

We Are All a Bit Delusional

Dan Gregory & Kieran Flanagan

Given the choices you obviously make in terms of what you spend your time reading and the sources and subject matter you're attracted to, there is every likelihood that if we asked you how you rate yourself, you would probably answer, "Above average."

This, on the surface seems a fair and reasonable assessment. However, where this kind of self-assessment becomes problematic is that when you ask a very large proportion of the population this question, you mostly get the same answer.

Unfortunately, most of us can't be above average—the math just doesn't work. Now clearly, some people are aware that we're below average in some areas of our lives, some may even believe that we're below average on the whole, but overwhelmingly, human beings are a little delusional when it comes to their conception of their own competence.

We regularly ask the audiences we speak to, to look around the room at their peers and to raise their hands if they believe they are below average competence compared to the rest of the room. If we're lucky, we might get two or three hands going up (we suspect they may not have actually understood the question). Statistically, of course, half of the room should have their hands in the air.

Part of this response is driven by not wanting to look vulnerable or stupid in front of our co-workers or community, but much of it is driven by a delusion we've bought in to after years of consuming the hyperbole of the self help industry. In other words, we over-rate ourselves and do the same with our people, our peers and those we spend our days with.

Of course we are all unique snowflakes filled with pure potentiality capable of doing extraordinary things... but mostly, we don't.

This translates to the expectations we place on other people too. In our experience, every CEO or leader we work with extols the virtues of their team. “We’ve got the best team in the industry,” they’ll often say. Of course, this is pretty unlikely. What they might have is the best team they could afford given the time and budget they’ve invested in finding them and developing them.

So our delusion is wide spread and for most of us, invisible and unconscious.

So what drives this delusion? What does it cost us? And how can we avoid it?

Human beings tend to want their life experiences to be positive. Sure, many of us live lives of quiet desperation, but overwhelmingly, given the choice, we will gravitate to the simplest path, the least challenging activity and the most enjoyable company.

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But this has not always been the expectation in life for most of the human population. In fact, the inclusion of the right to “the pursuit of happiness” affirmed in the Declaration of Independence was historically, quite a modern concept.

The issue with seeking only positive experiences is that it seldom leads to growth or the expanding of one’s capabilities. Nevertheless, the heart wants what the heart wants.

This desire for only positive experiences is at the root of all manner of social ills, from over-indulgence in food, alcohol and drugs to staying too long in broken relationships, misreading market signals in our investments and even creating cultures that don’t share bad news with management.

The costs, however, extend beyond our own opportunity to grow and develop and in fact distort our judgment, set us up for failure, have us employing impotent strategies in our lives and ultimately have us writing checks our bodies (or minds, or teams) can’t cash.

Avoiding some of the downfalls of this delusion requires an awareness of how our delusions manifest and an adoption of strategies that in fact take our delusion into account.

We Fail To Prepare For Failure

We are all a little delusional about our chances of success and the possibility of failure.

The homily, “Failure is just one of the steps to success,” has almost become cliché.

Indeed, many leaders use this line of reasoning to bolster employee spirit in tough times. However, for the most part, we tend to assume that failure is one of the steps that “other people” will experience and won’t dare raise its ugly head on our projects.

Part of this is an innate hopefulness we seem to have as human beings. Hope is perhaps one of the most addictive emotions we ever experience. Unfortunately, hope is neither a strategy, nor an accurate predictor of results.

As a result, we rarely factor failure into our preparation or thinking. And even when we do, we rely on such narrow margins for error that when there is a reversal against our position or our intention, it tends to be catastrophic rather than manageable.

Contrast this with the world of aeronautical engineering. For decades, engineers have been designing aircraft that can stay in the air and land safely, even if half of the engines go out. In other words, a 50% failure doesn’t necessarily lead to tragic results.

Consider what would happen in your business, or community activity or even in your day-to-day life if you experienced 50% failure. How would you cope if half of your staff failed to show tomorrow morning, or if a similar proportion of your customers all of a sudden decided to go elsewhere, or if price competition forced you to halve your profit margin?

Most of us would find such experiences stressful to be sure, but more importantly, these would be breaking points for many of us.

This line of thinking is more than just a matter of being pessimistic; it's a critical consideration in risk mitigation and strategy.

Of course there are those in life that spend so much time packing and checking their reserve chute that they never make the jump and open the main, but the opposite is also highly likely. That we will jump without an honest assessment of where we stand and what risks we will face.

Factoring for failure is not a symptom of negativity or procrastination, it is a willingness to look into the dark places many are unwilling to go and to prepare for what might eventuate, and more importantly, to have a strategy to keep us on track when the unexpected arises.

We Expect People To Care More Than They Might

Gallup's Global Workforce Engagement Study puts workforce disengagement at around 50%. In other words, half of the people you work with, or that work for you are not engaged in the work they do. Approximately 20% are actively disengaged. A fifth of the workforce is actually white-anting the work of everyone else in the team, and considering what an extraordinarily brave admission this is there is every chance the actual number is somewhat higher.

Again, our delusion kicks in and we think, "Not my team guys, they're all kinds of awesome!" But the truth is, the larger your organization, the more these numbers become statistically significant.

Simon Sinek's book, *Start with Why* suggested that what made the difference in successful, highly engaging organizations was a clear sense of purpose that went beyond simply producing product or making sales.

