



“The Big Picture”

What it is, how losing sight of it can lead us into certain heuristic traps, complacency and the normalisation of deviance and importantly, what we can do about it...

“Their preparation was short sighted”

“Their actions were ill considered”

“They had adopted a blinkered approach”

“He was very single minded”

These are just examples of some ways of referring to negative situations or outcomes where the bigger picture has dropped from view or been obscured and I imagine we've all used or heard similar. Let's begin with some definitions so we're all on the same page...

The Bigger Picture - The most important facts about a situation and the effects of that situation on other things.

Heuristic - There are a couple of definitions but the most appropriate for our purposes is this: a pattern of thought, mental habit or rule of thumb that eases the cognitive load of making decisions.

Heuristic Traps - When that pattern, habit or rule and subsequent response are not appropriate for the situation or replace the ability to be objective. There have been many articles written on these and a simple internet search will bring up a host of information.

- **Familiarity** - Same venues, client types, course/session content.
- **Scarcity** - Fickle or rare conditions, limited time.
- **Commitment** - Financial, time, promises made to self, clients, others.
- **Social Proof** - Others have done it so it must be ok for me/us.
- **Instructor/expert halo** - Assumption that the expert has all the answers/knowledge required.
- **Acceptance** - The desire to be accepted is a fundamental human trait. Often people will expose themselves to greater risk if they think they'll be accepted more.

Normalisation of Deviance - The erosion of good practice into bad practice to the extent that it becomes common practice.

On initial consideration it could be thought that normalising deviance, complacency and the falling into certain traps is just the result of laziness, of not bothering and whilst this might be the case in some situations the real reasons are often more complex yet subtle. The cause for some of these issues can be attributed to a cultural, psychological and behavioural preference for comfort, familiarity and convenience.

Comfort, familiarity and convenience.....great qualities for a coffee shop but less so in a risk management situation where they really need to be kept in check.

On the one hand these things are good and **should** allow us **more** head space, **more** thinking time, allowing us to make better assessments of the variables like the conditions, the groups energy and attention levels or the objective hazards. After all we need to be comfortable in our environment, right? Comfortable yes, but relax? Lower our guard? Take our eyes off the ball? Lose sight of the bigger picture? Obviously not.

However issues arise when we prioritise or just give in to the immediate benefits of comfort and ease or look to avoid the potential (and usually perceived) imminent consequences of embarrassment, or letting people down, losing face or being reprimanded. In doing so we 'turn a blind eye' to or 'lose sight' of the potential for those greater impacts, negative and positive, that are often only a couple of considered decisions away.

Tiredness, de-hydration, stress, decision fatigue and low mood along with other 'trigger' factors can come into play here and contribute to things just not stacking up in our favour.

Let's look at it another way:

Imagine you crossing Dartmoor at night in the driving rain and howling wind - hoods up and heads down (gotta love Dartmoor in August). You're fixated on the beam of your head torch and the next few feet ahead of you, trudging on wanting to end the immediate discomfort as soon as possible.

Whilst the effort your putting in is admirable it's not going to serve you if you don't stop and put in the extra effort to get the map out and make sure that you're going in the right direction. Yes doing so will extend the discomfort in the short term but will pay dividends by preventing you from ending up where you really don't want to be. The effort to re trace your steps or course adjust far higher and the discomfort will need to be endured for much longer than if you'd been bothered to keep the bigger picture in mind.

The thing is, not bothering, being complacent, cutting corners, bending rules, being negligent, they're all really easy to do - seriously if you decided to do any of these things today (please don't) it would take virtually no effort at all and in the short term your life would probably be easier, more comfortable, less hassle.....for a while

Here's the crux of this article - by losing sight of the bigger picture it becomes far easier to justify a cut corner, more convenient to a miss or shorten a brief and more comfortable to push beyond the boundaries of remit or experience or forgo aspects of procedure that they 'don't see the point of'. Do so for long enough and it's easy to see how it can become the default practice.

When performance lowers - rationalising or rational-lies-ing(?) increases .

