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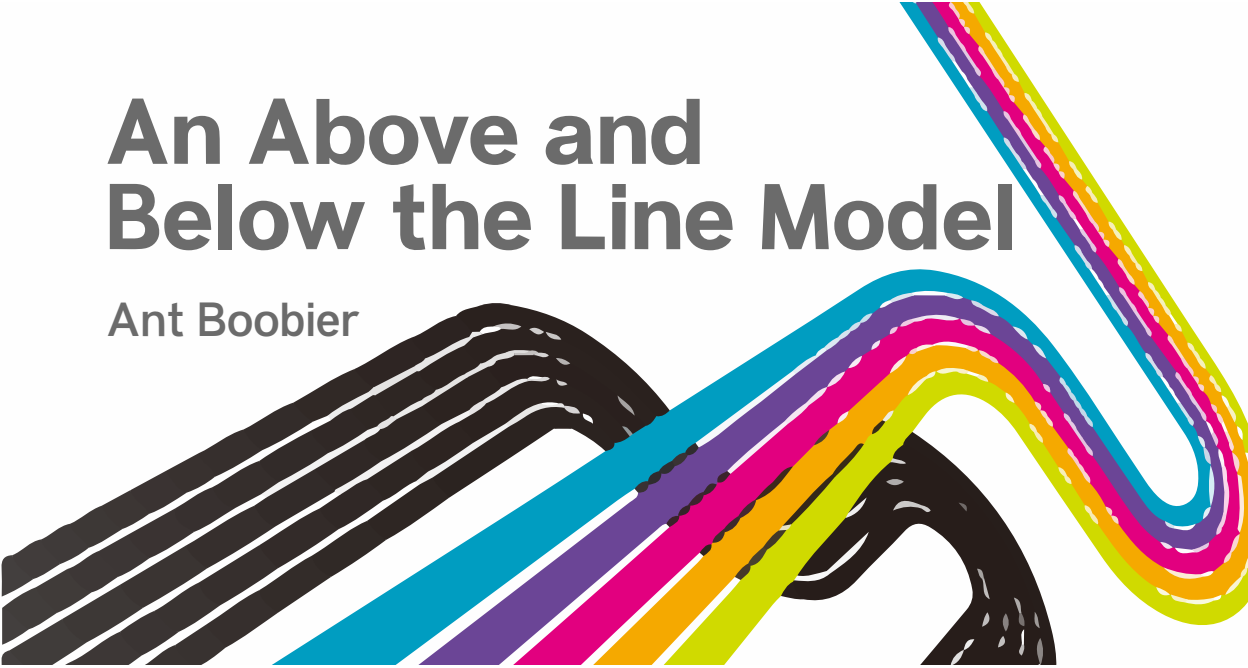
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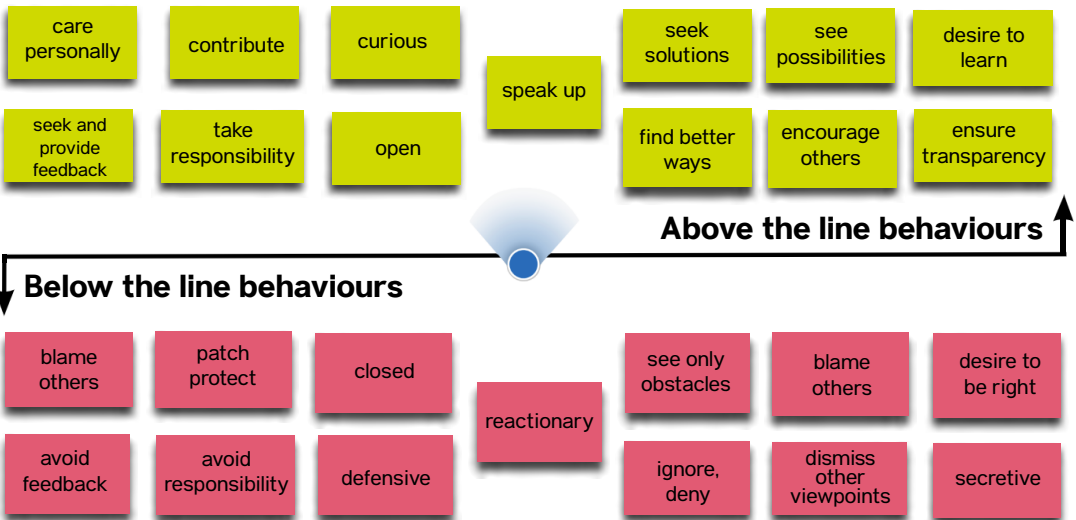
An Above and Below the Line Model

Ant Boobier



An organization’s culture is expressed through the sum of its language and behaviors. Negative behaviors have a palpable impact on teams and, in turn, the culture in which that team exists; one person belittling a colleague’s idea will make the recipient think again before making another suggestion. On the other hand, positive behaviors encourage and enable people to participate and thrive; the person who encourages and builds on someone’s idea will foster collaboration and encourage the recipient to speak up in future.

