

On the path to SUCCESS



Bob Hughes

CEO of the Forton Group Bob Hughes gives us his insight into high performance leadership

In last month's article I gave an overview of those leadership behaviours in today's complex and constantly changing world. In this article, I dive deeper into the first of those behaviours - "Searching for Information" - which sits in the first cluster of behaviours, the Thinking Cluster. We'll also explore the five levels at which a behaviour can be observed.

And that observation is key to high-performance. Once we know what we're looking for, we can see those behaviours in practice. And that gives us the leverage to improve our own, or others' leadership.

My background is the IT industry: responsible for the BT payroll system, paying over 100,000 people every month. Recently I was socialising with some colleagues from that time, reminiscing about some of the near misses. Failure would have led to none of those people getting paid.

We failed once. Spectacularly.

A change we'd been asked to make to the system meant that we could put a short informative message on everyone's payslip. In my defence, I strongly recommended that this didn't happen; at least, not without piloting it first.

It was around Christmas when we first launched it, so we put a "Happy Christmas" message out. Unfortunately, there was a complex bug in the system which meant that as well as getting this friendly message, the net pay box on everybody's payslip showed a big fat zero.

When it came to fixing this problem, or indeed solving the many problems we

managed to fix before the disaster occurred, it was absolutely key that we were in possession of all the necessary information to locate and fix the errors.

And, because deadlines were tight, we would often put in the best available solution in the time available. Then reflect afterwards on how to improve and prevent future failure. And the place to start is always by gathering as much information as you can.

There is natural tendency to only gather the data that we need in order to get past the hurdle in front of us. Especially when we are under pressure. Whatever field we work in.

The danger is that our solutions are limited to the familiar, the routine and the obvious.

We may end up with a short-term fix but are unlikely to achieve a major breakthrough, a more sustainable, or longer lasting solution.

I've mentioned before that each of the behaviours we will be covering over the next 12 months can be observed at five different levels.

Let's work through each of them, with examples. This gives you the opportunity to consider where you might mark yourself on this behaviour, and think about ways that you can develop your strengths.

Earl Landgrebe, a US politician and staunch ally of Richard Nixon throughout the Watergate hearings, famously said "Don't confuse me with the facts. I've got a closed mind."

I'm sure we all know people who will

ignore the facts and make decisions in other ways, perhaps based on their emotions alone. I am writing this on the day before the EU referendum; I've seen plenty of closed minds. It can also happen in such simple things as everyday purchases that we make. How often are we swayed by advertising or brand when selecting a product or service?

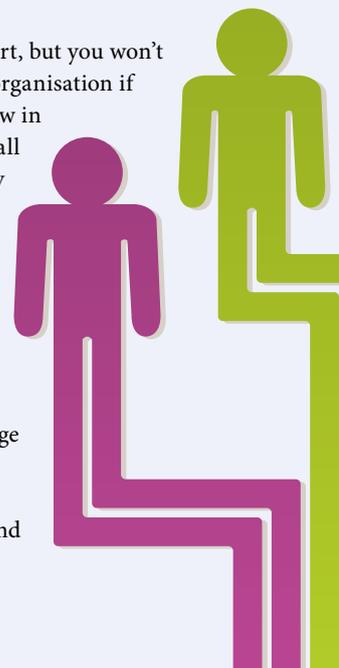
People would be rated as having a limitation in the 'Searching for Information' behaviour if all they did was rely on what they already know. Or on the assumptions that they are currently making.

So the first development step is to challenge your own assumptions.

Are they really based on facts? It might help to employ an ally here, either to challenge you or to support you in looking at ways you might find new, relevant, information.

That's a great start, but you won't add value to your organisation if you were too narrow in your search. Or, if all you do is get clarity about the limited information you already possess.

The difference comes when you have done some thorough research around the challenge you're faced with and, by doing this, you truly understand



the challenge in depth.

I am reminded of the American television medical drama House MD starring the wonderful Hugh Laurie. He was the inevitably flawed genius, leading a team of doctors in a New Jersey hospital.

