



**THINK FOR YOURSELF:
HOW SELF-DETERMINATION
UNLOCKS HUMAN POTENTIAL**

Carol Sanford



Have you ever wondered why, in a culture that celebrates its work ethic, most people hate their jobs?

Why, in a democratic society, people dislike and distrust their government? Why social and economic inequalities seem baked in, regardless of how much education, effort, or funding we throw at trying to correct them? Why does a growing deluge of scientific information about ecological and planetary collapse generate indifference or anxiety, but no deep change in the ways we live and work? Why do wild conspiracy theories garner more trust than carefully documented research?

The source of these dilemmas can be traced back to a historic moment a hundred years ago, when modern society underwent a profound restructuring so thorough and so successful that it has become invisible to us. This was the result of a concerted, intentional, and opportunistic effort, undertaken by a small but ambitious group of psychological practitioners, to drag psychology out of its backwater status in university philosophy departments and make it a powerful field of its own.

Frustrated by their inability to attract funding, recognition, or social stature, they sought to give psychology practical relevance, and they saw an opportunity to lift it out of obscurity by applying it to a range of social issues. An important part of their strategy was to bring psychological study and practice into alignment with scientific principles.

The *behaviorists*, as this group came to be known, believed that they could address the critical issues of their time, especially the tendency for societies to periodically erupt into episodes of chaos, violence, crime, and global warfare. They sought the means to create a well-ordered society, one where the more destructive behaviors of humanity could be controlled and channeled into productive purposes that would improve the material conditions of life for all people.

To accomplish these ends, they proposed a new, materialist approach to psychology that was rooted in experimental research and scientific method. This would enable them to create powerful new instruments of social influence and management, turning psychology into an applied, practical discipline and emancipating it from its subordinate role as a minor branch of philosophy.

The behaviorists made a compelling case to leaders in government and industry, to university presidents, and to the press and the American public that there was a need to move fast to implement their ideas and discoveries. Social chaos was intensifying social anxieties and fueling nationalist, racist, and anti-immigrant movements, along with programs to sterilize lower-class women to prevent them from having children. The behaviorists believed that they offered a more enlightened and humane alternative to these authoritarian methods.

At the time, the behaviorist method seemed like a breakthrough, a scientifically credible answer to middle-class anxieties. But it had two serious flaws.

First, behaviorism lacked a sound theoretical base. It borrowed its methods from the physical sciences and its foundational premises from experiments on animals.

Because behaviorism started from an axiomatic belief that only observable behaviors and actions were appropriate subjects for psychological study, its practitioners saw no need to reflect on and critically examine the sources of their own thinking. The proof, as far as they were concerned, would be provided by the results they were able to produce with research on human subjects in the field. Animals can be conditioned and, because they are animals, so can humans.

Within the narrow limits of behaviorist definitions, this was logical, but it failed to even consider the question, "What happens to the humanity of humans when you treat them as animals?"

Given this framing, it became possible to conceive of people as interchangeable parts within the vast machinery of an industrial society.

A second flaw arose from some of the personal limitations of the founders of the movement, who were perhaps more motivated by a desire for wealth, influence, and fame than by concern for scientific, moral, or ethical rigor. Rapid technological advances produced by scientific discovery had given material science an aura of invincibility, and the behaviorists were determined to catch a ride on its coattails.

Just as new technologies were delivering unprecedented control over material processes, the behaviorists promised to deliver a comparable level of control over people, conditioning them to behave in predictable and predetermined ways.

PEER REVIEW

Kerry W. Buckley, in his biography, *Mechanical Man: John B. Watson and the Beginnings of Behaviorism*, describes alarm among scientists with the direction that the new psychology was taking. They were troubled by the apparent willingness of the new class of professional scientists to evade the larger implications of their work and to accept the routinization of scientific inquiry.

Nevertheless, the empiricists were ascendent, not least because of their early insight that they could establish their utility by allying themselves with the growing movement to bring a scientific approach to education.

