

Stimulus and Equities, Working in Government, Detecting Bullshit
What Happens Next – 8.8.2021
John Petrocelli QA

Larry Bernstein:

The philosopher Harry Frankfurt talks about that the trouble with bullshit, is that it's insidious to institution, it corrupts from within, and that an institution itself needs to find ways to call out bullshit. In any organization, there's plenty of bullshit. Whose job is it to detect it, call it out, and remove it, and why are certain institutions more tolerant to bullshit than others?

John Petrocelli:

I'll start with the latter part of that question. One of the reasons that we're so tolerant of it is because we don't expect it to have a negative effect on our thinking, our reasoning. We assume that it's harmless. We don't even talk about bullshit in the same way that we talk about lies. I mean, you and I might be sitting on a porch, and maybe Robin and Bruce come by and say, "What are you guys doing?" And we might say, "Oh, we're just sitting out here bullshitting," right?

But we wouldn't say, "Oh, well, we're sitting out here lying to one another," right? And the social reaction to the two different forms of behavior is completely different. If someone lies to us, we're usually pretty angry. We have a lot of disdain for that behavior and there's a large asymmetry in the trust ratio. Now we usually give people the benefit of the doubt. We assume that new people that we meet are honest and trustworthy. But a single lie, now we can't trust them. Now we need at least 100 or 200 instances in which they tell us the truth to regain that trust and an expectation of honesty. That asymmetry isn't as great with bullshitting. Usually, we give the bullshitter sort of a social pass of acceptance. We say, "Oh, Larry's just bullshitting us." And we think that it doesn't have an effect. But my studies show that that that's clearly not the case when you focus on what people actually believe to be true and what their attitudes and opinions are. And those two things are absolutely fundamental to decision-making. So that's one of the reasons why we tolerate it so much.

And then the second reason for the former part of that question is that the communicative culture that we live in today is not practiced at calling bullshit. And if we don't start at the top with leaders, managers, people who are actually managing people and gaining information, important information that often comes in the form of explanation, and explanation, we know, is often counted as if it is evidence, right? But evidence and explanation are two totally different things. Evidence is something that supports a claim or an assertion. It's something that demonstrates. It verifies. It supports that idea. Evidence may be a bunch of reasons for why you believe what you believe, but rarely does it come in the form of hardcore, boots-on-the-ground evidence that supports the claim. And as we continue to just accept that and forget the important difference between those two things, we're very unlikely to call bullshit when we see

it. And until we sort of create a communicative culture that encourages evidence-based communication and evidence-based reasoning from the very top down, I think we're going to continue to keep piling the bullshit on and making decisions based on this stuff.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to give an example you had in your book, and it related to when you go to the wine store, comments that are listed under a given bottle of wine. Sometimes it'll say something like chocolatey, hint of blackberry with a coffee aroma. And, you know what that is? That's just bullshit. It's bullshit because if we ask a group of different wine tasters, they would not come up with the same result. What do we make of that kind of bullshit?

John Petrocelli:

Well, it certainly has a big effect on what people purchase. I mean, and at the wine shop, people want to purchase something maybe special for an occasion or something that they're going to like. And they assume that wine sellers have tried all of the wines, the thousands of wines in the shop. If you talk with people who sell wine, usually they don't know much more than your common shopper at the shop. They will pretty much buy anything that you suggest, if you say, "Oh, this wine goes well with fish or steak," they believe it. And the words that are used, I mean, everybody wants to drink, it sounds fun to drink something that reminds you of a cozy cottage in a winter storm. But the language, we refer to this type of language as pseudo-profound.

A lot of this language that you see in wine, you also see in corporate gibberish and in business speak, I mean, words like bandwidth and leverage and win-win and all of these types of words that are sort of, they're kind of ambiguous fillers that make things sound more profound and more impressive than they actually are. They're not helpful in decision-making. But people expect them, and they react to them as if they're cardinal truth. And it's just something that continues to proliferate, not only in wine, but I mean, if you switch to any industry, whether it be automobiles, jewelry, real estate, I mean, they all have their own special language, and people are expecting of that language. And it does move us. But when you track back and say, well, what does that actually mean? What does it mean for this to be a win-win situation? You often find that there's really not much evidence for it. Maybe it's a win for one person, but not the other. If you think about things from a critical thinking standpoint and a scientific reasoning standpoint, you'll often find that the pseudo-profound language that you find in wine and almost any industry is really a lot of fluff.

