



MOVE AWAY FROM THE GREY®

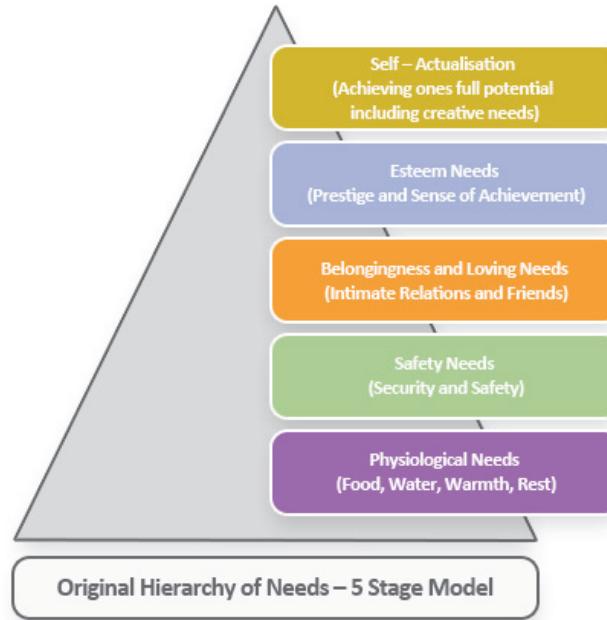
How to Have Impact in a Hostile Environment

1.0 Background

I have worked in numerous companies with a pervasive hostile environment, whether it be in consultancy or operational roles. The purpose of this paper is to try and help managers /practitioners recognise the signs in more depth and then prepare themselves for delivering impact. I attempt to cover some of the practical steps a leader can use to make a difference in a hostile environment, by fully understanding what is going on, and maintaining focus. I will define what I believe to be a hostile working environment, its key characteristics, and how it can negatively impact people's abilities to work efficiently and effectively in it. It might be possible to positively influence the culture of your team, and those around you, but you may not be able to influence the company. This will be dependent on the company size and your specific role. My reflections are from a practitioner perspective based on experience, although I will reference some relevant research and applied theory. The basis for this is a discussion document where I am promoting debate and challenge. There are no companies referenced directly or indirectly in this paper, so any inference that may or not be made, is the reflection of the reader.

2.0 Overview & Context

There has been a western trend to more progressive and less directive cultures in certain companies. In theory, employees have greater autonomy and influence over their respective scopes of work. This has been driven by a change in management practices, the belief in the value of employee engagement, and a drive to self-actualisation and the current trends for "Mindfulness". However, I believe there have been some recent regressive factors moving away from this, in part driven by a competitive market place and the need to be more agile. This may seem as paradoxical as conventional theory / practice has shown that a more engaged and content workforce will perform better, and deal with the need for agility and rapid delivery. I have tried to postulate the drivers for this regression. The eminent clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson¹ has talked recently about the rise of factionalism and tribalism, and the need for people to identify with certain factions or groups. His views are considered as controversial in certain quarters, as he has broached his theories in the context of religion. In addition, he also talks about the dangers of political correctness, in terms of its lack of transparency, and the potential consequence of limiting open debate. To an extent this has possibly been exemplified by the rhetoric on social media and in the press, post the "Brexit" vote in 2016. We have also witnessed lower levels of actual teamwork and more individualism in the work place. This selfishness is driven by the need to survive, especially as the economy gets tighter, which is the base of the Maslow Pyramid²



3.0 Understanding the Culture

The first step to delivering impact in a hostile culture is to recognise that you are in one. That statement may sound trite, but it is not as easy as it looks. What defines a hostile culture or environment? My definition is relatively simple. It is one in which it is difficult to execute your work or perform consistently without thinking about what could come next, and negative distractions i.e. “watching your back” continually. It is noteworthy that people don’t have to shout or raise their voice for the atmosphere to be hostile.

One of the key elements for success is to understand the difference between “active hostility” and “constructive pressure”. The former will be intense, repetitive, inauthentic and likely to be less rational. The latter will be effectively the opposite of those characteristics, but will still maintain the required accountability, and will have a level of mutual trust between parties. Typical behaviours and activities that are common for active hostility include totally unrealistic targets, minimal information, poor explanation, no context, shifting deadlines or targets and changes in scope. In more severe cases, there can be a “mob” style approach where a manager enlists others to aid the hostility. There are many other behaviours that one may witness, but another useful reference point is the work done by Geert Hofstede³ the eminent psychologist and his associates, on macro cultures. Hofstede categorises and describes six different cultures. There will be traits mentioned above that are pertinent in a significant number of the dimensions, but probably the most relevant are “Power Distance” and “Masculinity vs. Femininity”. Cultures that are likely to be hostile will have large power distance and show the characteristics of hierarchy, leading to existential inequality, expected subordination, autocracy, the belief that power is absolute and that its legitimacy cannot be challenged. Cultures with small power distance tend to be more collegiate.

