



EXECUTIVE DIGEST

Confronting indifference toward truth: Dealing with workplace bullshit



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Abstract Many organizations are drowning in a flood of corporate bullshit, and this is particularly true of organizations in trouble, whose managers tend to make up stuff on the fly and with little regard for future consequences. Bullshitting and lying are not synonymous. While the liar knows the truth and wittingly bends it to suit their purpose, the bullshitter simply does not care about the truth. Managers can actually do something about organizational bullshit, and this Executive Digest provides a sequential framework that enables them to do so. They can comprehend it, they can recognize it for what it is, they can act against it, and they can take steps to prevent it from happening in the future. While it is unlikely that any organization will ever be able to rid itself of bullshit entirely, this article argues that by taking these steps, astute managers can work toward stemming its flood. © 2020 Kelley School of Business, Indiana University. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. What's that smell?

“When the sky’s falling, I take shelter under
bullshit.”

—Scott Lynch, *The Republic of Thieves* (2013)

“One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted” (Frankfurt, 2009, inside cover). Most of us would agree that our workplaces are awash with bullshit. We believe we can spot it during committee meetings, vapid announcements, and town hall assemblies, as well as in puzzling and frustrating decisions. We also decry the inordinate influence of those who create and spread bullshit, and how they have managed to

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rise to the top of our organizations not in spite of but because of their bullshit (Spicer, 2017). Yet were we asked to describe why something is bullshit and what we should do about it, we would not likely agree on a common view. Instead, there would be a proliferation of definitions and recommendations. Despite its pervasiveness and impact on workplace morale and performance, there is a dearth of advice on how to deal with workplace bullshit. Unfortunately, as per philosopher Harry Frankfurt's quote above, too many of us produce and accept bullshit in the workplace. This is probably most true when organizations are in trouble or when the sky is falling, as the recent cases of Enron and of BP in the Gulf of Mexico attest.

In response, we draw on the work of Frankfurt (2009) and others (e.g., Christensen, Kärreman, & Rasche, 2019; Graeber, 2018; Spicer, 2017) to understand and suggest ways of dealing with workplace bullshit. We begin by defining bullshit and explicating the distinctions between bullshit and other forms of misrepresentation. We then introduce a four-step framework for understanding how to deal with workplace bullshit:

1. Comprehend workplace bullshit;
2. Recognize workplace bullshit;
3. Act against workplace bullshit; and
4. Prevent workplace bullshit from occurring.

In line with the topic of our article, we use the acronym C.R.A.P. to refer to this framework. We conclude with some thoughts about how individuals and organizations can further intervene to stop the creation and proliferation of bullshit. While our ideas will be helpful to everyone, we place particular emphasis on the role of leaders, who are likely to be the key reasons why bullshit

either is or is not overflowing in their organizations.

2. I'm not lying to you

What is workplace bullshit? It is the basis for nouns (e.g., that information is bullshit; that person is a bullshitter) and a verb (someone is bullshitting). Drawing on Frankfurt (2009), we define workplace bullshit as taking place when colleagues make statements at work with no regard for the truth. The term bullshit therefore comprises both the communicative act and the information in it. Bullshit can be conveyed in written form (e.g., emails, letters, reports), spoken form (e.g., conversations, speeches, audio/video recordings), and graphical form (e.g., photographs, charts, diagrams).

The disregard-for-the-truth aspect of the definition underlies how bullshit is a form of misrepresentation that differs from lying. A liar is someone who is interested in the truth, knows it, and deliberately misrepresents it. In contrast, a bullshitter has no concern for the truth and does not know or care what is true or is not. In other words, to tell a lie, the liar must know what is true. The lie is designed and communicated under the direction of that truth, whereas the bullshitter has more freedom because they do not care about the truth and are not constrained by it. Table 1 below shows an example of workplace misrepresentation that compares bullshitting to lying. Understanding these differences is important for recognizing and dealing with the phenomenon of workplace bullshit.

In this article, we focus on the workplace. This context is related to but different from misrepresentation phenomena in other specific professional contexts, such as leadership, journalism, and politics (see Table 2 for some examples of these). By focusing on workplace bullshit, we are dealing with the situations that occur when colleagues

Table 1. Lying vs. Bullshitting

	Example statement: An organizational leader informs employees that a proposed strategic change will not result in job losses.	
	<i>Lying</i>	<i>Bullshitting</i>
Form of workplace misrepresentation	The leader knows there will be job losses but hides or manipulates the truth. The leader is lying by stating known untruths.	The leader has no idea whether there will be job losses or not, and is thus not hiding or concealing the truth. The leader is bullshitting because they neither know nor care whether their statements are true or false.

