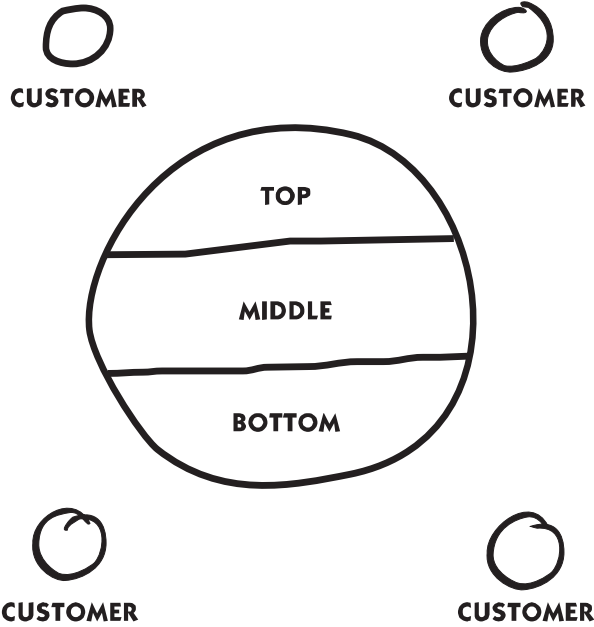


# Prologue: Overcoming System Blindness

## Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer:

### Positions and Conditions



Throughout this book, we will be talking about Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers. Given the complexity of organizations, this may appear to be a gross simplification of organizational life as the reader has experienced it. At times, as in “A Familiar Story” (which follows), we will treat these as *positions*: you are either a Top or a Middle or a Bottom or a Customer. At other times we will treat these as *conditions* all of us face in whatever position we occupy. In certain interactions we are Top, having overall responsibility for some piece of the action; in other interactions we are Bottom, on the receiving end of initiatives over which we have no control. In other interactions we are Middle, caught between conflicting demands and priorities. And in still other interactions, we are Customer, looking to some other person or group for a product or service we need. So, even in the most complex, multi-level, multifunctional organizations, we are all constantly moving in and out of Top/Middle/Bottom/Customer conditions.

## **A Familiar Story of Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers**

There is a pattern that develops with great regularity in the widest variety of organizations and institutions. The pattern goes something like this:

Tops are burdened by what feels like unmanageable complexity;

Bottoms are oppressed by what they see as distant and uncaring Tops;

Middles are torn and confused between the conflicting demands and priorities coming at them from Tops and Bottoms;

Customers feel done-to by nonresponsive delivery systems.

Top “teams” are caught up in destructive turf warfare;

Middle peers are alienated from one another, noncooperative and competitive;

Bottom group members are trapped in stifling pressures to conform.

Tops are fighting fires when they should be shaping the system’s future;

Middles are isolated from one another when they should be working together to coordinate system processes;

Bottoms’ negative feelings toward Tops and Middles distracts them from putting their creative energies into the delivery of products and services;

Customers’ disgruntlement with the system keeps them from being active partners in helping the system produce the products and services they need.

Throughout the system there is personal stress, relationship breakdowns,

and severe limitations in the system's capacity to do what it intends to do.

When this pattern develops, our tendency is to explain it in terms of the character, motivation, and abilities of the individuals involved—*that's just the way they are*—or in terms of the specific nature of one's organization—*that's just the way we are*. If our explanations are personal, then our solutions are also personal: fix the players, fire them, rotate them, divorce them. If our explanations are specific to our organization, then we fix the organization: reorganize, reengineer, restructure.

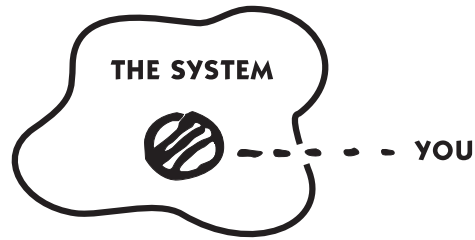
What I intend to demonstrate in this book is that this pattern is neither personal nor specific to any given organization. It is systemic. And because *systemic* is such a pervasive, multiple-meaning term, let me clarify its use here.

We humans are systems creatures. Our consciousness—how we experience ourselves, others, our systems, and other systems—is shaped by the structure and processes of the systems we are in. As a single example, when Tops are involved in turf warfare, this is less likely to be a personal issue—much as it may seem like that to the participants—than a systemic one, a vulnerability that develops with remarkable regularity in the Top world; therefore, to deal with turf issues as a personal issue is to miss the point entirely. This is true of many of the other “personal” issues in organizational life as well.

There is a tendency to resist this notion; we prefer seeing ourselves as captains of our own ships; we prefer the notion that we believe what we believe and think what we think because of *who* we are, not *where* we are. I will demonstrate how such thinking is the costly illusion of system blindness—an illusion that results in needless stress, destructive conflicts, broken relationships, missed opportunities, and diminished system effectiveness. And this blindness has its costs in all the systems of our lives—in our families, organizations, nations, and ethnic groups.

My purpose in this book is to transform system blindness into system sight. The paradox is this: With system sight we *can* become captains of our own ships as we understand the nature of the waters in which we sail.

## We Are Social Systems Creatures



We humans spend our lives in systems:

in the family,  
the classroom,  
the friendship group,  
the team,  
the organization,  
the task force,  
the faith group,  
the community,  
the bowling league,  
the nation,  
the ethnic group.

We find joy  
and sadness,  
exhilaration  
and despair,  
good relationships  
and bad ones,  
opportunities  
and frustrations.

So much happens to us in system life,  
yet system life remains a mystery.

*When We Don't See Systems*

When we don't see systems,  
we fall out of the possibility of partnership with one another;  
we misunderstand one another;  
we make up stories about one another;  
we have our myths and prejudices about one another;  
we hurt and destroy one another;  
we become antagonists when we could be collaborators;  
we separate when we could remain together happily;  
we become strangers when we could be friends;  
we oppress one another when we could live in peace;  
and our systems—organizations, families, task forces, faith  
groups—squander much of their potential.  
All of this happens without awareness or choice—  
dances of blind reflex.

*Five Types of System Blindness:*

*Spatial, Temporal, Relational, Process, and Uncertainty*

We suffer from Spatial Blindness.

We see our part of the system  
but not the whole;  
we see what is happening with us  
but not what is happening elsewhere;  
we don't see what others' worlds are like,  
the issues they are dealing with,  
the stresses they are experiencing;  
we don't see how our world impacts theirs  
and how theirs impacts ours;

we don't see how all the parts influence one another.  
In our spatial blindness,  
we fail to understand one another,  
we develop stereotypes of one another,  
we take personally much that is not personal,  
and, as a consequence, many potentially productive  
contributions are lost to the system.

We suffer from Temporal Blindness.  
We see the present  
but not the past;  
we know what we are experiencing now  
but not what has led to these experiences;  
we know our satisfactions and frustrations,  
our feelings of closeness and distance,  
the issues and choices and challenges we are currently facing.  
All of this we experience in the present  
but we don't see the history of the present,  
the story of our system that has brought us to this point in  
time.

In our temporal blindness,  
we misdiagnose the current situation,  
and in our efforts to solve system problems  
we fix what doesn't need to be fixed  
and fail to fix what does.

We suffer from Relational Blindness.  
In systems, we exist only in *systemic* relationship to one  
another:

We are in Top/Bottom relationships,  
sometimes as Top and sometimes as Bottom;



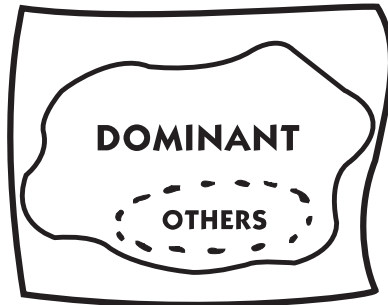
we are in End/Middle/End relationships;  
sometimes as Middle torn between two or more Ends,  
and sometimes as one of several Ends tearing at a common  
Middle;



we are in Provider/Customer relationships,  
sometimes as Provider and sometimes as Customer;



we are sometimes a member of the Dominant culture in which there are the Others, and sometimes we are the Other within the Dominant culture.



