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Our families, schools, and workplaces often train us to comply: taking on additional work when asked, agreeing with the group's consensus, and going along to get along with our bosses and colleagues. So, even when we're told to "think different" and "embrace conflict," we often hold ourselves back. But when individuals learn to say no more often, it can have huge benefits for their careers and organizations, says **Dr. Sunita Sah**. A psychologist and professor at Cornell's SC Johnson College of Business, she shares a research-backed framework for evaluating whether to comply or defy at work and offers advice on how to do both more effectively. Sah is author of the book [Defy: The Power of No In a World That Demands Yes](#).

Dr. Sunita Sah Interview Transcripts: The Power of No

Welcome to the HBR *IdeaCast* from Harvard Business Review. I'm Alison Beard.

Are you guilty of going along to get along, thinking your team was about to make the wrong decision but not raising your concerns, agreeing with your boss's ideas when you have better ones, saying yes to an assignment when you'd much prefer to say no?

Today's guest says this kind of compliance is a bigger problem than we might think in our everyday lives and especially at work. When we acquiesce to avoid conflict or even because we think it will help us get ahead in our careers, it can become a vicious cycle, leading us to behave in ways that aren't at all aligned with our long-term goals or true values.

She explains why we fall into these patterns and how we can break out of them to get to a point where we're either complying from a position of understanding and power, compromising or just saying no.

Dr. Sunita Sah is a psychologist and professor at Cornell's SC Johnson College of Business. She wrote the book *Defy: The Power of No In a World That Demands Yes*. Sunita, hi. Thanks for being on the show.

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SUNITA SAH: Hi. It's wonderful to be here.

ALISON BEARD: Let's start with the devil's advocate question. You argue that we live in this world that wants us to comply with convention or authority, but there are some benefits to that system, right? We don't want everyone walking around not doing what they're told or expected to.

SUNITA SAH: Well, I think the danger in constantly complying is that we might not think about it. We actually comply much more than we think we do. And even though the U.S. is known and has ideals for individualism and freedom of choice, in some of my experiments, what I see is an extremely high rate of compliance even when we're given advice that we know is bad. And it's in these situations that we want to be able to speak up and we want to be able to act.

ALISON BEARD: And we see in the business world certainly a lot of lip service paid to embracing diverse viewpoints and healthy debate and people standing up for themselves. But then a lot of managers in corporate cultures still really, at the base level, want people to fall in line. Why do you think organizations are struggling to practice what they preach in this respect?

SUNITA SAH: Well, there's three key reasons for why people find it difficult to defy and to get the right environment in organizations that encourage people to defy. First of all, we feel pressure to go along with other people, sometimes enormous pressure. And what my research has shown is that we often feel this in one-off interactions with strangers as well. The other is that we don't often understand what compliance and defiance actually are, and we need a better understanding of that. And then the third is that once we decide that we do want to defy, we want to say no, we want to speak up, we actually don't know how. We don't have the skill set to do so. And so because of these reasons, we end up complying, but it can end up causing serious problems.

For example, one survey found that 9 out of 10 healthcare workers, many of them nurses, did not feel comfortable speaking up when they saw a colleague making an error. Another survey of

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over 1,700 crew members on commercial airlines found that only half of them felt comfortable saying something when they saw a mistake. And these can be life-and-death situations, and so what I realized is that we often equate being compliant with being good and defiant with being bad. And really sometimes it's bad to be so compliant. Because even if it's not a life-and-death situation like the ones I described, keeping silent when you feel something is wrong can be soul-destroying.

ALISON BEARD: But the theory of psychological safety, this idea that teams need to welcome that kind of input and feedback and make sure that everyone feels comfortable contributing and speaking up when they think something is wrong, that's been around for a long time. So is the hurdle our own mindset or the structures around us?

SUNITA SAH: It's both. So indeed the environment around you is very important. And one of the things that we do want to consider when we defy is what type of situation is this. Is it safe for me to defy, and will it be effective? Even if you feel safe and you speak up, is it going to make a difference?

In one of the projects that I've been working on looking at nurses and nurse managers and the gap between what they think are the reasons that nurses don't speak up. What we see is that the nurses don't feel safe. And even if they feel safe, they say, "It's not because I fear the consequences. It's because I've spoken up so many times before and nothing ever changes."

But beyond that, we also need to ask questions about ourselves because it's very hard to be defiant if you don't know who you are and what your values are and what you stand for. And so that element of it is very individual; it's developing that skill set to actually be able to say something.

ALISON BEARD: But then a lot of us have been really trained to say yes and compromise with our parents, our teachers, our bosses, and a lot of times that's actually served us really well. So

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how do we get past that feeling that being a team player is the right thing to do to embrace the idea that we might decline an assignment or tell our boss we think that he's wrong?

