



Do You Suffer From Making Stuff Up Disorder?

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The Grave Temptation to Make Stuff Up

My client Bill writes for a major financial company. When we were talking about his career change, he said wistfully: "My dream job is to write for the Economist."

"Oh?" I responded. "How do you know? Do you know someone who works there?"

He didn't.

Did he know whether it was considered a great place to work? What kind of hours the company expected from employees? The opportunity to advance? The culture? Did he know what kind of turnover there was, or the reputation of the management or executive team?

He didn't know any of that.

"So," I said, "how the heck do you know what it is like to work there?"

He responded, "Well I really don't. They just write such great content. They cover the world and they're so focused on important news and trends. I am just sure it would a wonderful place to work."

He read the Economist and fixated on working there as his dream job. In short, he was Making Stuff Up. (Stuff could also be replaced by a four-letter Germanic-Old English word I use sometimes.)

Making Stuff Up, (MSU) is what most of us do when we don't have actual information. When there are holes or gaps in what we know, we just fill them in with things that seem to make sense based on our hopes or fears. Often, the ideas we stuff the gaps with have absolutely nothing to do with the reality of the situation.

In Judith Glaser's book, *Conversational Intelligence: How Great Leaders Build Trust & Get Extraordinary Results*, she discusses that the stories we make up have a significant impact on our careers. MSU can cause you to go after jobs that would make you

miserable, because you didn't really research the job itself. It can keep you from pursuing a great job, because you're afraid you're unqualified. It can cause you to give up on a job you're being considered for because you assume they weren't interested or didn't like you. And it can cause other people to lose confidence in you, because you present as irrefutable fact information that has no basis. In short, it means you make decisions based on the ghosts in your head, which is generally a bad idea.

We all make stuff up sometimes, when the information's not there. It's perfectly human. But when it comes to your career, don't do it.

The Pain We Cause Ourselves: Awfulizing

Bill made stuff up about a dream job. But many people make stuff up that awfulizes a situation. They don't know the facts so they cook up a worst-case scenario, talk themselves into it, and proceed to freak out about the story they just made up.

Rhoda, a former CEO had applied for a job as Chief Operating Officer of a national association. She was excited about the job and felt like the feeling was mutual. But then she didn't hear back from anyone. So she got on the association's website to see if she could pick up any clues about what might have happened. There, she saw the smiling face of their senior vice president of operations. In seconds, Rhoda had a story going. They had changed their minds! They had hired someone else already! They just hadn't bothered to tell her about it. She contacted me in a panic, a whole scene playing out in her head like a movie.

"So," I asked her, "in absence of information, you decided to play detective?"

I recommended she call her contact at the company and ask about it. When she did, she learned that the Sr. VP of Operations was taking a leave of absence to care for a family member and they decided to upgrade the position to COO. She never would have come up with that explanation on her own.

Another client, Marcos, was in a protracted negotiation with a prospective employer. They went back and forth and it seemed like every time Marcos had a question or an

issue about the position it took a long time to get resolution. They wanted him. I could tell. But every time he had to wait for a response, his anxiety increased. At one point, he simply didn't hear from anyone for several weeks. He called me in a panic: "I've lost the job!"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I haven't heard from them for weeks, they finally gave up, I lost the job!"

"You don't know that," I said. "All you know is that you don't know what's happening. Why don't you call the recruiter?" He did. No answer. I still encouraged him not to *awfulize* what was happening but acknowledge that he just didn't know. As it turned out, the recruiter's mother had gotten very ill and he'd dropped everything and gone to take care of her. By the way, he did get the job.

When my client, Susan, started a new job with a major drug company she knocked the ball out of the park. They loved her. But when the division Susan worked for, which had around 200 people, announced a 30% headcount reduction, she went into panic mode. She kept thinking: "Last in; first out..." Fortunately, she only had to wait one day to learn from her boss that, not only would she still have her job, but she was to lead a highly prized project. She ignored every sign that she was highly valued, even though there were a lot of signs. She just made stuff up in her head when she heard about the layoffs, which caused an enormous amount of stress.

If I do this, they will do that. If I raise the price, they'll stop hiring me; if I want to change my hours, they'll fire me; if I refuse to take on extra hours, they'll give all the good projects to someone else...

The Dire Predictions That Don't Come True

My client Sally works from home. Whenever she has meetings with her boss, she brings a list of activities she's been doing and he always criticizes them in a harsh, abusive way. It's gone on like this for years. She brings the list; he tears her down. The rest of their relationship is fine. One day I suggested she try not bringing the list. After all, according to her, he'd never asked for a list. She only brought it because she'd done so with other bosses. Well, she told me, that was just crazy. He'd really go after her then. So I asked her: "How do you know?"

She didn't. She was Making Stuff Up.

