

# ***THE SOFTER SIDE OF CHOOSING AN OFF-THE-SHELF SOLUTION***

*BY PETE BURDEN AND MARTIN TATE*

*A COMPANION ARTICLE FOR  
OFF-THE-SHELF IT SOLUTIONS:  
A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE TO SELECTION AND PROCUREMENT*  
[www.bcs.org/books/offtheshelf](http://www.bcs.org/books/offtheshelf)

**'No man is an Iland, intire of it self;  
every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine.'**

John Donne (1572–1631)

## 1.1 WHAT YOU CAN LEARN FROM THIS ARTICLE

- The book provides a structured process for selecting an off-the-shelf software solution (Tate, 2015). This process inherently helps change happen more smoothly because of the extensive consultation and engagement. In addition, there are usually things going on beneath the surface that in our experience can get in the way of successfully choosing the right software.
- This article highlights some of these things, and shows how every individual involved in the approach – including the leaders – can contribute personally to success by learning to speak up more fully and completely.
- An overview of complexity is at Section 2; some guidance on specific actions anyone can take to find and use their voice in meetings is at Section 3; specific considerations for the project lead are at Section 4.



## 1.2 OVERVIEW

There is something tempting about constructing the world as a sane and simple place. Perhaps it gives us a sense of comfort – that our lives will be easy and things will always work out well. However, we often find that the world really is much more complex – not just complicated, but complex, unpredictable and beyond our absolute control. Figure 1 wittily draws attention to the contrast.

Selecting an off-the-shelf solution is a multi-team, collaborative (meaning multi-organisation) activity. This is the human context in which the project takes place.

Rather than turn away from that difficult truth, this article suggests it is more useful to 'turn into' the 'mess' (Ackoff, 1999). Living in a complex world does not mean we are powerless. There are many things we can do, personally, and some of them are critical to the success of the selection project.

Within references to *Section* numbers in the main book, note that the first segment is the chapter number.

Figure 1 The Realities of Change (Delta 7, 2011)



The realities of change

## 2. ASPECTS OF THE COMPLEXITY

---

### 2.1 BIAS IS REAL

We can pick just one idea that is highly relevant to any software selection: that bias is real.

It is for this reason – that all of us have biases, and that biases can get in the way of making the most appropriate choice – that the book recommends a structured approach.

Over and over, as we use checklists and quantitative measures to determine the business needs and to evaluate products and suppliers we try to reduce or neutralise these biases. The approach includes several elements specifically designed to reduce bias – for instance, see the book Sections 8.6, 9.8, 9.12 and especially 9.12.4.

But bias is not a simple thing. We cannot just say:

“Oh, so-and-so is always 32% biased in favour of such-and-such.”

A person is not a plank of wood or a length of metal. We cannot say:

“They are 32% out of tolerance levels for that component.”

Why is this so?

It is tempting, especially when we live in a world that is dominated by the need for scientific explanation, to try to see the world as a thing, a system. Sometimes a machine, like a complex clock. Or perhaps like a biological system, with pumps, valves and chemicals.

It is tempting also to believe that people are rational actors within that system. That our dominant forebrains lead us to analyse the situation correctly and make wise and sound choices, based on logic.

However, another part of us knows that human beings are not always rational. Every one of us has things going on which are ‘below the waterline’. We would not be human if this was not true, despite our need to simplify the world and to see it as sane and logical.

It is even more complex than that because, by definition, these things are outside of our consciousness. We do not know what we know, or what we do not know. For example, we are biased but usually unaware of these biases.

According to some studies nearly 80% of people believe they are better drivers than average. (McCormick, Walkey and Green, 1986).

How can this be? It makes little rational sense to hold that belief. In the words of Dunning and Kruger we are ‘blissfully incompetent’ (Kruger and Dunning, 1999).

## **2.2 MEANING IS CONSTRUCTED**

We understand better today than ever that meaning is 'constructed' between people.

To take an example, if I shout the word 'Hey', it may mean 'Look out' or 'I'm over here' or many other things – depending on your point of view. Our relationships, past, present and future, will alter the meaning. The meaning does not rest in the words alone – meaning is constructed in and from our relationships.