SUNITA SAH: So I was also known for being an obedient daughter and student as a child. And I remember asking my dad, "What does my name mean?" And he told me in Sanskrit my name actually means good, and mostly I lived up to that. I got up when I was told to, did all my homework as expected and even had my hair cut the way that my parents wanted me to. And these are messages that we receive, so we do end up being trained to be very compliant. We don't actually get any training in how to defy, and that doesn't serve us all the time.

So it's not about being a bad team player. In fact, a lot of the whistleblowers that I interviewed, they spoke up because they really did connect with the values of the organization and the mission of the organization, and they didn't think the organization was really living up to those values.

If you don't speak up to your boss for example, it really constrains innovation and creativity, and it could be very costly if you don't speak up and there's a mistake. So I would also argue that in many situations the workplaces themselves, the managers and the leaders, would also like an environment when people speak up when they see something is wrong.

ALISON BEARD: You do note in your book, though, that saying no can be a lot harder and career limiting for people who aren't in positions of power and particularly those who don't represent the majority demographic of their organizations. So I think women and people of color might feel like they are more limited in doing something that feels antagonistic or aggressive or will be perceived that way at work.

SUNITA SAH: So there's two things there. One is what I call a defiance hierarchy. So it is a privilege to be able to defy, and some people can more easily defy than others. Not only are there more consequences for some people, but actually there is a need to defy more for some people

because their expectations of compliance and towing the line is actually higher for some people than it is for others.

The second thing that I want to address, which I think is really important, is that one of the myths of defiance as you just described it is that it is aggressive or angry or loud and bold and violent, or it's superhuman, heroic and out of reach. And actually it's none of those things. My definition is that to defy is to act in accordance with your true values when there is pressure to do otherwise. And that makes defiance actually a proactive positive force in society. All our individual acts of consent and dissent every single day build up to the society we live in.

So it affects our workplaces, our lives, and our community. And that's why it's really important to know that you don't have to be brave or have a strong personality or be larger than life to incorporate defiance in your life. It's not about aggression or confrontation, it's about speaking up when you need to.

ALISON BEARD: So how do we recognize when it's the right time to say no instead of yes or defy instead of comply?

SUNITA SAH: So this is the difficult aspect for many people. And one of the first things about wanting to defy is that we often feel tension in those situations. So we might hear, for example, a sexist remark. We might be asked to do something unethical or something that we don't agree with. In these situations, we often feel uncomfortable because we're caught between the expectations and what we think is the right thing to do. And in those situations we often feel tension which can manifest in different ways for different people.

So for example, it could be your throat constricting or feeling unease in your stomach or having a headache or just intrusive thoughts. But often what we do is that we disregard that tension. We think it's not worth our doubt, we think it's not worth our anxiety. And so we try to get rid of it by just saying, "The other person must be right. They must know what they're doing." But in actual fact, that tension is the first stage of defiance, and feeling that tension means you haven't

given your agency over to someone else completely because if you had, you wouldn't feel any tension, you would just obey them.

And then the second stage is just acknowledging that this is a situation that I might need to defy. And then the third stage is that you vocalize that to someone else, and that doesn't need to be confrontational. It could just be as simple as, "I'm not comfortable with that." Or it's approaching with curiosity rather than confrontation. But that third stage of saying something that you're not quite sure, or what does this mean, have you considered something else? That third stage is really important because once you've externally and verbally told somebody else, the research shows you're more likely to get to the fifth stage. Because you can't go back in time now and say, "Oh, you were fine with it to begin with."

ALISON BEARD: And so the fifth stage is defiance. Does this work for something that's not necessarily an ethical issue, but just something that you don't want to do because you don't think that it's going to be career enhancing or enjoyable or interesting or worth your time?

SUNITA SAH: Yeah, I think it works for both of those aspects. What we need to do really is think about what our values are. And the reason I talk about values is because what my research has shown me again and again is what somebody believes their value is to be is quite different from how they actually behave. And the distance between who we think we are and what we actually do is enormous. And that aspect is very much an aspect of connecting with who you are. But in terms of turning down an assignment, that could also be connected to, am I the best person for this, or am I compromising the organization in some way if I'm overworked, on the verge of burnout, or there's somebody who's just much better suited to this than I am?

ALISON BEARD: It's also important, though, to pick your moments, right? You want to choose the right time and the place to say no, to defy, particularly someone in a position of authority, right?

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SUNITA SAH: Absolutely, yes. So we can't defy everything, otherwise we wouldn't get much done in a day. So what I recommend is first of all asking yourself a series of questions. So the first one that can be done even before a moment of crisis arise is to really ask ourselves, who are we? What do we stand for? What are our values? And if the values that we have are integrity, say, compassion, empathy, equality, we need to know what they are and be explicit about them. And writing out and explaining why your values are important means that our intended behaviors, what we wish we had done in a situation are more likely to follow. And also clarifying our values actually has been shown to have a lower biological stress reaction, so lower cortisol levels.

