

# Behavioural Digest

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## Difficult Conversations

By Tommy Taylor

We've all had them. We've all avoided them. And we all know that our natural instinct will be to want to avoid them again.

However, what if we can learn to encourage those difficult conversations and embrace them; embrace the conflict that undoubtedly occurs when acknowledging something uneasy. Leaders must create the psychologically safe environment where those critical conversations of feedback and opinion become a celebrated daily occurrence, with no associated repercussions.

Simon Sinek describes dysfunctional businesses as a tree of monkeys. "Those at the top look down and see smiles, while those at the bottom look up and see asses..." Most leaders know that the more senior and influential they get, the harder it is to get honest, truthful feedback. People are less likely to have those difficult conversations with you, and are more likely just to agree and smile. The stakes are high for the employees. The balance of choice will likely shy away from the difficult conversation and lie more towards putting up with the issue. The great leaders work to remove any fear of repercussions and build the trust needed to instil the safety, where difficult conversations thrive.

So perhaps people can lower the stakes, chop down the tree and make an exquisite new table for all the monkeys to sit round.

## It's Not Too Busy, It's Ego

By David Lees

Running courses with people from a cross section of organisations for nearly 20 years gives us a special lens with which to view a company culture. As part of a course, people are required to register on a web-based portal, and answer 4 simple questions. In all, it takes less than 10 minutes. There's a trend that happens on almost every course concerning the likelihood that a person will pre-register for the course, with the correlation being how senior the person is in the organisation. So have a think: What happens to the likelihood someone will spend 10 minutes registering for the course as their rank increases? You nailed it - the likelihood drops like a stone.

Now the normal response can range from a sincere apology to a snarky "I'm much too busy," with the bulk of the responses sitting within coo-ey of the latter. The thing is, everyone is flat out busy! So, if everyone is busy, why do only the lower ranks log on and register? Maybe it's consequences...?

OK, so the title of this article suggests that these higher-ups are just being egomaniacs, which may be true in some instances, but the real issue is that of impact. When higher ranked members of a course cohort routinely do their homework and contribute energetically to the training sessions, the scores and capability of all the attendees increases. Conversely when they don't contribute, and don't lead in the room, well you can imagine, it's not good - this is a vintage downstream-impact blind spot for many people in leadership positions. By not considering how their behaviour impacts the people around them, they impact the effectiveness of a course negatively, and not just by a little bit. The lack of any consequences for the leaders is exposing them to the blind spot. If their boss was there, and had done the homework and registered, would they be chipping in a bit more...?

# Ascending Authority, Descending Knowledge

By David Lees

There are many situations in business where experts have to ask for approval for things, from people who are not experts. The catalyst for this article was a story from someone working in a national sized, multi-billion-dollar organisation. A project manager wanted a change approved on their project worth \$2,000; it ended up needing to go to the CFO for approval. This seems nuts, it is nuts, but it exists everywhere. Even when the people up the hierarchy used to do the job that the current experts occupy, they often don't have the context with which to make a decision, making it even more nuts. The title of this article does not say "descending intelligence," although sometimes in clouds of frustration some people might want to say that. It's not an intelligence thing. The people asking for approval have the intelligence (and the context), so we're in the situation where the hierarchy effect can mess with us again if we're not paying attention.

It's sometimes difficult to stay generous on this subject. Approvals processes often seem to be a poorly disguised power trip. Often the questions asked by the appointed overlords fall into the basket of trying to add value where there is none, often the delegated authority for very senior professional people is set oddly low, which gives rise to the need to go and ask, "Please sir, can I have some more." Just for some context here, Charles Handy, when working in a senior position at Shell, used to have a sign off authority of \$50, at a time when he oversaw millions' worth of work!

It seems that the original intent has again been lost, and what is left is something that does not serve the organisation well. In the origin story above, sending the approval 8 rungs up the ladder will have cost multiple times the value of the change. The key here is what the approval is for. If it's permission to make a change, what's the reason for asking for permission? Let's just be sure that it's not just that you don't trust the staff? If it's checks and balances, why doesn't it happen at the appropriate level on the project? Is it an alternative view, is it to make sure that something strategic isn't missed? If so, be clear about that. Once the reason is clear, that filter can be passed over the things we're looking to have approved, there will likely be a bunch of stuff that can get binned, and we've now saved time, and provided some agency and responsibility to some smart people for doing the right thing.

## Shades of BMT

- If you think you are in a fix, feeling threatened and uncertain, call for back-up.
- If you set the bar too high, then people will just duck under it.
- You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it read a book.
- If you put someone in a place where they must lie, they will probably lie.
- Progress is achieved with traction. The foot on the floor will get the wheels to spin, but there's no forward motion. Traction first, progress second.
- The problem with training is the honesty of what gets said in the training room probably stays in the training room.

# Just Going With The Flow

By Howard Lees

I spoke to someone last week who is going for an interview. As part of the interview, he has to do an 'in tray' exercise. I couldn't resist saying, "Where's the interview, 1965?" On reflection, in the 1960's organisations operated via face-to-face conversations, movement of bits of paper and latterly, the use of the telephone. We were able to construct some fairly complex projects without the use of any of today's advanced communication technologies. They were different times for sure; not better, not worse, just different. However, I don't remember ever feeling that people's strong feelings of uncertainty was ever at today's current all-time high.

Most people derive their reinforcement from being in control of what they do and when they do it. I don't meet many folks who say to me, "On weekends I just sit in my living room wondering what I should be doing." Some workplaces, especially for knowledge workers, are becoming more and more controlled from above. Others are moving dramatically in the opposite direction.

I have witnessed a couple of workplaces at each end of the spectrum lately and the differences were astonishing. On the more 'new and enlightened' front, the knowledge workers were not constrained in any way. There were no set hours of work, there were no visible signs of corporate control, desks/workspaces were set out in teams, some based on product, some based on task, some based around a particular client. You could breathe the environment when you walked in, people were interested and interesting.

These self-regulating workers are the same types of humans that populate the more Dickensian modern workplaces, but they got lucky or went looking for a positive workplace. It's out there, it can be found, perhaps you have already created it. All it takes is a little energy and a dab of inspiration.