

The New Johari Window

#22: Quadrant Two: The Locus of Control

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Why don't we find out more about ourselves from other people? We don't find out either because we don't want to know (Q2-I) (internal locus of control) or because we don't know that we don't know (Q2-E) (external locus of control). I will explore each of these panes (Q2-I and Q2-E) in greater depth.

Q2-I: The Blocked Self

In Chapter Two I described the postmodern self. We are saturated and overwhelmed by the complexity, unpredictability and turbulence of the world that surrounds us. Under such conditions, it is understandable not only that we try to reduce the size of our sense of self (the minimal self), but also that we become highly selective in what we take in from the external world—especially from other people, who are facing just as many postmodern challenges. As a result, we are inclined to intentionally block out some feedback about ourselves that other people hold (Quad Two: Internal). The reason for blocking feedback from other people is actually much more complicated than this. This is especially true when we decide who we will listen to regarding feedback about our behavior and what we are likely to retain from what they tell us about ourselves. I propose that there are seven major factors that underlie and determine the nature of the Quad Two blocking (Q2-I).

The first two factors relate directly to the postmodern condition just described. The first of these postmodern factors seems a bit obvious and mundane; yet, it is quite important in our postmodern world and can often lead to alienating relationships. I don't want, don't ask for, and rarely listen to feedback because I am distracted by other matters. I can't be bothered with

the feedback or have no time to do anything about it anyway. Why learn something new about myself, when I am likely to be pulled away from this new information five minutes later with some other crisis in my life or exposure to additional information about myself. We give off many signals to other people indicating that we are not really interested in their feedback: “Yeh, yeh, thanks. Now who else has something to tell me about myself!” This, in turn, leads other people to withhold their feedback. As a result, we are no longer bothered with even the desire of other people to tell us something about ourselves that we don’t already know – or that they think we don’t already know.

The second factor concerns the amount of information and level of complexity of the information I receive on a daily basis. I feel overwhelmed. I am already unfrozen (to borrow from Kurt Lewin’sⁱ model of change) and do not need any new information to convince me that I am living in a challenging world. Czikzentmihaliⁱⁱ would suggest that we live in a (postmodern) world that is filled with anxiety, rather than in a world of boredom. I need more support to match the challenge.ⁱⁱⁱ I don’t need the additional challenge of new feedback – especially if I think it might be negative in nature.

The third factor concerns the wisdom of our defenses. “I don’t want to know because I am not yet ready to handle what you have to tell me.” People whom we perceive to be very wise and insightful may be greatly appreciated and admired; however, we may be hesitant to encourage their Q2 feedback, given the other challenges in our postmodern life and given our need to move one step at a time in gaining access to our unknown self (Quad Two and Quad Four). We believe they are very bright and insightful – and fear their knowledge of us. We trust these people – especially their competence – but don’t trust our ability to handle their feedback. The question becomes: “when am I ready to know?” There is a second related question that is strategic in nature: “How do I retain the commitment of this person to provide me with the feedback, so that it is forthcoming when I ask for it?”

The fourth factor concerns status differences between the giver and receiver of the feedback. I

feel intimidated and therefore do not want to receive feedback from the other person. This person has power over me. My acceptance or rejection of their feedback has implications for me—it is not neutral. They directly or indirectly request modification of my current behavior. They want me to do less of what I usually do, stop doing what I usually do, do more of what I usually do, do something other than what I usually do. This is not just feedback for information, it is feedback for compliance—that's why it is often not wanted.

It makes a big difference with regard to feedback when a person has power over me or when they represent, in some manner, the formal authority in an organization of which I am a member. "Neutral" feedback provides information about me that I can either accept or reject. "Power-based" feedback provides command as well as information. "Neutral" feedback might contain a hidden agenda. I can usually either seek out this hidden agenda or ignore it. "Power-based" feedback inevitably contains a hidden agenda.

