Over 80 people gathered at the IBE’s summer event to hear the insights of Margaret Heffernan on the concept of wilful blindness.

**Introduction**

The session began with an introduction to the legal concept of wilful blindness, which was cited in the trial of Enron’s Skilling and Lay, and states that if there is knowledge that you could have had and should have had but chose not to have, you are still responsible.

**The human inability to multi-task**

From this foundation, Margaret moved on to talk about how, as humans, we are pre-disposed to overlook things that we don’t like, and how the concept of ‘them and us’, where catastrophes are provoked by a few ‘awful’ individuals is not actually the case.

Using BP’s 2005 Texas City Refinery explosion as a point of reference, attendees were told about how the human brain is incapable of multi-tasking (even for women!). Instead, it flicks exceptionally quickly between activities, meaning that there are momentary blind-spots, which cause the brain to become fatigued. Busyness resulting from the competing demands of business can result in this brain fatigue. One consequence of such a state is that the brain is pre-disposed to prioritise keeping the body awake. When this occurs, one of the first things to ‘shut down’ is the ability to think critically, resulting in tunnel vision – which was identified as one of the causes leading to the incident in Texas City.

A number of causes of organisational wilful blindness were outlined.

**Ideology**

It was explained that the corporate ideology at BP at the time of the refinery explosion, which thought ‘big is best’, dictated the practices of the organisation and created a form of tunnel vision. The pursuit of rapid expansion created big debts which resulted in drastic cost cutting measures and basic work place practices were overlooked to the extent that everyone knew that it was a dangerous place to work. It was suggested that this problem wasn’t limited to BP and other organisations would do well to recognise some of the early warning signs.

**Cognitive problems**

Returning to the science behind the concept, it was noted that anomalies are always interesting and usually meaningful; however, they are often overlooked. Using the work of Alice Stewart into the effect of x-rays on babies in the womb as an example, the point was made that scientists chose to stand by the already accepted Threshold Theory, rather than accept the new data.
Conformity and Obedience

From here, the conversation turned to focus on the issue at the organisational level. It was observed that humans choose conformity, rather than standing out from the crowd. Therefore, the values individuals exhibit at work have the tendency to be slightly different from their individual values. Citing the well-known Asch experiment, it was acknowledged that we conform because we are fundamentally social animals.

Another experiment, by Stanley Milgram, was used to highlight the point that humans are fundamentally obedient to those in authority. The results from the experiment suggest that when ‘under orders’ moral focus changes from wanting to be a good person, to wanting to do a good job. Consequently, no matter how mad, bad or dangerous an order is, if it comes from a person in a position of authority, then it is likely that people will follow it.

Implications

Studies from Europe and the US show that there is a culture of organisational silence, where 85% of respondents said there were issues that they wouldn’t voice at work. Whilst the figures for Europe and the US were very similar, the reasons given for this silence were different. In the US the reason was observed to be fear of recrimination, whereas in Europe it was because respondents thought that raising concerns would be futile.

The profile of those who speak-up

There is a small minority of people who are prepared to voice their concerns, and it is these people who are of interest. The first point made was that these people start off as ordinary employees. Organisations need to change their approach to such people, and treat them as an early warning system. However, very few are currently set up to seek out, or facilitate, such people (the aviation industry was given as a positive exception where they celebrate speaking out particularly in the interests of safety). A second common characteristic of a person who is willing to voice their concerns was revealed to be that they had grown up in small towns where individual actions mattered. It was suggested that organisations would do well to embed this attitude of personal responsibility into their culture.

Final thoughts

The discussion was left on the note that organisations are blind until the blindness is continuously and persistently removed. Before the discussion was opened up to questions, three practical steps to help make organisations less blind were offered:

1. Conflict isn’t a bad thing – managers should be trained in conflict resolution (of which listening is a key part),
2. Companies need to be alert to the ‘do good-ers’ in their ranks,
3. Blindness is a human condition.