Bullsh*tting: The pros and cons of using empty and misleading communication

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People adopt the practice of 'bullsh*tting' in the workplace because it can allow them to become a member of the professional community.

A paper by Professor André Spicer, Professor in Organizational Behavior at the Business School (formerly Cass), explores the concept of bullsh*tting—which is common in many organizations—as a social practice.

"Playing the Bullsh*t Game: How Empty and Misleading Communication Takes Over Organizations' explains how certain speech communities—a group of people sharing a common language or dialect—encourage bullsh*tting because it can reinforce their identity, negotiate practical challenges, and ensure their work can be carried out in a particular community.

As a result, bullsh*tting can become routine practice inside an organization. Professor Spicer believes three things are likely to make the practice more common.

1. Conceptual entrepreneurs—there are large number of potential bullsh*tters, particularly inside the management ideas industry by the likes of consultants, thought leaders and gurus
2. Noisy ignorance—actors often lack knowledge about an issue but are compelled to still talk about it. For example, middle managers who are ignorant about their subordinates' work but are under pressure to say something as the boss
3. Permissive uncertainty—actors who do not know what to do and are willing to consider any knowledge that can plug a gap. For example, the rise of artificial intelligence has led to claims surrounding the expertise, albeit without understanding the technology.

There can also be negative consequences of bullsh*tting. These include undermining the actor's identity, and result in mistrust and avoidance from colleagues who may believe them to be incompetent. The actor may also question themselves as a result, with a previous feeling of self-

reinforcement replaced by self-undermining.

The risk that bullsh*tting becomes built into the fabric of an organization means there is an increased likelihood that the practice gains more credibility, becomes more acceptable and is publicized externally. Professor Spicer believes that to backtrack from this escalation, organizations must unlearn the practice by reflecting on the language that they use and cut out jargon, be more vigilant with fact-checking, 'call out' bullsh*t and question the values of what they say.

Professor Spicer, who defines bullsh*t as 'empty and misleading communication," said:

"While there are positive and negative consequences, the use of bullsh*tting is one that must be carefully considered, and it can be a slippery slope for individuals and organizations.

"Although it can come down to personal choice or poor reasoning, bullsh*t can be perpetuated by an environment. It is the responsibility of the employer to encourage transparency and open and honest work environments to ensure the practice doesn't spread out of control and lead into a trap that can be hard to climb out of."