In every episode they diagnose the problems of a patient. I enjoyed watching the show but after a few episodes began to see the formula: the first diagnosis was the obvious one, based on a simple analysis of the presenting symptoms. Of course it never worked and so they moved onto the second diagnosis. Again this was wrong, and often led to making the situation even worse - the patient almost dies. It was only when Hugh Laurie came up with some completely wacky and improbable diagnosis that the patient's life was miraculously saved and the cast were able to fill their time in by bitching about each other until another patient was wheeled in.

So when searching for the information you think you need to solve the problem or address the issue, looking beyond the obvious can be vital.

That might mean looking around your organisation to see how else it's done. Or seeking advice from colleagues or other professionals doing similar work elsewhere. And by the way, it's why having a really good network - beyond your own specialism - is such a crucial part of being a great leader.

It also helps to expand the areas where you explore for information.

Use standard business analysis tools to broaden your thinking: for example, 'PEST' is one that is often used.

'PEST' stands for Political, Economic, Social and Technological.

It is sometimes extended to

include Legal and Environmental and becomes 'PESTLE'.

Its structure is valuable in helping think through different aspects of issues, and to see through different lenses. A lawyer's, or legal view, of an issue is going to be different from an environmentalist's view.

Another useful skill here is curiosity: keep an open mind. Be open to the possibility that some information may come in from the leftfield. Something that inspires you. Something that amuses you.

'When searching for the information you think you need to solve the problem or address the issue, looking beyond the obvious can be vital'

I was re-watching the wonderful old movie The Dambusters the other day.

They were faced with the problem of how to maintain the Lancaster bombers at a very specific height, whilst flying in the dark over a reservoir.

A few of the Squadron took a night off to watch a London theatre show. One of them noticed how two of the spotlights shining on the star on stage converged to make a single light and took this information back to create a solution. They set two spotlights at a specific angle shining below the bomb bay in such a way that, when the lights met, they were exactly 60 feet above the water.

This points to how to use this behaviour at the 'Strength' level.

Broaden your search beyond your own organisation and even your own profession; what can you learn from other walks of life that might inform you better? Take in a show!

And relaxation isn't a soft option. We know that, when people relax and more oxygen gets into the system, their cognitive functions improve. Laughter, really does help to shift our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Just as physical movement, such as taking a walk or stretching, improves how we feel.

Until recently, many professions, including medics and the airline industry, believed they were too 'professional' to use the language of relaxation. Their jobs were too demanding. Their roles too complex. Their situations too serious.

It took a different approach to the issues of 'attitude to failure', to help people

see that there is room for significant improvement in every organisation. At every level. It takes leadership to be humble and acknowledge that it could (easily) happen to me.

It took an airline pilot to set up the Clinical Human Factors Group to improve safety and efficiency in health care. Following his wife Elaine's tragic death after a train of surgical errors in 2005, Martin Bromiley applied the industry know-how he gleaned as a pilot, in this very different field.

Where there are clear guidelines as to what to do when things go wrong, and very experienced people are in charge, there are particular patterns of behaviour that occur. The best leaders and managers will recognise this human behavioural weakness and put systems in place to mitigate those risks.

For example, the pattern of the most senior experienced professional being so focused on the task in hand that they don't notice time passing - when time might be critical. The pattern of other people nearby who could support them, not stepping in or speaking up, when they see something wrong.

As leaders and managers, we need to set up systems that ensure the checklist is always to hand. That the checklist is always used when something complex goes wrong. That junior staff can always speak up - without fear of being disciplined - when they see that something is not right. That when things go wrong, it's a behavioural failure, not a failure as a human being.

The highest level of this behaviour is when the leader sets up strategies to systematically collect information in their organisation. And that they encourage others to do the same; across the unit.

The best leaders will also set up systems that consistently train and reward people to reinforce the desired behaviour. Performance, productivity and motivation will all increase as a result.

Yes, things will go wrong. High performance in the 'Searching for Information' behaviour means we use our thinking skills to plan ahead, and rehearse, for those very occasions. For everyone's benefit.

Next month we'll stay in the Thinking Cluster and explore the behaviour of 'Concept Formation'.

If you'd like to contact Bob Hughes about any of the points in this article, contact him at bob.hughes@thefortongroup.com ♦

