

## Corruption: Can a behavioural approach shift the dial?

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The first global summit on anti-corruption was held in London in May. The summit brought together world leaders, businesses, academics, civil society and international organisations to discuss the practical steps that could be taken to tackle corruption across the world. Here at BIT, we think that behavioural science can make an important contribution to anti-corruption. David Halpern, our CEO, articulated this recently in his [contribution](#) to the Anti-Corruption Manifesto.

In order to explore the behavioural angles to corrupt practices in a range of policy domains, we organised a roundtable at the recent [Behavioural Exchange conference](#). We were joined by leading academics and practitioners specialising in behavioural science and corruption. Here are six interesting points that were discussed:

1. **Focus on the behaviour.** The group discussed understanding corruption, not as a single entrenched problem, but as a collection of individual behaviours, each occurring in a specific context and at a specific decision point. Targeting specific corrupt behaviours, rather than attempting overarching sets of policies, will give us clues as to how we can discourage those particular behaviours and may reveal new opportunities to address corruption.
2. **Better understand the range of motivators and the psychology behind corruption.** When viewing corruption by others, we often assume that it is driven by self-interest and done by inherently bad people. However, the psychology of corruption tells a different story. Social pressure, mental 'moral licensing' (e.g. my salary does not reflect the value of my work, therefore I deserve more money), reciprocity (e.g. I need to reciprocate the favours I've received) and self-serving bias (e.g. the course of action that favours me is also 'good' for others, or at least that it does not harm them) may affect an individual's likelihood to engage in corrupt acts.
3. **We behave the way we expect others to behave.** The extent to which corrupt behaviours are perceived to be widespread in society is likely to affect people's expectations of honesty, and so their own corrupt behaviour. We update our beliefs of social norms with the information in our environment. Indeed, examples from the behavioural literature demonstrate how observed [social norms](#) can influence dishonest behaviour.
4. **The prevalent social capital matters.** Countries with historically low levels of social trust (people believe that most other people in their society cannot be trusted) have a higher levels of corruption. For example, in regions with very low levels of social trust, giving contracts to family members or close contacts might make more sense to individuals than carrying out open procurement procedures. Understanding the pattern of social networks, obligations and

trust in a specific context, will help us devise mechanisms to encourage cooperation between actors unknown to each other.

5. **Corruption is never victimless.** Certain corrupt acts can be perceived as victimless crimes due to the diffusion of responsibility (the victim might be the public purse, for example). But, of course, there are always victims. Making the impact of corruption more salient and personally relevant at key points in the decision journey could help people to more fully appreciate the impact of their dishonest behaviour on others.
6. **Modern tools and technology can help.** Data collection capabilities have an important role to play and are increasingly available. Technology is enabling people to report in real time, creating networks of support, making undesired behaviours visible (e.g. [I Paid A Bribe](#)), and encouraging whistleblowing by combining private knowledge with big data analytics (e.g. [digiwhist.eu](#)). But the availability of these tools is not sufficient. Digital platforms should be designed in a way that understands and encourages specific human behaviours e.g. making it simple for people to report corruption.

In the coming year, we plan to test whether these insights, based on a behavioural approach, can effectively reduce corruption. Whilst we recognise the complexity and challenges that deep societal issues like corruption bring, we are excited to be pushing the boundary of where behavioural approaches can be applied. We hope to organise another discussion in the autumn and would be keen to hear from those working in the area.