

EXPLAIN LESS, PREDICT MORE

(Slide EXPLAIN LESS?)

JOHN

Will we ever be able to explain less, and predict more? Let's find out.

(Pause.)

Hello. I'm John Bandler. And I'm 72.

(Pause.)

I wasn't always 72 . . . I was once 27, and a postdoc fellow at the University of Manitoba.

(Pause. Slide 1 of Bandler in Newport Beach.)

Yes, in Winnipeg—in straight-laced Winnipeg—fresh out of Swinging Sixties England, heavily inclined towards bell-bottom pants and pink shirts from London's Carnaby Street, a full beard masking my face. And I find myself canvassing, door-to-door, for a socialist party—I'll let you guess which one. “Seek, and ye shall find.” “Knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” So I stand at a door. I knock. A man opens. I thrust a flyer at him. And I plunge straight into my opening line, “Can I interest you in...?”

(Pause.)

The man lets me finish my opener, and, oh dear, his face is reddening. Is he about to match my political flyer with his fist?

(Pause. Slide 2 of Bandler in Newport Beach. “You couldn't interest me in anything.”)

“You couldn't interest me in anything!” he declares, and slams the door in my bearded face.

(Pause.)

I was prepared. I had my party's policies down pat. But that red-faced man in the doorway was having none of me. It was his loss, I decided, not mine.

(Pause.)

Of course, I hadn't the foggiest idea whom I might encounter. My call, strictly random, outcome unknown. Well, not quite. In 1960's Winnipeg, a bearded guy was about as rare as a dodo. Long hair and a beard marked you as left-wing and degenerate. But substance triumphs over appearance, right?

(Pause. Slide of Bandler at Imperial College with typewriter.)

Three years earlier, back in 1965, in England, I'm a graduate student at Imperial College. My field: microwave engineering. But in the sage words of my bearded fellow student Al Wexler—who later invited me to join him in Winnipeg as a postdoc—I'm just a greenhorn. But a greenhorn who was sharpening his expertise.

(Pause. Slide of Bandler at desk with manuscript in hand.)

So, several years later, here I am, a professor at McMaster University. And I'm seriously into computer-aided engineering design, mathematical optimization techniques, state-of-the-art stuff. And, during the years 1974 and 1975, I receive these three manuscripts for confidential review, all from the Technical University of Denmark, papers written by mathematician Kaj Madsen and his coworkers.

(Pause. Slide of Kaj Madsen and Hans SJ.)

I study the papers. Naturally they get the treatment they deserve: I elaborate on as many shortcomings as I can find. Okay. I'll admit it. These guys are my most serious competition. Still, the editors rightly ask them for changes. Major changes.

(Pause.)

Does Madsen's team meet the challenges? Absolutely. And then, not only do the editors accept their reworked manuscripts, Madsen's optimization algorithms are destined to become classics.

(Pause. Slide of Was I Prepared? Aware? Creative? Predictive?)

Was I prepared? Was I aware, creative, predictive, or even empathetic towards my rivals? With respect to recognizing any possible long-term opportunities, my actions seem seat-of-my-bellbottom-pants at best.

(Pause. Slide of Hurricane Katrina Threatens New Orleans.)

Talking about seat-of-the-pants, millions must have been watching TV during the so-called "voluntary" evacuation of New Orleans in preparation for Hurricane Katrina. My wife and I were. I remember seeing cars and SUVs, thinking, good thing they all have cars in New Orleans. I don't recall any buses heading out of town. From the mayor of New Orleans to President Bush, from CNN to the Pentagon, everyone else must also have thought it a good thing that people in New Orleans had access to cars.

(Pause. Slide of Busses: Not Everyone in New Orleans Owns a Car.)

So why, days later, was reporter Geraldo Rivera of Fox News standing outside the crowded New Orleans Superdome, mike in hand, pleading for someone, anyone, to do something, for the poor, for the sick, for the elderly? Well, those busses had stayed neatly parked in their parking lots.

(Pause.)

So much for preparation, for the poor, for the sick, for the elderly. An opportunity missed, a national lapse in predictive thinking. Creativity is surely dead.

