

The Creation of Dissonance

Our beliefs are profoundly important in terms of influencing behaviour. If we assume that leadership is about influencing a group of people in order to achieve objectives over time, then leadership must be about understanding beliefs and how they form, as well as understanding and challenging unhelpful beliefs.

One thing that is unavoidable when leading people effectively is creating dissonance. If you want to change a culture (a collection of beliefs), the fallout from dissonance is an occupational hazard. Dissonance is a natural response to an unexpected event or behaviour – a challenge to our beliefs – it may be a surprisingly pleasant or very unpleasant and stressful.

It can be positive, like a new manager setting expectations and providing feedback to a team that was never well-led. And it can be negative, for example, finding out that your role has changed without your knowledge or input. Dissonance can also be intended to be positive, but be experienced negatively, and vice versa. What we intend is often quite different to how another person experiences our behaviour.

If you've sent what you believe is a benign email and received an upset response in return, you will know that the response you expect is often not what you get back in practice.

It is futile to attempt to control reactions in others, although we can seek to influence – this is at the core of leadership. And while we can't "change" beliefs, we can seek to form new beliefs. These new beliefs are also experienced through our personal system of beliefs – we want to believe what we believe and will rail against a challenge to our belief systems. How do you actually achieve positive dissonance?

Let's look at some options in response to dissonance.

- To rationalise the event as a "once off"
- To deny its existence
- To form a new belief that accepts the event as a new pattern of behaviour

When attempting to create new beliefs about yourself, your team or the organisation you are working for, the third point above is the hardest to achieve. This makes leadership challenging and implies that if we choose to behave in a way that challenges a prevailing belief – for instance, "I'm going to start giving feedback to my team" – we need to do it consistently and persist. If we don't, the beliefs will snap back to where they were before, but this time with another even more damaging belief: "managers have tried to lead before, but have failed – no-one can lead us well".

Consider the example below of a General Manager informing her Council of the results of a recent government assessment.

A General Manager of a metropolitan Council calls an all-staff meeting. The results of a government assessment are in and the Council is not seen to be sustainable if it is run according to its current structure, size, asset base, and scope of services. The GM paints the picture by saying “we can’t continue on like this. The old ways will not be good enough. We will all need to change. That’s why I’m today announcing a review into everything we do – from how we manage our assets, to dealing with customers, to reviewing DAs. No-one is safe. I’m appointing a project team to review what we do and report back to me in 3 months’ time. I’d like you to all cooperate with the review.” The next day, the GM sends an all-staff email appointing the Director Corporate Affairs as Acting GM as she is going on holidays for 6 weeks.

What beliefs might the listeners form about the GM’s speech? Fair or unfair? Loving or unloving? What about her subsequent behaviour? How might your role and experience in the organisation influence your reaction?

Some in the organisation will already know this news is coming. Perhaps you are the Director of Corporate Services and you’ve been involved in the executive discussions about the proposal to the government and have correctly predicted your Council will not fare well. Or you might have just started in Council from a customer service role from another sector – to you the news is a shock. For this person, they will be processing dissonance. What happens next is crucial for the beliefs that will be forming.

Assuming the GM does end up going on leave and this news filters through to the Customer Service officer, how might they rationalise the speech that they experienced? If no other information makes its way through, what assumptions will be formed about the GM’s behaviour as a response to the dissonance that has been created? What other ways of handling the situation would give a different result?

The challenge of leadership is understanding these processes **before** acting so that your behaviour (through creating dissonance) leads to the **creation of positive beliefs** – in other words, a positive culture – about yourself, the people in the organisation or team and the organisation itself.

Reference

Systems Leadership, Creating Positive Organisations by Ian Macdonald, Catherine Burke and Karl Stewart; Gower 2006

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