

Behavioural Digest

No. 134 - October 2021

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



See the Mess and Smile

By Bruce Faulkner

There are extremes of optimists and pessimists out there. The overly enthusiastic optimist is destined for failure because they inadvertently block all the potentially useful dissenting voices. The perpetual pessimist suffocates everyone's enthusiasm. Both find certitude at their own extremes, but this blinds them to the inevitable depression they inflict on others. The happy life is messy. It sits between these extremes, nullifying any chance of certainty.

Behavioural observations help reveal these messy realities by stripping away any unrealistic window dressing, but in doing so can bruise a few egos. When this happens, the injured party often retreats or lashes out. A person with a good grasp of workplace realities avoids directing effort at unachievable targets and so realistic assessments rarely surface in normal day-to-day conversations.

Observations about human behaviour often feel pessimistic, but they also contain good reasons for optimism. Every behaviour serves a purpose. Knowing why a behaviour is occurring almost automatically clarifies how one could influence it. This is a reason for optimism as we create the possibility of something different. Staying flexible and observant in this messy middle ground creates a presence of mind to recognise opportunities as they arise. Perhaps the optimal path is to resist the premise that restricts the choice to being either a pessimist or an optimist and choose instead to be a strategist.

When Does a Project Start To Wobble?

By Howard Lees

Bidding contractors and designers generally follow the lead of the client when it comes to the direction and needs of a project. Despite their best efforts to find the most suitable contractors, it's the client who decides if the project is going to go well or not. The tenderers could feed poor strategy or inconsistencies back to the client, and most try to. Not many tenderers go and speak to the executive decision makers in the client about their ITT misgivings; in fact, they are told that they cannot do that. They have to 'play the game' on the client's IT portal which is never satisfying. Most tenderers fear speaking out to client executives for fear of rejection or voiding their own tenders. That is the point where many projects go wrong. This fear of feedback occurs at every stage of every tendering process. The really clever clients understand this and write a strategy for tendering a project that has aligned incentives and multiple places for people to safely deliver feedback.

I often think of a particular brand of retailer who carried out a spate of building work in the 1990's. They used contracts with generous bonuses for both problem solving and quality assurance. They contracted one company to build all their stores for a lump sum price per store with generous early completion bonuses. Some of the programmes went from nearly 60 week programmes to around 40 weeks over time as the contractor got progressively better at building the same thing over and over. The client continued to honour the contract even though contractor was heavily profiting from the bonuses. The early openings for the superstores allowed them earlier than anticipated profits: Win, win. It's possible to align incentives, in fact its easy to do. I have never personally read a behaviourally sound ITT, but I look forward to doing so in the future.

The Threat of Punishment Chain

By David Lees

Conversations that happen regularly at work are centred around what issue is happening today, and the seemingly obvious fix (insert your own examples here). Assuming the issues are valid, and the fix is too - why do so many exist without being resolved?

Firstly, for the water cooler commentator, raising the issue with the perpetrator of the blunder provides potential for conflict. Behavioural science shows us that if there is a sniff of a chance that someone could punish the messenger, we are less likely to go out on that limb. So the person who's made the mistake doesn't know about it.

Secondly, the person in charge of the blunder is likely to be in a position where they are judged on their performance. As such, the idea that they would revisit a decision they made and admit that they were wrong is likely to be seen as a punishing event. In countless coaching conversations with people in this situation, a coachee has explained that they already know the answer to an issue, however in order to broach it they would have to raise it with a superior staff member, and we're back at conflict again, which means we're back at avoiding punishment again.

What exists in the workplace is an overriding threat. It exists in really very pleasant workplaces, not just the ones with the Type A Bully Bosses. Work is overwhelmingly contingent on threats – deadlines, nags, losing face, losing a contract, missing a milestone, losing a bonus. A solution lies in “how” we measure performance and provide feedback, and the difference between a learning environment and a judging environment.

Imagine you are at an amateur painting class. You're painting a hand and the tutor shows you a different way you could paint it which would add depth to the painting. It's unlikely you'd be offended at the feedback; you'd probably be really chuffed and give it a go. This is because there is no link in the performer or tutor's mind that painting a hand badly would be a reflection on the person's value.

Shades of BMT

- ‘Human error is about how people have learned to cope (successfully or not) with the complexities and contradictions of work’. (Sidney Dekker).
- It is possible to deliver constructive feedback without being rude; it's a learned skill called tact.
- If you are serious about changing for the better, you cannot be impatient. That's one of the key barriers.
- People like gossip. Sadly, inaccurate reporting of what's going on can be more interesting than accurate reporting.

More on Major Projects

By Duncan Hasson

I have personal experience of both major project success and project failure. I have talked long and hard to numerous clients about what good looks like, with varying success. Project collaboration and the behaviours from the delivery team during construction are shaped by the ITT phase if simply left to nature.

A major Motorway project I worked on was a disaster due to the aggressive ITT and contract terms. This created an aggressive commercial environment; both the client and the contractors drifted into combative behaviours. This resulted in the project over-running by an embarrassingly long time, in full view of the road-using public. Of course, the public ended up stumping up for the overspend too, as they often do.

On the other side of this coin, the Bakerloo Line Link for London Underground was set up collaboratively right from the start. The ITT included an early contractor involvement (ECI) process which genuinely welcomed innovation and collaboration from day one. This followed through to the delivery phase, assisted by forming a One Team credo. The rest is history; the public got what they wanted, the client got what they wanted, and the project team got to experience something great they will never forget.

Self-Sabotage

By Lynn Dunlop

Why do we sometimes avoid doing things that will be beneficial for us, even when we think we want to do them? Going for a walk, doing meditation and eating more fruit are low on effort, perfectly pleasant and often mysteriously hard to do.

It can be useful to acknowledge the difference between *knowing what to do* and *doing what you know*. Each of these skill sets benefits from having different strategies to ensure we follow through on our good intentions.