



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Context Blindness

What We Don't See Will Hurt Us

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One of the paradoxes of our human condition is that we are systems creatures—much of our lives is spent as components of larger systems—as members within the family, work group, organization, neighborhood, sports team, political party, faith group, nation, and more. On the other side, we are blind to how the structures and processes of these systems affect our everyday lives—our experiences of ourselves and others, our frustrations and satisfactions, and our effectiveness. Our orientation tends to be personal; we see people and not the contexts in which we and they operate. That blindness to context is costly in terms of stress, relationship breakdowns, and diminished organizational effectiveness, all of which can be avoided or reversed with system sight.

This chapter describes two forms of context blindness: *blindness to the contexts others are working in* and *blindness to our own contexts*. The costs of context blindness are examined, along with the productive possibilities of system sight. The challenge for the OD practitioner is to help our clients see, understand, and master the systemic contexts in which they and others are living. OD practitioners themselves must be sensitive to systemic contexts, too.

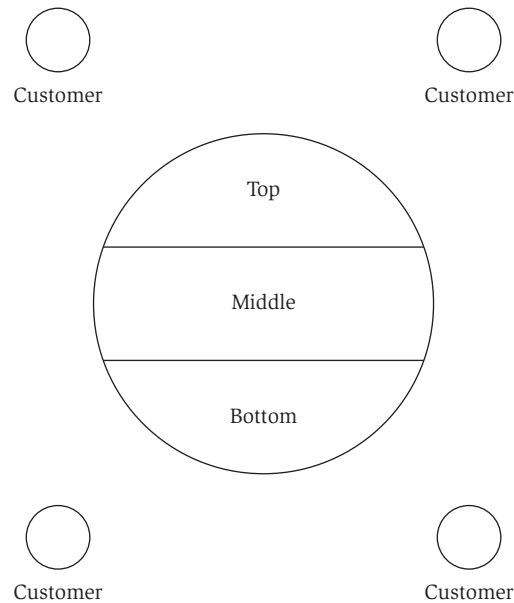


Figure 32.1. Structure of the Organizational Simulation

FROM SYSTEM BLINDNESS TO SYSTEM SIGHT

Back in the 1980s, I had been experimenting with a variety of organizational simulations as part of management education programs; the model I used most frequently had an organization composed of Tops, Middles, and Bottoms interacting with Customers and potential Customers (see Figure 32.1). In these exercises, people were randomly assigned to their positions. *This random assignment is a key point.*

As part of each exercise, we would ask people to describe what life was like for them in their parts of the system—what issues they were dealing with, what feelings they had—and to describe how they saw other parts of the system.

At the time I was less focused on theory development than on creating engaging interactive experiences. What struck me as fascinating was the regularity with which people described themselves and others based not on who they were as personalities, but on the positions they occupied. There were unique and regular patterns of Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer experiences. Whoever entered those worlds was likely to experience some variation of these patterns. I was wowed by this revelation.

One day, while strolling along Boston's Newbury Street, I ran into a colleague and shared my excitement over this discovery. "Barry," he said, "you have just discovered sociology." O.K., so I wasn't the first, yet it still felt like a fresh discovery with powerful implications.

CONTEXT: THE MISSING INGREDIENT

Clearly, context was shaping people's experiences of themselves and others, yet context was invisible. People tended to be blind to the contexts others were operating from. As a consequence, they misunderstood others, had little empathy for them, made up often-incorrect stories about others' motivations, judged them, resisted them, or reacted against them.

People also tended to be blind to their own context and how it was shaping *their* experiences. For example, they were blind to how they were reflexively reacting to their own Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer contexts in ways that caused stress, soured their relationships with others, and diminished their organizational effectiveness. People were seeing people, not context. This blindness was costly.

