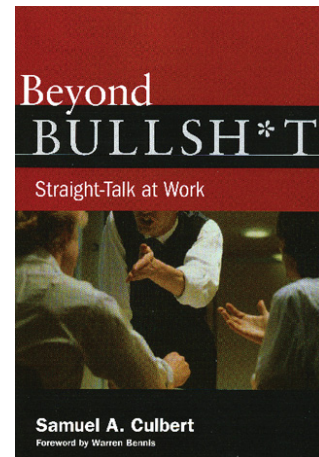


Book reviews

Reviewer	George Simons , SIETAR member
Review	August 2008
Author	Samuel A. Culbert
Title	Beyond Bullsh*t: Straight Talk at Work
Publisher	Stanford Business Books
Details	Published 2008. ISBN-9-780804 758857



The author of *Beyond Bullsh*t* says that, “This book is for people who wonder what it’s going to take to get rid of the constant deception and obfuscation that, at the end of the work day, leaves them feeling beaten up, confused and even a little dirty.” Culbert attempts to address this question with a book rooted in personal experiences and true anecdotes that highlight the necessity, dangers, benefits and management of bullsh*t in the US workplace.

I started to read this book shortly after listening to a TV interview with Jesse Ventura, the ex-governor of the US state of Minnesota. Whatever you feel about his libertarian politics, Ventura is a “straight talking” fellow if ever there was one. Ventura, a professional wrestler, turned actor, turned politician, compares the current political campaigns as well as the US business world to US professional wrestling. It looks like a real fight to the fans, but in fact the wrestlers knowingly both operate and cooperate in a theatrical act that makes money.

USians are submersed in a vast history composed of myths, stories and legends that have both nourished and obfuscated who we are. We needed stories to become and continue to expand as a nation and as an imperial power in our *Promised Land*, with our *Manifest Destiny*. Of course there have always been straight talkers such as Rudyard Kipling who adapted his poem “The White Man’s Burden” to the US invasion of the Philippines. The title of the poem itself, in testimony to the power of bullsh*t, was transformed into a philanthropic meaning of helping the disadvantaged better themselves our way whether they want it or not. Kipling’s comment cited above was certainly inspired by his experience and Victorian colonial rationalization (read “British bullsh*t”).

We have needed a story to take us to war, from the *Boston Tea Party*, *Remember the Maine*, *Pearl Harbor*, *The Gulf of Tonkin Incident*, to 9/11. Real or fabricated, but certainly elaborated and marketed events become the bullsh*t fed to the US public for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Marketing is everything and whether we are talking about commercial products or foreign policy, the appropriate branding story and spin need to be created, whether well thought out or doctored in the moment. It’s all about sales, whether of ideas, guns or butter. Lest you identify me as a discontented expatriate, let me reassure you, that first yes I am one, but let me also reassure you that a similar analysis fits most of the national actors on the political stage. It is just that I know my own country’s history a bit better.

Culbert doesn't refer to these background issues, but in fact they are the necessary epistemology for comprehending the communication dynamics that he wants to help the reader understand and better manage. As we are continually reminded, "It's the Culture, Dummy!"

How does one disconnect from, get beyond bullsh*t? The author points out that "People say what they need to say to get support for their agendas and to avoid other people's resistance." Culbert makes the point that order to buy into bullsh*t we generally have to rationalize, i.e., disconnect from the fundamental truths we know about ourselves and others, i.e., deceive ourselves. In other words, when your bullsh*t indicator flashes red, it should not be ignored.

Communication skills in the USA have gone through a variety of emphases historically, viz., sensitivity training, assertiveness training, non-violent communication, etc., and each has promoted a number of these tools. Most of these technologies at some level or other sought to liberate us from some form of oppressive bullsh*t or other. Culbert selects a number of such tools, in particular a process of truth finding and tactics for anchoring oneself in straight talk.

*Beyond Bullsh*t* draws on "I speak" for example, speaking for oneself in terms of one's truths and feelings. Far from being a moment of spontaneity or a cathartic blast (or, I might add, flaming on the internet), the author sees straight talk "in the context of a reciprocally supportive and caring relationship." "Straight talking cohorts," he continues, "give and expect reciprocal concern on almost any matter bearing on each other's work effectiveness and personal well being." Relationship is king, and even straight talk and "I speak" turn into bullsh*t when the speaker imposes his or her agenda on another's vulnerability. Thus the author explores ways of listening and talking that can nurture the relationship at the same time that they promote freedom for straight talk.

Is your or my straight talk always right? Of course not. But reflectively finding and speaking our truth brings the real resources of ourselves to the situation, instead of our continuing to flail about in whatever tub of bullsh*t in which we are currently awash and where we are encouraged to "not make waves" and to CYA. In other words, straight talk *is* the diversity advantage, the grass roots democracy if you will that liberates us from the spiral, viral marketing of bullsh*t and inauthentic political correctness. Candor needs to be examined for its benefit to both the speaker and the listener.

Is there a place for bullsh*t in the workplace? Culbert thinks so. When I was a student of psychology, Fritz Perls delighted in distinguishing between "elephant shit," "bullshit" and "chicken shit." (Asterisks omitted here, as Fritz would consider them inauthentic). These distinctions might be useful in reading Culbert's suggestions. Elephant shit is the big poop that politics, patriotism, religion, yes, even science, are capable of excreting to overwhelm and bury our vulnerable human agendas. Chicken shit? The droppings of everyday of custom, politeness, habit, and the like, those little inauthenticities that fertilize our normal relationships with those we know and don't know. Every culture has its chicken shit and, once you learn to walk in it, it allows you to be at home. The workplace is no exception. The author insists that, "Without bullsh*t the workplace would be about as serene as the lawless Wild West."

Culbert believes that truth telling is contagious. We certainly hope so.