This behaviorist ascendancy launched a process by which we in the United States changed nearly every aspect of how we manage human affairs and, as a result, we became modern. We transformed ourselves from producers to consumers, from citizens to taxpayers, and from self-reliance to a dependence on external, verifiable authority.

A Turbulent Time

Times of upheaval produce profound shifts in belief, culture, and ways of living. The turn of the twentieth century was just such a time, with societies spinning out of control in ways that seemed increasingly confusing, violent, and oppressive.

Taken together, these forces led to an almost complete breakdown of long-held assumptions about the nature of human beings and what it takes to lead and manage them. This created an opening for the belief that science and the technological and engineering solutions made possible by scientific discoveries were the key to creating a well-ordered and prosperous world.

Given this framing, it became possible to conceive of people as interchangeable parts within the vast machinery of an industrial society and to successfully sell this idea to leaders in business and government. This is exactly what was accomplished by a generation of new professionals—engineers, urban designers, social scientists, management theorists, and psychologists.

Into this volatile mix, the introduction of behaviorist theories of psychology acted like an accelerant, creating a firestorm of change that left almost no corner of life untouched.

At the time, behaviorist psychology was a fledgling discipline. John B. Watson, who is credited as its founder, was a doctoral candidate in psychology at the University of Chicago. In those days, psychology was still embedded within the field of philosophy, where it was seen as an introspective art. The University of Chicago saw an opening for direct and utilitarian application of psychology in the booming industrial economy of the era.

However, to be taken up by industry, psychology needed to discover a way to measure and predict outcomes from its methods. This led to the thinking that behavior was the key because changes in behavior could be both measured and predicted, whereas concepts like consciousness and introspection could not be objectively observed and studied and therefore needed to be abandoned. This changed the game, because now psychology

could establish itself as an independent scientific discipline and attract the kind of grant funding that was being poured into material sciences and engineering.

Drawing on the work of Pavlov, who was famous for conditioning dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell, Watson reasoned that humans could be similarly conditioned, offering a practical means for making behavior predictable and controllable.

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This was quickly adopted by businesses of every stripe. Indeed, to this day the highest paid psychologists are industrial behaviorists working within large corporations. They study behaviors that lead to desired results, codify standards of these desired behaviors (nowadays known as competencies), and design incentives and punishments that will condition employees to deliver on these standards. Watson specifically targeted education as an ideal place to practice this new scientific method.

Mechanisms of Control

Behaviorism and the educational and management systems based on it were conceived to make society work in an orderly, predictable way. But, in the long run, they have failed, precisely because they take choice away from individuals. Over time, when people are not allowed to make meaningful choices or are given meaningless choices to make, their ability to choose well atrophies, along with their ability to think for themselves and to discern what is best to do in a situation. They may even lose the ability to distinguish for themselves what is true or false.

The Unconsidered Alternative

There is a completely different set of approaches to understanding and shaping the human mind that originated thousands of years ago, starting from the premise that people can come to know themselves and manage their own development and participation in social institutions. I think of these as lineage traditions, ways of identifying and developing the potentialities of human beings. Such lineages can be identified in philosophical, spiritual, healing, artistic, shamanic, and even political traditions.

THERE IS AN ANTIDOTE

It was 1993, and I was working with Stelios Tzesos, Colgate's general manager for Africa. We were given responsibility for meeting the new constitutional mandates established by Nelson Mandela's government to promote corporate management that reflected the diverse racial makeup of the country.

Many other companies had thrown up their hands in despair; they believed that it would be impossible to grow a management class from the uneducated (and sometimes illiterate) 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 trusted that our approach could develop the innate talents in anyone. As it turned out, we were more right about this than we could have imagined.

