Business bullshit

Career fertilizer or hazardous substance?

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Much of the language used in corporations is meaningless. What’s more, it is meaningless by design. Bullshit can be profoundly dangerous and make people despair – but it can also help them make their way in the world, reports André Spicer.

Kroned

A young man wearing a tuxedo walks across a ballroom. Around him are traces of festivities which have run their course: balloons, empty glasses, confetti. On 1 January 1984, this image appeared throughout the US. Next to it were the words: ‘The Party’s Over’. This was advertisement taken out by AT&T, the largest public utility in the US at the time. On this New Year’s Day, AT&T had been broken up. All its subsidiaries faced a new world where a cosy monopoly was replaced by the rigours of competition.

One of the subsidiaries facing this new competitive environment was Pacific Bell. No longer did it hold a virtual monopoly over California’s telephone infrastructure. The management team was under pressure to overhaul the company. Pacific Bell executives decided it was not just their balance sheet that needed an overhaul – their employees needed to get overhauled as well. To do this, the company employed a well-known organizational development specialist called Charles Krone. Mr Krone set about designing a management training programme which promised to transform the way people thought, acted and talked. By passing through this training course, senior managers hoped that their underlings would be elevated to new levels of consciousness and their company would be unleashed to compete in this new world.

The training programme Mr Krone devised contained many of the well-worn standards you would expect. But this vanilla management training was packaged in a rather bizarre wrapper: the thought of a 20th century Russian mystic named George Gurdjieff.

According to Gurdjieff, most of us spend our days mired in ‘waking sleep’. We
automatically respond and don’t reach ‘higher states of consciousness’. To break free from this torpor we need to engage in what Gurdjieff called ‘the work’. The focus of ‘the work’ is one’s own self. Through his self-work of undermining ingrained habits of thinking, Gurdjieff claimed it was possible to liberate your own inner potential and see profound truths.

Originally, Gurdjieff’s ideas appealed to artists, intellectuals and free thinkers. People like the writer Katherine Mansfield, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright and the psychonaut Timothy Leary were all influenced by his ideas. By the 1980s, Gurdjieff’s mystical ideas had found a resonance in the rather strange setting of a large Californian utilities company. All 70,000 employees of Pacific Bell were to be helped along a journey to a higher state of consciousness with the aid of management training underpinned by Gurdjieff’s ideas.

In a programme that came to be known as ‘Kroning’, employees were taken through ten two-day sessions where about seventy people would come together to be instructed about new concepts. After going through the programme, employees had an impressive new vocabulary, which came to be known as ‘Kronese’. They talked about ‘alignment’, ‘end-state visions’, ‘paths forward’, ‘purposefulness’ and ‘intentionality’. This new vocabulary was presumably designed to shake employees awake from their bureaucratic doze, and open their eyes to a new higher-level consciousness.

There were some unfortunate side-effects of Kroning. To start with, it became almost impossible for outsiders to understand what was going on in the company. One former employee pointed out that she could ‘remember periodically having outsiders in a meeting and they absolutely could not follow a meeting held in Krone’. The new language ‘led to a lot more meetings. Everything took twice as long’. One employee speculated that ‘if the energy that had been put into Krone had been put into the business at hand, we all would have gotten a lot more done.’

Although Kroning was packaged in New-Age language of psychic liberation, it was backed by all the threats of an authoritarian corporation. Many employees felt like they were under undue pressure to buy into Kroning. For instance, one manager was summoned to her superior’s office after a team member walked out of a Kroning session. She was asked to ‘force out or retire’ the rebellious employee. Another employee explained how ‘it was made clear that any opposition to the training or any complaints would affect your future. If you didn’t go along, you were made to look stupid or threatened’. You had to wake up, or else!

Kroning did not come cheap. The programme cost $40 million in 1987 alone. This high price tag, in conjunction with public concerns about the authoritarian nature of the programme and the rather strange New-Age tone, prompted California’s Public Utility Commission to undertake an inquiry into the leadership development programme. They concluded that the programme had many good basic features, but that it was too expensive. As a result, Pacific Bell called a halt to Kroning, and introduced more traditional management development techniques.

