

Q2 Field Log: From Absurdity as Signal to Building Orientation Capacity

Over the last few months, one pattern has been difficult to ignore. People are noticing more of what's happening at work. They are picking up on tension, misalignment, and contradictions in how things actually unfold. In many cases, they can feel it immediately, even if they can't fully explain it yet.

Once something is named, often with the help of the Workplace Squeeze or the Absurdities Report, the question shifts almost immediately:

What do I do with this?

What's making that harder is not a lack of information. It's the environment around it. There is no shortage of perspectives right now. Strategy, complexity, leadership, narrative, and culture are all offering ways to interpret what's happening. In many cases, they are describing similar conditions, but from different starting points, using different language, and pointing to different actions.

So alongside recognition, there is fragmentation. The very spaces intended to help people orient are not fully aligned themselves. That leaves people trying to reconcile competing interpretations while still needing to act.

The result is a kind of practical confusion. Not about whether something is happening, but about what to do next and where to begin.

WHAT I'M OBSERVING IN THE FIELD

A few patterns are showing up consistently, regardless of industry or role - across conversations, comments, direct messages, and field testing. What's becoming more visible is this:

- Communication is increasing, but shared meaning does not always stabilize. Conversations are more structured and aligned on the surface, but do not always result in a clear, shared understanding.
- Alignment often happens quickly, but it doesn't hold. Decisions appear clean in the moment, yet the same issues resurface later, often outside the original context.

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- Recognition is high, but response is uneven. People are seeing what's happening, but how to respond remains uncertain and varies depending on the situation.
- Multiple perspectives are describing similar conditions without integrating. Different fields are pointing to the same dynamics, but not connecting them into a coherent way of working with them.

Alongside this, there is more signal available than before. The challenge is not access to insight, but discerning what matters, what applies, and how to act while things are still unfolding.

There is another serious layer to what I'm seeing that is important to name. In some of the stories being shared with me, the conditions have moved beyond tension or misalignment into sustained psychological harm. People are describing environments shaped by power dynamics, fear, toxicity, and a lack of safety, where the cost of speaking or acting is high and the room to intervene is limited.

There is a lot of energy in that space right now. Frustration, anger, and, in some cases, a deep sense of disillusionment. That is real, and it reflects the conditions people are working within.

This work is not designed for those environments. It is focused on situations where there is still some degree of agency. Where people can notice what is happening, test small shifts, and influence how a situation unfolds, even if only at the margins. That distinction matters.

What People Are Telling Me About the Work

Much of what I'm describing here has been shaped through direct interaction with people working inside these conditions, including those who participated in the Workplace Squeeze course and openly shared what they were seeing and navigating in real time.

The engagement and conversations come through multiple channels - responses to the Workplace Absurdities Report, participation in the Workplace Squeeze course, feedback on the papers, reshared posts, and ongoing conversations with practitioners, consultants, and leaders.

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There is a consistent pattern in how people respond. First, recognition. People see themselves in the work. They recognize the situations immediately and often express relief at having language for something that previously felt vague or difficult to articulate. What follows is more varied. Some people try small shifts in how they engage. They ask a question, pause a conversation, or test a different way of responding. Sometimes that creates movement. Sometimes it doesn't.

Others hold back, not because they don't see what's happening, but because they are unsure how it will land or what the consequences might be. What shows up instead is uncertainty about how to work with what they are noticing in the moment. What becomes clear is that the constraint is not understanding. It is confidence and clarity in how to respond in real conditions, under pressure, and without full certainty.

What's Expanding

Alongside these conversations, the work is reaching further. More people are finding it through the report, the Field Papers, and the Squeeze work, often after encountering something in their own environment that they can't quite make sense of.

Over the last quarter, participation and engagement have included people from the UK, the United States, Switzerland, Australia, and Canada, with particularly strong growth in the UK. What stands out is not just where people are coming from, but why they are arriving. They're not looking for more explanations. They're trying to make sense of what they're already seeing.

What This Is Changing in My Work

This has shifted how I am approaching the work. The focus is no longer just on naming what is happening, but on helping people work with it while it is still unfolding. That means paying closer attention to what actually helps in the moment, without assuming full clarity or relying on fixed approaches. A few areas have become more central.

- Distinguishing signals from noise. Not everything that stands out is useful, and not every signal helps orient action.
- Moving from naming to navigating. Recognition is important, but it is not sufficient. What matters is how people engage once something has been noticed.
- Staying practical without becoming prescriptive.

The work needs to be usable, but it also needs to respect the conditions people are operating in.

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How the Work Is Taking Shape

As this work has evolved, it has become clear that this is not a single offering. It is becoming an ecosystem.

The Workplace Absurdities Report surfaced something important. Not just what people are experiencing, but what is missing. The capacity to orient in environments where conditions are shifting, signals are emerging, and clarity is incomplete.

At the center of this work is a simple idea:

Absurdity is not just something to fix. It is a signal.

A signal that something in the system is not aligning, often before it is formally recognized.

The first Field Paper explored this directly. From there, the work expanded into a broader focus on orientation as a practical capacity. The ability of a system to maintain a shared understanding of what is happening, what matters, and how to respond.

