

How to Fight Bullshit at Work (and Keep Your Dignity and Job)

After getting lost in the conference hotel, I finally located the 'creativity workshop'. Joining the others, I sat cross-legged on the floor. Soon, an ageing hippie was on his feet. 'Just walk around the room and introduce yourself,' he said. 'But don't use words.' After a few minutes of people acting like demented mimes, the hippie stopped us. 'Now grab a mandala,' he said, pointing to a pile of what looked like pages from a mindfulness colouring-in book. 'And use those to bring your mandala to life,' he said pointing at a pile of magic markers. After 30 minutes of colouring, he told us to share our mandalas. A woman described how her red mandala represented her passionate nature. A man explained how his black mandala expressed the negative emotions haunting his life. A third person found words too constraining, so she danced about her mandala. Leaving the room after the session, a participant turned to me and quietly said: 'What a load of bullshit.'

All over the world, organisations encourage kooky activities unrelated to employees' work. I have attended workplace retreats where I learned beat-boxing and African drumming. I have heard about organisations that encourage employees to walk across hot coals, take military assault courses, and guide a raft down dangerous rapids. There are organisations that force their employees to stage a lingerie show, take part in a 'bush-tucker trial' by eating insects, and dress up in giant animal costumes to act out fairy tales.

My cynical fellow participant in the mandala-colouring workshop described it as 'bullshit'. She had chosen her words wisely. The philosopher Harry Frankfurt at Princeton

University defined bullshit as talk that has no relationship to the truth. Lying covers up the truth, while bullshit is empty, and bears no relationship to the truth.

The mandala workshop bore many of the tell-tale signs of bullshit. The session was empty of facts and full of abstractions. Participants skipped between buzzwords such as 'authenticity', 'self-actualisation' and 'creativity'. I found it impossible to attribute meaning to this empty talk. The harder I tried, the less sense it made. So, during the event, I politely played along.

After spending more than a decade studying business and organisations, I can assure you that my unheroic response is the norm. Most people are likely to follow my bad example, and stick to the script. There are many reasons for this, but politeness is an important one. Bullshit greases the wheels of sociability. Questioning bullshit can be a sure way to lose friends and alienate people. Even when we smell bullshit, we are willing to ignore it so we can avoid conflict and maintain a polite atmosphere. Our desire to keep social interaction going smoothly prevails over our commitment to speak the truth.

In a short aside in his [book](#) *On Bullshit* (2005), Frankfurt describes an interaction between the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and Fania Pascal, Wittgenstein's friend and Russian teacher. 'I had my tonsils out and was in Evelyn Nursing Home feeling sorry for myself,' Pascal wrote. 'Wittgenstein called. I croaked: "I feel just like a dog that has been run over."' Wittgenstein, apparently, was disgusted: 'You don't know what a dog that has been run over feels like.'

Wittgenstein's response seems not just odd, but rude. So why did the great philosopher do this? Frankfurt's answer is that throughout his life 'Wittgenstein devoted his philosophical energies largely to identifying and combatting what he


regarded as insidiously disruptive forms of “non-sense”.’ Wittgenstein is ‘disgusted’ by Pascal’s remark because ‘it is not germane to the enterprise of describing reality’. She is ‘not even concerned whether her statement is correct’. If we were to react like Wittgenstein whenever we were faced with bullshit, our lives would probably become very difficult indeed.

Instead of following Wittgenstein’s example, there are ways we can politely call bullshit. The first step is to calmly ask what the evidence says. This is likely to temper our interlocutors’ views, even if the results are inconclusive. The second step is to ask about how their idea would work. The psychologists Leonid Rozenblit and Frank Keil at Yale University [found](#) that when they asked subjects to tell them, on a scale of 1 to 7, how they would rate their knowledge about everyday objects such as toilets, most people would say about 4 or 5. But when asked to describe precisely how a toilet worked, they dropped the rating of their own toilet expertise to below 3. Asking over-confident bullshitters exactly how their idea might work is another way to slow them down. Finally, ask the bullshitter to clarify what he means. Often, bullshit artists rely on ‘zombie nouns’ such as ‘globalisation’, ‘facilitation’ and ‘optimisation’. Pushing beyond linguistic boondoggles helps everyone to see what is solid and what is clothed in ornamental talk.

Politely questioning a peer is one thing, but it is much trickier to call out the bullshit of junior colleagues. Decades of [research](#) has found that people listen to positive feedback and ignore negative feedback. But Frederik Anseel from King’s College, London has found that people are willing to listen when negatives are focused on the future. So instead of concentrating on the bullshit a junior might have created in the past, it is best to ask how it can be minimised in the future.

Calling out an underling’s piffle might be tough, but calling

bullshit on the boss is usually impossible. Yet we also know that organisations that encourage people to speak up tend to retain their staff, learn more, and perform better. So how can you question your superiors' bullshit without incurring their wrath? One [study](#) by Ethan Burris of the University of Texas at Austin provides some solutions. He found that it made a big difference how an employee went about posing the questions. 'Challenging' questions were met with punishment, while supportive questions received a fair hearing. So instead of bounding up to your boss and saying: 'I can't believe your bullshit,' it would be a better idea to point out: 'We might want to check what the evidence says, then tweak it a little to make it better.'

Next time you're faced with a bullshit attack, it might be tempting to politely zone out. But that only gives the bullshit artist time and space. Or you might be tempted to follow the example of Wittgenstein, and fight back. Sadly, bullshitters are often impervious to full-frontal attack. The most effective tactic in the war on empty talk seems to be to outflank the bullshitter by posing your questions as constructive tweaks, rather than refutations. That way, you might be able to clean up the mess from within, rather than raging from the outside. 

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