That may sound academic, but consider a real-life example from project management: the use of the word 'finished'.

Every experienced project manager knows that different people's interpretation of this word can make a big difference to project success. If you and I have different interpretations of the word, when you pass the 'finished' product to me for the next stage of processing, I may tell you it is clearly 'not finished' – and it needs to be re-worked.

This has consequences for the critical path activities in the project. It may also have consequences for our relationship. I may decide that you are not to be trusted, and that decision might affect our next communication.

## **2.3 IT IS EVEN MORE COMPLEX THAN THAT**

So a different understanding, a different way of making sense, of even a single word can affect the result, and our relationship.

Then consider that every person in a complex decision-making situation has a different understanding of the word 'finished'. These meanings are all contextual – affected by how each individual relates to every other person. And that these meanings change in real-time as the situation changes – for example, my idea of 'finished' may change as a deadline approaches. The broader context – including the other relationships I have – also changes the meaning I make.

Of course, during a selection project, there is never just one word to consider – there are many words, and many meanings to make.

And the more we think about it, the more complex it gets.

Think about how our perception itself is dependent on many things. Our moods, our feelings, affect what we see. So do our thoughts – what we imagine about other people affects how we see them, the judgements we make and the action we take as a consequence.

This was summarised by Argyris as the Ladder of Inference (Mind Tools, 2015). Maybe I have decided your work is sloppy, perhaps because you did not 'finish it' last time. So this time I am on the lookout for flaws in your work. Amazingly, I find some; this confirms my pre-judgment of your ability; so prejudice and bias grow.

If only it were even this simple. Remember that a large component of how we interact is non-verbal. It is not just about what we say, it is about everything else. We judge people based on their personal appearance, their clothes, their tone of voice, how they sit or stand, where they look (for example, whether they meet our eyes).

Remember we are social animals. The videos of the Elevator Candid Camera (Beck, 2014) or the Asch Experiment (Asch, 2013) confirm this. The elevator clip especially demonstrates the power of body language – as the group turns, so does the individual – a bit like sheep.

Both videos also demonstrate how powerful the group is. How easy we find it to conform, and how difficult it is to step away from that, even as we conceive ourselves as independent beings.

And, finally, remember again how much of this is unconscious – that is, it is outside of our awareness.

Note the occasionally confused looks on the faces of the participants in the videos. They are sometimes unsure why they act as they do, but equally they seemingly cannot help themselves.

Despite ourselves, and our best desires, we cannot always be conscious. Of ourselves, or of how we are reacting to other people.

## **2.4 SO IT IS A MESS**

So it really is a 'mess' – a constantly changing, flexible, contextual, complex, and responsive process (Griffin, Shaw and Stacey, 1998). It is very hard to even agree what is happening, let alone predict what will happen next. It is almost impossible to ensure that any particular outcome will arise.

It is, of course, a very human mess, and we probably would not want to be without it. Who would really like to live in a world that operated like a huge clock? But to deny its very real complexity would also be strange.

This is the setting in which the approach to choosing off-the-shelf software takes place. Every meeting, every discussion, every step is happening within this complex organisational, human or 'soft' environment.

This explains why it is so important to try to eliminate biases. Biases are real, and will get in the way of good decision-making. However, it is evident that we can never completely eliminate them.

When someone in a weighting meeting chooses a particular weight (see book Section 5.7) their choice will be impacted: by their perceptions; by their own past; by how they feel; by their beliefs about the future; by their loyalty to their team, boss or department; by the power relations in the group. Perhaps their choice will be impacted by the weights that other people are giving. Although the rigorous weighting process tries to minimise this, almost certainly they will be influenced by the weights that they imagine other people will give.

There are several counter-balances in the method – for example, challenging the subjectivity of suppliers by asking them to sign up to a particular set of weights. But none of this will completely remove the overall complexity, so we need to find a way to deal with it.

