

EXEMPLIFICATION

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1. Core Definition

Exemplification is identified as a crucial strategy within the broader theoretical framework of impression management and self-presentation. Specifically, it involves the intentional and deliberate deployment of behaviors designed to convince others that the actor is highly dedicated, morally upright, and virtuous. The fundamental goal of exemplification is to project an image of **high moral character**, integrity, and self-sacrifice, thereby eliciting respect, admiration, and sometimes guilt from observers.

Unlike related strategies, such as ingratiation, which seeks to gain affection, or self-promotion, which focuses on competence, exemplification prioritizes the dimension of moral worthiness. The actor seeks to be regarded as a legitimate and reliable moral exemplar whose actions set a standard for others to follow. This strategy is inherently relational, depending entirely on the audience's perception and subsequent internal attribution of the actor's motives as genuinely altruistic or dedicated, rather than merely manipulative.

Effective exemplification often requires visible displays of effort, commitment, and often, personal sacrifice. For instance, in an organizational context, an employee utilizing exemplification might conspicuously stay late, volunteer for difficult tasks, or forgo personal benefits for the supposed good of the group. The success of this strategy hinges on the degree to which these efforts are recognized by the target audience and interpreted as stemming from deep-seated virtue rather than opportunistic motives.

2. Theoretical Context: Impression Management

The concept of exemplification was formalized within the influential taxonomy of impression management strategies developed by Edward E. Jones and Thomas S. Pittman in 1982. They posited five primary strategies used by individuals to control the images others form of them: ingratiation, intimidation, supplication, self-promotion, and exemplification. Each strategy targets a specific desired attribution from the audience.

In the Jones and Pittman model, exemplification is the strategy employed when the actor desires to be seen as **morally superior** and dedicated, aiming to evoke feelings of guilt or inferiority in the observer for failing to meet the exemplar's standards. This differentiates it sharply from self-promotion, which seeks competence attribution (being seen as skilled), and ingratiation, which seeks likability attribution (being seen as friendly or attractive). The core leverage of

exemplification is moral authority.

The philosophical roots of impression management trace back to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, where social interaction is viewed as a performance aimed at sustaining a particular definition of the situation and the self. Exemplification serves as a carefully constructed performance designed to present the "ideal self" concerning societal or organizational virtues. The performance is successful when the audience accepts the projected moral identity as authentic.

The strategic nature of exemplification highlights the tension between genuine motivation and calculated presentation. While some behaviors that fit the pattern of exemplification may indeed spring from genuine virtue, the term, when used in psychological literature, usually refers to the *strategic deployment* of those behaviors for the purpose of shaping public perception. The individual is actively managing the informational cues they send regarding their commitment and morality.

3. Mechanism of Exemplification

The mechanism through which exemplification operates relies heavily on the principle of social comparison and the interpretation of behavioral cues. For the strategy to be effective, the targeted audience must perceive the action as costly to the actor, thus strengthening the inference that the action is driven by intrinsic moral commitment rather than external rewards or coercion. When effort is high and benefits are low, virtue is easily inferred.

Key to this mechanism is the conspicuous display of **effort and sacrifice**. The exemplar must ensure that their virtuous actions are visible to the relevant audience. For example, a leader wishing to exemplify dedication might conspicuously work through lunch or take on tasks others avoid, but only if the action is observed and noted by subordinates or superiors. Unseen sacrifice holds no value in the context of strategic exemplification.

Furthermore, exemplification often works by establishing a behavioral baseline against which others are judged. By performing actions that exceed normative expectations--such as demonstrating extreme dedication, exceptional consistency, or unusual personal restraint--the exemplar creates a higher standard. This often places social pressure on others to meet this elevated standard, or at least feel obligated to respect the person who set it. The intended emotional response is often not admiration alone, but also a sense of indebtedness or inadequacy in the observer.

The persistence and consistency of the virtuous behavior are also vital components of the mechanism. Episodic virtue is often dismissed as situational or opportunistic. However, when an individual consistently maintains a high standard of moral or dedicated conduct over time, the audience is more likely to make a stable, internal attribution--concluding that the person genuinely

possesses the trait of high morality or commitment, solidifying their status as an exemplar.

4. Behavioral Manifestations

The specific behaviors associated with exemplification vary widely depending on the social context, but generally cluster around demonstrations of hard work, self-denial, and adherence to moral rules. In professional settings, manifestations frequently involve displays of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) that go above and beyond the required job description, specifically those tasks that are unpleasant or time-consuming.

Common behavioral manifestations include:

Conspicuous Diligence: Arriving noticeably early and staying noticeably late, or working during designated breaks, thereby demonstrating superior commitment and industriousness compared to peers.

Voluntary Self-Sacrifice: Taking on undesirable tasks, volunteering for difficult assignments, or explicitly declining personal benefits (e.g., refusing a small bonus or delegating an easy task) to show dedication to the collective good.

Moral Consistency: Rigorously adhering to ethical guidelines, rules, and procedures, even when minor violations would be unnoticed or beneficial, showcasing unwavering integrity and reliability.

Setting High Standards: Publicly expressing dissatisfaction with mediocre results or low effort from self or others, implicitly positioning the self as the benchmark for expected performance and virtue.

In political or public life, exemplification often takes the form of demonstrating populist appeal, humility, or ethical puritanism. A politician might conspicuously drive an old car, wear simple clothing, or publicly donate significant portions of their salary to charity, all designed to signify detachment from materialistic corruption and genuine commitment to public service. The focus is always on creating a visual and behavioral narrative of **unimpeachable virtue**.

It is important to distinguish between genuine altruism and strategic exemplification based on intent. While the outward behaviors may be identical, the psychological concept focuses on the underlying motivation: the desire to influence the audience's perception of one's moral status. The behaviors are chosen precisely because they are highly visible and diagnostic of virtuous qualities.