The results were stunning. These Black workers outperformed any group I have ever encountered. They quickly grasped the complex systemic frameworks and processes we set up for them, putting them immediately into practice and clamoring for more. Their intimate understanding of the political and social dynamics of their communities allowed them to innovate everything from products to modes of distribution. This immediately moved them onto a trajectory of financial growth and, within months, made Colgate South Africa one of the top-performing divisions in the company's global operations outside the United States.

In the turbulence and violence engulfing their country, Colgate South Africa created an internal culture of respect and reconciliation that brought about a safe and creative oasis for all workers.

Tzesos and I had many deep conversations, trying to understand what we were witnessing. These were people without trained expertise and without status, who were not conditioned to need or even respect experts. Their capacity for self-reliance, creativity, and intellectual agility was astonishing. Eventually, Tzesos summarized his insights in a major public speech that addressed employees, suppliers, government officials, and others, in which he said to these workers,

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 asked of you.

He closed with the promise, "We will help to build a great country while building a great company."

I had wondered for years, why so many people accept (or reject) the things I said *without* subjecting them to rigorous examination. I was beginning to be 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.

Reconsidering the workers that I had encountered in South Africa, remembering what is possible in a community that has learned to think for itself, I committed to never again do people's thinking for them.

It took me a while to unlearn the habits of expertise, to stop supplying answers, and to find ways to create the conditions necessary for fostering the capability in people to articulate the worthwhile questions that they were burning 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 United States 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 and do the thinking. I also set out to create work systems in which employees charted their own developmental paths in service to making life better for customers, turning the almost universal human desire to make meaningful contributions to others into a powerful business growth engine.

Remembering what is possible in a community that has learned to think for itself, I committed to never again do people's thinking for them.

It was while I was in South Africa that I invented the concept of *promises beyond ableness*, an instrument for fostering and developing 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 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 newly

integrated country. This gave them the will and motivation to reach beyond any limitations placed on them by lack of education, social advantage, or political power. 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. The process had three core aspects.

First, these promises were grounded in deep caring for specific customers, along with understanding about 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 Colgate South Africa. And third, each worker developed a clear plan for pursuing their promise, which had the additional benefit of providing the basis for recruiting resources and support from both inside and outside 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 this agency would have on the lives of other people.

In the years following, I have seen that the sense of meaning and surge of agency 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, lifesheds, and the world. We now have over 100 case stories in 16 industries that proved us correct.

Cultivating Genuine Self-Management

Behaviorism is just a recent and particularly powerful manifestation of this very old practice. But behaviorism and all other methods for establishing top-down control undermine and sideline precisely those qualities that distinguish human beings. These include the abilities to manage ourselves with regard to some desired aim, project ourselves into an envisioned future, make strategic plans, 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.

The guiding principle for all of this was the activation, development, and nourishment of personal agency.

Behaviorism presents a double impediment to this development. It substitutes conditioning for genuine self-management, and it uses an array of rewards and punishments to elicit the desired behavior, most of which have as their subtext the implied threat of nonbelonging. The need to belong to coherent social groups is a core driver of human 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.

The approach that we first articulated in South Africa is designed to do the opposite: to increase self-managing capacity and develop complex, higher-order thinking in every member of an organization—and ultimately every member of society.

Promises beyond ableness are important because they arise from what is personally significant to an individual, but they reference a larger whole that extends 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 relationship within which we wish to be included. 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.

Businesses as Nodes for Change

After nearly a century of behaviorism's influence on every aspect of our collective lives, it is perhaps not surprising that different factions have learned to use its methods to advance their agendas.

One way of looking at the social and political polarization spreading within the United States 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 theorized, our thoughts should be shaped by experts, it stands to reason that competing ideologies will eventually attempt to take control of the consensus-building machinery that shapes what we know to be real and true. Our experts and our facts versus yours.

Although business was one of the most powerful drivers for the adoption of behaviorism in the last century, 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.

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 a management philosophy based on control and conditioning is in direct opposition to unleashing the power of this intelligence and agency.