Table 2. Different forms of misrepresentation

Misrepresentation phenomena	Description of the misrepresentation phenomena	Examples
Bullshit jobs	Meaningless or pointless jobs that are so unnecessary and non-value-adding that even the employee would struggle to justify their need (Graeber, 2018). This is often reflected in meaningless job titles.	Any administrative position that exists to serve only the person performing it. When such positions are eliminated, there is no negative impact on the organization or society. Often these positions come with meaningless job titles such as Director of Strategic Recruitment.
Fake news	News articles, pictures, and reviews that are intentionally and verifiably false and that could mislead audiences (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Berthon & Pitt, 2018).	One of the top fake news articles in 2018 was a satirical World Daily News Report piece on a lottery winner in the U.S. arrested for dumping a large amount of manure on his ex-boss's lawn.
Fake company slogans	Slogans that do not truly reflect a company's value proposition (e.g., promised benefits to customers) and values (e.g., practices and culture; Lee, Hannah, & McCarthy, 2019 in press).	Consider the slogan of disgraced energy company Enron, which was "Ask Why." The reality was that the company did not want anyone—employees, analysts, or customers—to ask about its financial standing (Lee et al., 2019).
Political bullshit (a.k.a. posttruth politics)	Statements by politicians that are not triangulated in relation to the truth and without concern for the veracity of the statement in question (Hopkin & Rosamond, 2018; Suiter, 2016).	The fake claims made by U.K. politicians about how easy and beneficial it would be for the U.K. to leave the European Union.
Marketing bullshit (a.k.a. puffery)	Exaggerated or false claims by marketers that amplify the features and performance of a product or service (Chakraborty & Harbaugh, 2014).	In 2000, a court ruled that ads from the Papa John's pizza company stating "Better ingredients. Better Pizza" could not be verified as fact and should be deemed puffery.
Jargon bullshit	Words or expressions used by a particular profession or group to make something seem legitimate and enticing, while also muddling language and thinking (Poole, 2013; Spicer, 2017).	Expressions for thinking creatively such as "blue-sky thinking", "ideas shower," and "out-of-the-box thinking." Such expressions are used in the game buzzword bingo.
Workplace deviance	The deliberate desire to cause harm to a workplace through acts such as lying, cheating, and stealing (Warren, 2003).	In 1995, Nick Leeson, a rogue trader at Barings Bank, made fraudulent and unauthorised trades that led to the collapse of the bank.
Workplace lying	Dishonesty and untruthfulness in the workplace (Grover, 2005).	When employees embellish their resumes or make up stories about their experience and accomplishments.
Workplace bullshit	When colleagues make statements in any form (e.g., written, spoken, or graphical) at work and without regard for the truth (as defined in this article).	An organizational leader informs the employees that a proposed strategic change will not result in job losses, but the leader has no idea whether there will be job losses or not.

misrepresent such things as: reasons for and consequences of an organizational change; intentions to work on or fix something; reports about work claimed to have been done; explanations and rationales for decisions and actions undertaken in

the workplace; and surveys on the harmony, performance, and outputs of teams. For this context, we explain how to effectively comprehend, recognize, act against, and prevent the crafting, spreading, and impact of bullshit.

Bullshit is not a new phenomenon in or outside the workplace. However, in today's post-truth world (Keyes, 2004), and aided and abetted by modern communication technologies, it may be more prevalent than ever. Bullshit has become so commonplace that it is suggested that business communications are dominated by *truthiness* (in which the validity of something is based on how it feels), *post-fact* language (taking a position that ignores facts), and *echo chambers* (where positive-feedback loops create cravings for and fuel the spread of bullshit; Berthon & Pitt, 2018). Frankfurt (2009, p. 63) argued: "Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about." Thus, the more often colleagues at work are asked to comment on matters about which they know little or nothing, the more bullshit there is. Petrocelli (2018) built on these ideas, arguing that people are more likely to bullshit not only when they feel obligated to provide an opinion but also when two other conditions are present: when their audience doesn't know much about the subject, and when there is no accountability for producing bullshit. These two conditions exist because there is a misguided assumption that workplace democracy grants colleagues the permission to have uninformed and unchallenged opinions on everything. In other words, the production of bullshit in the workplace occurs when the forces that impel a colleague to speak on an issue exceed their knowledge about that issue (Frankfurt, 2009). This imbalance is one of the primary drivers for the rise and resilience of fake colleagues, their failed initiatives, and the ensuing hollowing out of the professions of business, leadership, and management. To this, we would add that bullshit is even more likely to be present and attenuated in times of organizational crisis. When people are under pressure and when things are less certain and the facts and eventualities less clear, bullshit is more likely to flourish as people simply make up things on the fly.

