

How We Choose and Send Signals

A man sat at a metro station in Washington D.C. on a cold January morning and started to play the violin. He played Bach for about 45 minutes. During that time, since it was rush hour, thousands of people went through the station, most of them on their way to work.

Three minutes went by and a middle-aged man noticed there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds and then hurried to meet his schedule. A minute later, the violinist received his first dollar tip: a woman threw the money in the till and without stopping continued to walk. A few minutes later, someone leaned against the wall to listen to him, but the man looked at his watch and started to walk again.

A three-year-old boy wanted to stop and pay attention. His mother hurriedly tugged him along, but the child stopped to look at the violinist. Finally, the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk, turning his head all the time. This action was repeated by several other children. All of the parents, without exception, forced them to move on.

In the 45 minutes the musician played, only 6 people stopped and stayed for a while. About 20 people gave him money but continued on. He collected \$32. When he finished playing and silence took over no one seemed to notice. No one applauded.

The fiddler standing against a bare wall outside the Metro in an indoor arcade at the top of the escalators was one of the finest classical musicians in the world, playing some of the most elegant music ever written on one of the most valuable violins ever made.

Two days before his subway concert, Joshua Bell sold out at a theater in Boston and the seats averaged \$100 each.

His performance was arranged by The Washington Post as an experiment in context, perception, and priorities -- as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste. In a banal setting at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend? Journalist Gene Weingarten was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing for his thought-provoking analysis of the experiment.

Is that a story about taste? Or as some bloggers argued after the incident, did people quickly move on because a violin is too high pitched to be appreciated outside of a Metro stop? Or is it a simple case of confirmation bias created by the expectation that in that setting the quality of music would be mediocre at best? More than likely, it is all of the above.

That is how easy it is to miss the music. It is highly unlikely that people moving through the Metro would have been able to discern virtuoso quality music while rushing to get somewhere. That quality of recognition would have had to occur in a few seconds in a milieu filled with distracting noise and contradicting signals. Perhaps another accomplished violin player would have picked up the information quickly enough ... or would have been sufficiently curious to pause long enough to recognize the virtuoso quality of the music and enjoy the short concert.

So what can we learn about organizational culture from this little experiment? Information often comes from unlikely places and is easy to miss. Some of that information carries with it implicit opportunities if we stop and pay attention to it. *It is easy to fail to discern the latent value in unformed ideas as we press forward with other information that shouts its presence more loudly.*

Sometimes we simply do not expect it so we don't recognize it. In organizations such failure often translates into lost opportunity. Those who missed Jonathan Bell read about their loss in the Washington Post. In organizations we may never know it.

Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon.com, during an interview with the Harvard Business Review in 2007 quoted an oft-cited observation about how easily we fail to discern information that is in front of us:

"I think most big errors are errors of omission rather than errors of commission. They are the ones that companies never

get held to account for, the times when they were in a position to notice something and act on it, had the skills and competencies or could have acquired them, and yet failed to do so. It's the opposite of sticking to your knitting: It's when you shouldn't have stuck to your knitting, but you did."¹

Very smart people can miss the music. So, lest we judge the Metro commuters too harshly, let us take a look of how the same people might have responded in the presence of different signals. Suppose the whole purpose of the event was to expose passersby to a few refreshing moments of excellence during their busy day. In this case they would have sent a different set of signals. Joshua Bell could have been positioned next to a well-crafted message that said:

"This is Joshua Bell, one of the most celebrated violinists in the world.

He is playing Bach Violin Sonatas on a Stradivarius violin.

Bostonians in a sold-out concert recently paid over \$100 per person to hear him.

This concert is brought to you by the Washington Post. "

Most likely the Metro would have had to deal with a massive congestion problem as the first few people who stopped and read the sign and then listened, were quickly joined by others who also read the message and still others who could not even see the message but were attracted by the crowd.

Same Player, Same Music but Different Signals

What would the message have triggered? The graphics signaled: this is a class act. The brief intro to Joshua Bell and Bach signaled: this is a very high-quality event. The price paid by Bostonians signaled: this is a bargain. The Washington Post reference signaled: generosity and opportunity as well as an answer to the core question, "Why would someone so famous come here and play for nothing?" The entire sign and its contents, along with the fact that it was occurring at a Metro stop, signaled: This is a rare opportunity.

