

# Broken windows management

In the same way that a neighbourhood with graffiti-strewn walls, abandoned cars and rundown buildings is vulnerable to further decay, companies with ramshackle management can breed organisational vandalism and worse...

James Q Wilson and George Kelling probably didn't expect to trigger a massive policy shift of colossal socio-political consequences when they wrote an article for *Atlantic Monthly* in 1982 entitled 'Broken windows: the police and neighbourhood safety'. The authors had developed a theory based on their observations of a well-known sequence of events in some urban communities, summarising it like this: "Evidence of decay (accumulated trash, broken windows, deteriorated building exteriors) remains in the neighbourhood for a reasonably long period of time. People who live and work in the area feel more vulnerable and begin to withdraw. They become less willing to intervene to maintain public order (for example, to attempt to break up groups of rowdy teens loitering on street corners) or to address physical signs of deterioration. Sensing this, teens and other possible offenders become bolder and intensify their harassment and vandalism. Residents become yet more fearful and withdraw further from community involvement and upkeep. Some people leave if they can. This atmosphere then attracts offenders from outside the area, who sense that it has become a vulnerable and less risky site for crime."

Further to publication, two things happened. First of all, a fuller theory emerged from what had originally been an observation of reality, one that is all too familiar in many of our cities today. Second, actions were taken in many places in the US, some of them counter-intuitive, misinterpreted or controversial even now.

The glue that holds the 'broken windows theory' together belongs to the behavioural and social sciences. I suggest that it is extremely useful – beyond the unpleasantness of some suburban life – to understand organisational decline in our safer and perhaps even cosier business organisations. As in suburban US, there are practical ways to deal with the organisational



...says Dr Leandro Herrero

deterioration, or, alternatively, dare I say, get out before it's too late.

The 'broken windows theory' suggests that relatively small – and in themselves often harmless – realities (broken windows, graffiti on the walls, litter in the streets, etc) have the power, if not addressed promptly, to create big social changes by sending signals to the environment. These signals are interpreted as: "Nobody cares much around here, it's safe to break things, litter or vandalise," and this makes the environment attractive for people who engage in these kind of behaviours. Prolonged harmless graffiti leads to more broken windows and wider vandalism because its message is: "You can get away with destruction here," which opens the door to broader disorder. To put it bluntly, minor deterioration can create irreversible decline. The 'broken windows theory' was a pillar for what, years later, would be known as 'zero tolerance' law enforcement policy in places such as New York, which has been often misunderstood, I suspect even by many who quote the policy.

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The conventional wisdom of the action to be taken to fix these problems would read: “Don’t let them get away with it, punish them.” But in behavioural sciences terms, punishment has very moderate effects, at least if compared with what we call ‘extinction’, that is, making sure that if there are incentives for those engaged in the disorder, these incentives are removed. In behavioural sciences, we call behavioural reinforcement anything that, ‘attached’ to a given behaviour, can increase the probability of it being expressed. For the New York gangs engaged in massive graffiti of underground trains, for example, the reinforcement could probably be best understood in terms of a sense of power – got from seeing the effect of their actions all over the place, and the apparent immunity they enjoy. Power, ego-building, a sense of achievement, group spirit, whatever it is or was, is reinforcing those behaviours, that is, it is motivating these people to do it again. While conventional wisdom and popular psychology would suggest that the police should find and punish those perpetrators, a truly behavioural sciences-based approach would favour the removal of the reward over the application of punishment. And this is precisely what authorities in places such as New York did. Instead of “find them and punish them,” they opted for “find them and show them the futility of their actions”. How? By cleaning the graffiti as fast as they could, in some cases in front of the perpetrators’ own noses. And as a knock-on effect, overall crime declined. Big time.

‘Broken windows’ policy is far from a theoretical framework. It has clear consequences, as a commentator in the *Washington Post* described: “The theory has spawned a revolution in law enforcement and neighbourhood activism. Broken windows? Get building owners to replace them. Graffiti on the walls? Scrub them clean, then get tough with graffiti artists. Abandoned cars? Haul them away. Drunks on the sidewalks? Get them off the streets, too.” The commentator cites an official American neighbourhood website’s stance: “These ‘order strategies’ such as those listed below help to deter and reduce crime: quick replacement of broken windows; prompt removal of abandoned vehicles; fast clean-up of illegally dumped items, litter and spilled garbage; quick paint-out of graffiti; finding (or building) better places for teens to gather than street corners; fresh paint on buildings and clean sidewalks and street gutters.” It couldn’t be more prescriptive.

