

The terrorism of bipolar rhetoric

The verbal responses to the terrorist attacks in the US highlight a growing trend in bipolar thinking. Dr Leandro Herrero calls for a more considered use of language

The events of September 11 have launched what somebody has called a 'New World Disorder'. It is difficult to dissociate oneself from the events in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, psychologically or otherwise. The impact on business life will be noticeable. I am not referring to the financial impact – negative for airlines and insurers and positive for security firms and arms developers – but the psychological impact. We don't know the effect of that yet. The only thing we can do is to watch corporate behaviour.

For some, the situation is nothing short of apocalyptic. A faculty colleague, at the business school where I teach, circulated an e-mail containing apocalyptic numerology: "The date of the attack: 9/11: $9 + 1 + 1 = 11$; September 11 is the 254th day of the year: $2 + 5 + 4 =$

11. After September 11 there are 111 days left to the end of the year. Flight 11, had 92 people on board: $9 + 2 = 11...$ "

But an even more incredible, misguided response, was my colleague's exhortation to "open MS Word and type the following flight number: Q33 NY [which he erroneously described as the flight number of one of the planes which hit the World Trade Centre]. Now change the size of the letter to 26 and change the letter type to Wingdings...amazing!" Just in case you don't bother to do so, you will see is a plane, two squares looking like towers, the death sign and a star. Well, just for the record this is not my 11th article in *Scrip Magazine*.

And my colleague was not the only one to see hidden meanings everywhere. A short piece in

Business Week referred to the now shelved advertising campaign for the launch of Microsoft's new operating system Windows XP: "One of the Microsoft ads had PC-users flying through buildings, which looked eerily similar to attack victims leaping to their deaths from the burning towers...The new ads, we are told, will feature smiling PC-users levitating a few feet from the ground to suggest freedom and mobility."

By contrast, US writer Gore Vidal commented, somewhat cynically, "It will be all over by the Christmas sales."

Central to all these events is a war of words. The use of the word 'war' is itself legitimate to some, dangerous and inaccurate to others. The French prime minister was quick to insist, "We are not at war." The term crusade was quickly abandoned. There were discussions on the difference between terrorists and freedom fighters. And there was a late realisation that 'Infinite Justice' – the original name of the proposed military operation – offends those who see this as the patrimony of God alone. Worryingly, a vast paraphernalia of euphemisms was used to describe the disappearance of people, groups or entire states as a potential consequence of military retaliation. This was typified by the reappearance of an old war euphemism, 'collateral damage', to refer to civilian casualties. (The release date of a Hollywood film with this name has been postponed.) Then came the discussions on what civilisation means. For some there is one civilisation; for others several – western, Islam, etc. Some refer to mankind or humanity, others civilisation, many mix and confuse both.

Language is the protagonist. It is neither neutral nor universally understood. For most people, the West's lexicon and rhetoric so far has been composed, calm and measured. For others, terribly dangerous. Both hear the same discourse. The only unequivocal use of language that I have heard has come from Bill Clinton who declared that, during his presidency, he had authorised the killing of the main terrorist suspect. Hey, this is clear, not catch and bring to justice, not take him to a court of law, but kill him. Many people were quick to stress that this does fit easily with the concept of justice and democracy. But nobody could accuse the ex-president of fiddling with rhetoric.

A bimodal world

What is more important than the use of rhetoric in itself is how it polarises social relationships. The world has become bipolar in just a few days. It is not just the 'you are with us or against us' – a choice that, as one journalist pointed out, people don't want, need or should have to make – but how the space in the overall spectrum of thinking has become occupied by the extremes. Being anti-war becomes anti-American or pro-terrorism. Suggesting that the hijackers were anything but cowards (a term President Bush first used to describe them) becomes conspiracy. To explore the under-

The use of rhetoric polarises social relationships – 'you are either with us or against us'



Illustration by Rob Wilcockson

It's time to get rid of the 'or' and embrace the 'and' philosophy to overcome the tyranny of bipolar rhetoric.

lying causes of the atrocity becomes collusion with terrorism. Challenging the statement that they have done it because "they hate our values", becomes sharing the terrorist's own values. This polarisation is not good for our children's future. Words may become the real source of terror.

Perhaps a bimodal world is not as new as I pretend. Although I have just witnessed it on the BBC News 24 TV channel, it has always been there. Maybe most of us think this way – and I have a little theory about it that I will share. After all, business life is full of bimodal thinking. We have been taught to choose between extremes. Nobody has put it better than Collins and Porras in their acclaimed – and several times quoted in this column – book, *Built to Last*. The authors suggest that companies have a choice: to surrender to what they call 'the tyranny of the or' or to embrace the 'and'.

