Corporate conformity...

Being different can be challenging. Being different can unnerve, upset, irritate and anger others. Being different can be the best thing you'll ever be. Because you are.

This is an article of three halves (sic!). This half is going to look at the problems that conformity can cause in organisations, and the second half, to be published soon, will look at the opposite: non-conformity. Finally, in the third half, we'll hit the sweet spot.

Many of us will have come across conformity in our lives. It begins for many at school, where there is the desire to fit in, and can continue throughout adult working and social lives. Unfortunately, there are some real risks associated with it. This is by no means an exhaustive list:
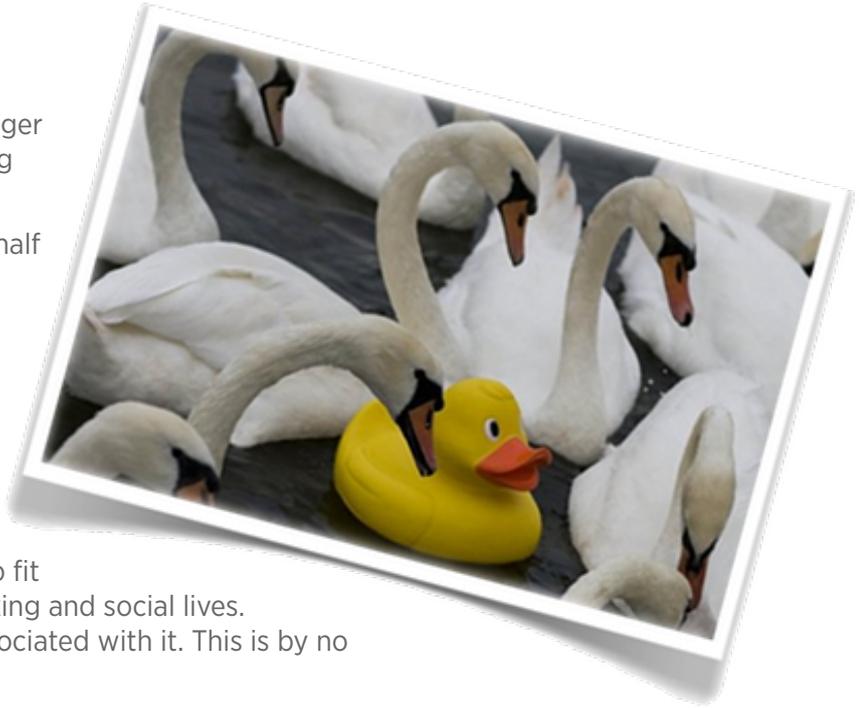
Group think

Just take a moment, and see how many examples you can think of in each of the following categories:

- Failed product launches
- Marketing campaigns gone wrong
- Political ideas that crash and burn
- Detailed plans that go awry

My guess would be that in many of these instances, corporate or organisational "group think" is in operation. Most teams, businesses and companies value enthusiasm; value those who get behind big ideas; value and reward people who take the lead and make things happen. Rightly so: those are all wonderful things.

It appears to be harder – or at least less common – to value and reward the few individuals who question the group think. The people who challenge others and ask the difficult questions. And yet those can be just the people who are needed to help organisations avoid potentially catastrophic failures.

Inauthenticity

A second concern about conformity is that it can lead to inauthenticity. Organisations, brands, businesses: they all can have, and can benefit from, a consistent expression of their image; but to what extent does this demand conformity from employees?

In the long-term, can the right people, who you really want in your organisation, sustain a pretence of being something that they are not? There is a balance to strike between conformity and freedom to be oneself.

Sub-optimal performance

At the risk of banging on about one of my favourite topics and favourite philosophers, how can an organisation benefit from the enormous rewards delivered by using Socratic dialogue if everyone conforms to the corporate norm? In essence, Socratic dialogue:

is a form of inquiry and debate between individuals with opposing viewpoints based on asking and answering questions to stimulate rational thinking and to illuminate ideas

…and what rational organisation could possibly want to prevent this?

