

The Grift of Fear

What Gavin de Becker taught us about predators, and how we should have used it



DR. ROBERT W. MALONE

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In 1997 a security specialist named Gavin de Becker published a book called *The Grift of Fear*. It is a book about predicting interpersonal violence, and it has trained a generation of readers, mostly women, to recognize the behavioral signatures of predators before the violence arrives. Charm. Forced teaming. Too many detai

sharking. The unsolicited promise. Discounting the word *no*. de Becker compi by working as a threat-assessment consultant for celebrities, executives, and government officials, and by talking, at length, to people who had survived att their lives and to perpetrators who had been caught before completing them. ' patterns are not subtle once you know what to look for. They are also, de Beck argued, recognizable in advance to anyone who has been given the vocabulary

The title pun was deliberate. Fear, the kind that arrives unbidden when a star too close on an empty subway platform or when a friendly-seeming offer of he off, is not a defect of evolved cognition. It is the *gift*. It is the brain doing exact it evolved to do: reading a small set of cues faster than any conscious deliberat could, and pushing the body away from danger before the mind has caught up Becker's case studies, the people who get hurt are almost never the ones who f notice the signals. They are the people who noticed accurately and overrode th They had been trained to defer. They did not want to seem rude. They felt une could not articulate why, and so dismissed the feeling as paranoia.

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This is the book that should have been on every desk during the COVID years not.

What I want to argue here is something I think the public-health establishment contrarian media response to it, and the broader culture that consumed both l collectively missed. The pandemic was not, primarily, a failure of expertise. It

failure of recognition. The same psychological machinery that de Becker identifies as the machinery that protects us against the charming stranger at the door, was targeted at a population scale by institutional actors whose interests were not with ours. And by some of the loudest dissident actors as well. The targeting was largely successful. The gift, on both sides, worked.

The reason it worked is not that people are stupid. The reason it worked is that the institutions had access to communication channels with effectively unlimited reach and the techniques they deployed were precisely the techniques de Becker had cataloged in 1997. Charm. Authority cues. Forced teaming ("we're all in this together"). Unsolicited promises ("safe and effective"). The dismissal of objections as mere failures ("you're killing grandma"). The refusal to accept *no* as an answer on a question deemed consequential. And, when those techniques met resistance, time and economic costs were imposed on those who continued to say *no* anyway.

The dissident response, when it came, was sometimes calibrated and accurate also, in important respects, the same kind of operation pointed in the opposite direction. The same charm. The same forced teaming ("we're the ones who see through it"). The same unsolicited promises ("this protocol will save you"). The refusal to update when subsequent evidence demanded updating. The same compliance extraction, dressed as resistance.

Both versions worked on the same biological substrate. Both versions paid.

Consider the unsolicited promise. De Becker treats this as one of the most reliable signals of a hidden agenda. A promise made when none has been requested usually indicates an intent to do exactly what the promise denies. The trustworthy act explains. The unreliable actor reassures.

“The vaccines are safe and effective.” This sentence was repeated at intervals that corresponded to no particular challenge requiring rebuttal for roughly three years. It was repeated by senior officials in television appearances, by manufacturers in advertising, by celebrities in scripted PSAs, and by employers in mandate communications. No one had asked for the reassurance. The reassurance arrived anyway. By de Becker’s framework, the question to ask was: what are these people preempting? What is the future criticism that the reassurance is being deployed to head off? Subsequent data answered the question. Internal communications prepared in the years since, including the Pfizer and Moderna documents released under order, the FOIA-ed correspondence among federal officials, and the Twitter F showing the architecture of platform suppression around vaccine criticism, all indicate that the underlying claim was considerably weaker, at the time it was asserted, than the public communication suggested. The unsolicited promise arrived exactly as de Becker would have predicted, a tell.

Or consider typecasting. de Becker describes it as a minor insult deployed to prevent engagement from someone who would otherwise walk away: “I bet you’re too smart to talk to a guy like me.” The target wants to prove the label wrong by engaging, but the engagement is the predator’s foot in the door. De Becker’s defense is the simplest possible one. You act as if the words were not spoken. Any energy you spend disproving the label is energy you cannot spend evaluating what is actually being asked of you.

“Anti-vaxxer.” “Denier.” “Conspiracy theorist.” “Grandma-killer.” “Covidiot.” Each functioned to make the recipient want to disprove the label by demonstrating compliance, which is exactly what de Becker said the move was intended to do. The recipient who insisted, “I’m not against vaccines, I just have questions about this vaccine,” had already conceded the frame. The recipient who refused to engage with the label, who treated it as the manipulative move it was rather than a descrip-

requiring rebuttal, kept the question on its merits.

By de Becker's framework, this is not difficult to see. It was difficult to see only because the labels were issued by institutions the recipients had been trained to. The pandemic-era equivalent of the predator's "I bet you're too stuck-up" v public-health authority's "anti-science." Both work for the same reason. Both defenses, by people whose intentions are not aligned with ours, against our in about whether to comply.

The same analysis applies to the contrarian side. The dissident communicator described skeptics of his protocol as "shills," "captured," or "still asleep" was r the same operation. The label was meant to do the same work: to convert a qu about the underlying evidence into a question about the questioner's moral or epistemic standing. de Becker's defense is the same in both directions. The lab the cost the speaker extracts before you have evaluated the substantive claim.

