

The New Johari Window

#19: Quadrant Two: The Blind/Opaque Area

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When first presenting the Johari Window, Joe Luft knew that he wasn't breaking new ground in declaring that people have a "blind" side to them – that we are not always aware of how other people see us. He was fully aware that many authors and observers of the human condition remarked about this "blind side" years before he did:ⁱ

The curious idea that man is unable to see clearly and understand a good part of himself despite his intelligence and self-consciousness has been voiced by William James and by poets and philosophers centuries before Freud. The graphic analogy for Freud was the iceberg; man's mind was mostly submerged, only a small part appearing above the waterline. Quadrant 2 shows roughly the same picture with the added detail that some of man's behavior and his motives are known to others and not to himself.

Joe Luft's analysis and his Original Window are unique in that this "blind" self is juxtaposed with and dynamically interrelated to the three other selves: public, private and unknown.

The Power of Quad Two

Let me illustrate the power of Luft's interplay of Quad Two (Blind Self) with the other three selves by offering a case study. I recently coached a man who has been successful at "turning around" failing organizations. He does so by being "tough" or even "ruthless." Joseph (to use a pseudonym) knows that this is the case and lives with the "reality" of being the one who makes the hard decisions. He sets aside his own personal feelings and sacrifices interpersonal relationships for the good of the organization (in this case, CMC Products) for which he is working. However, as other people with whom he works get to know him better, these attitudes about Joseph tend to change.

Joseph's colleagues see the "softer" side of Joseph. They see that the decisions Joseph must make weigh heavily on him. If they are particularly astute, they observe that Joseph's seeming arrogance and frequent withdrawal from interpersonal relationships is really a symptom of his personal despair and depression – his unhappiness about always being the "realist", the hatchet man, the one who says "no." His co-workers observe the quite different way that Joseph relates to members of his family when they show up at the office. They see the remarkable patience and care that he shows for two young men and one young woman he is mentoring. These three promising employees enjoy weekly luncheons with Joseph, where they freely talk about their own careers and their vision regarding the kind of organization that CMC can become.

Joseph doesn't know that he is seen in this shifting way by people with whom he works. He thinks they always see him as the "mean machine" and assume that they work hard out of fear rather than respect for him and the CMC Company. It is only after he received feedback I obtained from his co-workers (through confidential interviews and a descriptive questionnaire) that he came to realize that this shift was really happening. It was hard for Joseph to accept this feedback – even though it was positive. Any self-concept is hard to change, even if it is being changed in a very positive way.

Furthermore, for Joseph the feedback seemed to reveal his vulnerability and his ambivalence about making the tough decisions. It was only after extensive coaching that Joseph could begin to accept and more clearly see and appreciate this formerly opaque transformation in the perceptions of his co-workers. One of the consequences of this increased insight was that Joseph could more readily share the burden of being the "tough guy." Other people could say "no" and he could sometimes say "yes." He was no longer (as the British School would say) "sucked" into a specific, stifling role. Joseph now had more interpersonal freedom – and less depression.

We are eternally vulnerable to other people when we have blind spots about our own behavior. Joseph was aware of this vulnerability. Knowing he is blind or partially blind helps Joseph a great deal, but, as Joe Luft notes, this doesn't resolve the dilemma. "Knowing that others have blind areas and that they see themselves through opaque lens helps a bit more, but still does not remove the predicament."ⁱⁱ Luft offers a partial solution to this dilemma. He begins this analysis by asking a few fundamental questions:ⁱⁱⁱ

. . . how do I deal with the embarrassing prospect? The answer of course is to get on with the major curriculum, to learn to "know thyself." How do I begin? The subject, me, is so simple, yet complicated, where do I start? Can I learn about the things I don't know about myself that others seem to see so clearly, without hurting them or myself? I know a few things about others of which they are unaware – will I have to spill all in order to get them to level with me? Won't this change my relationship with them?

At this point Luft suggests that we will often opt for caution and leave Quad Two material alone:^{iv}

Why are people so hypocritical; if they know something why don't they speak out? The truth won't hurt, or will it? Perhaps it would be better all around to simply ignore the blind areas and to agree to deal only with what is in the open for all parties concerned. I see no point in embarrassing people by letting them know I know something about them of which they are unaware. After all, we are not barbarians. A man should live and let live by learning how to behave diplomatically. Tact will do the job. Learn to be discrete and tactful and this whole unpleasant half blind affair can be dropped.

