

# Behavioural Digest

No. 137 - January 2022

Behavioural Leadership  
Online Course - Spring 2022

[Click here for details](#)



## Optimisms

By Walter Hufnagel

### Base optimism

A passive focus on the upside of a situation, assuming that good things are going to happen, seeing the best in situations or people whilst maintaining a sense of realism.

“Yeah, I think it’s going to work.”

### Hero Optimism

Projecting past the line of the best-case, most realistic outcome, and drifting into fantasy.

“Hey everyone, this solution is definitely going to work.”

### Stubborn Optimism

Being fully aware of the reality that we see, not blind to it, and at the same time filled with the conviction that we possess the ingenuity, innovative capacity and determination to change that reality for the better.

“I’m going to make damn sure it works.”

### Destructive optimism

The relentless optimism of the leader that suppresses all potential dissenting opinions.

“It’s very dark down here.”

## Is It Worth It?

By Lynn Dunlop

Hanlon’s Razor - “Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity” - is an adage which suggests, albeit a little cruelly, that we give people the benefit of the doubt as our starting point. When we’re frustrated by something someone else is doing, the safest thing to do is to assume that the person is not deliberately acting in ways that block progress, but instead that they are misguided, uninformed or that they have valid albeit different priorities.

That said, our next steps - should we want progress - must be to gather information on the behavioural patterns of the person in question. Assuming a benign starting point is one thing but gathering data on what is actually happening will help guide our next steps. If someone has been asked to complete some work and - despite prompts, interventions and pleas - simply refuses to participate, there may well be other factors in play over which we have no line of sight or influence. In those circumstances, the best question to ask is: Is it worth it? Is it worth my time and effort to change the behaviour of this person?

Where it *is* worth it, the route to take is using behavioural techniques to change someone’s environment sufficiently so that they demonstrate new behaviours. But if it’s not worth it, consider instead simply spending all your time and effort on getting the best from other people. Spending time reinforcing the desired behaviours of others is likely to be more pleasant for everyone involved and offers opportunities that might be missed if we are spending all our time greasing the eternal squeaky wheel. No matter how many times you kiss some people, they resolutely remain a frog.

Behavioural Leadership Conference.  
May 18th & 19th Manchester.  
Email [nicola@hollin.co.uk](mailto:nicola@hollin.co.uk) for more details.

# The Language We Use

## By Bruce Faulkner

The language we use sets a scene. It frames what we see and what we assume. Language acts as a prism because of the way it bends our perceptions. It shapes what we examine and what gets excluded. For example, the word 'resistance' is a word that can distort our world view.

Organisations spend a lot of time and money designing and implementing change programmes. The people involved anticipate resistance and make plans for how to deal with it. Look at what happens when that word is thrown out on the table: "This area of the business has a history of resisting change." What actually happened in the past was that people did not behave how they wanted.

Immediately, the stage is set for targeting certain groups of people. The conversational energy goes into figuring out how to overcome resistance. If frustration builds, then people reach for expedient solutions. This often means invoking the power of the hierarchy to impose the change.

Tuning into the language being used reveals perspectives bending and distorting in real time. A simple example is to listen for statements that describe people as being the problem. It is just as easy to describe a situation as people having a problem. That language would set the scene to figure out ways of supporting them.

The conversation needs to stop focusing on what isn't happening. Change requires people to coordinate their behaviours with each other and that is sometimes awkward and messy.

Progress meetings should encourage people to talk about their experiences in their workplace. The challenges they bring up probably don't appear in any of the change plans. They are using new language, words that describe obstacles, not resistance. This change of perception is powerful because knowing why a behaviour is occurring almost automatically clarifies how to influence it.

# Power Plays

## By Howard Lees

A friend of mine was interviewing for a Director post at her company. She said that this smartly dressed guy turned up for interview and his opening statement went like this – "If I get this job then you need to know that I always turn up late to meetings, I don't respond to that many emails and phone calls, I respond very badly to bad news, I often cancel appointments with people at the last minute and I can generally be pretty impatient and irritable." Of course, this story is not true, although I suspect that some of these behaviours will appear unchecked in various workplaces, from time to time!

# Shades of BMT

- "If he writes her a few sonnets, he loves her. If he writes her 300 sonnets, he loves sonnets" - unknown
- It takes no courage at all for the boss to lord it over everyone. It takes real courage to act with humility.

# Why Is It So Hard To Fix?

## By Joanne Benjamin

The reduction in travel/commuting times in the last 2 years, with many remote working, has increased the available time 'in work' which has been swallowed up with more meetings and in some cases even longer working hours in order to catch up with the also increased e-mails and workload that (unless done during the meetings) still need completing. A person can only be in one meeting at a time and the workload doesn't tend to reduce when you are in the meeting. Many people I have spoken to in these situations are experiencing high levels of stress.

In addition, when people are too busy, their ability to deliver considered responses is reduced. They can fall into being unintentionally abrupt and even confrontational in their responses. This change can create a negative impact on the environment and the people in it, as they are unlikely to want to 'bother someone' or 'add to' the already increasing stress they are witnessing, so they hold things back.

It seems like a big enough problem that is well worth improving, so why is it so hard to get people focused on it? I have a theory...

When there are a huge number of parts to the same problem, it feels overwhelming. When the problem is broken down into smaller pieces, those individual pieces feel insignificant compared to the overall big problem. Ultimately nothing gets fixed. Our brains have, somewhere along the way, been conditioned into putting small problems into a box that 'we'll deal with later'. The box never gets opened, it just keeps filling up until it's so overwhelmingly full it's too difficult to figure out where to start.

Breaking things down really is the route to improving things, so it's worth taking the time to reset expectations. If everyone around you took one small piece of the problem and spent 10-15 mins on it then things would improve and quickly. Fix each part, one at a time, tick each off as it's completed. Over time - "problem, what problem?"