Kroning may seem to be one of the many examples of costly and ill-calculated misadventures which are so common in corporate life. Although it seems to have been
largely forgotten, its legacy lives on today in offices around the world. If we return to the kind of language which seemed so strange to employees at Pacific Bell, we notice it seems all too familiar today. ‘Alignment’, ‘paths forward’, ‘end state visions’ and ‘purposefulness’ seemed like class-A corporate gobbledygook in 1987. Kronese sounds positively sensible when compared to today’s corporate jargon like ‘ideation’, ‘imagineering’, ‘issue scanning’, ‘inboxing’ and ‘impactfulness’. Although Kroning may have been killed off, management speak has lived on.

But a second hidden legacy of Kroning can be found in offices around the world. If you look carefully in the pastel-coloured cubicles or forlorn staff notice boards of any workplace, you are likely to find something which is a memento to the deep psychological wounds of being Kroned. Among the yellowing safety notices and out-of-date advertising for fundraisers you are likely to find a cartoon featuring a schlumpy engineer called Dilbert and his evil boss called Dogbert. Seemingly drawn using an office computer during the meaningless hours spent at work, these cartoons capture in mercifully short scenes the repetitive tragedies of office life – pointless buzzwords, wasted restructuring exercises, repeated outsourcing and endemic insecurity. The universe depicted by the cartoon’s creator Scott Adams could be anywhere – the (non)action takes place in some unidentifiable (non)place on the edge of an office park in the middle of suburban nowhereville. These scenes of existential loathing in the office have proved wildly popular throughout the world. They say something about contemporary office life and its endless emptiness that no management book can capture. Where did this bleak vision of the workplace come from? What prompted Adams to sketch such a sad universe? The answer, of course, is office life itself. Adams experienced the cubicle life at first hand. Adams worked for Pacific Bell as a programmer when Kroning was in full swing. He did not leave the company until 1995.

**The industrialisation of bullshit production**

Pacific Bell and its Kronese may have seemed strange in 1987. Today, organizations around the world are awash with such management speak. Many millions readily use these terms to talk about everything from educating children to running nuclear power plants. It has become a kind of organisational lingua franca. These terms are swapped between middle managers as freemasons used secret handshakes to indicate their membership and status. This not so-secret language echoes across the cubicled landscape. It is the beige back-drop to modern office life. It seems to be everywhere and refer to everything. Yet it also has no origins, no history, no author, and no real believers.

Rolling out bleeding edge innovation; going forward by getting granular; taking a helicopter view to doing some blue-sky thinking; circling back before close of play; proactively pushing the envelope; reaching out to get on the radar; taking a bio-break to avoid boiling the ocean; doing the no-brainer by picking those low hanging fruit; synergising some sunsetting; having a cold-eyed review of core competencies; diarizing some drilling down; thought leaders touching base in town hall meetings; having your human capital do some horizon scanning; benchmarking best practice. Unintelligible to the uninitiated, but all too familiar to those who are unfortunate enough to be exposed to this kind of piffle every day of their working lives. This is business bullshit.

Bullshit is not the same thing as a lie. To lie, you need to have some respect for the truth.
When you lie you are trying to cover something up. The liars know they might be found out. They know there is a truth, and that they are on the wrong side of it. Bullshit is another matter altogether. According to the Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt, the bullshitter has ‘a lack of connection or concern for the truth’ and a remarkable ‘indifference to how things really are’. [1] Bullshitters do not lie. They don’t try to cover up the gap between what they are saying and how things really are. They are not concerned that their grand pronouncements might be illogical, unintelligible and downright baffling. All they care about is whether people will listen.

While liars can go to elaborate lengths to cover up, the bullshitter unashamedly puts it out there for everyone to see. And what’s more, bullshitters consider their handy-work to be an art form. Like any good artist, they long for an appreciative audience. The more accomplished bullshit artists expect applause, awards and significant recompense for their masterpieces.

