

From Here to Obliquity



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Summary

This paper examines the principle of *obliquity* and its application to improve the effectiveness of sustainability communications in effecting behaviour change. The work of others is reviewed along with examples of the author and others' experiences applied in small and large organisations. It concludes with questions which should be asked to harness an oblique approach and highlights issues requiring research.

1. Introduction

This paper is written by a practitioner working behaviour change in large organisations to reduce energy consumption. It is not an academic treatise reporting quantitative measurement of research. The purpose is to highlight the principle of obliquity which has been observed for the last 150 years but has not yet been harnessed widely as a tool in sustainability communications. The paper illustrates the principle from practical examples including the research of others. It then poses 'obliquity questions' which can be used to determine more effective methods for communication with targeted audiences to effect lasting behaviour change.

2. What is Obliquity?

There are at least three common uses of the word *obliquity*: one is by scientists in defining the tilt of the earth's axis to the horizontal. Gynaecologists use it in relation to the way a baby presents its head in childbirth. The third use is sometimes called the Principle of Indirection or *obliquity* which is the subject of this paper. The economist, John Kay, describes the word in the sub-title of his book *Obliquity*¹ as "Why our goals are best achieved *indirectly*". This is counter-intuitive and paradoxical.

However, the concept has been known and articulated for over 150 years:

John Stuart Mill put it this way:

*Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness... aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way.*²

George Merck the founder of the successful pharmaceutical company reminded his staff:

*We try never to forget that medicine is for the people. It is not for the profits. The profits follow, and if we have remembered that, they have never failed to appear.*¹

Richard Branson of Virgin:

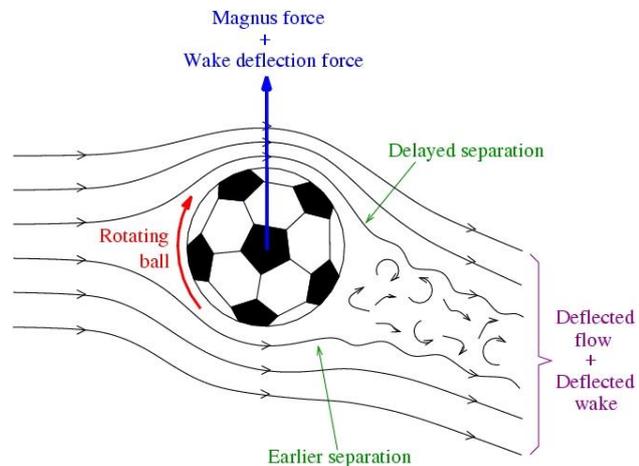
Clients do not come first. Employees come first. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of your clients.



CS Lewis described it:

You will never make a good impression on other people until you stop thinking what sort of impression you are making. Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try and tell the truth, you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever noticing it.³

David Beckham achieved his goals indirectly by bending the ball around the wall of defenders and bending it over the goal keeper into the back of the net. A direct approach would have resulted in the ball hitting a defender instead of the goal. This may appear to be a trivial example but illustrates the principle.



3. Obliquity and Sustainability

Dr David Pencheon was Head of the Sustainable Development Unit in the UK's National Health Service (NHS), Europe's largest employer. In a blog⁴ titled *Sustainability by Stealth – 8 steps to heaven*, he includes *obliquity* as one of his eight steps. He acknowledges a paper *Sustainability by Stealth – 4 ways to make sustainability more attractive*⁵ by Dror Ezion, Assistant Professor at McGill University. So the principle of obliquity has been introduced into sustainability communications, but, because the principle is pervasive, it is no surprise to discover examples exist but are not named as such.

4. Defining Reality

Max du Pré in his book *Leadership is an Art*⁶ said that "The first responsibility of a leader is to define **reality**.." To lead effectively a leader must have a vision but also fully appreciate the starting point (reality) otherwise any strategy will be flawed. Defining reality means understanding who the target audiences are, where they are, what they think and their motivations. Often sustainability communication lacks effectiveness because the current reality is inadequately defined or understood. Even if we have correctly defined reality and have identified the desired environmental behaviour we still need an appropriate strategy. This is where obliquity helps.