One other trait of active hostility which I have witnessed is that of “Compliance”. In this case, compliance can be interpreted not of defined rules, but of dictates and edicts. Here, the end justifies the means and defined rules can be bent or ignored to meet the edict. Finally, another characteristic that will be exemplified is one of “Reactivity” vs “Strategy”. If the rules of the game are changed, the overall strategy will become unclear or lost. Coincidentally, this also ties in with one of Hofstede’s dimensions, that of short termism vs. longer term thinking.

We must remember that none of these characteristics can be taken in isolation, and on their own will not determine active hostility, but in combination could lead to one.

4.0 Finding the Balance Point

What do I mean about finding the balance point, and why is it relevant? If you are a new leader in a large organisation, then in order to have impact you will have to be different without either alienating yourself or acquiescing to the cultural norms too much. It is critical that you resonate with your team and conform to the rules initially. This does not stop you being a “change agent”, but you do it without being too much of an “initial” maverick. If you are established in the organisation this part will be easier, but for you to effect any internal change may be more difficult as there may be a reticence to challenge. The key point is that you need to be accepted by your own team in order to have future impact. This does not mean you don’t question, or challenge paradigms. It means you must effect change from the inside and gather momentum.

This is where a coaching background, or understanding the concept of mindfulness and particularly self-awareness, can help. Understanding the impact of your approach and behaviour you elicit on the people around you will enable a greater chance of success. This will give you key insights into how your approach will impact the team as you start to challenge them. You need to find the critical “balance point” between listening, challenging and conforming. Furthermore, you will be in a better place to understand their reactions and thus understand how to adjust your approach if required. Finding this balance point in a hostile environment will be critical to your personal success.

5.0 Delivering the Impact

In the previous section I mentioned about the importance of finding the balance point and understanding your environs. This will be the platform for work you are going to do and help determine the impact you will have on your team.

So, in more detail, what are the key things you need to do to have impact in a hostile environment?

- Staying above the line – This means as you start to challenge, never let your emotions run away with you. Stay professional, balanced and calm, even if you are getting pushback or a recipient of some of the hostility.
- Appropriate behaviour – This builds off the last point, but don’t let your behaviour become aggressive or inappropriate even if some of your colleagues are being so. Don’t get sucked in, or acquiesce to a lower level. Inappropriate behaviour does not have to be a raised voice; it can be manipulation or passive aggression.
- Staying true to your values – This may sound obvious but is often difficult in a hostile environment. Staying true to your values will help your team trust you and demonstrate a level of resilience. Ideally your values should be like those of the company, but this may not always be the case. If this is true and if you wish to stay, then you may need to find values where there is common ground.
- Be authentic – In a hostile environment, the chances are that some of the people around you will be less authentic. Being authentic demonstrates two things. Not only will it resonate with your team and build trust, but it will show people that you dare to be different whilst being true to yourself and unique. Not being authentic means not being who you are because you are afraid. Authenticity is fundamental to success.
- Focus on value not fear – Here, value is more than just your personal values, but an approach. If we value what we are doing or are being instructed to do, we are far more likely to deliver on it, as opposed to approaching it from a position of fear. One of the examples I use regularly is that of personal protective equipment in a manufacturing environment e.g. safety spectacles. One can either “value” your eyes or have the “fear” of being punished.
- Don’t be afraid to be different – In a hostile environment it can take courage to do this, but you will reap the rewards. Some of the key and less obvious traits of “change agents” include being on the edge continually, impatient and frustrated, and moving in an opposite direction to the herd. This requires not only inner belief, but in a hostile environment both patience and resolve. As a change agent you will be challenging the

