



“Bankers Are ‘Only’ Motivated By Money”

(And Other Ways Organizations Domesticate Us) Todd M. Warner

How do you shift the behaviour of bankers?

This was the subject of a conversation. All of the people involved had considerably more experience in financial services than me, so their perspectives were particularly striking. The low point of the conversation happened when one of them said this: “Bankers are only motivated by money. It is the only way we know how to get people in banking to do things.”

Now, I know some bankers, and count a number of them as friends. Watching them at soccer games and birthday parties, I’m struck by the fact that they’re not “only” motivated by money (unless that child with the dirty nappy was slipping them some cash on the side).

But this conversation reveals a more vexing problem: Organizations domesticate people. Like Pavlov and his dogs, we are trained to discrete patterns of responses in organizations. It is not flattering, but I would propose it is a reality we don’t understand, nor take advantage of: organizations domesticate people to certain ways of working. The problem of domestication in organizations sub-optimizes all kinds of performance and innovation. Through a combination of factors, organizations create “goldfish tanks” with a certain mix of water that drives the behaviour of the “fish” in their tanks.

Bankers are not *only* motivated by money, but the social conditions in which they exist—the “tank water” in which they swim—conditions them to work in certain ways, and play certain types of games. As smart people, bankers play them well. Frequently, the fixes that organizations muster to shift behaviors in these goldfish tanks either inadvertently reinforces the tank water, or it tries to take a lone fish out of the tank, put them in a pristine tank with some nice people, interesting ideas, and a good buffet, and then expect them to go back to their tank to do something with it. Neither of these approaches work. “Domestication” in organizations is a critical challenge, and one that leaders must learn to master and guide.

At the core of domestication is how organizations teach people. Organizations “train” people not through their learning programs, but through the ways they work and the assumptions that abound in their social system. Organizational “domestication” is like the barnacles on the bottom of a boat in a harbour; they grow over time and build on one another. Often, the longer the assumptions implicit in domestication go unchallenged, the more firmly entrenched they become. “Bankers are only motivated by money” is the dominant form of domestication in financial services because that is the social system that banks have created for them, and they’ve reinforced this barnacle over time. This “domestication” is true of all organizations. Upon closer review, there are three ways that organizations domesticate us, and there are a few things change-minded leaders can do about it.

Organizations inadvertently drive domestication because people want to be included. At their core, organizations are social systems in which people are vying for power and attention. Organizations frequently prey on people's need to be included. I've seen bright, capable people left devastated because they were not invited to the "right" meeting. Mind you, they have plenty of meetings to attend, but organizations (and the leaders within them) tend to unwittingly create "in-groups" and "out-groups," unintentionally. This social system is a powerful domesticating agent.

Meetings, then, are a quick litmus test of domestication in any organization. Meetings in many organizations are banal, mind-numbing experiences that rarely deliver real value, but they almost always represent one of the cleanest artifacts of domestication. If you want to understand domestication in your organization, try to step back and watch what really happens in meetings:

- What is not said?
- How is the agenda set?
- How are mistakes discussed? (Or, are mistakes discussed?)
- Who speaks?

Meetings in which domestication is strong tend to be highly conventional, risk-avoidance events. Interestingly, organizational domestication tends to yield patterns in meetings that are self-perpetuating. These patterns in meetings frequently persist across leader transitions, so the “domestication” of what we do in meetings are often quite difficult to dislodge. The logic of meetings is often the sine qua non of organizational domestication.

A second facet of domestication roots itself in the “plumbing” of organizations—the web of processes, policies, and systems—what I call the “functional rhythms” of a place. Organizational “plumbing” drives conformity. A large portion of organizational life involves “running the plumbing”—making sure that systems and processes work and that nothing unexpected happens. Large swaths of an organization’s employee population is dedicated to running the plumbing—budgeting processes, reporting, performance reviews, talent processes all constitute plumbing that needs to be run. This plumbing impacts how the people who deliver value do their work, and can make them unsettled and focused on certain problems that someone else thinks are important. This plumbing almost always has domestication assumptions built into it, and it contributes to the value destroying “games” that people play. Look no further than the volume of companies emerging from the era of rigid Performance Management systems to see the recognition, and impact, of this form of domestication.