So how do I understand an organization’s culture? I draw a line.



This is the “Above and Below the Line” Model. Above the line I list open and positive behaviors, while below the line I list behaviors that are closed and negative.

Above-the-line thinking and behaviors are about being open and curious, having a desire to learn, and being able to respond effectively and usefully in any given situation. These positive behaviors include:

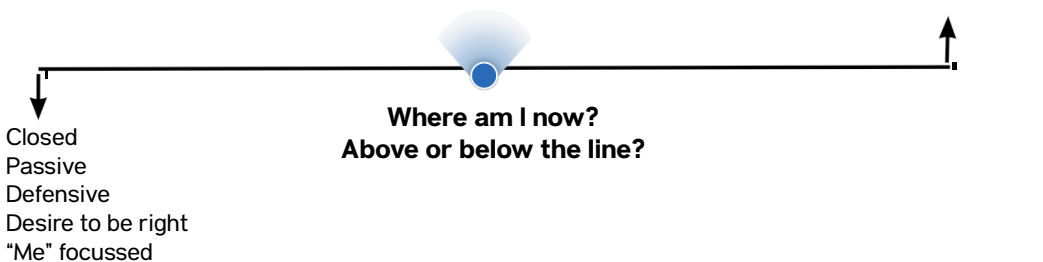
- Being open and curious
- Having a desire to learn
- Being collaborative and team focussed
- Taking responsibility
- Contributing
- Seeing possibilities
- Seeking solutions
- Finding better ways
- Speaking up
- Seeking and providing feedback
- Ensuring transparency
- Caring personally
- Encouraging others

When your thinking and behaviors are below the line, you're defending yourself, being closed to others and placing precedence on being right over being open to learning. These behaviors are the mirror opposite of positive above-the-line behaviors.

An organization's culture and personality is expressed as a sum of those behaviors. The question is, where do its people spend the majority of their time: above or below that line? Observable behaviors will direct others on how to act, or how not to act.

An organization's environment has a massive impact on where its culture sits on the line, and in order to shift organizational culture, the people inside it must play their part and take responsibility for their own behaviors.

Those people are us.



Above and Below the Line Model

I started drawing using this model after attending a session where a crucial participant turned up late. This particular attendee was already frustrated thanks to a previous, unproductive session and the negative behaviors they brought with them into the room spread to the rest of the group. Collaboration stopped, people shut down, the whole dynamic changed and the other attendees left wide-eyed and surprised. What had happened? The latecomer wasn't a bad person. They didn't normally act like that. When I chatted with that attendee afterwards, I discovered they had no idea how much of a negative impact they'd had on the group.

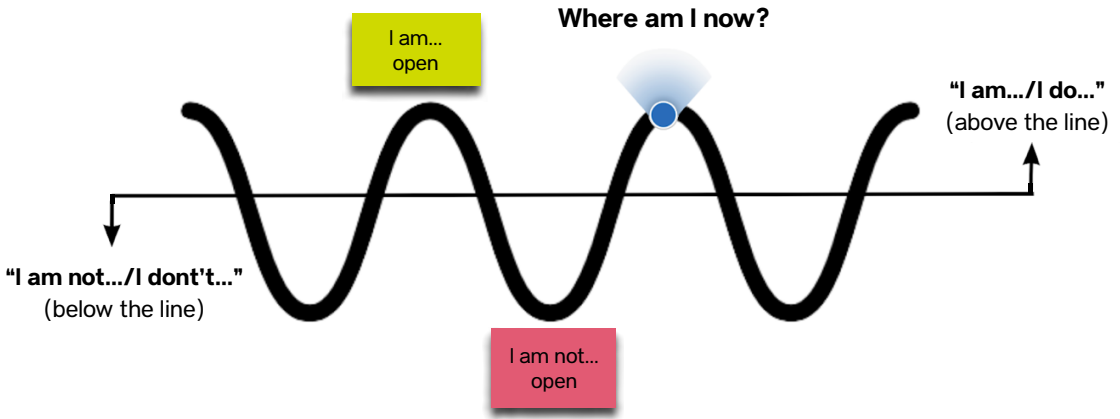
The way people behave and the language they use in their interactions with each other forms and reforms the culture of a group—which could be either a team, department, or organization. In those interactions, the things above the line can have an outsized positive impact.

When comparing your organization to the "Above and Below the Line Model", the two questions you need to ask yourself are: "Where am I now?" and "Am I able to bring my best self into this environment. If not, why is that the case?" It's about how you turn up, how you see yourself, and how other people see you.



