



Seeing Clearly – The First Tool for Leadership/Organizational Creativity

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Leadership scholars and practitioners postulate that creativity is increasingly essential for survival. However, this paper proposes that before becoming creative, it is essential for leadership within an organization, and the organization as a whole, to “see clearly.” This paper exposes the reader to reasons why leaders need to see clearly and it provides six techniques for doing so: resolving to see; taking a holistic, system-level view; seeking contributions of the entire enterprise; varying perspective; remembering the “OODA Loop”; investing in employee training; and being proactive. Seeing clearly will assist leaders as they contemplate becoming more creative while remaining coordinated and concerted with their present efforts.

And Jesus said, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?...You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (NIV, Matt 7:3, 5).

Leadership scholars and practitioners postulate that creativity is increasingly essential for survival. “Creativity is a component [of innovation] that enhances the ability of organizations to retain their competitive advantage as well as to stay ahead of their competitors”(Parjanen, 2012, p. 109). Creativity is the ability to ponder the endless possibilities in a changing world with something fresh and new. “Creativity is seen by most experts in the field as the process of developing ideas that are both novel and useful” (Burkus, 2014, p. 5). Creativity requires the ability to see clearly what now exists and posture what may occur in the future. Creativity is “idea generation (ideation)” (Denti & Hemlin, 2012, p. 1240007-1), as contrasted with innovation, which is the implementation of ideas. However, before beginning to become creative, this paper postures that it is essential for leadership within an organization, and the organization as a whole, to “see clearly.” This will require removing some “planks.”

Northouse (2010) describes leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3). By leadership, this paper does not merely refer to the CEO or president, but rather, anyone who is in a leadership role, whether that role is assigned or emergent. “Leadership that is based upon occupying a position is called assigned leadership...when others perceive an individual as the most influential person, regardless of title, the person is exhibiting emergent leadership” (Northouse, 2010, p. 6). Also within this paper, “[leadership] is a function of action” (Black, Morrison, & Gregersen, 1999, p. x).

The word organization “stems from the ancient Greek word *organon*, meaning a tool or instrument: something with which one works” (Morgan, 2006, p. 277). Toffler (1971) has this to say about organizations: “An organization is nothing more than a collection of human objectives, expectations, and obligations. It is...a structure of roles filled by humans” (p. 127). This ability to view the organization as a collection of individuals with a purpose is key to seeing clearly, and worthy of restating: “an organization is a collection of individuals, whose members may change over time, forming a coordinated system of specialized activities for the purpose of achieving certain goals over some extended period of time” (Hitt, Miller, & Colella, 2009, p. 9).

Why Do We Need to See Clearly?

“God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened...when the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some, and ate it. She also gave some to her husband” (NIV, Gen 3:5-6)

Having one’s “eyes opened” with the inherent ability to see in a clear and discerning manner has its roots in the earliest discussions of mankind, as in the Genesis example above. Due to how we have evolved, and how paradigms have changed as we progressed from agrarian to industrial, to post-industrial, we also need to refocus our eyes and remove “planks” so that we might see more clearly. “If agriculture is the first stage of economic development and industrialism the second, we can see that still another stage has suddenly been reached” (Toffler, 1971, p. 14). What are those “planks” and how did they form? If we can agree that we are indeed moving (or have moved) from an industrial to a post-industrial world, our discussion will focus along that seam.

Basics of the Industrial Age

The emergence of the factory system during the Industrial Revolution posed problems that earlier organizations had not encountered. Work was performed on a much larger scale by a larger number of workers, and required maximum efficiency, leading to hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations (Daft, 2010, p. 23). The factory required standardization from its workforce, not necessarily innovation. On the production line, the essence is moving parts along to complete the task. “This paradigm required size, role clarity, specialization and control. This has given way to speed, flexibility, integration, and innovation” (Ashkenas, Ulruch, Jick, & Kerr, 2002, p. 6).

Post-Industrial/Information Age

The post-industrial age has been called many terms. For example, some see it as the age of information. Regardless of the name, “two fundamental forces have shaped the world society: the electronic information revolution and global economic interdependence” (Rosen, Digh,

Singer, Philips, & Phillips, 2000, p. 10). These two fundamental forces, can be further subdivided into “technology, travel, trade, and television” (Marquardt & Berger, 2000, p. 3), forming a global interconnectedness, unprecedented in preceding years.

