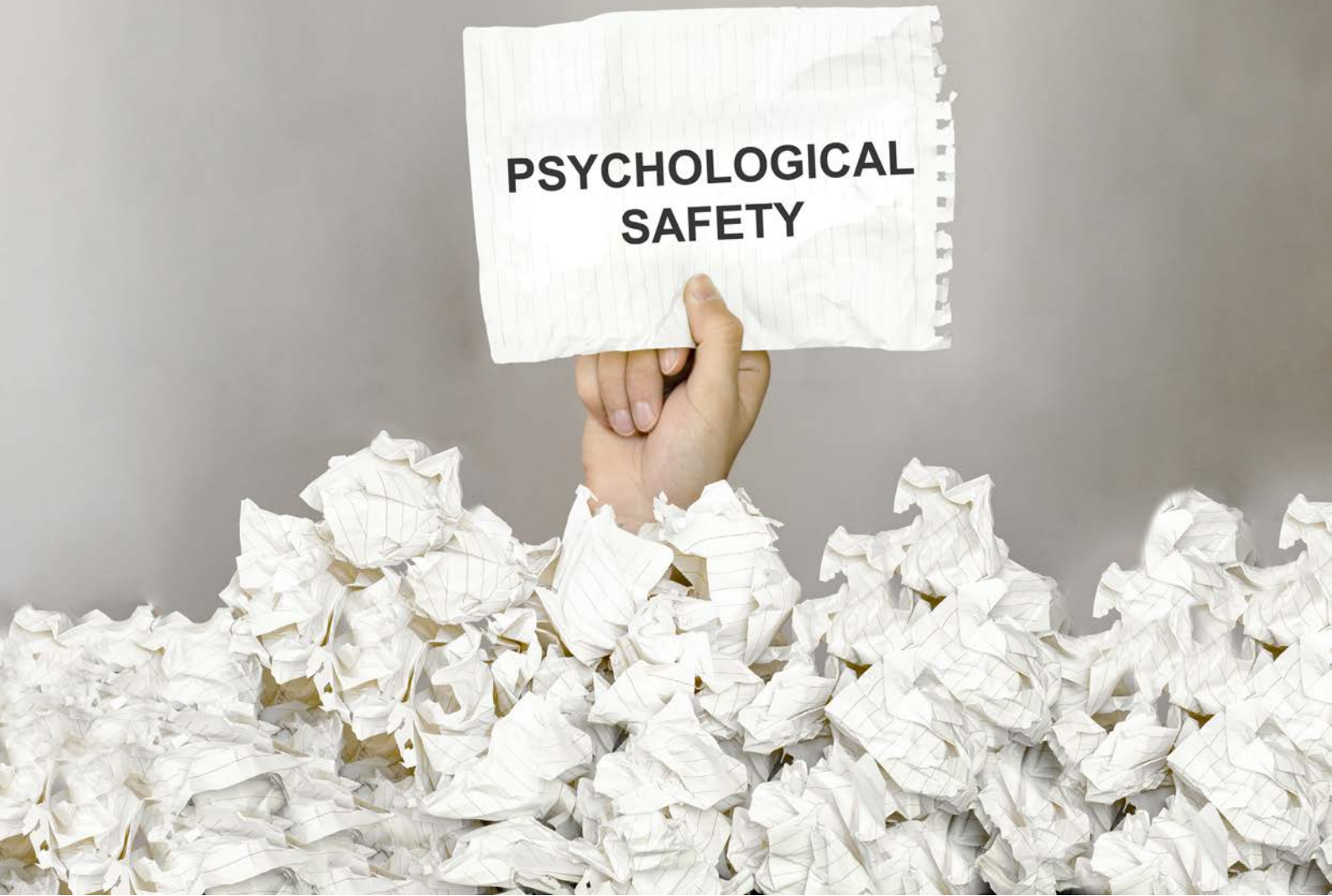




When safety is lost

Paul O'Neill and Tim Dalmau



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Setting the scene

As a puppy, Paul's small black dog was "encountered" enthusiastically in a park by a large black dog. When the puppy wasn't looking, the big black dog shoved his cold wet nozzle, boldly and clumsily onto the puppy's rear end. This induced a shrill whelp and sent the little thing to cower Paul's legs.