We tend not to see ourselves in these systemic relationships, nor do we see the dances we fall into in these relationships:

Becoming Burdened Tops

and Oppressed Bottoms,

Disappointed Ends

and Torn Middles,

Judged Providers

and Done-to Customers,

the Righteous Dominants

and the Righteous Others.

In our relational blindness,

we experience much personal stress and pain,

potential partnerships fail to develop,

and system contributions are lost.

We suffer from Process Blindness.

We don't see our systems as wholes,

as entities in their environment.

We don't see the processes of the whole

as the whole struggles to survive.

We don't see how "It" differentiates  
in an environment of shared responsibility and complexity  
and how we fall into Turf Warfare with one another.

We don't see how "It" individuates  
in a diffusing environment  
and how we become alienated from one another.

We don't see how "It" coalesces  
in an environment of shared vulnerability  
and how we become enmeshed in GroupThink with one  
another.

In our process blindness,  
our relationships with our peers deteriorate,  
productive partnerships fail to develop,  
and our contributions to the system suffer.

When we suffer from Uncertainty Blindness,  
we see fixed positions battling fixed positions,  
but we don't see the uncertainty underlying these positions,  
the conditions for which there are no obviously correct  
answers;

in our positional blindness,  
we escape from uncertainty into certainty,  
from mystery into fixed unassailable positions about  
how to manage our responsibility in the Top world,  
our vulnerability in our Bottom world,  
our tearing in our Middle world,  
our coming together in a world of Dominants and Others.

In our uncertainty blindness,  
our righteous battles with one another keep us from  
realizing our full potential as Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and  
Dominants and Others.

## **Seeing Systems**

This book is about seeing systems.

It is about overcoming system blindness.

It is about seeing our part in the context of the whole in ways that enable us to avoid misunderstandings and to interact more productively across organizational lines (Act One).

It is about seeing the present in the context of the past, such that we can get a more accurate picture of our current condition (Act One).

It is about seeing ourselves in relationship with others and creating satisfying and productive partnerships in these relationships (Act Two).

It is about seeing our systems' processes in ways that enable us to create systems with extraordinary capacities for surviving and developing (Act Three).

It is about seeing the uncertainties in our system conditions in ways that enable us to move past the destructive battles of righteous position versus righteous position (Act IV).

## **My Windows into Systems: The Power Lab and The Organization Workshop**

■

### **THE POWER LAB**

**The Elite (Tops)**

**Managers (Middles)**

**and Immigrants (Bottoms)**

### *Living Together in the Community of New Hope*

My understanding of systems is a fortuitous outcome of work that had another goal. Over thirty-five years ago, I set out to create a learning environment in which people could deepen their understanding of power and powerlessness in social systems. The result was the Power Lab.<sup>1</sup>

The basic idea was to create a societal setting in which people could experience issues of power and powerlessness directly and dramatically. And so we created a world with clear-cut differences in power and resource control—a world somewhat ironically called the Community of New Hope.

There are three social classes in New Hope—the Elite (or Tops), who control the society’s wealth and institutions; the Managers (or Middles), who manage the society’s institutions for the Elite; and the Immigrants (or Bottoms), who enter the society with no funds, few resources, and no control over the society’s institutions. This new world is compelling in that it encompasses all aspects of participants’ lives—the quality of their housing and meals, the job opportunities available to them, the amount of money they have, their access to resources, and more.

A good play needs an appropriate theater, and we were fortunate early on to discover the Craigville Conference Center on Cape Cod.<sup>2</sup> Craigville offered an isolated setting with a variety of housing possibilities for the various social classes and a huge tabernacle that could house the society’s institutions—its court, newspaper, company store, employment center, pub, and theater. And most important, the Craigville staff have over the years functioned as patient, understanding, cooperative, and sometimes bemused partners in this venture.

The staff members create the “world” into which participants are “born”—as either Elite, Managers, or Immigrants—and then step back and allow the community to unfold. There are no scenarios to follow, no further directions from staff. What becomes of the society depends on whatever the collection of players makes of it.

The Power Lab was created to support participants in their learning about systems and power, but I have undoubtedly been its major beneficiary. Over the past thirty-five years, I have played a variety of roles in these Communities of New Hope, sometimes as an active player—Elite, Manager, or Immigrant—but more often as an Anthropologist standing outside the system, collecting its history as it unfolds, observing and interviewing societal members. It was not until several years had passed that I realized what a remarkable situation I had fallen into. How often does one have the opportunity to stand outside a social system and observe its total life—to be privy to the separate deliberations of each class as well as to their interactions with one another?

Several of the scenes to follow come directly from the Power Labs (**14**, Bart and Barb; **15**, “‘Anthropology’ or Mick Gets Wiped Out”; **26**, “Daniel: Mutant in the Middle Space”; **45**, “Alienation Among the Middles”; **50**, “Immigrant Martha Has a Breakdown”; and **66**, “A Mutant Moment in the Middle”), and these scenes are but the tip of

the iceberg. Everything in this book is infused with learning drawn from the Power Labs.

The reader may be taken aback by two stories of personal breakdown at the Power Lab. The Power Lab *is* a challenging experience, and participants are cautioned to that effect prior to enrolling. On the other hand, the Power Lab is probably a more supportive environment than most of our other organizational and institutional environments: All participants have their own personal coach who works with them before, during, and after the program; additionally, there are periodic Times Out of Time (TOOT) sessions in which participants can pull back from the experience and gain perspective on it. Still, there were these two breakdowns. Both were “cured” before the lab ended, in ways that enlightened all of us, and in both cases the “breakdown” and its “cure” were clearly systemic, although on the surface the breakdowns appeared to be personal. These two stories offer important lessons about the systemic nature of apparently personal breakdowns in the wider world.

■

## **THE ORGANIZATION WORKSHOP**

**Tops (Executives)**

**Middles (Managers)**

**Bottoms (Workers)**

**Customers**

*Working Together in Creative Consultants, Inc. (CCI)*

The Organization Workshop is an offshoot of the Power Lab. People who participated in the Power Labs began to request that we bring our work into their organizations. Apart from a few truly adventurous souls, most organizations were reluctant to do a full-scale Power Lab in-house. However, there was considerable interest in helping executives, managers, and workers deepen their understanding of systems and their ability to work cooperatively with one another. This interest set the stage for the development of the Organization Workshop.

Again, the educational strategy is to create a learning environment

or stage on which participants can directly experience key processes and dilemmas of organizational life. In this workshop, participants are “born” into an organization that exists for between a few hours and a day. The organization—CCI—is composed of Executives (Tops), who have overall responsibility for the system, and a group of Managers (Middles) responsible for Worker groups (Bottoms) whose members work on various projects assigned by Tops or Middles; outside the organization are potential Customers who have projects they need help on and money to pay for services. Staff simply set the stage; we put people into position, present the traditions of the organization, then step back and turn the organization loose.

In each workshop, there are Times Out of Time (TOOTs; see 10 and 11), in which we stop the organization, bring everyone together, and have them describe their experiences as Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers. What are their worlds like? What pressures are they experiencing? How does each part of the system experience the other parts? These TOOTs tend to be incredibly illuminating experiences for participants. But consider for a moment what a remarkable learning opportunity the TOOTs have been for me—listening to many hundreds of people over the years as they describe their experiences as Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers. For me, what a light this has shed on the nature of systems! And my intention in this book is to share that light with you.