However, Luft doesn't let us off the hook at this point. He suggests that the Blind areas in our psyche will inevitable create problems for us: "Unfortunately, it cannot be dropped. Blind areas increase the hazards of living with ourselves and with others even if it may add a note of unselfconscious charm."^v Luft not only doesn't let us off the hook, he also suggests that our

blind self is quite large and that it is engaged in most people that we meet: “People who know you well know a great deal about you of which you may be unaware. Even on short contact, another person may discern qualities in you that you are not ready or able to see.”^{vi}

In some way, we even know that other people know. We try to hide behind many masks – makeup, perfume, elegant suits, toupees – but still feel uneasy when meeting new people: “will they see through me?” Luft poses an important question at this point:^{vii}

How does one learn more about one’s opaque or blind area, Q2? . . . This is not sophistry but an accurate statement of prevailing knowledge. And for very good reason – the most complicated subject is man, man in relations with others and in relation to himself. Nothing is more important; and yet systematic, confirmable inquiry has only just begun in this century. But surely learning about himself and his opaque area has been going on since the beginning of time; man must have learned a great deal. Yes, he has, but how much is valid is still unknown.

Let us return to Joe Luft for one final comment about this daunting and paradoxical task:^{viii}

In effect, we are compelled to take our stand behind two positions. The first is to continue the struggle for enlightenment using the best of the known ways, and adding to these with whatever ingenuity and originality we can bring to bear. The second is to recognize that we will remain blind and unaware, to some extent, regardless of our growth and actualization, and to develop a degree of humility in the face of this reality. Is this a pessimistic view? I don’t think so, unless one is determined that the tragic and the comic both can be expunged from interpersonal experience.

The socio-critical theorists (Continental School) suggest that we are often “blind” not just to how other people see us, but also to our social constructions of reality, to the prescribed role we play in society (often at the expense of other people who are less fortunate), and to our prejudices and biases regarding people who differ from us in some important way. This

societal source of “blindness” may ultimately be the most threatening to our personal sense of being thoughtful, responsible and caring citizens of the world. It may also be particularly hard to address given the widespread support in all societies for these forms of collective “blindness.”

Very few psychotherapists, human relations trainers, or 360 degree feedback processes ever touch on these elements of the second quadrant. That is one of the reasons why I have introduced the Continental School in the New Johari Window. Perhaps as Joe Luft suggests, the task of liberating our personal and societal blindness is an ongoing task. The revealing of Quad Two blindness is, perhaps, one of the fundamental tasks of a humanistic, lifelong search for enlightenment and personal development.

Interaction between Two People

In order to better understand and appreciate the dynamics of Quad Two in Luft’s original Johari Window, I will turn, as I did in several previous essays, to the relationship between Sheila and Kevin. As you will recall, Sheila is Executive Director of the Human Service Agency, and Kevin is her new Board Treasurer. Both Sheila and Kevin are psychologically sophisticated. They both went to college, took Introduction to Psychology, have participated in several rudimentary human relations programs and – most importantly – have accumulated 40+ years of interpersonal experience and wisdom. They both know that Quad Two exists in one another.

Sheila knows (or at least assumes) that Kevin is holding back some thoughts and feelings about her. She suspects that Kevin may find her to be a bit intimidating, both because of her rather forceful and no nonsense manner and because of her friendship with Kevin’s boss. At an even deeper level, she wonders if Kevin is intimidated by strong and assertive women. “Is Kevin relatively quiet and reserved at Board meetings and during our meeting today because he is afraid of me or is he just a shy or quiet man?”

What about Kevin's Quad Two observations, beliefs (assumptions) and feelings about Sheila? She is quite assertive and straightforward – and Kevin appreciates this, especially when she, as a seemingly competent woman, acknowledges that she is not comfortable with financial matters. Kevin is hesitant to share these impressions (and his appreciation) with Sheila, because it might sound condescending (just what a chauvinistic man might say: “I like it when women share their vulnerability.”) This also might not be something of which Sheila is proud, and she might not appreciate his attention to this disclosure (Quad Three) on Sheila's part.

There are many other things that Kevin is unwilling to share with Sheila: (1) he is threatened by Sheila's friendship with his boss, (2) he's not sure if Sheila is being honest about her lack of comfort regarding financial matters (she may be condescending to him – making him feel more at ease by telling a lie about her comfort level regarding finances), and (3) he finds Sheila to be physically attractive and particularly likes the Auburn tones in her hair (he could *never* share this information with her). The list goes on and on. Kevin is a man who is very cautious about sharing almost anything about another person with this person (this is some of the information in Kevin's Quad Three). This is why other people see Kevin as “shy” and “quiet” (Kevin has received this Quad Two feedback from other people at the human relations workshops he has attended).

