



# THE RIGHT PLACE AND TIME FOR DEFIANCE:

ACTING IN ACCORDANCE WITH YOUR TRUE VALUES  
WHEN THERE IS PRESSURE TO DO OTHERWISE

Dr. Sunita Sah

# When deciding how to behave in a situation,

especially if you experience tension, the first question of the Defiance Compass—*Who am I?*—helps us identify and connect with our core moral values. Once we do that, it is time to turn our gaze outward, to assess our surroundings and ask: *What kind of situation is this?* Like the first question, we might ask and answer it implicitly. But the more explicit we can be in our awareness and questioning, the more comfortable and practiced we can be with putting our defiance into motion.

The better we are at analyzing our surroundings, the more quickly and skillfully we can make informed decisions about defiance. We must assess for two main factors—safety and impact.

*Is it safe for me to defy? (safety)*

*Will this action make any difference? (impact)*

When it comes to defiance, we want to feel safe in several dimensions: physically, emotionally, financially, and socially. We also want to know that our defiance will be effective—that it will have a positive impact.

Think back to Rosa Parks, sitting in her seat on that Montgomery bus, looking once again into the indignant face of the bus driver James Blake. We know the journey that led to that day—the long struggle for justice, the late nights planning at the kitchen table, the black-and-white photos of the battered body of Emmett Till. Parks’s actions were not the product of mere impulse. They were the product of close observation and clear-eyed assessment of her situation—not only within the struggle for civil rights, but right there on that bus, sitting among the other passengers, breathing their air.

Rosa Parks was well aware of what could happen if she refused to give up her seat. She knew the risks to her safety: She could be arrested, subjected to immense scrutiny, and face harassment and legal jeopardy.

But Parks also thought her refusal to move could have an impact. It could be a way to advocate for desegregation of the city’s buses. As an activist with years of work behind her and impeccable credentials within the Civil Rights Movement, her fellow activists would rally around her. Her stand could make a difference.

Although I recommend assessing for positive impact, defiance isn’t always about winning others over. Sometimes, we want to defy simply to take a stand (or seat) for what we believe in.

The stages of defiance—tension, acknowledging discomfort, vocalizing it, then threatening to stop complying before the final act of defiance—can amount to a conversation with the environment. Even if you skip steps or go out of order, the stages help you test the waters and assess how defiance could affect you in the moment. These attempts to probe the situation help detect whether the time and place are right.

These are profoundly personal decisions. Some people defy despite great risks to their physical and psychological safety. Often, they defy even when they are certain it will not lead to lasting change. But a clear understanding of the possible risks, costs, and benefits allows us to make an informed decision. The choice is ours.

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### **THE DEFIANCE EMPATHY GAP**

Defiance is inherently risky. It will never be completely safe. A True No does not always bring with it the risk of bodily harm, but defiance can have immense psychological, social, financial, or professional costs. Going against the status quo could cost us our job or leave us isolated, mocked, or ostracized.

At the same time, a culture in which everyone is constantly swallowing their True No can have devastating consequences.

On an airplane, if a co-pilot cannot speak up about an error to the pilot in command, the lives of hundreds of passengers could be at stake, thousands of feet in the air. In law enforcement, if an officer has no way to report misconduct without fear of reprisals, the force and the public will suffer. In a hospital, a nurse who cannot flag a doctor's error without fear of being fired could lead to the death of a patient.

Several years ago, I interviewed fifty nurses and nurse managers at a major U.S. hospital for a research project. I asked the nurses questions such as: *How comfortable are you to speak up or raise work-related issues, especially those related to patient safety? What keeps you or other nurses in your unit from speaking up about problems?*

What I learned reinforced my concerns: Many nurses were not at all comfortable speaking up. The kinds of issues the nurses described as problematic were common but potentially serious: an error in medication, a chronic staffing shortage leading to shortcuts and mistakes.

By far the most common reason for why the nurses did not speak up was because of a lack of psychological safety. These nurses used the word *fear* often—they believed that disputing a nurse manager or a physician would lead to retaliation, and they were intimidated by the power imbalance inherent in their roles. As one nurse put it:

***Probably one of the biggest things would be fear; fear of getting in trouble. ... I think there is also a level of intimidation from higher-ups or ... if there's someone at the bedside and the physician's saying "This is what we're going to do," and you know in your mind "This doesn't seem right" ... That takes guts to step up and say, "Whoa doctor, no, we're not going to do that."***

But fear was not the only limiting factor for these nurses. The other reason many of them gave was the belief that even if they did speak up, it wouldn't matter. The nurses didn't believe that speaking up would have any positive impact.

As one nurse expressed:

***I think we all get to the point where it's like I'm not scared to speak up but nothing ever changes, nothing ever happens.***

One can easily imagine keeping silent in such circumstances, even if you have witnessed an error. If you do not feel psychologically safe, *and* if speaking up wouldn't lead to real change, what is the point?

