



**THE TOXICITY OF BEHAVIORISM ON
BUSINESS RESULTS, RACIAL EQUITY,
AND ON A WORKING DEMOCRACY**

Carol Sanford

It was 1993 and I was a business educator working with Stelios Tzesos, Colgate's general manager for Africa. We had been given responsibility for meeting the new constitutional mandates established by Nelson Mandela's government to promote corporate top management that reflected the diverse racial makeup of the country. Many other companies had thrown up their hands in despair, believing that it would be impossible to grow a management class from the residents of the country's segregated townships, people from whom educational opportunities had been deliberately withheld by the apartheid system. We thought it was a worthwhile challenge and believed that our developmental approach could develop the innate talents in anyone. Well, we were more right about this than we could have imagined.

The results were stunning. On the whole, the Black workforce from the townships outperformed any group I have ever encountered. They would quickly grasp the complex systemic frameworks and processes we laid out for them, putting them immediately into practice and clamoring for more. Their grasp of the governing and social dynamics of their communities allowed them to innovate regarding everything from products to modes of distribution. This immediately moved them onto a steep trajectory of financial growth and within months made Colgate South Africa one of the top performing divisions in the company's non-U.S. global operations.

In the turbulence and violence that were engulfing their country at the time, they created an internal culture of respect and reconciliation that created a safe and creative oasis for all workers.

Stelios, a Greek National, and I had many deep conversations, trying to understand what we were witnessing. These were people without trained expertise and without status, and who were not conditioned to need or even respect experts. Their capacity for self-reliance, creativity, and intellectual agility was astonishing. Eventually, Stelios summarized his insights in a major public speech that addressed employees, suppliers, government officials, and others in which he said: “Intelligence doesn’t come from school. In fact, in some ways intelligence can be undermined by schooling, which teaches you to rely on other people’s thinking. But you’ve always had to think for yourselves to survive and thrive in some of the toughest conditions in the world. Because the former government gave you no support, you had to create everything for yourselves—economies, governing infrastructures, social programs, education. That’s why you were able to understand and immediately respond to what we’ve asked of you.” He closed by saying, “We will help to build a great country while building a great company.”

I was 50 at the time, and it took me another 10 years to take the full impact of this lesson in South Africa to heart. In those intervening years, I continued to build a platform, publish articles and books, and deliver lectures and speeches—the expected activities of a so-called thought leader. But something was bubbling up from below the conscious threshold, demanding my attention about the difference in response in Africa. Why did so many people in the Western World, accept (or reject) the things I said without subjecting them to rigorous examination? I noticed I was seen as a source of solutions and best practices, and this disturbed me deeply. I was contributing to the collective illness whereby we never learn to think for ourselves and I knew that something had to change. The workers I had encountered in South Africa had shown me what is possible in a community that has had to learn to think for itself and I committed to never again do people’s thinking for them.

It took me a while to unlearn the habits of an expert, to stop supplying answers and to start creating the conditions for people to create worthwhile questions to pursue for themselves. What I had witnessed in South Africa was an extraordinary degree of personal agency on the part of the people I worked with, agency that far exceeded what I was accustomed to encountering in the U.S. and Europe. I realized that providing expertise is antithetical to cultivating agency and I began seeking new ways to engage my client organizations. For example, I stopped offering organizational models and started emphasizing the use of living systems frameworks, which provide the structure for thinking but require participants to supply the content. I also set out to create work systems where employees charted their own developmental paths in service to making life better for customers, turning the almost universal human desire to make a meaningful contribution into a powerful business growth engine.

It was while I was in South Africa that I invented the concept of promises beyond ableness to foster and develop personal agency. As I reflected on the high degree of agency I encountered there, I realized that it was connected to the fact that everyone felt that they had something at stake personally. They knew family members, friends, neighbors, and customers who were going to be directly impacted by the work we were doing inside Colgate, and that this ultimately would contribute to the future success of their country.

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This gave them the will and motivation to reach beyond any limitations placed on them by lack of formal education, political power, or social advantage. They saw opportunities to make a difference and they grabbed them and ran.

The problem was that the resulting activity was scattered, heading in too many directions at once. To address this, we evolved promises beyond ableness as an engagement process to channel agency toward highly effective ends. This process had three core aspects. First, these promises were grounded in a deep understanding and caring about specific customers, where they were trying to go with their lives, and what was needed to help them get there. This kept the promises real and meaningful. Second, they were aligned with the overall strategies we were developing for the company. And third, each worker developed a clear plan for how they were going to pursue their promise, which had the additional benefit of providing the basis for recruiting resources and support from inside and outside of the company.

The guiding principle for all of this was the activation, development, and nourishment of personal agency, informed by deep caring about and commitment to the effects that this agency would have on the lives of other people. Projects were sourced, designed, and led by individual workers, a profound difference from participative involvement models where ideation comes from others and workers either choose or are delegated to carry them out. In this case, nothing was organized, researched, decided, or evaluated by an external other—it all arose directly from the people doing the work. The sense that someone was depending on you to come through for them made each promise a powerful way to access individual agency while at the same time keeping efforts focused.

