

Chapter 4

QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 4—

Section II—Counterbalancing Machines, Screens and Data: 7 Steps to Increase the Human Factor at Work

Chapter 4—TALK ABOUT THE TURD ON THE TABLE

1. Can you start out by explaining what “talk about the turd on the table” means? Is it the equivalent of straight talk, or is there more to it than that? Perhaps you can define by example what talking about the turd is, and counterbalance it with an example of someone who doesn’t talk about it?

Many years ago, I participated in a meeting with the CEO of a very well regarded large company to discuss ways our two companies might partner.

After sharing visions and perspectives on the future, it was time to get down to figure out how our companies might work together.

So I suggested we begin by addressing “the turd on the table”, which was the fact that on the fringes we were competitors and both of us saw the same path to growth which could make us bigger competitors in the future. Was this a “lets learn about the potential competitor meeting” or a “lets find a way to partner so we can both grow recognizing the potential of friction meeting”?

The CEO said, “I am so glad you brought up what I was thinking about but you brought it up so “elegantly” ”

We had a very positive meeting and dinner for the next few hours since the CEO and his team and our team addressed “the turd on the table” and because of this our conversations moving forward were “bull shit “free!

Many years ago a boss of mine identified leadership as the ability to understand, face, adapt and align with reality.

Too often, particularly in meetings, we hide reality within layers of protocol, diplomacy, and dazzling multi-media shows. We are so afraid of the truth breaking out that we hold meetings to prepare meetings to get ready for a meeting.

Time passes. Opportunities come and go. The world spins.

And all the while instead of addressing the “turd on the table”, we talk about being sensitive, being politically correct and we all think we are in some psychological thriller or dramatic play where every move and word can make the difference. Meetings are

thick with intrigue, back room dramas, meaningful silences, and side bar “bathroom break” conversations.

The joke is on all the participants because everybody knows what needs to be addressed. We all know what is the “turd on the table” and after the meetings we speak about how no one went near it.

So instead I suggest calling out the turd.

Call it out. Shine a bright light on it. Place it on a pedestal. Address the damn thing !

2. Why does reluctance to talk about the turd exist? More specifically, does it have to do with the rise of the machines and the dominance of data? Do people prefer to seek refuge in numbers rather than deal with the messy truths that sometimes crop up in workplaces?

The reluctance to speak about the turd on the table has two reasons. The first is fear and the second is magical thinking.

A. **Fear:**

1. **Fear of being punished:** When one mentions the elephant in the room there one often is shining a light on something that others prefer to gloss over or hide for a variety of reasons from not wanting to offend a person, or to demoralize or slow down a room that is hoping to move forward quickly or most likely not agitating a senior person who will be upset with what they hear.

Mentioning a turd shines two spotlights. First on the turd and secondly on the person who called it out. And often to avoid facing the turd on the table the room or the powers of be decide that the truth teller or caller out is the turd!

2. **Fear of being wrong:** If there is a problem or an issue that one has discerned but no one else has mentioned it in the room there is self-doubt. Are you reading the situation right or is it some subjective flaw in your thinking? Is your analysis of the situation wrong?

Self-doubt is a great censor.

3. **Fear of being left holding the turd:** As they say in stores “if you break it you pay for it”. Sometimes when one calls out an issue the turd namer is appointed the turd slayer. They are asked to write up why there is an issue and potential solutions. In an overworked environment adding yet one more problem to your to do list is less than appetizing especially if it’s a turd!

4. **Fear of being disliked:** We all want to be liked and we spend a lot of time working on our image and trying to be admired. Calling out issues is often a form of criticism which makes one vulnerable to both being disliked but also retaliatory criticism.

B. **Magical Thinking or the “turd is brownie phenomenon”**

1. **Inability to see a turd:** Many times companies tend to be insular and they tend to benchmark and compare versus existing competitors or last year or the way it has always been. As a result new innovations, new competitors or a fundamental

change in the world order is missed. Not because nobody is willing to call out the turd but because they cannot see it.