Not all bullshit is bad though, and this is particularly so outside of the workplace, in the sphere of normal social intercourse. Consider what Spicer (2017) calls 'artisanal bullshit,' which we might call 'social bullshit.' In a study of how friends interacted with each other in English pubs, it was found that this type of bullshit is important and acceptable, and it may even be a positive aspect of friendship relationships (Fox, 2014). The banter, the loose talk, the unsubstantiated opinions, and the fanciful claims all lubricate and amplify our interactions with friends and family. Friends in social and leisure contexts often

reminisce and brag about achievements and make farfetched claims about what might have been and the ones that got that away. In such contexts, we are not expected to communicate precisely as we would, say, in a work setting and in our professional capacities. In the process of normal social intercourse, we have a license to produce artisanal bullshit. This is different from producing damaging bullshit or telling bald-faced lies. In fact, a social life devoid of artisanal bullshit is likely to be a boring and bland one. However, when we engage in work, we must distinguish between this type of social bullshit, which can be harmless or even helpful to the organization (because it can enable the development of normal interpersonal relationships), and other types of bullshit that can have damaging impacts on the organization. Strictly within the workplace and in our professional capacities, "No longer is bullshit a handy supply of manure for fertilising new ideas. Instead, it can create a dangerous waste problem, which could make people—and, indeed, the entire organisation—profoundly ill" (Spicer, 2017, p. 164).

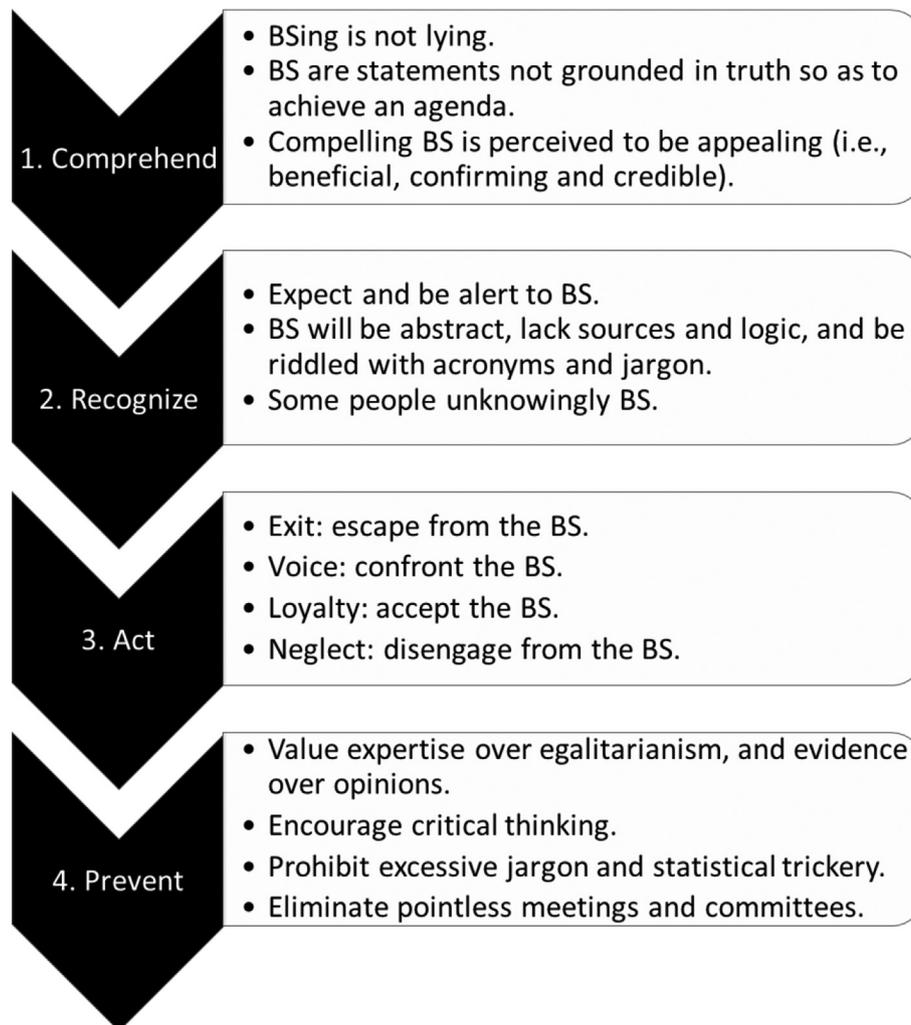
3. The C.R.A.P. framework for dealing with workplace bullshit

It is critical for us all to better comprehend what workplace bullshit is, how to recognize it, how to act against it, and how to prevent it. This is the focus of our article, and in this section, we explain each of these steps and present the C.R.A.P. framework (Fig. 1) for understanding how to deal with workplace bullshit.