Larry Bernstein:

We have a question from Jeremy Clorfene, he asks, "How would you distinguish in the world of propaganda, lying and bullshit? For example, Make America Great Again or for Obama, Hope and Change. How do you think of those sorts of propaganda as bullshit?"

John Petrocelli:

Well, obviously some propaganda is not grounded in truth, genuine evidence, or established knowledge. That's for sure. But not all propaganda is bullshit. If I give you a set of facts and I am concerned about the truth value, and they happen to be true and well-supported by the established knowledge and evidence, then that could still be propaganda, but I wouldn't categorize it as bullshit. But to the extent that you are trying to persuade and influence with things that have no connection to truth, then that would be propaganda that is bullshit. But there are many, many different motives of the bullshitter that have nothing to do with persuasion and influence, and what we might use propaganda for. There was a study done recently with hundreds of employees within a number of companies. And they defined for the employees what bullshit was in the same definition that I've been using, and they asked, "Well, why would you do this? Why would you engage in this behavior?" And they found 36 different situations and reasons why people would engage in bullshitting. And what it whittled down to were two dimensions, one of which was status, so promoting one status and trying to appear knowledgeable and impressive and worthy of their position. And then the other is simply communal value, to get along with others, to connect with others, and to be part of the group. And that doesn't necessarily have anything to do with persuasion and influence. That's just simple connection.

But another important motive is simply to see what it feels like to say something and see what reactions are actually liked to something that you may not even really believe, but, again, has no connection to truth, established knowledge, or genuine evidence. And that's very different than sort of using propaganda to change attitudes and minds.

Larry Bernstein:

I mentioned before that, how can organizations call out bullshit, and I got a question from Jay Green. He asked the following, "We've had truth committees before in organizations, whether it be Soviet biologists or the Catholic Church, which had a truth committee that declared that, in fact, the earth was the center of the universe or was flat. How should we think about the dangers of organizations be truth seekers and calling out falsehoods or bullshit?"

John Petrocelli:

Well, certainly if decisions are being made with no attention to truth and reality, we're in a very big mess, which is typically, quite frankly, the case. And the reason for that we know from treasure troves of cognitive psychological research that people are typically reasonable when they have information that they fully consider. If someone is not motivated to focus on truth or connect their reasoning to truth, established knowledge, or genuine evidence, really, I don't see much hope for that individual. But in general, people are usually reasonable thinkers. They'll take information that, that they believe to be true, and then they'll make general inferences from that. But the problem is that most of the data that they get, most of the information they get comes from their own personal or maybe even professional experience. And we're often prisoners of the confines of our personal experience. And that type of experience provides

extremely messy data. The data from those experiences are often random. They're unrepresentative. They're often ambiguous, certainly incomplete, often inconsistent, indirect, second or third-hand, and often surprising are counter attitudinal, or not things that we necessarily want to be true or want to believe.

And when you're making decisions based on that kind of data, it doesn't bode very well for optimal decision-making. And it strikes me, as a judgment and decision-making researcher, it strikes me as a very odd thing for people to do. But again, people rely on that information, and they rely on anecdotal from their personal experiences to justify the beliefs and attitudes that they have, and that's what they often feel, that's all they need.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to go to some very narrow definitions in linguistics and see if it upsets you or not. In Frankfurt's work *On Bullshit*, he quotes Wittgenstein about use of metaphor. I'll give you an example from my real world. Yesterday I went to my mom's house and helped her clean up the house. And I came home and I told my wife... She said, "Are you tired?" I said, "Tired? I feel like I've been run over by a truck." Now, the reality is I've never been run over by a truck. I doubt that I really felt like I was run over by a truck. I was embellishing and exaggerating how I felt. By your definition, it was clearly bullshit. But is it problematic, or is that just the very nature of language and metaphor?