2. **Reliance on data without interrogation or listening to instinct:** In today's data driven world a plethora of data can obfuscate the truth. Realms of data and myriad graphs often herald an answer and we accept what the machine spits out forgetting to ask how the data was collected and compiled, what biases were in the algorithm and we overlook our instinctual doubt at some results when they are arrayed against the cold computed math.
3. **"Drinking the Kool-Aid"** is an expression commonly used in the United States that refers to any person or group who goes along with a doomed or dangerous idea because of peer pressure.

Today most companies proudly promote their purpose, missions and visions since they are important to communicate to their customers and suppliers and motivate their employees.

Sometimes to ensure emotional bonding of employees with these goals there is a plethora of activities, events and writings that infuse the culture with the rightness of "the way"

When I joined Leo Burnett three decades ago, I admired the strong culture of excellence, humility and achievement which were re-enforced with stories and artifacts.

Our logo had a hand reaching for the stars with the founders statement of "when you reach for the stars you may not touch one but you will not come up with a handful of mud either", stories about "lonely men" (in those days there were mainly men) who did the work that management presented and needed to be remembered and we handed out apples at the receptionist to remember that the founder gave out out apples at his reception desk when he started the company just after the depression and people said he would soon be selling apples rather than giving them away. Today the company hands out hundreds of thousands of apples. These stories and culture have created an ethos of excellence for many companies including Leo Burnett.

But there comes a time when culture becomes so strong that the company uses the past to suppress the future. For instance at another company driven by an Apple, Apple they still ask what would Steve Jobs do. Well Steve Jobs may not have introduced an iPad or bought a Beats.

A religious fervor overcomes the company and so blinds us that a turd becomes a brownie

3. And how will talking about the turd balance story and spreadsheet? How does straight talk help humanize the workplace and inject empathy, creativity and the like into the culture?

For a company or a team to thrive it needs to be and feel connected to each other and reality.

This connectedness requires trust and empathy.

Trust and empathy is hard to attain when people do not speak honestly to each other or address the vulnerabilities of their organization including an avoidance of the real issues and problems they face.

Data is often a key component of discerning that there is a problem with the business, but it may not in itself explain why the problem is occurring without proper understanding and interrogation.

The spreadsheet often reveals an answer to a problem without addressing what the problem might be.

My experience over the years has indicated that discerning the problem requires developing and testing hypothesis from realistic to speculative.

This exploration of possibilities should not be limited by some areas or regions too sensitive to discuss such as poor decision making, bad data, flawed process or cultural issues. If certain reasons and answers are not acceptable or too sensitive (the turd on the table) the answer is likely to be shit.

Addressing the turd on the table also is key for innovation and creativity because these practices require going out on the limb, taking risks, failing frequently and often challenging the status quo.

The ability to soar to a great idea is enabled by the knowledge that there are no nets in the sky to watch out for but rather a trampoline of trust near the ground that ensures speaking or investigating or ideating with candor and free of fear will not result in a splattering!

One sees these in brainstorming and off-site meetings where attendees are told that there are no wrong answers and they should not criticize or mock each other. The question I often have is why does this ability to generate ideas and look at things in new and often ways of piercing clarity be only limited to the annual or bi-annual offsite? Do we need to leave our workplace and be surrounded by inspirational speakers and play

dough and Lego pieces to speak our minds and think and speak freely? Should not every day at work be about honesty and improvement?

4. Because this is the prescriptive section of the book, here is my first question in that regard: How do you encourage people in a company to say what they really believe? What should leadership do to foster a culture of openness and transparency? How do you overcome people's reluctance to tell their bosses that they're wrong, to tell customers that they shouldn't do what they want to do? What actions can leaders take that will change the mindsets of their people in this regard?