And then when we're in a situation and we feel that tension, we can ask ourselves, what type of situation is this? Is it safe and is it effective for me defy? And depending on that, we might decide to postpone defiance to another day. Maybe the costs are too great or the benefits too meager. But if we think this is something that we want to defy, well, the third question that we ask is, what does a person like me do in a situation like that? And that, again, is connecting with our values. What does a person like me with these values of integrity, equality, compassion, how do I behave in this situation? And that allows us to decrease that gap, that distance between who we think we are and what we actually do. And that's really important.

So these three questions, who am I, what type of situation is this, what does a person like me do in a situation like this, are really important to ask because that can help us determine if we should defy or not.

ALISON BEARD: And are there any other rules of thumb that you've seen people use in the workplace or that you recommend people use to decide whether defiance is worth the risk?

SUNITA SAH: So we probably know what's happened to people in the past if they have defied, or if success is a goal for you in the workplace, what makes somebody successful here and what does not? And then really you have to think it's an individual thing about, does this align with

my values? Am I okay with what success looks like in this organization and what I need to do to get there?

Another rule that we can think about is when you want to consent to something, it often feels good. And one of my friends has a saying that she's like, "Unless it's a hell yes, you should say no." But I actually differentiate between compliance and consent. So compliance is something that's often externally imposed and that we go along with, and it's either due to the expectations of another person or an organization.

Consent is often conflated with compliance, but they're actually fundamentally different. And I take informed consent in medicine, and I apply it to other decisions that we make in our lives. So to have informed consent, we need five elements. So the first one is capacity. We need the mental capacity to be able to make that decision. Second, we need knowledge. We need knowledge of the situation, the risks, the benefits, and the alternatives. And we also need to understand, that's the third element is to really understand those things. And then we need the freedom to say no.

And if those four elements are there, then the fifth one is that we can authorize informed consent if we want to say yes, or we can give our informed refusal. I love this aspect of a hell yes, because true consent often feels good, but we also need to make sure that those five elements are present.

ALISON BEARD: And so there are times when you actually do advocate for compliance because you haven't met those conditions.

SUNITA SAH: There are times when I advocate for what I call conscious compliance, and that is the elements for consent or dissent, we have the capacity, the knowledge, the understanding, maybe the freedom to say no. But because it's too costly in that time, in that space or it won't have impact, we decide that we're going to go along with it, and that I call conscious compliance. So it's not the kind of wiring default compliance that we might have been trained for or

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socialized for in our lives, but it's really thinking about it and being thoughtful and thinking, in this situation, I'm going to comply for now.

ALISON BEARD: So a lot of the advice you're giving is to prepare, think about your values, get in the right mindset, but then a lot of this evaluation needs to happen in the moment. Your boss asks you to do some office housework task, and you want to say no, but you're trying to figure out whether saying yes would be better for you. Or a salesperson on your team is doing something that you think might be shady with a client, but you're in the meeting, and so you're really put on the spot. How do you make time for all those steps that you just described to think through whether or not you should speak up or say no?

SUNITA SAH: It does become more fluid. So this goes back to training before the moment of a crisis and getting used to those questions. There's a really fantastic quote that's often attributed to Bruce Lee, but actually it was a Greek poet that said, "Under duress, we don't rise to the level of our expectations, but we fall to the level of our training."

So it's that training that we do before these moments arise that allows us to be more fluid in the situation. So when we feel that tension, we say, "This is something where I might need to defy." And then you don't need to jump to stage five in the act of defying straight away. You can just feel that tension, acknowledge it to yourself, and then articulate it to somebody else.

So start asking the questions, "What do you mean by that? Can you clarify what exactly does that entail?" And those questions are really powerful because we're not saying yes as a default reaction. We're also not saying no as a knee-jerk reaction. We're asking those questions in the situation to find out a little bit more.

ALISON BEARD: And let's talk a little bit about the aftermath. So in some cases there might be the guilt of feeling like you're insulting your boss or colleagues by disagreeing with them or you're letting them down by saying no to something you've asked them to do. Or in other cases you might have stuck your neck out and said, "This is the way to go," and then been wrong, or

perhaps you miscalculated what the consequences might be for you of defiance. So how do you deal with the aftermath when it's uncomfortable?

SUNITA SAH: So often there are costs of defiance, and this is why we worry about it because we get concerned about offending someone else. We think we might lose a relationship, we might lose a job. But often what we don't think about are the costs of continually complying with other people, and disregarding our values continuously, bowing your head to other people, can leave you quite drained. And it can affect us psychologically, spiritually, emotionally, and even physically in the end if we end up getting burnt out. And so in those situations, we need to be aware of the costs of both sides. What is it going to mean?