John Petrocelli:

I think in that case, you sort of are hinting... When you're using a metaphor, you're hinting that you are at least open to the connection to truth because you're saying, "I feel like." And then if you follow that up at all, all you need is a single question. "Well, what do you mean by that?" Right? "Can you please clarify your claim?" And what we will find, that's one of the best questions to ask a suspected bullshitter, is to ask, "What is it exactly that you are saying?" And what you'll find is bullshitters will usually take a couple of backpedaled steps and start to clean it up right away. Because they'll actually listen to themselves and they'll realize, "Well, maybe that didn't sound right." And they didn't actually mean that literally. You're already exposing yourself to less bullshit if you just clarify the claim. Clarification is a major antidote to bullshit.

But if you follow that up then with... Let's say you're still following that. And he's like, "Yeah." And you're giving me something that still, you think that this claim can be supported. "Well, how is it that you know that that is true? By what sort of evidence supports your conclusion by that?" If you ask how, you will usually get what we call a concrete construal of the event or the situation, whereby people will be more likely to provide genuine evidence. If you ask, "Why do you feel like that, Larry?" Then a lot of times what people will provide is sort of an abstract level of construal, which gets at some of their heady values, and what you'll get is a lot of explanation. You won't get evidence for that. But if you get past how, then you can also ask, "Well, have you considered another alternative? Have you considered the fact that if you actually got ran over by a truck, we better rush you to the emergency room right now? Have

you considered alternatives to your assertion or your claim?" All three of these questions will help you diagnose the individual's interests and their regard for truth, established knowledge, and evidence for their claim.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to bring Robin Greenwood into this conversation. But first, I want to read a quote from Harry Frankfurt's book *On Bullshit*. Here's the quote. "Why is there so much bullshit?" He writes, "Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he's talking about. Thus, the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person's obligation or opportunity to speak about some topic exceed his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to the topic. This discrepancy is common in public life, where people are frequently impelled, whether by their own propensities or by the demand of others to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant."

Now, the reason I bring up the quote is that Robin teaches a class at Harvard Business School, an introductory to a finance class where they use case studies. And at the beginning of these case studies, Robin calls randomly on a particular student and asks them to open up the discussion and present the case.

Now, most students try to prepare. But on the whole, now they're being called in front of the whole class to make a case. And I imagine because they don't know, they're generally ignorant of the facts that it requires a propensity to bullshit to the classroom. Now, everyone knows that they could have been called. They recognize the challenge that Robin has asked them to do. And to some degree there's an extensive amount of bullshit. And I wonder if this process, as you think, does that encourage bullshitting sessions, that we're training people to speak on their feet and to allow for the production of a bullshit

Robin Greenwood:

I don't want to give away too many tricks of the trade. But if my bullshit detector goes off, keep in mind that I have prepared for the case significantly more than even a prepared student. And if I feel like somebody... I call on an opener and they're not ready, I draw them out, and will ask follow-up questions such that it usually becomes apparent to the entire room that they're unprepared. And then they usually will, in 90% of cases, just two minutes in say, "I'm sorry, I didn't read the case." And then we move on. And that's not a great experience for them. And so smart people usually will make that admission earlier, rather than get drawn out for two minutes.

Larry Bernstein:

Well, I wasn't really thinking about kids that weren't completely unprepared. But to some extent you do prepare, but now you're being asked to go beyond your knowledge base. In any presentation, there's some truth seeking, and there's some bullshit. I don't think they're going to make complete falsehoods because they'll be called out on that. But there's a certain

element of bullshit that's required to make the sale, like the used car salesman that John mentioned.

John Petrocelli:

Certainly, the obligation that people are supposed to have an opinion about everything, I believe has expanded in our information overload world. I mean, ever since the internet, we not only were expected to have opinions about all of the major issues of the day. The economy. Nuclear energy, voting, who should vote, capital punishment, all of these big issues. You're still supposed to have opinions about those things today, but now you're also supposed to have opinions about whether or not Game of Thrones ended early, or whether or not people should be allowed to carry toy dogs in their purses. And if Kim Kardashian should or shouldn't be famous, and if her sisters should or shouldn't be allowed to digitally modify their pictures on Instagram.