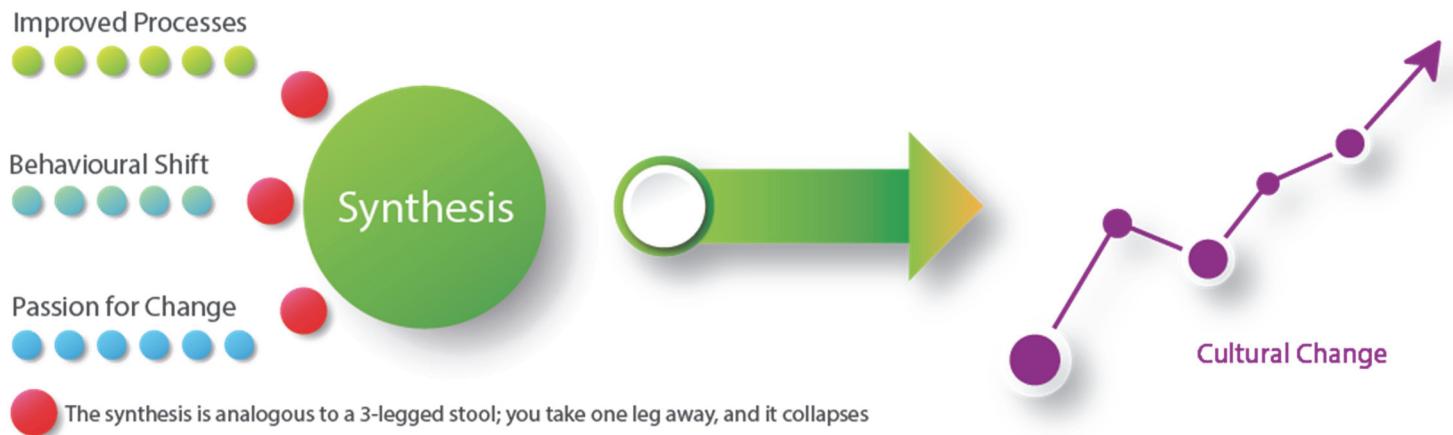
local paradigms, but that will not make you feel uncomfortable. The key point is to be respected, but not necessarily liked.

- Strategy vs Transaction – In order to have impact as a leader, you will have to be strategic. This sounds obvious and would apply to any environment. However, you will witness an increased level of transactional behaviour in a hostile environment. As I referred to earlier in the paper, in a hostile environment you will see high levels of progress chasing and transactional behaviour.
- Confident Humility – This approach might be more difficult in a hostile environment. As a leader you need to be confident and humble. The hostility may sap your energy and the confidence that goes with it. Staff will always respect a confident leader, so this is where you will have to rely on your inner strength. The humility element will show the staff team that you are truly different and will start to create some subliminal messages. Some people may not be able to cope with your humility and even become more hostile, but hopefully this will fade over time.
- Helicopters & Weeds – I have used these descriptors many a time during my consultancy work to help people understand the level of detail required at any point in time in order to achieve the goals. All great leaders can switch from these perspectives continually. Sometimes it is imperative to be looking at the detail, for instance when you are designing or manufacturing a safety component. However, if you are looking at initial changes to a business process, then ideally you should be taking the helicopter perspective and if you were looking at the minutiae then this could slow you down. I have seen many managers get stuck in either one or the other, thus impacting their personal performance. So how does a hostile atmosphere negatively impact the ability to switch between the two? As mentioned previously, hostility saps our personal energy and puts us more into survival mode. The need to survive will be a distraction and can inhibit our ability to think strategically and impede the ability to switch.
- “Losing it” - Remember you are human, and although you need to maintain the utmost control of your emotions and behaviours, it is OK to “lose it” once in a while. It shows the team that you are genuine. Behaviour is the “tune” played by and listened by others, as a result of the very dynamic and circular relationship between feelings and thoughts. Maintaining perfect outward behaviour is important, but impossible sometimes.
- Compassion & Gravitas - It is possible to speak with both. This links to other points, but if you show compassion you will earn respect, especially in a hostile environment. When you are demonstrating compassion, it is also possible to do it with gravitas. This will also earn you respect and show that you are serious.
- Cognitive Biases – Daniel Kahneman⁴ has done some considerable work in this area, and these biases are real. It is critical that you do not let these get the better of you, as again it increases the probability that you will make the wrong assumptions and lose clarity of purpose. A few examples of the biases that are relevant are “Bandwagon Effect”, “Status-Quo Bias”, “Anchoring Effect” and “Negativity Bias”. The titles should be self-explanatory, but for more information and explanation please research Daniel Kahneman³ and his work on biases.

The keen observers will have noted that some of the elements mentioned above are pertinent to any environment. However, the strength of character required to carry these through in a hostile environment is considerably greater. It takes character, patience and resolve to practice these and see them through. It will be impossible to practice all of these at one time, but you need to choose the critical ones for your environment. The real skill is knowing when to use them and how often. Elements like trust and authenticity must be practiced all the time as they are truly transformational, the other approaches can be more in the moment and transactional. This implies another skill, which is truly understanding the difference between transactional work and transformational work. This is often confused, and people fall into the trap of believing they are transformational when they are being transactional. In a hostile environment, the probability of being transactional increases.

Professional coaches and coach leaders have these attributes and skills and are more than capable of delivering effective change. It is about having a strategic plan, in conjunction with working in the moment.

One of the models I regularly use in consulting to demonstrate the requirements for a cultural shift is shown below:



The probability of one of these elements being removed is increased significantly in a more hostile environment. Therefore, as an individual change leader you need to stay true to your purpose.

