

Behavioural Digest

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One Bad Apple

By Howard Lees

I noticed last year when researching my book on strategy that a number of the gurus talked about 'a few key behaviours' making all the difference. They agreed that most dysfunctional behaviours in organisations are 'recoverable' however a very small number are critical, directly leading to brilliant success or crippling failure. We all spend our time observing people, one way or another. I spend a lot of my time observing the behaviour of one person and seeing if I can detect a nonverbal response in another person (or others in the same room).

In meetings, every now and again there is a silent 'scream' of a response in others to something said. Maybe there are a few behaviours that set the stage for the future direction of that particular group/team etc. For example, perhaps the Chief Legal officer dominated a board meeting in the past and everyone seemed to passively reinforce it. In no time at all this team has a Legal Chief that dominates everything. Letting the first domination event go by unquestioned was everyone's mistake; they may not have noticed.

Passivity among groups of people is the beginning of the end for a productive and collaborative workplace environment. Direction, good and bad, useful and not, is dictated by people that turn up and take notice of what's happening around them.

The Marshmallow Test

By Bruce Faulkner

In the late 1960s, the researcher Walter Mitchell created the 'marshmallow test' to study the preschooler's self-control. The setup was: "Have a marshmallow. I have to leave the room now, but if you wait until I get back to eat it, I will give you two." The researchers tracked these children over 20-30 years, and those who struggled with delayed gratification had all kinds of bad outcomes, like drug use and crime.

In 2010 a researcher named Celeste Kidd observed a little girl being given an ice cream, only to have it taken away from her before she even got a taste. Kidd realised that self-control might be the wrong way to view the marshmallow test.

Kidd's new experiment looked at the environment's impact on self-control. She created an unreliable environment where researchers promise the child something and then let them down. Cue the experiment: The child experiences an unreliable environment and then is left alone to choose to eat "one marshmallow now, or two if you wait until I get back".

In the unreliable environment, 1 out of the 14 children lasted the full 15 minutes. Most only managed 3 minutes. While in the reliable environment, 9 out of the 14 children waited. The rest averaged 12 minutes. A simple change to the environment's reliability extended the child's ability to wait by a factor of 4. In either setting, the child's self-control is a rational choice. Their behaviour aligns to what they already know about their environment. This was never a skills problem, it was always about environmental influence.

It is the person and their environment together that reveals the true nature of their relationship. Understanding this leads to solutions that are quicker, cheaper to implement and also more effective.

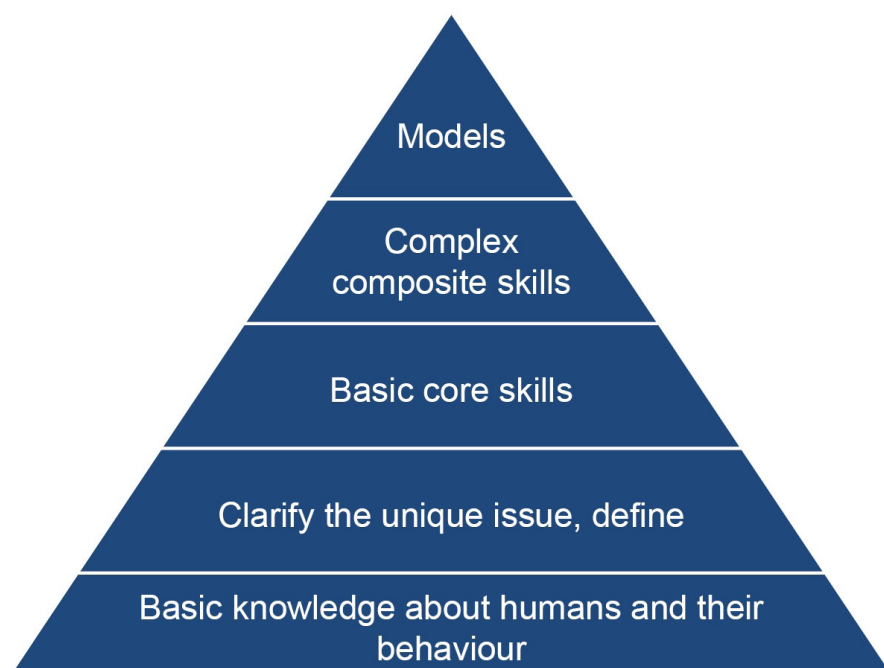
Core Skills, Part Two

By Leif E. Andersson

As I said last month, relationships precede results. Therefore leadership is, to a large extent, about creating good relations - an alliance. The problem is that leaders are seldom trained in the basic skills needed to nurture these key relationships. Do you remember primary school, when the teacher put you in a group to work together with others for the first time? Did the teacher teach you what group work is and how you do it? Have you ever - in your whole educational background - been taught specific tools for working with others?

In my experience, leadership training and literature miss that vital part of leadership. We assume that leaders have the skills for that, but they frequently don't. Leadership training, I have observed, often shoots way too high. It focuses on more advanced theories, models and complex skills and misses the basic core skills that are needed to master the more complex ones. Take coaching as an example. There are several good, well proven methods for coaching out there. But if leaders do not master active listening it doesn't matter how skilled they are in any coaching model. And, without the ability to take the trouble to discover someone else's perspective, active listening in turn is also just going to fail. These are the steps that need to be mastered prior to developing a strong and successful relationship.

After years of thinking about core skills, I have made a hierarchical model of what leaders need to know. First, everyone needs some basics about human psychology. Then they need to define the unique individual issue at hand. There are some evidence-based basic skills that require mastery. In the next instalment I will expand on the items in the pyramid.



Power Dynamics

By Lynn Dunlop

I am owed a phone call. The person in question is a senior director and a client. He is a nice guy, but there is a notable dysfunctional pattern to his behaviour. I'm not the only one who has commented upon it, and I've observed it multiple times - this nice guy lets people down.

He agrees to things but fails to turn up, or arrives but then excuses himself to take phone calls, or he promises things (like a call) but doesn't deliver. There are apologies - but the behaviour remains.

It seems that he doesn't understand the downstream impact of this behavioural pattern on his people. I know how frustrating I find it, and the information I need from this call is one that potentially will make a key difference to a team delivering an important project. So how must his team feel?

Whether he knows it or not, this director is power-playing. Due to his seniority, he holds most of the cards in each of his relationships. For example, suppliers like need to stay on his good side if we want continued work from his company, and his direct reports can't deliver overt criticism for the risk of limiting their careers.

The uncertainty caused by someone who consistently (daily) breaks low-level promises means you can never, ever rely on them. This director, having risen to seniority, is sheltered from consequences as few people have the psychological safety to tackle dysfunctions that affect their own careers.

Let's hope he calls me back eventually so we can have a frank conversaton.

Shades of BMT

- A child learns how to walk up and down stairs before they learn how to read; a safety sign would be superfluous.
- Cycling is the new golf.
- We return to places that we have previously found reinforcing; a holiday destination, a comfy chair, a cafe, a beach, a person.
- Read what you love until you love to read.