An example of this 'tyranny of the or' is often seen in drug development; the supposed choice is between speed and quality. It is the belief that speed compromises quality or that doing things to a high quality must be slow. The problem is not in

this apparently innocuous dichotomy, but in its pervasive power. One starts by acknowledging the choice and ends up *de facto* ensuring that anything fast is sloppy and any good quality document needs 20 people to sign it off. Bipolar thinking is powerful, and dangerous.

Visionary companies

Collin and Porras give examples of a broader strategic interest. They suggest that visionary companies embrace an 'and' philosophy. In other words they combine the apparent opposites that are supposedly mutually exclusive. Here are some of their 'and' approaches:

- Purpose beyond profit and the pragmatic pursuit of profit.
- A relatively fixed core ideology and vigorous change and movement.
- A clear vision and sense of direction and opportunistic experimentation.
- Audacious goals and incremental evolutionary progress.
- Selecting managers steeped in the core and selecting managers that induce change.
- Ideological control and operational autonomy.
- Extremely tight culture (almost cult like) and ability to change, move, and adapt.
- Investment for the long-term and demands for short-term performance.
- Organisation aligned with a core ideology and organisation adapted to its environment.

Another form of bipolar business 'groupthink' is that no-one questions the leader versus manager polarisation. So much emphasis has been put on the sexy aspects of leadership that management is left as the boring, operational option. However, the art of leading and running an organisation also requires the art of management. The bipolar thinking – 'Is he a leader or a manager?' – misses the point that any worthwhile professional has to do both at the same time.

Bipolar thinking and rhetoric is particularly visible in the area of the 'theory of the firm', or to use the title of a lecture by Charles Handy, 'What's a company for?' For 'market fundamentalists', a company is merely a tool to make profits for the owners. There is no remit for social responsibility and all talk about enhancing employees' human fulfilment is nonsense. These market extremists insist that those who support other approaches – such as the firm being primarily a social institution fulfilling the needs of individuals and society as well as making profits – are anti-capitalists. They may even be socialists or anti-globalisation extremists who break McDonald's windows in Seattle. It is another version of the 'with us or against us' mentality. In management, this kind of thinking leads to the worst forms of toxic management – a concept that I invented a long time ago to describe destructive management practices often portrayed as leadership.

Why is this categorical, A or B, approach to reality so popular? I am convinced that it has to do

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with our way of dealing with uncertainty. If we are able quickly to categorise into ‘boxes’ – such as A or B, pro-western or pro-terrorism, shareholder value driven or socialist, manager or leader – our level of anxiety decreases and we can grasp and contain an otherwise complex reality. Categorisation into a bimodal world is the best mind anxiolytic that our brain produces. Bipolarisation is the Valium of the mind.

My thoughts are with all the victims of September 11. UK broadcaster, John Humphrys, said in *The Sunday Times* that his first reaction to the news was to hug his one-year-old son and apologise for the world he has been brought into. I share with Mr Humphrys a similar age, fatherhood – we each have a baby son – and his reaction to the news. If I have a chance, I will teach Thomas, my son, that the world is multidimensional, not categorical. And that this is compatible with having strong values and beliefs. People, positions and qualities comprise a continuum, plus to minus, and we all are somewhere along it, not necessarily at the extremes. I will teach him that rhetoric can be toxic and language beautiful; that a bimodal world is a more comfortable illusion than a multidimensional reality; that we all try to categorise because it is the best way we know to handle it, even though the boxes may be fantasies.

One day when his attention is no longer focused

on building bricks on the carpet, I will also explain that ‘why’ is always the hardest question. We should not surrender to the easier primacy of the what, where or who. To describe the reality is easy, to comprehend is much more difficult. Humphrys’ article stressed the need to understand the enemy in order to overcome him. And, to do this, the question ‘why did it all happen?’ must be asked. He was inundated by e-mails from the ‘what/where/who’ coalition who almost accused him of taking the terrorists’ side. They seemed to be saying, ‘Well, if you are so clever, tell us why?’ His reply to my e-mail stressed “that answering ‘why?’ is not hard, it is today un-answerable”.

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Further reading

John Humphrys. ‘Understanding the demons is the way to destroy them’, *Sunday Times*, September 16, 2001.

‘Windows XP: when hype gets too hyper’, *Business Week*, October 8, 2001.

James C. Collins, Jerry I. Porras. *Built to Last: Successful habits of visionary companies*, Harperbusiness, 1997.

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