And that element of regret, I actually see a lot of regret from people who didn't speak up when they wanted to. So for example, in Michele Lamont's book *How Professors Behave*, she describes an incident where they are a group of professors, mainly I think four senior white guys and a young woman of color who are assessing grant applications to see who would qualify for a grant. And what the woman said was that there was one applicant where they started gossiping about the applicant, and she didn't think they were being assessed fairly on the quality of the application, but it was mainly to do with gossip. And she didn't say anything. And she came out and she said the one thing that she wanted to do was the one thing she could not do.

And that could be due to insinuation anxiety. She did not want to question the integrity of the people in the room. Having met them for the first time, the fact they were more senior to her, she didn't want to say that they're being unethical or question their integrity. And that led to regret. So it's not that you are speaking up and then regretting it. It's often that we're not speaking up, and we're regretting it.

ALISON BEARD: And when people do start saying no, what do you see it doing for them both individually and then also for their teams and organizations?

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SUNITA SAH: What's really fascinating is that once that tension that they feel to begin with, once they get to that last stage, stage five, a lot of that tension just dissipates. They feel really proud and great for having stood up for what they believe in. And when I've done this in the past and I've been able to stand my ground, I often feel the same. And so being able to defy leads us to a more joyful life, in a way. We're more connected with who we are, we're more connected with our values, we're more authentic, and that leads to a more honest life.

ALISON BEARD: What about the team organization aspect? Maybe you could talk about the domino effect.

SUNITA SAH: Oh, yes, the defiance domino effect. So defiance not only transforms you, but it also affects the people who observe it. So there's a ripple effect. So one person can start a reaction, which makes a great difference. So if somebody speaks up, somebody else could say the same, or even if it's not in that particular situation, watching someone defy. And what I found in a lot of people is that they often talk about growing up and seeing one of their parents defy or stand up for something that was really important. And that moment tends to stay with us.

And certainly I have stories of my mother and father who, especially my mother, I thought of as a very compliant person. She did all the cooking, the cleaning, the grocery shopping, she looked after everybody in the household. I thought she was extremely compliant, and one day she defied. And that defiance actually showed me that defiance is not a personality, it's a practice. It's a skill set that we can choose to utilize or not, but having the skill set is really important. And her defiance affected me, and so this ripple effect is actually a great one, that one person can make a big, big difference.

ALISON BEARD: And what's your advice to managers who want to cultivate the right amount of defiance and willingness to say no among their team members, but not so much that it leads to chaos or no one stepping up to do some of the more thankless tasks that need to be done?

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SUNITA SAH: Well, I think if we think about defiance as a positive force, we want to cultivate that aspect of defiance. This is not about asking people to be extremely self-interested and just saying no to everything. We're asking people to think about defiance as in acting in accordance with your true values when there's pressure to do otherwise. And cultivating those type of environments can start with managers actually demonstrating that, because sometimes they have to fight for resources for the team, and they have to often defy their own leadership. And so thinking about what is in the best interests of the organization or also the employees and all the stakeholders is the first question of cultivating that environment.

And then if somebody does speak up to you, making it safe, welcoming that, telling them that they're free to say no, and they're free to think about it. Especially if you're going to people, as I said, lower on the defiance hierarchy, then you want to think about, who am I asking to do these tasks all the time? And am I making this an organization? If I value equality, do we have that within this organization? So thinking about who they're asking for maybe non-promotable tasks or thankless tasks, and then creating an environment where it's safe for somebody to say no and also be listened to.

ALISON BEARD: And after all this research writing the book, what's one thing that you encourage everyone out there to do differently at work now?

SUNITA SAH: I think the main thing would be to start asking yourself, does this situation go against my values? And really getting to know and clarify what your values are and the world that you want to create. So this isn't just about saying no to people, it's about saying yes to the world that you want to create. And I can leave you with another quote that I really love. Because people so much associate defiance with being bad and compliance with being good, I think it's important to shift that mindset. And this quote by C.P. Snow gets to that. "So when you think of the long gloomy history of man, you will find more hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion."

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ALISON BEARD: Well, Sunita, thank you so much. I've learned a lot from reading the book and talking to you. Appreciate you talking to me today.

SUNITA SAH: Thank you so much. It's been fantastic to be here.

ALISON BEARD: That's Dr. Sunita Sah, professor at Cornell's SC Johnson College of Business and author of the book *Defy: The Power of No In a World That Demands Yes*.

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Thanks to our team, senior producer Mary Dooe, associate producer Hannah Bates, audio product manager Ian Fox, and senior production specialist Rob Eckhardt. And thanks to you for listening to the *HBR IdeaCast*. We'll be back with a new episode on Tuesday. I'm Alison Beard.