Recently one of my industry colleagues Michael Donohue mentioned to me that increasingly the most valuable assets in communicating with individuals were a four, five and a six-letter word.

These were data, trust and intent.

Do you have the data and is it good?

Can you be trusted or are you trusted?

What is your intent? Why are you saying what you are?

He noted that people listened to me because I often had this combination.

Another word that is used to describe my way of communicating is candor.

I believe that if you do not say what you believe it is far more dangerous to your career and your future than if you say what you believe because instead of someone with candor or bravery you will be regarded as duplicitous or cowardly.

It's better to be provocative than mute.

More importantly than the implication for you it is the implication for your company.

Companies hire talent for their skills, experience and their diverse ways of thinking.

If these abilities are to be monetized by the company, they need to be made actionable which means spoken and executed on. If an individual has a point of view with good data, is trustworthy and has good intent then it must be shared because not doing so is robbing the company of important perspectives and ideas that could be the difference between success and failure.

In life we often regret errors of omission much more than we do errors of commission.

If you know something critical or believe something passionately saying it at most will lead to you being put in the right place if it wrong or even if it is right but people do not want to listen to you. Addressing the turd on the table at worst has people correcting you and noting that it is not a turd and at best rectifying behaviors or plans to flush it away.

On the other hand, not speaking will at minimum castigate yourself and at worst could imperil your firm because you could have stopped a problem but did not.

Not voicing your point of view or expressing your doubts or opposition or different perspective is a dereliction of duty. How many companies have become diminished because a mistake that could have been corrected, a nascent competitor that could have been vanquished if recognized earlier was not or some other stitch in time that could have saved nine was not identified?

To ensure that individuals feel safe and companies re-inforce the need to voice your perspective I would use as a filter the three words that I have mentioned earlier.

A. **Data:** Do you have, or your employees have data that supports the point of view? If you do not have actual data, why do you feel the way you do? Often an instinct is a form of data.

B. **Trust:** Do you trust that speaking out will not be punished. Are your running a team where people feel safe expressing themselves?

C. **Intent:** Are you saying something because you believe it is for the good of the company or the other person you are sharing your insight or perspective with? Is the employee sharing their perspective to further the company or is it to hurt or damage or obfuscate?

To ensure as a manger you run an environment that allows for addressing the “turd on the table” one should communicate, express and re-inforce the four behaviors.

1. **“What if the opposite was true”?** The reason I got my first job at Leo Burnett in 1982 was an essay I wrote as part of the job interview process called “What if the opposite was true” which stated that unless someone can build a strong case for the opposite of what they say or believe to be true they probably should not be believed since they have not really thought, analyzed or assessed the situation. Since that day I always ask, “What if the opposite is true”. Individuals and managers as they make decisions should always ask themselves this question.

2. **Lead by example:** Be a turd identifying manager. Companies are their people and leadership matters. If a leader of a company or a group identifies and calls out turds they make it much safer for other people to do the same.

3. Celebrate and incentivize versus hiding or punishing turd slayers: When someone brings up or addresses issues their work should be celebrated and even awarded bonuses. Behaviors are driven by incentives. If you want turd slayers than celebrate the turd slayer.

4. Discuss and use the DTI (Data, Trust and Intent Filter): Ask people to state why there is a turd on the table and evaluate their speaking out by asking them or looking for data, trust and intent.

These four suggestions have been ones that have worked again and again in productive ways and minimized group think, silence and more importantly made the work place more open and less scary.

Today we are living in a connected world and innovation is really about fresh insightful ideas. These ideas and perspectives need a safe green house where perspectives can be shared, risk taking encouraged and the give and take of ideas and perspectives transacted.

Free thought and free conversation allows for this diversity in view points and thinking.

5. Another prescriptive question: How do you convince people to follow their instincts rather than the data? Because data has been deified, people trust the numbers far more than their own experience and gut; so how do you encourage them to factor in the data but also rely on what they know to be right and true? Is it behavior that a CEO and other senior leaders need to model? Is it a question of training? Is it making a high-profile decision and letting everyone know that it's based not on what research and numbers tell us but what our experience and teamwork suggests must be done?