The ‘broken windows’ model is powerful and attractive and, as such, it is not surprising that by

using it to explain lots of things, it has accumulated its own share of critics. For example, the significant decline in crime in many US cities over a period of ‘zero tolerance’ implementation is portrayed by some as a consequence of the policy, but others see it as a simple accentuation of a trend that had already been present and linked to many other social factors. One recent theory of the fall in crime rates is found in the controversial Donohue-Levitt thesis, launched in 2001 by two Stanford Law and Chicago Economics professors. It explains the drop in crime over the years in the US as a consequence of the implementation of legalised abortion. Levitt put it simply to the *New York Times*: “A difficult home environment leads to an increased risk of criminal activity. Increased abortion reduced unwantedness and therefore lower[ed] criminal activity.” The complexity of any ‘explanation’ in the social sciences is enormous and therefore not unexpectedly contentious. And this is a good controversial one. Linking cause and effect in social sciences is definitely a tricky affair. But the ‘broken windows’ model is one that can help us understand and deal with situations closer to home, in the day-to-day management of our business organisations. It is a conversation worth having here.

### The writing on the wall

We have our own versions of graffiti and litter in our companies, and I’m not talking about the cleanliness of the toilets. Organisational life is full of rules of the game, some of them explicit, others tacit, some necessary, some not, some enabling us to do our jobs, some plain silly, and created only to satisfy big egos. In non-judgmental behavioural terms, rules create the borders of what is acceptable and what is not, therefore serving as a map for people in the organisation. If the rule is stupid, people should be able to challenge it by trying to change it, but never by simply ignoring it. There is a trick here. Ignoring a stupid rule, and being able to do so without being penalised, may have the intentional good consequence of making that rule less stable, which is good news. However, if an authority figure in the organisation ignores the rule, period, this is a graffiti signal to others, saying: rules are not taken seriously here. This may be unintended, but it is potentially a powerful trigger for a widespread lack of compliance. In the process of fixing A (by ignoring it) we have created problem B. And

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many rules are not stupid. They simply guide efficacy or effectiveness or time management or information flow or quality maintenance. If you see a decrease in compliance, a progressive rise in loose ends, unfinished discussions, decisions only half-baked, delayed implementations, poor usage of an information management system or agreed actions not taking place, and people getting away with it, you may be looking at broken windows.

As in the social theory described, these facts in isolation may not be big enough to make the firm collapse but, whether you want it or not, they will have a multiplying effect, with unintended consequences. You may think this is simply lack of discipline, and you may be right, but that is unfortunately just a label that means very little in behavioural terms. The reality is that if there are no negative

consequences for the perpetrators, and the behaviours are reinforced by the fact that loose compliance, for example, is simply possible, before you know it the place will attract other non-compliance realities of a bigger magnitude. Perhaps you could also call it poor

management, period. You may be right, too, in which case that management is more unlikely to see anything particularly wrong.

### Early warning signs

I am more interested in the utility of 'broken windows signals' in the organisation. These are symptoms that you may have spotted which, although not necessarily an expression of a true and full 'broken windows' environment, should be an early-warning signal. They should ask you to make a judgement on whether, beyond those symptoms and signs, there is something more

serious. The greater the tendency for loose ends, the more you should be alerted. Together with the examples given above, watch out for meeting minutes that suddenly disappear from the agenda and don't seem to get reviewed any more; requests for issue input followed by prolonged silence; deadlines that appear more 'flexible' than ever or simply are not met; circulated briefing documents that nobody really reads; a loss of clarity about who is accountable for what, perhaps associated with an increase in so-called shared responsibility; requested formats (for meetings, reports, input sought) that are ignored; repeated postponement of events due to the lack of a quorum. All these are broken windows in the management system. They may not kill the firm by themselves but they are symptoms of underlying pathology.

In the best of these cases, there may not be death on the horizon but the firm's weak immune system will simply attract other infections. A worse case is one where all these things seem to be 'new' or not noted in the organisation's previous medical history. The firm has a temperature and the fever should alert you. And alert is a good word. While very poor organisational performance may rock the firm enough to shock the system and trigger immediate remedial measures, a more gentle, increased tolerance for marginal performance is a sign of serious deterioration that can be easily overlooked. It is the equivalent of walking along the same street every day and not noticing the broken windows and the graffiti.

You may think this is all very well but isn't happening or isn't possible in your organisation. After all, yours isn't one of those companies. For the eternal optimists, I would remind you of a social experiment in 1969 by Philip Zimbardo, now professor emeritus of psychology in Stanford. It is considered a precursor of the 'broken windows' theory and you'll see why. Zimbardo left two identical 'vulnerable' cars in the street in two different cities and waited for them to be vandalised. The one in New York's Bronx was stripped bare in a day. The one left in a street in Palo Alto, California, remained untouched for a week. At the end of the week, Zimbardo himself put a hammer through one of the windows and, as one report put it: "As though this act and its impunity were the starting gun they were waiting for, the Californians rallied round to destroy that car just as thoroughly". All it takes is a broken window in your organisation. You decide what action to take, but here is a tip: don't bother with punishment.



**Minutes of meetings that disappear from the agenda and requests for issue input followed by silence are both types of broken window**

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