### **Swimmers, Slugs, and Ballet Notes: A Word About Style**

As you may have already noticed, this book is written in a nontraditional form. There are acts and scenes, pinballs and talking body parts and mysterious “swimmers”; there are poems and dialogues along with conceptual material and cases; there are amebocytes and slugs and earthworms, a variety of dances, and even one set of ballet notes. The imagery of dance is used regularly because so many system processes seem balletic in nature: One party pulls up responsibility to himself or herself while the other passes it up; Bottom groups neatly and regularly split into the “reasonables” versus the “hardliners”; Middles fly apart from one another while Bottoms coalesce. There is form and coherence and predictability to all of these movements. None of which is to imply a lightness to these dances because the dances I describe alienate us

from one another, knock us out of the possibility of partnership, and sometimes lead to wholesale death and destruction.<sup>3</sup>

Theater, too, in its various forms, has played an important part in my work. Theater enables us to bring into play a variety of senses: We can see the action, hear it, feel it, dance to it, and join in with it. The Power Lab and the Organization Workshop are forms of organizational improvisation theater: beginning conditions are created, participant-actors enter the stage, and, without further instruction, they improvise. *The Terrible Dance of Power* has had several staged performances, as has *The Dance of Disempowerment*.<sup>4</sup> *The Dance of the Robust System* (62) still awaits its first performance. More recently, staged performance and interactive theater have been added to our Seeing Systems repertoire.

It is my fondest wish that you are enriched by the diversity of formats provided in this book and that the various pieces come together to help you see more clearly the many systems of which you are a part. My wish is that through your seeing systems in more depth, system life will become richer and more meaningful for you; you will have a deeper understanding of your experiences in systems; you will see new strategies for making happen what you want to have happen and what your systems need to have happen; and you will discover ways to create systems that contribute to the world and are deeply satisfying to you and other system members.

## **Acknowledgments**

I offer my thanks to some very special people who, over the years, through their encouragement, confrontation, support, and challenge, have contributed to this volume. To Steven Piersanti, for his continuing support and encouragement while gently yet unrelentingly urging me toward deeper levels of exploration. I am grateful to the Brookline Group—Lee Bolman, Dave Brown, Tim Hall, Todd Jick, Adam Kahane, Bill Kahn, and Phil Mirvis—some of whom (I for one) have been meeting monthly for over twenty-five years to nourish, comfort, and prod one another toward greater self-awareness and personal and professional growth. The Power + Systems E-Team and Power Lab staffs, past and present, have been an inspiration, demonstrating the possibilities of high-commitment learning and performance teams. I am buoyed by the hundreds of Organization Workshop trainers who are

carrying this work to organizations and institutions around the globe. Warner Burke and Vlad Dupre offered unwavering support for my early, formative, and not always elegant work during their tenures at the National Training Laboratories. Mike McNair, Perviz Randeria, Leigh Wilkinson, and Barry Johansen provided critical readings of early drafts of this book. I thank Edwin Mayhew for a delightful collaborative relationship as we developed workshop designs that led to the Organization Workshop, Fritz Steele and Joe Meier for our partnership during the early days of the Power Lab, and Bob DuBrul for his pioneering work in putting Middle Integration theory into practice. The entire staff of the Craigville Conference Center—housekeeping, kitchen, grounds, directors, and front office—has worked diligently with us since 1972 to create the environment in which Power Labs have flourished. I have been blessed by unstinting love from my daughters, Leslie Perreault and Karen Kennedy, whose estimates of my abilities have far exceeded my own and have therefore given me high standards to aim for. A deep bow of admiration, gratitude, and love to Karen Ellis Oshry, my partner in all aspects of life, who has labored mightily by my side, tolerating my moods and reading and critiquing more variations of this work than any human being should ever be made to endure. And finally, I am indebted to the many thousands of people who have participated in our Power Labs and Organization Workshops and who have allowed me to be with them, observe them, and interview them as they wrestled with the challenges of system life. They came to me as students, but so much of the contents of this book I have learned from them.

As the Talmud says: From all my teachers I have learned. I thank you all for your contributions yet hold none of you responsible for the contents of this work.

Barry Oshry  
Boston, Massachusetts  
February 2007

# Scene 1

## When We Don't See the Big Picture

---

### 1 Pinball

Sometimes life in the organization feels like a game of pinball,  
and we're the little metal ball.

We start each day launched into a mysterious world of  
bumpers  
lights  
bells  
and whistles.

Lights flash on  
and off.

Buzzers sound.

Gates open  
and close,  
sometimes propelling us at high speed to some other center  
of the action,  
and sometimes letting us drop quietly  
into a hole.

All of this is a mystery to us.  
Is this just a set of random events?

Or is there some grand scheme  
known to others, but not to us?  
One day we hit a bumper.  
Lights flash.  
Bells ring.  
Big numbers go up on the scoreboard.  
The next day we keep an eye out for that bumper.  
We hit it.  
Nothing. A dull thud.  
And we continue, puzzled, along our way.

Some days there's lots of action  
and big scores.  
Other days there's lots of action  
but not much of a score to show for it.  
And other days there's very little of either.  
At the end of the day—  
lots of action  
or little,  
high scores  
or low—  
we drop through the final gate, heading home.  
Sometimes we're impressed with our accomplishments,  
sometimes depressed by our failures,  
sometimes we're dreading the next launch,  
sometimes we're champing at the bit for the next game.  
And most times,  
as we slide past the gate heading home,  
we pause momentarily to reflect:

NOW WHAT WAS THAT ALL ABOUT?

**2**

## The Manager of the Heart

**Suggestion:** *You might enjoy reading this piece to a group of supervisors or middle managers; see if they know what it is like to be “The Manager of the Heart.”*

Life in the organization may feel like a game of pinball,  
but the organization itself works more like the human body,  
everything neatly connected to everything else.

However, when we don’t see the whole,  
it can all feel like one chaotic mess.

Take the Manager of the Heart.

At times it’s a peaceful job.

A nice even supply of fresh blood comes in from the lungs.

All engines pump smoothly: Lub . . . dub . . . lub . . . dub.

Oh-oh! EMERGENCY! EMERGENCY!

Bells ring.

Buzzers sound.

Messengers come bursting into your office:  
chemical messengers from the bloodstream,  
electrical messengers from nerve endings.

Who are these guys? Where do they get their information?

Who gives them the authority to tell you what to do?

“What emergency?” you ask. “Where?”

“THERE’S NO TIME TO EXPLAIN!” say the Big Shot  
Messengers.

“JUST START SOME HEAVY PUMPING!”

So you tell your people: “FULL AHEAD ON THE  
PUMPS!”

You've got a good crew;  
in no time they've got those pumps working away at full  
capacity:  
LUB . . . DUB . . . LUB . . . DUB.  
You're proud of your crew. You turn to those Messengers and  
say:  
"OK. Bring on that emergency. We can handle anything!"  
But the Messengers aren't looking at you;  
they're checking their pagers.  
"Forget it," says the electrical messenger.  
"Cut back," says the chemical messenger.  
"Emergency's canceled," they say.  
*Emergency's canceled? We're just getting up a head of steam.*  
"CUT BACK! CUT BACK!" They're desperate now.  
"YOU'LL BURST SOME PIPES!"  
"What'll I tell my crew?"  
"CUT BACK!!!!"  
  
So you tell your crew.  
"It's for the good of the system," you tell them.  
"What do you want from me?" you ask them.  
"I don't make the rules around here."  
  
And then it's calm again.  
A nice even flow of blood.  
Pumps humming along: Lub . . . dub . . . lub . . . dub.  
And you start thinking.  
  
You start worrying about your crew.  
How many changes of direction can these folks take?  
Will I be able to count on them in a real emergency?

You start thinking about those Messengers,  
those Specialists,  
acting like big shots,  
giving out orders,  
all that technical mumbo jumbo.  
When was the last time any of them bloodied their hands  
opening and closing a stuck valve?

You start thinking about the Bigwigs.  
Whoever they are,  
wherever they are,  
are they just playing games with us or what?  
Maybe they know what they're doing,  
maybe they don't.  
What do they do up there all day anyhow?  
Maybe they've got the big picture,  
but what if they don't?  
What if they're just . . . crazy?

And then you start thinking about yourself:  
All this stress,  
the way you blew up at those Messengers.  
They're just doing their jobs after all.  
Maybe you're losing your cool.  
Maybe you can't cut it anymore.  
Maybe you're not half the heart you used to be.

