

Behavioural Digest

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Panic Routines By Bruce Faulkner

I have my head down working on my plan, and then an urgent demand appears; someone else's emergency has hijacked my plans. My week was already fully loaded and now I have to deal with this. Now I am thrown off course and my brain throws out all kinds of options. When stress captures the brain there is no chance for calm and creative thinking. I need to escape from this condition as fast as possible. These aren't the best conditions to deliver my best work or to keep me healthy. I want to avoid being swept along by the disruptive momentum of others. For that, I have a simple strategy. I call it my 'panic routine'.

This panic routine allows me to compose myself by slowing down time. I respond by asking the disrupter of my peace some simple clarifying questions. Doing this forces the other person to get off my back do a bit of thinking themselves. It also puts some new time into play. I have a list of simple questions to hand: "Have you talked to finance yet?" "Are there any likely legal problems?" and "Are there any safety considerations?" are just few of my staples.

The secret is to plan 'panic routine' questions during calmer moments. Start by looking for patterns in these urgent demands. From there, draw up a list of simple clarifying questions. Write them out and keep the list visible. The next time a faux emergency shows up, scan the list and ask the most appropriate question. Problem solved.

Culture Change? Not So Fast By David Lees

Culture change is a massive industry, and an admirable crusade. It's clearly needed these days; we're struggling to achieve goals in a faster and more complex world by using methods that were born in the last century. Progress away from Taylorism has been made, but slowly. The workforce is different these days; many more people are looking for values-based roles and fewer highly skilled people are putting up with command and control methods of operation within organisations. In order to attract and keep skilled people, it follows that we should cultivate cultures to do that. It is not a simple thing to do.

It's reasonable to compare using the word culture in this way, to talking about the economy - it's not one thing, it's a significant number of things which combine and are rolled up into the generalised description. Just like when trying to improve the economy, if a company is trying to improve the culture, a spray and pray method is probably going to waste a lot of time and effort without an accurate impression of what it is about the culture that needs to change, and where. So, what to do?

Ed Schein, in his book *Organisational Culture and Leadership*, points out that a very important aspect of the endeavour - and the first step he takes when engaging with a client on their culture change project - is to ask, "What are you looking to achieve in terms of changing the culture, and what do you mean by culture?" He then recommends an extensive familiarisation process prior to authoring any kind of survey. The gist of the approach is: Without understanding your frame of reference in detail and getting to the truth of what is happening now, any rush to roll anything out will be missing the target from the get-go.

My Door is Always Open....

By Tommy Taylor

“My door is always open” is a phrase I’ve heard numerous times during my career, and one I’m sure a lot of leaders believe provides their employees with the confidence to give the upward feedback we all know is so vital.

However, that door is usually at the top of a long flight of stairs, far away from the comfort of the office floor (locker room) and ironically, it’s rarely physically open. The build-up of fear and anxiety of what you have to lose in highlighting any shortcomings in the business will often paralyse an employee into saying nothing at all or, even worse, they simply submit to silence and conformity. So, as leaders, how can we release this anxiety and fear that our employees hold so that they can confidently walk through that open door and speak freely?

Firstly, consistency is vital. That one time the boss immediately dismissed someone’s opinion or did not fully engage in what they were saying? The fear of rejection spreads like wild fire through the workplace. It doesn’t matter if the boss has responded to feedback expertly 100 times, that one negative lapse can bring it all down. A factory worker may think twice about highlighting corners being cut in safety processes or an employee, who has an idea about how to run meetings more efficiently, may not speak up. Silence and conformity will thrive. The chances of growth will die.

Secondly, big egos can be the enemy of feedback. Ego narrows vision and the only feedback welcomed must confirm current beliefs. This confirmation bias makes bosses lose perspective and devalues anyone else’s opinion. The door is definitely not open, just the letter box, and only fan mail is welcomed! The best leaders avoid this ego trap by focusing on regularly showing humility and gratitude to those who have openly fed back their thoughts. Great bosses value the input of those around them.

All leaders will have at some point been in this position. It is those great leaders that haven’t forgotten what it felt like to walk up those cold stairs. They haven’t forgotten the stomach churning feeling when knocking on that door. They create a safe environment where the threats and repercussions of new ideas and opinions are eliminated. They move themselves downstairs and take the door off its hinges...

Stress and The Causes of Stress

By Jonny Bennett

This year, I have noticed a lot of CEOs joining an essentially laudable bandwagon, talking about the damage to their employees caused by stress in the workplace. It strikes me that the most observable daily behaviours in workplaces centre around emails, meetings and managerial interactions. These senior leaders are inadvertently presiding over and reinforcing the very regimes that cause the vast majority of the undue stress in their workplaces. Perhaps if they want to improve things then their next discussion should centre around the causes of stress in their workplaces. That might help the unfortunate victims of this terrible dream get a bit closer to a happy awakening.

Conscious Incompetence

By Howard Lees

I had a knee replacement operation in early December. All went well and my recuperation comprises daily exercises and stretches on a scale from monotonous to excruciatingly painful.

At my last physiotherapy session, they said, “OK, now you can just walk normally.” I have been walking for 60 odd years but after hearing those words I have no idea how to walk properly. It’s a heel and toe process I have been using fluently all this time and now it’s gone!

“Just walk normally” comes in the same banal class of instruction as “Don’t worry about it,” and “Just think nice thoughts.”

Stuck in Your Comfort Zone?

By Lynn Dunlop

Sometimes, rather than fix a problem we ignore it. It might seem too big a problem, or we might feel obliged to prioritise other things. However, ignoring the problem will likely make things worse in the long term. Lots of things contribute to this situation, but one of them might be that old ‘better the devil you know’ adage. For some people, our comfort zone are places with lots of ongoing problems, and while we don’t necessarily like it, we are more comfortable with it than with the uncomfortable unknown that comes from potentially solving the problem. If you notice that you’re unhappy but comfortable, use that as a prompt to make a change.

Shades of BMT

- We all get the same number of hours in the day as everyone else.
- Some people are not too busy; they are too disorganised!
- If people routinely make promises they don’t keep, over time, others will notice. It doesn’t matter how trivial the promises, the effect’s just the same
- People don’t want to be supervised, especially by someone they don’t like.