### 3. SO... HERE IS WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

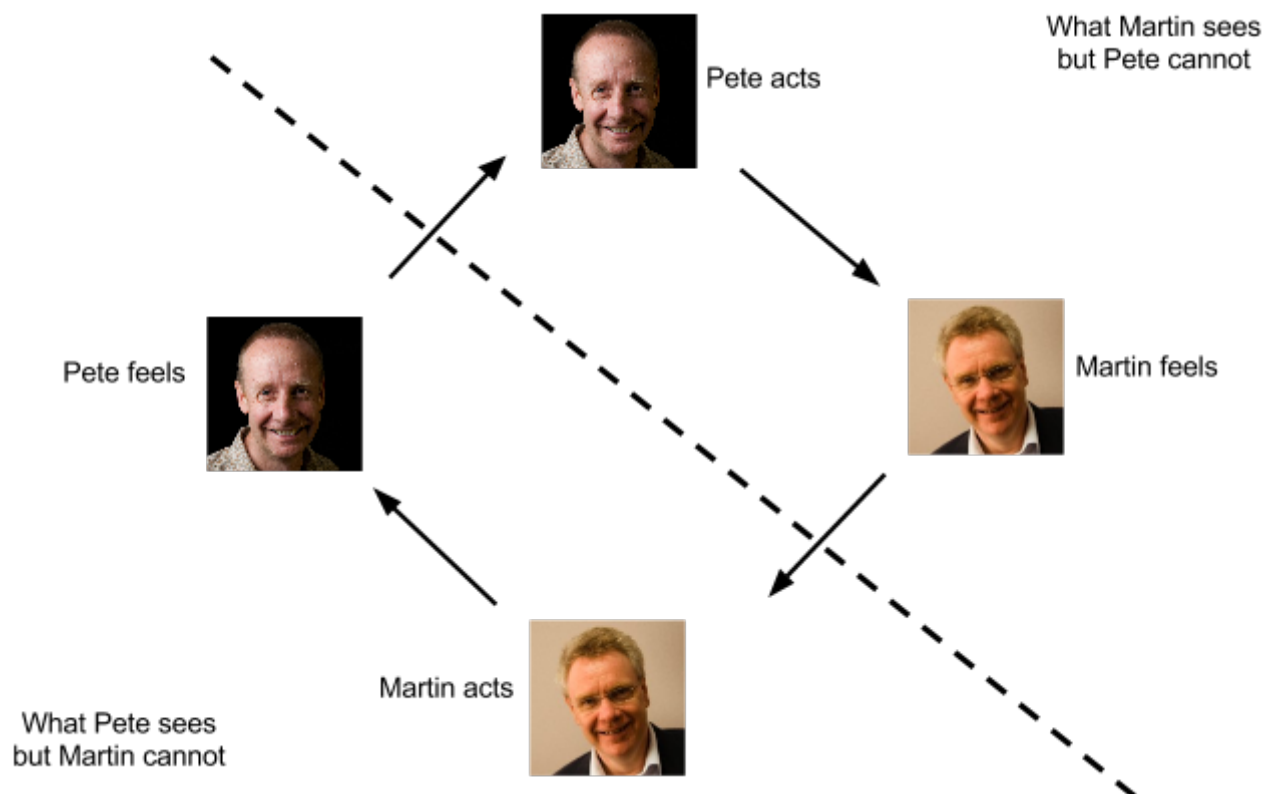
#### 3.1 THE ANTIDOTE

It would be great if people were more conscious of all of these causes of bias. If we were all perfectly enlightened, able to see into our unconscious and habitual desires and wishes, could we temper them?

It would be great if we were always able to be conscious of the effect that other people have on us. To see how easily our perceptions and views and decisions are changed by those around us, and step away from this, becoming true individuals, fearless and free.

The diagram at Figure 2 shows two people involved in a conversation. As we have considered, when Pete says or does something, Martin will interpret it in his own unique way. The meaning he makes and the feelings he has in response will be unique to Martin and to that situation (McLain Smith, 2008).

*Figure 2 Acting, seeing and feeling in a conversation*



That meaning and those feelings may cause Martin to say something in return. In turn, Pete will interpret that and respond internally in a particular way. His interpretation will impact his response.

And round and round.

But notice something else. Pete can only see certain things. He cannot see what Martin feels inside, because our feelings are private to ourselves. He cannot wholly 'see' his own action, what he 'says', either. Because, as we have discussed, meaning is constructed in Martin's mind, and Pete is no telepath.