THE CHALLENGE FOR THE OD PRACTITIONER

The challenge is to be able to see, understand, and master the systemic contexts in which we and others operate. Immediately, there is a problem. We do not see context; all we see are people. So we become fascinated with people, understanding them, analyzing them, assuming that if only we understood them better we would know how to interact with them. Unfortunately, in system life, this is not the case. To be personally effective, we need to understand and master the systemic contexts we move in and out of. To interact effectively with others, we need to understand and take into account the systemic contexts in which they are living. Let's observe the trials of Dora and Sam as they struggle to do well but are undone by their blindness to system context.

I. Where in the World Is Dora?

Dora has had a tough day. Things didn't go well in the team meeting she was leading. She had a lot of complaints from members. Then she needed to pass down an unpopular initiative coming from above, which she knew was going to stir up trouble—and it did. Next, she learned that her project proposal was denied. Finally, the data analysis she was promised for today didn't come—*next week, we promise*.

In the course of this difficult day, Dora has passed through four distinct contexts, and Dora, being blind to context, has reflexively reacted in ways that

have caused her stress, soured her relationships with others, and diminished her effectiveness.

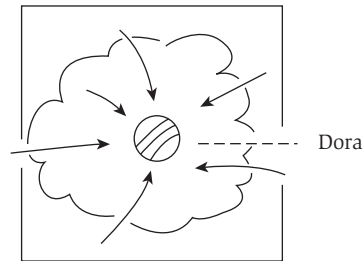


Figure 32.2. Dora as Top in a Context of Complexity and Accountability

In Figure 32.2, Dora is at the Top, Team Leader. Here she has stepped into the top context of complexity and accountability, and, being blind to context, she has reflexively sucked responsibility for this team up to herself and away from others. By doing so, she has become responsible for the team, while members have become not responsible. She feels the burden of the team’s failures, and the members blame her for the failures.

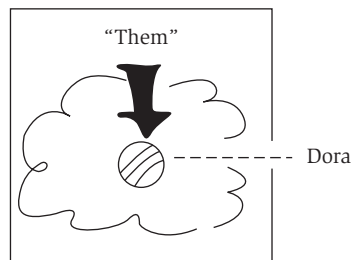


Figure 32.3. Dora as Bottom in a Context of Vulnerability

In Figure 32.3, Dora is at the Bottom, in the context of vulnerability in which there is always some “them” who make decisions without her involvement. This affects her in major and minor ways. Now *they* have done it again, denying the project proposal that has meant so much to her. Being blind to context, Dora has reflexively held “them” responsible for her condition and the condition of the system. Now she is the oppressed Bottom—angry with “them,” disappointed with “them,” resentful of “them,” and seeing herself as the blameless, helpless victim of “them.”

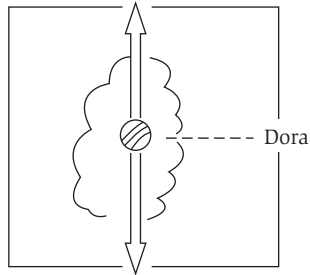


Figure 32.4. Dora in the Middle Tearing Context

In Figure 32.4, Dora is in the Middle, in the tearing context between two (often more) conflicting needs, demands, perspectives, and priorities. Now she is being tasked by Tops to deliver an initiative, which she knows will be unacceptable to Bottoms. Top and Bottom are in disagreement about this initiative, both of them are looking to Dora for her support. Dora, being blind to middle context, has reflexively slid in between Tops' and Bottoms' conflict with one another and made their conflicts her own. Now *she* feels responsible for resolving *their* issues. So now Dora is the torn Middle—confused, feeling weak, not fully satisfying either party, not getting any positive feedback, and beginning to doubt her competence.

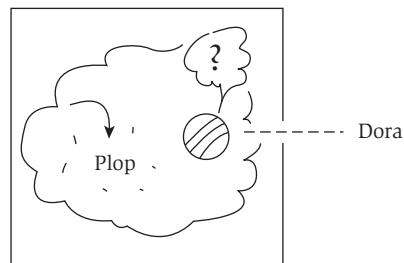


Figure 32.5. Dora in the Customer Context of Neglect

In Figure 32.5, Dora is the Customer. She needed that data analysis today; they assured her it would be here today. But the data analysis did not arrive. Instead there are excuses, apologies, other priorities, new promises. Once again, being blind to context, Dora in the Customer context has reflexively held the delivery system responsible for delivery. They're responsible, and Dora's not responsible. Isn't that how it's supposed to be as a Customer? Maybe so, but now that delivery hasn't come, Dora is feeling like the righteously screwed Customer.