With few growth prospects, many developed western economies have turned to bullshit as a source of prosperity. A cursory analysis of growing sectors in the West will suggest that those areas which have the greatest scope for bullshit production have also been the ones which have grown most rapidly. One study found that the ‘economy of persuasion’ (a more polite word for the bullshit economy) accounts for 25% of the US economy. [2] A recent update on this by the Australian Treasury revised the number upwards to 30%. [3]

So, who exactly are all these bullshitters? There are clearly some sectors from which the stench is overwhelming. In her analysis of the flood of bullshit in contemporary life, Laura Penny identifies some sectors which are particular bullshit-intensive. [4] One leading source of bullshit is politics. In this sector, well-honed skills at dodging anything that looks like a passing reference to the truth are exquisitely well developed. ‘Politicians are among the first people to tell you that politicians are full of shit’, Penny points out: ‘nobody seems more delighted to describe, in exquisite detail, just how corrupt government is than someone who happens to be running for it, or an elected member of it’. [5] Being so self-aware of their bullshit production, politicians seem to feel obliged to create a constant river of the stuff. A sample of some recent policy buzzwords, may give you a sense of this: ‘enterprise culture’, ‘the third way’, ‘connected government’, ‘the big society’, ‘open democracy, ‘nudging’. All these concepts were hotly contested and keenly coveted at the time. But all of them have been quickly flushed down the drain of history, only to be replaced by another relatively similar-sounding concept. During the past few years bullshit production in politics has undergone a step-change. Well known examples include Silvio Berlusconi’s trademark empty rhetoric, Vladimir Putin’s skilful reconstruction of the Russian media into a ‘hall of mirrors’, patently false claims used by those campaigning for Britain to leave the European Union, and Donald Trump’s empty rhetoric. [6] Many commentators have called this approach post-truth politics. [7] This is a politics based on the appeal to emotion rather than evidence and reason. It is a politics where experts are denigrated, and facts are seen as irrelevant. According to Laurie Penny, a central aspect of post-truth politics is bullshit. [8]

Then there are the advertising and public relations agencies who have made a multi-billion-dollar business out of what Penny describes as ‘making shit up’. Indeed, insiders quite readily acknowledge that their field is mired in bullshit. In advertising there is also an inbuilt acknowledgement that what is produced it bullshit. ‘Open happiness’ (Coke),
‘I’m lovin’ it’ (McDonalds), ‘Travel should take you places’ (Hilton), ‘Live your life’ (American Eagle Outfitters), ‘What can brown do for you’ (UPS), ‘Because I’m worth it’ (L’Oréal), and ‘Believe in Better’ (Sky). All these corporate slogans are masterful exercises of flagrant bullshit artistry.

Of course, there are many other fields which are mired in bullshit: There is media, with its pseudo-celebrities and empty chatter. There is sports, with its stunning empty commentary, masterful circumlocutions and ongoing stream of pointless statistics. There is the technology world with its fondness for claiming even the most idiotic incremental innovation is going to ‘change everything’. But if there is one sector which has mass produced the most impressive examples of bullshit today, it is likely to be the field of management.

**The bullshit business**

Some of this great river of talk and text endlessly flowing out of organizations is not bullshit. Some describes what is: details of customer orders, meeting times, a new acquisition or divestment, funding cuts, a minor success. These fragments of information may be boring, maddening or indifferent, but they are not bullshit. There are also occasional well-reasoned words people use to talk about what has been (a good explanation for why that product didn’t sell), or what could be (an interesting proposition about which market we should move into next). Sadly, well-reasoned words are rare in corporate life. And of course, there is a third type of words which most of us are all too familiar with. These are words which have absolutely no reference in reality at all and lack the most basic characteristics of logic. Instead they seem to be a set of randomly connected vague terms which are impossible to relate to reality. These unreal and unreasonable words are bullshit. They do not try to hide or disguise the truth. Rather, as Harry Frankfurt points out, they are created with no relationship to the truth. [9]