5. Travelling Indirectly

A strategy helps us to get from where we are now to where we want to be. So if A is the current position (reality) and a desired environmental behaviour is identified at B, then the direct approach is to go from A to B. Traditionally, an environmental message is used to elicit the desired environmental behaviour. An example would be 'save CO₂ by switching off lights'. See Figure 1.

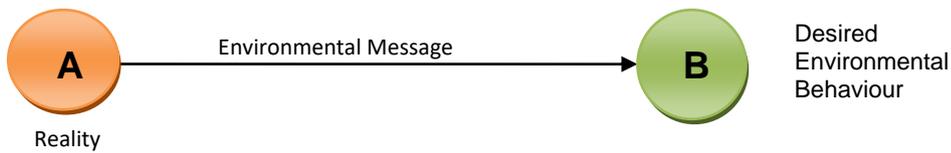


Figure 1 *The Direct Approach*

Obliquity is an indirect approach with an alternative, non environmental message to arrive at B faster and more effectively. See Figure 2.

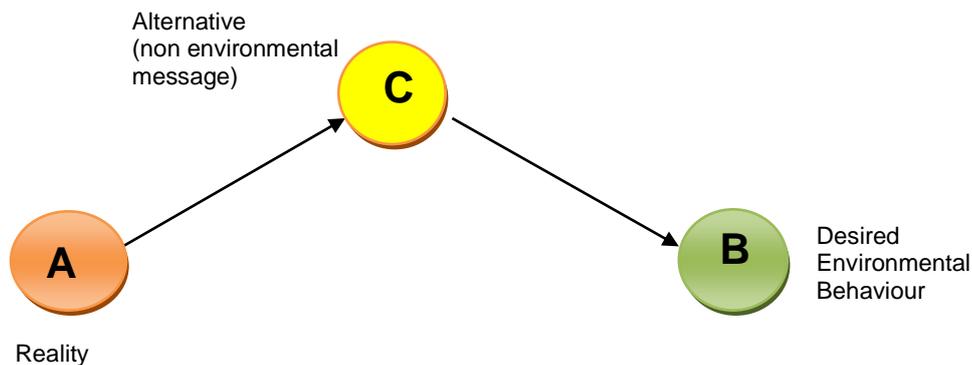


Figure 2 *The Oblique Approach*

The angle ACB is an oblique angle and suggests the term *obliquity*. The paradox is that for some people a non environmental message has a larger impact than an environmental one to elicit improved environmental behaviour. This is often because the co-benefits are more attractive and valued than the perceived environment benefits.

An example is the use of 'social norming' in getting hotel guests to re-use their towels. So instead of using the direct approach of "Help reduce energy and water by re-using your towels", a non environmental message could be "Did you know that 85% of guests re-use their towels?" The environment is not mentioned. But Caldini⁷ and his researchers found a similar social norming message to be more effective.

6. Obliquity & Sustainability in Practice

So how does this look in the real world? Here are seven practical examples:

Example No. 1 Catering in an Airport Hotel

I was asked by the Department of the Environment to write up a case study⁸ on energy savings in the catering department of an airport hotel. The Head Chef had conducted awareness training which resulted in a gas reduction of 40%. At the end of the interview the chef said “Of course, the management are pleased as it has saved money, but I am pleased for *other reasons*”. So I explored the other reasons to discover that the head chef thought energy management was an excellent idea as it made his life easier by:

- providing a cooler working environment for his staff
- less frayed tempers meaning better team work and lower staff turnover
- less recruitment and training costs
- quality of the food improved



Figure 3 Head Chef with his new combi-oven

As the kitchen was sub-metered, the chef was able to prove his staff had saved more energy than colleagues elsewhere in the hotel and as a result, his request for more efficient combi-ovens was put to the top of the investment priority list. Once installed, these ovens saved over 50% compared to the old ones. See Figure 4. It did not matter that the head chef had little interest in saving money or reducing environmental impact. He just wanted an easier life which his efforts at energy management delivered.