So Dora has had a rough day, and throughout the day she has failed to see the part she has played in creating her own difficulty: reflexively sucking up responsibility when in the Top context, holding higher-ups responsible for her condition when in the Bottom context, sliding in between others' issues

and conflicts when in the Middle context, and staying aloof and holding the delivery system responsible for delivery when in the Customer context.

Advice to Dora. Pay attention to the systemic contexts you are in, and notice your reflex responses to those contexts. Finally, ask yourself if there aren't more satisfying and productive choices for you in each of those contexts. When you're Top, is there some better alternative to sucking responsibility up to yourself and away from others? When you're Bottom, is there some better alternative to holding "them" responsible for your condition and the condition of the system? When you're Middle, is there some better alternative to sliding in between other people's issues and conflicts and making them your own? And when you're Customer, is there some better alternative to staying aloof and holding the delivery system responsible for delivery?

II. Doesn't Anyone Care About Sam?

Sam is also having a tough day. He had been working on this new initiative for the organization. He was quite proud of what he had done and immediately shipped a copy to his Top. He has been expecting some acknowledgement from his Top: maybe a raise or a bonus or maybe even a promotion—at least a thank you. There was nothing. Then he ran this idea by his workers; he expected them to be enthusiastic about the possibilities this plan had for their work lives. Instead of enthusiasm, he got blank stares, yawns, apathy, and irrelevant comments about sports. Next, he went to his Middle, soliciting support in moving the initiative ahead. What he got from his Middle was a weak *I'll see what I can do*, with not a lot of conviction. Finally, he brought the idea to his Customer, hoping to demonstrate the organization's forward thinking. The Customer did not care. What a day for Sam.

Let's see if we can give Sam some clarity. If Dora's problem was that she was blind to the context *she* was in, Sam's issue is his blindness to *other people's* contexts. He believes that people are people, when, in fact, people are people struggling to cope with the systemic contexts they are in.

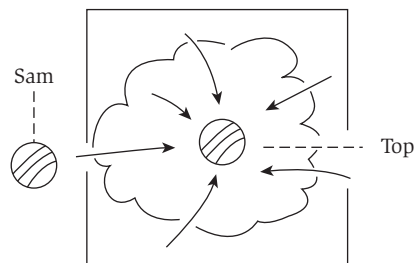


Figure 32.6. Sam Interacting with Top Living in a World of Complexity and Accountability

In Figure 32.6, Sam brings his initiative to Top, who is struggling to survive in the context of complexity and accountability. To Sam this is a brilliant plan;

it may also be that to his boss, but, given the Top's context, Sam's brilliant plan may show up as just another complexity—or maybe even a complaint. So he received no bonus, raise, promotion, or praise. Nothing.

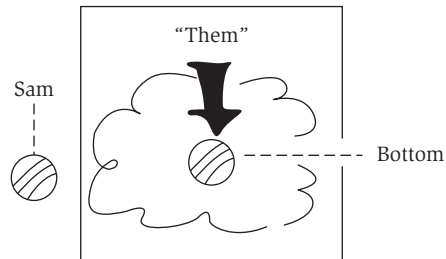


Figure 32.7. Sam Interacting with Bottom Living in a Context of Vulnerability

In Figure 32.7, Sam brings his brilliant initiative to his Bottoms, who are living in this world of vulnerability in which there is always a “them” doing something to us. It's possible that his Bottoms might perk up to this plan's possibilities, but, given the Bottoms' context, Sam's brilliant plan might show up as just another case of “them” doing it to us. So there is no enthusiasm. Just a sense that: relax, this too shall pass.