In the presence of that palette of signals, even those people who were not familiar with classical music may have brought to that moment all the listening acuity and appreciation that they could muster. Experienced listeners would have been inspired. There would have no doubt been a quiet dynamic that was subtly signaled through the

crowd itself that, though unspoken, encouraged high quality listening and appreciation.

Mothers would have nudged their children forward or placed them on their shoulders rather than tugging them away. More than a few listeners would have adjusted busy schedules. The concert would have likely ended with a roar of applause.

Now consider the actual signals that were in play on that day... a busy Metro stop often frequented by street musicians...other busy people who paid little attention...a trip destination. What thoughts and beliefs would that prompt? “No really good musician would have cause to play at a metro stop.” “If it is free, it isn’t worth wasting my time for.” “I have a schedule to meet.”

Notice the difference in what people saw and heard between the actual event and the hypothetical but completely plausible alternatives. Imagine the striking difference in range of information that people would have absorbed: from viewing the music as an interruption and perhaps a mild distraction ... to appreciation for the quality of music that would have taken people to their own thresholds of understanding. But just as striking is the shift that would have occurred in the nature of the crowd from independent, unrelated individuals to a collective temporarily bonded by a common desire to share this event, signaling each other in ways that heightened their mutual appreciation and reduced distracting triggers.

No matter what the intended outcome, the signals that we send can have a dramatic influence on our ability to achieve it. We can easily make the case that in organizations, people who display a level of creativity that is equivalent in its own way to the Joshua Bell’s virtuosity and reputation would never be overlooked in the presence of signals that triggered their best natural inclinations. Most of the collective intellectual work in organizations is much more mundane. But the right signals can trigger a striking shift.

Lessons from the Latrero

The award-winning short film titled: *historia de la latrero* opens with a series of shots of people enjoying a beautiful day in a Mexican plaza near a fountain. Birds sing. Children play. People smile and laugh.

The camera then pans on a blind beggar sitting by the fountain with a crude message that reads: “I am blind. Please have compassion.”

People pass him by and a few carelessly toss coins his way. Some coins land on the ground. Others find their way into his can.

Then a well-dressed man in a business suit walks by, stops, comes back, and reads the message. The blind man senses him there and touches his foot. The man takes out his pen. He picks up the sign, turns it over and writes a new message then leaves. More passersby start past the beggar. They stop. They read the message and begin to put money in his can. The camera pans on the can as coins and even bills are placed in it. The blind man obviously pleased with his newfound abundance feels the concrete, picking up even more coins that missed his can.

Later the stranger reappears and again stands in front of the blind man who touches his foot and recognizes him. In a brief exchange which represents the only dialogue in the movie he asks the man what he wrote on the sign. The stranger says, "I wrote the same message but in different words," and leaves. The movie closes as the new words on the sign appear on the screen: "It is a beautiful day, and I can't see it."

Two Signs, Two Different Signals

Once again, we see the way contrasting signals shape performance. The first sign, rather than triggering the compassion that was already present, subtly implied that the passersby needed to be reminded to have compassion (a form of push). Push creates resistance even if ever so subtle. The new message triggered the best instincts in people by connecting them to their *own* appreciation of the beautiful day. It then pointed them toward the contrast between their ability to casually enjoy it and the blind beggar's inability to see it. A small adjustment in language triggered the best instincts of the passersby.

Two signs, one fictional and one hypothetical each created profound shifts.... shifts in tone...shifts in awareness...shifts in generosity of heart...shifts in feelings...shifts in the connection between people...shifts in values about what really matters...and all because of what those signals triggered in a moment.

The challenge in organizations is that culture is created and then reinforced by the signals that people send to each other. Signals may be disparaging or inspiring, cynical, or hopeful, suspicious, or trusting. They may invoke a contest of ideas or the joint development of new shared understanding. We can foster knowledge or ignorance, competence or incompetence, inspiration, or desperation. We can trigger the highest and best instincts or those that are mean-spirited and degrading.

We Grasp the Meaning of Signals Even When We Are Not Aware of It

Information that is sent and received so quickly that the exchange operates below the awareness of either the sender or the recipient is referred to as a thin slice because it is both instantaneously and seamlessly picked up and interpreted. We exchange easily recognizable signals through language and non-verbal cues that are easy to read. But we also exchange them in countless subtle ways, many of which are non-conscious. We respond to these signals called thin slices and pick up the implicit information even when we cannot put our finger on why. Notice how when you walk away from conversations with some people you feel lighthearted and with others you feel a sense of disquiet even when you would find it difficult to describe why.