This is an example of **retrospective obliquity**, or stumbling across obliquity by accident. However, it can be used instructively. Whenever I train catering staff in energy efficiency I begin by telling delegates that I am here to *make their lives easier*. I then relate the story of the head chef's experience. It is replicable and has resonance in every catering department in the UK and beyond. This example also illustrates the use of storytelling as an important tool in sustainability communications.

Example No. 2 US Army in Iraq and Afghanistan

In 1944 it took 1 US gallon of fuel to keep a soldier on the front-line. By 2014 it was 22 US gallons. In Iraq and Afghanistan, 35,400 troops were involved in moving fuel in dangerous environments to supply 300,000 troops. This took 1,000 trucks a day. One out of eight army casualties were taken as a result of protecting fuel convoys.

“Saving energy saves lives” says Army General Martin E. Dempsey. “In Afghanistan, fewer supply convoys will directly relate to fewer casualties.”⁹



Figure 4 *Destroyed Fuel Convoy*

Example No. 3 London Hospital Staff Saving Energy

In 2012 Barts Health NHS Trust ran a pilot on energy awareness campaign covering a part of their estate¹⁰. The communications plan focused on patient care rather than saving energy to reduce costs or reduce environmental impact. Staff were asked to:

- **Turn off** equipment not in use, reducing excessive noise and heat generation
- **Lights off** to help promote sleep and reduce light pollution
- **Close doors** to improve patient safety and privacy, reduce noise, draughts and help regulate room temperatures

While staff were encouraged to take energy saving actions the TLC (Tender Loving Care) also mean TLC (Turn off, Lights off, Close doors). the patient surveys in the TLC wards could be compared with those in non-TLC wards in the same hospital demonstrating the effectiveness of the pilot.

The initiative resulted in:

- 40% increase in lights switched off
- 18% fewer open doors
- 25% fewer privacy disruptions than in non-TLC wards
- 33% fewer incidents of sleep disruption for patients in TLC wards

Savings of £105,000 per annum were estimated because there was not the sub-metering in place to directly measure savings. Despite this weakness, the patient surveys were quantitative and provide useful evidence of enhanced patient experience. So the energy

saving message was directly related to the staff's main goal of improving healthcare for patients and providing a better patient experience¹¹.

Example No. 4 The World's First Zero Carbon Fire Station

In 2008 Neil McCabe, in a fire-station in Kilbarrack (north Dublin), embarked on a vision to make his station the first carbon neutral fire-station in the world.¹² This he has achieved by taking 300 individual actions/projects. Many involved simple good housekeeping measures by staff engagement. An investment of €160,000 is saving €48,000 per year yielding a simple payback of 3.3 years. Energy consumption has been reduced by 95% and water consumption by 90% using a rainwater harvesting system. Other investments have included solar thermal heating, condensing boilers, window upgrade to Passivhaus standard, LED lighting, improved insulation, new radiators, improved controls and the total involvement of his colleagues.

It started as a staff initiative to increase staff morale, following a near 50% loss of staff to a new fire station. Neil's first idea was to improve the working environment by reducing the amount of waste created in the station. It started small with a box for recycling batteries. This was successful and Neil built on this to encourage staff to submit their own ideas for energy and waste saving and also becoming more active in the community.

The fire station grounds have been converted into a community garden where retired fireman and local community get together to grow some of their own food. The retirees also give tours of the fire station to families and schools. There is a commemorative garden for deceased fireman, where all the trees planted are native species. The fire station site has its own biodiversity plan which includes bee-hives.



Figure 5 Neil McCabe showing visitors the station's community garden

Neil built his strategy on The Green Plan:

- See your staff as an asset
- Behaviour change has no up-front cost, yet has the greatest potential for saving energy and money
- The staff themselves are the low hanging fruit so get them engaged
- Share responsibility, everyone has a role
- Sub-meter and prove the savings of each initiative
- Get agreement that all savings are ring-fenced and used for re-investment in the station

Neil attributes the success of the Green Plan to taking an oblique approach to improve working conditions for staff and building community. The fact it also saved money, meant he was able to demonstrate savings to management and get further investment. The initiative quickly built its own momentum - everyone wanted to be involved – many not necessarily for environmental reasons.

What do the fire-fighters think? They are “proud of the station’s achievements, it has a nice atmosphere and is a great place to work.”