So what can we do about it? - if you're like me then you like a bit of background knowledge but what you're after are things you can actually implement, Theory has its place but without considered application it's not a lot of use.

1st off to remind yourself of 'The Bigger Picture' try this task - the key is to take your time and put some real thought into it.

"Both ends of the stick"

Take 2 large sheets of paper (capturing things on paper is way more effective than trying to do this in your head) and at the top of both write down what your job/role is.

One one sheet write **Positives/Benefits** and on the other write **Negatives/Consequences**

The task now is to note on the respective page all the positives/negatives about your job/role and then go into the benefits or consequences of each and expand on them:

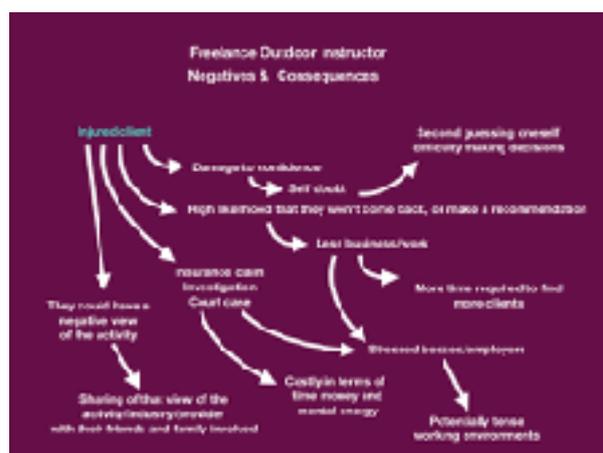
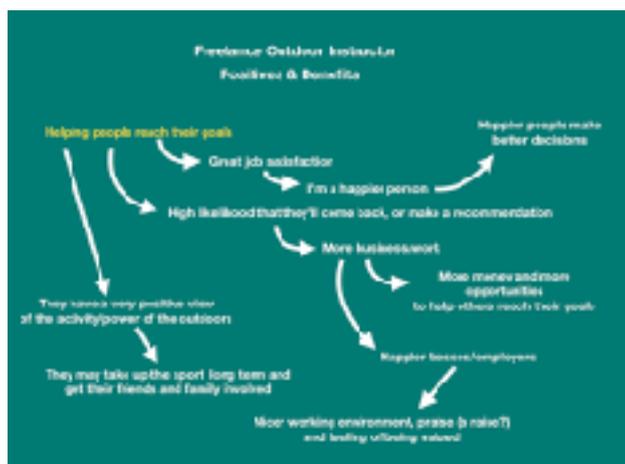
- What are the benefits of that benefit? and then the advantage of *that* benefit?
- What's the repercussion of that consequence? what's the knock on effect of that particular negative aspect and why is that an issue?

Think not only of the impact or affect to you and your clients but also your colleagues, family, organisation/ business and maybe even out into the industry.

Some things to help you with this task:

- There will be aspects that might appear under both. List them separately or show how a positive could lead to a negative and vice versa.
- Keep going until it starts to get a bit tenuous and then move on to the next one.
- Leave plenty of space under/around each one as you'll be surprised how big your picture can get.

Here's one example of how it might look and for simplicity sake I've only used one positive and one negative.



Don't get hung up on the content I've put in as it's just here to give you the idea.

Once again, don't just try to do this in your head, capture it on paper. Once you've finished, take a moment, sit back and take a good look. What you're looking at here is 'both ends of the stick' and if you choose to pick it up (take on your role/position) then you assume responsibility for both ends, you can't have one without the other. You've got to have the whole stick too not just the bits that are easier, comfortable or more convenient... Keep this somewhere safe, keep referring back to it and chances are you'll be able to add to it as time goes on.

I could spend a lot of time delving into this more looking at decision points, reframing some of the negatives and so on but I'll leave it here. If done well the primary purpose of this task should be pretty clear.

So we've reminded ourselves of the bigger picture, the grand scale of things, so how can we become aware of comfort and convenience tendencies and minimise or negate the negative effects?

Watch your language!