Oh-oh! What's that sound?  
Who's that racing along the bloodstream?  
I know, I know.

**EMERGENCY! EMERGENCY!**

**3****The Mystery of the Swim**

We may not see the big picture, but that doesn't stop us from creating our own version of it.

In John Barth's "Night-Sea Journey," a "swimmer" tells us of his journey.<sup>1</sup> He is the sole survivor of what began as a horde of eager, strong, and dedicated swimmers—thousands of them, millions, maybe billions! (He's not sure how many there were.) Only he remains—exhausted and confused. The others are gone, drowned in what now seems like an endless and pointless misadventure. Some, disillusioned and hopeless, have taken their own lives.

Along the way, there were many debates among the swimmers. What was this journey about? When did it begin? Where would it end? What purpose, if any, did it serve?

Different camps with competing philosophies developed regarding the meaning of the night-sea journey. Some argued that there was no meaning to it, that it was a pointless venture, that the struggles and deaths of the swimmers were all in vain. Many from this school took their own lives out of despair.

Others believed that the meaning of the venture lay in the swim itself, that the point of the swim was to swim as best as one could for as long as one could.

Still others believed that the swim was part of some grand design that they, the swimmers, could only speculate about but never fully comprehend.

Within the grand design school, there were varying viewpoints: Some believed that the grand design was inherently good, others believed it was evil, and others believed it was neither good nor evil but that it merely existed.

But now all the others are gone; the debates, the discussions, the schools of philosophy have all drowned in the night sea. Only the narrator remains. We listen to him tell of his journey; he shares his thoughts and feelings. He is tired and confused. Should he continue the struggle or, like the others, allow himself to drown?

And as we read on, we too are confused and discomfited. The swimmer's story is an unsatisfactory one for us. The questions that plague him plague us too. What *is* this night-sea journey? Where did it begin? Where will it end? What purpose, if any, does it serve? The swimmer tells us in great detail about *his* journey, yet that is not enough for us. We need to comprehend the journey itself, the whole of which he is but a component part.

Barth never gives us the answer we seek, and without that answer, the journey remains for us an unsettling mystery.

However, if, during our reading—the first, second, or third time through—it comes to us what this night-sea journey is, we are struck with great illumination. Now, having grasped the whole, we read the story through again. What once was confusing is now crystal clear; what once seemed complex and mysterious is now simple and straightforward. The squabbles, debates, and philosophical discussions all make sense to us. *And they all seem like so much silly superstition.*<sup>2</sup>



Barth's tale is both a sly joke and a challenging message. He is less concerned with those night-sea swimmers than with us and—given our remarkable brains—our apparently unlimited capacity to create stories that explain what we really don't know. We are story-making machines; we have stories explaining everything from the mystery of life to why the boss never responded to our memo. If we realized that we were making up stories, there'd be some fun to the process and little damage. The problem comes when we believe that our stories are the truth, and we then act on the basis of that "truth."

The challenge is to be able to move past our local picture and the imperfect "truths" it generates to seeing the larger picture and the truths it reveals. First, let's look at how it usually goes—*not always, not with everyone, but with great regularity*—when, in our spatial blindness, we see the part but not the whole.

## 4

# Seeing the Local Picture

Some systems are perfectly healthy when viewed from the perspective of the whole; but when viewed from the perspective of any one part, they appear to be disorganized, chaotic, a collection of random events.

Our Heart Manager didn't have the big picture.

All she knew about was what was happening in her small piece of the system.

All she knew directly was that decisions affecting her were being made in some remote power center.

She didn't know how those decisions were being made and she didn't know whether to trust them.

She felt beleaguered by interference from a variety of staff specialists.

She was concerned with potential labor unrest among her troops,

who also did not have the big picture.

She was beset by rumors.

There was talk of a shutdown in the stomach during the emergency.

Was it true? What did it mean? Would the heart be next?

For our Heart Manager, system life was a game of pinball.

When we have a local perspective:

- Things seem a lot messier than they really are or they seem a lot neater than they really are.
- We tend to blame ourselves for things that may not be our fault or we blame others for things that may not be their fault.
- We react to rumors rather than facts.
- We tend to misinterpret events happening elsewhere in the system.

- We tend to misunderstand and misjudge others in the system:
  - We may see them as malicious, incompetent, and insensitive when in fact they are not.
  - We may see them as well-meaning and all-wise when in fact they are not.
- We are unsure about ourselves, about what to do, about how our actions fit in with the actions of others and with the whole.

When we have a local perspective, organizational life feels like a game of pinball . . . or worse.

## **5** “Stuff” Happens

We may be blind to others’ worlds,  
but this does not stop them from sending “stuff” our way.

Here you are going about your business



and then . . .  
stuff happens.

Some of the stuff that comes our way is positive, surprisingly good news:

- We get the bonus we’ve been waiting for.
- The project is accepted.

Some of the stuff that comes our way is noxious:

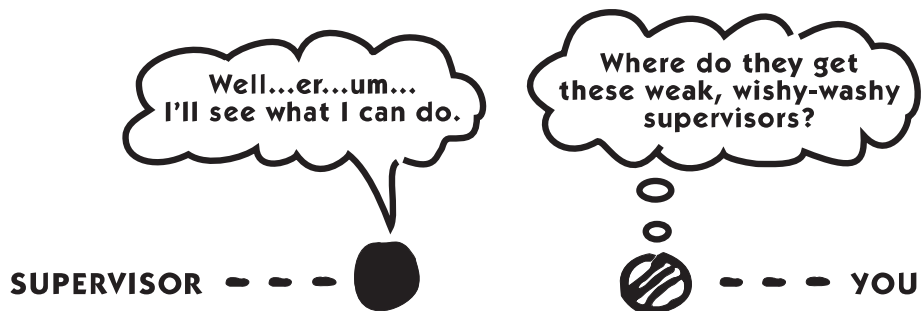
- We don’t like it.

Some of the stuff that comes our way is a mystery:

- “Why on earth are they doing that?”

And some of the stuff that comes our way is both—noxious and a mystery.

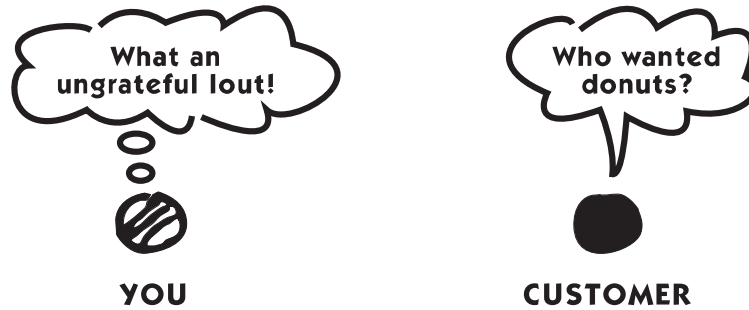
For example, you make what seems like a simple request of your supervisor, and instead of saying, “Sure thing, you can count on it, it’s coming your way,” your supervisor looks at his feet, shuffles around, and mumbles, “Uh . . . well . . . let’s see . . . er . . . well, I’ll see what I can do.” The supervisor’s reaction is stuff coming your way. Noxious and a mystery. And you react: *It was just a simple request! Where do they get these weak wishy-washy supervisors?*



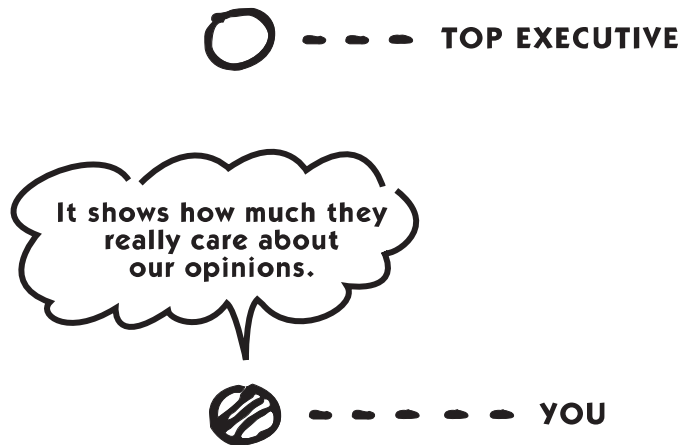
You go to your workers with a proposal you think they will be enthusiastic about, and instead, they put up a wall of resistance. Their resistance is stuff heading your way. Noxious and a mystery. And your reaction: *I just don't get it; what is the matter with these people?*



