



## **Businesses told to take their eye off the bull**

### *How “bullshit” management speak is distracting organisations from their core business*

If you regularly sit in meetings and think ‘This is bullshit’, you may not be alone. The language of modern organisations is now so mired in management jargon that much of it is bullshit, according to a leading academic.

In a new paper titled, *‘Shooting the shit: The role of bullshit in organisations’*, Professor Andre Spicer of Cass Business School claims that a preoccupation with bullshit is leading organisations to neglect their core business and alienate employees.

“Organisational life is largely about the creation, circulation and consumption of talk and text – much of which is now bullshit. By this I mean a great portion of what is spoken and written in organisational settings bears scant regard for the truth. This is crowding out the primary purposes of firms, demoralising employees and undermining the trust of broader stakeholders,” he explains.

#### **Mundane jobs**

According to Professor Spicer, the post-industrial economy has left “office dwellers” under-employed in mundane jobs which have little social purpose or value. This void has been filled with organisational bullshit. “Indulging in the dark arts of bullshit is a way of sidestepping the meaningless that stalks life in the immaterial workplace. This typically involves using talk and text that is highly ambiguous, long-winded and fleeting,” he says.

“Think of corporate strategy. Although it is treated with great reverence, it is often fleeting, interchangeable, relatively meaningless and very ineffective. Similar things can be said about statements of organisational values which often jumble together a whole set of nice sounding generic worlds like ‘quality’, ‘service’ and ‘value’.”

#### **Fatal distraction**

Professor Spicer believes that bullshit has become so prevalent that it threatens to become a fatal distraction for organisations. “When a firm gets hooked on bullshit, a significant amount of the organisation’s effort becomes focused on the production, circulation and consumption of bullshit.

“Managers and employees, for example, will need to spend large chunks of their day attending meetings or implementing change programmes linked with bullshit. This might be tenable for a short period of time but when processing bullshit linked to change becomes a routine part of organisational life, it leads to a systematic distraction from the primary task.”

According to Professor Spicer, bullshit can also trigger a deep sense of affront among employees. “If members of an organisation are continually subjected to bullshit, they are likely to rapidly stop taking much of it particularly seriously. Any new direction or programme is likely to be cynically treated as just another fad.”

He says this leads many employees to experience a sense of violation and harm to their occupational identity, and by implication, themselves. “Many professionals who have been subjected to the discursive vagaries of management fads often experience them as being an assault on their identities as skilled and able professionals,” he explains.

Bullshit can also undermine the trust of a range of stakeholders in organisations, leaving behind brittle relationships with customers and investors. “If stakeholders continue to be confronted with an on-going parade of what appears to be utterly baseless talk, it is likely they are going to doubt the authenticity, ability and consistency of the organisation they are dealing with... Consequently, organisations mired in bullshit are often the ones that become increasingly brittle, unstable and liable to be blown apart by small changes in the environment.”

### **Cut the crap – but not all of it**

But surprisingly, Professor Spicer suggests that bullshit in small doses could actually be beneficial, helping to boost the image and confidence of organisations.

Bullshit allows individuals to build up an appealing image often in the absence of other more substantive resources such as knowledge and abilities. He highlights a study of a large management consultancy where employees used bullshit to impress clients, maintaining a “them and us” division over the people buying their services.

Bullshit is used by employees as a confidence trick to impress and convince themselves. For example, middle managers often use bullshit to build a convincing narrative about who they are in what is often a precarious position. “Liberal doses of bullshit help anxious middle managers to perform a confidence trick and convince themselves they are useful and worthwhile members of the organisation,” explains Professor Spicer.

Bullshit is also frequently used by organisations to build their broader legitimacy. “Organisations often adopt policies and practices not because they are particularly effective or efficient, but because they are considered to be broadly socially acceptable,” he says. “For instance, many firms adopt ‘total management’ practices not because it helps to make their product but because it appeals to a wider set of stakeholder by appealing to be a good organisation.”

### **ENDS/**

#### **What is bullshit?**

Bullshit is not simply a false statement – a claim that is meant to deceive or to violate the truth. Rather, bullshit is language that has two distinctive characteristics: (1) it is articulated without concern for the criteria of the truth and (2) the bullshitter wilfully articulates it to pursue their own purposes and interests.

#### **How to spot bullshit**

**Bullshit is vague** - the skilled bullshitter relies on significant amounts of strategic ambiguity. This entails using words or concepts that are difficult or impossible to pin down. Very broad words like ‘excellence’, ‘quality’ and ‘innovation’ are excellent examples of strategic ambiguity. They are words that could mean almost anything to anybody and allow a bullshitter to escape from too much interrogation.

**Bullshit is long-winded** - this makes it harder to pin down what the core concepts actually are. By over-packing speech and writing, it is difficult to discern what is important and what is not. Concepts that should be subjected to further interrogation are skirted over without any further inquiry. Discourses of leadership, for example, are over-packed with a whole series of associations, ideas and other concepts.

**Bullshit is slippery** - this involves avoiding any clear commitment to a particular discourse and continually shifting between different terms in a vague and often baseless fashion. By keeping discourse shifting and moving, it is possible for the bullshitter to avoid attaching themselves to a

particular position which they might be asked deeper questions about. For instance, many corporate strategies are typically made up of a set of rapidly shifting trends, ideas and management fashions. This makes it difficult to subject to any kind of critical scrutiny.

**Bullshit is creative** - bullshitting is hard work. To bullshit, most people need a continued supply of discursive resources. Fortunately, there is a whole industry of consultants, gurus and other managerial idea workers who are charged with creating and circulating management fads and fashions. This gives potential adopters a stock of ideas and discourses that they can use in their day-to-day acts of bullshit mongering.

### **How organisations can contain bullshit**

Organisations need low levels of bullshit, but only in strictly confined places where they can experiment with ideas. Here's how organisations can contain bullshit.

- **Straight-talking** – cut the jargon, especially buzzwords, and explain ideas in straight forward language. Use short statements, for example, in place of glossy PowerPoint presentations.
- **Test the logic** – apply basic tests of logic to statements and ideas. Does the reasoning follow? Is the argument expressed in its simplest and most logical form?
- **Test the evidence** – is there evidence for whether an idea has succeeded or failed in the past, not just here but in other places. Checking the scientific evidence base for a new idea is also a good idea.
- **Devil's advocate** – have someone argue against the idea – perhaps even the person who is putting it forward.

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