"A word does not start as a word - it is an end product which begins as an impulse, stimulated by attitude and behaviour which dictates the need for expression" Peter Brook.

I'm not talking about Effing and Jeffing here but how language can be a very powerful and useful way of accessing and understanding what the beliefs and assumptions about a given situation might be. By being more aware of what we, our clients and colleagues say we can identify potentially short sighted aspects of attitude or behaviour and address them before they create issues. It's a massive subject area but I'll include this just as an example:

Need vs Prefer, Have to vs Want to.

I'll keep this short. If we label what are really only preferences as needs then we begin to remove the possibility for options like backing off or more appropriate alternatives.

"I really **need** to get these QMD's done this week as I've spent a lot of money getting here and I'll not get another chance anytime soon"

"I **have** to get the group to the summit as I promised them I would"

Equally issues arise when we term 'Musts' and 'have to's' as preferences.

'Yeah in an ideal world it would be good to give everyone a proper safety brief but...'

"I haven't used a group shelter in months so I don't see the need to take one every time"

Tactic - write "Need or Prefer" somewhere prominent like on the back of your hand or write it down, take a photo and use it as your phone's wallpaper or lock screen for a couple of days. What we're aiming for here is an increase in our awareness of the language of ourselves and others so we can catch any miss labelled thoughts, reframe them, remain more objective and better manage expectations. Since our use of language is very habitual and pattern like what this gives us is a 'pattern interrupt' a form of 'catch feature' to help us recognise when we might be losing sight of the big picture, allowing us course adjust, stop us going down the wrong path and, given our roles, potentially taking others with us.

Other questions to help regain a bigger picture perspective:

Would you do this if you were on assessment? Or as part of providing evidence for a court case? Would you teach someone else to do this? Would you do this if your boss/staff/peers were watching? If not then you need to ask why are you contemplating/doing it now??

I get it, sometimes it's really hard to differentiate and be able to have that level of clarity about our thoughts which will provide a basis for balanced decisions, especially when working in isolation or when there are a lot of variables or 'grey areas' that need considering- which is why it's really important to:

Discuss and Plan

- Open, honestly. Keeping these topics and issues as part of regular conversation, discussing and deciding in advance the potential traps and ways to avoid them reduces the chances of them becoming problems.
- Have options - an ideal option if all things line up (and note what those things are), a back up option and the plan for bailing early or not even going at all.
- Set points of 'no further progression' - These can be weather or terrain conditions and /or time/location and get into the habit of sticking to them.
- Hold yourself accountable by discussing grey area's or more challenging situations openly with a trusted peer or mentor and/or with everyone in the group (where appropriate). Here's the thing - if you don't feel comfortable discussing a particular plan or decision with a peer or mentor then that in its self is quite telling - ask yourself why and answer with honesty and go and discuss it with them anyway. I understand its not always possible to do in advance but could be done as part of a personal review of the day - a lot of us work on our own and so having a sounding board is really important - we might just have to quieten our ego and put up with some discomfort in order to reap the benefits.
- Manage expectations of all involved (you included) as its one of the best ways of avoiding situations where you feel every committed or like you have run out of options. Having potentially 'tough or 'uncomfortable' decisions with people early on in the day/session/booking process/planning is a lot easier than later in the day/session/ trip when tiredness, hunger, feelings of commitment and scarcity are increased in both them and you.

Doing the right thing - being proactive takes effort. Making the tough decisions will often be uncomfortable to do and we might not be popular as a result. We might lose face, we might disappoint our clients by not getting to the summit or getting X number of climbs done during the session. However, if the decision was made with due consideration, stemming from careful assessment and honestly held beliefs then it's very likely to be the right decision and it's just part of our job to deal with any discomfort that might arise in order to protect our clients, organisations, industry and ourselves from the potential for much greater harm.

There are only ever a few decisions between the big positive impacts that our industry can provide and the more severe consequences. By keeping an eye on the bigger picture I believe we'll be better able to navigate our way through those decisions.

“The mountains will always be there, the trick is to make sure you are too.” - Hervey Voge

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