3.1. Comprehending workplace bullshit

Workplace bullshit comes into existence when one or more members of an organization are intent on pursuing an underlying agenda of their own, such as protecting themselves against criticism or perceived threats, or attempting to benefit themselves in the pursuit of opportunities. That agenda may be exclusively self-serving, or it may be intended to serve the organization; it can have selfish or selfless motives. The bullshitter makes a decision to further that agenda through communicative acts and decides on a message and a medium that will help them to achieve that agenda. Crucially, while doing so, they disregard the truth, in the sense that they are not concerned with the truth, inaccuracy, or falseness of their message but only in its efficaciousness in promoting the desired agenda. The bullshitter then is

Figure 1. The C.R.A.P. framework for dealing with workplace bullshit



presenting a statement that they expect others to take as being objective and true, when in reality it may be neither of those things and is only expedient in serving the bullshitter's agenda. For example, consider when a manager tells employees that they must do a task in a certain way because it is so specified in the union's collective agreement, but the manager has no idea whether this specification in the collective agreement actually exists or not. In this case, the manager is consciously bullshitting. They are not lying, because they do not know whether the task is actually specified in the collective agreement. They are bullshitting because they are making a statement without regard to the truth so as to convince employees to perform tasks in a specific way. Such bullshit, relative to the truth, can be a highly effective tool for convincing people. The bullshitter does not feel constrained by the truth

and so has the freedom to make statements as novel, exciting, and convincing as is necessary to further their agenda. Bullshitters thus bullshit in order to make their own lives easier. They believe that this approach to communication will benefit them, the organization, or both. Furthermore, a bullshitter's statements may never have been intended to be believed or even to garner much attention. They are intended to misrepresent by being appealing or convincing, or by distracting, exhausting, or disengaging colleagues, so that agendas can be pursued with little or no resistance. This lack of awareness of the true nature of workplace bullshit is one of the reasons why there is such an abundance of it (Fredal, 2011).

Once bullshit is crafted and stated, an audience consumes it, assesses it, and potentially spreads it. Bullshitters seek to shape how their audiences appraise the bullshit, and a key concern for them

is that their audiences view their bullshit as appealing. Remember that bullshitters, unrestricted by truth, have more freedom to frame their statements. They are at liberty to devise appealing bullshit with three significant characteristics. First, the bullshit may offer personal benefits to the audience. For example, if a scientist in a research and development (R&D) department hears some bullshit from their boss that suggests the company is about to double the R&D budget, the scientist is likely to find this bullshit appealing. In addition, some employees may also relish or need workplace bullshit so as to flourish in their jobs. They view bullshit as a necessary aspect of organizational life. Trendy jargon, flaky logic, and shallow arguments can be so appealing to some that they provide them with direction and energy.

Second, bullshit that confirms the existing interests, beliefs, experiences, or attitudes of the audience is likely to be more appealing through their selective perception of the bullshit. For example, if a leader announces a dubious strategy for the company to become the best innovator in its industry, an employee with an innovation job role will be far more likely to receive this bullshit statement more positively. In such cases, workers can perceive the bullshit as personally flattering: If one worked in the R&D department of a company that placed importance on being innovative, one might also see the bullshit as praise for one's work and responsibilities.

Third, the audience is more likely to find the bullshit appealing if they also find it credible. A key to credibility is the identity of the person communicating the bullshit. If a leader or expert in innovation announces that their company will work toward being one of the most innovative companies in the world, then employees are more likely to believe this statement than if it were made by someone who cares or knows little about innovation. Furthermore, the nature of the information in any statement matters. When a bullshitter claims to have referred to trusted sources and uses technical language and jargon related to the issue, this could significantly enhance the credibility and appeal of the bullshit statement.