The things that people seem to have, or feel obligated to have an opinion about, it's all over the place today. And I think that to the extent that people feel that obligation and don't feel as though, "Well, I haven't had a chance to generate a well-informed opinion about this, because I don't really know enough yet." You never hear anyone say that. It's very rare that people say that. If you take a look at the way debate teams are graded or rated in their debates... I don't know if you've looked at one, but more recently, what students will do in debate teams is in their five minutes they will rattle off as many arguments as they possibly can, sometimes 30 arguments and then if the opposition doesn't have a chance to debunk or counter argue all 30 of those, then the ones that are not addressed are just assumed to be true. And they're scored as points. And I think this kind of happens in our social discourse. Again, people have explanations for things that it's counted as logic incarnate truth, and ipso facto evidence, but it's clearly not. I think socially, we just accept that. And I think until we start using and recognizing the difference between evidence and explanation in our discourse, then I don't think we're going to get very far.

Bruce Tuckman:

Another thing I was very impressed when I went to the CFTC's Commission Meetings, when the commissioners were speaking. And I also had the privilege to sit in a few Supreme Court cases while I was in Washington. Those levels of discussion were miles above other things that you hear in the general political government arena. I don't know exactly what the cause of that is. It could be that the press is not standing quoting five sentences out of context, or they're not looking for a small thing. Maybe that's one, but there seems to be some settings where we can avoid a lot of things that John's talking about. But most settings we can't. And I don't know. I haven't analyzed what it is that makes a place conducive to serious thinking. But I did notice just a massive difference. You wished that more Americans would be tuned into those two places, compared to things they listen to all the time.

Larry Bernstein:

It's funny you should bring that up, Bruce. I attended a Supreme Court session once in my life. I was a guest of my high school tennis partner, David Hoffman, who was a Rehnquist clerk. And he got me a seat in the front row. And when I got there, Rehnquist turned to another justice, and said, "I'd like you to read an opinion." And it was Clinton vs. Paula Jones. And he said, "In a 9-0 decision, we vote for Jones, that Jones can go ahead with the lawsuit against Clinton, and then do a full investigation while he's still president." When I was listening to it, I was like, "Oh my god. I don't think they're right." So even though you're there and it sounds very sophisticated, they can still get the answers very wrong.

I want to go on a different path for bullshit for a second. And that relates to the application of fictional approaches in non-fictional settings. Journalism changed in the late fifties and early sixties with Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote. And I'm specifically thinking of Truman Capote's book *In Cold Blood*, where, in what appeared to be a non-fictional work, Capote put words and dialogue together, which was full fabrication. But it got to the gist of the matter. And ironically, in my own storytelling, my friend, Bruce Tuckman, who listens to my stories, he'll always say, "Larry, I noticed you were making up dialogue. And in all the dialogue, all the actors sound just like you, Larry. It's just inconceivable that your daughter would sound like that." Do you find it problematic in storytelling or in non-fictional settings where dialogue is fabricated, but in some ways what the author will tell you is, "Look, in storytelling, you just want to get to the gist of the matter? What do you want from me? I wasn't there." Or, "Who can remember exact dialogue?" Do you find that problematic?

John Petrocelli:

Yeah, I would, in terms of the weight that we give it. And if it's something, again, that supports or demonstrates, verifies a claim or assertion, that is paramount. That information should be weighted much more heavily than an analogy, sometimes of which is false. We call these things false analogies if they kind of fit the situation, but they're not quite correct. And people make leaps and bounds from them. And again, we would count them as sort of potential explanation, but they should not be weighted in the judgment and the decision as much as hardcore boots on the ground evidence would do. I mean, we also know that leading questions can change judgments. Even if you actually observed, if you were an eye witness to an event occurring, where two cars crashed. If I asked you, "Well, how fast were the cars going when they hit each other?" Versus, "How fast were the cars going when they collided?" Or, "How fast were they going when they smashed?" As I moved further away from, "They hit," the judgment of how fast they were going increases.