You know that your customer is upset, so you make a gesture to soothe the customer's feelings, and instead of appreciation, the customer replies with anger and sarcasm. More stuff heading your way. And your reaction: *How did these customers get to be so nasty?*



You send a memo to your Top Executive, making what you feel are valuable suggestions for improving the operation. Weeks go by, and there is no response to your memo. More stuff. (Physicists would probably refer to this as “minus stuff.”) And you react: *Those Tops, they talk the talk, but don't walk the walk.*



So stuff comes at us regularly—noxious stuff, mysterious stuff, minus stuff. And how do we react to stuff (*not always, not everyone, but with great regularity*)?

1. *We make up stories that explain the stuff.* Our brains don't like mysteries, so in the absence of knowledge about other people's worlds, we quickly fill the void with our stories about them. We create our

myths about their motives, and because we don't see ourselves making up stories, we see our stories as the truth.

2. *We evaluate others.* In our stories, we see them as malicious, insensitive, or incompetent.
3. *We take the stuff personally.* We experience it as if it is aimed at us and intended to hurt or block us.
4. *We react to the stuff.* We get mad, we get even, we withdraw.
5. *We lose focus.* If we had started off with some good intention, we quickly lose interest in that good intention, and instead our focus is on the stuff, our stories about what lies behind the stuff, and our emotions.
6. Our actions then become the stuff for others. They make up their myths about us—about *our* motives and competencies. They take our actions personally and react to us—getting mad, getting even, withdrawing—and on and on it goes when we do not see the worlds of others.
7. And if there had been any hope of creating partnership with one another, those hopes are diminished if not evaporated.

**Reflection:** *As you know yourself, when stuff happens that is noxious or a mystery, about how long does it take you to run through the above list? [Hint: Some readers measure their reaction time in nanoseconds.]*

## Scene 2

# From Spatial Blindness to Spatial Sight

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**W**hat if, instead of making up stories,  
we could know the real story?

What if, instead of seeing only the local picture,  
we were able to see the whole picture?

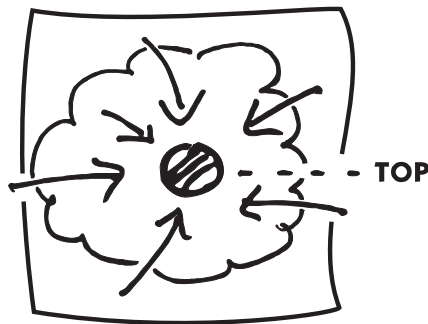
What if, instead of reacting to stuff,  
we could see the context behind that stuff?

This is the possibility of spatial sight.

## 6 Seeing Context

In organizations, much of the time we think we are dealing person-to-person when in fact we are dealing context-to-context.

### Tops Surviving in a World of Complexity and Accountability

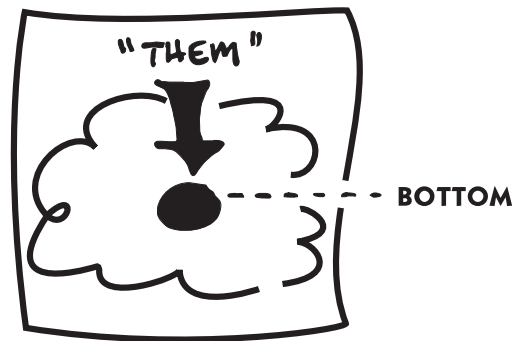


When interacting with *Tops*, we are not just dealing person to person; we are dealing with people living—sometimes struggling to survive—in a world of **complexity** and **accountability**—lots of issues to deal with, difficult issues, unpredictable issues, issues they thought were taken care of that keep coming back, as well as issues regarding the direction, culture, growth, and structure of the system. And *Tops* are accountable for the successes and failures of the system.

If we are able to see into Top’s world, we may have a better sense of what happened to our memo to the top executive suggesting improvements in the operation—why we got no response. It may be that Top experienced our well-intentioned suggestion as just one more complication in an already overcomplicated life. It’s also possible that Top, feeling responsible for the overall operation, experienced our cavalierly offered suggestion as a criticism.

It may also be that if we see Top’s world more clearly, we can come up with smarter strategies for getting our proposals heard. Can we come across in a way that is seen as reducing the complexity of Top’s world rather than increasing it? Can we come across in a way that communicates that we share responsibility for the system?

### **Bottoms Surviving in a World of Invisibility and Vulnerability**



When interacting with *Bottoms*, we are not just dealing person to person, we are dealing with people living—sometimes struggling to survive—in a world of **invisibility** and **vulnerability**. They often are not seen by higher-ups, and higher-ups can influence their lives in major and minor ways:

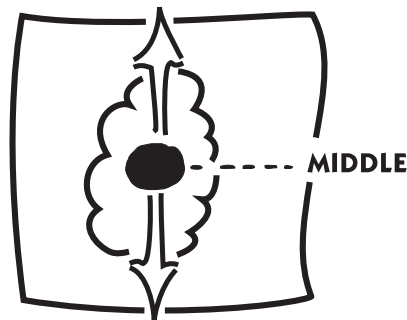
- They change pension and health-care plans
- They reorganize
- They shut down plants

- They come up with new initiatives
- They acquire new entities
- They divest themselves of others

And all of this happens *to* Bottoms.

If we are able to see into Bottom’s world, we may have a better idea of why our workers greeted our initiative with a wall of resistance. Given that higher-ups are always doing things *to* them, it’s easy to see how our initiative was experienced as just another case of “Them doing it to us again.” And if we see into Bottom’s world more clearly, it may be that we can come up with better strategies for gaining involvement. How can we acknowledge their experience of vulnerability? And how can we position our initiative such that it reduces rather than increases that vulnerability?

#### Middles Surviving in a Tearing World



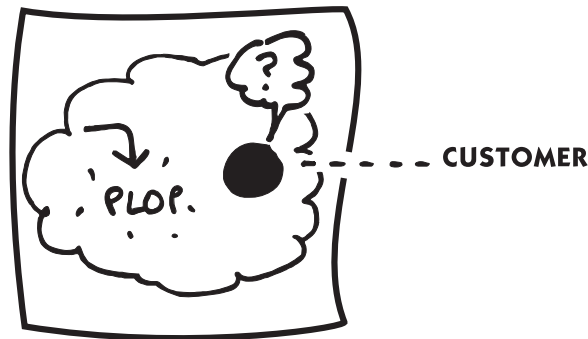
When interacting with *Middles*,  
 we are not just dealing person to person;  
 we are dealing with someone living in—sometimes struggling  
 to survive in—a **tearing** world.  
 They are pulled between you and others.  
 What you want from them, they don’t have;  
 they need to go to others to get it.  
 And what others want from them,  
 they need to come to you to get.

They experience “simple” requests *from* you or others as complex tearing *between* you and others.

If we are able to see into Middle’s world, we have a better understanding of why our supervisor’s response was so weak and wishy-washy. Because Middle doesn’t have what we asked for, and because Middle would have to go to someone else to get it, it’s crystal clear to us that our “simple” request is not so simple in that Middle world. It’s easy to see how our request creates *more tearing* on Middle.

And if we are able to see into Middle’s world, we might come up with more effective strategies for working with Middle to get what we need. How can we acknowledge the tearing on Middle, rather than poking fun at it or making it worse? How can we support Middle in getting what we need? How can we reduce the tearing rather than increase it?

