody, and work at least, you ask your boss. Hey, what would it take for me to get a raise, or for me to get to the next stage in my career? 100%, I guarantee, your boss will tell you exactly what it will take. And then when you come back and you say, "Okay, this is what you said it would take for me to get a raise, and here's how this happened, and here's how I've done that. Can you help me out to make that happen?" Your boss would feel tremendous cognitive dissonance if they were like, "Yeah, no. Never mind." Right? They absolutely feel committed already to trying to help you make that happen.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. It's just this fusion of all the processes that we know, because it reminds me of Cialdini's commitment and consistency thing, right?

Zoe Chance:
Exactly.

Andy Luttrell:
Like, "I got you to say that this is what you think should happen. It would be very bizarre, at this point, for you to pull out from that." And the other thing, like you say, is the information, and it's

sort of reminding me only now in the moment, thinking about when we want to make change, but we're communicating outside of our own experience. You just have to ask the question. It's how bold of us to think that we know the answer. And I think about this with… You see disparities in health outcomes during the pandemic, disparities in vaccination rates, and you go, "Well, couldn't we just have an actual conversation about what would it take for this to be a viable thing for you to do to protect yourself and others?" Rather than go like, "Isn't it enough that I tell you it's effective?" But maybe I'm missing something.

Zoe Chance:
Right. And that I think that you are an incredible moron for not seeing the righteousness and truth of my view. Yeah. And it will be different for different people, too, right?

Andy Luttrell:
Are there examples that come to mind in teaching this, or working with students, exercising the question that highlight other ways in which, even more mundane ways in which this question can be influential?

Zoe Chance:
Yeah. So, a business example that I find interesting and motivating is from a company that… It's the medical device that I worked with before going to Barbie. And they had a CEO… Actually, she was second in command, Ginger Graham, and they were in the good position of their demand outstripping supply, and she needed to ask employees to come in and work overtime, working three shifts during the weeks between Thanksgiving and including over Christmas. This is not something people really want to do. And of course, you have to give them financial incentives if you're going to ask them to do something like that, but you know, it's just not enough to say, "We're gonna pay you to do this thing that takes you away from your family during the time of year when you least want to do this." And you'll end up just feeling like you're prostituting yourself if you have to do something that you really didn't want to because someone paid you all this money.

So, she knew she wanted employees to want to come in and do this, and be willing to, so she said, "I'll pay you money. Of course, I will pay you money. But tell me, what will it take for you to be willing? What else will it take for you to be willing to come in and do this?" And they told her, "So, we're hungry. We need food. We like pizza. A bunch of us take the bus and the bus doesn't run at night, so you need to give us rides. Taxi money. And also, we're stressed out about wrapping our Christmas presents, so we want you to hire a Christmas present wrapper at work." And these are the kinds of things, they're so simple, but they are so meaningful and so helpful. She could never have known they needed a Christmas present wrapper, right? She doesn't take the bus. She's an executive. She doesn't know the bus doesn't run at night and that they need taxi money.

And so, just asking these simple questions had employees happy to come in. They did it. They set record production levels, and everybody got… I think it was a 30% bonus at the end of the year, so everyone is happy at the end, and of course, the company thrives. So, it's a great example.

A super-duper mundane example is me asking my own TA, "What would it take, Saif, for you to come in every day on time," after he was late a bunch. And it was really stressing me out as you

can imagine. He's coming in after class starts. And so, Saif, when I ask him this question, instead of just telling him, "Listen, you need to come in on time or we're done and you're no longer my TA," which is how I felt in my mind, I let him save face when I just said, "Hey, what will it take for you to fix this in the future?" And he just starts talking to himself about his bicycle, and his alarm clock, and blah, blah, and he's going through this, and I said like, "Okay, is there anything you need from me?" And he's like, "No, consider it done." And then he comes in on time every day for the rest of the semester.

It's not that this would have changed his life and ten years later, he's still gonna be showing up on time. But I'm absolutely sure that allowing him to save face instead of criticizing him in this situation was another magical outcome of the magic question that influenced his behavior in a positive way.

Andy Luttrell:
Reminds me too there's some evidence that ultimately persuasion… All persuasion works via self-persuasion, right? You don't change your mind because of my arguments. You change your mind because of the thoughts that my arguments lead you to think.

Zoe Chance:
Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:
Which, sounds like that's kind of what this is doing too, right? It's just kind of saying like, "I'm not gonna tell you. I'm gonna suggest to you some things that you should think about," but ultimately the thing that makes the change is your own reflection. And you go, "Oh, I've discovered this secret for myself."

Zoe Chance:
Yeah. Yeah. And expanding from that, it's so important in almost all influence situations between human beings that the other person wants to say yes and the other person is happy having said yes, and so leaving it more open to let them decide and feel like we weren't trying to strongarm or bully them into this decision, which includes them being able to think about it themselves, come up with their own ideas, but especially, especially decide for themselves do I want to do this thing? And then when they say yes, you and I and people in our field know already that when they feel that they weren't pressured to say yes, they're more likely to commit, and follow through, and be happy with that outcome.

Andy Luttrell:
That strikes me as a very inspirational and perfect way to end, so I just want to say thank you for taking the time to talk about the book. There will be details in the show notes of the episode for where people can go and get it.

Zoe Chance:
Awesome.

Andy Luttrell:
But yeah, thank you so much. This has been great.

Zoe Chance:
Thank you so much, Andy. I really enjoyed talking with you.

Andy Luttrell:
Alright, that'll do it for another episode of Opinion Science. Big thanks to Zoe Chance for taking the time to talk about her work and her new book. That book again is called Influence Is Your Superpower: The Science of Winning Hearts, Sparking Change, and Making Good Things Happen, and it comes out February 1st. You can pre-order it now! There's a link to the book and Zoe's website in the show notes.

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