In the years since, I've seen that the surge of agency and sense of meaning that we experienced in Colgate South Africa can be generated for any company. In other words, any worker can become their own powerful engine for innovation on behalf of customers, communities, and the world.

THE IMPLICATIONS

It may be easy to forget how radical this idea is. It expresses deep faith in the inherent but undeveloped creative intelligence and drive of all people, when they are able to connect their work to something they believe in and care about. But a lack of faith in the potential for intelligence and goodwill on the part of people is precisely why systems of social control exist—if we can't trust people then we need to figure out how to control them. One of the things that keeps dysfunctional systems locked in place, whether in corporations, school boards, or engineering standards, is that we distrust the intelligence of our fellow workers and citizens. We pigeonhole them and carefully constrain the arenas within which they can exercise choice to prevent them from gumming up the works.

Behaviorism is just a recent, and particularly powerful, manifestation of this very old practice. It arose in the turmoil of the early 20th century as a relatively human response to the need to make people override their natural inclinations in order to function smoothly within machine-like systems of production, social governance, and war. In contrast to more coercive methods of control, it offered the advantage of making it possible to predict and condition behaviors to conform to optimal patterns being revealed by new techniques such as time and motion studies. This opened the possibility of accomplishing the behaviorists' oft-repeated ideal of an ordered society.

But in the process, behaviorism, and all other methods for establishing top-down control, undermines and sidelines precisely those qualities that distinguish human beings, qualities that are desperately needed to address the issues facing us at this time. Unlike rats, primates, and dogs, the study of whom has supplied experimental psychology with the bulk of its data and theories, humans have evolved mental capacities that go beyond those that we share with other mammals. These include the ability to manage ourselves with regard to some desired aim, the ability to project ourselves into an envisioned future, and the ability to plan and execute extended, complex actions. The potential to exercise these abilities is inherent in us, but unless they are developed, they tend to atrophy or remain stunted. Behaviorism presents a double impediment to this development. First, it replaces genuine self-management with conditioning. Second, it uses an array of rewards and punishments to elicit a desired behavior, most of which have as their subtext the implied threat of non-belonging. Belonging is a core driver of mammalian behavior, and when it is threatened it commands people's attention. This means that energy that could have been dedicated to higher mental purposes is siphoned off to address the need to conform to social expectations.

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The approach that we first articulated in South Africa is designed to do the opposite—it is meant to increase self-managing capacity, and to develop complex, higher-order thinking by every member of an organization and, ultimately, society. Promises are important because they arise from what is personally significant to an individual, but they reference a larger whole extending beyond individual interests. They speak to our need to belong, not by threatening it but by revealing pathways to evolve our contributions to the webs of relationships that we wish to belong to. Through a promise beyond ableness we become connected to something that matters, and this awakens will, motivation, and the sense that work and life have meaning.

Be forewarned, though. Everything I've said up to this point can be easily misunderstood if you are reading it from a top-down perspective. I have seen groups that, having heard about my ideas, set up programs in which a committee of managers generates a list of excellent ideas for improving customer experience and invites employees to choose one that they want to promise to work on. This sort of thing makes me crazy because it so completely misses the point! If the impulse, recognition of a need, ideas, commitment, planning, gathering of knowledge and resources, execution, evaluation, and iteration to make it better the second time around—if these things haven't all come from the person making the promise, then we're back in a behaviorist, expert-driven paradigm. We haven't created a context within which people can and must figure it out for themselves.

Of course, figuring things out is natural. Children figure out how to sit up, walk, speak, feed themselves. For very young children, these represent major accomplishments, breakthroughs into hitherto unknown arenas of capability and participation that they can see that older people have access to. This gives children the tenacity and courage to pursue these new abilities in spite of what must, at times, feel like insurmountable obstacles.

When they are a little older, usually around six years of age, they begin to get interested in belonging to a larger whole, and will seek opportunities to contribute to, for example, their families. In this way, tenacity gets translated into agency and the desire to learn for oneself into a desire to learn for something larger.

The drive to take on things we don't know or can't do is inherent in each of us, but it goes to sleep if it doesn't get connected to something compelling that we can see is needed in a situation that we care about. Once we see the need and make the promise to do something about it, the beyond ableness part provides the opportunity and reason to stretch and grow. Proactively seeking to work on things we don't already know how to do may seem daunting at first, but in the long run is profoundly life-affirming, in large part because it nests us into the larger systems of community and nature that give us life and meaning.

BUSINESSES AS NODES FOR CHANGE

After nearly a century of behaviorism influencing every aspect of our collective lives, it's perhaps not surprising that different factions have learned to use its methods to advance their agendas. One way of looking at the political and social polarization that is spreading within the U.S. and around the world is to see it as a battle over who gets to control what we think and believe. If, as the behaviorists believed, our thoughts should be shaped by experts, it stands to reason that competing ideologies would eventually attempt to take charge of the consensus-building machinery that shapes what we "know" to be real and true. Our experts and our facts versus your experts and facts.