(Pause. Slide of Obama's "Data Jam /Think Tank.")

But wait. I recently stumbled across a White House web page entitled: "Innovating to Improve Disaster Response and Recovery." Barack Obama's "Data Jam/Think Tank."

(Pause. Slide of Improving Disaster Response.)

Begin quote. "Last week [that's August 2013], the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) jointly challenged a group of over 80 top innovators from around the country to come up with ways to improve disaster response and recovery efforts." End quote.

(Pause.)

Great. Creative preparation. Prediction at work, in the highest of all circles.

(Pause. Slide of Haiyan Threatens The Philippines.)

Let's see. You are the President. And you've picked dozens of the most brilliant thinkers in the United States to brainstorm disaster response plans. And now, in just weeks, on November 7, 2013, opportunity knocks, tangible, screaming for your attention. The biggest storm ever to hit land is just 24 hours away from the Philippines. It's too late to get everyone out. But not too late to have your first responders' boots on the ground the moment the storm is gone.

(Pause. Slide 1 of Will You Or Won't You?)

You press a button, you say go, and your team is airborne. So, will you or won't you?

(Pause. Slide 2 of Will You Or Won't You?)

Too bad. It seems you won't.

(Pause.)

The Philippines: formerly under half a century of US domination. Here's one of Obama's most creative opportunities and, whatever the outcome, he's a hero. Obama's 80 top US innovators—his Innovation Fellows—have surely prepared for this. He's prepared for it. He can order his responders into the air on November 7. Yet, days later, reporters—the early arrivers—ask what's keeping those first responders?

(Pause. Slide 1 of Is This Obama Online Enrolling In Healthcare Insurance?)

But here's another opportunity, one with Obama's own name on it: Obamacare. Imagine him before the roll-out of his Healthcare.gov website personally checking out the site over a cup of coffee.

(Pause. Slide 2 of Is This Obama Online Enrolling In Healthcare Insurance?)

Of course, he doesn't need to. He already has an insurance plan he likes. And, after all, someone else stands behind the Obamacare website, someone else to blame: like Canada's own software giant CGI that was paid hundreds of millions of dollars.

(Pause. Slide 1 of "We Screwed It Up.")

It's not until 12 weeks after the official rollout of Obamacare—Obama's signature achievement—that President Obama admitted “. . . since I'm in charge, obviously, we screwed it up. . .”

(Pause. Slide 2 of "We Screwed It Up.")

Note: “I'm in charge” but “obviously, we screwed it up.” I'm sorry, Mister President. This is not an apology.

(Pause. Slide of Get Into Their Shoes.)

Put yourself into the shoes of the gatekeepers or facilitators of your opportunity. You want to succeed? Right? What's in it for them: your client, your partner, your citizen? How do “they” see you?

(Pause. Slide of Think Hollywood, Man.)

Flash back. It's October 1, 2013. It's roll-out day. You're President Obama, you've ordered a fail-safe system that simulates masses of people logging onto your healthcare website, all at the same time, and it works, and your Secret Service is swarming all over a low-income end of Washington, DC, while you personally, hands-on, show an uninsured man how to use Healthcare.gov to enrol in medical insurance for the first time. Not your driver. Not your aide. You! Pure Hollywood.

(Pause.)

And Hollywood loves underdogs. A leader, to be liked, needs to be seen to empathize with the underdog. Headline: Obama cares.

(Pause. Slide 1 of Google's "Vision.")

Eric Schmidt, the CEO of Google, said in 2012, “Innovation never comes from the established institutions. It's always a graduate student, or a crazy person, or somebody with a great vision.”

(Pause. Slide 2 of Google’s “Vision.”)

So don’t expect a government, or even Google—now itself an established institution—to come up with innovations.

(Pause.)

Hindsight vision, of course, has a unique and wonderful property. You can use it to explain everything.

(Pause. Slide of Let’s Explain Everything.)

Explain everything. According to psychologist H.J. Eysenck, “If we make up an ad hoc hypothesis for every new case . . . then we shall never go beyond the present position where we can explain everything and predict nothing.”

(Pause.)

