

Safety In Action Conference 2009

Learning Process Model and Techniques – for Safety Education, Training, Teaching

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1 Abstract

This paper presents the findings of clinical research focusing on behaviour, communication, motivation and conflict solving. Put into occupational life the outcomes of this research allow for early identification of warning signals indicating that someone is diverting from being cooperative, supportive, safe working into becoming a liability to themselves, to others and to an organisation. The findings allow for appropriate intervention and bringing a team member, manager, staff, family member back into team friendly, cooperative, motivated, safe working and productive mode.

2 Introduction

2.1 Are you familiar with behaviours such as these?

- A supervisor attacking staff for not doing things the way they were told? For not thinking clearly, for being 'stupid'? 'Why the hell do you not understand how this should be done? Can't you think?'
- A manager focussing on what's wrong, even if it is only a minor thing? A manager who does not acknowledge the good work, being stuck in his grumpiness? You might even hear this from this person: 'If you are not with me, you are against me!'
- A staff member making silly mistakes repeatedly? This person attracts criticism and puts himself (or herself) down in front of others ('It's always me being stupid, my mistake again!')
- A staff member withdrawing, not communicating anymore, or perhaps starting up several projects but getting nowhere with any of them?
- A staff member trying to get others to do the job for them? Or obviously having problems in understanding the issue, not grasping it? Or becoming a pain in the neck by constantly responding with that famous 'Yes, but...?'
- A manager who doesn't support his staff and expects you or others to fend for themselves? 'There is no free lunch around here!' or: 'Look, if it's too hot in the kitchen, get out!'

Of course, every day we experience such behaviours with others. Sometimes they are really obvious and intense; other times only subtle. And what about yourself? Do you find yourself at times in such situations?

2.2 How do we usually react when we come up against such behaviour?

Often we may counter-attack, counter-blame or look away and ignore it. Based on your experience, does this help the situation? Does it contribute to effective communication, to productivity or to well being? No, it doesn't. Quite the opposite is true: our reactions very often worsen the situation. Although we might feel that we have made a point, we actually do not improve the relationship with that person. In fact, we have just contributed to the deterioration of the relationship. We made communication even tougher for the future. We haven't motivated the other person at all. We have just got their back up.

In a nutshell: once we start to display such behaviour, especially when attacking, blaming others or withdrawing we become a liability to ourselves, to other people, to the process of business and to the organisation. Other staff members are not motivated to communicate with us and to cooperate, to commit themselves and to contribute. Isolated, stressed, detached and unmotivated, we may go over the top, start to take risks, take short cuts, bend rules and possibly break bones.

Needless to say that the very same thing is true for our family and friends – dealing with our partner, children and people who are important to us.

2.3 What are the consequences at work?

Research shows that the results are absenteeism, Mondayitis, presenteeism, unfounded sick leave, and other unproductive, risky behaviours. For example, in the aviation industry having to deal with the odd unruly passenger attacking, blaming or insulting staff at check-in counters or flight attendants onboard has led to major losses in working days. Airline staff just got fed up with such behaviour and stayed away from their job. That's why the airline industry has introduced harsh rules for passengers to ensure they comply with cabin crew's orders. For many decades now it has been an established fact in aviation that such behaviour onboard of an aircraft can be extremely dangerous. Aviation regulators around the world – under the global guidance of ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organisation, a body of the UN) – have mandated human factors training¹ for cockpit and cabin crew with a strong focus on communication, motivation, stress & emergency management and workload distribution.

In offices and factories in other sectors all around the world, staff work in teams. Such behaviours do not encourage teamwork. The other members of the team start complaining about their so-called colleague. The unity of the group is broken. Absenteeism may be the convenient explanation but what are the real underlying causes? Absenteeism simply means loss of productivity for the business.

2.4 Where failure is not an option:

In high risk industries, behaviours are absolutely critical. NASA acknowledged the importance of understanding the link between personality traits and behaviour as early as 1978². They were aware that if an astronaut gets under pressure, any distraction could have a disastrous impact on the mission. There is no time-out option out there in space. No time for a break or to apply a well-proven trial-and-error method. If someone goes outside their comfort zone and slips into any of the described distress modes, they and other crew members need to know what such behaviour means. They must know what's going on and what they can do about it. By stopping (someone) being pushed even deeper into conflict and distress they avoid even more dire consequences. Here is the good news: such behaviours are highly predictable and we can learn about them. We can teach people how they can identify what is going on and – more importantly – how to intervene.