Intelligence and agency only really get developed when people are expected and enabled to think for themselves.

What my Colgate South Africa stories demonstrate, along with all the other stories I have written over three decades, 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 twenty-first 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 terms of profit, systems, and employee retention, but also by generating beneficial ripple effects across our social and democratic institutions.

Indirect Work

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

It is important to understand that the constitutional mandate was not about good jobs for a limited number of talented Black workers. Rather, it was 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 in order to rise to the occasion, was a

powerful way to transform a nation. Colgate, he noted, was a demonstration of what becomes possible when you take this approach.

In such a system, it makes almost no sense to embrace a lack of education. But this is exactly what Colgate South Africa did when apartheid ended. We did not attempt to encumber Black South African workers with a theory of knowledge based on external authority.

As a result, they were free to trust themselves and their communities to draw from their life experiences as the raw material for business evolution. With this inner-freedom, they were able with relative ease to generate understanding from the complex frameworks and thinking challenges we posed them. Their self-generated understanding produced ideas and projects that were both innovative and deeply relevant in a fast-moving and turbulent situation.

From my point of view, the business world and the education systems that feed it have their priorities upside down—they operate from a life-diminishing belief system. It is clear to me that students should not be taught knowledge to make them experts. Instead, they should be taught how thinking works and how to discover their own thinking potential. Employees should not be pigeonholed based on what they have learned in the past; they should be challenged to extend themselves (and their employers) into new arenas of understanding. Our theories of knowledge should not reinforce conformity of thought; they should unlock the potential in every human mind to see the working of life in new ways.

THE GOAL OF BEHAVIORISM

When John Watson began developing and promoting his methods a hundred years ago, he explicitly stated his goal: to make behaviorism ubiquitous by embedding it in all our cultural institutions.

In particular, he proposed conditioning children from an early age as a way to make this possible. Parenting and the education of young children were especially important arenas to focus on if you wanted to create a population that could be externally controlled.¹

Case Story: Self-Determination at Colgate South Africa

The Black workers I met during the time I was supporting the change process at Colgate South Africa had been forced to live and work in appalling conditions of coercion and top-down control. For this reason, we were particularly careful not to import European or American ideas about how they should work and what they should work on. I was determined that there would be no gold stars, no patronizing attempts to encourage or model good behavior, in this workplace.

Although I did not have a fully developed vocabulary for this at the time, I knew that it would be critical to maintain absolute integrity with a self-determination theory of knowledge. Happily, there was such a pent-up hunger for agency and self-determination within this community that our efforts were received with deep appreciation and creativity.

1 Kerry W. Buckley, *Mechanical Man: John B. Watson and the Beginnings of Behaviorism* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1989), Kindle edition.

Because our mandate was to grow a new generation of Black leadership from within Colgate's workforce, I did not have to contend with patronizing managers reminding me that these people were uneducated and therefore could not do what I was asking of them. Their response beautifully illustrates the theory of knowledge behind what I did, and this can be mapped against the tetrad that we have been exploring.

Working with Black South Africans presented a wide-open field because survival had made them smart and resilient, while apartheid meant that they had almost no exposure to behaviorist practices, education, and institutions. Being asked to be completely self-determining in their thinking and creative work felt natural and joyful to them; they saw my request as an expression of my respect for them as people and the transformative potential that lived in them.

The methods, systems, and initiatives that we invented together were informed by Colgate's and my absolute confidence that the workers would rise to any intellectual challenge I put before them, **so long as they could see its relevance for their townships and country.** 🇳🇿



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Carol Sanford is a best-selling, award-winning author, business educator, summit producer, podcaster, and designer of membership communities. Her books are required readings in multiple departments from Stanford to Harvard. For 40 years she's collaborated with leaders to develop people and businesses to express their singular capabilities. Carol's clients include companies like Colgate, DuPont, and Seventh Generation. Google's Innovation Lab uses her Responsible Business Framework.

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