

Beware artificial 'Intelligence' and package-deal solutions

By Dr Andrew Bass, BassClusker Consulting

Executives and non-executive board members often receive pretty sketchy reports of the form: "We found this problem, and this is what we are doing about it", and have to assess quickly, and with limited information, whether the issue is being managed competently or not. There can be significant consequences for getting this assessment wrong. So it is sobering to reflect on how easy it can be for things to look well-managed when they are not.

In The Bar

A: Do you remember the old joke: "A lecture is a device for transferring information from the notes of the lecturer to the notes of the student, without it passing through the brains of either"?

B: Yes, often told by lecturers, and with no shred of irony. Actually I once heard that, according to research, the maximum time period students can attend properly to traditional lecturing is 15 minutes. The lecture in which I heard this lasted for 50!

A: Sounds about right. Just because a bunch of people are doing something which sounds and looks intelligent is no guarantee that it is! Now, that might not matter much in situations where the most important thing is to *seem* intelligent (and there are many of those)...

B: I can think of a couple of recent board appointments which can be explained in no other way.

A: Well don't knock that process too harshly – it gives the newspapers something to write about, after all. Trouble is, if you are responsible for real results, based on good decisions, then the appearance of intelligence – 'artificial' intelligence if you like – won't do. In fact it will create confusion, error and frustration.

B: True, but I'm not sure it's always easy to tell the difference. I mean we all like to think we can spot BS a mile off but if I'm honest, especially when I'm busy, I think more of the stuff slips by than really should. Are you saying you have some suggestions?

Bewitched by Language

A: Well, did you ever see that classic episode of the Irish situation comedy Father Ted ...

B: Oh I've caught a few – hilarious – I really should sit down and watch them all.

A: OK, well if you missed this one I can sketch it out: the heroes, this shambolic trio of priests, right? – are visited by the new Bishop...

B: Who's presumably been reading Tom Peters on the subject of *Managing by Wandering About...*

A: No doubt! So, Ted is deeply worried that Father Jack – the alcoholic one who looks like a tramp and swears constantly – Ted is worried that Jack will insult the Bishop and thereby draw unwanted scrutiny of their cosy and unorthodox local arrangements. So he instructs Jack to respond to all and any of the Bishop's questions with the phrase: "That would be an ecumenical matter."

B: Fantastic...!

A: I know ... and Father Jack somehow manages to implement the advice. So the joke is that the Bishop is deeply impressed with his apparent insight and judgement on a wide variety of subjects – you know: "Tell me Father Jack, what do you think about the anti-clerical bias of the media?", "That would be an ecumenical matter", "Goodness me, you're right I had never thought about it like that!" – to the point where he pronounces all three of the priests, and their work, to be of the greatest credit to the diocese.

B: Hilarious. But if you'll forgive me for being blunt: So what?

A: Fair enough. Well Father Ted is a parody of course, not reality. But it can only *be* a parody because it is a parody of something all-to-real. 'Ecumenical' is one of those wonderful 'free-floating abstractions' that sounds meaningful, but is usually left undefined, and so meaning/less, although that doesn't stop people from thinking something important has been said.

B: OK, now I see where you are going with this.

A: Free-floating abstractions abound in organizational life, and they create the appearance of intelligent discussion where there may actually be very little of that going on.

B: You're talking about stuff like 'empowerment initiatives', 'leadership benchmarking', 'world class quality', 'conceptual vision', 'service best practice', 'operational excellence' yada yada...

A: Exactly. And a lot of this is the everyday traffic of business conversation. It goes back and forth without any comment. The situation is like people who live near the motorway and don't notice the noise anymore.

B: And what you are driving at is that people think they are communicating, and making decisions based on real information, when they might be doing no such thing.

A: Yes. Jargon and buzz-words are harmless enough – indeed they are great time-saver – if everyone knows for sure what specifically they refer to. But much of the time, especially at senior levels removed from the day-to-day details, the listeners are actually getting no new information from these meaningful-sounding words. Instead, if they are not careful, they end up filling in the blanks from their own past experiences, so when they make decisions they are making them based on ideas which are long past their sell-by-date.

