

# Contagious Craziness, Spreading Sanity:

## *The upward (or downward) spiral of weird behavior in the workplace*

### **Case 1:** **The President: Force of Will**

In the late 1970s the president of a company I worked with asked that company's economists and financial forecasters to provide their future market predictions for the next decade. This was a capital intensive business with long lead times for equipment purchases, so a realistic appraisal of the likely future business environment was a pretty important thing. When the predictions arrived, they did not match what the president wanted to see.

Not at all.

It is not uncommon that people in positions of power are strong willed, opinionated individuals who are used to getting their own way. This president was no exception and his response to the figures presented was quite dramatic. After some blustering, shouting, and numerous derogatory remarks directed at the professional expertise of the financial forecasting group, he scratched out some numbers on a piece of paper and handed them over to the chief economist. *"These*

*are the numbers I want to see,"* he said, *"make these happen."*

There is no doubt that the will and the drive to do things is a very important attribute. Certainly, having a strong conviction that something **cannot** be done is usually a self-fulfilling prophecy. If people are truly convinced that something is not achievable, then they usually won't achieve it and if we argue for our limitations, we get to keep them. But sometimes things cannot be accomplished simply through force of will. Just because we really, really want something doesn't mean we will be able to get it. Even if we are the president of a major corporation.

### **Infectious behavior**

Capricious behavior, particularly on the part of powerful or influential people, can be infectious. When one person in an organizational system starts acting oddly, nearby people have two choices: to label the behavior as odd or to act as if it is normal.

If, for whatever reason, people act as if someone's weird actions are ok, they

themselves will start behaving weirdly. It is almost as if the odd behavior is catching. To compound the problem, we humans have built-in rationalizing capability that kicks in like a reflex when we act in an odd or unethical manner. This rationalization employs a thing called "cognitive dissonance" and allows us to continue to act in a weird way while simultaneously retaining the conviction that we are not acting in a weird way at all<sup>1</sup>.

### **Case 2:** **Project Managers Can-Do**

A friend of mine, who is a project manager at a large electronics company, described this behavior in the planning meetings he attends. The project managers reporting to the strong willed and forceful vice president in charge of their division almost compete with each other to promise things to the boss and pretend that they and their teams can do things that they really don't think they can do at all. The boss is the instigator. He puts enormous pressure on his people and browbeats them if they come up with numbers he doesn't like. When one manager

“caves” and agrees to something he (secretly and privately) doesn't think can be done, the others feel that they have to do so as well. The compliant managers then get praised by the VP which reinforces the behavior.

Privately, the managers bemoan their fate and wring their collective managerial hands over what their boss has forced them to commit to. But, until recently, they didn't change their behavior.

### **Case 3: The Construction Manager and the 1<sup>st</sup> Law of Behavior**

Years ago, I was coaching a (non-software) manager working in the construction industry. An affable and customer-centric person, his life was being made very difficult by his primary customer. The construction company built telephone switch centers and no matter what the manager promised and agreed to do for his customer, the customer always wanted more. In fact, it seemed like the more he gave the customer the more was wanted. The “customer is always right” approach did not seem to be working. After much discussion we decided that:

- The customer was a very strong-willed and decisive person.

- Asking for “more” is a perfectly appropriate thing for a customer to do, especially from the customer's perspective.
- The customer was asking for more **because** more was being provided.
- The customer seemed to be taking the view that if the construction manager agreed to do more, it meant he must be able to do it.
- As a strong-willed and very decisive person, the customer was expecting the manager to be equally strong-willed and decisive in deciding what could **not** be done.
- Therefore the customer would continue piling on until the project manager said “no”.

This could be called “Newton's First Law of Behavior”: **every behavior will continue until acted upon by another behavior.**

We could even extend this to Newton's Third Law and infer that the other behavior must be equal and opposite.

This meant that the project manager had to learn how to apply equal force in saying “no” to the extra work to balance the force the customer was applying in demanding the extra work.

### **Breaking the Cycle**

To stop this behavior, people and organizations must somehow get out of the cycle. For the construction manager it was to learn to be firm and to recognize that the customer is not best served by trying to do everything—the customer is best served by most effectively doing the most important things. This appropriate forcefulness meant that the customer had to truly appraise and decide what was in his best interest too and accordingly to act in a more rational manner.

For the software project managers dealing with the VP, my friend bravely decided to break the cycle himself. After working a lot on his project's estimation practice, he vigorously defended his estimates to the VP and simply refused to back down when pressured to reduce the projections. At one point, he even challenged the VP to fire him if necessary. The VP wisely chose not to do this and privately commented that it “took guts” to stand up and hold your ground like that.

Then an interesting thing started happening in this installation. Since there were dependencies operating between the division's projects, other project

managers started intentionally “hooking” their project estimates and plans to my friend’s project plan. Their reasoning was that since the boss doesn’t mess with **that** project and my project has hard dependencies on it, he won’t mess with my project too. As each project stabilized by being strongly coupled to more realistic projects and deadlines, everyone started calming down.

Inexorably, sanity spread across the organization as people started committing only to things they really believed they could do.

### **Infectious Insanity**

The opposite can be true too, as we saw in the case of the financial forecasting scenario. Confronted with the president’s demand to “...*make these numbers happen...*” the Ph.D economists returned to their financial forecasting groups and had to figure out how to ignore some factors or promote other factors to “make it happen”. One can imagine the chief economist’s assistant saying “...*but why would we ignore this factor, boss? We’d be crazy to do that! That’s not how it works!*” To which the chief economist might reply “*Well, that’s how it works if you want to keep your job...*”.

Then cognitive dissonance kicks in and people start rationalizing: “...*well maybe the factor really isn’t that important...*” and, starting from the top, everyone starts separating from reality.

In the business of software, this cycle results in significant and perennial over-commitments. Lacking well-defined estimation practices, these commitments are simply the wishes of the strongest-willed people with the highest authority—unless the organizations and people that work for them can provide the appropriate counter-response.

It seems that sensible behavior or weird behavior will grow within organizations rather like a disease propagates.

It is an upward or a downward spiral.

But we can choose the direction.

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<sup>1</sup> *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*: Tavis, Carol and Aronson, Eliot. Harvest Books 2003