The same is, of course, true for Martin. He can only guess at how what he says will be interpreted. And he has little idea of what Pete feels unless Pete chooses to describe it.

Realising this, Pete may indeed choose to describe his feelings. This would of course make it much easier for Martin to make a fuller decision. Perhaps Pete is annoyed with Martin for thinking he would submit something 'unfinished', and thereby questioning the quality of his work. Martin can understand that annoyance – because he would probably feel the same thing himself, in a similar situation. Perhaps Martin can alter what he says next.

The psychologist Carl Rogers called speaking up in this way 'congruence' (Kirschenbaum, 1996). To be congruent is to be transparent and authentic. We all know when we are not being congruent – when we feel one thing but say or do something that hides what we are feeling.

But this is all difficult stuff. It is a lot to ask of people to develop and maintain this level of self-awareness. Especially in the hurly burly of work, with the pressures of the business, of project deadlines and of collaborating across several organisations.

### **3.2 ENTER THE GROUP**

Ironically, just as part of the problem lies in the group (such as in group conformity) so does part of the answer. The group and our relationships in it endlessly confuse and befuddle us. But our colleagues in a group can also help us.

It is often much easier to detect confusion and befuddlement from outside. If I sit and watch two people argue, I can see their differences more easily than they can. For one thing, I have the advantage of not being so blinded by the emotions they are feeling.

Perhaps I could find a way to ask my colleagues what is going on for them. Perhaps I can see the spiral, the vicious circle in action, and help them head it off before it becomes a feud.

So, just as it is easier from the outside to see the difficulty of Martin and Pete's predicament, it should be easier to notice if some of my colleagues in the selection project are falling prey to emotion, or failing to perceive their own bias?

If I am concerned that a particular decision is being affected by any of the things we have discussed above, perhaps I can name them, and change the flow of the conversation. The things to which we pay attention, the things to which we give perceptual and emotional 'weight', affect the course of the conversation and probably the outcome.

In many of the important stages of the approach there are multiple people involved, normally in meetings. What if one or more people were able to speak up and change what everyone was paying attention to. Might that help?

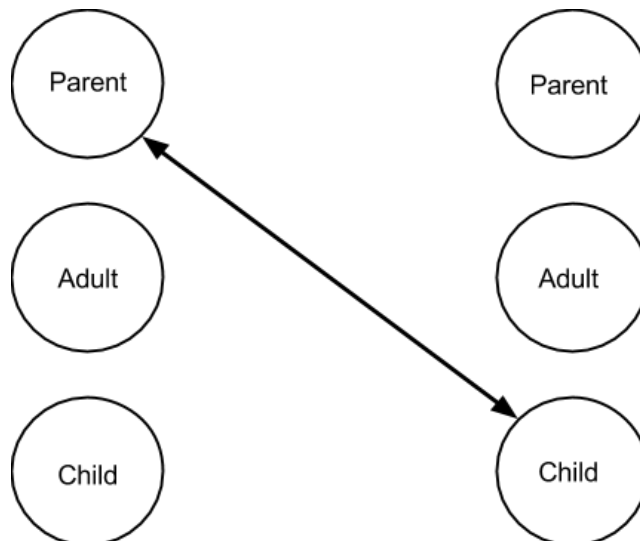
### 3.3 WE NEVER SAID IT WAS EASY

There are several reasons why speaking up in this way is not easy.

Firstly, we all lack self-awareness to some extent. Many of us have learned to pay less attention to our feelings than we might. So some people might not even be aware of their own incongruence, or that others are being incongruent. We may fail to tap into our own instincts, our own gut feelings that things are not quite right.

Secondly, power relations in groups are also real. Figure 3 illustrates this by a simple model from Transactional Analysis (Berne, 2010).

*Figure 3 An example of Transactional Analysis*



Have you ever found yourself acting in some way like a child? Perhaps rebelling, or perhaps being overly compliant?

Have you ever noticed yourself behaving like a parent? Feeling the need to nurture, or perhaps even to punish?

This model suggests that all of us, at times, slip into these roles. And that if I behave like a child the person I am communicating with may well behave like a parent. The converse is also true: if I behave like a parent, then you may behave like a child.

