

# Behavioural Digest

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Behavioural Leadership  
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## A Negative Capability

By Walter Hufnagel

Some people like problems that can be solved. At school, maybe they preferred maths or physics; something with a right answer that can be calculated (and not challenged). Creativity is more subjective. It is more like art or poetry, subject-wise; there isn't one answer. Instead, up ahead is a whole world of exciting possibilities.

Many artists tend to have what the poet John Keats called a Negative Capability. That means they go into things believing that something new and great is going to happen, even though, at the outset, they have zero solid evidence to support their expectations. It is the combination of their experience, hard work and a strong belief that maintains their energy and ultimately delivers - most of the time - a great outcome.

People with a low level of Negative Capability prefer to know all the parameters before they agree to set off on a creative journey. It is therefore unlikely that the people stuck in that mindset will be able to generate the required base level of Negative Capability to succeed from a journey into the unknown. Unfortunately, for some folks, the creativity journey is just too difficult to control!

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## The Vanity Channel

Anonymous

The narcissistic leader represents a big challenge. Narcissism is virtually a requirement to be CEO in some industries, especially where hero-leadership is still in vogue and the cult of personality still reigns (e.g. hedge funds, politics, technology). I think these leaders process feedback through their own personal filter in terms of what the feedback says about them, and often distort it to suit their own purposes. They can be coached, but you have to go through the vanity channel to make it work. The current crop of narcissistic politicians are prototypical examples of leaders who have attracted acolytes who influence them through their personal flattery channel and can get them to do just about anything that promises to increase their ratings (via rockets, yachts, climate denial, racism, insurrection etc.)

A good behavioural analysis will point to effective reinforcers for anyone and then you have to decide if you want to absorb the unintended costs of flattering someone who is likely to misuse their power. Ethics are relevant in these cases. The big challenge for us as coaches is wrestling with how to advise people who are the victims of these narcissistic patterns of behaviour. Unfortunately, we have to say "Be careful: As long as they have all the power, you will need to play by their rules or suffer the consequences, which are often unpredictable and severe." These matters are haunting for coaches; we can see the damage some of these people do to their workers and see that helpless look on people's faces that seem to say "My god, this is so obvious. Will no one do anything?" It's important normally to add a whiff of cadence at the end of a piece. This story, sadly, has no happy ending (or attribution!)

# Motivation Killers

By Garry Sanderson

From time to time I will enthusiastically suggest something in a meeting and receive a response that dampens my suggestion somewhat. Some people will indirectly resist an idea or suggestion, perhaps nodding in agreement with an agreed course of action then taking no action or even acting in the entirely opposite manner. The statements made can be equally impacting, with seemingly neutral or even helpfully framed comments being loaded with passively aggressive negative intent towards the suggested course of action. Steep power gradients heighten the impact of such statements, effectively stopping people seeking to bring new thinking, collaboration or constructive challenges in their tracks. Examples of such motivation killing statements are along the lines of:

- “Good thinking, but we tried that before and it didn’t work”
- “That sounds like a good idea if you can get some budget”
- “That’s very interesting, but I’m not sure talking about this now is the best use of our time.”
- “Could we have a quick show of hands to see who is siding with Garry on this suggestion?”
- “You’ve not worked here very long, have you?”

No doubt you will be able to add other examples of your own to this list. You are likely to recognise these statements when made by others, likely accompanied by feelings of frustration and deflated motivation. The greater challenge is to remove such weapons of mass demotivation from your own vocabulary. The first step might be to find out if other people think you are a serial sinner in this area...

# Be More Curious

By Lynn Dunlop

During difficult discussions or tasks, it is common to feel uncomfortable. Sometimes the discomfort is acceptable, and we simply accept its presence and get on with whatever is eliciting the uncomfortable feelings. Other times, the discomfort triggers less useful responses, like defensiveness, frustration or avoidance. In moments when we notice ourselves responding in a way that doesn’t reflect our best selves, the first thing to do is to practise recognising the discomfort for what it is. After that, a useful tool can be curiosity.

Curiosity can help us understand the situation and the people involved better. It can also help us understand ourselves better. It’s extremely difficult to be both defensive and genuinely curious. Curiosity will lead to better listening as well, and better listening will often lead to better solutions in the long run.

# Creating the Conditions for Survival

By Bruce Faulkner

Early on a Monday morning, people make choices about what they work on. They approach these choices with consideration. By lunch time, the demands of the hierarchy are spreading. Each new email contains yet another request. The cumulative effect is overload. They are now captured like wriggling fish in the too busy trap. The what and why of the next thing to work on is always situational. It comprises a combination of biology and the lessons learned while navigating their workplace environment. Biology fluctuates over the course of the day. Feeling fresh? Time expands. Feeling overloaded? Time collapses. Feeling frazzled? The sense of time disappears. Hold people’s biology in overload and they enter a frazzled state. Their ability to gain perspective disappears. Their need for a bit of relief means there is only room to fire off a pithy response and move onto the next thing.

That “what’s next?” decision is instinctive. Who or what is the most dangerous thing in the inbox? The lesson is learned after a few rides on this merry-go-round: Get that stuff sent as far away as possible. Now, everyone is catapulting their problems to the far reaches of the organisation. This creates the conditions that narrow the focus on survival. It doesn’t make them bad people. After all, they have just adapted to the reality that their leaders - knowingly or unknowingly - have created.

# Shades of BMT

- Addressing an emotionally charged issue brings a risk that we respond in ways that leaves no one happy or satisfied. When that happens, the standing of leadership gets diminished.
- A bureaucracy is created by aversive workplace environments, an environment where people feel they always have to be prepared for an attack of some kind.