

Behavioural Digest

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“Meetings, Boy, I Dunno” By Walter Hufnagel

Some organisations have worked out that meetings work well if people, for example, log in at 9.15am for a 9.30 start. People can engage in social chats while others log on so the meeting can start promptly at 9.30am. 50 minute long meetings seem to be effective. It seems that the people who were good at meetings before lockdown are still good. Some organisations are hilariously still attempting to have 3 hour long interminable multi-person meetings, with the attendant drop-ins and drop-outs. It seems that the people who were bad at meetings before lockdown are still bad.

Compassion and Strength

“One of the criticisms I’ve faced over the years is that I’m not aggressive or assertive enough or maybe somehow, because I’m empathetic, it means I’m weak. ... I totally rebel against that. I refuse to believe that you cannot be both compassionate and strong.”

- **Jacinda Ardern**
Prime Minister of New Zealand

It’s Relationships By Collette Murray

The importance of relationships in organisations has never been greater than in this time of virtual working. We’re all relying on technology to help us maintain our relationships, both personal and professional. Who would have thought that at nearly 82 my mother would become an expert Skype user! However, what happens when the relationships we had with our colleagues were strained before this enforced distancing? How can we collaborate effectively if we don’t share a mutual understanding of how our roles overlap and the joint goal we’re trying to achieve? If we understand that relationships are the most powerful antecedents, then we know that reverting to contractual obligations, job descriptions and heavy processes to try to drive behaviour are not going to work very well.

Asking leaders to step in and set (or reset) expectations isn’t really the answer. It could in fact have the opposite effect, by creating a greater sense of alienation. We can only control how we are in each relationship now. We can ask ourselves what we are doing that perpetuates the dysfunction, and adjust our own behaviours. We can maintain our focus on the outcome. We can offer constructive feedback to our colleagues. We can ask for and listen to their feedback, and we can seek feedback from observers of the relationship to hear a more objective view. If all else fails, and there are no signs of change, we can maintain our focus on delivering results and save our energy for building relationships that more mutually beneficial.



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Who's Talking

By Howard Lees

Some 12 years ago, we gathered data on which stereotypical groups of people were better at communicating than others on a number of construction projects. We were looking to see who was communicating effectively on the phone and email. Construction was around the 80% response range, design houses at 50% and clients were typically down at 30%. I have recently revisited this finding and discovered that it has not changed very much. My next step was to debate with some BMT folks as to what environmental factors made this so. Here is a summary list of everyone's potential contributory factors:

- The contractors' world is more tangible so communication is more reinforcing (progress is easier to see / every day / more visual).
- Construction folks are frequently talking about stuff that's happening now. Relationships are definitely more robust: They have to be.
- We studied the behaviours of bid teams tendering for new work. They communicated via email at week 1/10 but by week 8/10 everyone was using the phone!
- We studied the 'available natural reinforcers' for communication in the different environments? It is situational; the key to communication is leadership – you can have whatever you want if you really want it. The best leaders achieve high quality organisational communication.
- Contractors tend to be confident that they are directing resources into the right place. Needs adjust daily, and can be observed, by everyone.
- In design – there's a fast burn through hours but it's difficult to be confident of progress. There is even less confidence about remote designers' outputs.
- Construction – there are clear visible consequences, errors are more apparent in real time, firefighting is exciting, "we can fix this quickly and get back on track".
- Design – errors in design can go unnoticed for a long time, activity is much less tangible, discovery of errors can be emotional.
- Design & Clients – some poor decisions have a long gestation period before anyone realises; old mistakes can take ages to work through.
- If you get rung up in a construction setting, you have to ring back today. By tomorrow you have moved on and the point is now moot.
- Clients, especially government or large corporations tend much more to presenteeism and much sunflowering. Many client organisations do not measure actual knowledge worker performance. Communication only travels upwards, contractors and suppliers can be put on extinction (ignored). There are commonly plenty of unwanted behaviours available in client organisations, manifested by the existence of abundant passive aggression!

Which Brain Are You In?

By David Lees

Modern neuroscience, psychology, and economics have made dramatic leaps in understanding the brain in the last few decades. Little of that knowledge has found its way into common parlance, but there's one which would be incredibly helpful considering the current climate of pandemics and general global tensions: The area of understanding around our two brains.

In its most simplified state, we can describe the way we think as either reactive, or reflective. Nobel prize-winning behavioural economist Daniel Kahneman talks about these two states of mind as system 1 and system two.

When someone is in system 1, they are reacting with intuition and fluency, answering the question "what's 2 + 2?" for example. Generally speaking this is a good thing for most situations. We burn fewer calories when thinking in a system 1 state; a useful function when food was in short supply. However, an overreliance on this easy brain condition means that bad decisions can be made, when system 1 takes over a situation that it's not really qualified for. That's where things go wrong.

In leadership, often the most reinforcing thing to do in the short term is not the best option for a long term solution. These short-circuit decisions are inevitable. However, if you're aware of the way the brain works, then preparing for your interactions provides a previously walked path for system 1 to use in the moment. We would call these the "steps before step one" of your interactions.

Shades of BMT

- Knowledge workers do not deliver discretionary effort in aversive workplaces.
- Leaders should explain why information is important, knowledge workers are not great at blind obedience.
- Anonymous staff surveys burst the happy bubbles of impatient leaders, that's why they rarely carry them out.