When that capacity begins to weaken, the earliest signs do not show up in dashboards or formal metrics. They show up in how people experience the system. In language, in behavior, in small adaptations, and often in what people describe as absurd.

The Absurdity Research Program

The research program sits at the core of this ecosystem. It is focused on a central question:

How do systemic contradictions generate early signals inside organizations, and how do those signals influence sensemaking, orientation, and coordinated action?

To explore this, the work focuses across four connected areas:

- Signal emergence: how early indicators of system tension first appear
- Sensemaking: how meaning begins to form around those signals
- Orientation and decision dynamics: how shared understanding holds or fragments
- Practice and intervention: how people can engage with these conditions

This work is grounded in field observation, narrative data, and real organizational environments.

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The Absurdity Pattern Library (Internal Diagnostic System)

One of the primary outputs of this research is the Absurdity Pattern Library. This is the underlying diagnostic system. It identifies recurring configurations that appear across organizations, regardless of industry or context. A pattern is not an isolated example. It is a repeatable structure made up of three elements:

- a structural contradiction in the system
- the adaptations people make to cope with it
- the language used to describe what's happening
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These three elements tend to cluster and reappear together. That is what makes them a pattern. Patterns become visible before formal breakdown. They act as early indicators that the system is under strain. For example, phrases like:

- "Everything is priority one"
- "We've launched this before"
- "I'll just decide so we don't stall"

are not random frustrations. They are signals of underlying structural pressure. Across contexts, these signals consistently cluster around a small set of tensions:

- strategy vs capacity
- coordination vs autonomy
- narrative vs reality
- authority vs accountability
- metrics vs meaning

As these tensions intensify, systems begin to lose coherence. People operate with incomplete or conflicting understandings, coordination becomes harder, and decisions become increasingly reactive. The Pattern Library captures these recurring dynamics at the level of structure.

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The Library of Contradictions (Public Expression Layer)

The Library of Contradictions is the public-facing expression of the Pattern Library. It translates structural patterns into recognizable, lived experiences that people can immediately see in their day-to-day work.

Instead of describing the system, it names what it feels like to be inside it:

- Alignment Theatre
- Accountability Hot Potato
- Artificial Harmony
- The Boomerang Conversation
- Phantom Decisions
- Everything Is Priority
- Let's Not Go There
- All Motion, No Movement

These are not separate ideas. They are surface expressions of deeper patterns. Where the Pattern Library explains why these dynamics occur, the Library of Contradictions makes them visible and shareable.

This distinction matters. Most people don't need another framework. They need a way to recognize what is already happening. The Library of Contradictions provides that entry point. The Pattern Library provides the depth behind it.

From Research to Practice

This is where the rest of the ecosystem begins to take shape. The Field Papers deepen the thinking. The research program grounds it in real environments. The Pattern Library makes recurring dynamics visible.

From this, more applied forms of the work are emerging. Courses, guides, and pilots that help people work with these conditions in their own contexts. The current Field Guide is one example, focused on meetings, but part of a broader direction toward navigating patterns across organizational life.

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This work now sits across two connected spaces --

Behaving Badly HQ operates as the field investigation arm, where observation and experimentation are happening. **InSpark** is the research and development hub, where the models and structured work are being built and connected.

Together, they form an ecosystem designed to help people engage with complexity as it is experienced.

What I'm Testing Right Now

A significant portion of this work is being shaped through real use. The current focus includes developing simple ways of engaging with situations as they unfold, without forcing resolution or over-structuring the moment. This includes testing approaches in real environments, observing what happens, and refining based on what holds.

There is also an open field layer where people are trying parts of this work in their own contexts and sharing what they notice. This is providing insight into what enables people to act, not just what they could say.

Where This Is Heading

Across what is emerging, a consistent pattern is becoming clearer:

- Communication is increasing, but meaning is less stable
- Recognition is increasing, but response is uneven
- Pressure is increasing, but orientation capacity is not keeping pace

This is not a lack of insight. It is an uneven ability to respond to what is already being noticed. The next phase of the work is focused on building that capability across contexts, not just in meetings, but in how people make sense of and navigate complex environments over time.

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INVITATION TO CONNECT

If you're seeing versions of this in your own work, here's where to start. At the heart of this work is ongoing field interaction. It is shaped through listening, through real conversations, and in response to what people are actually navigating.

If you're encountering moments where something doesn't quite hold, where conversations loop, or where alignment doesn't translate into action, there are a few ways to engage:

- Start with the Workplace Squeeze course to better understand and name what you're experiencing and apply in the workplace
- Use the one-page meeting guide for simple ways to test this in real conversations
- Explore the Field Guide (pilot) to apply this work more directly
- Read the Field Papers for the deeper backbone of the research

I'm also continuing to develop additional Field Guides and would be interested in what situations or patterns would be most useful for you to work with. This work is being shaped through what people are encountering and choosing to engage with.

If you're noticing something in your own work, I'm interested to hear what it looks like. Please reach out to hello@behavingbadlyhq.com

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