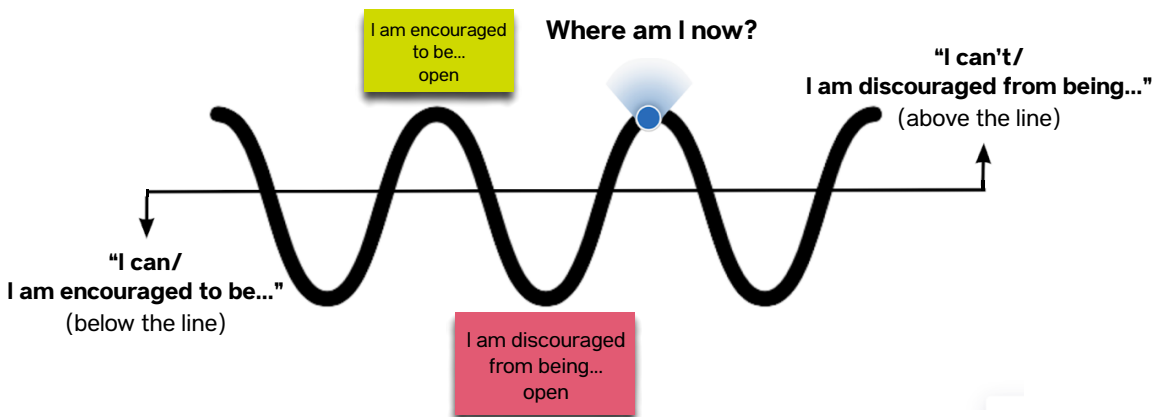
Personal Responsibility

The thing I like about the “Above the Line Model” is that it is relative rather than absolute. There can be situations when we all slip below the line, and we, as individuals, need to have the courage and insight to realize when and why this occurs. For example, when my session attendee was able to recognize how their negative behavior had impacted the group. It’s about actively taking personal responsibility for your own behaviors and asking yourself if you do, or do not, exhibit them.



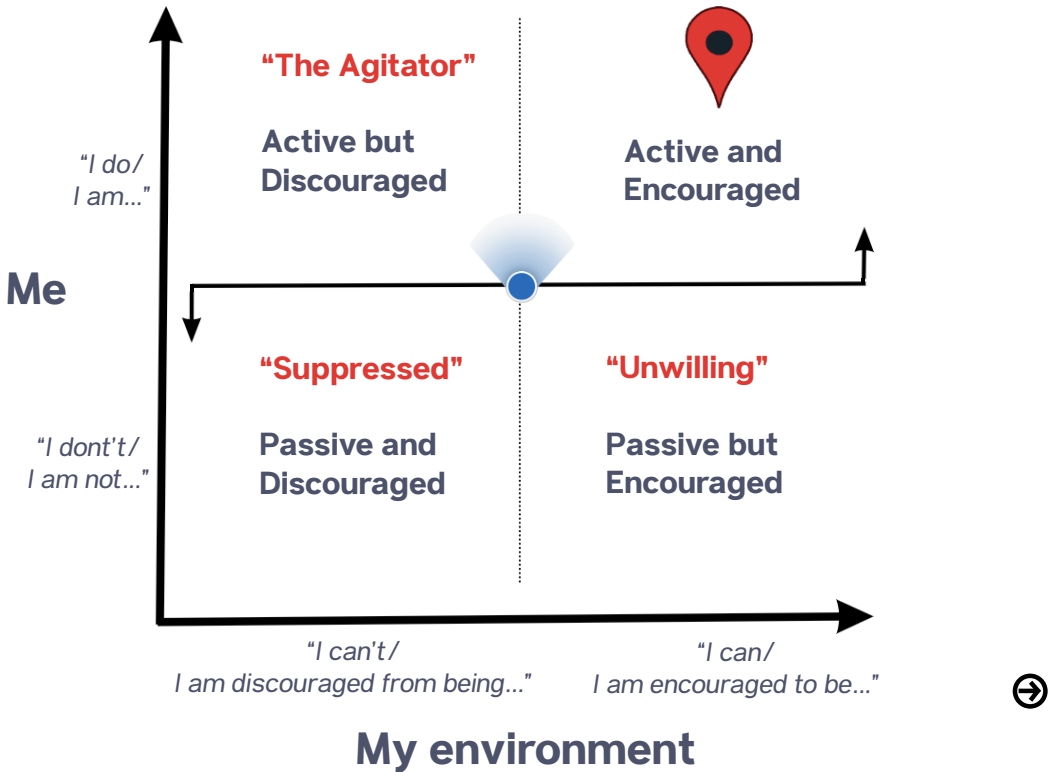
My Environment

Personal responsibility is a crucial aspect of improving behavior, but it isn't enough; your environment has a large impact on behavior as well. Environment is a fairly broad term: it can be the people—individuals or a group—around you, an organization, a system, or a specific situation. The impact of this environment can be actual or perceived. Understanding the impact your environment is having requires you to assess whether you feel psychologically safe, by asking yourself if your environment encourages or discourages you from exhibiting positive behaviors.