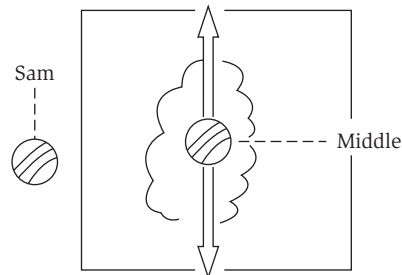


Figure 32.8. Sam Interacting with Middle Living in a Tearing Context

In Figure 32.8, Sam goes to his Middle; certainly that's the Middle's job, to move brilliant initiatives like Sam's ahead. And that is what Middle might do, but given that Middle is struggling to survive in this tearing context in which there are no simple requests, Sam's request may show up as more tearing. Now Middle has to deal with Top, and Top has her initiatives she wants Middle to bring to Bottoms. So, *I'll see what I can do*, says Sam's Middle weakly.

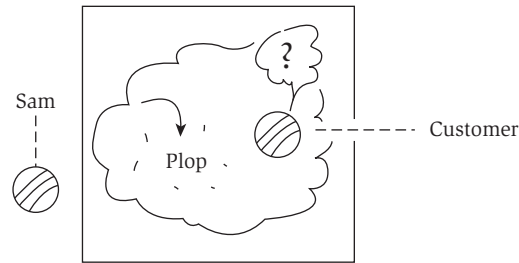


Figure 32.9. Sam Interacting with Customer Living in a Context of Neglect

Finally, in Figure 32.9, Sam brings his initiative to his Customer. This is not the product Customer has been waiting for, but Sam thinks that his initiative will impress the Customer with the organization’s forward thinking. Now, it’s possible that the Customer would be suitably impressed but, given Customer’s context, Sam’s brilliant plan might show up as more of the same, more “neglect.”

As a result, this is Sam’s day: no response from his boss, glazed eyes of indifference from his Bottoms, weak wishy-washy non-committal response from his Middle, and anger from his Customer. And, in his blindness to the context of others, Sam takes this all personally; he sees these others as insensitive, malicious, or incompetent; he reacts: gets mad, gets even, withdraws. This is the last anyone will see of his brilliant initiative. In fact, it may be the last anyone sees any initiative from Sam.

Advice to Sam. Pay attention to the contexts others are living in. Have some empathy and understanding for *their* worlds; don’t get hooked by their initial reactions. They are not about you; they are the reactions of people struggling to cope with the conditions of *their* worlds. Stay focused on what it is you are trying to make happen; be strategic, take others’ contexts into account. Maybe your brilliant initiative will get a better hearing if you introduce it in a way that reduces the complexity of your Top, reduces the vulnerability of your Bottom, is more supportive (less tearing) of your Middle, and reduces the neglect of your Customer.

SUMMARY

Our challenge as OD practitioners is to help Dora, Sam, and our organizational clients see, understand, and master the systemic contexts in which they and others are functioning. Context blindness is costly, resulting in unnecessary stress, broken relationships, misdirected and wasted energy, lost opportunities, and diminished organizational effectiveness.

When we see *ourselves* in context, we are less likely to fall into dysfunctional patterns as burdened Tops, torn Middles, oppressed Bottoms, and righteously screwed Customers, all of which diminish our potential contributions to our systems. Seeing *ourselves* in context enables us to understand our worlds and to make choices that empower ourselves, others, and our systems.

When we see *others* in context, we are less likely to make up inaccurate stories about them, take personally what is not personal, get mad, get even, and withdraw, all of which take us out of the possibility of productive partnerships with one another. Seeing *others* in context enables us to understand their worlds, empathize with the issues they are dealing with, and, ultimately, interact with them in ways that are mutually productive and in the service of the system.

Resources

Oshry, B. (1992). *The possibilities of organization*. Boston: Power + Systems.

Oshry, B. (2007). *Seeing systems: Unlocking the mysteries of organizational life* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.