"A good decision is based on knowledge and not numbers" Plato

Today a good decision is based on knowledge that includes but does not solely rely on numbers.

Numbers are important because they are a measure that must be taken into account even when you make a decision that runs counter to what the numbers would suggest.

Qualitative decision making that refuses to acknowledge numbers or facts is often wrong and plainly ill informed. Numbers are often facts. Facts are stubborn things. One needs to wrestle with stubbornness and not refuse to acknowledge its presence.

Qualitative decisions that incorporate the data but then due to other rationale overrides the numeric is often brave, human and prescient.

Blaise Pascal the French Philosopher wrote "We choose with our hearts and we use numbers to justify what we just did"

It is imperative that we acknowledge this human reality that decisions are complex and combine facts, data, numbers with gut, instinct, feeling. They combine the story and the spread sheet.

Today we are overwhelmed with numbers and in fact there are so many that they connect with themselves and figure out the answer. Yes Artificial Intelligence or Machine learning is really about data connecting to data and writing software.

As we move into the Algorithmic age data processing and data decisions will be spit out by the machine. The key value we will add is how we augment this data by combining it with knowledge, perspective, experience and connections that the machine cannot make because it cannot escape its own data input and most importantly it does not feel yet...

Some of the most innovative products and decision making come from gut instinct or making connections between disparate observations.

I believe innovation is fresh insightful connections. Data is a key input but eventually it's how to connect pools of facts and experience that helped create everything from the iPhone to sticky notes.

There is case after case of taking the road less travelled by...the road less paved with numbers (informed but not paved) to win.

a) Overriding the numbers is sometimes a key to success. Costco could have paid its employees less since economically that is what a manager should do to maximize profit. Instead Costco paid its employees a multiple of minimum wages and ended up doing better than Walmart which paid minimum wages. Better pay led to better and happier employees who were both more productive and driven to help shoppers. Walmart eventually followed Costco versus the numeric spreadsheet.

b) Apple increased its costs and built Apple stores when the most successful computing companies were Dell and Gateway which pioneered the direct selling model. Gateway is dead. Dell is a different company. Today every major electronic company from Samsung to Microsoft is opening flagship stores. The insight that drove the Apple store included the opportunity for people to sample simplicity and touch the immaculately designed product, a recognition that Apple was a luxury brand like Gucci and Prada and not just an electronic purveyor and much more. These insights and connections were much more than data.

How do we encourage the combination of data and instinct, fact and feeling?

Over the years I have preached "The 3 limits" that help overcome a dependence on data

1. Encourage Data Collection with limits: Many times, people do not make decisions of any sort because they do not believe they have enough data. I encourage people to set a time limit in which they will collect data, so they do not dither forever in a quixotic search for some holy grail of fact.

Collect often. Collect more. But collect fast.

Then unless your instinct and gut tell you that you are missing essential data or making a decision with the data you have could lead to a dramatically dangerous and not changeable decision you must commit.

Most decisions are reversible if new data comes up and so waiting around makes no sense.

2. Recognize the limits of data: Data is an ingredient and sometimes a critical one that flavors the dish but it not the meal! There is much more to a decision than data including insight, instinct, context and much more.

Data is often backward looking and cannot leap into the future. The decision makers or team creates that move forward.

When someone says data is the new oil, I remind them that it is the refineries that make a lot of the money and it is how one combines and filters data rather than the data itself that makes the difference.

I pirate, paraphrase and purloin a poem...

*Data data everywhere
So much data that I will sink
Data data everywhere
Pray who will help me think?*

3. Data driven decision making alone will limit your career: When someone tells me that they made a decision based on what a spreadsheet or model suggested they do, I urge them to start looking for a new job since they will soon be unemployed in an age of Algorithmic machines.

