

Behavioural Digest

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Military Labels

By Nick Gordge

I thought the following might amuse you as much as it did me:

General Freiherr Kurt von Hammerstein-Equord (1878–1943) was Chief of the German High Command. He supervised the manual on the Military Unit Command (Truppenführung), which was published in October 1933.

This classification system is widely attributed to him, although it may be apocryphal:

“I divide my officers into four classes; the clever, the lazy, the industrious and the stupid.

Each officer possesses at least two of these qualities. Those who are clever and industrious I appoint to the General Staff.

Use can be made in certain circumstances of those who are stupid and lazy.

The man who is clever and lazy qualifies for the highest command. He has the requisite nerves and the mental clarity to deal with all situations.

But whoever is stupid and industrious must be got rid of, for he is just too dangerous.”



Processes

By M. Ninkasi

Process, in and of itself, is very useful. It is, for a lot of situations, absolutely essential. A process can provide a roadmap for people to achieve their goals, and it can ensure that people carry out dangerous tasks knowing how to do so safely. In other situations processes can stymie creativity, kill high performance, and at its worst can result in genuine suffering because, “Sorry I have to do this, I’m just following the process.”

Getting rid of a process that is working well is silly, just as putting more process in place to fix a problem that wasn’t driven from process in the first place is silly. All over the world there are companies attempting to ‘fix’ a process by putting a new one in place, when the process wasn’t ever the problem. No process in the world will work well if there are barriers in the way of following it. Replacing a process without fixing any underlying issues is nothing more than a fool’s errand.

Automated Reasoning - The Early Years?

By Howard Lees

I suspect we are sleepwalking into a new era where we belatedly discover we have been algorithmed into a convenient stereotype and have in some way suffered some kind of loss because of it.

Life these days is framed in our use of various apps; we are using them and - I suspect - they are using us. It may have got silly already for all I know. Going forward, I am not sure I want to be guided or judged by a machine. It’s hard enough being judged by other humans!



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The Power Of Nothing

By Lynn Dunlop

I recently listened to a podcast that offered tips to parents whose toddlers had begun to bite. The presenter noted that the biting behaviour was likely to result in one of three things: attention; access (to food/toys); or avoidance (avoiding having to clear up toys, for example). The parent's job was to figure out which of these outcomes the behaviour was aimed at receiving, and then make sure the child simply didn't get that reinforcer.

Sounds pretty simple, right? The hard part is figuring out what the child wants? No. The hard part is what to do next. Because the most reinforcing thing for a care-giver is to act to stop that behaviour. They might try to explain that biting is naughty, or maybe put the child in a 'time out'. But if the child is looking for attention, an explanation gives them exactly the reinforcement they were seeking. If the child was avoiding clearing up toys, a 'time out' gives them exactly that avoidance. So what to do instead?

The answer is 'nothing'. No attention, no access, no avoidance. Nothing. Ignore that dysfunctional behaviour. Later, teach the child how to ask for what they need/want in other ways so they know what to do instead, but in the moment the ideal strategy is to do nothing at all.

The lesson for me is that the same behavioural rules apply when we're adults. When we are in responsible roles at work and observe a patently dysfunctional behaviour, most often the best thing to do in the moment is nothing. It feels wrong. But if the behaviour is a one-off, it won't matter. And if it's a pattern, the most constructive thing isn't to tell the person to stop. It's to take time to understand the source of the behaviour (in adults, it's most commonly attention or avoidance) and then work on reinforcing an alternative behaviour instead so they don't have to resort to the dysfunction. Changing the environment this way means we're not delivering punishers, which tend to trigger all sorts of unpredictable new dysfunctions of their own!

This Might Not Be What It Screams!

By Dr Richard Kazbour

The Fundamental Attribution Error is a psychological concept that describes our tendency to attribute the actions (and at times failures) of people to "who they are" internally, rather than considering the environment's influence on their decisions.

Picture this: A 4-year-old is screaming and throwing objects off of the shelves at the grocery store. His dad hands him the toy that started the episode and the boy stops. One explanation for the boy's egregious behavior is quite simple - he's a brat. If we left it at that, however, our attribution of the problem also means the tantrum is the boy's fault. See any problems with this logic?

The Middle Manager Quandary

By Howard Lees

A couple of struggling organisations I read about this last month both had the same exact paradox. A big problem had been uncovered at the top too late to save each organisation. Both will now either go bankrupt, or survive in a completely different format. Were their problems widely known before they blew up? Yes! Was it a big surprise to the boards of directors when things were uncovered? Yes! How can that happen?

Well, in both cases the middle managers who had the information early enough to solve their problems did not pass the information upwards for fear of a bad response from the directors. This is the middle manager quandary. The directors had not set up a 'psychologically safe' environment for the smooth transfer of information up and down the organisation. One could very cruelly say that the middle managers perpetrated a fraud by not reporting the bad news upward, BUT the reason they held off was that they had been conditioned over time to avoid a bad response; they feared punishment. If the boards of directors had received the information in a timely fashion, they could well have saved their companies. It's the most ironic of self fulfilling prophecies.

Shades of BMT

- "To predict the behaviour of ordinary people in advance, you only have to assume that they will always try to escape a disagreeable situation with the smallest possible expenditure of intelligence"— Friedrich Nietzsche
- "Behaviour is what drives performance. Personality is not the issue." – Robin Stuart-Kotze
- "I am always ready to learn although I do not always like being taught" – Winston Churchill