These thin slices are not easily masked. Researchers have discovered that the muscle that orbits the eye (the orbicularis oculi) that combines with a smile to signal happiness cannot be activated by will.

We can fake a smile, but we can't display fake happiness with our eyes. We often sense when people are incongruent even though if we are asked, we might have a hard time explaining why. So, if we want to trigger the best instincts in other people, we can only do that from the context of those same instincts within ourselves.

We make amazingly accurate judgements about attractiveness, likeability, trustworthiness, competence, and aggressiveness during the first 1/10 of a second according to Janine Willis and Alexander Todorov.² Virtually any belief, or opinion or attitude held by a person who is in our presence is picked up by us whether we are aware of it or not.

We are so good at reading this information, without even thinking about it, that our instant interpretation can be more accurate than a trained observation. We seem to pick up and understand the meaning of thin-sliced information best when we do not over-think it. Any athlete who has been in a slump knows what happens when you over-think your game.

Researchers, for example, have discovered that people who are trained to look for signs of lying do not score as well in accuracy tests as amateurs. The experts were so invested in their analytical ability to detect liars that they learned to ignore their own intuitive interpretation of thin-sliced information instead of leveraging it.³

Signals spring from two-way communication. Both the sender and the receiver influence both the impact and the meaning of the signal. We quickly learn to read each other's thin sliced messages. And if the person sending the message is important to us such as a boss, we may confer with other people about how to interpret it. One senior government official had a reputation for never praising people. They gauged his assessment of their work by the number and difficulty of assignments he gave to them. This decoding of his messages was widely shared.

From someone else silence might be a blank slate on which to trace an interpretation based on personal history of moments when contributions were met with no response. Silence could mean approval, disapproval, or anything in between. In the face of no information, we fill in the blanks based on our own history of similar moments.

The receiver can amplify, shift the meaning, or even fail to recognize a signal. For one person a negative signal may be devastating, to another it is not even noticed or is recognized and quickly discarded as "that's their problem."

Anything to which we pay attention triggers resonant feelings, beliefs, understandings, and competencies.

Signals Have a Far-Reaching Impact on the Performance of a Culture

We can even make each other smarter. Consider a simple experiment conducted by a group of Dutch social scientists. Forty-six of the hardest Trivial Pursuit questions were asked of two different groups of

students. One group was asked to think about the idea of a college professor for a few moments before starting the game. The second group focused on soccer hooligans before beginning. Those who focused on a college professor chose the right answer on just over fifty-seven per cent of the questions. Those who focused on soccer hooligans answered just over 42% correctly. That is a 26% difference in outcome caused by nothing more than a difference in focus! A college professor represents reasoned thought. Soccer hooligans, of course, are the epitome of chaos. What is the optimal version of a thinker and problem solver? The Trivial Pursuit experiment triggered the way students think by creating two different models. For the students, it was a college professor. Focusing on a professor triggered the circuits, the innate capabilities within each of them that were aligned with that trait. Therein lays the power of signals.

So, it would follow that when we are interacting with other people, the way they view us strongly influences our own mental acuity. You may wonder, is this really the case? It turns out that it is, even with senior citizens. For example, in one experiment, prior to testing older adults, they were subliminally presented terms relating to the word elderly. Some were presented with negative terms such as senile and dementia. Others were presented with positive terms such as wise and experienced. When given memory tests, each group's memory fell in line with the subliminally presented terms.

We trigger intellectual performance through both the *content* of thin slices and the *mood and feeling* that accompanies it; and mood and feeling matter. We now know what we have suspected all along. Positive attitudes heighten the ability of a group to deal with complex ideas and to formulate out-of-the-box solutions. Marcial Losada has developed a mathematical model that shows what happens on business teams when a 3-to-1 ratio is reached between positive vs. negative attitudes as registered in actual behavior. At 2.901-to-1, a tipping point is reached when the team shifts into the creative elaboration and exploration of ideas vs. one that dead ends its ideas. Positive attitudes are contagious and are an important component of inspired organizational culture. ⁴

These signals play a powerful role in the quality of an organizational culture. But often we have no idea of the impact the signal has had upon us. In the Trivial Pursuit study, the researchers chose the focus.... think like a professor or soccer hooligan. The participants accepted that choice of focus even though they had no idea that their choice would affect their performance.