This is a reality.

If one cannot discern what a machine cannot or augment what it can one will be replaced.

AI and machine learning has taken such a quantum jump recently that we are now in the beginning of a machine age where lots of decisions will be provided by machine.

Selecting and connecting the right decisions and then understanding and communicating them will be key.

6. A third prescriptive question: Is this something that can be taught or is it inherent? I ask this because if it can't be taught, then there's nothing prescriptive we can suggest. So I'm assuming that people can learn to develop the courage to face inconvenient truths, to take a stand that isn't justified by the numbers, that goes against the conventional wisdom? So should organizations be encouraging people to go with their gut, take risks, speak truth to power? Should they incentivize these actions through formal rewards and recognitions programs or is it something they need to do more informally? Or both?

Today we live in transformational times as the forces of globalization, demographic shifts and technological change feed of each other to create new threats and opportunities for every firm.

Large successful companies are being upended by new upstarts such as Dollar Shave Club, Airbnb and Uber.

People are empowered like never before with smart phones which serve as sling shots that allow them to have God like power.

Disruption is the name of the game.

Disruptive thinking is what Companies often ask for but do not often get.

One of the reasons is that historically the nail that stood out got pounded down rather than the squeaky wheel getting the grease.

Challenging the status quo is not only something that takes bravery but is particularly difficult in an environment when you may be punished or branded a non-team player who does not just get the culture.

It is for this reason that companies must find ways to enable and encourage speaking truth to power. If someone inside does not speak the truth and therefore ensure critical issues are addressed the truth will arrive via competitors who take away market share, a newspaper article speaking of unfair practices or pricing or some other shock to the system which may be hard if impossible to recover from.

Truth has a habit of breaking in.

Better it breaks out inside the company, so it can be addressed.

Many of us know what the problems are, and we are willing to whisper them outside of work or to trusted friends because we may not feel safe inside the company.

Thus, truth telling, and turd calling is not some genetic trait but one that we all have skills to do. What we need is the right environment for this skill to show itself.

By encouraging speaking out helps the company survive and thrive.

Here are some ways companies can do so

1. Anonymous Tip Lines/Suggestion Boxes : Sometimes it takes the safety of anonymity to speak up. While ideally people should feel safe to voice their truth it is sometimes difficult.
2. Management rules that insist on asking for truth and making it part of the culture: At the end of every important meeting the lead manager should ask two questions a) is there something that has not been said that should have been said and b) can someone please say why what we discussed or agreed to today maybe wrong? These two questions both enable speaking up but also start impacting the culture making it a questioning one.
3. Rewarding truth tellers. Nothing aligns behavior like incentives. Rewarding rather than punishing people who challenge the status quo with reconciliation, financial benefits and promotions sends a powerful message.
4. Bosses who discuss when they are wrong and how they can be wrong: By telegraphing a combination of humor and vulnerability management can make it safe
5. Case Studies/Outside Speakers: Bringing in people or sharing case studies on how companies either succeeded by recognizing the turd on the table.

7. What are five (or three or ten) most common “turds on the table”—the most difficult topics to broach or truths to tell within organizations? This might include things like “telling the boss he’s wrong” or suggesting a 180 degree swing in strategy or ignoring all the social media data.

Over the years I have found that there are many “turds on the table” and they can be grouped into five broad areas.

1. Management Issues.

- A) Management is disconnected from reality and refusing to acknowledge facts (GE)
- B) Management is creating a toxic workplace through bullying, discrimination or harassment. (#Me too Movement)

2. Cultural Issues

- A) Company culture is now a cult and has become inflexible
- B) Company culture is fear driven and people keep their heads down (

3. Financial Issues

- A) Company is not calculating true costs or over inflating revenue (Enron)
- B) Company is taking short term dangerous issues to goose the numbers in ways that are not good for company or consumers (Wells Fargo creating fake accounts)

4. Legal Issues

- A) Company is not consistent with spirit or word of the law (Anderson Consulting)
- B) Manipulation of numbers or stealing of copyrights etc.

