

The New Johari Window

#24. Quadrant Two: Three Schools of Thought

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As in the case of Quad One, some rich insights regarding Quad Two can be derived from consideration of the differing perspectives on this quadrant that are offered by the American, British and Continental schools.

The American School

The American School attends to the dynamics of Q2 from two fundamental assumptions. First, it is assumed that Q2 feedback is “real” and “accurate.” If this feedback is not “real” and “accurate” that is because the person giving the feedback is either lying or for some reason has a distorted picture of the feedback recipient. This represents the “objectivist” stance of the American School. Somehow and somewhere there is a firm reality and an honest and competent (two elements of trust) observer who can accurately see and report on the behavior of another person. As we shall see, the British and Continental Schools assume a more “constructive” stance, believing that reality is constructed rather than observed and that feedback inevitably says as much about the sender as the receiver.

The second American School assumption (or bias) concerns the expansion of Q1. The bigger Q1 is the better it is for a relationship. This is why the original Johari Window was so often misunderstood by many American practitioners. It was assumed that the Window called on one to give feedback (as well as disclose to others, as we shall discuss in Chapter Seven). This is somewhat understandable given the origins of the Window in group dynamics workshops, where extensive feedback was the norm. However, as the movie, *Bob, Ted, Carol and Alice* so humorously (and painfully) illustrated, indiscriminate feedback outside the protected (and artificial) settings of the encounter group can be quite destructive.

The Johari Window concerns the impact which appropriate feedback has on a relationship. It is not a champion of universal feedback. Interpersonal understanding and clarity are the goal, not an expanded Q1. A fundamental question thus remains for the American School (and all advocates of feedback): Why do you want a large Q1 and why do we want feedback and disclosure to expand Q1? I will more fully address these questions and the dynamics of appropriate feedback and disclosure in Chapter Seven.

The matter of feedback doesn't end here, with regard to the American School perspective. There are many other good reasons to encourage feedback that lead to much more than just the expansion of Q1. First, skillful and thoughtful feedback can involve appreciation. The recipient of the feedback can gain recognition of their own distinctive strengths (see my discussion of the appreciative perspective and the Window of Strength in Chapter Two).

Second, according to the American School, feedback can lead to personal learning. Having received feedback, I can do more of something I am already doing (an appreciation-based perspective). In reaction to this feedback, I can also do less of something or quit doing something (a deficit-based perspective). There is a third alternative, I can do something new (transformational learning/double loop learning). I can make use of the feedback not only as a motivator for this transformation, but also as a guide for discovery of the new direction (a fuller description of these options is provided in Chapter Seven with regard to four models of change).

Third, the American School would suggest that feedback can yield freedom. It gives us more room to move in Q1. When other people are telling us what they think of us, we have many options as to how we can respond to this feedback. This represents the essence of optimism in the American School. While many people would suggest that feedback can lead to conformity, the American School suggests it leads to individuality.

The conformity that was emphasized in critiques of mid-20th Century society (*The Organization Man* and *Man in Gray Flannel Suit*, outer-directed man) is countered by a key American School assumption. It is assumed that we can more readily choose what we place in Quad One when information from Quad Two is available to us. It is when we don't know how other people are reacting to us that we turn to traditional social norms or we try to find out how other people are behaving and assume that this is the way for us to behave. The American School would further suggest that timely and constructive feedback enables the other person in the relationship to expand her own Q1. Thus, freedom is expanded for both parties in an open and candid relationship.

There is a fourth positive impact that the American School suggests is inherent in timely and constructive feedback. It can help two people build interpersonal trust. First, it builds trust in *intentions*. "I want to know what you are thinking of me so I can improve our relationship." I was consulting to a large human service delivery system in which the leaders of one large unit in the system were running into problems with the central administrative unit of the overall system. These unit leaders decided to ask the central system administrators for feedback with regard to how they could improve their relationship with the central system. My client leaders were not focusing on how the central administrators had helped create the problem, nor were they trying to give feedback to these administrators; rather, they were asking for constructive feedback that would enable them to identify their own person role in helping to create the problems.