Like anything in the world of business, bullshit is actively traded. While the bullshit artist might prefer the bar, the bullshit merchant can find a lucrative trade in any large organisation. They are likely to thrive because large organisations are often gigantic machines for manufacturing, distributing, consuming bullshit. There are clearly specialists at each stage of the chain – senior executives and their various consultants create it, middle management spend their days distributing it, and of course it is left to the rest of the organisation to eat it up. Significant effort is put into this whole process – days, months, years, whole lifetimes are spent in the commerce of bullshit.

In pre-modern organizations, feedback about the relationship between what one said and what one did was swift, conclusive and brutal. Because people were closely connected with the production process, they could see when words drifted from reality. There tended to be a calcified language in each workplace which was handed down as tradition. With the rise of modern production methods and large bureaucratic systems, this traditional language of work withered away. It was replaced by the jargon of experts such as engineers. Their talk was distant from the salty tongue of the shop-floor. But it often had a connection with the realities of work and some basic logic.

As factories producing goods have been progressively dismantled in the West and outsourced or replaced with automation, large parts of western economies have been left
with little to do. Some sociologists worried this would lead to a world where people would be left with little work. [10] We would only work a few hours a day and then need to find something to do with the rest of our time. The great tragedy for many is that just the opposite seems to have happened: at the very point where work seemed to be withering away, we all became obsessed with work as the path to the good life. [11] To be a good citizen, you need to be a productive citizen. There is only one problem of course – there is little which needs to be produced. The great puzzle is this: how do we deal with all these work-obsessed people when we have few real opportunities to work? The answer of course became a job-creation scheme. But as David Graeber points out, it was a job creation scheme with a twist. [12] Instead of creating jobs which have some meaning and purpose, there has been the creation of a huge stock of what Graeber calls ‘bullshit jobs’. These are jobs which people working in them experience as ‘utterly meaningless, contributing nothing to the world’ and they ultimately think ‘should not exist’.

People working in bullshit jobs need to do something. And that something is usually the production, distribution and consumption of bullshit itself. These bullshit workers spend their days with varying degrees of enthusiasm working up, living with and often eating up the kind of managerial bullshit we have already mentioned. Just think about the average office worker’s day, and you begin to realise how mired in bullshit she is. She probably checks some mobile device a few minutes after waking up (the first of the 150 times people check their smartphones, on average, each day). Then she might sift through a few emails from insomniac colleagues. Then she hits the shower. Instantly her mind starts to wander to an upcoming strategy meeting and how best to frame an argument. On the way to work, she might read a report. Once at work, she is likely to sit through an endless stream of meetings, punctuated by frantic moments of checking emails, a lunch with colleagues, some downtime lurking on the internet. If it is Monday, then she is likely to being doing some internet shopping in the afternoon – one of the peak times for this activity. In the late afternoon, she may have to attend a training session on a new management technique. If she is lucky, she might find an hour to work on a document. On the way home she might check her emails once again. Then maybe some dinner, watch television while lurking on social media, and to top it all off take one last look at her emails before bed. This is the kind of day which so many office dwellers live. It is a day where we feel we get little or no work done. In a sense, we are right. All we do is largely process, distribute, and consume bullshit. We feel that we have been really productive when we have miraculously managed to carve out a small slice of time to actually produce a little bullshit ourselves (for instance, completing a report, a PowerPoint deck or one of the many other meaningless products of contemporary work life).

Apart from a few clearly deluded individuals, everyone in the world of the office knows that the words they spend their days working with are ultimately meaningless. After all, increasing numbers of office dwellers are well-educated people who have been taught many of the basics of critical thinking. Their years of education coupled with some degree of native intelligence means they know many of the words which flow through their in-boxes are ultimately baseless. But they are also smart enough to know that the bullshit they work with can do some positive things. By offering ourselves up as conduits in the great corporate sewerage system we buy ourselves a job. This gives us an income, some social standing, a social network and a vague sense we are doing something with our life. If we point-blank refused to work with corporate bullshit, then we would probably quickly
find ourselves to be emancipated from work, but also impoverished, socially maligned, deprived of friends (at least our current ones) and in need of some sense of purpose.