Since then, whilst playful and confident with canines of any other appearance, he reacts to any big black dog he spots; and he can spot them at a fair distance. It is like he has a radar set up specifically for big black dogs.

Each of us has worked recently with people struggling to adapt to a highly energetic style of engagement and attention from other senior executives and CEOs in group meetings, Teams or Zoom calls and other situations when 2 or more are gathered.

They describe the experience as humiliating, frightening, offensive, and just plain wrong. In one case, the CEO is portrayed as kind, friendly and supportive in one-to-one conversation and as a "rabid and unpredictable black dog" in

group settings, yes, black dog. In another case the CEO was described as behaving "like a lion with a toothache in a kindergarten play room".

This realm can also include any senior executive or leader. Such people tend to be labelled bullies and their behavior is coming under more and more legal scrutiny in recent times.

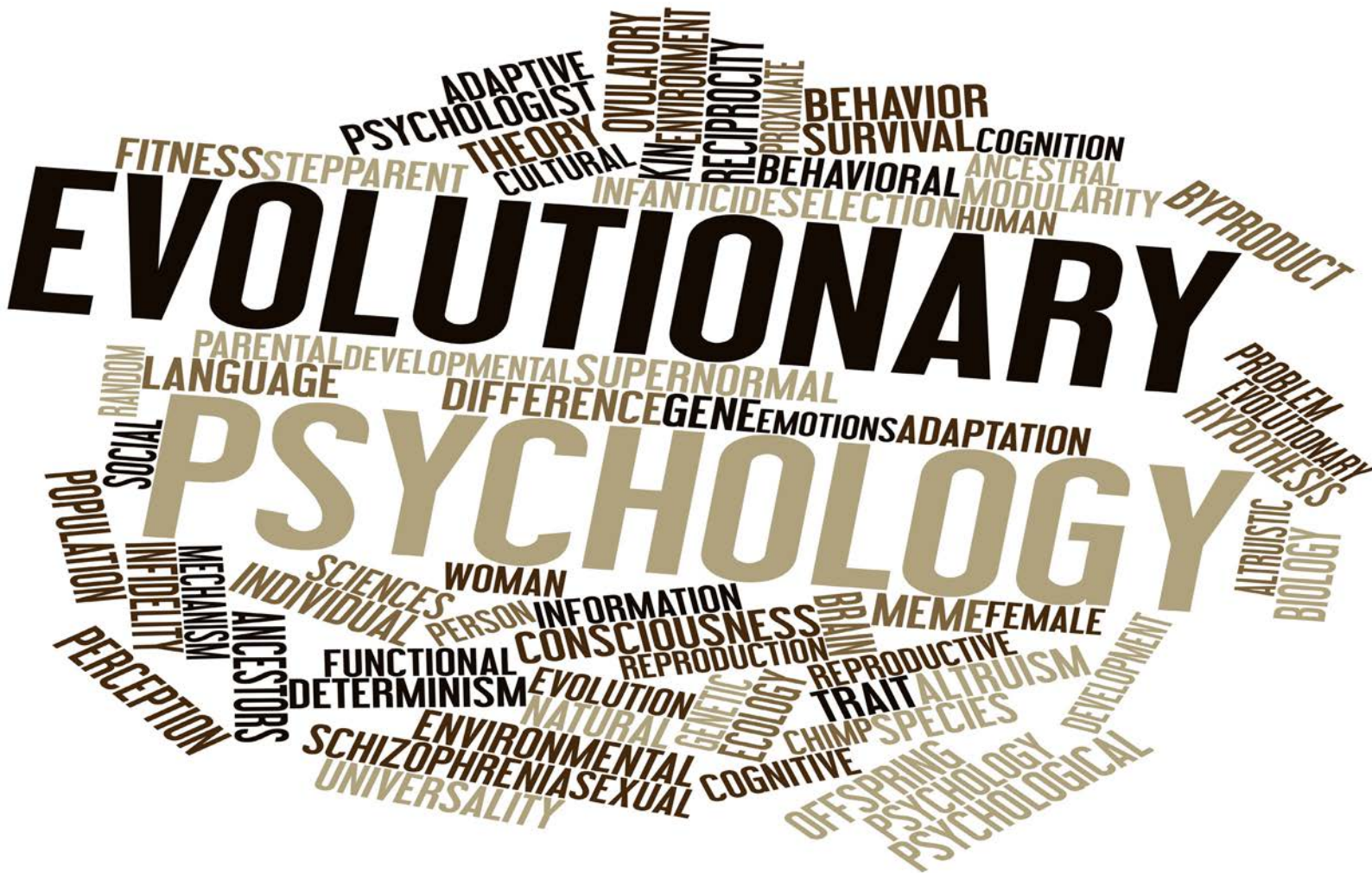
When these same CEOs receive feedback, they do the predictable: they turn to explaining their motives ("but I was only trying to"), or they blame the victim ("they need to toughen up" or "what's wrong with them?").