Finally she screwed up her courage and went to the meeting without the list. She was kind of a basket case during the days before the meeting. But when she got there, without the list, he said nothing. He just took notes on her activities and didn't give her grief about it.

Sally's situation is another form of MSU I hear all the time.

"If I do this, they will do that. If I raise the price, they'll stop hiring me; if I want to change my hours, they'll fire me; if I refuse to take on extra hours, they'll give all the good projects to someone else."

But when I ask: "How do you know? On what information, what data, are you basing this assumption?" Usually it's just the ghosts in our heads. We don't know at all.

It makes us feel like we have control if we can "decide" the outcome, even if it's totally made up.

Often our MSU thoughts seem so real, or we've rehearsed them so often that we don't even remember that we never stopped to ask

"Where did I get this idea?"

We just get really anxious about something and it makes us feel like we have control if we can "decide" the outcome, even if it's totally made up. In fact, the only thing you can control is your response to the fact that you DON'T KNOW. So either find a way to get information or find a way to learn to live with uncertainty. There's a lot of that in life. Learning to live with it is a good idea.

Let History Guide You

One thing that's really important with MSU is to make a mental bookmark of all the times you've been panicked about something and it turned out you were wrong. Think back to all the times you've "awfulized" something. Someone didn't call within a given window (that you made up) and you assumed something terrible had happened or was about to happen. You may have freaked out, chewed your nails, yelled at your family,

drank a bunch of whiskey, applied for another job you really didn't want, or ate an entire cheesecake. Whatever. You could feel the tension rise inside you like a thermometer in a cartoon character.

And the truth turned out to be nothing like the story you made up.

It's important to go back and remember those moments and how silly you felt afterward. The best thing to do in those situations is realize that you don't know what's happening, make an effort to get answers, and breathe through the moment. Admitting you don't know is a lot less crazy-making than the intense fantasies you're likely to come up with. Try to stay in the moment and accept that the truth is You Don't Know. And that's okay.

Stop, Drop and Roll

Of course, it's hard to remember to breathe and stay in the moment when something big is on the line. That's why I suggest you remember Stop, Drop, and Roll. Do you remember when, as a kid, you were told to stop, drop, and roll should your clothes ever catch on fire? The idea was that your natural reaction to having fire on your body would be to panic and run. They came up with a saying that was easy to remember that told you exactly what to do. So, before panic could set in, you'd remember to stop, drop, and roll. Make sense?

Many of us have triggering events that set off panic. My client Mary has a boss who tends to be rude to her whenever she calls. One day, Mary was attending a conference, quite happily listening to a session, when she felt her cell phone vibrate. She looked down at the caller ID and it was her boss. This was usually a trigger for anxiety. She was going to get yelled at. Normally she would bolt out of the session and take the call, even though it was likely to be unpleasant.

Everyone has MSU. Even scientists and engineers who aren't supposed to ever make stuff up. It's a normal thing our brain does.

This time, she remembered Stop, Drop and Roll. She did not know why her boss was calling. She did not know she'd done anything that would get her yelled at. All she knew

was that she was in a session and her boss was calling. So this time she did not immediately answer; she let the call go to voicemail. She texted her boss back saying she was sitting in a session and could not take her call then asked whether there was anything she could help her with.

Her boss replied that she too was coming to the conference and just wanted Mary to know. That was it. That was all.

Mary executed Stop, Drop and Roll flawlessly. She controlled the narrative rather than letting her boss dictate her emotional state.

Managing Communication

When my client, Nancy, took the job she has now, the boss confided that she was not easy to work for. So Nancy avoids the boss and only talks to her when something goes wrong. In between times, she makes up stuff in her head like:

I am not doing a good job.

My boss does not like me.

They are setting me up to let me go.

Is any of this stuff true? I do not know...and neither does Nancy.

I help people find new careers, but I also can help them find more satisfaction from the jobs they already have. Nancy really likes her job, aside from the constant panic that she's not doing well. So Nancy and I decided she should schedule a weekly meeting with her boss to discuss the following week's schedule. Nancy needed to talk to her boss on her own terms. She needed to manage the communication to find out what her boss really thinks. What she learned was that her boss is moody and that most of the time her behavior toward Nancy has nothing to do with Nancy. Opening up that conversation, understanding where her boss was coming from solved a lot of Nancy's MSU.

Everybody has MSU. Even scientists and engineers who aren't supposed to ever make stuff up. It's a normal thing our brain does. The problem isn't that we make up a story,

the problem is that we believe it and react to it. Instead, we need to recognize that MSU is just our brain filling in the holes and that it might not be true at all. So Stop, Drop and Roll. Don't get upset about the story in your head, take a deep breath and get facts, or just admit you don't know.

One of the big issues for people in a career transition is learning to deal with the uncertainty. But, you can deal with uncertainty looking for what you really want, or gritting your teeth and putting up with a job you really don't. I think the first one's better.