NASA and other companies or organisations have learned that simply attending a leadership course does not change much. There is a need for a fundamental understanding of how people 'tick' – in all aspects – before anyone should be allowed to lead others. Communication³ and motivation are vital factors of an effective relationship.

3 The solutions – recognising behaviour

Here is the good news: the scientific evidence, the tools, the programme and the training cycle are out there ready for implementation. At the end the effect of such change has more to do with changing a corporate culture into a safety culture where everybody buys in.

3.1 Some background

Clinical research in behavioural psychology has shown that dysfunctional behaviours as described previously are entirely predictable. They follow a pattern that kicks in again and again. And they typically provoke responses that rather aggravate rather than defuse the situation.

If a person displays any of these behaviours, it needs to be recognised as a call for help by that person, as that person is clearly in distress. One or more of his or her inner psychological needs have not been met positively. More importantly, research has shown that in this situation we switch to a mode where we start to get the needs met, but negatively, so that the situation just gets worse.

Unfortunately, we tend to label a person displaying such behaviour with all kinds of tags: 'what a loser!', 'how stupid is that?', 'useless guy', 'idiot' etc. We need to accept that behaviour under stress does not have anything to do at all with the person as such but is all about the stress the person is experiencing.

If we can understand this, handling those situations will become much easier. We all have our needs that we are striving to get met positively, day and night, in our work and personal lives.

3.2 The human operating system model:



The diagram consists of two stacked rectangular boxes. The top box is light green and contains the text "application software". The bottom box is orange and contains the text "human operating system".

People function a bit like a computer. We all have application software packages (knowledge, skills, experience) making use of a human operating system. These are made up of what we have inherited, what we have experienced from our mother during the nine months we were carried around in the womb, and during our first five to seven years of our life.



The diagram shows a light green box with three overlapping circles on the left side. Below it is an orange box with the text "human operating system".

On our application level we accumulate knowledge, skills and experience. The older we get and the more we use this application software the more experienced we get.



The diagram shows a light green box with three overlapping circles on the left side and a red arrow pointing upwards from the center. Below it is an orange box with the text "human operating system".

Sometimes in life we get into a situation where old stuff from within our human operating system starts to fire up, to interfere with what's going on at the application level. That's when we do things that do not fit any more with best industry practice as learned and applied previously very reliably.



The diagram shows a light green box with three overlapping circles on the left side and a large red arrow pointing upwards from the center. Below it is an orange box with the text "human operating system".

It eventually takes over our thinking and doing in parts or fully and we seem to do things that are not making sense to the outside observer. We are motivated to do this by our inner psychological needs that become very powerful and overriding... (taking risks, cutting corners, road rage, domestic violence, attacking or blaming others, slipping into victim role...)

Example: experienced pilots – highly trained in technical and non-technical aspects – land much too far down the runway and as a consequence the aircraft overshoots the end of the runway. Note: the rules were clear, there were no technical problems, they have done this hundreds of times before in reality and in simulators and they were familiar with the airport. But the fascination of the goal, 'go-homeitis', the determination to land at the destination took over. The big picture was lost and best industry practice was totally ignored and abandoned. Miraculously nobody was killed, but the aircraft was a total loss.

3.3 The 'I am OK – You are OK' model:

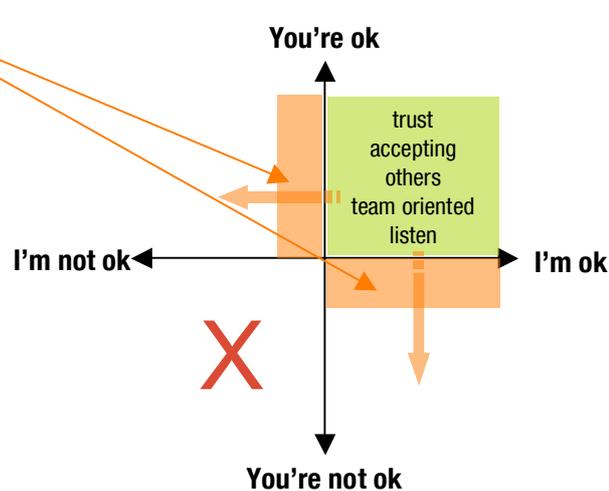


We use a simple but compelling model to explain what happens. It looks at two dimensions as depicted above: the 'I am ok', 'I am not ok' dimension and the 'You are ok', 'You are not ok' dimension.