There are tricks that you can do with discourse or fictional analogies that can get people to think as though they've got an accurate picture of what actually happened, or the way things are, or how the world actually works. But when you critically analyze it, you'll see that the center often does not hold. And it's certainly not going to hold as well as finely collected, systematically collected data that goes well beyond anecdotes. I'm talking about hundreds of observations for basic claims and assertions, not just as a story, whether it be fictional or non-fictional.

Larry Bernstein:

Robin, what are your thoughts on the case study approach to truth seeking and the role of bullshit in that process?

Robin Greenwood:

That's a huge question. I think the main benefit of the case method approach is that students can wrestle with the problem, put themselves in the seat of the protagonist and explore it from multiple angles. As a result, compared to listening to it in the lecture or reading it in a book, they're much less likely to forget it. In fact, I've spoken with students, who 20 years later remember a particular case study and the lessons from that case study, something you'll almost never get from reading about portfolio theory in a textbook. That's just to give you an example.

Now, having said that, there's a lot of chatter along the way that gets discarded in pursuit of that noble cause. I guess I'm saying I'm okay with some of that. I think the one thing I would add to this is you need a guide to take you through the BS. So as long as you have some clear thinkers in a group, whether that be the instructor guiding the discussion, or you have great students who were able to see the core issues and take you past the jargon or any kind of misleading information. I think it works.

Larry Bernstein:

Bruce, having been in the public sector and the private sector, is there more or less toleration for bullshit in one sort of institution than another?

Bruce Tuckman:

I'm not quite sure. I think it's a little bit like I was saying before, that there are just certain settings that bullshit is more natural. And I think, again, John was trying to get at that. I think you did mention the academic world, where I spent a lot of time, also. And there's some, but when people are at a seminar... I mean, again, the other two people on the call can say what they think. I think in a seminar, there's not a lot of bullshitting. I think people are trying to figure out what's going on and you can't get away with very much. And I think it has serious talk, and the government employees or business people, you also get that. I think as the crowd gets larger, as the group gets larger, as you're with strangers, then there's, again, all this stuff that John's talking about, trying to impress people and trying to make them think. It's more setting dependent than institution dependent.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's just follow that up with this example of that. Bruce, we're old friends, and sometimes we sit around and we bullshit. And to what John was talking about, what we'll do is, we'll test out a new hypothesis. We'll throw it out there and we'll see each other's reaction. And if one is dumbfounded and shocked and horrified, that'll give us a clue that maybe we shouldn't mention that again. I think there's a distinction when we talk about, "We're just bullshitting."

Maybe we're not exaggerating. We were just trash talking or just talking gibberish. And maybe that should be the nature of my other question for John. John, to some extent you define some bullshit as just being gibberish. To what extent are we just having fun? Is it just ridiculous? When did it turn from gibberish to being a problem?

John Petrocelli:

Yeah, I think if you are saying, "Hey, we're just bullshitting." Or if you signal in any way that this may not be very well tied to truth or genuine evidence or established knowledge, I think what you're doing is you're saying, "I'm speculating." Or you're putting a qualifier out there and saying, "Hey, I actually am interested in truth. And what I'm saying, though, is not necessarily gospel truth." Right? I think in that context, I think it's generally harmless. But when you say the same thing and you are disguising or being deceptive in the way that you say it, and suggesting that you are interested and that you do believe what it is that you say, similar to the liar, you are being deceptive in that you're acting as though you actually are interested in the truth. And if you're not, but you're pretending that you are, then I think depending on the content, it can vary in how harmful it is.

If it leads someone to believe something that's not true and then gets factored into an important decision, then I would say it's extremely harmful. But if it leads you to believe that the Keeping Up with the Kardashians is a great show and you should watch it. I mean, I'm not so sure. I think that's at least mildly harmful, but I'm not too sure that that has the same kind of harm that, "Well, yeah, I'm going to buy this used car and now I'm going to expect it to give me another 100,000 miles. It only has 20,000 miles on it now. I should easily clear 120,000 miles." And then it turns out to be a lemon because the person selling to you really had no clue about any of the details of the car. I think it certainly depends on the context and what the actual content of the bullshit actually is. But it can certainly vary.