Rigidity

As a final example of the issues that can be caused by conformity in organisations, I want to mention rigidity.

Times change. Environments change. Circumstances change. In order to cope with this, organisations, and therefore the people within those organisations, need to change too. If conformity is too great, if thinking becomes inflexible, and if approaches, styles and behaviours become rigid, the organisation will not be able to change, quickly enough, to cope, let alone reap the rewards of change.

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So, if conformity can be such a dangerous thing, how about a non-conformist approach? The next article in this series will dip into that pool of stormy water…

...versus behavioural singularity...

My last article dealt with the potential issues created by corporate conformity. Particular areas for concern that were raised included:

- group think

- inauthenticity

- sub-optimal performance

- rigidity

Moving to the other end of the spectrum then, we have studied non-conformity, or what I'm going to define as behavioural singularity. I want to make this distinction because I want ensure that the "teenage" approach to being individual doesn't cloud the discussion – the concept that many teenagers try incredibly hard to be "different" whilst ensuring that actually, all they are really doing, is conforming to a different norm. This article is about being really different.

To explain what I mean by behavioural singularity in this context, recall those people who are deliberately different. The people who make an effort to stand out from the crowd. The people who choose to take the opposing view to the majority simply because it is the opposing view. I think there are pros and cons in having these people around in teams and organisations:

They are unique

The biggest single advantage that the behaviourally singular people have over their conformist counterparts is that they are, by definition, unique. If one conformist leaves a team, company, or organisation, then (arguably) very little has been lost – there are a million and one other people expressing the same views and using the same approaches who can take their place.

However, losing the only complete and deliberate non-conformist makes the chances of the problems associated with conformity developing much, much higher.

Norm-challenging

In addition to being (slightly) valuable simply because they are unique, there is a more fundamental value to be appreciated. Teams need people who will challenge the norms; who will ask the tough questions; who will poke, prod and nag away at things and not take no for an answer.

Having someone take the opposite view to you and challenge you is the first step on the road to truth-seeking Socratic Dialogue, and you need to have people in organisations who are willing to be unpopular enough to challenge the norm.

Inauthenticity

Problem number one comes about if this behaviourally singular approach is inauthentic. As with all inauthentic behaviour, negative outcomes are just around the corner:

- The individual themselves may not be able to sustain it. They may tire of acting the role, particularly if they are not rewarded for it, and may then fail to provide the positive aspects of their role.

- Colleagues, managers and leaders in the organisation may begin to see through this act, and therefore take the potentially useful challenges less seriously.

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- As the behaviourally singular approach is non-authentic, the value of the challenges that the individual makes are likely to be lower to the rest of the team or organisation than a genuinely-held, authentic challenge.

Undermining and wearing

Longer term, there is a real danger, particularly if inauthenticity is exposed, of the balance of the organisation simply becoming bored, worn down and irritated by the person who takes the opposing view for the sake of it.

Organisations, teams, companies and indeed any group can ultimately be undermined by difficult individuals if they are not themselves strong enough to resist.

Rigidity

As with conformity, there is a potential for rigidity here, simply from the opposite side. The issue that causes the rigidity is the same for both conformity and behavioural singularity – it is driven by the fact that the people involved are choosing their positions with reference to their relative position to everyone else, not because of data, knowledge, skill or other positive external factors.

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So, if complete conformity and behavioural singularity have their problems, where is the sweet spot? The next article will be published soon...

...or being yourself

This is the final article in a series of three – but, like the final Harry Potter book, it will be divided in two!

The first article covered the issues and challenges raised when behaviour is driven by a desire to conform; the second covered the different (but overlapping) challenges when behaviour is driven by a desire to simply be different. Now it's time to look for the sweet spot between these extremes.

