

# Behavioural Digest

No. 133 - September 2021

Behavioural Leadership  
Online Course - Winter 2021/22  
[Click here for details](#)



## Experts Shmecksperts

By Bruce Faulkner

Adam Grant is a smiley happy psychologist. He is very good at making up pithy sayings and headlines, although I find he has a habit of reducing things down to a binary condition. Here is an example from one of his tweets: “Insecure people pretend to know things they don’t. They dismiss expertise from others. Secure people admit what they don’t know. They defer to expertise in others. Proactive people take the initiative to learn what they don’t know. They acquire expertise from others.”

The tweet’s content is digestible, but the advice is superficial. Grant calls for deferring to expertise, but an idea expressed with confidence is easily mistaken for expertise. Also, social environments are rarely benign. Most of the time, someone is promoting their agenda. This deference to expertise could open people up to exploitation.

The other downside to this advice is that the expert is doing the thinking. This feels efficient, but it comes with a price. In most settings, the expert is not embedded in the local environment. This doesn’t stop them from speaking with confidence as the audience smiles and nods. Deferring to the expert is faster, and it provides someone to blame when it all goes wrong.

## Learning from Our Mistakes

By Lynn Dunlop

There are lots of organisational barriers to learning from mistakes: Doing so takes time, and money. It requires a focus on the past whilst also getting the day job done, and it can adversely affect an organisation’s reputation and shareholder value. From a personal perspective, the barriers can include avoiding damage to a personal and professional reputation, as well as the discomfort of focusing on a mistake and the inevitable blow to the ego that having made a mistake confers. Finally, there are issues surrounding ‘whistleblowing’ - people calling out others’ mistakes are looked down upon even when they are seen as having done the right thing. No-one likes a tattle-tale.

With all these barriers in the way, what can overcome them? People in most industries have tried lessons-learned processes, but as with all processes, it’s all about the execution - do people actually use them as intended? Do people even read them? (Spoilers: No; it’s incredibly rare)

So, what can be done? It’s a bigger matter that cannot be covered in a short article, but in short it needs a cultural focus, starting with the organisational leaders, on welcoming news of errors and focusing on what can be learned from them. Sidney Dekker has written about Just Cultures in his work on human factors and safety. When a mistake is made, instead of focusing on what rule was broken, how badly, and what the consequences should be, instead focus on forward-looking accountability. Who was affected by the mistake, what do those people need - both now and going forward - and whose obligation is it to provide those things?

Hollin books are now available to buy and borrow on Kindle.  
[Click here](#) to see the full e-book collection.

# Management Visits and Getting The Truth

By John Geates

I remember struggling to make my management visits truly useful, both for me and the people I was visiting. It took me a long time to get there, as the staff initially believed I didn't really want to know any awkward truths. I persisted and the floodgates eventually opened. That was the hardest part. To maintain any credibility and trust, every issue raised had to be answered - negatively or positively - otherwise, there was no point in doing it.

It was a massive commitment to do it right but totally worth it if done in that belief. Tokenistic gestures and platitudes just don't work and if you're not prepared to listen to the pain and take it on yourself then you should stay in your office and believe the hype.

*John Geates is the former Assistant Chief Constable and Director of the Scottish Police College.*

# A Moment in Time

By Howard Lees

When challenged in the moment to be creative, many people will react with a 'freeze' response. It's just too much of a shock for some people to 'come up with something imaginative' in that instant; it freaks them out. It's not lazy or stupid, it's the impact of being caught off guard.

There comes a moment in our courses where each student is asked to take some time and think about how they can use their new learned skills to fix something simple that will have a small but observable impact in improving their organisation. Trainers will then observe a specific 'look' on the face of some of the students. That 'look' says 'Oh gosh, I have to think of something really fast, something that can make a difference'. Often what happens next is that students suggest that they fix a notorious company work process that has never worked properly and is never going to work properly in a month of Sundays. If there was a chance that the said process could work, it would have worked by now anyway.

The skilled trainer has already predicted that this would happen, they have prepared something that will 'ease their pain'. There may be a speech describing a fresh green field of possibility, they will recount examples of simple improvements that past students made that went on to contribute to major improvements in their organisations. In that key moment, a great trainer can inspire a whole class, one person will speak up with an idea, the trainer will pounce and ask for other contributions and ideas, a discussion ensues. The whole class breathes in relief of the discovery of a way forward. There's only one way success can be achieved in these circumstances: Create an environment where people feel that they can make suggestions, gradually turn those initial suggestions into reality by adding the collective brain power of the group.

# Inch by Inch, Row by Row

By Susan Prebble

A by-product of analysing monthly organisational data is that occasionally something sticks out as unusual, interesting, or incorrect. A common next step is finding someone senior to listen as the detail of the recently discovered dysfunction is explained. This requires some form of response, some change, some decisive action. Perhaps the next step is limited by the organisation's cultural incrementalistic approach to change. This is the maximum speed of action that can happen without tearing the bureaucratic walls of the organisation down and upsetting either the Executives in their relaxed state of optimism or the other investors who benefit from allowing the Executives to remain in that optimistic state.

Feedback in organisations can be an unwelcome guest. Corporate may already have convinced themselves of this year's performance and the pending bonus pool/share price that it will generate. But someone in the engine room has discovered a glitch that everyone should now be aware of. A strident crew member with binoculars has just spotted a tell-tale white floating monolith in the sea ahead. Now everyone is in the breathless grips of hierarchical company politics, and this is the real test of the integrity of those in power. Will someone from the higher echelons be looking out for those distress signals from below decks? Will they act with integrity? Sadly, there's no more time in our schedule today; tune in next week for the thrilling next episode of 'Inch by Inch, Row by Row'.

# Shades of BMT

- 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.
- If you find yourself getting irritated by the people you depend upon to work for you perhaps it's a sign that you are disorganised.