There is a deeper point in de Becker's work that I want to bring forward because I think it is the right framework for understanding what the pandemic actually de Becker distinguishes fear from worry. Fear is calibrated. It is a response to specific present signal that something is wrong, and it is accurate enough often enough that we should treat it as a protective intuition rather than a defect. W something else. Worry is manufactured. It is sustained beyond the duration of actual signal. It is frequently imposed by one party on another. It often function substitute for action rather than as a guide toward it.

The pandemic era was, primarily, a worry-generation event. The fear, where it was justified for narrow, specific groups under narrow, specific conditions. Even people with comorbidities in the spring of 2020 had something approximating

signal. Most other groups did not, most of the time. The worry, however, was universal, undifferentiated, sustained, and continuously reinforced by institutional communication channels that benefited from its continuation.

The institutional channels did this because they were funded, staffed, and incentivized to do it. The contrarian channels did it because they were funded, staffed, and incentivized to do so. Daily case counts were presented without context.

Hospitalization graphs without baseline comparison. Modeling outputs whose subsequent revisions received far less attention than the original projections. Contrarian side: vaccine adverse event reports without denominators. Individual stories of injury without representative sampling. Excess mortality projections: disconfirmation produced no comparable retraction effort.

Both versions cultivated worry in their respective audiences. Both monetized and cultivated worry. The mechanism is exactly the one de Becker identified, scale the predator's manipulation of an individual mark to institutional manipulation of a population. The reason it scaled was that the underlying psychological mechanism was the same. The brain that feels worry in response to a fabricated signal at the door feels the same worry in response to a fabricated signal on television, with the difference that the television signal arrives every day for years, and the friend at the door in twenty minutes.

This is the gift, plain. The *gift* of fear is the protective intuition that lets us detect signals of danger. The *grift* of fear is the systematic exploitation of that same intuition by parties whose interests in our worry are different from our own.

Here is what I think de Becker would have said to anyone watching the pandemic communications, on either side, if he had been asked.

He would have said: Notice the unsolicited promises. Ask what they are preening for. Notice the typecasting. Refuse to engage with the labels. Notice the forced teaming. Notice the “we’re all in this together” and its dissident-side equivalent, “we’re the only ones who see.” Ask whether the teaming is real or constructed. Notice the volume of detail in communications about uncertain questions. Ask whether the detail is proportional to what is actually known. Notice the refusal to accept *no* as an answer on questions deemed consequential. Treat that refusal as the most reliable available signal that the actor is not engaged in good-faith communication.

And above all, he would have said: trust the unease. The people who got hurt in the case studies were not the people who missed the signal. They were the people who picked up the signal accurately and dismissed it because they could not yet articulate what they had picked up, or because the cost of acting on it was higher than the benefit of overriding it. That cost, in the context of the pandemic, was a designed feature of the environment. The social and economic price of saying *no* was deliberately raised on both sides, to deter the rational actor from doing it.

The people who suffered, at population scale, were not the credulous. They were the ones who knew something was off and could not, socially, afford to say so.

The question now is whether we are going to be a harder mark next time.

The institutions that ran the last operation are still here. So are the contrarian operations that ran the parallel grift on the other side. They are funded, staffed, and ready. The next event will not look identical to the last one. The techniques, however, will. The unsolicited promises. The typecasting. The forced teaming. The dismissal of *no*. The compliance extraction dressed as either authority or resistance.

The defense is the same in both directions. It is the calibrated skepticism that

Becker was trying to teach. Not paranoia. Not cynicism. Just the recognition that warmth and confidence are tools, and that the tools have signatures, and that signatures are visible to anyone who has been given the vocabulary.

The gift of fear is the protective intuition. The grift of fear occurs when intuition is hijacked. The recognition of the hijack is the main defense. de Becker has been with us, since 1997, how to see it. We did not listen the last time. There is no reason, that we cannot.

Gavin de Becker, The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us from Violence (Little Brown, 1997), is the source for the framework discussed here. The specific de Becker ideas ("Forced Teaming," "Charm and Niceness," "Too Many Details," "Typecasting," "Loa Sharking," "The Unsolicited Promise," "Discounting the Word 'No'") are catalogued in the book's central chapters and re-applied to institutional and dissident pandemic communications in our forthcoming book, The Grift: How Fear Became a Business Who Profited from Running It.

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VikingMom 🌟 Thoughts from a Viking Mom May 18

The "teaming" aspect correlates with Mattias Desmet's Mass Formation theory. We are social creatures and will often adapt our behavior to remain "in the pack" even if our instincts tell us that the group might just be wrong this time!

And then once we have crossed that line, it becomes harder to stand up or push back. As we do, we sense a disconnect between the facts we can plainly see and the "consensus" position of the "group" in which we desperately still want to belong.

We are seeing this phenomenon play out in our society now, as more and more information about everything that happened in 2020/2021 is now being exposed and many of the lies we were told are being debunked in real time. There is a core group that is even more strident in their refusal to admit they were wrong on even one aspect of the narrative would be to open the door to the possibility that they were wrong on almost everything!

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"The social and economic price of saying no was deliberately raised"

Yes. Each of us had to make that calculation. There were no winners, on either side of t
We need another Nuremberg trial, to remind the medical community that their oath to f
harm actually means saying NO to Big Pharma, Big Government and Big Media. The leg
also needs to understand their responsibility to support doctors of conscience.

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