#### Customers Surviving in a World of Neglect



When interacting with *Customers*, we are not just dealing person to person; we are dealing with people living in—and sometimes struggling to survive in—a world of **neglect**.

They are not getting the attention they feel they deserve;  
they are shunted from one person to another;  
products and services are not coming to them as fast as they  
want, at the level of quality they want, and at a satisfactory  
price.

[“PLOP” is the sound of product or service not quite making  
it to you.]

And if we are able to see into Customer’s world, we have a better understanding of why our Customer reacted to our nice gesture with anger and sarcasm. Customer was not interested in a tour of the facility. Customer was not interested in coffee and donuts. Customer was not interested in completing our customer satisfaction questionnaire. Customer was only interested in quality service, and quality service was not forthcoming. It’s easy to see how Customer experienced all of our nice gestures as *more neglect*.

And if we are able to see our Customer’s situation, we may be better able to develop the relationship both we and Customer want. How do we decrease Customer’s experience of neglect rather than increase it?



In the story to follow, we can see how the same configuration of events can be experienced differently depending on one’s systemic “world.”

**7****The “Truth” About Jack**

*An old proverb says: “We see people not as they are but as we are.” To which we add: “And who we are is shaped by the systemic context in which we exist.”*

Jack is fired.

Jack’s manager says,

“Jack was a pain in the butt, always complaining. The reorganization worked out perfectly. We no longer had any need for him. When I learned he was causing trouble for his group, that was the perfect opportunity to let him go. I asked the Tops if I could fire him, and they said go ahead.”

One of Jack’s coworkers says,

“I liked Jack. We were a tight group. I never saw him do anything wrong, nothing that would warrant firing. When I learned he was fired, I was scared: If they could fire him for whatever he did, then I wasn’t safe either.”

Jack’s manager says,

“I was under pressure from the Tops. They were looking to me for production. There were Customers to satisfy, contracts to be signed, work to be done. The other group members were ready to work, but not Jack. Whenever I came to the group with work to be done, Jack always had these issues he needed to talk about. I just couldn’t get the work done with him around.”

A Customer says,

“When I learned that Jack was fired, I hired him immediately. I needed some creative help on my project and wasn’t getting it. I never experienced Jack as a troublemaker. While working for me, he was a dedicated, hard-working, creative employee. As for the firing, all Jack ever wanted was respect. What was wrong with that?”

Jack says,

“In the beginning, the Manager asked us to come up with some creative ideas on a project. We put a lot of energy into that, and then we

learned that the decision had been made and the Customer hadn't even heard our ideas. Then the Manager tells us we've been put on a new project. We start on that project, only to learn there's a reorganization and our group is being broken up. It's crazy, and I'm frustrated. I want us all to talk about what's been happening to us. But the Manager says there's no time for that; there's work to be done, and the reorganization to be implemented. Finally, I'm given a new job: I'm going to do the design work for all the groups. I like that; it seems like a good assignment; I'm ready to go. Then I look around and see that all the groups are doing their own design work! I'm bewildered and totally frustrated. The next thing I know, I'm fired."

A second member of Jack's group says (sheepishly),

"I made a mistake. I was in the men's room and I made a casual comment to the Manager about Jack being a problem. It was a joke, nothing serious. Jack wasn't any big problem for us, but you could see that he was aggravating the Manager. I made a joke about it—something to say in the men's room. I never dreamt it would lead to this."

Jack's Manager says,

"That was all I needed."

A Top says to Jack's Manager,

"You think firing Jack was your idea? The Tops had already made the decision to fire him. Here we were running around like crazy trying to keep this organization afloat. Every time I pass this guy in the hall—I mean every time—he's got some complaint: his equipment, the temperature, his work assignment, the Manager. Every time I pass him, it's another complaint. When you came into the office, we had already made the decision to fire him."

So what is the truth about Jack?

Is he a troublemaker? Or is he a regular group member not much different from the rest? Is he a whining complainer the organization would best be rid of? Or is he an innocent, frustrated victim of management ineptitude? And what about that dedicated, hard-working, creative employee the Customer saw? Is that the real Jack?

The truth about Jack? Well, it depends as much on the conditions of your world as it does on who he is.

- In the world of a harried Top overwhelmed by complexity and accountability, the truth is that Jack is an unnecessary complication.
- In the world of a Middle torn between pressures from above and below, the truth is that Jack’s “simple request for conversation” is more unwelcome tearing.
- In the world of Jack’s associate group members who share his condition of invisibility and vulnerability, the truth is that Jack is an OK guy not much different from the rest.
- In the world of a Customer starved for service, the truth is that Jack is the answer to his prayers.

Jack was fired. To what effect? Again, it depends on where you stand.

The firing simplified the life of Tops,  
it reduced the tearing of Middles,  
it heightened the vulnerability of Bottoms,  
and it resulted in much-needed service for the Customer.  
But doesn’t this tell us more about the others’ worlds than it  
does about Jack?

## **8** Charlotte Is a Problem

*What difference would it make if we could see “stuff” from a systemic lens rather than a personal one?*

Charlotte hates her job. She sees the company president as distant, arrogant, and uncaring. Charlotte’s supervisor sees Charlotte as surly and uncooperative; “not a team player” is how he described it in her performance evaluation.

It wasn't always this way. Let's see where this problem started.

Some months ago, something was bothering Charlotte, something about the workflow that had been causing redundancy, misallocation of resources, costly errors, and diminished productivity. On her own, she did a careful study of the situation and, convinced that she was onto something, she spent her evenings writing a detailed report that included her observations, the apparent costs to the system, evidence of mismanagement (she was a bit caustic here), and her vision of how the workflow should be structured, along with the steps she felt would turn things around and ensure success. In the end, this was a detailed report, meticulously done, twenty-five single-spaced pages, with charts and graphs. Charlotte was proud of her work and the fact that she did this at her own initiative and on her own time, and she was truly excited about making a positive contribution to the organization.

Charlotte finished her report and sent it off to the company president. Then she waited. And she waited. Certainly there would be a phone call, a meeting, some acknowledgment of her contribution, maybe a bonus; even a promotion wouldn't have been out of the question. Something. But nothing came.

A week went by. Two weeks. Still nothing. Hope waned, and bitterness began to settle in. *Those executives*, she thought; *they go off to these programs on partnership or leadership or empowerment; they learn all the right words, but in the end it doesn't mean anything. It's more of the same old arrogance of top management. They really don't care.*

That marked the end of Charlotte as a highly motivated worker. Now she's angry; she has her evaluations (all negative) of the president; she is feeling righteous—*I did the right thing and what did it get me?* She's lost interest in pursuing her productivity project, and she is not averse to sharing her feelings with her coworkers.



Not to let the president off the hook, but Charlotte did have a choice: to play in the Side Show or the Center Ring.

**"S** tuff" happens;

you can take it personally

or treat it systemically;

one takes you to the Side Show,

the other to the Center Ring.

## 9

## Center Ring or Side Show?

Organizational life (all of life) is a circus  
with stuff coming at us from many directions—  
noxious stuff,  
mysterious stuff,  
minus stuff.

In the circus of life we have two choices:

We can head for the Side Show

or stay in the Center Ring .

In the Side Show

we take the actions of others personally.

This brings us:

- Lots of drama, attractive stories with good parts for *us*—we are either the hero of our story or the poor, blameless victim of those bad guys
- Plenty of excuses why we don't have to do anything
- Plenty of righteous indignation

It also results in:

- Wasted, misdirected energy
- Loss of potential partnerships
- Diminished contributions to the system

Or

we can head for the Center Ring

where we take others' worlds into account.

What are *they* dealing with?

In the Center Ring:

- We have more understanding of others' worlds, more empathy with them.

- We may be less quick to judge others, to see them as malicious, insensitive, incompetent.
- We don't get hooked by the stuff; we don't let it stop us.
- We stay focused on what it is we are trying to make happen.
- We are strategic; we take others' worlds into account.
- We ease the condition of others to make it possible for them to do what we need them to do.
- We work to create or remain in productive partnerships with others.

