



Fiona ROBERTSON

Your baby is ugly (and it's ok)

The first time I heard the expression 'your baby is ugly' was during a brief stint working for a boutique consulting firm in the mid 2000s. It was used by one of the partners to describe the message he needed to deliver to the client he was consulting to. The results presentation was scheduled for the next day and he was really stressed. He had done a very thorough examination of the client's business and had a good idea of what was causing their underlying problem and what they needed to do to make things better.

But he also knew they wouldn't want to hear what he had to say. He knew they would have a negative emotional reaction to being told that something was wrong, despite the fact that they had invited him to look at their business precisely because they knew something was wrong. I remember saying to him something along the lines of "but surely they want to know what the issues are so they can fix them? Isn't that exactly what they're paying you lots of money for?". He patiently explained to me that humans are not rational, they're emotional. I thought he was nuts.

The next day I watched as exactly what he predicted played out in front of my eyes. He delivered the message about as skilfully as you could imagine. Lots of facts and figures backing up every point he made, no room for doubt about the data, logical conclusions that could be turned into hypotheses for testing. Lots of good advice about how to confirm his findings and what solutions to test to improve the situation. He had done detailed modelling of the financials of several proposed solutions. You couldn't have asked for a consultant to do a better job.

But the client was horrified. Not overtly. There was no yelling or throwing things. There was just an icy discussion about who he had spoken to and where the data had come from and what assumptions were under his modelling and so on and so on. They most certainly did not welcome his work in the way I thought they would. They did not thank him for his careful analysis. They did not express relief that he had managed to find something that was clearly wrong and could be fixed. They did not commit to any of the proposed solutions, they didn't even commit to confirming that the problem was the one he had identified. As far as I know, that client took precisely zero action as a result of his work and the report ended up buried in someone's inbox. They probably didn't even read it.

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I was utterly baffled. I simply couldn't understand why anyone would hand over large wads of cash to someone specifically so they could find the thing that most needed to change to make their business more successful, and then completely ignore the answer. I'm not baffled any more.

Turns out humans aren't rational. They're emotional. Who knew?

When you're in a senior position in a company, whatever happens there, good or bad, feels like a reflection of your own personal worth. Of your identity. When someone finds something wrong, you feel it deeply and personally - in exactly the same way you would if someone literally told you 'your baby is ugly'.

In the culture change business, where I spend my time, this effect is amplified even more. Culture is such a poorly understood field that anything and everything is frequently considered culture. So if you're in a senior position and someone tells you there's a problem with your organisation's culture, there's no easy way to separate that piece of feedback from one that seems to be suggesting that you are somehow a bad or flawed or deliberately evil human being. It hurts. And I don't mean figuratively, I mean literally. There is compelling research from UCLA that the human brain cannot distinguish social pain from physical pain. So you're going to feel injured.

But that can be a problem because the reality is this: there is no such thing as the perfect organisational culture. It simply doesn't exist. And if it ever did, it was only for a fleeting moment because as business conditions change, which is happening faster and faster all the time and won't be slowing down any time soon, culture must change along with it. It's not something that can ever be perfect, it's only ever something that is a work in progress and needs to be endlessly tweaked - continuously nudged in the right direction in a very deliberate way.

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A brief digression: there are similarities between this and parenting. We all know it's impossible to be the perfect parent. That's not a thing. The question is not 'how do I parent perfectly', the question is 'in what particular way will I screw up my kids?' A friend of mine likes to joke that there are three golden rules for bringing up children, but nobody knows what they are.

So if you ask someone to take a look at your organisational culture - conduct any kind of diagnostic, from a simple set of in-depth interviews with representatives of the various tribes within your business to a more detailed survey and workshop process - you need to go into it knowing a few things.

First, they will find things that aren't perfect. That's not a likelihood, it's a certainty. If you're not fully expecting that to be the case, you're probably better off not asking for the diagnostic in the first place. At least in that case you can be blissfully ignorant of the cultural issues that exist in your business and maybe sleep better at night. Although it's probably more likely that knowing something's not right but not being able to figure out

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what exactly the problem is or how you might start to address it might cause some stress, it can definitely be ignored for longer.

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Second, you're not going to enjoy hearing about what the issues are. Your heart is going to hurt. You will feel injured. That's not because you're too sensitive or a wimp or weak. It's because you're a human being and your brain is not designed for the 21st century. Your brain is designed to keep you alive, not to watch PowerPoint presentations. It is designed to identify threats and it can't tell the difference between a physical and an emotional threat. It will react in exactly the same way if you're being chased by a lion or told by a consultant that your culture has a few problems.

I get that this isn't fair. It totally sucks. Just when we most want to be our best grown-up selves sitting in our boardroom in our suit and looking like we're all over it, our brains are busy telling us we're going to die, raising our heart rates, pumping chemicals into our blood and making it almost impossible for us to hear what is being said, let alone think clearly about it.

Your heart is going to hurt.

And for all the consultants out there who have been baffled by the reactions of your clients when you go out and do exactly what they ask you to do: it's probably not you. You can't avoid the way the brain functions, but you can help the situation if you know what's happening. You might consider sharing the results of your investigations in one session, then allowing some time to pass (ideally days, not hours or many weeks) before engaging in any kind of discussion about what the results mean or what might be done about them. Allow the space for the emotional reaction to happen first - it's going to happen anyway - and only then start the rational work.

If you're a senior executive. You're not a weak or evil person. Be kind to yourself. Give yourself time to process what you've heard. Let your brain do its job. Then have the courage to face the findings and ask what can be done to nudge things in the right direction.

So yes, your baby is ugly. And it's ok.



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