The central system administrators were initially quite surprised about this request for feedback. They were even suspicious of the underlying motives. Soon, however, the surprise and suspicion turned to appreciation, respect and trust. The central administrators began to provide feedback and found that this feedback was being openly received and acted upon by the unit leaders. Things began to improve – in large part because the feedback was requested. The central administrators were accustomed to being blamed for everything. This was something new: other people asking for feedback so that they could identify and correct their

own behavior. It was not only new, it was constructive and effective!

The American School would suggest that honest, constructive feedback can also enhance trust in *competency*. “I know how to ask for, accept and make use of feedback.” The central administrators in the human service delivery system were impressed with not only the unit leader’s willingness to accept feedback (trust in intentions), but also with the skillful and careful way in which these leaders solicited and engaged the feedback. The unit leaders asked questions to clarify the feedback and took steps to ameliorate the problems identified in the feedback. This led the central administrators to consider their own role in the problems that had existed for many years between themselves and their unit colleagues. They modeled the feedback soliciting, receiving and enacting process of the unit leaders – further evidence of their trust in and respect for the competencies of these leaders.

The American School is less likely to emphasize the impact which feedback has on the third form of trust: a *shared perspective*. This form of trust is often ignored because the American School tends to be relatively naïve with regard to differing perspectives on feedback in other societies and cultures. It is often assumed among practitioners of American School training and consultation that all parties value feedback and an expanded Q1. It is assumed that all cultures are operating in the “American” spirit. This assumption of shared perspective was generally warranted in the case of the human service delivery organization with which I consulted. Most of the unit leaders and central system administrators were deeply embedded in the American spirit of candor and task-related openness.

There was one member of the unit leadership team, however, and one member of the central system administration who had recently come from other societies. One of the members of the unit leadership team had come from an Asian society and one member of the central administration had come from an African society. The Asian-born unit leader was very uneasy about asking for feedback. On the one hand, it showed disrespect for the central system administrators. “Shouldn’t they be giving us feedback, when they think it is appropriate? We

seem to be saying to them that they don't know when or how to give us feedback."

Conversely, the African-born administrator was very reticent to give any feedback, because in his society feedback is usually given in a more indirect manner. It is insensitive and a sign of intense anger to give someone direct feedback, when it is usually being given through a third party.

This example, and many others regarding cross-cultural perspectives on feedback, suggest that the American School's enthusiasm regarding direct and open feedback processes needs to be tempered with a recognition of differences. The first phase in any feedback process, when people from different cultures are involved, is a discussion about the differing perspectives on and interpretations of the process of feedback. Trust in both intentions and competencies will be enhanced by this initial step of building trust in shared perspectives (or at least shared understanding of differences in perspectives).

The British School

Whereas the first quadrant (public self) is "owned" by the American school, this second quadrant is clearly "owned" by the British School. Those who view interpersonal relationships from this perspective—especially those who are strongly influenced by the Kleinian (Neo-Freudian) branch of the British school—are fascinated with that which we don't know about our relationships with other people. Quad Two is very large for these observers of human interactions and it is filled with many psychic dynamics and complexities.

The Psychic Echo Redux

I first spoke of the "psychic echo" when describing the dynamics of Quad One in Chapter Three. The third phase of this echo (when the voice hits the wall and begins to bounce back) is all about feedback and it exemplifies the British School's caution about the veracity of interpersonal feedback. When someone else is powerful, famous, charismatic or a major player (in some capacity) in a group of which we are a member, we must be careful about the quality and timing of the feedback we give. We may be "buying into" the self-image of the person

receiving the feedback or colluding with other members of the group to assign a specific role and cluster of personal characteristics to the person receiving the feedback.