Thus, the comprehending step of our framework (Fig. 1) highlights that there is a difference between outright lying as opposed to bullshitting; that the bullshitter is always motivated by a wish to further their own underlying agenda; that bullshitters actively seek to make their bullshit communications palatable to those they wish to bullshit; and that the audience's selective perceptions can play a significant role in how the

bullshit message is received. In that sense, bullshit is similar to other forms of persuasion, including many of the misrepresentation phenomena in Table 2. However, the essence of bullshit is that it involves a disregard for the truth. When an audience appraises bullshit, in addition to assessing its appeal they will also reach their own conclusions about whether or not the message is grounded in the truth. Next, we turn attention to how to recognize workplace bullshit.

3.2. Recognizing workplace bullshit

The next step in the C.R.A.P. framework concerns how to develop a 'nose for bullshit' (i.e., how to recognize bullshit). The first rule of bullshit recognition is to expect it (Berkun, 2011). This is because everybody will either knowingly or unknowingly bullshit at some point. Bullshit can be characterised as a dynamic and effective form of political behaviour in organizations, or as those "activities that influence, or attempt to influence, the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within the organization" (Farrell & Petersen, 1982, p. 405). In an environment with multiple competing agendas, if some of them are being advanced via the use of bullshit, it might not be surprising if some people feel that they must bullshit as well so as to stand a chance of pursuing their own agendas. Furthermore, some bullshitters bullshit because they are naïve, biased, or sloppy in their handling of statements. They do not realize they are crafting or spreading bullshit. There is a primary need therefore to be alert to the possibility of bullshit. While accepting its ubiquity, one must avoid becoming so accustomed to bullshit as to be indifferent to its presence. In other words, it is necessary to develop a healthy cynicism about the possibility of bullshit.

The cornerstone to recognising bullshit is knowing how it masquerades. This involves recognizing how colleagues go about framing statements (in written, spoken, or graphical form) that are without regard for the truth. Typically, such statements are abstract and general in nature and come across as the opposite of plain English. The statements will lack details, sources, and logic, and they will be full of logical disconnects and gaps. Furthermore, if a statement is riddled with meaningless language, acronyms, buzzwords, and jargon, then it is likely to be bullshit. Consider for example, the statement by Howard Schultz, the CEO of Starbucks (2017) about the new Starbucks Roasteries, which he said were "delivering an immersive, ultrapremium, coffee-forward experience." The *Financial Times* deemed this to be the

epitome of corporate claptrap (Kellaway, 2017). When faced with ‘jargonese,’ often people assume that they are missing something, or they confuse vagueness for profundity. The rule holds however, that if it is not possible to understand what the words in a statement mean, then it is reasonable to suspect the statement to be bullshit. Finally, when seeking to detect bullshit, it is important to consider how data may be framed and presented in ways that might support bullshit statements. This has prompted the University of Washington to launch a course entitled “Calling Bullshit in the Age of Big Data.” The course explores how data can be used to steer people toward misleading conclusions, arguing that students should learn to be vigilant about how the visualization of data can produce bullshit that contaminates their information diet (Bergstrom & West, 2017).

The third rule for recognizing bullshit is to recognize that bullshitters can sometimes produce and spread bullshit unknowingly. This can happen when an audience finds an initial bullshit message appealing, confirmatory, and credible, and so concludes it to be truthful. Once an audience is fooled by the bullshit and the bullshitter, they are likely to follow and spread instructions or assumptions contained in the bullshit, but they do so without knowing that they are now bullshitting. They inadvertently become accomplices in the creation and spreading of bullshit because they have been unprepared, gullible, sloppy, or deluded in accepting something to be the truth. As these individuals are not Machiavellian crafters of bullshit, it can be more effective to focus on challenging the bullshit itself rather than attacking and discrediting the bullshitter (Christensen et al., 2019; Cohen, 2002).

The aphorism not to attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity is central to recognizing bullshit produced by the unknowing bullshitter. For example, consider a colleague at work who is told by a senior manager that a planned new product will deliver certain benefits to customers despite the existence of sound logic and good evidence to the contrary. That colleague may accept and even pass on the bullshit simply because they find it highly appealing (beneficial, confirmatory, and credible). Or, they may do so because they have tight time and informational constraints (Spicer, 2017), as often happens when companies are in crisis, and they are unable to accurately evaluate the bullshit. Instead, they resort to inadequate ‘satisficing’ (a portmanteau word of *satisfy* and *suffice*) to make suboptimal decisions (Simon, 1956). Or, they may have been caught up in the hype and the

related jargon, buzzwords, and acronyms behind the new product. In sum, bullshit of this nature is not produced by design. In the words of U.S. lawyer and presidential adviser Ted Sorensen, it is likely produced unknowingly, as many employees develop “a confidence in [their] own competence which outruns the fact” (Sorensen, 1963, p. 72).

