

BETWEEN THE LINES

January 31, 2017

BIA Between the Lines: Trump – The CEO President

Introduction

BIA examines statements of company executives using our proprietary Tactical Behavioral Assessment® (TBA™) methodology to assess their completeness, transparency and confidence surrounding all types of business issues. If you have ever attended one of BIA's training sessions on how to use our methodology, you may have heard us suggest that watching political talk shows is a great way to practice your TBA™ skills. No political party or politician has a monopoly on obfuscation. However, the election of Donald Trump – a business executive who is now the country's chief executive – presents BIA with a unique opportunity to demonstrate how our analysis applies in the political arena, as well as in the corporate executive suite.

From C-Suite to Oval Office – No Differences in Behavioral Tactics

We applied our proprietary TBA methodology to then-President-elect Trump's January 11, 2017 news conference held in New York. One reporter asks now-President Trump to respond to allegations that he and his Cabinet picks represent a multitude of conflicts of interest. In a business context, this type of question is important for investors, since it sheds light on the quality of corporate governance and an executive's ability to fully and objectively fulfill his obligations to shareholders.

Our methodology reveals that Mr. Trump never actually addresses the question concerning conflicts of interest among his Cabinet picks. Instead, he attempts to convince listeners of the quality of his nominees – a tactic that employs what BIA calls “protest statements,” leaving listeners to reach their own conclusions about the conflicts of interest rather than actually providing the requested information. For example, he begins his response by remarking on how “brilliant” Rex Tillerson has been during the Senate confirmation hearings and that “he ran incredibly Exxon Mobil.” Similarly, Mr. Trump shifts the topic to highlight how “our great senator” Jeff Sessions was a “great prosecutor and attorney general in Alabama.” These statements are designed to assert, indirectly but irrefutably, that his Cabinet picks will set self-interests aside by virtue of the fact that they are “brilliant,” “great” and “incredible.” None of these statements, however, offers any tangible information about whether or not his nominees' private interests conflict with their obligations to the public. Mr. Trump resorts to emotional appeals rather than providing responsive information to substantiate his position. This suggests that either he does not possess the facts to do so, or the facts he does possess do not support the image he is attempting to convey.

Then-President-elect Trump is also asked if Russia has any leverage over him, financial or otherwise, and if he would release his tax returns to prove it. Mr. Trump insists that he does *not* have any dealings with Russia. The way that he does so, however, provides behavioral evidence suggesting this is not the case. First, he states that he “tweeted out” that he has no dealings with Russia, and later says he “certified” that. These phrases provide Mr. Trump psychological distance from the original statements; he can readily say that he “tweeted” and “certified” that he has no Russian dealings without being accountable for directly responding that he has no such dealings. Additionally, he is overly narrow in his statements, saying that he has “no current pending deals.” This statement does not preclude the possibility that he has had dealings in the past, has ongoing deals, or that he would consider new deals in the future.

Mr. Trump attempts to bolster the impression that he has no conflicts of interest regarding Russia by insisting that he has “stayed away” from deals in Russia and gives an example of a \$2 billion deal in Dubai that he turned down because “I don't like the way it looks.” Through this statement, taken literally, Trump inadvertently reveals that he does not believe his personal dealings in foreign countries would pose a problem, just that they look bad. Indeed, he insists that “I could actually run my business and run the

government at the same time” and that “I’d do a very good job” because “I have a no-conflict situation because I’m president.” This concerted effort to define away business conflicts as president, coupled with his acknowledgement that a no-conflict situation is “a nice thing to have,” reveals that Mr. Trump feels entirely justified and is far more inclined to continue business relationships with foreign countries while president than he attempts to portray.

It is also important to note that at no point in his response to this question does Mr. Trump directly deny that Russia has any leverage over him, nor does he address whether or not he would release his tax returns to prove it. This is strong behavioral evidence that he is unable to refute the possibility of Russia influence, “financial or otherwise,” and that a close examination of his tax returns would reveal this or other information Mr. Trump does not wish to disclose.

In fact, the very first question posed by a reporter during the press conference asks Mr. Trump if intelligence agencies provided him with the two-page summary of unsubstantiated claims that Russia has compromising information about him. Mr. Trump neither confirms nor denies that they did, instead stating that, “I’m not allowed to talk about what went on in a meeting,” as a way to avoid answering. He adds, “we had witnesses in that meeting” and that “I read the information outside of that meeting,” “I read what was released.” These statements literally say that Mr. Trump read the “information” and “what was released” to give the impression he did not receive the information first-hand. This reflects an effort to psychologically distance himself from having to directly confirm, deny or otherwise hold himself accountable for the accusations.

Mr. Trump then takes the opportunity to insist that “It’s all fake news. It’s phony stuff. It didn’t happen.” However, he does not take the opportunity to set the record straight. While “It didn’t happen” appears to be a straightforward refutation, it is wrapped in what the BIA methodology defines as a series of “attack” behaviors on accusers. He states that the report was “gotten by opponents of ours” and “they put that crap together,” characterizing these opponents as “sick people.” This is an attempt to discredit the accusations in the report and the motivations of the people behind it. This impulse to lash out at accusers, rather than rely on statements of personal knowledge and conviction, reflects a mindset where Mr. Trump has no other option for how to respond. This high level of attack behaviors in his answer, combined with no attempt to refute the allegation details, suggests that he has no basis for his claims, or that the facts he does possess conflict with his ability to deny the accusations.

The same reporter also asks if the then-president-elect accepts the “opinion” that Vladimir Putin ordered the hack of the Democratic National Committee (DNC). Trump answers “I think it was Russia.” What is behaviorally significant here is that Mr. Trump immediately resorts to a concerted effort to downplay the severity of this issue and redirect attention away from Russia by emphasizing, “we also get hacked by other countries and other people” and that, “when we lost 22 million names and everything else that was hacked recently,” “they didn’t make a big deal out of that”; “That was probably China.” Mr. Trump’s attempt to simultaneously minimize and gloss over Russia’s hack of the DNC reveals his desire to avoid further discussion of the topic and to minimize the impact of the Russian action. This provides behavioral evidence that Mr. Trump has reason to believe that closer examination of Russia’s hack into the DNC would expose information that would be unfavorable to him.

It is also notable that, when responding to a subsequent question on whether the DNC hacking would color his relationship with Mr. Putin in the future, Mr. Trump never answers. Instead, he continues his efforts to downplay the hacking issue and eventually justifies the end results, stating, “But look at the things that were hacked, look at what was learned from that hacking.” This provides additional behavioral evidence suggesting that Mr. Trump is unlikely to allow the incident to adversely affect his relationship with Mr. Putin, and he is concerned that a close examination of his ties with Russia or Mr. Putin surrounding the hacking could reveal damaging information.

January 11, 2017 press conference transcript and video:

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/11/us/politics/trump-press-conference-transcript.html?_r=0