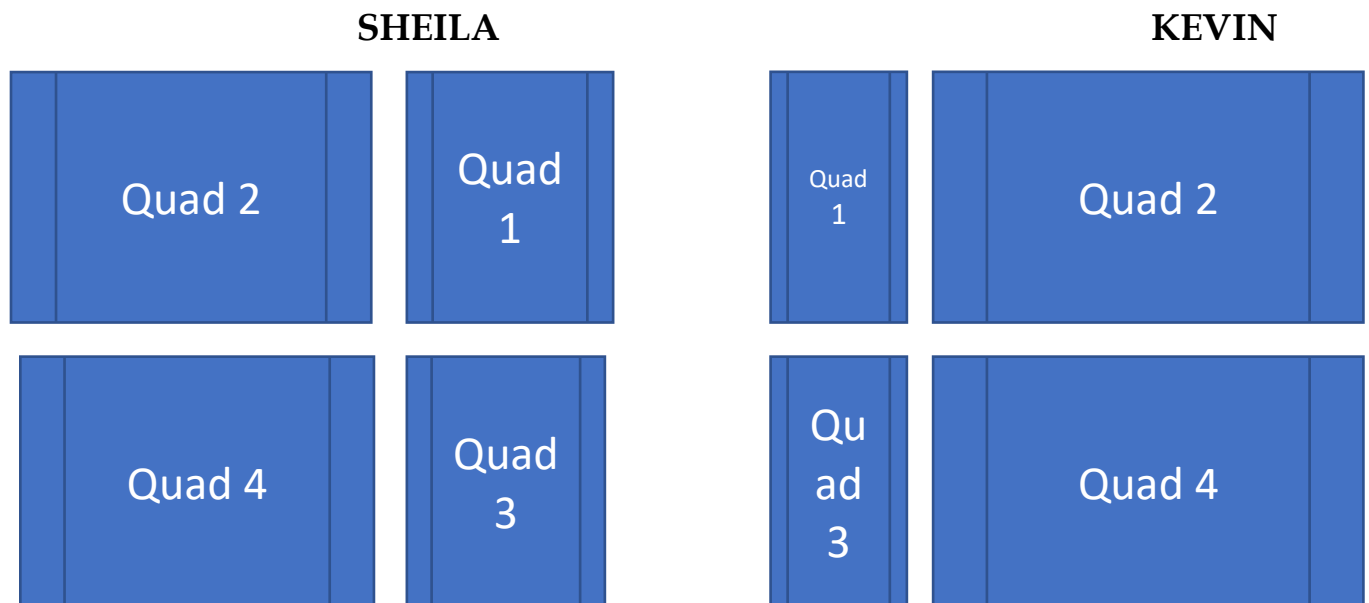
Kevin is particularly reticent about sharing Quad Two information with people who have some potential power over him. And he is even more reticent to share Quad Two information with women – because the rules of society seem to be changing about ways in which men and women relate to one another. Thus, Sheila is at the top of Kevin's list, in terms of people with whom he is unlikely to share much Quad Two information.

Given the fact that Kevin also feels uncomfortable about sharing information about his own lack of experience and expertise in financial matters (Quad Three), and the inter-dependency that Joe Luft proposes between the four quadrants, it is even more likely that Kevin will hesitate to share Quad Two information with Sheila. Luft would suggest that Kevin's Quad

Two feedback to Sheila is likely to lead eventually to Quad Three disclosure of his potential financial ineptitude to Sheila. This is the power of Luft’s original model – it identifies our fears of interdependence (if I say this, then I may have to say that), as well as the actuality (or potential) of this interdependence, with regard to improvement in interpersonal relationships.

Here, then, is the current status of Sheila and Kevin’s interpersonal relationship, with regard to Quad Two. Sheila holds a fair amount of Quad Two information (observations, beliefs, assumptions, feelings) about Kevin that she is unwilling to share at this point, because: (1) she doesn’t want to “hurt Kevin’s feelings,” (2) she doesn’t want to risk messing up this important, functional relationship, and (3) she is uncertain about some of her initial impressions and speculations about Kevin. Kevin holds an even larger amount of information about Sheila in his second quadrant. He doesn’t want to share it because: (1) he doesn’t want to offend Sheila (this gaffe would undoubtedly get to his boss), (2) he wants to do a good job as Treasurer and needs Sheila’s support to be successful, and (3) he is unclear about the “rules of the game” regarding his relationship, as a male, with Sheila, a female.

Graphically, the relationship between Sheila and Kevin might look like this (with regard to Quad Two):



Note that Luft's highly interdependent model suggests that both Sheila and Kevin's Quads One and Three will be smaller as a result of a large Quad Two, and that Quad Four will be larger. The consequence, according to Luft, of retaining a large amount of unshared information about another person (large Quad Two) is not only that our public self (Quad One) is smaller – the obvious implication – but also that we will have a smaller Quad Three (less unshared information about ourselves) and a large Quad Four (more unknown information about ourselves).

In other words, we will go more “unconscious” or become less self-insightful when we are unwilling to give other people feedback regarding our observations, assumptions, beliefs and feelings about them (Quad Two). This is a very powerful statement! It serves as the foundation for many human relations programs (including the Ojai and NTL programs with which Joe Luft is closely associated) and for the American School (to which I will turn when considering the second quadrant in the New Johari Window). I will frequently return to this powerful dynamic in the original Johari Window, and consider ways this dynamic *does* and *does not* hold true.

ⁱLuft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 27.

^{iⁱ}Luft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, pp. 27.

ⁱⁱⁱLuft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, pg. 27.

^{i^v}Luft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, pg. 28.

^vLuft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 28.

^{vⁱ}Luft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 28.

^{vii}Luft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 29.

^{viii}Luft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 29.