One of the most powerful ways organizational plumbing domesticates people is by rewarding and valuing the wrong things. Systematically, through Remuneration and Talent systems, organizations create significant, unintended consequences deep in their bellies. Talent in most organizations is broken. It may work at the top of the house where it is shepherded and overseen with monastic-like scrutiny, but 2-3 layers down in most organizations, it is a mess. Leaders at these levels often recognize and reward minions. “Minions,” if you haven’t seen the movie, are cute creatures who do what the master wants.

I have worked with “talent” in dozens of organizations on multiple continents, and they’re typically bright, confident, articulate people. I would propose, however, that they’re not vastly distinct from the masses that work around them. They are frequently people who personify the essential “identity” that emerges from organizational domestication. In one organization, which was plagued by conformity and risk avoidance from decades of command and control leadership, a battery of psychometrics on the “talent” population revealed that they were risk averse, compliant, and not bold—the organizations’ “talent” factors had created exactly the opposite of what the company needed. These people were identified as “talent” because they played the games well, and they represented—almost subconsciously—the broken ideals of the status quo. By focusing on “talent” at these levels, we actually exacerbate conformity and fear in the social system.

But the impact of this plumbing goes beyond HR practices—every piece of plumbing in an organization is an HR practice, as it impacts and defines the experience of the people doing the work. In one large organization I worked with, any department not using their entire budget was penalized the “missed” percentage of their budget out of their subsequent year’s budget. The intent, I have no doubt, was to ensure sound planning. The impact, and related domestication, was to create a flurry of wasteful activity in the last quarter of every year. People recognized this folly, and they even made jokes about it, but they played along, as they’d all been domesticated to play this game. Plumbing is a big driver of domestication, because these processes and systems tend to define the rules of the games that people play, and the extracurricular activities that capture their attention away from delivering value.

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The third way organizations domesticate people is through the unintended role modelling of leaders. I'm not talking about which speeches they give, or what "all company" emails they send out. I'm talking about what they prioritize, what they recognize, and where they spend their time. Organizational leaders are one of the last bastions of hierarchy in the world; everywhere else, hierarchy has been steamrolled or disavowed. But through the plumbing of organizations, we keep hierarchies strong in organizations. If you want to understand this form of domestication in your organization, ask leaders two questions: Which meetings don't you miss? Which ones are you willing to cancel at the last minute? This level of prioritization, while unintended, sends very clear messages to the organization about what is important, and what should be focused on, and what can be ignored. It inadvertently "trains" people to certain realities.

Now that you're feeling dejected and horrified by your existence within an organization, let me offer a glimmer of hope... What can you do about it?

Be brave. Challenging anything in an organization takes guts. It is much easier to be a victim or just play the games. It seems that is what most bankers have done! Real leadership in organizations is never the sole domain of those in hierarchical positions. It is more often thoughtful, courageous people challenging norms to make small, local changes that impact

those around them. This requires tact and—in the words of a friend of mine—the ability to “be provocative without provoking people.” A blueprint for courage may include the following:

- **Understand the “games” that are played in your organization and start to build a coalition to dislodge them.** Everyone knows the games that people play, take the “budgeting” game cited earlier, but they just go along because it is easier than pushing back. If you can identify and test impressions with confidants, you can start your own social movement.
- **Focus on new joiners.** If you can’t identify the “games” that your organization plays, then you’ve been in the organization too long. Seriously, if you can’t see them, become best friends with every new joiner to the company, and ask them, “what seems odd?” in their first month. New joiners to any organization are deep in the midst of becoming domesticated, but they have a window where they can see the silliness of the status quo as they try to learn it.
- **As your momentum builds, start to call the “games” out.** Watch and question meeting norms, and the rigour of discussion that exists in them, help improve the efficacy of initiatives by ensuring that a compelling “why” is deeply localized, and help functions impact operations in more productive ways. It is sometimes interesting, as you step back and watch “the way things are around here,” to identify what is considered “provocative” and ask “why?”... publicly!