This is a two way street: the response triggered in the employees is one thing, the awareness of acceptance of the reality of the consequences of their behavior (as distinct from their beliefs and motives) for the senior executives concerned is another. So, too, is their openness to increasing the range and repertoire of their behavior.

Power downward

Rarely, do they stop and appreciate just how much "power is invisible downwards" as Michael





Grinder says, or for that matter accept that it is their actual behavior in group settings that is the trigger, that there is nothing wrong with the other person, they are just being an average everyday evolved mammal, albeit a human one.

They seem perplexed when they no longer enjoy robust debate among people within their organization, when subordinates seek to talk directly to anyone else except them.

In one particular global resources company this very pattern by a CEO led to a US\$5 billion catastrophe from which the company is still trying to recover 10 years on. Such behavior triggers self-censorship, poor decision-making and low engagement across an organization.

In this instance his senior executives were unwilling to tell him just how bad the situation was until it was too late. Unfortunately it was they who paid the price with their careers and not the CEO concerned.

When the late Warren Lett from La Trobe University once said “the principal of a school is the recipient of the most inauthentic communication in the school”, in reality he was speaking not only of schools, but any organisation where the unwitting behavior patterns of a senior executive or CEO trigger this form of group avoidance and fear.

Learned patterns

Back to the park with the little puppy - at its core, this response mechanism is an adaptive trait, meaning it was selected for by an evolutionary process, such that animals were more likely to survive and reproduce if, when startled or shocked by something at one point in their life, became acutely sensitive to such things, in order to avoid it in the future. That's true for the human animal too.

Indeed, as the famous mixed martial artist, Chael Sonnen, said, “most young men's

perception of Health & Safety changes radically the first time that they are punched hard in the face".

Violence, the threat of violence, or its believable likelihood, even if only implied through an attitude or smallest of behaviors, will radically shift a person's attitudes and beliefs about their own safety. In doing so, their behavior will alter significantly due to this explicitly or implicitly perceived danger.

Such violence need not be only physical, it can be verbal and non-verbal as well.

Several of our clients have been held hostage. During their ordeal, unbelievable and horrific threats occurred to themselves, their children and their colleagues. Even when the perpetrators have been caught and are long behind bars, a state of hyper-vigilance and poor sleep can persist for years after the grisly event.

If you have ever witnessed someone having a phobic reaction, they are exhibiting a clear response to a survival threat.

If either of us says to a CEO that their behavior is creating or resurfacing phobic patterns among

their employees, they tend to look aghast, but this is indeed what they are doing.

This reaction is not the slow steady build-up of fear, as the brain realises it is about to have a very uncomfortable event. Rather, their body reacts rapidly, intensely and without volition.

If startled by a sabre-toothed tiger, the survival benefit of this response is plain. So, whether alert to big black dogs, sabre-toothed tigers or would-be assailants, the mammalian autonomic nervous system is geared to survival; and, once an intense, threatening or startling experience has been had, the autonomic nervous system will actively seek to avoid a further encounter. This is equally true of employees in an organization, children in a family or partners in long-term relationships.

The power of filters

It does not need to be a real and present danger to trigger these responses, it can simply be perceived danger or threat.

An elderly woman, when sent a VCF card by a friend with contact details in it by text to her phone would not click on and open it for fear





that it would infect her phone. She had been well and truly **filtered** by focusing on stories in the media of what can go wrong more than what can go right.

Some of these filters to our consciousness are placed by others (both positive and negative) or they can be created by ourselves, by our own internal machinations.

For example, a former colleague of one of us said his father was very concerned about the prospect of being burgled. This despite,

- a) living in one of the safest cities in a country with
- b) one of the lowest crime statistics on the planet; and
- c) there has never been an attempt to break into his home.