Huntington calls our present state “sheer chaos” (Huntington, 1996, p. 35), but not from the standpoint of a lack of order. We see evidence of this chaos reflected in changes regarding the impacts of nation-states to smaller groupings. Additionally, corporations are increasingly global, expanding beyond national borders. For example, for decades, the United States and the Soviet Union were diametrically opposed, with each deterring the other from warfare. Yet, in 2001, a small group known as Al Qaeda launched an attack directly on the United States, and we find ourselves battling them ever since. “Chaos, complexity, and change are everywhere” (Sanders, 1998, p. 4), not just in the example above. The music industry provides a good example of the rapidity with which change is happening. Within less than one lifetime, recorded music has gone from reel-to-reel tapes, to vinyl records, to 8-tracks, cassettes, MP3 players, CDs and now cloud computing. This information age displays intense global competition, rapid and nearly constant change, and transformative technological developments, as well as cultural and societal issues.

How do Planks Form?

As we have progressed from the industrial to the post-industrial era, we have not necessarily advanced our organizational models. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once stated:

When we look at modern man, we have to face the fact that modern man suffers from a kind of poverty of the spirit, which stands in glaring contrast with a scientific and technological abundance. We've learned to fly the air as birds, we've learned to swim the seas as fish, yet we haven't learned to walk the Earth as brothers and sisters. (Kerber, 2007)

The same could be stated for many organizations and the models they follow. There must be an understanding that “leaders and followers form an action circle around a common purpose” (Chaleff, 2009, p. 2). This would allow all within the organization to clearly see where the organization is headed, and make contributions to getting to that destination. Recalling the Genesis story, opening of the eyes can be likened to achieving wisdom, which is also necessary from creativity, and lacking wisdom would indeed be another plank.

Sternberg...argued that creativity should be observed in relation to wisdom, [which] is not just about maximizing one's own self interest, but balancing intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal such as one's city, country, environment, or God...although wise thinking must be creative, creative thinking need not be wise. (Mrnarevic, 2011, p. 13)

Children are born creative with eyes and their other senses attuned to their surroundings, picking up the behaviors and social and cultural traditions the environment offers. We find that it aids in their creative ability, creating fertile imaginations. However, in our post-industrial world, “our education system is [still] predicated on the idea of academic ability, and there's a reason. The whole system was invented – around the world, there were no public systems of education, really, before the 19th century. They all came into being to meet the needs of industrialism” (Robinson, 2006). Thus, there needs to be a reinvention of the educational system to facilitate

clearly seeing in this new world. Senge (2006) quotes Deming as stating, “we will never transform the prevailing system of management without transforming our prevailing system of education. They are the same system” (p. xiii). “From a very early age we are taught to break apart problems, to fragment the world [and what we are seeing or experiencing]. When we then try to see the big picture we try to reassemble the fragments in our minds” (Senge, 2006, p. 3). As a metaphor to aid in understanding, could a snowstorm be defined by studying the individual flakes? This would be a futile, non-productive effort. We need the ability to see the entire storm to understand what is happening. Likewise, we could not describe a completed jigsaw puzzle by examining one piece, or even a few pieces grouped together. We need an understanding of the complete picture to even have a prayer of putting the puzzle pieces together!

How Do We See Clearly?

“So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. So God said to him [Solomon] ...I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart” (NIV, 1Kings 3:9-12)

Resolve for yourself to “see.” “Organizations should never outsource their eyeballs,” (Oster, 2011, p. 126) while removing the planks from their eyes. What does that mean? For one, it requires eliminating bias. We also need to be wisely discerning. “By looking in the mirror and seeing ourselves both as we see ourselves, and as others see us, we have an opportunity to [imagine] powerful new possibilities” (Morgan, 2006, p. 26). We also need an understanding of others: “Leaders who respect others also allow them to be themselves, with creative wants and desires...they approach other people with a sense of their unconditional worth and valuable individual differences” (Northouse, 2010, p. 387). The global environment is one that contains many cultures with varying worldviews. “Culture roots and anchors us” (Rosen et al., 2000, p. 33). As businesses seek to engage on the world stage, they must be attuned to those views, roots, and anchors, or they will fail.

Take a Holistic, System-View. A learning organization is one that includes systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared visions, and team learning, but “systems thinking is the discipline that integrates the [other] disciplines, fusing them together into a coherent body of theory and practice” (Senge, 2006, pp. 11-12). Systems thinking allows us to “see disabilities more clearly—for they are often lost amid the bluster of day-to-day activities” (Senge, 2006, p. 26). As we have learned to view the world and organizations from an industrial age mindset, we must now view them from a holistic system lens, putting pieces back together to examine the entire storm not merely each individual flake. For example, Edison did not merely bring forward a lamp, but realized “it would require efficient electrical generations, wiring, metered distribution, sockets...all of these separate parts...for one machine” (Utterback, 1996, p. 61). “We live in a world made up of nonlinear dynamical systems” (Sanders, 1998, p. 70), and they need to be viewed in that manner. This is a holistic approach, which takes an innovative vision to a new and larger dimension.