As the potential recipient of this feedback, I had better seek out this hidden agenda for my own welfare. If nothing else, I had better gain an appreciation of the biases, assumptions, perspectives of the feedback-giver, if this person is in a position of power over me. No wonder I don't want to receive "power-based" feedback: it requires careful listening, interpretation, analysis and "mind-reading."

There are two other important differences between "neutral" and "power-based" feedback. First, my own reactions to these two forms of feedback are likely to be quite different. If the feedback comes from a "neutral" source, then my affective reactions are more likely to be "neutral" or at least moderate in magnitude. I might not like to receive negative feedback from a neutral source; however, if I have requested the feedback or trust the intentions of the feedback-giver (see fifth factor), then I am likely to be able to listen to the feedback (even if negative), absorb it, and even do something about it (under my own free will). If the feedback comes from a "power-based" source, then I am much more likely to react to the feedback in a highly emotional and "irrational" manner, even if the feedback is positive. This, in turn, means

that I am more likely to distort what I have heard. I might generalize what I hear (I become all good or all bad), shift the focus of the feedback (“Is he really talking about my team or is he talking about his own problems?”), or deny the feedback all-together (“Who is he to complain!” “She doesn’t know what’s she’s talking about!”).

Finally, there is the impact of the feedback on the relationship itself. When feedback comes from a “power-based” source, the relationship is likely to change – especially if the feedback is unusual or rarely given. I will be inclined to avoid the power-bases source in the future if the feedback is negative or be attracted to this source in the future if the feedback is positive. As many child psychologists have noted, when we punish children for “bad” behavior (provide them with power-based feedback of a negative character), then the child typically doesn’t quit doing the “bad” behavior.

Rather, the child learns to do this behavior when the punishing parent is not present. If many of the child’s behaviors are being punished, then the child learns to avoid the punishing parent all-together or learns to disregard (grows immune to) the punishment. This change in the relationship is stressful and often threatening for both parties; hence, feedback is likely to be avoided by both the person in power and the subordinate.

The fifth factor leading to our desire to avoid feedback from another person is based on our assessment of the other person’s intentions (one of the three forms of trust) – both the intentions of which we think the other person is aware (their Quad Two) and the intentions of which we think they are unaware (their Quad Four). We are particularly fearful that the other person holds contradictory intentions. On the one hand, they really want to give us the feedback because they think it will be of benefit to us: “You need to know because it will be good for you.” They may also think the feedback will enhance our relationship, by helping to building trust in intentions: “By telling you this, I know that you will respect me even more and will know that I will always be honest with you.”

On the other hand, the person wanting to give us feedback might not believe that we will really make use of this feedback: “You don’t really want to know.” Or “You’re not ready to receive this feedback.” They may also believe that their feedback isn’t really worthy of our attention, given the other concerns we have in our challenging postmodern life: “You don’t really need to know.”

There may also be a concern about the negative impact which this feedback will have on our relationship. “I’m not sure that you will either respect me more or trust [intentions] me more if I give you this feedback. In fact, you may resent me and not want to see me any more.” Our Quad Three is leaking all over the place, letting the other person know in many different ways that we don’t want to receive their feedback. This will, in turn, tend to confirm the reasons for their reticence in giving the feedback. Nothing is said and future opportunities for honest feedback are diminished (self-fulfilling prophecies and self-sealing). If we anticipate contradictory messages, then we are less likely to unfreeze and be open to the feedback we do receive.

These first five blocking factors are quite understandable – even if they lead to disruptive interpersonal relationships. These blocking factors can be monitored by all of us as we reflect on the feedback we do or don’t get from other people. The final two factors are less understandable and often help to create conditions of widespread isolation of people who are not open to feedback from anyone. The first of these isolating factors is the opposite of the first two factors.

We are not overwhelmed nor are we faced with nothing but postmodern challenge; rather, we live in a very comfortable world – a world that is isolated from the challenges of postmodernism. There is no incentive to listen to other people – especially those who see the world differently from ourselves – and we are not likely to do anything with the feedback anyway.

