



Stanford eCorner

Hot Causes, Cool Solutions

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Making rational arguments is not enough to change collective behavior, says Stanford Professor Bob Sutton. Here the co-author of *Scaling Up Excellence* identifies the power in connecting emotion and "hot causes" to tangible "cool solutions" to reduce an individual's focus on pure self-interest.



Transcript

This comes from Huggy Rao's research on social movements. So it turns out that even though we're at a place like Stanford where we are all smart people who make logical arguments. It turns out to change human behavior especially collective human behavior that just making a rational argument won't work and the basic recipe is, as Huggy would put it: first you get the emotions cranked up. You get the hot cause cranked up. And then you link it to a tangible set of solutions. So to give you a good example I already mentioned the IHI, the 100,000 Lives Campaign. When they kicked off that movement, they brought together at a large conference about 4,000 different folks from hospitals, from the insurance industry, from the American Medical Association and they had in two of the speeches they have: one, was from Sorrell King whose daughter Josie died from a series of preventable medical errors at Johns Hopkins Hospital and Sorrell said, please don't let this - what happened to my daughter happen at your hospital. So hot cause, cool solution and my favorite part. So and Huggy did this case. One of the other speakers was Sister Marry Jean Ryan, who ran a large Catholic hospital system in Florida.

And she basically said it's a moral imperative or as I would translate it, if you don't join the 100,000 Lives Campaign you're going to go to hell. So that's a real hot cause. But then there was the cool solution, are you going to adopt some of these six practices. And just real quickly, I don't want to spend a lot of time in this, but Huggy and I about what we started - this is about two or three years ago. We taught a class to try to get Stanford undergraduates to wear helmets. Let's do it quick. How many Stanford undergraduates we got here? Raise your hand. Keep your hand if you wear a Helmet? It didn't work very well, but anyways. So we are still trying though if you get in a serious accident and you've 85% more risk of injury, if you wear a helmet. So anyways so what happened was we sent out this group - our groups of students and we had them sort of basically deal with groups of undergrads to just try to get them to wear helmets.

In one of the groups they did what they call the watermelon offensive. This was with the men's soccer team and they tried to convince them to wear helmets, they made a rational argument this did not work at all. So what they did was, they started smashing broken watermelons everywhere. And they put little things on their handlebars. I have one in my office that were basically a picture of somebody next to a smashed watermelon with a crashed bike sort of lying there without a helmet on. And they kind of got them laughing and going and it's also you know sort of a light, but gruesome metaphor and then they got them to start wearing the helmets. So this was at least for about seven weeks. This was effective and as we can solve from the survey here, we're having no lasting impact at all. We can talk about when scaling sticks. The other thing is when it comes to creating a hot cause, people who are good at creating a hot cause are the masters of naming the problem or better or worse yet naming the enemy.

And you know Jobs this is a like a long quote from Steve Jobs, I don't think I'm going to read, but the basic sort of upshot of this is he comes back to Apple after being gone and somebody - one of the first things he hears at an all hands meeting is that

Michael Dell says you should shutdown the company and give it back - the money back to the shareholders, Jobs says fuck Michael Dell. Typical Jobsian sort of thing. This is from John Lilly, who has spoken in this and then everybody gets kind of worked up because they're getting emotional especially that sort of Apple pride you got sort of you know either do a great job or get out, but there is also a cool solution. He gives them a three-year vest for their stock rather than a one-year vest and John describes how effective this was. And throughout Jobs' career, he was a very complicated character and I'm not sure I would want to have worked with him. But he - one of his hallmarks was just getting pissed at people, I mean sort of in his dying days he called up Larry Page and screamed at him and threatened him, because Google was allegedly stealing stuff that by the way Apple had probably stolen from somebody else. But that was sort of his mode of operation, okay. So when you do this, though the key hallmarks are you arouse collective pride and aggression. When you look at work by sociologists and psychologists they say a lot of what happens in this process of sort of social movement, is people get the emotions cranked up and they stop thinking about their self-interest and they start thinking more about the collective interest.