Putting it into a Quadrant

Viewing this model from a single dimension does not draw the distinction between the personal ownership of our behaviors and the impact our environment has upon them. To resolve that, I've found it useful to integrate both aspects and, ultimately, reframe the line as a quadrant (I do love a good quadrant).



I describe each of the four areas as follows:

- **Active but Discouraged:** the environment actively discourages positive behaviors, but the person is an “Agitator”. Agitators look to exhibit positive behaviors and, in doing so, try to lead by example. If you’re in this situation it’s probably time to get out, unless something changes and other people begin to adopt your behaviors.
- **Passive and Discouraged:** people here are “suppressed”. Their environment discourages them from exhibiting positive behaviors and, as a result, they are reluctant to show them.

- **Active and Encouraged:** This is the sweet spot, a place where you can be open and positive, and you are encouraged to be so by the environment and people around you.
- **Passive but Encouraged:** this environment actively encourages good behaviors, but for some reason people are unwilling to be open and positive. This could be because they perceive the environment to be psychologically unsafe and need more active support.

So how can you or your team find out where you sit amongst these four quadrants? The positive behavior questions I use for *Personal Responsibility (Me)* and *Environment* dimensions are as follows:

	Ask yourself...	Do you exhibit this behavior?
Me	“I do/I am...” “I don’t/I am not...”	“...open” “...curious” “...seek to learn” “...take responsibility” “...contribute” “...see possibilities” “...seek solutions” “...find better ways”
My Environment	“I can/I am encouraged to be...” “I can’t/I am discouraged from being...” “I observe my colleagues actively [being]...”	“...speak up” “...seek and provide feedback” “...ensure transparency” “...care personally” “...encourage others”

Plot out your answers on the quadrant. Hopefully you find yourself in the upper-right quadrant where you are “Active and Encouraged”, exhibiting positive behaviors in an environment that supports you to do so. But if you find yourself in one of the other quadrants, consider how you and your environment are impacting your behaviors and what you need to do to shift to the upper-right.

Next Steps

The “Above or Below the Line Quadrant Model” is situational and is not absolute. It is not a static map or one-off exercise, and is instead intended for use in reviewing and reflecting upon where you are at any given time.

When I work with individuals, teams, and organizations, I share this model with them. I explain the concept of the line and the quadrant, the importance of realizing where you are, and the impact that it can have on your colleagues. So what’s stopping you? Draw that line, share the model. Make it everyone’s role to ensure they and their organizations focus on positive above-the-line behaviors, and in doing so build more positive, uplifting cultures.

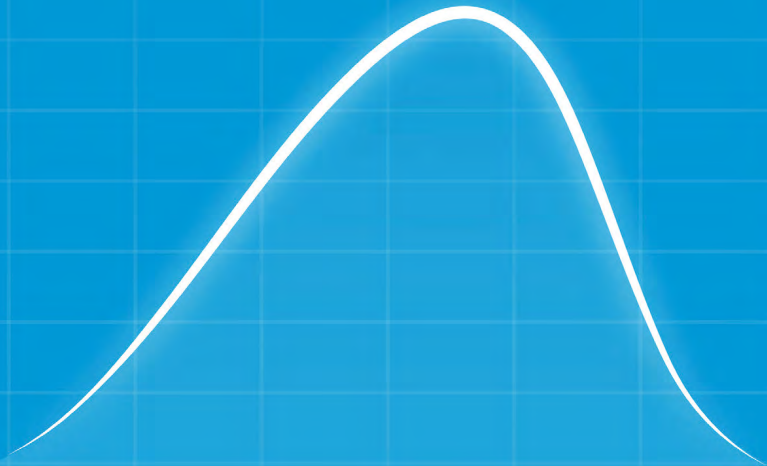


Ant Boobier

is an Agile coach at Nomad8, with a focus on Product Development, Business Agility and leadership. He’s worked with large organisations both in the UK and New Zealand, from RAD and DSDM in the 90s, XP and Scrum in the 2000s to a magic mix of Lean UX, Design Thinking and Agile today.

An assignment for this week, starting on Monday: Print out the “Above and Below the Line” model and keep that with you (but do not show it to others). Listen to the language used in your organization this week, and look at the behaviors shown; in your team, the CEO’s speech, the intranet, Trello, Slack, or the internal newsletter. Is this “Above or Below the Line” language and behavior? At the end of the week, discuss what you have noticed with others. What does this tell you about your culture? In which quadrant are you/is your team?

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