Example No. 5 Local Authority Pool Cars

A Scottish Local Authority began to introduce electric cars into their fleet of existing diesel vehicles. The management assumed that staff would not preferentially select the new electric vehicle and were considering how to encourage their use. To their surprise, they discovered that staff were already selecting electric in preference to diesel. When asked why, staff said the electric cars were more comfortable and had better acceleration. Without realising it, the management had made the sustainable choice easier. This is another example of retrospective obliquity.



Figure 6 A Local Authority Electric Pool Car

But how could the obliquity opportunity have been foreseen or designed in? After the electric cars had been purchased, the obliquity question could have been: “How is the electric option a better experience for the user?” Going back a step further in the procurement decision, the obliquity question could have been: “What specifications of the proposed vehicle will make it the vehicle of choice for the user?” Both questions focus on the user experience not just on the environmental benefits. Both questions also require a comparison of the alternative choice of the existing diesel. That brings us back to defining reality.

Example 6 Mezzanine Lights in a Distribution Centre

In a large Distribution Centre there were three mezzanine floors with twin fluorescent tubes which ran 24/7 even though the site operated with very few staff on the night shift for eight hours per day. Presence detection had not been fitted to the lights because the Security Manager wanted the lights on to detect, via CCTV, anyone on the mezzanine floors who should not be there. However, it was pointed out that presence detection would cause the lights to come on and make it easier to see on CCTV. It would make the job easier for security staff monitoring CCTV both in real time and retrospectively. This is an example of

translating a perceived barrier into an opportunity. Not only were presence detectors fitted but the lamps were changed to LED.



Figure 7 Mezzanine lights and CCTV

Example 7 Health and Safety Improvements in Industry

In a UK manufacturing site, LED lamps with presence controls was fitted down one side of the factory. The motive for doing so was to improve the lighting levels and reducing electricity use. This was achieved: the lux level at ground level doubled and the electricity consumption was halved. But two co-benefits were that the number of health and safety incidents decreased in the areas where the LEDs were fitted. The workers also commented on the improved working conditions. This is another example of retrospective obliquity where the co-benefits were then used to help promote LED lamps at other sites in the group.

7. Harnessing Obliquity in Sustainability

There are three fundamental questions which need answering:

- What is the starting point of the people? (A)
- What are the desired environmental behaviours? (B)
- What are likely oblique/indirect approaches to get from A to B? (C)

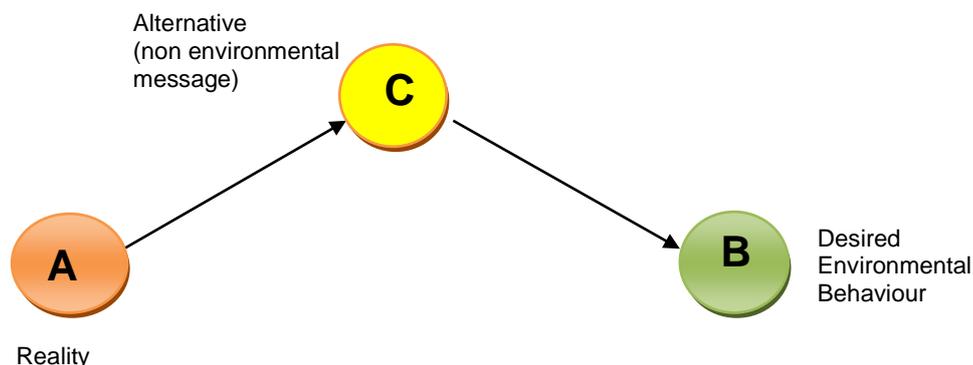


Figure 8 The Oblique Approach

The importance of identifying the starting point has already been stated. It is easy to make wrong assumptions sometimes based on a subjective approach. The best way to identify the starting point is to talk to people and listen. This can be done individually or in focus groups or using existing meetings. However, for larger organisations this will be time consuming.

One tool is to use a survey which quantitatively measures the awareness and motivation of each respondent¹³. An example of a recent survey is shown in Figure 9.