Again these patterns are largely unnoticed. If you wonder if it ever happens, just consider what happens when you return to your family home, or when you are with your siblings. Which roles do you adopt, perhaps unconsciously?

There are many other theories of relationships and how groups operate. For our current purposes, it is perhaps enough to realise that these effects are real. And they are important because behaving like a child or parent is not ideal if I am trying to speak up and highlight the attention we are paying to a particular aspect of the selection project. If I think you are exhibiting bias, it is unlikely to help if I keep quiet. Or if I tell you off.

What we are usually seeking is an 'adult-to-adult' way to explain what we see or what we experience.

### **3.4 USING LANGUAGE**

The third reason this is difficult is that most of us do not always use the language we need to express clearly and cleanly what we want to say.

Imagine the emotional effect if I say to you something like:

"You are being biased in your decision".

Or more simply:

"You are ignoring the facts".

Remember that if people are being irrational, it rarely helps to say:

"You are being irrational".

Most people will interpret this as a kind of 'accusation'. I am telling you how you are – when I cannot possibly know how you are. Because we are separate individuals, each with our own experience.

It was perhaps for this reason that Thomas Gordon developed the idea of the I-message or I-statement (Bolton, 1986). Simply put, rather than using an accusative, I simply talk about myself.

So I might say instead:

"I am concerned that we haven't considered all the facts."

This is more likely to engender enquiry than resistance in the listener:

"Why are you concerned about that?"

And the idea of enquiry itself is also very powerful.

Most people 'advocate' much of the time. Particularly in business settings, career progression is often based on being able to stand up for yourself, to tell a good story, to get the facts across, to make good decisions.

It is not just the case in business of course. Our educational system reinforces this, as do most interactions in civic, political and social life around us. Thinking and believing things, and being able to express these thoughts and beliefs is high valued socially. What rules the day is:

“I think such-and-such....”

But as we have discussed, we live in complex settings, where there are actually few certainties. The more complex problems become, the less that simple cause-and-effect relationships hold true. We learn instead to expect the unexpected.

And the problem with advocacy in conversation is that, a bit like using the word ‘you’ it tends to divide and raise hackles.

If you tell me that I am getting it wrong because I have ignored the facts, it is unhelpful on two counts:

1. I feel accused because you are talking about me, but with incomplete understanding about what is going on for me.
2. Maybe I think I have not ignored the facts, and therefore we are immediately in disagreement.

Again, the alternative is to enquire:

“I am concerned that we haven’t considered all the facts – what do you think?”

To enquire is not simply to ask questions. It is an attitude, a way of being. But asking questions is a very good start. A question may lead to an answer. Or it may lead to another question. Maybe we will start to bring to the surface a number of things that were previously unconscious, that we were previously unaware of.

This substitution of I-statements for ‘you-statements’ is a straightforward but powerful technique that you can adopt and encourage. Once introduced to the working vocabulary of a group, they will often encourage each other to recast statements this way.

### **3.5 ANXIETY**

Of course, as well as our lack of self-awareness, the reality of power relations and our tendency to advocate, there is a fourth thing that can get in the way of speaking up.

- Perhaps I am anxious about the effect what I say will have on you. Will you shout at me?
- Perhaps I am nervous that my intervention will slow the process down? Is it OK to make waves?

Carl Rogers' idea of congruence again provides a clue to how to handle this. Perhaps I just speak about the anxiety:

"I'm concerned that what I say next will annoy people."

"I'm concerned about slowing down the process."

While also reflecting the complexity and risk of the situation:

"And I am also concerned about what will happen to our decision if I don't say this..."

Such a phrase will often preface your attempt to mitigate some of the organisational risk, and mitigating that risk entitles you to speak up – it is more duty than disloyalty.

## 4. THE PROJECT LEAD

---

So what does this all mean for the project lead – the project sponsor, manager or facilitator? The use of enquiry is particularly beneficial when used by the project lead:

- Enquiry is not simply about asking questions. It is a way of being. It is the opposite of advocacy – where we hold a position, and try to convince others to adopt it.
- Enquiry means that we do not hold a position, and we are not trying to convince. Instead we are open, we wonder, and we are curious.