The commonality between the extremes is that they are driven by a desire to be something that is driven by external factors; the behaviour of an individual is controlled by the behaviour of the majority – either to conform or rebel. In these cases, the individual concerned is not being themselves, but playing a role like an actor – the lines, the characterisation, the behaviour is being developed, designed and controlled by others.

The obvious solution to this is for teams, companies and organisations to create environments in which it is (more than) acceptable for people to be themselves – but this creates challenges. The other side of the coin is that individuals must make the commitment to be themselves – to be authentic – and again, this creates challenges.

Part One of this final instalment is going to look at the first of these – the challenge of balancing permission (and encouragement) for employee authenticity with the real, practical business needs of the organisation.

Organisational challenges

External versus internal behaviour

For most teams, organisations or companies, there are internal and external interactions that take place. For example, the stereotypical behaviour of a sales team at a internal two-day teambuilding course is likely (hopefully!) to be different to the behaviour of members of that team externally – in front of clients or customers. The question then arises: which behaviour is truly authentic for each individual?

Groups need to take a great deal of care from both the internal and external perspectives – just how strong are the expectations of certain styles of behaviour, and are we really aware of what or which style is natural and authentic for each individual?

Client or customer expectations

Developing the point above, another area that organisations feel they need to take into account is the (perceived) expectation of clients or customers. Would clients in your industry be comfortable with certain styles of dress, language and behaviour, or would it damage your business?

In addition to that question, there is also the question of just how accurate our perceptions of client or customer expectations are – are we realistic in our assessment, or are we as an organisation conforming to a norm that may not actually exist?
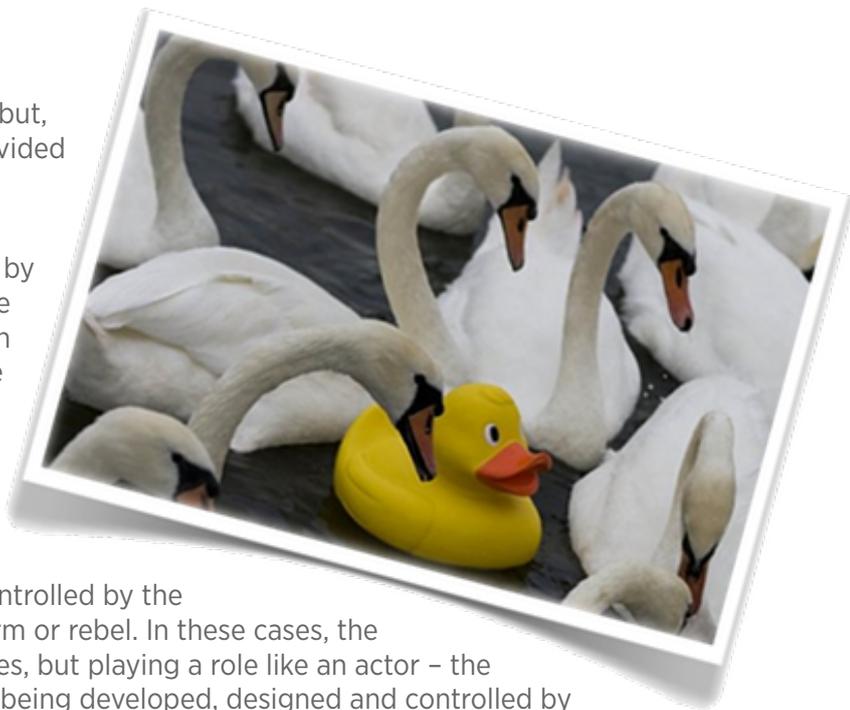
Brand image

Certain companies have very strong corporate brand images, and some of those are successfully communicated by their employees (equally, some companies have poor corporate images reflected by – or even created by – their staff, in certain high street stores for example). Virgin Atlantic cabin crew, the "geeks" in Apple stores, the waiters in Michelin 3* restaurants; their dress, behaviour and language is a critical part of their brand image.

So how can authenticity be allowed if a significant part of the communication of the brand image is delivered by employees? It's another challenge...