Questions to think about:

1. Why do we spend so much time in the Side Show?
2. What are the system consequences of the Side Show?

**Reflection:** *Just think about some situation, present or past, in which you are or have been in the Side Show. You have fallen out of partnership with another person. You have your story that explains the situation. There's a lot of emotion wrapped up in that story. Your role is clear; you are the blameless one (hero or victim). Now ask yourself: what would you have to give up or let go of to move from the Side Show to the Center Ring?*

Seeing systems is not simply a minor shift in behavior. The Side Show is simple, reflexive: We're OK, and there's no further action we need to take. The Center Ring challenges us: Can we let go of our story? Can we let go of our evaluation of the Other? Can we let go of our righteousness? Can we stay in the process rather than ending it? Can we be strategic rather than reactive? When we choose the Center Ring, we choose a different order of *being* for ourselves.

The Side Show is predictable, but it is not inevitable.

The Center Ring is not predictable, but it is a human possibility.

How can we see the big picture in our day-to-day system life within the context of our family, our work group, our organization? It may be that life needs to imitate art. Let me share with you a dilemma I experienced in the early days of the Organization Workshop. We would set up the organization—with Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers—and turn it loose. Action would break out all over the place—interactions within groups and across groups. I would run anxiously from place to place with my yellow pad, trying to track the action. After all, I was the one who set up this exercise (the Top), so it was important that I understand what was happening in order to help others learn from it.

It was impossible. I couldn't keep up with the action; too much was happening in too many different locations. And even if I could see it all—which I couldn't—there was important information that was invisible to me. *I had no access to people's experiences*—what were they thinking and feeling? How were they experiencing their worlds? How were they experiencing people in other parts of the system? Eventually we solved the problem by creating the Time Out of Time (TOOT). And having created it, it became clear that *it was less important that I saw what was happening throughout the system than that all system members saw it*. So let's see how the TOOT works.

### **“Stuff” Happens!**

The exercise begins . . . and “stuff” happens everywhere. Tops are feeling overwhelmed: Customers looking to them for service; Middles looking for information and direction; basic issues about the organization that need to be decided. Middles are pressed by their Bottoms for information and direction that Middles don't have. Bottoms aren't getting the direction or feedback or the big picture. Customers aren't getting the attention they need. Work on projects gets started, is taken away, and disappears into a black hole. The organization appears to be disjointed (Middles can't get their act together, there are inconsistencies in reward systems). Some projects are drawing lots of attention, others are getting little or none. Tops are invisible to Bottoms, who wonder what, if anything, Tops do. Reorganizations happen, and many wonder

*Why?* Bottoms are wondering *What, if anything, is the added value of Middles?* Tops are deluged by demands coming from every direction; Bottoms get bonuses they feel they don't deserve, or they don't get bonuses they feel they *do* deserve. It's another day in the whitewater. Emotions run the full gamut—from excitement and challenge to anger, despair, hopelessness, apathy. And then it's time to TOOT.

We stop the organization, bring all the players into one place, and ask them to describe for one another what life is like in their part of the system: *Describe your world for us. What are the issues you are dealing with? What are you feeling? How are you seeing other parts of the system? Are they helping you or hindering you?*

First we hear from the Tops, then the Bottoms, then the Middles, and finally the Customers. Each part of the system begins to elucidate its world for the benefit of the others. Together they begin to illuminate the whole.

The TOOTs are an impactful part of the workshop. They are clearly the antidotes to spatial blindness. It is as if someone has turned on the lights for the entire system. Myths about others begin to shatter. The worker who was so evaluative of the Middle gains a better appreciation of the dilemmas Middle lives with; Tops hear firsthand about the frustrations of Bottoms; everyone hears the frustrations of Customers; the processes within groups are illuminated—the turf issues developing among the Tops, the inability of Middles to get together, the *me* versus *them* mentality developing among the Bottoms.

We set two basic guidelines for the TOOTs. *Tell the truth* (paint a picture for us; you are our experts on your part of the system; there is no other way for us to know what your world is like) and *listen carefully to others* (don't argue or debate, just let it in).

The TOOT's success depends on these two conditions:

- Are people willing and able to tell the truth of their experiences? In highly political systems in which people are committed to keeping secrets from one another, TOOTs will not work. Likewise, the quality of TOOTs suffers when people are unable to get in touch with or share their experiences.
- Are people willing and able to let in and accept as valid the experiences of others? The value of the TOOT will be diminished if people are committed to maintaining their stereotypes of others even in the face of disconfirming evidence.

When those two conditions are met, the results can be astounding.  
Some outcomes:

- 1. Illumination.** People are intrinsically interested in moving beyond their narrow perspective to see “the big picture” and their part in it.
- 2. Empathy.** People begin to have more empathy, understanding, and patience with one another. They are less quick to judge and slip into the Side Show.
- 3. Depersonalization.** As people begin to see the contexts of others’ actions—the issues they are dealing with—they are less apt to take these actions personally. They realize: *This is not an act directed against me.*
- 4. Revitalization.** Instead of reacting to others—getting mad at them, getting even with them, withdrawing—people are more apt to stay in the Center Ring and put more of their energy into the work of the system.
- 5. Problem solving.** Although it is *not* the purpose of the TOOT to solve problems, problems *are* identified—Tops are not getting the information they need, Customers are dissatisfied, efforts are being duplicated—and often, following the TOOT, these problems are addressed and dealt with *from any place in the system, not just by Tops.*
- 6. Strategic planning.** As people begin to understand others’ worlds, they see how their own actions have made it difficult for others to cooperate with them, and they see how they might get what they need by *easing* rather than exacerbating the conditions of others.

The organizational transformation following a TOOT is usually remarkable—more cooperation, less finger-pointing, more energy directed to the business of the system—and it all happens not through problem-solving but by simply illuminating one another’s worlds.

There is another factor at play here. Following the TOOT, there is a brief, prepared (on newsprint or PowerPoint) conceptual input describing the worlds of Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers pretty much as it has been described earlier in this section. This presentation maps closely the experiences people just had in the TOOT. This raises ques-

tions: *How is that possible? The presentation was prepared ahead of time, yet it described what we just went through.* In the midst of the action, what may have felt personal and specific to our situation couldn't have been personal or specific. If it were, how did *our* unique experiences get on that presentation? In such moments, there is the potential for a fundamental breakthrough: what happened to us was not personal and not specific; it can only be understood and managed systemically.

## **The TOOT Challenge**

TOOTs are a possibility within most systems—the family, the work group, the plant, the business unit. Even when we work side by side with others, we are often blind to their experiences. We see the externals but not the internals; we see others' actions but not their thoughts and feelings.

The TOOT is a simple and powerful way to see the systems of which we are a part. All that is required is that we come together, share our experiences, and listen to the experiences of others.

What I appreciate most about the TOOT is that it is not prescriptive—you do not tell people what they should or should not do. I believe that people react positively to *not* being told what to do. The TOOT illuminates the system and, in that clarity, people see new choices. And the choices are theirs to make. Once we see clearly, most of us will do the right thing.

Our situation changes from one of blind reflex to enlightened choice.

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## **TOOT Guidelines**

1. **EVERYONE SHOWS UP.** It is important that all relevant parties be at the TOOT. Whether you are satisfied or dissatisfied, ready for new challenges or ready to quit, your experience is relevant to the TOOT. Come and be prepared to share your experience.

2. **NO BUSINESS.** The TOOT is not a staff meeting; it is not a time to solve problems (although what comes out at the TOOT often leads to subsequent problem solving). The purpose of the TOOT is to illuminate the system for all, so everyone can be clearer about the whole: What issues are people facing throughout the system?
3. **TELL THE TRUTH.** You are the expert on your part of the system. The rest of us are dependent on you to let us know what life is like for you: What is your world? What issues are you dealing with? What are your feelings?
4. **LISTEN CAREFULLY TO OTHERS.** Be open to the experiences of others. Discover their worlds, their feelings, the issues they are facing.