Everyone contributes to the organization’s awareness and health. “At the time of writing the Declaration of Independence, its author, Thomas Jefferson was in a follower role. He was a junior member of the committee and was assigned the task by John Adams and Benjamin

Franklin” (Yukl, 2010, p. 139). But he saw clearly what needed to be done and took action. Within organizations, if everyone is seeing clearly, creativity can occur from any rank within.

Varying one’s perspective is a practical approach to seeing clearly by “restating a problem many different ways, and diagramming, mapping and drawing a problem” (Michalko, 2001, p. 17). This concurs with the fifth of Covey’s *Seven Habits*: “Seek first to understand then to be understood” (Covey, 1989). The leader is not only responsible to see clearly, but also must help others to do likewise, providing others with the same sight picture. It “must make sense to others [and] must be understandable” (Handy, 1989, pp. 134-135). Diversity of thought helps the organization to change perspective, and should be encouraged. Diversity should be “sought across boundaries, and at all levels, [with the] call for a new culture of leadership that shapes horizontal, non-hierarchical relationships without relying on formal power and control” (Deiser, 2011, p. 18).

Remember the OODA Loop. Seeing clearly is also the first of four steps in John Boyd’s “OODA Loop.” This approach grew out of a military view of how to combat an adversary, either as an individual or as a strategic plan, but it is also applicable in the business arena. “OODA” means: “observation, orientation, decision, and action” (Hammonds, 2002). The first step, germane to this discussion, is to observe, or in the vernacular of this paper, to see clearly. Being able to see clearly facilitates our ability to apply speed, flexibility, integration, and innovation to whatever challenges arise. As was stated previously, it is not solely the leader’s responsibility to observe, which enhances the ability of the organization to be creative. “Every organization wanting to stay competitive in an innovation-driven economy needs creativity from every one of its people” (Burkus, 2014, p. 48). To have unity of purpose, the organization needs unity in what is being observed or seen, as well as the way ahead. While doing so, understand that observation takes time. “Learning to see slow, gradual processes requires slowing down our frenetic pace and paying attention to the subtle as well as the dramatic” (Senge, 2006, p. 23).

Employee training is an area that inspires seeing clearly as it demonstrates the desire for everyone to take responsibility and become involved. It also combats whatever negative effects arose from the educational system, as previously mentioned. “When you share responsibility with [leadership training] teams, it really gets people thinking about ownership” (Marquardt & Berger, 2000, p. 88). As the teams are trained, and as they take on ownership, conditions are ripe for creativity. “Under the right conditions, everyone can generate great ideas” (Burkus, 2014, p. 11). Moreover, it is not necessarily “experts” who will provide those fresh ideas, as they may have “planks” in their eyes: “People who solve tough problems often come from the edge of a domain. They have enough knowledge to understand the problem, but don’t have a fixed method of thinking” (Burkus, 2014, p. 85). This avoids “what [Harvard’s Chris] Argyris calls skilled incompetence—teams full of people who are incredibly proficient at keeping themselves from learning” (Senge, 2006, p. 25).

Being **truly proactive**, which “comes from seeing how we contribute to our own problems...all too often proactiveness is reactivity in disguise” (Senge, 2006, p. 21). Gyskiewicz (1999) tells the story of a Japanese fishing villager who, unlike his neighbors, built his home facing the direction of the perennial tsunamis. By doing so, he was able to see clearly what was going on in the surrounding environment, and acting upon true knowledge, take steps to survive the next

event. “He could not take control of the sea but he managed his responses to it in the most effective ways” (Gryskiewicz, 1999, p. xix).

Conclusion

To see clearly, one should take a bite out of the apple of resolving for oneself that they will and can see, while striving for a holistic, system-level view. Engage with all within the organization to help them clearly see. This will require some training programs as well as time. The followers and the leader did not become “blind” overnight. Leaders should realize that even the lowliest of followers might have the creative idea that leads to organizational success. Finally, leaders should remember to observe, both inside and outside the organization, to include what may seem to be unrelated fields. They may just supply the prescription the leader and the organization need to succeed in a changing world, with something fresh and new.

About the Author

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