There is an old saying that there is no one more beautiful and lovable than someone who loves us. This is an exquisite (and sometimes painful) example of the “psychic echo.” Person A is in love with Person B. She identifies some characteristics in Person B that Person B is trying to convey to the world (“I am clever.” “I am handsome.” “I am sensitive.”). Person A accepts this feature in Person B and reconfirms it with Person B through her (Person A’s) actions, nonverbal expressions, and feedback. Person B is delighted to receive this confirmation and, in turn, is more likely to acknowledge, accept, appreciate and reconfirm the projected self-images of Person A. As a result, both Person A and Person B appear to be even more beautiful, smart, and talented to one another. They are both confirming each other’s desired self-images. Beauty is, indeed, in the eye of the beholder.

Similarly, in a group, Person A may be assigned the role of “peacemaker” or “intellectual.” Person A unconsciously accepts this role (the influence of Q4), accepts projections and reinforcements by other members of the group, and suddenly becomes the peacemaker or intellectual. When the assigned role is valued by the group, then everyone in the group colludes to make Person A highly skillful in this role. Person A becomes a terrific peacemaker or intellectual. Alternatively, if Person A is assigned (and accepts – sometimes by subtle or not so subtle coercion) a role that is not valued, then group members collude (with Person A’s concurrence – another Q4 intrusion) to “deskill” Person A in this role. As a peacemaker, Person A creates more conflict than he resolves. As an intellectual, Person A is remarkably dense and insensitive to what is going on around her.

The roles played by “peacemaker” and “intellectual” in a group can be quite powerful and the feedback “echo” can be quite distorted given the unconscious needs of the group. There are even more powerful (and primitive) roles, however, that are played out in groups – especially groups that are under pressure. We find, for instance, the idealized self being played out as a

role in some groups. One member of the group becomes almost “saint-like.” She is unable to do anything wrong and she may begin to believe in her own perfection.

We see this acted out dramatically in several of the musicals created by Andrew Lloyd Webber during the last decades of the 20th Century. *Evita* is about the wife of an Argentine dictator (Juan Peron). She is idealized by the poor of Argentina, despite her own misuse of public funds. Similarly, we see the idealization of Deuteronomy, the leader of the feline society in *Cats*, who is so powerful that he can choose the recipient of a reincarnation every year at the end of the Jellicoe ball. Perhaps the most powerful (and controversial) of the projections being explored by Webber concerns Jesus Christ (in *Jesus Christ Superstar*). Judas Iscariot serves as the person who sees through and questions the projections placed on Jesus (similar to the role that is played by the Che Guevara character in Webber’s *Evita*).

As is often the case in real life, the idealized figures in all three Webber musicals can perform wondrous (even miraculous) feats, in part because of the collusion of other members of their group. We don’t actually know if these miraculous feats really occur (in the musical or in real life), in part because of our own strong desire to believe that the projected idealization is real. In a similar manner, we project negative images on other figures – whether this person is Judas or Che – who see through the idealized projection. They are identified by the group as villain or (at the very least) “party-pooper.”

Feedback and Idealization

Specifically, with regard to feedback coming out of Quad Two, the British School suggests that very strong, reinforced barriers are erected by members of a group when one of its members is idealized (either in a positive or negative fashion). There is to be no “bad news” when the idealized person is assumed to be perfect. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Judas tries to engage Jesus in a dialogue regarding how things have “gotten out of hand.” Not only would Jesus have nothing to do with this negative thinking, those around him (especially Mary Magdalene) are quite annoyed with Judas. He shouldn’t even broach a negative subject, given how

overwhelmed (and yet always giving) Jesus is with his love and kindness for other people. Similarly, there is not much tolerance in groups under stress, for any good news about the negatively idealized person in the group. We have no interest in hearing anything positive about Saddam Hussain, nor about any of the other arch-enemies of our society (such as Hitler or Stalin).