As long as we can stay in the 'I'm ok – You're ok' quadrant of the model we are team-friendly, cooperative, supportive and non-judgemental. The moment we get under stress we start to leave this quadrant and we either move into the 'I am ok / You are not ok' quadrant and we start picking on others or we move into the 'You are ok / I am not ok' quadrant and pick on ourselves. Neither of those areas are for co-operation, positivity or support. That's when we start to become a problem, a liability to ourselves and to others. This is when we start to systematically disrupt our own life and those of others. This is when we start cutting corners because we know better, or where we frustrate others because we expect them to be as committed as we are. Or we expect others to fend for themselves, and we do not support them.

As mentioned earlier, if someone drifts outside the "green zone" of 'I am ok / You are ok', there is a tendency that others – by their reactions to the behaviour – drive this person even further away from the "green zone". People usually counterattack, counter-blame or simply look away and turn as blind eye, all of which doesn't help the person to feel that they are ok.

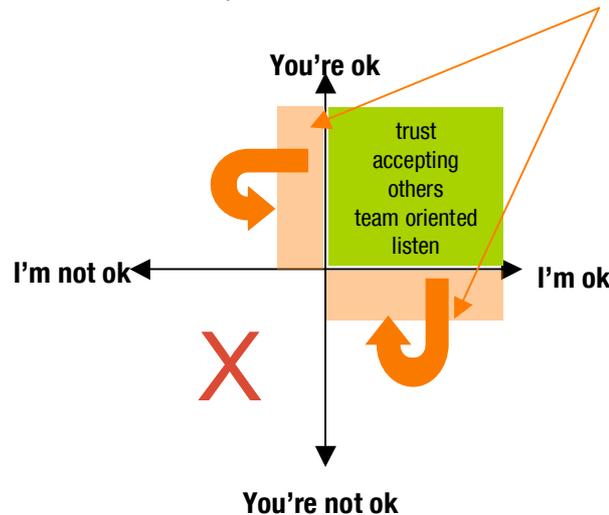
Also very interesting: as someone drifts outside the green zone, this person is going to cross a **border area of highly predictable, disruptive behaviour – early warning signals!**



Wouldn't it be great to be able to help that person to quickly come back into the green zone, instead of increasing the pressure on that person? Wouldn't it be great to be able to bring them back to meaningful communication, motivation, cooperation and coordination again?

It is as simple as this...

- understanding that certain behaviours are warning signals to show that the person is under stress,
- recognising that these warning signals have nothing to do with me, but rather with that person and that I don't need to take things personally, and
- knowing that I have a method at my fingertips to help the person **to do the U-turn** and come back into the "green zone", the 'I am ok / You are ok' quadrant!



3.4 What is it that we want to achieve?

In order to be able to adequately intervene we need to have a better understanding of how we function. Once we understand the relationship between observable behaviour and personality we are much better equipped to observe, identify and understand behaviour and to react in a way that will help people under stress. Once we are able to put observable behaviour into the context of personality traits and needs, we have the tools to get someone back into the 'I am ok / You are ok' attitude.

3.5 The behaviour observation model:

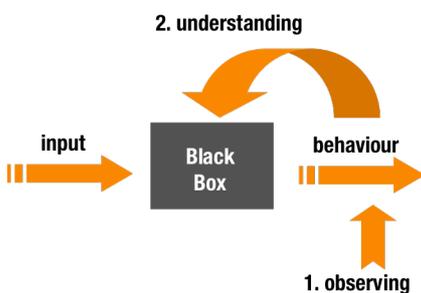
The ultimate goal of psychology is to understand how a human being ticks, and why. Behavioural psychology works on the basis that systematic analysis of behaviour offers insights into the functioning of the human being, and why humans behave the way you can observe.

