

The New Johari Window

#30: Quadrant Four: The Unknown Area

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The fourth quadrant is filled with paradox and enigma. It provokes convoluted questions similar to the one we all confronted in elementary school as junior philosophers: “If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is present, then does it still make a sound?” In the case of our Johari Window, the question is: “How do we know Quad Four exists, if no one is aware of what’s in it?” Even if we accept “on faith” that the tree does make a sound and that Quad Four material does exist, how do we discover what is in this quadrant and how do we appreciate the impact which Quad Four content has on the other three quadrants?

Inference and Reflection

Joe Luft suggests that we know what is in Quad Four through the processes of inference and reflection. First, let’s examine what Luft said about inference:ⁱ

Understanding Q4 functions in the total picture is important because in everyday life there is obviously the same kind of problem. Relationships within organization are often so complex and intense and so resistant to rational, logical approaches that they clearly suggest the presence of deeply hidden and unknown areas of behavior.

Thus, we can infer something about the content of our own Quad Four by noticing what is unusual about our relationships with other people.

We can also learn about our Quad Four material, Luft suggests, by reflecting back on our life experiences: “The residue of past experience and potential for future experiences are contained in Q4. Perhaps it is true that whatever has registered with us once psychologically may be assumed to exist in the unknown quadrant.” Thus, through reflection backwards in our life,

we may uncover memories (retained experiences and associated feelings) that seem not to be part of actively conscious experiences that are either shared (Quad One) or kept secret (Quad Three) from other people.

Joe Luft is very optimistic about not only the value of this Quad Four material in enhancing our interpersonal relationships, but also our capacity (psychologists call it “ego strength”) to acknowledge and work with this Quad Four material. Luft doesn’t think we need a psychoanalyst to retrieve and live with this Quad Four material. We only need a little courage and some supportive relationships and settings (such as in a human relations training group).

Furthermore, as Luft suggests in both quotations, any suffering associated with the surfacing of Quad Four material is offset by the benefits inherent in moving this material into the other three quadrants. When we add Quad Four material to the accessible quadrants, we get a “total picture” regarding our self and discover our future “potentials.”ⁱⁱ

It is axiomatic that with greater exercise of the individual's psychological resources, variety and diversity *increase*. The individual has more choice. He has more depth of feeling, more shades of experience. He has access to more associations of thought and in greater combination. He may suffer doubts where others have none. His inner richness opens him to all kinds of human states with one possible exception: He emigrates away from a feeling of certainty. He can at the same time be more self-confident because he is more open to and aware of the realities of his human environment.

Clearly, Luft has infused his analysis of Quad Four and the value of moving Quad Four material into the other three quadrants with the optimism of the American school. Yet, as we have already seen in Luft’s analysis of the other three quadrants, we can’t readily dismiss him as either naïve or simplistic. He offers many exceptional insights regarding this final quadrant.

Potential for the Future, Residue of the Past

In essence, Luft views Quad Four as a rich, untapped gold mine for personal and interpersonal growth:ⁱⁱⁱ

What we inherit in our genes and what remains as yet unrealized are also important components of quadrant four. Latent talent may grow at any time in life depending on conditions and opportunities. People may bloom with extraordinary abilities in their later years, and as the life span is extended more persons have the opportunity to develop their Q4 resources.

Quadrant Four contains the untapped resources of the person: (1) what we don't know and what is potential about our interpersonal needs, and (2) what is about to come to center stage in our developmental process.

Erik Erikson – a famous psychoanalyst (and former actor) – addresses this concept of potential and residue by introducing a theatrical metaphor. He describes each of us as standing on a stage, playing eight different parts (developmental phases of life). At any one moment, one of these eight parts is front stage and in the spotlight. We (the ego – or audience) are focused on this one phase; however, all of the other seven players are always present on the stage and are always part of the “play.” They reside at the back or side of the stage and are out of the spotlight; however, they always influence the phase that is in the spotlight. Some represent a phase that was formerly in the spotlight (residue). Others represent a phase that is yet to occupy center stage (potential).

Erikson further suggests that the former phases (or specific developmental issues associated with these phases) are likely to play particularly powerful roles (in relation to the spotlighted phase) if they were not very successfully played out or negotiated when in the spotlight. We move on to the next phase, but the “baggage” (to mix our metaphors) from the previous phase(s) lingers and continues to interplay with or even interfere with the role being played by the phase that is currently in the spotlight. This, in turn, increases the chance that current developmental issues won't be successfully addressed. This, in turn, increases the chances that

this phase itself will linger and impact on the next phase when it is in the spotlight.

Thus, the complexity and breadth of developmental issues at each phase may increase if we don't successfully play out the current role and phase. The so-called mid-life crisis and despair of later life exemplify this compounding effect. Regarding the fourth quadrant of the Johari Window, this means that the residue of the past may be increasingly influential or even disruptive if developmental issues associated with this residue are never successfully addressed. Q4 is likely to intrude more often in Q1. There is likely to be more unintentional leakage into Q3-External, and our clear and accurate receipt of feedback (Q2 to Q1) is less likely to occur. Our developmental "ghosts" appear at inopportune times – as they did in the life of Charles Dicken's Ebenezer Scrooge – and demand attention.

ⁱLuft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 65.

ⁱⁱLuft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 67.

ⁱⁱⁱLuft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 66.