## 11

## The TOOT Dilemma

The TOOT is like turning a light on in a dark room when you thought the light was *already* on.

The TOOT confronts us with a dilemma:

We can listen to these others,  
try to understand their worlds,  
empathize with them,  
work with them,  
see them as OK people—  
like us—  
take their worlds into account,  
try to ease their condition  
just as we would like them to ease ours.

Or

we can stick with our story.

Our story may be more appealing than the TOOT story,  
more dramatic,  
bad guys (them),  
good guys (us),  
the blamed  
and the blameless.

This is the tension the TOOT creates:

Our story  
against Its story,  
judgment  
against empathy,  
blame  
against understanding,  
reaction  
against thought,  
“Them”  
against “all of us,”  
good guys and bad guys  
against just plain folks.

This is the tension of seeing systems.

You want to see your system?

Try TOOTs.

The challenge is this:

Are you willing to tell the truth?

Are you willing to listen to others?

Are you willing to give up *your* story  
for Its story?

# Scene 1

## Relational Blindness

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### 17 What About All the Drama?

She says she's a scientist, a student of organization. She's been interviewing me now for several hours. I've been telling her all about this organization—about my boss, my work, our special High Zest Initiative, the meetings I had today, our new products, the current challenges. As I'm talking, I'm struck by one thing: *she's not taking any notes*. What kind of scientist is this? But I go on. I tell her the details: the battles I'm having with Charley, the various personality quirks of all the players—the bosses, the managers, the supervisors, the workers. Still no notes. I tell her about our new Instant Gratification Plan for customers. No notes. Then I review minute-by-minute all of the events of the day and the week. Then we go over the year. Still no notes. Then it's over.

“Is that all?” she says.

“That's about it,” I say.

She takes out her clipboard and checks off one box.

“What's that?” I ask.

“My summary,” she answers.

“Your summary?” I exclaim. “One check mark!”

“That's it,” she says.

“What have you checked?” I ask.

“DBR,” she says.

“DBR?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“After all the details I gave you? All the drama. The personality sketches. The crises. The breakthroughs. That’s all you have to say. DBR?” I ask incredulously.

“Yes, that covers it pretty well.”

“Well, just what is this DBR?” I ask.

“It’s the Dance of Blind Reflex,” she says. “And thank you very much.”

## 18 The Dance of Blind Reflex

- Check here if DBR. (See definition below.)
- Check here if *chronic* DBR. (Pattern persists throughout all seasons and despite frequent reorganizations and other shuffling of personnel.)
- Check here if *episodic* DBR. (Other patterns prevail, but when trouble hits, the organization falls into DBR.)

### Executive Summary

In the Dance of Blind Reflex:

- Tops feel *burdened* by unmanageable complexity.
- Bottoms feel *oppressed* by insensitive higher-ups.
- Middles feel *torn*—they become weak, confused, fractionated, with no minds of their own.
- Customers feel *righteously done-to* (screwed) by an unresponsive system.
- All of the players fall to see their part in creating any of the above

## **Burdened Tops**

- Tops feel *burdened* by overwhelming complexity and responsibility.
- There is too much to do and not enough time to do it.
- There are fast-moving, ever-changing, unpredictable conditions to deal with.
- Tops receive incomplete information, yet decisions must be made. They make decisions but are not sure whether they are the right decisions. They set priorities but are not sure that they are the right priorities.
- Tops feel a heavy responsibility for the system; so many people's fates—and the fate of the organization—rest in their hands.
- Tops look to Middles for support but feel they don't get the support they need. Tops can't get their initiatives down through their Middles; they can't get consistent information up from their Middles; they feel their Middles are too dependent, not entrepreneurial enough.
- Tops feel isolated and out of touch with much of the system.
- There are many important issues Tops know they should be dealing with—visions, missions, long-range planning, employee initiatives—but with all the firefighting, there just never seems to be the time. Tops wake regularly in the night thinking of things they should be doing.

## **Oppressed Bottoms**

- Bottoms feel *oppressed* in the system.
- Others (higher-ups) make decisions that affect their lives in major and minor ways—reorganizations happen to them. Initiatives come and go. Health and retirement benefits are diminished; plants are closed. Work forces are reduced (“They” call it “rightsizing,” but Bottoms know better).
- Bottoms feel unseen and uncared for. They see things that are wrong with their situation and with the organization that higher-ups ought be fixing but aren't.

- Bottoms feel isolated in the system: they don't have the big picture, there is no vision they can commit to, they don't see how their work fits into the whole, they don't get feedback on their work.
- Tops are invisible to them except for ceremonial acts (like Christmas visits), which seem patronizing.
- Bottoms feel that Middles add little value—they are uninformed; they may be well-meaning, but they are powerless; they are inconsistent and uneven. (*Why can't those Middles get their act together?*) Even Bottoms who feel central to the system's work—they are skilled, knowledgeable, experienced—feel vulnerable. Anything can happen!
- Much of Bottoms' energy is focused on “Them” (higher-ups); Bottoms are angry at “Them,” frustrated by “Them,” resentful of “Them,” disappointed with “Them.”

### **Torn Middles**

- Middles feel *torn* by the system—they feel weak, confused, and powerless.
- They are pulled between the often conflicting needs, requests, demands, and priorities of those above them and those below them.
- Middles are “loners” in the system—not connected with Tops or Bottoms, and not really connected with one another. Thus each Middle faces the stresses of the system alone, unsupported by others.
- Middles are often seen by others as confused and wishy-washy, as having no firm opinions of their own. And Middles have no independence of thought and action; they don't know who they are.

Some Middles seek their identity by aligning themselves with Tops, internalizing their goals and wishes. They become more Top than Top, thereby alienating themselves from Bottoms.

Other Middles align themselves with Bottoms, identifying with them and championing their causes, and thus alienating themselves from Tops (who don't see them as sufficiently “managerial”).

Still other Middles bureaucratize themselves, creating such hurdles and hoops for others to jump over and through that others tend to avoid them as much as possible.

Finally, there are those Middles who, in trying to be fair, responsive, and even-handed with both Tops and Bottoms—and with all others who make demands on them—simply burn out in the effort.

- Middles receive little positive feedback; they are never doing quite enough for anybody. In time, many Middles internalize this feedback. (“Maybe I’m not as competent as I thought I was.”)

### **Righteously Done-to Customers**

- Customers feel *righteously done-to*.
- They are stunned to find that the system treats them more as problems than as opportunities.
- They feel ignored and inadequately attended to. Promises made; promises broken. Explanations. Delays. Excuses. Everything except the quality service they feel they deserve.
- Customers see the system as focused more on itself than on them.
- When Customers make what seem to them to be reasonable requests or demands, they are greeted with hostility, as if they are at fault.
- Sometimes, frustrated Customers:
  - Lower their standards and accept what was previously an unacceptable level of quality
  - Fool themselves into believing that low-quality service really is acceptable
  - Threaten to take their business elsewhere
  - Do take their business elsewhere
  - Take their business elsewhere, only to find out that they get the same poor service wherever they go
- Customers feel frustrated, angry, betrayed, powerless.

## **How Do Those Inside the System Explain Their Condition?**

Blame is freely shared:

- Bottoms blame their condition on insensitive, callous, uncaring, out-of-touch higher-ups.
- Tops blame their condition on the complexity of the world they are dealing with.
- Middles blame their condition on the conflicting demands of the middle job.
- Customers blame their condition on self-absorbed, insensitive delivery systems.
- Everyone feels justified.
- No one sees his or her part in creating any of this.

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**“So, that’s all there is to my rich and complex life?” he asks. “A single check beside DBR?”**

**“That’s it,” she says.**

**“But my life seems so unique, so special, so beautifully chaotic.”**

**“That’s how it feels from the inside, but from the outside—”**

**“It’s just DBR.”**

**“Exactly,” she says.**

**“Scary,” he says.**