An idealized self gets reinforced if the idealized person has power. The psychic echo is certainly influenced by the distribution of power in an interpersonal relationship or group. As I frequently note throughout this book, feedback from another person is often withheld or distorted as a result of power differentials between the giver and receiver of the feedback. However, as the British School so insightfully notes, this distortion does not require threat or even a differentiation in formal power.

The distortion only requires an “apparent” discrepancy in power – as a result of either positive or negative power being projected onto the idealized member of the group. Interpersonal and group analysts from the British School would agree with their colleagues from the American and Continental schools that the command inherent in feedback given by someone with superior power can be coercive in nature and can be enforced with power. The British School observers, however, would suggest that the ultimate impact of this coercive feedback is often unpredictable. We can’t really anticipate or understand what occurs when the coercion takes place unless we are aware of the projections that reside behind the power.

It is important that those in a place to give feedback (holders of Quad Two information) know why they don’t want to give someone else feedback – especially if the recipient of feedback holds more power than the giver of feedback. It is also important for the idealized person in the relationship or group to know why they don’t want to receive feedback from the other person in the relationship or from other members of a group. The potential (and idealized) recipient of the withheld feedback should ask: “Am I holding on to an idealized self?” The potential giver of the withheld feedback should ask: “Have I discarded, isolated or projected

aspects of myself onto another person? Do I refuse to give feedback because I don't want the other person to become real? Would this force me to accept aspects of my own unwanted self?"

The British School also offers a more positive side about power with regard to members of a relationship or group being the target of projections from other people. In his later years, Wilfred Bion identified this positive role.ⁱ While the later work by Bion is rarely cited, it offers many rich implications regarding the role of leadership and power in a group. According to Bion, a powerful person (on whom much is projected) can provide and serve as a container of the anxiety that is experienced by followers when they can't personally handle this anxiety. Much as a parent can hold the anxiety of a child while it is growing up, so the leader of a group or the leader in an interpersonal relationship can temporarily hold the anxiety of others, until such time as the anxiety is reduced or transformed, or until such time as the other person(s) can handle and manage the anxiety themselves.

The member of a group on whom considerable courage is projected can readily play this role of container for the anxiety experienced by other people. By serving as a container, the leader can help followers transform or reframe the anxiety and associated, anxiety-provoking objects, people and events. Leaders help with this transformation or reframing through use of the wisdom (dependency assumption), courage (fight/flight assumption) or vision (pairing assumption) that is projected on to them.

The Continental School

Though Quad Two is "owned" by the British school, the Continental school also has much to say about this dimension of human interaction and stakes its own claim with regard to social-critical insights about this quadrant. Q2 is very big and very important for Continental School, in large part because its contents and dynamics are strongly influenced by the power relationships that exist between the parties involved in this interaction. Power strongly influences the content and timing of potential feedback.

An initial Continental school question can be posed regarding power relationships: “who is allowed to give feedback?” There are several related questions: “What are the repercussions and implications embedded in the feedback for both parties?” There is also the matter of postmodern “narcissism” – a term that Christopher Lasch uses to describe our contemporary situation.ⁱⁱ We need feedback to “fill us up.” We are obsessed with self: “Enough about me. Why don’t we shift to you? So what do you think about me?” We are not only obsessed with self, but also desperate to know what other people want us to be. I would also suggest that there is narcissistic machismo. We request feedback to show that we “can take it.”

Social Construction and Feedback

There is the matter of social construction, which I first introduced with regard to Quad One. We need feedback to confirm our beliefs and self-image. This often sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy – we surround ourselves with other people like ourselves. Social constructions are reinforced by power. As a result, many narratives are never told and many constructs are never shared – because they are held by people who have no power. One of three things often occur. In some cases, these narratives are lost.

One of my colleagues, Richard Smith, had studied two Native American tribes in California, learning the languages of both tribes and interviewing the last living elders. As someone who was terminally ill, Richard sought a small amount of money from both governmental and philanthropic sources to finish his work (by bringing in an assistant). He was unsuccessful in obtaining these funds and died without completing his work. The narratives of both tribes are now lost. These narratives had been conveyed from one generation to the next by oral (rather than written) means. They were never recorded for posterity and are now lost. It is indeed tragic to witness the death of entire cultures and narratives.