If you are a senior leader in an organization, help reframe the problem by role modelling unexpected things. While senior leaders don't "define" the culture, they can stimulate it pretty powerfully. Start by recognizing that your organization is a social system. This focus on social context leads to very different conversations and activities, and it requires you to look at and question a different set of things. Make curiosity and openness your hallmark—if you can start to ask a different set of questions, and invoke real conversations about domestication, people can start to change themselves. Based on my experience, when senior leaders in organizations can role model openness, vulnerability and curiosity, very different social patterns start to open up beneath them, and vast resources can be accessed to improve performance.

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Leaders modelling a more open way of working and self-improvement is typically a good place to start, but be careful. Great “shapers” of social systems tend to target feedback in the very specific areas they want to improve. In one organization, a well-intentioned leader asked their team at the end of a meeting for “any feedback.” The room fell silent, and people looked at one another with intense trepidation. The feedback was way too vague and broad, and domestication won, as the leader hardly ever got feedback.

Feedback is best when it is small and sharply focused on something precise. I saw an interesting video recently that talked about the difference between a bomb and a combustion engine. Use this model to think about feedback. Combustion engines have millions of tiny explosions all the time, but they are very focused and precise and—barring carbon emissions—yield great value to the world. Bombs, on the other hand, are one big explosion, and they yield destruction. Typical feedback and performance discussions are bombs in organizations—destroying motivation and yielding little more than resentment and a sense of being judged. Build more combustion engines, and model it yourself.

The final place organizations can focus is by starting to recognize the day-to-day routines that distinguish their best performers. Unlike our typical approaches of understanding performance through abstracted competencies, a focus on routines can go viral quickly in a social system.

Your best people do things differently, and most organizations don't understand what that difference is. You can't describe a Bugatti Veyron through a list of parts, so why do we think we can describe effective leadership through a list of competencies. Organizations are social systems, and certain routines define impact and effectiveness. Focus on these!

A routines-based approach to understanding performance makes learning and improvement very applied. Leaders like it, because they can see the path to improved performance, not just scoring better on annual 360-degree survey reports. Line leaders will recognize, and talk about, those patterns with a vigor unseen in typical approaches using abstracted models, because the approach privileges the world in which they live and work every day.

By identifying, simplifying, and replicating the routines through which the best people thrive and get great results, organizational social systems can change quickly. The focus and language of routines, when done well, passes the "sniff test" of face validity for line leaders, and gets traction on the ground, quickly. Focusing on the best routines won't just raise the profile of the chosen few, it will raise the performance of everyone.

In one business I worked with, three routines were identified and focused on through all kinds of mechanisms—team meetings, leader's one-on-one discussions with direct reports, and

town hall meetings. The organization had done all of these mechanically for some time, but when they started to focus on the routines that were evident in the “best,” a clear pattern emerged, and it was a pattern that leaders could integrate and apply quickly to their real work. This approach improved the organization’s culture survey data by 21 points on some critical questions within nine months.

The social system of any organization is nimble and active, people learn and react and change all the time—but on their own terms, and based on the games that they play every day. People will say that culture change takes a decade. I believe it only takes that long if you pull the wrong levers. If you pull the right ones, people shift quickly. But you have to overcome the tyranny of the status quo to get the right movement, and you have to become much more savvy at understanding a different set of patterns and variables than we’ve typically privileged.

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I once wrote that “organizations are prisons for successful adults.” They don’t have to be. With some courage and some new lenses, organizations can be great. Leaders and employees in organizations have to be enabled to understand and question the status quo of the social system in new ways, and be given channels to improve what we know about great performance in very applied ways, not in abstraction. **Who knows, we might even discover some new ways to motivate bankers along the way!** 📌

Info

ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Todd is the founder of Like Minds Advisory, a consultancy of veteran executives and practitioners who work with organizations to think differently about execution and the human side of performance. With almost 20 years of experience in Corporate Learning and Executive Education, he was formerly the Chief Learning Officer at BHP Billiton, and an Executive Director at Duke CE, based in London. He has won numerous awards for his work, and he has worked with CEOs and Executives around the world to reshape their approaches to impacting people and culture. His work has been featured in numerous publications, and he has received global awards for reshaping learning through innovation—including, leader led approaches, the use of routines, and mechanisms to embed learning at work. He lives in Melbourne, Australia, but keeps a foot planted in the American West.

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