Certainly, this has been a core feature in our leadership strategy in our businesses over the years.

However, those of us who are highly career driven, the Type-A's in the room, tend to assume that others see the world through a similar filter to our own. And this can set us up for a delusion in terms of engagement.

A compelling “Why” can be incredibly motivating for those of us who define ourselves by the work we do and who have work that is by its nature, highly engaging and stimulating. But this can ignore the large numbers of those we work with for whom employment is simply a means to an end. For many, if not most of us according to Gallup’s study, a job is just a job—a way to pay our rent, to put food on the table and perhaps to fund our “Why.”

These personal “Whys” might be time coaching a baseball team on the weekend, or painting, or playing in a band or simply spending time with those we love.

The point is; their personal values hierarchy might not have work where we think it ought to be. But we’d like to suggest, that’s OK (Not that they’re asking for permission).

What this means though, is that we need to adopt strategies to drive performance and engagement with this reality in mind.

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We Over-Rely On Discipline And Motivation As Single Bullet Strategies

Almost every management text or self-help tome asserts the importance of discipline and motivation in driving results. This is often reinforced by the fact that the leaders who make headlines who are often charismatic speakers and engaging personalities. But is this simply another delusion we've bought in to?

One of the risks of using motivation and discipline as single bullet strategies is that none of us is disciplined in every part of our lives. Neither are we motivated all of the time. And yet we rely on these two psychological factors to drive engagement and performance.

A better option, in our opinion, is to utilize design over discipline. What this means is, designing systems and processes that have such a bias towards success that results are possible independent of motivation or discipline.

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Let's look at an example from our own lives.

Every year, we set and share goals for our business and our personal lives that we review at the end of the year. Last year, Dan's personal goal was to spend more time at home. We both travel a lot, working in the US, Australia and Asia, often flying once or twice a day. As a result, home time is a rare and precious commodity.

However, at the end of the year, when we reviewed our goals, we realized that it didn't seem to matter how motivated Dan was to spend time at home, or how disciplined he was about closing his computer down and jumping on his motorbike, he just wasn't getting any greater time at home.

So we did the numbers. What we realized was, Dan has an hour commute to work and an hour ride back home. That's two hours a day, ten hours a week or one long workday every week. When you consider that's fifty-two days and then factor in weekends, that's two whole months every year Dan's not at home.

Discipline won't solve that problem. Motivation can't solve that problem. It's actually a design failure.

If all Dan did was to move the office half an hour closer to his home, or move half an hour closer to the office, he immediately, without any greater motivation or discipline gets an extra month at home every year.

We need to adopt a similar line of thinking in all of our strategies around change and rely less on motivation and discipline when a better strategy is Behavior Design.

We Fight Against Human Nature

Growing up near the ocean, you learn two things about swimming in the surf. The first is, always swim next to a Brit. You may not be able to out-swim a shark, but hey, maybe you don't have to.

The second thing you learn is what to do if you get caught up in a rip tide. The most important thing to remember is never swim against the current. You'll only exhaust yourself and drown. If you want to survive, you need to learn how to swim with and across the current, to use the current to your advantage in reaching your ultimate goal.

The same is true of human behavior. We are constantly fighting human nature and designing processes that seek to fit human beings to systems rather than designing systems to work with natural human behavior.

Critical in this is an understanding that our survival brain still drives our decision making and our survival brain is, there's no nice way to say this, selfish, scared and stupid.

But rather than seeing these attributes in a negative light, as they so often are, we'd do better to realize that these are the filters that helped us survive as a species—a capacity to look out for number one, a desire to mitigate risk and a bias towards the simplest and easiest solution have been critical to both surviving and thriving.

These natural drives still sit at the root of our behavior and we'd do better to work with them than to delude ourselves that they no longer play a part in our “self-actualized” lives.

Some years ago we did some strategic work with Coca-Cola to drive recycling in shopping malls. Our research told us that people wanted to recycle. They rationally bought into the idea of being more intelligent with waste and emotionally too, there was a sense of responsibility for how we treat the planet.

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Given the amount of buy in, you would think that simply making recycling stations available and signposting their location in the mall would lead to the desired results.

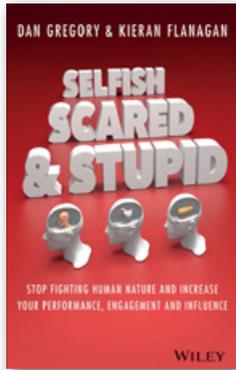
What we learned however is that there is an enormous gulf between what people say and what they do.

It was only when the recycling stations were painted in garish colors and moved next to the food court and the restaurants in the mall, to a point where it was almost harder not to recycle that shoppers did what they said they would.

By removing personal effort and working with human nature instead of trying to change it, we had achieved the result we wanted.

This is the core opportunity in waking up to our delusions, whether they be about our staff, our customers or about our own personal capacities. **The more we are courageous enough to deal with what's real, the more real world success we ultimately experience.** 📍

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Dan Gregory & Kieran Flanagan are behavioral researchers and strategists, specializing in behaviors and belief systems—what drives, motivates and influences us. They have won business awards around the world for Innovation, Creativity and ROI working with such organizations as Coca-Cola, Unilever, News Corp and the United Nations in Singapore. They are passionate advocates for the commercial power of creativity and a return to more human engagement, cultures and leadership.

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