Alternatively, those without power discredit their own constructs: “I must be crazy or ‘backward’ because I never hear my story or construct coming from credible sources.” This self-discrediting strategy is particularly noteworthy in the arena of alternative medicine (in

North America and elsewhere in the world).ⁱⁱⁱ Many healers, herbalists and healthy life style advocates during the first three quarters of the 20th Century felt like “second class” citizens in the health care community. They sometimes discounted or at least were quite defensive (or mute) about the remarkable story of success they could tell about healing or about the prevention of illness or injury. Their narratives of health have been recently found to be valid. Today we recognize the health benefits associated with exercise, natural (organic) foods and one’s positive state of mind.

There is a third alternative. Community leaders and spokespeople may never share their stories or constructs outside their immediate community. This strategy is readily apparent in the ethnic ghettos that still exist in many North American cities and in the distinctive languages (e.g. “Ebonics”) that are created in these ghettos and minimally used outside the ghettos.

We see this strategy used in communities that are isolated, not because of prejudice and discrimination, but because citizens purposively choose to live in life style enclaves.^{iv} Retirement communities and condo complexes for affluent, unattached and youthful adults exemplify residential enclaves, whereas weekend sport car rallies and ballroom dancing clubs offer periodically convened enclaves. In each case, distinctive narratives (often filled with jargon, oblique references, abbreviations and nicknames) are created, sustained and kept from public view or scrutiny.

A fourth alternative can also be added to the mix. The minority narrative or construct becomes a source of conflict or even revolution. We see this strategy being manifest in the multiple efforts to bring minority studies into collegiate curricula and in the efforts to legitimize the teaching of “minority” languages (such as Spanish and Ebonics) in our school systems. In these cases, advocates are asking for equal treatment: “our narrative is just as valid and important as the majority narrative.”

In other cases, the minority wants their narrative to replace or at least supersede the majority

narrative. Members of the minority group proselytize and recruit other people to their new social construction. This strategy is abundantly evident in the rise of evangelical churches in North America and Islamic fundamentalism throughout the world. It is particularly evident today in the efforts of many conservative Christians to bring the creationist narrative of “intelligent design” into our school systems as a counter to the Darwinian narrative of “natural selection.”

This fourth strategy is very powerful and pervasive when there is heavy investment in the alternative narrative – as is often the case with regarding to religious beliefs and political ideologies. The presence of a second (or third) viable narrative is a threat to the narrative one holds dear. The other narrative creates “cognitive dissonance”^v and must be eliminated or discounted immediately.

A complex addendum can be offered (and often is offered) to an emotionally-laden narrative – suggesting that the true believers will be vindicated or even “saved” by some superior authority or power and that the nonbelievers (those holding the other narrative) will either be found to be in error or condemned to some horrible fate (unless redeemed or forgiven by the charitable true believer). These highly motivated efforts to eliminate cognitive dissonance reinforce the commitment of minority believers to their distinctive social constructs and elicit frequent conflict between those who embrace differing constructs and narratives.

There is yet another response that involves social-psychological development among all parties. There is the movement from a dualistic frame (only one right way to see the world and only one truth) to a multiplicity or expedience frame (if there is no one right way to view the world, then any way is acceptable, as long as you have the freedom or power to engage this viewpoint). As some pendants have noted, there is a new Golden rule: “those with the gold will rule.”

Hopefully, there is movement beyond this expedient multiplistic frame. There is a shift from

multiplicity to a reasoned relativism in which multiple narratives are appreciated, understood and accepted. The person, group, organization or society shifts to either a relativistic “smorgasbord” in which each narrative stands independently alongside other independent narratives, or a “melting pot” relativism in which there is a concerted attempt to blend the diverse narratives or create a higher level, shared narrative regarding the acceptance of all narratives (“we are a nation of many colors and many traditions.”)

