

Workers who love ‘synergizing paradigms’ might be bad at their jobs

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Employees who are impressed by vague corporate-speak like “synergistic leadership,” or “growth-hacking paradigms” may struggle with practical decision-making, a new Cornell study reveals.

Published in the journal [Personality and Individual Differences](#), research by cognitive psychologist [Shane Littrell](#) introduces the Corporate Bullshit Receptivity Scale (CBSR), a tool designed to measure susceptibility to impressive-but-empty organizational rhetoric.

“Corporate bullshit is a specific style of communication that uses confusing, abstract buzzwords in a functionally misleading way,” said Littrell, a postdoctoral researcher in the College of Arts and Sciences. “Unlike technical jargon, which can sometimes make office communication a little easier, corporate bullshit confuses rather than clarifies. It may sound impressive, but it is semantically empty.”

Although people anywhere can BS each other – that is, share dubious information that’s misleadingly impressive or engaging – the workplace not only rewards but structurally protects it, Littrell said. In a work setting where corporate jargon is already the norm, it’s easy for ambitious employees to use corporate BS to appear more competent or accomplished, accelerating their climb up the corporate ladder of workplace influence.

Corporate BS seems to be ubiquitous – but Littrell wondered if it is actually harmful. To test this, he created a “corporate bullshit generator” that churns out meaningless but impressive-sounding sentences like, “We will actualize a renewed level of cradle-to-grave credentialing” and “By getting our friends in the tent with our best practices, we will pressure-test a renewed level of adaptive coherence.”

He then asked more than 1,000 office workers to rate the “business savvy” of these computer-generated BS statements alongside real quotes from Fortune 500 leaders. Divided into four distinct studies, the research verified the scale as a statistically reliable measure of individual differences in receptivity to corporate bullshit, then, through use of established cognitive tests, made connections between receptivity to BS and analytic thinking skills known to be essential to workplace performance.

The results revealed a troubling paradox. Workers who were more susceptible to corporate BS rated their supervisors as more charismatic and “visionary,” but also displayed lower scores on a portion of the study that tested analytic thinking, cognitive reflection and fluid intelligence. Those more receptive to corporate BS also scored significantly worse on a test of effective workplace decision-making.

The study found that being more receptive to corporate bullshit was also positively linked to job satisfaction and feeling inspired by company mission statements. Moreover, those who were more likely to fall for corporate BS were also more likely to spread it.

Essentially, the employees most excited and inspired by “visionary” corporate jargon may be the least equipped to make effective, practical business decisions for their companies.

“This creates a concerning cycle,” Littrell said. “Employees who are more likely to fall for corporate bullshit may help elevate the types of dysfunctional leaders who are more likely to use it, creating a sort of negative feedback loop. Rather than a ‘rising tide lifting all boats,’ a higher level of corporate BS in an organization acts more like a clogged toilet of inefficiency.”

When BS goes too far or gets called out, real reputational or financial damage can occur, Littrell said. For instance, a leaked 2009 Pepsi marketing presentation with language such as “The Pepsi DNA finds its origin in the dynamic of perimeter oscillations...our proposition is the establishment of a gravitational pull to shift from a transactional experience to an invitational expression ...” led to widespread ridicule in various news outlets.

And in 2014, a memo from the former executive vice president of Microsoft Devices Group to employees, later dubbed in the press “the worst email ever,” opened with 10 paragraphs of jargon, including “Our device strategy must reflect Microsoft’s strategy and must be accomplished within an appropriate financial envelope,” burying the real news in paragraph 11 – that 12,500 employees were going to lose their jobs.

Overall, the findings suggest that while “synergizing cross-collateralization” might sound impressive in a boardroom, this functionally misleading language can create an informational blindfold in corporate cultures that can expose companies to reputational and financial harm.

Littrell’s scale offers practical applications and could someday provide insights into job candidates’ analytic thinking and decision-making tendencies. More work needs to be done, but for now, it’s a promising tool for researchers, Littrell said.

Researching BS also points out the importance of critical thinking for everyone, inside the workplace and out.

“Most of us, in the right situation, can get taken in by language that sounds sophisticated but isn’t,” Littrell said. “That’s why, whether you’re an employee or a consumer, it’s worth slowing down when you run into organizational messaging of any kind – leaders’ statements, public reports, ads – and ask yourself, ‘What, exactly, is the claim? Does it actually make sense?’ Because when a message leans heavily on buzzwords and jargon, it’s often a red flag that you’re being steered by rhetoric instead of reality.”

An open-access version of the study [is available here](#).

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