For this reason, education, journalism, and the norms of political discourse and process, which were once thought of as arenas governed by a shared set of underlying assumptions and values, have become volatile and highly contested. They now serve as the focal points for struggles over who gets to dictate the terms around which our behaviors are then conditioned. This makes these arenas unsuitable (or at least challenging) for the kind of deep epistemological questioning that I'm advocating.

There is, however, one arena that remains well-suited for this work because it hasn't yet been weaponized within the larger culture wars. Business, from my perspective, offers a nodal opportunity to shift the behaviorist epistemology that is enabling these conflicts to grow.

Although business was one of the most powerful drivers for the adoption of behaviorism in the first place, it also offers an ideal place to evolve beyond behaviorist methods, to supplant and replace them with a more coherent understanding of how human beings actually work. This is because businesses, whether they are conscious of it or not, are fundamentally educational entities. No one questions the need to learn in order to fulfill one's job responsibilities, and businesses are constantly trying to upgrade the skills of their employees in order to remain innovative and competitive in fast-changing markets. At the same time, businesses must educate those same markets, along with their suppliers and distributors, and even the regulatory infrastructures within which they work. Smart businesses are always endeavoring to make themselves and their stakeholders smarter, and this is driven by business imperatives, protecting it somewhat from the angry debates going on in editorial pages and city council meetings.

It is not particularly difficult to make the case to most business leaders that one of their greatest underutilized assets is the intelligence and creative agency of their employees. From there it is a short step to the realization that an epistemology based on control and conditioning is in direct opposition to unleashing the power of this intelligence and agency. What my Colgate South Africa stories (and all the other stories I've written about over the years) demonstrate is that intelligence and agency only really get developed when people are expected and enabled to think for themselves. In other words, undoing the legacy of the behaviorists and reclaiming the integrity of democratic governance is the true and necessary social contribution of companies in the 21st century. It is the appropriate place to invest the considerable energies of social conscience that currently drive a plethora of issue-focused movements. Businesses that are willing to make this investment will discover that it yields returns not only in financial, business, and employee retention terms. It will also generate beneficial ripple effects across our social and democratic institutions.

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INDIRECT WORK

Nelson Mandela, one year after his election and the simultaneous ratification of South Africa's new constitution, created a special award. He wanted to recognize Colgate's exceptionally rapid and successful fulfillment of the new constitutional mandate to bring Black and other non-White workers into corporate senior management roles. In part, he was moved by the ripple effect these efforts were having in the adjoining townships, where Colgate workers, as part of their promises beyond ableness, were serving on governing committees and leading initiatives to address a host of social needs. The leadership coming out of Colgate was so impressive that Mandela's government actively recruited its members to serve in these positions.

It's important to understand that the constitutional mandate wasn't about good jobs for a limited number of talented Black workers. It was really about igniting a movement of Black leadership and agency to address the aspirations of a population that had been marginalized for generations. In his award speech, Mandela noted that throwing lifelong outsiders into roles of leadership, where they would have to develop themselves if they were to rise to the occasion, was a powerful way to transform a nation. Colgate, he pointed out, was a demonstration of what becomes possible when you take this approach.

Mandela was pointing to what I now call indirect work. If you want to address the urgent social and environmental challenges that face a nation or community, don't work on the problems, and particularly don't work on problems by bringing in experts to solve them. Instead, work on the creative intelligence, conscience, and agency of the people in that nation or community.

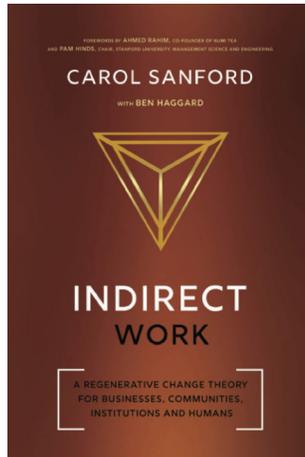
When these are activated, the problems become solvable. When they are not activated, the same old problems (and unanticipated new problems) will always reassert themselves because the underlying conditions haven't changed. Even worse, you accelerate and exacerbate polarization.

This transitional moment in South African history turned out to provide the perfect conditions for demonstrating the validity of this idea because Black people had been so little exposed to the destructive influence of behaviorist systems of conditioning. They were accustomed to thinking for themselves, and they knew better than to trust outside authorities, who in the experience of the Black community had always and obviously worked against their best interests. Colgate was successful at harnessing this energy because it actively cultivated the self-determination of people while helping them direct and focus their efforts to produce systemically beneficial effects. The lessons it offers are applicable to the many systemic problems we are struggling to address in the world today.

Building the independent thinking capacity of people is, in and of itself, a social responsibility, one that will have more far-reaching and enduring consequences than any narrowly focused social responsibility program. 📖



Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Through her university and in-house educational offerings, global speaking platforms, best selling multi-award-winning books, and human development work, Carol Sanford works with executive leaders who see the possibility to change the nature of work through developing people and work systems that ignite motivation everywhere. For four decades, Carol has worked with great leaders of successful businesses such as Google, DuPont, Intel, P&G, and Seventh Generation, educating them to develop their people and ensure a continuous stream of innovation that continually deliver extraordinary results.

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