In sum, the recognizing step of our framework (Fig. 1) highlights the need to be vigilant about the potential for workplace bullshit; in particular, it is useful to develop a healthy cynicism about communications that suffer from abstract, over-complicated English, excess jargon, illogical connections, and lack of evidence. Finally, some bullshit is spread inadvertently by gullible believers of the original bullshit communicated to them. In the next section, we discuss how to act when faced with workplace bullshit.

3.3. Acting against workplace bullshit

When employees correctly conclude that a statement is bullshit, they may react in a number of different ways. To illustrate these reactions, we draw on Hirschman’s (1970) *exit, voice, loyalty* framework, which he initially formulated to illustrate how employees react to organizations in decline or when the sky was falling. Scholars later added *neglect* (Farrell, 1983; Withey & Cooper, 1989) and successfully applied the framework to help understand employees’ responses to negative workplace experiences (Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, & Mainous, 1988; Turnley & Feldman, 1999). We apply this framework here to employees’ reactions to bullshit.

When employees act by exiting, they are trying to escape from the bullshit and the bullshitter. This can involve quitting the organization or seeking a transfer to a different unit of the organization so as to avoid the influence of the bullshitter. Exiting is a likely reaction when employees are so appalled by the bullshit that they cannot stay with the organization or unit, or when they are already disillusioned, and the bullshit (possibly the latest bout in a stream of bullshit) is the last straw. For exiting to happen, employee dissatisfaction with the situation must rise to such a level that the disadvantages of remaining and facing bullshit in the workplace are greater than the disadvantages of leaving. Or alternatively, the personal costs of leaving should be low enough relative to the costs of the two other responses in which workers remain and either contest the bullshit (i.e., voice) or disengage from the workplace bullshit (i.e., neglect).

Voicing is the act of employees speaking up to confront what they consider to be bullshit. Employees may ask to see evidence that supports the suspected bullshit. They may themselves provide bullshit-challenging evidence along with alternative statements, and when doing so should be cognizant that simple and coherent bullshit will tend to be more appealing than intricate and complex truths. Employees may also voice by laughing at and mocking bullshit. This is a way to “informally show up its emptiness without having to risk a full-frontal face-off with powerful bullshit artists” (Spicer, 2017, p. 167). Voicing can also entail publicly calling ‘bullshit on bullshit’ or seeking help from an outside agency, such as a union or government office. Employees are more likely to choose to voice when they perceive that the organization offers sufficient psychological safety; that is, when employees sense that they will not be embarrassed or punished if they speak up (Frazier, Fainshmidt, Klinger, Pezeshkan, & Vracheva, 2017). The propensity to voice also depends on the extent to which employees have organizational commitment; that is, whether they care for and believe in the organization enough to want to counter the harm of bullshit, combined with their perceived ability and capacity to make a difference. Such conditions are necessary for effectively confronting bullshit. A principle known as Brandolini’s Law states that the amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude larger than is needed to produce it (“Brandolini’s Law,” 2014).

Loyalty occurs when employees correctly recognize that a statement is bullshit yet decide to go along with it. In doing so, they accept and become accomplices to the bullshitter. They may do so for various reasons: out of allegiance to the original bullshitter, or because they find the bullshit personally appealing, or because they genuinely believe the bullshit is somehow good for the organization. Hirschman (1970) describes loyalty as the product of mostly economic factors, and these factors too could enchain an individual to a workplace flowing with bullshit if the cost of exiting or voicing is too great for them. Furthermore, some employees may remain loyal in the hope that the flow and impact of bullshit may diminish at some point or that the costs of exiting or voicing will improve.

Finally, neglect is the act of disengaging oneself from the bullshit and the work surrounding it. Workers who choose neglect as an approach to dealing with bullshit may have tried to voice in the past but found themselves criticized, ignored, and even marginalized. They then stay and disengage

because exiting is too costly. Neglect may be common in organizations in which the flow of bullshit is ubiquitous and relentless, and it is easier for those organizations’ employees to try to ignore the bullshit rather than to challenge it or escape from it. Such employees will distrust and even dislike the leaders and other colleagues who produce bullshit, and they will lose confidence in what they say they will do or claim to have done. They will then disengage with the organization, become disinterested, spend less time at work, and expend less effort when there.