6.0 Reflections, Conclusions & Opportunities

I have reflected on this earlier in the paper, but it is **not easy** to have impact in a hostile environment so it will take significant effort, patience and a resolute approach. You will be “rocked” by these environments.

It is important to understand that the hostile environment can become additive over time, and there may be a tendency for managers or leaders to adopt a certain management style of behaviour. The environment is always fundamental as it starts shaping us from day one when we come on Earth, based on our personal emotional experiences and the meaning we attach to these experiences; social psychology perhaps cannot explain this in depth. Understanding the whole (body-mind) is needed; our cells have memories. If we have felt numerous times the same worry, fear etc., then every time an environment evokes these feelings this will affect our thought processes and behaviours.

The psychologist Dr Philip Zimbardo tried to prove this hypothesis in an extreme environment with the Stanford Prison Experiment⁵ in 1971. The purpose was to investigate the psychological effects of perceived power, focusing on the struggle between prisoners and prison officers. He took a random group of volunteers and assigned them roles as either prisoners or guards. Early reports on experimental results claimed that students quickly embraced their assigned roles, with some guards enforcing authoritarian measures and ultimately subjecting some prisoners to psychological torture, while many prisoners passively accepted psychological abuse and, on the officers' request, actively harassed other prisoners who tried to stop it. The experiment only lasted 6 days, and some of the volunteers left mid-experiment. Subsequently the methodology of the experiment and its unscientific nature was brought into question, especially as Dr. Zimbardo was effectively involved in supervisory activities. However, from a practitioner perspective, it is easy to see how the attributes and behaviours of leaders and their teams can get exaggerated over time, with subordinates becoming quiet and submissive. I have personally witnessed both active and passive aggression⁶ in these hostile environments with the recipients physically shaking in meetings on a regular basis.

I have listed below some of the behaviours you may witness in a hostile environment as a “ready reckoner” means of understanding the nature of the environment you are working in.

- Verbal Aggression
- Poor adherence to standard and agreed practices
- Very little communication committed to in writing
- Lack of clarity on objectives
- Poor general communication
- Constant changing or conflicting schedules
- No praise or recognition for good work or achieving targets
- Targets moving without explanation
- Unrealistic work schedules
- Leaders never apologising
- Unnecessarily long working hours
- Constant disturbance in working time
- Factionalism and Cliques
- Passive Aggression
- High value for “Compliance” at all costs
- Submissive Behaviour
- Inconsistent HR policy or approach to discipline
- Rule based systems that are illogical, not easy to implement or open to interpretation

One of the attributes that any leader or change agent will require is a clear understanding of their own personal self-awareness, and the environment. These both impact the ability to have enough personal energy to make the required changes. As mentioned previously professional coaches have these skills and can either coach the leaders or act as coach leaders.

7.0 References

1. Jordan Peterson – Canadian clinical psychologist and a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto. His main areas of study are in abnormal, social, and personality psychology, with a particular interest in the psychology of religious and ideological belief and the assessment and improvement of personality and performance.
2. Abraham Maslow - American psychologist who was best known for creating Maslow's hierarchy of needs; a theory of psychological health predicated on fulfilling innate human needs in priority, culminating in self-actualization.
3. Geert Hofstede – Dutch social psychologist, former IBM employee and Professor Emeritus of Organizational Anthropology and International Management at Maastricht University in the Netherlands, well known for his pioneering research on cross-cultural groups and organizations.
4. Daniel Kahneman – Israeli-American psychologist and economist notable for his work on the psychology of judgment and decision-making, as well as behavioural economics. **Status-Quo Bias** - We humans tend to be apprehensive of change, which often leads us to make choices that guarantee that things remain the same or change as little as possible. **Negativity Bias** - People tend to pay more attention to bad news — and it's not just because we're morbid. Social scientists theorize that it's on account of our selective attention and that, given the choice, we perceive negative news as being more important or profound. **Bandwagon Effect** - Though we're often unconscious of it, we love to go with the flow of the crowd. When the masses start to pick a winner or a favourite, that's when our individualized brains start to shut down then enter into "groupthink" mentality. **Anchoring Effect** - Also known as the relativity trap, this is the tendency that we must compare and contrast only a limited set of items. It's called the anchoring effect because we tend to fixate on a value or number that in turn gets compared to everything else.
5. "The Stanford Prison Experiment – A Simulation Study of the Psychology of Imprisonment Conducted at Stanford University".
6. Passive Aggression - Relational aggression, such as silent treatment or subversive manipulation towards a select group of individuals for personal gain.

"Change Agent" – An individual who is instrumental in influencing change for the greater good. Someone without fear and is willing to change the Status Quo.



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