But we don’t just give ourselves over to handling shit for selfish reasons. When it comes to bullshit, we can be quite altruistic too. By making frequent use of bullshit, people can help to create at least a semblance of certainty in what are often highly uncertain organizational contexts. By using impressive sounding words, bullshitters can feel like they have some control. Bullshit gives us a way of putting all these big anxiety-inducing questions aside. It allows us to focus on comfortable, yet ultimately empty solutions. Many people might not know quite what they are doing. Bullshit can provide them with some ersatz certainty that what they are doing is the right thing – even if this is not quite the case.

The liberal use of bullshit can help organizations appear to look good in the eyes of others. By adopting empty buzzwords, the bullshitter is able to assure others they are doing the right thing. For instance, if everyone else in your industry is talking about big data, and you are not (even if that is for good reasons), then it is likely that you will be seen as ‘out of step’. When this happens, firms can be punished. In a study of the introduction of total quality management techniques, Barry Staw and Lisa Epstein found that firms which adopted the technique did not perform any better than firms which did not adopt the same techniques. [13] They did however tend to be rewarded in other ways – they were more admired by others in the industry, they were seen as more innovative, and others thought they had higher quality management. All this image enhancement had one economic impact: their CEOs’ pay went up.

As the sheer amount of time and resources devoted to producing, circulating and consuming bullshit increases, it leaves little room in an organization for much else. Members of an organization tend to compensate for this rather tragic situation in two ways. One tactic is to try to find time in other parts of their life when they are able to do the part of their job they think makes their work meaningful. This can often create a rather troubling situation where employees find their whole work day taken up with meetings and then they spend their evenings and weekends on their ‘real work’. The result can be a form of self-exploitation where employees take time off themselves just so they can do a good job. They do this not because they are forced to, but because they deeply care about the work they do. [14]

A second response, which is at once slightly more healthy but also more deeply troubling, is the cynical one. Instead of desperately trying to find time in the rest of their lives, many people simply give up and accept that their job is completely meaningless. They accept there is no ‘real work’ in their role – it is all just bullshit. Such resignation has its advantages: It can help individuals cope; It frees up some time in the rest of their life where they might be able to find meaning; It means they will not always be trapped in an endless war with bullshit which they cannot win. But these significant psychological gains have profound collective implications. As people give up fighting to find time and space to do the work they think is important and meaningful, these very tasks stop getting done.

As bullshit work takes over, and the core tasks of an organization begin to die off, the organization starts to be hollowed out. This can have tragic consequences. The lack of anything actually getting done can mean customers and other stakeholders gradually
realise the organization does not seem to be doing its core task at all, or if it is, it is being done poorly. As the organisation’s core tasks are neglected, people lose trust.

As consumers, we don’t go to a bank or a restaurant or a doctor for a large helping of business bullshit. We go there because we want a decent quality product or service at a commensurate price. As employees, we do not go to work in order to play around with the latest management buzzwords. We go there to use our skills and talents to contribute in some way to society and to be rewarded in return. As investors, we do not give our savings to companies to invest in endless strategy exercises. Rather, we would hope our money is invested in making organisation productive which will provide us with a reasonable rate of return. As citizens, we do not expect that organisations will come up will all the latest fads and fashions to impress us. What really interests us is whether that organisation contributes to our society by creating jobs, paying tax, and creating useful products or services. Sadly, the growth of business bullshit has stopped some our best organisations from understanding why they exist in the first place.

*This essay is based on the book Business Bullshit by André Spicer, published by Routledge (2017).*

**Footnotes**


4. Laura Penny, *Your call is important to us: The truth about bullshit*. (New York: Crown, 2010).

5. Ibid.


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