We may be living in a lifestyle enclave or in a world that is protected (because of our wealth, our power, or the presence of a doting parent or spouse). We see this factor operating in the lives of celebrities (sports, film, television) who never receive corrective feedback regarding their aberrant behavior. They grow increasingly isolated from the world and fail to learn from their own life experiences. Strange and self-destructive behaviors that are strongly linked to unconscious Quad Four dynamics often emerge.

The second isolating factor, and last of the seven blocking factors, is defensiveness: “I block out all feedback and remain blind because I don’t want to see.” This neurotic stance is highlighted by the British School and is based on our disengagement from parts of ourselves (the disowned self) that, in turn, lead to an internal cognitive dissonance that must somehow be resolved – often through distortion in the trust we assign to our relationships with other people. We project onto other people the lack of trust we have in them and ultimately in ourselves. We don’t trust their competence. We don’t respect the other person’s sensitivity, perceptions, or self-awareness – so don’t want to receive their feedback.

This is often just a projection of our own unacknowledged needs and insecurities. We are, in fact, worried that they might be insightful and know something about us that we don’t know ourselves. It might be our wisdom-of-the-defenses that is taking care of us and ensuring that we don’t hear what we are not yet ready to hear. Unfortunately, we fail to recognize that it is our defenses that are operating, not the incompetence of the other person.

There is also a mistrust of the other person’s intentions. We don’t believe that the other person is really interested in our welfare. They may be actively trying to hurt us. Perhaps we have hurt them. They are angry at us. They have an alternative agenda or hidden agenda – their third quadrant is closed. We look for these alternative agendas in large part because we don’t believe that we are truly worthy of any attention. We therefore believe that feedback is being given not for our good, but for the good of the person giving the feedback. We are suspicious of everyone and therefore learn nothing from anyone – thus creating a vicious cycle of

incompetence (on our part), isolation and further diminution of skills.

The third form of mistrust concerns perspectives. We assume that other people come from different worlds – therefore they are likely to misperceive us and our behaviors and intentions. We detect minor differences and insert a psychological wedge between ourselves and those who wish to give us feedback. We retreat to our enclave, ignore feedback from people who are “different from ourselves” and stagnate. The rich insights that other people can offer us about ourselves – that help liberate Quad Four as well as Quad Two – are lost. We have surrendered to our fears and have forfeited control over the feedback that we can choose to receive from other people at the right time and place.

Q2-E: The Ignorant Self

As in the case of Quad One, Quad Two is best understood when both an internal and external perspective on this interpersonal quadrant are taken into consideration. There are not only dynamics operating inside oneself that influence Quad Two, dynamic factors outside oneself can also influence the extent to which information about oneself is blocked. This external blocking can occur because the person in question is protected by other people.

People in power, for instance, are often protected by their staff from receiving feedback from other people. This blocking of feedback may occur because the staff member doesn't want to be “killed” as the deliverer of disturbing feedback. Feedback might also be blocked because people around us believe that we don't need more “bad news” or because they believe that the feedback is neither accurate nor fair. An even more pernicious dynamic is often in operation when we consider the flow of feedback upward and downward in an organization.

Administrators at the top of an organization often agree with those at the bottom of the organization; however, communication is filtered through mid-level managers who frequently view their organization differently from either those at the top or those at the bottom of their organization.

Why don't we try to break through these barriers when we know that we aren't getting all of the feedback from other people? Are we being protective of our self (Q2:I) – or are we really unaware of this potential feedback from other people? Why is there an ignorant self? Why don't we know that we don't know? I would suggest several reasons for this apparent ignorance. First, if we are in a position of power, we might be surrounding ourselves with “yes men” and “yes women” – hence only receive positive feedback (if we receive any accurate feedback at all). There is a second reason: insensitivity. Other people might protect us from feedback because we seem to be “clueless” about the impact we have on other people.