B: Is this really that prevalent?

A: Well now we've talked about it, I think you'll notice it a lot – you'll probably be shocked by how much. As an example, I was working on a B project recently, and the COO asked to meet with a senior IT project manager. The manager, let's call him Mike, was extremely quick to make sure I knew his credentials, previous blue-chip employers, ratings, 'black belts' etc. He started to talk an incomprehensible (to me anyway) stream of apparently meaningful words and phrases - I remember one was something like 'compliant project governance architecture'.

B: Sounds important.

A: Well, bearing in mind I have a technical background in software engineering – admittedly from a long while back – I was nevertheless left without a clue what he was saying, although I'll agree it all sounded strangely impressive.

B: Sometimes these technical experts talk about stuff and I find I have to let them keep talking in the hope that I'll be able to pick up a thread and get a sense of what they mean. Maybe that gives the impression I am somehow acquiescing or buying their pitch.

A: I am confident you are not alone. I certainly found myself doing this with Mike. Next time I saw the COO, she wasted little time on getting to the question that was bugging her, phrasing it as innocently as possible: "So how did you get on with Mike?"

B: You had some interesting choices to make about what to say!

A: Yes, this was one of those little moments of truth for a consultant! Although happily we do have a licence to ask 'naive' questions – something that is not always afforded to insiders. Anyway I went for it. I said, "To be honest Jane, I didn't understand a bloody word he said." And she simply replied: "Thank you." I went on: "Actually I suspect he's full of it." And she said: "That's what I think, but he seems to have a lot of people impressed. He has some influential supporters round here, but I think he is wasting our time and resources."

B: Why do you think there were positive perceptions of this guy? The way you tell it, it seems obvious he was a chancer.

A: Well Jane and I talked about that. Maybe some people were just worried in case they looked stupid for not understanding him – and maybe others just let the abstractions slide by because they

were busy, and he sounded confident and meaningful. And yes, we even considered that maybe we were simply wrong about him (subsequent events proved that we weren't, however).

B: I do see that kind of thing from time to time, but he sounds an extreme example.

A: He was, no doubt. But the fact remains that he had got a long way at some big-name businesses, all the while brewing up trouble. When he left, it quickly became apparent that his world class governance architecture was built on pretty rickety foundations. I'm willing to bet that if you look for it, you will find a lot more of this kind of thing that is less obvious, but maybe as a consequence is more misleading.

B: So this is an example of what you are calling 'artificial' intelligence?

A: Exactly. What I'm saying is that free-floating abstractions can sound beguilingly clever *whether the listener can figure out what the speaker is referring to or not*. In fact it is quite possible for people to 'converse', back-and-forth, apparently meaningfully, almost purely in terms of undefined, usually multisyllabic abstract nouns and adjectives. An observer or newcomer will have the feeling of being left out of an important and significant discussion. And this happens in just about every meeting in every organization, in every sector I have ever seen. The result is often a comedy of errors, or more usually, just errors.

B: I wonder how much of my own meetings are taken up with this.

A: My guess would be that if you arranged to get a verbatim transcript, you would be surprised. You may also be concerned about how much the quality of your discussion could be improved.

B: I'm not sure I'm ready to risk it!

Just because it seems clever...

A: Well while you consider that, here's another angle. Have you any familiarity with the scientific movement of Artificial Intelligence from which I've borrowed the name?

B: Well I studied History at University, so not formally, but I vaguely remember reading something about, is it the Turing Test?

A: Yes, perfect. The great computer science pioneer Alan Turing proposed a test that might be used to decide if a machine was intelligent. The modern version would be an internet chat, and the test would basically be this: could you determine whether your chat partner was a real person or a computer program. If you judged it to be a person while it was actually a program, Turing proposed that the program could be called intelligent.

B: Something mechanical that seems intelligent – like the person speaking in slick mid-level abstractions?