I asked the nurse managers similar questions: *How comfortable are the nurses in your unit speaking up or raising work-related issues, especially those related to patient safety? What do you think keeps the nurses from speaking up about problems?*

The nurse managers gave strikingly different reasons for why the nurses in their units did not speak up. They did not focus on psychological safety or impact. Instead, these higher-ups saw a nurse's failure to speak up as a personal failing—not a cultural issue. They believed that either the nurses abdicated their responsibilities for reporting errors, or they just did not have the ability—they were not skilled enough or confident enough to speak up. As one manager said:

***Some people, some nurses do not take as much ownership about what is going on in their environment with other patients.***

In essence, the nurses thought that the hospital culture was the problem, while their bosses thought it was the nurses themselves who were at fault.

My colleagues and I named the discrepancy between nurses' and supervisors' perceptions the *voice empathy gap*. Managers and employees held different opinions about what prevented speaking up (voice), based on their positions in the organizational hierarchy. Because of their different roles, they interpreted the situation, and the people within it, in fundamentally different ways. Managers could not empathize with employees' emotions of fear and intimidation. They did not understand how uncomfortable it can be for someone to speak up.

Empathy gaps like these are problematic. If nurse managers like those I spoke with do not believe that there is a culture problem, they will do nothing to change the environment. And if nurses feel unsafe suggesting change, or believe that raising concerns will make no difference, a cultural stalemate can set in. And in a high-stakes setting like a hospital, everyone loses, particularly patients.

**Defiance does not need to be “big” to be impactful. Small defiant acts matter more than you think.**

Empathy gaps are not limited to hospitals, and they are not always about speaking up. An empathy gap can apply to defiance more generally, resulting in a *defiance empathy gap*. What seems unsafe to you might be within a comfortable norm for those with more power—who then do not understand how you could feel unsafe. And when you consciously comply with a situation because you feel unsafe, those with power may misunderstand you, believing that you consented, or that you didn't take your responsibility to defy seriously, or that you simply lack the ability to enact a True No.

In other research conducted with my collaborator Catherine Shea, I examined the different perceptions between recruiters and candidates toward illegal demographic questions in job interviews. We identified a perception gap whereby interviewers often misconstrue illegal questions, about marriage and children, as benevolent gestures to build rapport or help the interviewee. In contrast, job candidates, especially women, perceive them as potentially discriminatory, leading to less trust in the interviewer and less desire for the job. This gap in perceptions persists because candidates, burdened with insinuation anxiety, tend to comply and answer the question. This response can inadvertently perpetuate the cycle where interviewers, oblivious to the negative repercussions of their line of questioning, continue with their potentially detrimental behavior.

Dismantling defiance empathy gaps is often a necessary part of creating an environment in which everyone's True No is valued. It is often difficult to do, but my research suggests that educating managers on the voice empathy gap can shift their beliefs. When managers were informed about the importance of psychological safety, situational constraints, and culture on speaking up, they were more able to understand their employees' perspectives.



For employees, however, creating change should not require you to constantly sacrifice your well-being in unsafe environments, even if those environments are exactly what you aim to change. You don't have to consistently fall on the grenade to make sure it doesn't hurt anyone else. When the time is not right, sometimes it is better to wait for a better opportunity—a time and place when your defiance will be less costly and can truly make a difference.

But defiance can give us a tool to change cultures, not simply leave them. Remember, we have several options *besides* a principled exit when our values do not align with an environment. Defiance doesn't have to be loud to make change, and leaving isn't the only way to defy. Through routine advocacy, dissent, and professional disobedience, those who don't currently "fit" can help to change a culture for the better, working from the inside.

Cultures are never totally static. The people may make the place, but that doesn't necessarily mean by leaving, but by *staying* and *defying*. Defiance can change even the most hidebound and regimented environment into something new. All of us have this power and using it does not necessarily mean we must commit ourselves to grand gestures. Defiance does not need to be "big" to be impactful. Small defiant acts matter more than you think.

As organizational psychologist Karl E. Weick wrote, small wins—"a series of concrete, complete outcomes of moderate importance"—can, over time, add up to major victories. **Even the earliest stages of defiance can lead to major change.** 📖

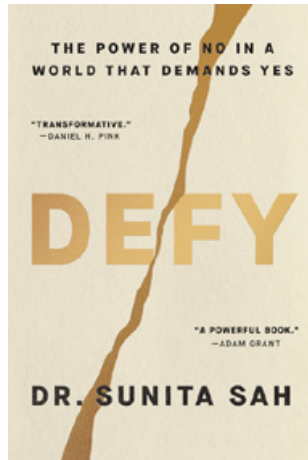


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Dr. Sunita Sah is an award-winning professor at Cornell University and an expert in organizational psychology. She leads groundbreaking research on influence, authority, compliance, and defiance. A trained physician, she practiced medicine in the United Kingdom and worked as a management consultant for the pharmaceutical industry. She currently teaches executives, leaders, and students in healthcare and business. Dr. Sah is a sought-after international speaker and consultant, advisor to government agencies, and former Commissioner of the National Commission on Forensic Science. Her multidisciplinary research and analyses have been widely published in leading academic journals and media entities including *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *Scientific American*. She lives with her husband and son in New York.



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