

The New Johari Window:

#8 Unpredictability

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Living on the edge of unpredictability can be exciting and addicting. It is a threshold experience. This is what Csikszentmihalyi calls a flow experience. It brings us into the special realm that resides between boredom and anxiety. The edge is a boundary – the intersection between different systems and different cultures. It is at the edge or boundary of any system that we find maximum information and maximum unpredictability, for the edge is the point where a system is conducting transactions with the outside world. Many relationships that could be labeled postmodern are poised on the edge of chaos. This is not chaos, as it is usually defined in terms of anarchy or complete disorganization; rather, as this term was originally being used and is now being used, chaos is defined as a state of unpredictability – as a system in which certainty and uncertainty are in interplay with one another.

Interpersonal Edginess

Relationships can't be predicted and this is a very scary and "unhinging" thought. We may now be living in the age not of anxiety but of "edginess." A Midwest-bred educator, with extensive business experience described this era of edginess in terms of a popular film cartoon:

My current image of a past employer is almost a cartoon that many postmodern companies will reenact. It is Wiley Coyote back-pedaling madly, clawing at the ground trying to stop as his inertia carries him to the precipice. There, the great cosmic road runner hovers in mid-air with a silly grin on its face. The coyote goes over and down silently, and with a look of utter chagrin. "Beep! Beep!" is the only communication heard.

In this postmodern era, men and women look for certainty in the midst of unpredictability, as they stand, like Wiley Coyote, poised on the edge or already over the edge of a psychological and organizational abyss.

Another middle aged corporate executive stated this point quite eloquently in his description of a moderately large corporation that he helped to found:

Our people spend their time looking for the insignificant events; the events at the margin that can add order or stability to the complexities they live in. This reduces our effectiveness as an organization and ultimately limits our ability to survive in a very competitive marketplace. They are constantly looking for ways to reduce their frustrations and uncertainty by seeking and challenging the vision and leadership of the company. While we the senior management focus on growth and largeness, they focus on transitions. Our continuous play between chaos and order is reflected [in] our need to constantly be in meetings. Someone finds a chaotic situation and quickly calls the group together for resolution. Instead of making clear and concise decisions that are communicated to the organization we tend to increase the ambiguity in the company and clarify only the smallest of issues. We do not address with clarity the process required to make uncertainty easier to resolve for the organization.

Perhaps, as some system theorists would have us believe, the primary function of any postmodern relationship is to (somehow) snatch structure and certainty out of the mouth of the dragon of chaos and uncertainty. System theorists described this as the process of postmodern entropy – it is the tendency of all systems to move toward disorder or chaos (the second law of thermodynamics) and of postmodern relationships, in particular, to move quickly toward this unpredictable state. Many systems in our world, it would appear, can be best described as entities that hover on the edge of or move back and forth between states of certainty and uncertainty.

Uncertainty and the Johari Window

What does this unpredictability mean? First, it means that relationships are not subject to control by any one participant in this relationship. People interact in dynamic ways. There is never *one* Johari Window. There are always at least two – often three or four. Unfortunately, at times, the Johari Window has been portrayed as a static system: “I have a large Q2” or “I have a small Q3.” “My Q4 is shrinking.” This is not an accurate use of the Window. Our four quadrants expand or contract in relation to the person(s) with whom we are interacting – and the panes of their window are themselves large or small as a function of their relationship with us.

With regard to internal and external control, we are not sure what we can control, hence are not sure what we can predict. The reverse is also true: we are not sure what we can predict, hence we are not sure what we can control. We can *influence* a relationship, but not control it. Equally as important, we can seek to *understand* the complex nature of a relationship – but can’t predict precisely what will happen in the future with regard to this relationship or even what will happen one minute from now. If we can predict and control the relationship, then there is nothing but the external panes in both sets of windows. An external locus of control is dominating the interaction. The setting (rules, roles, scripts, social expectations) is dictating everything. There is no personal authenticity. The participants are all “actors.” No, this is not accurate, for actors are allowed some spontaneity and they add their own character to their part). Rather, the participants might as well be robots or computer programs in this type of relationship.

As I noted in an earlier essay in this series, the postmodern condition combines complexity and unpredictability. There is a level of cognitive and emotional challenge that can be overwhelming. I’ve already spoken of the over-whelmed self. It’s more than just the cognitive dimensions described by Kegan – there is also (as I mentioned) the emotional element. We diminish ourselves, we become selective – and we look for sanctuaries. These sanctuaries can be exceptionally valuable times and places for reflection, learning and renewal. They can also,

in some sense, be “false sanctuaries” – places and times in which we meet with people of like mind. We move into life style enclaves where there is greater predictability and less complexity with regard to self-definition and identity. We attempt to find false sanctuary by dulling our own senses (through use of mind-altering drugs or rituals) to avoid or diminish the challenges of the complex senses of postmodern self. We either reduce the domain of exploration in false sanctuaries (Lasch’s minimal self) or engage in an obsessive focusing on the discovery of some “authentic” self (Lasch’s culture of narcissism). We retreat from full engagement in the world and the intricacies of interpersonal relationships.

There is another way in which we can address the challenges of postmodern complexity and unpredictability. We can look for some way in which to order the seemingly chaotic intrapersonal and interpersonal world in which we dwell. The Johari Window provides order – a way of sorting out, categorizing and thinking about human interactions. It is a “simple” model that doesn’t neglect the complexity and unpredictability of postmodern interpersonal relationships. We can use the Window as a guide not only for our own personal reflection (in a true sanctuary), but also as a guide for interpersonal dialogue about the specific relationships in which we are engaged. This dialogue hopefully takes place, itself, in a true sanctuary that provides both safety and encouragement of appropriate disclosure and feedback.