A: Exactly. And it turns out that lots of people have tried to write such programs. A classic early experiment, developed by Joseph Weizenbaum, was called ELIZA (after Eliza Doolittle from Pygmalion aka My Fair Lady – the cockney flower girl taught to converse like a duchess by Professor Henry Higgins). ELIZA parodied a ‘non-directive’ psychotherapist by simply selecting some portion of what you had just typed in, and using the selected portion to build its next question. So if you typed: *I am depressed*, Eliza might reply: *Oh, I am sorry to hear that you are depressed. When did it start?*

It is easy enough to see how it works: basically by using a set of rules telling it to convert “I” → “you”, “am” → “are”, “depressed” → “depressed” and so on. A few tens of such rules got the system a long way.

B: Not really intelligent.

A: Not at all, and with modern tools, not difficult to replicate: in fact doing so is now considered an undergraduate-level assignment and version exists on the internet. But the interesting thing is that if you try one you will find that it’s amazing how convincing such ‘symbol shuffling’ can be. In fact, because people like to anthropomorphize, many who interacted with it judged the original ELIZA program genuinely intelligent – Weizenbaum’s secretary liked to discuss her problems with it because she felt it empathised with her better than most humans.

B: Hmm. I’m not always the best listener – maybe I could learn something from ELIZA!

A: Joking apart, I once designed a communication workshop based on that principle and it worked remarkably well in keeping listeners focused on the issue of importance to the speaker. Great for over-talkative salespeople for example.

B: Interesting. I’ve got some of those - but that sounds like another conversation. How does ELIZA relate to the sort of ‘artificial’ intelligence that you are saying gets in the way in organizations?

A: Well here is the point. Of more lasting interest than the clever but not-that-complicated computer programming, was the surprising discovery of how credulous people were in projecting real intelligence on to ELIZA. That really disturbed Weizenbaum, and in fact led him to write a book on the limits of computers.

B: People imputing intelligence where there is none, and maybe taking decisions based on it.

A: Exactly. Now consider the following dialogue (which I’ve heard a gazillion times in conversations among managers about organizational issues):

- Person 1: We have a sales problem
- Person 2: Ok, let’s get some sales training in.

- Person 1: We have a problem with staff empowerment
- Person 2: This empowerment programme is specially designed to do that.

- Person 1: We have a credit control problem
- Person 2: Let's buy this new credit control software.

B: Uh oh..

A: I think you see what I'm saying. In each case, there's a kind of 'ELIZA Pattern' operating, in which people simply take the word 'problem' out of the description of the issue, and substitute in a word such as 'training', 'programme', 'software'. Bingo, you've got your answer, and if you say it confidently, it's amazing how often people will nod uncritically and move on to the next item on the agenda, feeling confident they have dealt with the issue.

B: It looks like a decision has been taken. The trouble is that it's been taken without the issue passing through the minds of the parties discussing it.

A: Nicely put. Tell you what. Let me get another round in, and then I'll spill the beans on a consulting trick-of-the-trade that revolves around this decision-making process.

B: Do you want to borrow my watch so you can see if you have time?

Packaged solutions don't meet unique requirements

A: When management consultants talk among themselves, it is not unusual for one to say, a bit cockily, something like this: "Bs think their problems are unique, but actually there are only ten (or six, or fifteen...) management problems."

B: Such as?

A: Well what you get from them is a list of mid-level abstractions such as: lack of succession planning, communication failures, silos, under-delegation etc.

B: Well we've certainly had all those issues at one time or another, probably have them all now in some part of the group.

A: At that rarefied level of description, so do most organizations. At that level, the list might be right, but the trouble is, at that level, anything might be right.

B: Kind of like horoscope language?

A: Yes, or if you want another way to think about it, like a Rorschach test where a patient projects their issues on to the ink-blot and then thinks it's the ink-blot that is meaningful. However you think about it, the consultant's tactic of listing the ten issues sound good – especially when said with confidence. And having established this outlook and, by implication, their expertise, it is then rational to package and offer the appropriate 'diagnostics' and template solutions.

B: I must say I see a lot of this kind of thing. I can't quite decide what I think about it.

A: My view is that Bs should resist the tendency to be pigeonholed. Almost all management situations have familiar and predictable elements in them, true enough, but they also have unique elements, and – to reverse the assumption expressed by the cockier consultants – it is *those* that are usually the most significant ones from the perspective of getting a result.