5. Industry Issues

- A) Refusal to acknowledge that customer behavior has changed or competitive landscape is different than believed (Most newspeak publishers for first decade of digital)
- B) Not acknowledging seismic shifts in technology since it will require making difficult decisions (Kodak versus Digital)

8. Can you provide some examples that illustrate talking about the turd on the table, both from your own experience as well as what others have done (either those you've worked with/for or researched examples)?

The opening to question one has the first example (it was with the CEO of Adobe about 10 years ago where I asked him address the question that was on all our minds)

Last month during a conference I made two provocative statements that jolted the industry.

First I said we say how much we value consumers time but I had done some math and realized we were paying less than minimum wages for people to spend an hour watching ads. No wonder folks were signing up for ad free options.

This created enough of a buzz that a leading publication hired experts and ran a series of articles to determine if this was true. One of the links in the link page shares all the research.

Another statement I made was that the opportunity to interrupt people in the United States with advertising was likely to decline between 20 and 30 percent in the next five years. This statement had Citibank issue a note to determine the impact on advertising and many said it was overstated.

A publication shared my thinking and it was clearly not some drunken math.

The points of the two statements were to wake marketers up from the belief that a) we could depend on mass advertising to build brands and b) urge them to realize that reaching people was going to get more expensive so this fixation on buying media cheaper and cheaper was disengaged from reality.

Another recent turd on the table was to get Clients to realize that the big platforms of Facebook and Google were not here to disrupt agencies but to disrupt marketers and unless they started paying attention to this reality they would be in trouble.

(An article and interview about these statements (all in the last month) is in the links section and should provide a lot of fodder)

There is a degree of intent sixty to calling out the turd on the table and it is widespread across the world and across more than business.

The whistle blowers find so much turd that is diarrhea and can bring a company down for ever or change an industry or government (see link to top 10)

Others like Wells Fargo make people re-think a brand and lead to leadership changes.

The key is if we call out turds early and often we never get to the diarrhea level attack

(chapter description)

Creating a culture and modeling behaviors that encourage straight talk is a crucial balancing act. Organizations need to communicate through their leaders and managers that people have a voice and should use it honestly and regularly, even when their voice may clash with studies, projections, computerized models, etc. More specifically, organizations should foster two types of talk.

First and foremost, say what you think rather than taking refuge in “the data”. People can obscure or obliterate their main point by presenting a series of charts and slides that set up a thicket of numbers that effectively hide the real point they’re making. It’s tough to tell a hard truth in an age where we’re loathe to offend or when everyone is pushing us to seek consensus. But good leaders want honesty and transparency, no matter whose feelings are offended. As an incentive, people who talk about turds on the table usually become organizational stars. They become known as straight shooters, as bold thinkers, as people who are sufficiently brave to confront difficult situations directly.

Second, do not go with the crowd if your instinct says no. In a numberocracy, people are wary of going against what the data says to do—where it predicts the market will, what it suggests employees will be most receptive to, what will be most financially prudent. In meetings, group and crowd dynamics take over, and the majority may cite chapter and verse—or data and more data—to justify their view. If you don’t agree with the majority, though, take a stand. This is especially true if you’re operating on a higher moral principle, if you believe in the rightness of your point of view. The turd here is the “inconvenient truth”, the difficult but right thing to do.

Besides suggesting other ways that organizational leaders can encourage these types of conversations, I’ll also illustrate how to do so with examples. I’ll relate the policies enacted by humanistic leaders who want to motivate their people to say what they think and feel rather than deliver by-the-numbers presentations or avoid stepping on anyone’s toes. And I’ll share stories of individuals who were sufficiently courageous that they were willing to risk offending a boss or a customer to speak from the heart about a sensitive issue.