There are countless ways in which we send signals that trigger the innate abilities of other people. They can cause us to improve or diminish our mental acuity, to approach each other with openness and appreciation or go down paths of anger and recrimination, to welcome and further evolve ideas or build walls around our mental constructs. They have an impact on the cohesiveness, diversity, and general effectiveness of social networks. They either build or undermine social capital. They can help to create conversations that flow fluently, deeply, creatively with a sense of inquiry and dialogue, but they can also foster conversations that are contentious, competitive and even toxic.

The conditions that govern these signals apply to any group of any size from nation states to virtual strangers twittering. In every case, the signals can be changed in a way that improves the quality of organizational culture.

When Signals Become Contagious

Signals...either positive or negative... can escalate in a self-reinforcing explosion. In contrast to the strangers who walked past Joshua Bell and the fictional people who were enjoying the plaza on a beautiful day, we are in a workplace or a family or among friends. As a result, we continuously breed signals and they quickly become self-reinforcing. Toxic signals especially, can create toxic responses not only toward the person who initiated the signal but also in the next few people and so on as they in turn signal others.

James Breckenridge has devoted considerable research to the psychology of terrorism. He is convinced that negative information is more contagious and “stickier” than information that is upbeat. He has shown that it explodes out more rapidly and is more difficult to turn around once it has momentum.⁵ In addition, negative information is also given great veracity. Give us a good crisis and we are on it. We are more inclined to believe it than positive information. Every political campaign strategist knows how complex and expensive it is to correct half-truths. Once something is believed, especially if it fits our other beliefs such as our ideology, or scientific paradigm, or opinions about the people we work with, or the organization itself, confirmation bias sets in and disconfirming information is often invisible.

But positive signals can also be infectious if they are credible. They too are contagious. James Fowler has shown that at least in

communities, happiness is contagious to at least three degrees of separation.⁶ Happy people trigger happiness in their friends who then pass it on to their friends.

The contrasting messages on the beggar's sign are ample testimony to the immediate shift that occurs when we signal the best instincts in both individuals and in groups. That is why the research on thin slices is so important. You cannot fake positive signals, but if they are congruent, they make their mark.

Positive signals cause people to see what others miss and they see it sooner. They mine a wider range of information from their individual and collective wisdom. They include more divergent thinking. They are more likely to break through to new understanding...creating novel thought rather than merely an extension of current thinking. These people have more fun because they enjoy the process. They take pleasure in each other.

Best Practice Signaling

How do we create the compelling signals in an organization that can shift collective thought to a new level? What is the organizational language that causes people to experience the same message in a new way, or that pivots their attention so that they see information that they otherwise might have missed ... messages with good design in combination with language, and values that pivot our focus...messages that trigger competence and inspire the best instincts in others?

An effective signal tells a story quickly. It shifts attention. Inspired signals switch on the inner circuits that cause us to open, evolve our ideas, be engaged, and even be moved by a piece of music when it is well conceived and masterfully delivered, no matter the genre. In the presence of inspired signals, we see what we might have otherwise missed and realize possibilities that otherwise would not have occurred.

1 The Institutional Yes, An Interview with Jeff Bezos by Julia Kirby and Thomas A. Stewart, HBR Oct 22, 2007

2 The New Unconscious, edited by Ran Hassin, James Uleman & John Bargh. Oxford University Press, New York, 2005 (Chapter 12, page 309, The Glimpsed World: Unintended Communication and Unintended Perception by Y. Susan Choi, Heather M. Gray and Nalini Ambady)

3 Janine Willis and Alexander Todorov First Impressions: Making Up Your Mind After a 100-Ms Exposure to a Face., Psychological Science; July 2006.

4Levy, p 317

5 For a summary of the wide array of studies from which these findings are derived see Barbara Herbrichson and Marcial Losada; Positive Affect and the Complex Dynamics of Human Flourishing; American Psychologist, October 2005, pp 678ff

6 See Eric Weiner, The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World.

7 James Fowler and Nicholas Christakis, Dynamic spread of happiness in a large social network: longitudinal analysis of the Framingham Heart Study social network: BMJ 2008;337;a2338.