Finally, there may be the development of a mature commitment in relativism: we recognize and learn from diversity, yet know that we must live by a specific narrative. We must construct the world in a particular manner, while living our lives as responsible parents, employees, leaders and citizens. There may even be a step beyond this commitment in relativism – something that Richard Rorty calls the “ironist” perspective in which we fully embrace several different narratives that may (ironically) contradict one another.^{vi} At any one moment and in any one place we operate from one of the narratives and constructs, knowing full well that we must engage a different narrative and construct at other times and in other places. Rorty describes this as a contingent way of thinking and acting.

Implications and Applications: What to do about Q2

After this complex analysis of Quadrant Two, we are left with the fundamental question still unanswered: What do we do about Q2? We must create conditions for receiving feedback. This means that we must find time and place for Q2 and create conditions for constructive feedback. We must find or build trusting relationships – learning from the American School and its emphasis on the building of trust in intentions and competence. We also must be sensitive to cross-cultural differences and invite an initial dialogue regarding differing perspective on the nature and purpose of feedback.

We can push the envelope of the American School even further by participating in something called “double loop learning.” I will have more to say about double loop learning later in this book (Chapter Seven); however, at this point I can recommend the creation of processes by

which and settings in which we reflect with significant people in our lives on ways in which each of us has been most receptive to and benefited most from feedback given by the other person.

While it is important to learn from the content of specific feedback, in the long run it is even more important in a relationship to discover appropriate occasions and appropriate sequence of interactions that lead to constructive feedback in this relationship. The truth about our self in a specific relationship (from Quad Two to Quad One) is not the most important thing.

Feedback about the struggles to give helpful and constructive feedback (2nd Order Learning) is more important and more difficult to give than the feedback itself (1st Order Learning). This appreciative and double loop learning can be invaluable in not only the improvement of a current relationship, but also the establishment of future relationships. “When and how am I open to feedback in this specific relationship and what does this tell me about requesting and receiving feedback in future relationships?” With this double loop learning, we can more readily let other people know that we want feedback and how-and-when we want it. I will say more about this in Chapter Seven.

We can also listen to lessons being taught by the British School. We invite both parties in the relationship to reclaim their projections. The British School also encourages us to appreciate the wisdom of defenses. We can assume an appreciative perspective with regard to being selective and timely in the request for and reception of feedback from other people. It is particularly important for us to appreciate the wisdom of our defenses when we seek to become more aware of self-feedback.

The British School encourages us to look at our own slips of the tongue. These slips can occur when we feel safe and when we are ready to gain insights about ourselves – this is part of the wisdom of our defenses. Our slips should be appreciated: these slips offer us small self-insights. We are giving ourselves feedback (Q4 to Q1 or Q3). On the other hand, the wisdom of

our defenses suggests that there are good psychological reasons for being blind to certain things and we should respect our own reticence to receive feedback from other people or probe to deeply into our own slips of the tongue.

The British School suggests that we should also appreciate ways in which our “shadow” (more about this in Chapter Six) is telling us about our self. We should pay attention, in particular, to energy levels and fatigue—for our defenses will consume an enormous amount of psychic energy that tends to translate into physical energy.

Looking Ahead

With these preliminary recommendations regarding Quad Two and the processes of constructive feedback in mind, we are ready to turn to a companion element of human interaction—Quadrant Three—and to the processes of constructive disclosure.

ⁱ Based on comments regarding later work of Wilfred Bion provided by Mary Paige, Ph.D. San Rafael, California, 2002.

ⁱⁱ Lasch, Christopher, *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: Norton, 1979.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bergquist, William, Guest, Suzan and Rooney, Terrence. *Who Is Wounding the Healers?* Sacramento, CA: Pacific Soundings Press, 2004.

^{iv} Bellah, Robert and Others. *Habits of the Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

^v Festinger, Leon. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957.

^{vi} Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989.