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I'd like to offer a few thoughts to chew on in this area – how organisations can manage this apparent conflict.

Recruitment

By recruiting people who "fit" in the first place, a lot of issues can be overcome. However, the big caveat with this approach is to avoid the dangers of conformity...what are you expecting people to fit in with?

Clear objectives, clearly communicated

Explain the "why". The why can get to the very core of what is expected, and as long as the core is protected, there can be flexibility around the edges.

Challenging preconceptions

As an organisation, particularly the leader of an organisation, challenge your preconceptions about what is traditional, preferred or expected behaviour.

Being authentic as a whole

Finally, as an organisation, be authentic yourself. Don't project an image that is not really "you". Don't pretend to be something you're not. Your clients and customers will spot it, and your employees will be confused.

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Part Two of this article will cover the challenge of authenticity for individual employees.

...or being yourself, continued

We've reached the final part of this series of articles, which has covered the range of behaviours from utter conformity through to deliberately being different. The last article looked at the sweet-spot – authentic behaviour – from the point of view of the organisation. This, the last instalment, will look at it from the point of view of the individual.

In order to explore the benefits of being authentically yourself within a team, company or organisation, I'm going to break down the analysis into different sections, as they each have rather different challenges and rewards.

As a leader

In leadership roles in organisations, whether at the very top of an enormous tree, or simply managing a small team, there can be a great deal of pressure to conform to a norm of "leadership". The way you look, the way you act, the way you are: all of these things are much more on show than they were before you took on the leadership position, and it is therefore possible to feel that any slight discrepancy from the perceived norm will be picked on.

The most common occurrences of this pattern of behaviour are in the worlds of celebrity and politics. Politicians (and we'll see a lot more of this in the run up to the election) are pressured into giving conformist responses to questions and behaving in a unified, uniform fashion. This is seen as the best approach.

I would argue that this shows astonishing naivety, especially if the non-political world is adopting this approach from politics. In everything other than incredibly short-term, restricted interactions, people will see through a pretence of conformity, and trust will be immediately eroded.

As a leader, you want (and need) to be trusted. Being yourself is the only way that can happen.

As a team member

As with leadership positions, there can be expectations of conformity in team member roles, and it is possible, at least in the short-term, to act as if you fit with the "team norm". Two critical questions then arise:

- What is the norm?

As discussed in the last article in this series, one challenge for those trying to conform is to decide to what they are actually conforming. Just as there is no such thing in reality as the average person, there is no such thing in organisations as a single norm. You're going to have to put a huge amount of effort in to being fully flexible and adaptable to fit in with such a changing, transient thing – but why bother?

- Why is the norm helpful?

Surely you were hired and brought onto the team for your innate skills, abilities, attitudes and aptitudes? Not for your acting skills. If you spend your time on a team simply fitting in with everyone else, what value are you really adding?

As a candidate

Most people, I'd hazard a guess, have had debates with themselves (and perhaps enrolled others in the decision making process) about what to wear, what to say, and how to act in an interview situation. I'd hate to remove this questioning altogether, but…

- **Be yourself, because you won't succeed in the long-term unless you are. Take time, pains and care to be the best that you can be, but not to be something you're not.**

If you get a job on the basis of what is essentially a lie – being someone else – it'll be discovered by your employer, or by you, sooner or later. You've wasted your time and theirs.

Long-term development

If you think that life is a bit of a journey, and that you grow, develop, learn and change along the way, then hampering that learning experience by putting artificial filters between you and the world is a rather odd choice to make. The most important thing we can learn about through life is ourselves – who we really are, how we interrelate with others, and the impact we can have on the world around us. How on earth can we learn about ourselves if we don't allow ourselves to **be** ourselves?

Happiness

And finally…to my mind, the single most important individual objective of all. Pretending to be something you're not might work for some people some of the time, but I seriously, genuinely doubt whether it can deliver the most important thing of all – long-term happiness.