This sequence of diagrams explains this process in a simplified way:



The terms widely used are: input, Blackbox and output. With input we mean all outside factors that influence the human being.

Blackbox means the personality as such, and output means the objectively observable behaviour.



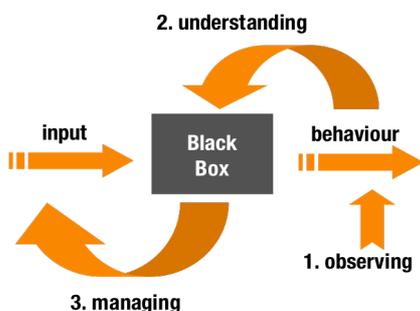
Step 1: Observing behaviour

Systematic analysis of behaviour starts with step 1: observing by listening to words and tones and looking for gestures, postures and facial expressions.

Step 2: Understanding the Blackbox

Once we have identified certain behavioural aspects we are able to relate to very specific personality traits, to characteristics and dynamics of a personality.

That in turn allows us to understand how a person functions, and we are able to predict what's going to happen next.



Step 3: Managing input

Once we understand how the Blackbox (person) functions we are able to much better manage our inputs in order to motivate, to win cooperation and to build rapport quickly and effectively.

How do we 'manage' this? It's not rocket science: by communicating the right way and meeting people's needs.

3.6 Identifying stress mechanisms:

For example, by observing attacking behaviour ('why the hell didn't you do what you have been told?') we are able to decode specific stress elements and psychological needs of the attacking person.

Being aware of this process we are less likely to respond with a counterattack or justification. We rather communicate the right way to motivate better behaviour.

Six typical stress mechanisms – highly predictable in their appearance – have been identified by Dr Taibi Kahler and described in detail in his 'Process Communication Model[®]' (PCM).

The six stress mechanisms correlate with specific communication styles that are also highly predictable.

The model had been developed in the early 70s in clinical research and in 1977 it was awarded with the Eric Berne Memorial Award.

PCM training has demonstrated a clear change of behaviours in many countries and societies right around the globe and in a wide range of industries and government agencies. It is used in recruitment, leadership and team training and in training of operational staff in risk and high-risk environment at staff and at management levels.

As a professional in the OH&S field you can use these specific communication styles to get onto the same wavelength when communicating with managers, staff, customers or government officials. So you won't just talk but communicate in an effective and productive way: motivating and winning cooperation for safe work practices through effective communication⁴.

Based on this model managers and staff will be able to develop new self-management skills, communication skills and stress management skills that will support safe work practice, team performance and achieving goals in a different and effective way.

This method and programme leads to:

- Ability to understand other people's behaviours,
- Predict and identify the onset of behavioural failure patterns,
- Intervene constructively through communication,
- Detect and correct miscommunication before it contributes to the incident or accident,
- Respond quickly to situations and defuse stress or amplify safety messages,
- Invite people on the way to making a U-turn away from potential harm back into safe behaviour,
- Find out quickly why something has happened.

4 Summary

4.1 In a nutshell:

This method of applied psychology puts behaviour, communication and motivation into a very practical, hands-on context without using psychological jargon.

Next time you are at the receiving end of an attack, if somebody blames you or if you just find it difficult to reach somebody who is withdrawing, stop and say to yourself: 'I see stress. They don't mean me! It's not personal. What do I need to do to communicate with them in a way that I can reach them?'

Try different things and see what works: provide information, be directive, show consideration, give space.

5 References

¹ International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), Flight Safety and Human Factors Programme: www.icao.int/anb/humanfactors/Documents.html

² McGuire, Terence, M.D., 'Astronauts, Reflections on Current Selection Methodology, Astronaut Personality, and the Space Station': www.taibikahlerassociates.com/research.html

³ Gottlieb Daimler-And Karl Benz-Foundation: www.daimler-benz-stiftung.de/home/discussion_research/collegia/completed_collegia/highrisk/all/white_book.pdf

⁴ Wilan, Ken Howard, "Communicating Success", *The Scientist*, 21:1:68, January 2007, www.the-scientist.com/article/display/38045/.