Why waste feedback on someone who isn't going to accept or integrate it? There is considerable evidence to support the conclusion that poor managers are less likely than good managers to make accurate predictions of how their subordinates see them^{iv} – they simply are insensitive to the feedback that they are already getting, hence are less likely to receive additional feedback. A third reason can be laid at the feet of the setting where the person lives or works. It might not be an organization that is devoted to learning. Even more fundamentally, it might not be a safe setting. It is an organization that devalues feedback. People are working in isolation. The culture of this organization is oriented to things rather than people. Its leaders focus on “facts” rather than “feelings.”

These several different dimensions of the ignorant self (Quad Two: External) is exemplified in the life of one of my colleagues (I'll call him Douglas). Douglas was president for several years of a major national association in Washington D.C. Douglas headed an organization of about 60 staff members, but worked with more than 3,000 institutions located throughout the United States. This meant that he was on the road 2-3 weeks each month. Fortunately, Douglas has a very capable administrative assistant who handled many of the details while Douglas was traveling. He carefully managed Douglas's schedule even when Douglas was in the office, so that his boss wouldn't be overwhelmed with requests. Virtually everything passed through Douglas' assistant (we will call him James) – and Douglas was very grateful.

James had previously served as chief of staff to a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. He was absolutely loyal to Douglas and super-competent. After about a year and a half, however, Douglas began to feel a little uneasy about his leadership role in the association. His four vice presidents were increasingly quiet during meetings with Douglas and even seemed to be hostile or at least resentful. James kept reassuring Douglas that everything was going fine and that Douglas was being very productive both inside and outside the office. Yet, Douglas felt uneasy and eventually decided to bring me into his organization to conduct confidential interviews with his vice presidents.

Data gathered from these interviews were startling. First, Douglas's vice presidents were indeed frustrated and angry. They had sent many memos and e-mails to Douglas that addressed specific concerns. Increasingly, their memos and e-mails were about their more general concern that Douglas was unavailable to them. It seems that James screened all memos and e-mails. He told the VPs that Douglas was under a lot of stress and shouldn't be hassled with their "petty" concerns. Thus, even when the VPs met privately with Douglas they said little about what was really bothering them – given that Douglas supposedly had received their memos and e-mails (which he didn't) and was simply indifferent to their concerns or had "bigger fish to fry!" Everyone remained mute given the deeply-embedded political culture of this association and the long-standing tradition (which Douglas didn't support) of firing "troublesome" VPs.

When Douglas received the consultation report, he "blew his stack." James was immediately going to be fired and Douglas was immediately going to set up a weekend retreat with his VPs to get things "ironed out." A bit of restraint and reflection were advised. First, it was clear that James meant no ill. He was trying to do what he thought was "best" for Douglas. An alternative plan was adopted that involved giving James clearer guidelines. James was to open up the channels of communication (Q1) and feedback (Q2) between Douglas and his VPs.

Furthermore, the retreat was to be held – but it was to be held four weeks from now to allow

for adequate preparation and a minimal disruption of the VPs schedules. Part of the retreat with the VPs was to be devoted to the role James should play in the organization. James was to participate in this discussion. Another part of the retreat was to be devoted to the lessons that can be learned from this destructive process – especially regarding ways in which the political culture of the association could become more open (2nd order learning and change – to be addressed in a later essay). The retreat was successful, and both Douglas and James became much more successful in their interpersonal engagements with other members of this association.

ⁱ Lewin's model of change is best described in Lippett, R., Watson, J. and Westley, B. *Dynamics of Planned Change*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1958.

ⁱⁱ Czikzentmihali, Mihali. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Sanford, Nevitt. *Learning After College*. Berkeley, CA: Montaigne Press, 1980.

^{iv} Guion, Robert. *Assessment, Measurement and Prediction for Personnel Decisions*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997.