Perhaps we should wait for futurist Ray Kurzweil’s promised singularity, at that not so distant date when “humans transcend biology.” Perhaps your wearable cognitive assistant will continuously monitor your every opportunity, whispering in your ear, “time to raise the ante” or “hey, hold back, you’re coming across too strong.” But then the gatekeeper of your prospective opportunity also has a wearable cognitive assistant. Cognitive assistants will battle it out to secure their hosts’ respective opportunities. Let those damned cognitive assistants screw things up.

(Pause.)

It’s hard to prepare, easy to criticize. Well, in the 1990’s, when my small software start-up Optimization Systems Associates puts me on the road—me, its president and marketer-in-chief—guess what I do first?

(Pause. Slide of Are We Bug-Free?)

Is our new version ready to show off, bug-free? Yes, my team swears, totally, absolutely, guaranteed. Okay. I simulate arriving at a client’s facility, running our software, hitting a few keys on the keyboard. And our “bug-free software” fails. My team scrambles, fixes it, and we go through this process all over again. My reputation is at stake. Our client’s time is at stake. Our sales opportunity is at stake.

(Pause.)

So, we prepared. We devised a system that automatically ran every test problem we’d ever solved to ensure that our new results always exactly matched corresponding ones from earlier software versions. All this, before demonstrating updates, or me going on the road.

(Pause. Slide 2 of Bandler in Newport Beach.)

Remember that door in my face? Well, at least three things caught me unprepared: my prospect’s lack of receptiveness (his confirmation bias), my appearance (his first impression of me), and my in-your-face delivery (my subtext). The “substance” of my preparation was totally irrelevant, my opportunity for an instant hit nonexistent. I was out of luck.

(Pause.)

And his confirmation bias could have shown itself as a fist in my face.

(Pause.)

What about Kaj Madsen? I could have lavished false praise on his manuscripts, poisoned his work with false praise.

(Pause. Slide of HSJ Quote Opportunity Of A Lifetime.)

At his retirement bash in 2010, his collaborator Hans said, “This story is a manifestation of one of the most fascinating features of science and research, namely the productive force of critique. Not only had reviewer A challenged us tremendously and improved our work. As it turned out, he and Kaj became life long research partners . . .”

(Pause. Slide of Kaj Madsen.)

And pink shirts don’t matter to Kaj Madsen. Nor do beards. He has one himself.

(Pause.)

You are the protagonist. And every event—short of death—is an opportunity. Yet, as things unfold, you have little control over outcomes, even if you think you do. Apparent opportunities may be delusions, or you may be pleasantly surprised. But take note: life-altering decisions about your “opportunities” are likely rationalized—or irrationalized—behind your back. Like Kaj Madsen’s decision to become and to remain my friend and collaborator.

(Pause. Slide of Cherish Your Setbacks.)

Accidents, “bungled” opportunities and “missed” opportunities: they are still opportunities. Cherish them. They’re part of your to-do-list for your next round of preparation.

(Pause.)

Although necessary for concert pianists, Olympic athletes, and the like, creativity and creative preparation aren’t always about years of study and gruelling practice. Empathy helps. A simple “Hello, John” can solve many standoffs, or earn you bankable brownie points, or a quick email that properly uses a spell-checker. Genuine interest in and respect for the gatekeeper or facilitator of your opportunity is always a bonus. The logo of this conference is apropos. Like it or not, looks and impressions are paramount.

(Pause.)

Opportunities catch you by surprise. And fear itself can determine the outcome: fear of failure, even fear of success. Hostile competition, often disguised as helpful advice, even friendship, is poison. Or you hit a wall; experts ridicule you; it seems absolutely essential to give up. These are either the milestones of your road to defeat or the gates of your golden opportunity. Just hang in.

(Pause.)

We’ve had our world wars, cold wars, star wars, wars on drugs, and the ongoing war on terror. All roads now lead to machine intelligence surpassing that of humans, and soon. The question is, which country, which culture, which political system, will the first super-human cognitive assistant—or perhaps should I say, cognitive master—adopt. Are you prepared for this game-changing opportunity?

(Pause. Slide PREDICT MORE)

If so, perhaps then, we can explain less, and predict more.

(Pause.)

Thank you.