In sum, exiting, voicing, loyalty, and neglect are four ways employees react when faced with workplace bullshit. While they are conceptually and empirically distinct, there are also important interactions between these different reactions. For example, loyalty to workplace bullshit can moderate instances of exiting and voicing. If a company rewards those who are loyal to bullshit, then the exit and voice reactions are less attractive. Similarly, if an employee tires of bullshit and finds they are in a situation where it is easy to exit (e.g., there is an abundance of external opportunities), then it is less likely they will remain with the organization to pursue voice or neglect reactions; they will just leave. This means that exiting, voicing, loyalty, and neglect are not just ways that employees can react to workplace bullshit but are also useful indicators of the extent and impact of workplace bullshit. If neglect and exit reactions are widespread, if loyalty is rewarded, and if voice is absent, then this indicates an organization that is fertile with bullshit.

3.4. Preventing workplace bullshit

The first three steps in the C.R.A.P. framework are used to understand the nature of workplace bullshit and how to identify and deal with it. Building on this knowledge, the final step in the framework outlines how to prevent the creation and spread of workplace bullshit in the first place. In the long term, this step may be of the greatest benefit in dealing with workplace bullshit. Effective prevention will minimize the need for, and costs associated with, recognizing and acting against workplace bullshit. For this step of the framework, we now outline a number of practices that your organization, your colleagues, and you (as you are likely to be part of the bullshit problem) should follow.

3.4.1. Encourage critical thinking

What people think and state depends on how they think. Thus, it is far more dangerous to assume people know what they are talking about than it is to assume they do not and then to let them prove

you wrong. To address this, organizations should encourage critical thinking, which is an approach to thinking that is reflective, sceptical, rational, open-minded, and guided by evidence. It is thinking that is not directed toward problem solving per se but rather about developing a discipline for recognizing errors, biases, and other weaknesses in one's own thinking and that of others (Halpern, 2013). Critical thinking is the opposite of the quick, automatic, skim-based thinking that produces and spreads workplace bullshit. It is thinking that is slower, more effortful, more calculating, and more conscious. Prolific bullshitters themselves are likely to be more effective at critical thinking, which is one reason for the view that "You can't bullshit a bullshitter."

Research by Pennycook, Cheyne, Barr, Koehler, and Fugelsang (2015) suggests that an organization's capacity to produce and accept workplace bullshit decreases with the prevalence of and value placed on critical thinking in that organization. They outline how individuals have different sensitivities to bullshit: Those who have the ability to stop and think analytically about the substance of statements are less receptive to bullshit, while those with lower cognitive skills and less insight are more receptive. To stifle and debunk workplace bullshit, this mode of thinking should not be limited to those employees in organizations, such as scientists and lawyers, who are trained to develop and run bullshit-free work processes. Colleagues throughout the organization, and especially those in administrative and leadership roles, should also practice it so that evidence can guide key decisions. This is also true in the areas of marketing and sales, which thrive on the creation and circulation of bullshit. There should be an organizational culture in which individuals are encouraged to ask what the basis of a statement is; to question the strength of that basis; and—as needed—to propose alternative statements, related evidence, and supporting tests.

3.4.2. Value evidence over opinions and expertise over egalitarianism

Spicer (2017, p. 179) claims that "most management initiatives remain utterly bereft of any evidence base. The result is that managers largely operate on the basis of superstition rather than fact." Whatever the truth of this claim may be, evidence is the available facts that can be used to assess whether a statement and its assumptions are true. This makes evidence central to critical thinking and a disinfectant for both the production and spread of bullshit. Evidence-based management is the translation of ideas and principles

based on best evidence into organizational practices (Rousseau, 2006). It is a practice that helps ensure decision makers don't bullshit. It requires them to consult and use the best available evidence as opposed to relying on outdated information or anecdotal and personal experiences and opinions (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). That is not to say that anecdote, opinion, and creativity do not have a place in management but that they should be presented as such rather than as statements that are objective and true. Statements grounded in strong evidence should trump statements based on opinion regardless of how appealing the statement or the colleague making it might be. In other words, as attributed to the late senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan: "We are all entitled to our own opinions, but not to our own facts."

Furthermore, to help encourage and value evidence over opinion, managers should be careful whom they consult. While they should seek substantive debate about statements and supporting evidence, they should only involve well-informed and value-adding experts. Social media and crowdsourcing initiatives regularly remind us that the wisdom of the crowd is not as judicious as we think. So while some may view it as positive to be egalitarian and consult as many colleagues as possible, this is likely to net opinion-based claims free of evidence. Such input is a reagent for bullshit production.