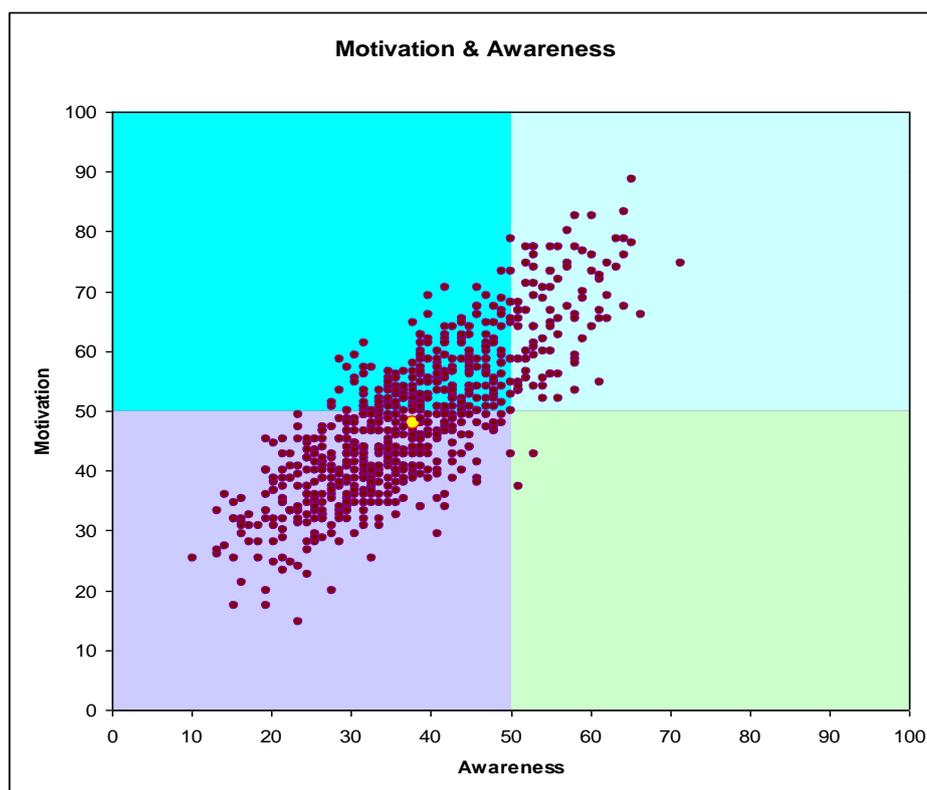


Figure 9 Awareness/motivation scores from a staff survey

Each dot represents an individual and the yellow dot shows the average of 550 respondents to this survey. The survey helps define a starting point (reality) and if the survey is repeated, the average can be seen to move. The aim is to get people to move towards the top right quadrant (high awareness/high motivation). Clearly some people are already there and these can be recruited as ambassadors or champions. The survey can also be used to identify potential savings before an initiative is launched.

Such surveys can help identify groups of staff by location, job-function or other variables, so different approaches can be used for different people. The survey can also identify opportunities and barriers which in turn can help identify the desired environmental behaviour (B). Key questions to ask are:

- What level of control do people have over energy/resource use?
- What are the current and desired behaviours related to energy/resource use?

Once the starting point (A) and the outcomes (B) are defined correctly, attention can be given to C – the oblique approach.

Some key obliquity questions to ask are:

- What is the vision/ethos of the organisation?
- Why do people choose to work in the organisation?
- What are people interested in/motivated about?
- What demotivates people?

- What aspects of their work do people find enjoyable/satisfying?
- Where are the links between the desired environmental behaviour and the areas which interest the target audience? (See Examples 1 to 7)
- How can improving environmental performance improve areas of interest/importance to the target audience.
- How can improving environmental performance make life easier for the target audience?

Answering these questions will provide insights into an oblique approach and some could be incorporated in the environmental survey described above.

8. Conclusion

There is scope for further research which provides comparisons of energy reduction data related to oblique and non-oblique approaches in employee engagement. Obliquity provides a 'win-win' approach as demonstrated in Examples 1 to 7 but, as yet, this potential has not been widely recognised or adopted by those promoting behaviour change.

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