B: Of course I can see that package deals certainly suit service providers. It's good business, from their point of view, to package their wares into standard formats which are cheaper to deliver and easier to sell. But you know what, a lot of buyers find it easier to buy a package, too. It makes comparisons with alternatives easier, and it reduces the *perceived* (if not actual) risk, especially when what you are buying could be considered 'vapourware'. After all, that's why software sitting on a little CD comes in a big nicely-designed box mainly full of fresh air.

A: That's all fair enough and I sympathise with buyers of services – I'm regularly one myself. I have nothing in principle against package deals - sometimes they can be a bargain. But on other occasions, you can come home more in need of a holiday than before you set out.

Cultivating awareness and improving responses to management issues

B: You've made some interesting observations and got my head buzzing a bit. Can you draw out some conclusions please?

A: I will certainly have a go. First I think the point about Father Jack and ELIZA is that they may truly *seem* intelligent, but it's an illusion (the intelligent actors were Father *Ted* and Joseph Weisenbaum, respectively). The apparent 'intelligence' of Father Jack and ELIZA relies on an all-to-human tendency to uncritically impute intelligence where there is nothing but a set of superficial but unreliable cues.

B: So you are saying I need to be careful not to be a sucker?

A: Hang on, you know me too well to think I would be so rude! No look: it's important to realise that we can all fall foul of this kind of uncritical acceptance – in fact, if you talk to professional close-up magicians, they will tell you that the easiest people to fool are the sophisticated audiences (the heroes of conjuring are those who can do kids' parties – a much tougher crowd altogether).

B: Nice recovery – although I notice the use of the mid-level abstraction "sophisticated" there. I was just checking. Well, look, what do you suggest? Can we do anything to combat this tendency to be bewitched by this 'artificial' intelligence? I can see that it would improve the quality of our problem-solving.

A: Certainly we can. The foundation is to recover awareness. Not to be habituated to the apparent meaningfulness of abstract discussion, like the people living near the motorway are habituated to traffic noise. Then, even at the risk of being thought ignorant or pedantic, we all need to be prepared to ask two simple questions when 'specialists' use jargon, or indeed when a free-floating abstraction

drifts into any discussion. Quite simply: “What do you mean, exactly?”, and “Can you give me an example?” (“What do you mean when you say it’s an ecumenical matter? How does that work out in practice?”) These two questions are reliable BS detectors.

B: I need to encourage more people to do that, although I do think that as you suggest, many of them hesitate for fear of being thought lacking in some way. So this is simple, but I would say not always easy.

A: True, but I think you agree it’s worthy goal. It’s powerful when everyone starts pursuing this sort of clarity without colleagues feeling it’s a threat – the quality of discussion goes way up. By the way, though, if you suspect the kind of bluff operator who seems to be implying that if you don’t follow the jargon you must be of lesser intelligent, try my colleague Alastair Dryburgh’s trick: “I’ve heard that terminology used in a slightly different context, but it doesn’t seem to have the same meaning that you are giving it – just explain, what’s the difference as you are using it between compliant and non-compliant governance architecture?”

B (laughs): Oh, I can’t wait to use that one. Anything else.

A: Yes, one more for now. I think leaders should be very wary of all pre-packaged solutions looking for problems, such as generic training programmes, integrated software systems, management fads and personality tests. Ask salespeople, internal recommenders and ‘experts’: “How do you know it will work *in our specific situation?*”

B: If I understand you correctly, you are saying that we should be prepared to deal with the idiosyncratic local features of our problems, and not accept pat solutions so readily?

A: You put it very nicely. If I was trying to paint a picture of the attitude which seems to work best, I would say to approach problem-solving as a detective, not as someone playing “Snap!” Hercule Poirot’s sidekick Captain Hastings is an excellent chap, no doubt, and exactly the sort you would want in your foxhole in a battle, but he invariably jumps to a stereotypical solution: “Gosh Poirot, do you think the butler did it?” Poirot is always more considered: “We will see in good time, My Dear Hastings, we will see.”

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