Finally, any approach to evidence-based management should ensure that the practices suit the industry and functional context. For example, professionals in a biotechnology company would be expected to follow and use industry-appropriate evidence-based practices that are likely to be more rigorous and extensive than those adopted by a fashion-clothing company. Such practices include encouraging or even requiring their employees to do the following four things (see Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006): (1) demand evidence for statements that seem implausible; (2) examine the logic or cause-and-effect reasoning between the evidence and the statement; (3) as needed, encourage experimentation to test the confidence of data and validity of statements; and (4) continually repeat and build on the first three activities to create an evidence-based learning culture that stifles the production and spread of bullshit.

3.4.3. Prohibit excessive jargon and statistical trickery

When bullshit is legitimized and codified, it spreads more easily and is likely to be more influential. This in turn fosters the future production of more bullshit. Two ways in which bullshit

becomes legitimised are through the use of jargon and statistical trickery. Jargon legitimizes bullshit because it can make a statement seem professional and based on specialized expertise; in other words, it can make bullshit appear objective and true. Bullshitters employ jargon words for the dual purpose of making something seem legitimate and enticing while also muddling language and thinking. To make it easier for nonexperts to remember and spread bullshit, bullshit statements and jargon can be simplified into acronyms and abbreviations to help the bullshit spread meme-like from person to person in an organization and beyond. Consequently, to prevent the production and spread of bullshit, organizations should prohibit the use of jargon, acronyms and abbreviations. For example, in 2010, Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, sent an email to all SpaceX staff with the subject line “Acronyms Seriously Suck” (Vance, 2015). In the email, he wrote:

There is a creeping tendency to use made up acronyms at SpaceX. Excessive use of made up acronyms is a significant impediment to communication. No one can actually remember all these acronyms and people don’t want to seem dumb in a meeting, so they just sit there in ignorance.” (Stone, 2015)

In further emails on the same topic, Musk says that jargon and acronyms are inherently untrustworthy and a sign that colleagues are doing meaningless work.

Finally, to help ensure that data are not used to steer people toward misleading conclusions, organizations and their employees should be encouraged to question statistics and visualizations of data. Employees should know the consequences of confusing means and medians, correlation and causation, and the measurement errors that can accompany biased sampling, the inclusion of outliers, and the misspecification of variables and relationships in regression models. Organizations should demand that visualizations of data have axes that are appropriately scaled and labelled, and that bar charts extend to zero to show the absolute magnitude. In sum, ask yourself: Does the visualization make a statement that properly reflects the underlying data, or has the visualization been designed to emphasize a bullshit agenda?

3.4.4. Eliminate pointless meetings and committees

Our final recommendation for preventing workplace bullshit is to tackle a key organizational mechanism that helps produce and spread it: pointless meetings

and committees. Both are inevitable and routine in organizations, as they can provide a forum for effectively sharing information, solving problems, and making decisions. However, there is an increasingly prevalent view that meetings and committees do not provide sufficient value when they involve too many or the wrong people, have no agenda, and are run inefficiently (Mroz, Allen, Verhoeven, & Shuffler, 2018). Such conditions make meetings and committees conducive to bullshit production, as the attendees, the communications, and the decision-making processes can be easily exploited by a bullshitter. To counter this, organizations should only establish committees and have meetings when there are clear terms of reference, a value-adding agenda, and the right attendees who can contribute to the desired agenda. More simply, the need for a meeting should be questioned unless an important decision needs to be made.

4. Conclusion

The workplace is a fertile place for bullshit in its many manifestations. This has been exacerbated by the changing nature of communication in the corporate environment, which now includes email, video-conferencing, intranets, and shared screens, in addition to face-to-face conversations, paper memorandums, and conventional meetings. Words, slogans, acronyms, jargon, graphics, and statistics flow effortlessly. In this article, we have defined bullshit and distinguished it from other forms of misrepresentation. We have argued that bullshit is different from lying in that the liar knows the truth but wilfully distorts it, while the bullshitter simply doesn’t care about the truth. While liars deceive their audiences, bullshitters almost certainly deceive themselves as well. Bullshit persists to a greater or lesser extent in most organizations, but there are indications that it is particularly prevalent in organizations facing trouble.

In order to cope with it in the workplace, we suggest that leaders adopt the C.R.A.P. approach. This is a simple process model for comprehending why bullshit exists, recognizing it when it is produced, knowing the options for acting against it, and then striving hard to prevent it from reoccurring. It is a model that would appeal to Lemmy Kilmister (2002, p. 225), who was the vocalist and bass player of the rock group Motörhead, and who said:

Apparently people don’t like the truth, but I do like it; I like it because it upsets a lot of

people. If you show them enough times that their arguments are bullshit, then maybe just once, one of them will say, “Oh! Wait a minute—I was wrong.” I live for that happening. Rare, I assure you.

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