5. Motivations and Goals

The motivations driving the use of exemplification are fundamentally strategic and linked to the acquisition or maintenance of social power and influence. Individuals employ this strategy because the status of a moral exemplar confers significant benefits within social hierarchies, professional organizations, and personal relationships.

Primary goals include:

Acquisition of Status and Influence: Being perceived as highly dedicated or moral grants an individual informal authority. Peers and subordinates are often more willing to defer to or follow an exemplar, viewing their judgment as trustworthy and motivated by collective welfare.

Legitimacy and Trust: Exemplification builds a reservoir of trust. In situations requiring difficult decisions or facing scrutiny, the perceived moral legitimacy of the exemplar provides a buffer against criticism and increases the likelihood that their actions will be interpreted favorably.

Avoidance of Negative Consequences: By establishing a history of virtue, an individual can strategically mitigate future potential blame. If an exemplar makes a mistake, the audience is likely to attribute the error to external circumstances rather than internal flaws (the "halo effect" working retrospectively).

Social Control: As noted by Jones and Pittman, the strategy can be used aggressively to induce guilt in others. By constantly demonstrating superior effort, the exemplar creates pressure, implicitly controlling the behavior of others who wish to avoid being seen as lazy or immoral by comparison.

Ultimately, the overarching motivation is the desire for control over one's social reputation. By carefully crafting an image of dedication, the individual secures a high-status identity that is resistant to challenge and provides substantial social capital, translating into career advancement, respect, and enhanced influence.

6. Ethical Considerations and Potential Pitfalls

Despite its goal of establishing morality, exemplification raises significant ethical dilemmas, particularly concerning authenticity and the potential for perceived hypocrisy. When the audience suspects that the virtuous actions are merely a performance rather than genuine behavior, the strategy backfires catastrophically, often leading to a stronger negative reaction than if the individual had simply been neutral.

A primary pitfall is the risk of **attributional scrutiny**. Observers are constantly attempting to discern whether the exemplar's motives are truly selfless or strategically self-serving. If the audience attributes the behavior to manipulation, the individual is labeled as a hypocrite or a "show-off," resulting in a loss of trust and respect. The greater the cost of the behavior, the more virtuous it appears; however, the greater the visibility, the higher the risk of being labeled manipulative.

This scrutiny leads to the "Exemplar's Paradox": the very attempt to conspicuously display virtue undermines the perception of genuine virtue. True dedication, by definition, should not require an audience. If the actor is too overtly successful in managing their image as an exemplar, the audience may conclude that the goal (reputation enhancement) is the true motivator, nullifying the

effect.

Furthermore, maintaining the image of an exemplar demands immense psychological and physical resources. The continuous need to perform at an unnaturally high standard can lead to severe personal costs, including burnout, stress, and impaired work-life balance. The individual becomes trapped in the identity they created, unable to relax or fail without jeopardizing their carefully constructed reputation.

7. Social and Organizational Applications

Exemplification is particularly potent in structured environments such as corporations, military units, and academic institutions, where commitment and loyalty are highly valued traits. In organizational psychology, leadership studies frequently examine how leaders use exemplification to motivate subordinates and establish organizational culture.

In leadership contexts, the strategy is often framed positively, referred to as **leading by example**. A leader who demonstrates personal commitment (e.g., taking a smaller salary during tough times or being the first to arrive during a crisis) utilizes exemplification to foster collective effort and loyalty. This behavior validates their authority and legitimizes their demands for high performance from their team, making followers more receptive to influence.

Conversely, employees often use exemplification upwardly, targeting superiors to gain promotions, enhanced evaluations, and access to resources. By consistently displaying superior dedication--even if marginally effective--they solidify their position as indispensable and morally reliable contributors, securing favorable attributions from decision-makers.

The concept is also crucial in understanding organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs). While many OCBs (like helping a coworker or attending non-mandatory meetings) are genuinely beneficial, when these behaviors are strategically performed to enhance one's image of moral dedication, they fall under the rubric of exemplification. The distinction rests on the public visibility and the actor's intent to shape the perception of their character.

8. Debates and Criticisms

A central debate surrounding exemplification concerns the difficulty in separating strategic image management from authentic identity. Critics argue that social psychology's focus on the strategic deployment of behavior risks pathologizing or devaluing genuine acts of dedication and morality, suggesting that all virtue is simply a calculated performance aimed at social gain.

However, proponents of the impression management framework counter that the utility of exemplification as a concept lies precisely in understanding how perceptions are managed,

regardless of the underlying truth. Whether the individual is truly dedicated or merely acting dedicated, the **social consequences** of the behavior--gaining trust, influence, and status--are identical. The psychological mechanism focuses on the observable social transaction.

Another area of critique involves the potential exclusionary nature of exemplification. Because the strategy involves setting an exceptionally high bar, it can inadvertently create an unhealthy competitive environment. Those unable or unwilling to maintain the demanding pace set by the exemplar may feel marginalized or pressured, potentially leading to resentment and a toxic work culture rather than genuine admiration.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of exemplification varies across different cultural contexts. In cultures that prioritize humility or collective harmony, overt displays of personal sacrifice and superiority may be viewed negatively, potentially being interpreted as arrogance or drawing undue attention to the self, thereby reducing the strategy's effectiveness compared to individualistic cultures that reward visible initiative and moral heroism.

Further Reading

[Impression Management \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Self-presentation theory \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Jones, E. E., & Pittman, T. S. \(1982\). Toward a general theory of strategic self-presentation. In Psychological perspectives on the self. Erlbaum.](#)

[Bolino, M. C. \(1999\). Organizational citizenship behavior, choice, and impression management. Academy of Management Review.](#)