

Licence To Kill

By Stuart White

Major Nidal Malik Hasan's recent shooting spree at Fort Hood army base in Texas has caused panic throughout the American military and raised more answers than questions. Firstly Major Hasan was any army psychiatrist, tasked with counselling military personnel and attending to their mental welfare, yet it seems that all the while it was he himself who most needed help – a clear case of 'Physician, heal thyself'.

Early reports indicate that he felt he was singled out for his ethnicity and religion by fellow soldiers and subject to taunting and ridicule. It's also been said that he had brought the matter to the attention of his superiors but his complaints and efforts to leave the service had been rebuffed and rejected. But even if this were the case, his ultimate reaction was extreme, to say the least.

Secondly how did he manage to stay below the parapet of psychological tests and assessments which are part of military procedures, specifically designed to examine personnel's suitability for military life, much less their general mental competence, their loyalties and allegiances. Surely if the testing processes were even partially accurate red flags would have popped up all over the place alerting testing staff as to his troubled state of mind? Or could it be that his tests gave inconclusive, even contradictory results, and were misread and misinterpreted by examiners?

From personal experience I can relate to this scenario. In fact something similar, though not so sinister and tragic, happened in our organisation recently which left me questioning the fundamental testing tools of HR. The testing in question is that of psychometric testing. For those not privy to what goes on in this intriguingly-esoteric world let me enlighten you slightly. As HR consultants we utilise a range of validated, accredited and internationally recognised psychometric test instruments to assess candidates for strengths, capabilities, personality and potential. When you link some of these together it creates what we call a test battery, tailored to meet specialist functions ranging from sales and customer service, through to graduate, technical, clerical, middle management and executive roles.

One of the reasons that multiple tests are used is to increase the reliability of the results by collecting enough data to analyse and thus form a reliable picture (potential, ability or whatever criteria you want to measure) of the test subject – all very well-designed, logical and, I thought, very reliable. Until this case, that is. Let me explain.

A colleague and I had undertaken an assessment on a manager who had produced startling different and contradictory results on two exercises in the test battery. In the personality test the manager had emerged as being of low intelligence, a highly anxious, nervous and stressed out individual with low self-esteem and highly emotional - crudely put, neurotic! Yet in the cognitive process test (thinking) she performed unusually highly with regards to her analytical capability, ability to reason logically and conceptualisation - an entirely different picture and hardly the traits for someone with low intelligence. We were truly stumped, especially as both tests have high validity and reliability. Naturally the solving of the puzzle was a lengthy searching and complex one but to skip a few hundred mental thought patterns, discussions, checking, and clarifying the test results as well as chatting to another consultant who had had an interview with the same manager we were eventually able to piece together the mystery.

This manager was seriously demotivated at work as a result of constant negative feedback from a superior and over time her self esteem, confidence and self-belief had been almost completely eradicated. The apparent test contradiction had arisen owing to the fact that the personality test relies on a person's self perception in order to sketch a profile whilst the cognitive test relies on ability. It is always amazing to find how, through situations and events, people can lose sight of who they are and what they are capable of. Here was a manager who basically thought herself useless, yet probably was in the top 5% of her company in terms of strategic capability. The incredibly sad thing in this instance is that the potential that had been destroyed by the organisation will take a lot of nurturing to get back to where it should be. In fact this employee may be so far gone that rescue is impossible. Once confidence is seriously undermined it may never truly be restored.

It reminds me of a friend's dog. Whenever I would visit for lunch this previously abused and subsequently highly nervous dog would rest its head on my knee, stare up at me and plead for attention, but ever so subtly less it might offend. Any sudden noise and it would cower and it seemed to live its life in a constant state of anxiety. It may have been rescued from physical abuse but even despite the 10 years of love its new family had given, this poor and battered creature could not break the shackles of its memory and thus remained a prisoner of what had been and what it clearly, deep down, was afraid might return.

I wonder how many other organisations are unwittingly imprisoning the potential of their employees just like that physically abused dog and our verbally and mentally-abused test subject?. How many incompetent managers are out there that because maybe they are too dumb to recognise the potential in others and think its cool to constantly carp, not knowing that any fool can criticize condemn and complain and as a result most fools do. I hear about it daily from generally good souls at the mercy of corporate bullies who use it as a tool to conceal their own inadequacies and incompetence or simply because they are people with little sensitivity, let alone the good sense to realise that constant criticism is counter-productive.

Perhaps we should insist that before anyone is allowed to operate at management level they need to get a licence. They should be tested to see if they can drive performance with the same level of awareness sensitivity and insight required to drive a car. And if they keep screwing up maybe they should have points against their name like they do for road offenders elsewhere in the world. Better still maybe we should be doing organisational audits asking people if they had felt smarter, better, more positive before joining the organisation. That way we could find out if we are unknowingly browbeating people into poor performance because as managers we have been told that we need to police and correct our employees when the opposite should be the case. It is our job to be motivators, coaches and inspirational beacons to guide ourselves and our staff through the daily demands and even drudgery of work life.

The case of Major Hasan is extreme but even in lesser instances a browbeaten employee is no good to themselves or to the company. Into the test battery perhaps we should build in empathy, sensitivity, sense, sound judgement and inspirational leadership. And if you don't pass your driving test you won't be allowed to take the wheel of responsibility till you do. Otherwise you may just drive someone to distraction, drive them insane or drive them to take drastic action with potentially tragic consequences.

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