It takes high self-esteem to let go of holding a position. Primarily because it means we have to accept the uncertainty that comes with complexity. We would like to make the world safe and sane. Enquiry means we have to live with that uncertainty, with that doubt. People may lack enough self-esteem.

Many people do not recognise that emotions are valid in business and within decision-making processes. Some people are habitually more used to talking about 'you' or 'they' than describing how they themselves feel. Some people are unaware of how power relations operate and how easily they will conform.

So the important role for the project lead is create a context where it is easier for this kind of self-aware conversation to take place. That means learning about all the things that can get in the way. And being the best model for the kinds of behaviours we have covered above – because people learn and take their lead from watching others.

It also means creating a context when conflict of ideas and differences of opinion is not only tolerated, but is welcomed. Because it is only through tolerating and working with difference that better understanding develops and therefore better solutions emerge.

And perhaps above all, remembering these words written in 1918 by Mary Parker Follet:

“It is not opposition but indifference that separates men.” (Follett, 1918)

## 5. ARTICLE SUMMARY

### TAKE-AWAY POINTS



- Try to remember the value you add simply by speaking up. It is hard work, but you can change the course of events by simply saying something that would not otherwise have been said.
- Learn to use I-statements to make it easier to communicate what is going on for you. This is what psychologists mean when they say strange things like 'own your feelings'.
- Go slowly – and avoid the pressure of the 'flock' or the 'herd'.
- Work on becoming more self-aware, and more aware of what is going around you in the groups and teams you are in. The world is complex, and cannot be fully understood. Perhaps it is better to accept that, rather than to fight it?
- If you are the project sponsor, manager or facilitator, your role is to ensure the quality of the dialogue is very high. The best way to do that is to model this yourself.

## 6. REFERENCES

---

Ackoff, R. (1999) *Re-Creating the Corporation: A Design of Organizations for the 21st Century*. OUP USA: New York.

Asch, S. (2013) *The Asch Experiment*. YouTube, Google. Available from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA-gbpt7Ts8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA-gbpt7Ts8) [19 Feb 2015].

Beck, R. (2014) *Conformity – Elevator Candid Camera*. Vimeo, InterActiveCorp. Available from <https://vimeo.com/61349466> [19 Feb 2015].

Berne, E. (2010) *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*. Penguin: New York.

Bolton, R. (1986) *People Skills: How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others and Resolve Conflicts*. Simon & Schuster: New York.

Follett, M. (1918) *The New State – Group Organization, the Solution for Popular Government*. Longman, Green and Co: New York.

Griffin, D., Shaw, P. and Stacey, R. (1998) Speaking of Complexity in Management Theory and Practice. *Organization*, August 1998 vol. 5 no. 3. 315-339.

Kirschenbaum, H. (1996) *The Carl Rogers Reader*. Houghton Mifflin: Boston.

Kruger, J. and Dunning, D. (1999) Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 77(6), Dec 1999. 1121-1134.

McCormick, I., Walkey, F. and Green, D. (1986) Comparative Perceptions of Driver Ability: A confirmation and expansion. *Accident Analysis & Prevention*, Volume 18, Issue 3, June 1986. 205-208.

McLain Smith, D. (2008) *Divide or Conquer: How Great Teams Turn Conflict Into Strength*. Portfolio: New York.

Mind Tools Ltd. (2015) *The Ladder of Inference: Avoiding 'Jumping to Conclusions'*. [www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC\\_91.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_91.htm) (27 Feb 2015).

Tate, M. (2015) *Off-The-Shelf IT Solutions: A practitioner's guide to selection and procurement*. BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT: Swindon.

## 7. FURTHER READING

---

### 7.1 USEFUL WEBSITES

Supporting book Extras page with downloadable articles, templates and checklists:  
<http://shop.bcs.org/offtheshelfextras.asp>.

Version: **3.9** | Revised: 13-Mar-2015 | Word count: 4,180

© 2015 Martin Tate | Decision Evaluation Ltd | [martin.tate@decisionevaluation.co.uk](mailto:martin.tate@decisionevaluation.co.uk)