Nonetheless, progressively over the years, as well as a top-end alarm system and safety

screens and locks for the windows, he would go on to instal additional locks to his front door.

At last count, there were six locks on his front door, as well as top and bottom sliding bolts. When our colleague was asked if their father would like to meet one us he said, *“Thanks but probably not. He doesn’t really do new people”*.

Having never met the person, nevertheless, whatever his father was feeling before each new lock was installed, it was not a feeling of safety. Once a new lock was fitted, that feeling of safety could only have been short-lived, if he achieved the feeling at all, since an additional measure would soon be applied.

Both instances show that the human autonomic nervous system will seek to reduce the likelihood of a further encounter, even if the initial encounter was an imaginary one.

The same is true for employees in the face of perceived danger from a senior executive or CEO.

However, given that the father's traumatic experience was imaginary and his defensive solution being real, unless he stops re-imagining burglaries, his traumatic encounters will continue, as will the fitting of additional locks. It can be reasoned that each additional lock will yield less and less security improvement; however, at least there will be some positive benefit.

The difficulties arise when the autonomic nervous system's response creates increasingly negative social outcomes.

Context is everything

Simon and Garfunkel noted, *“A man sees what he wants to see and disregards the rest”*.

That statement is correct, as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. To that point, an otherwise verbally gifted and gregarious lawyer could initiate and maintain any conversation with any woman on virtually any topic. That is, unless he found that woman attractive. At

which point, his verbosity, quick wittedness and roguish charm would elude him.

In fact, if the encounter occurred in a social setting, such as a nightclub, he would find himself retreating to the periphery; from where he could brood and berate himself, whilst stealing huffy glances at the attractive young lady.

And it is not just men: one female top executive was very confident talking with passion and precision, in a meeting, often heated, with supporters and detractors seated around the Boardroom table. However, if she was presenting to a room of people sitting looking straight at her, this would induce her to blush, sweat and stammer.

Similarly, a young engineer went from feeling socially awkward when meeting with senior managers to feeling intimidated by them to nearly passing out when asked a question by them.

The net effect was that he felt worse and began to actively avoid going to meetings with senior managers at all.

When someone is not feeling safe, their autonomic nervous system has shifted into a

surveillance mode, scanning for danger or threat. They have shifted out of their social **engagement** mode.

When in surveillance mode, they are not in a state that will allow them to engage. In terms of each of our three examples, in surveillance mode they are not capable of engaging with the attractive woman, speaking to the audience or answering the questions of the CEO.

As it happens, if frightened or startled by something less life-threatening than a sabre-toothed tiger, a phobic response can ensue anyway. Just like most phobics, the lawyer, top executive and the engineer, intellectually, know that attractive women, audiences and CEOs are not a danger to them; however, the cues their neurologies receive trigger the undesired response anyway - the autonomic nervous system is operating independently from their cognition.

Survival predates all

As the survival response predates social norms, personal branding or embarrassing and unhelpful behaviors, it is entirely oblivious to



these concerns.

In conclusion, real or imaginary violent experiences and real or imaginary threats to our safety will change how we think and behave. This is a good thing because our survival depends on our ability to adapt to danger by searching, recognising, evaluating, evading and eliminating the sources of threat.

Our physiology's adaptive mechanisms ensure that should a potential threat startle or frighten us once, we become much more sensitive and alert to that threat in the future. Like the puppy, we may find ourselves becoming guarded and adept at avoiding the perceived threat. We can feel compelled to become increasingly more self-censoring, defensive and fitting ever more door locks and bolts to the doors or our persona.

Unfortunately, our ability to socialize with others then diminishes, as we become more hyper-vigilant, cautious and distrusting; we can end up compelled to move away from what we otherwise have been drawn towards; and we can find ourselves mulling over our most painful or cringe worthy experiences. No matter if the perceived threat is to one's survival, health, wealth, continued employment, tribe or social status, these physiological mechanisms operate outside our consciousness.

Depending on the circumstances, these psychological mechanisms are both a limitations and a benefit. That being the case, how can we get rid of these limitations and allow us to live the life we want? How can those in power get their outcomes without triggering similar responses among their employees?

That will be explored in the next Newsletter.

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