

The New Johari Window

#21: Quadrant Two: Original and New Johari Window

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In this essay, I examine both the rich insights about Quad Two originally offered by Joe Luft and the insights about this quadrant in the window that can be derived from our 21st Century analysis.

The Original Johari Window

Joe Luft offers many insights regarding Quad Two – just as he does about Quad Three – that move beyond a simple identification of one’s blind self. He is particularly insightful, in my opinion, about three issues: (1) consensual reliability, (2) interacting alone and (3) forced exposure.

Consensual Reliability

Luft suggests that one’s perception of another person consists of two parts, the subjective and the objective:ⁱ

The subjective is the purely personal, i.e., what A alone perceives. The objective part, in human interaction, is what is consensually shared with others. However, for A there is *no division into the objective and the subjective*; it is all of a piece. In other words, some of A’s perception of B has consensual reliability (objectivity) and some of A’s perception of B lacks this reliability (has little or no concurrence with others).

Luft focuses on the concept of “consensual reliability” at this point:ⁱⁱ

It should be clear that we are discussing *consensual reliability* and not validity.

Obviously, consensus and validity are not necessarily the same thing. When criteria of validity exist, we could rely on these and set aside consensus. For example, production records are better than appearance for judging a worker's competence. However, interpersonal relations are based primarily on the perceived qualities in behavior and not on more valid elements.

As the Continental School and other postmodern schools so often note, we actively construct our realities. We don't just passively receive this reality. This is particularly the case with regard to interpersonal relationships: "We tend to pigeonhole each other very quickly and then to search for confirmation of our own stereotyping. Part of the delight in small group exploration is the way we come to modify our impressions of each other. Rarely do we know what moves another to change his impression of us." ⁱⁱⁱ

This is a critical point. Given that interpersonal relationships are dynamic and always changing, it is particularly challenging to track changes in the way other people perceive us, for these changes are frequent and often unpredictable (especially early in a relationship). Even when we get a solid purchase regarding another person's "character" or "personality," [attribution theory] this perception will shift. That is why our sense of another person's perception of us is often opaque – not wholly blind. We may have a fairly clear and accurate sense of their perception of us at an early stage in our relationship; however, this "old" perception is now outdated and tends to remain present (though opaque) and to distract us from more recent data.

Interacting Alone

Luft notes that "we carry each other around in our heads and continue interaction even after the other person is not present. An important aspect of human interaction is this interaction before or after being in the physical presence of the other. Anticipatory interaction with the other in our minds serves to prepare us for the exchange, and in certain important occasions may be crucial." ^{iv}

For instance, Joseph – the man I coached – was preparing for co-workers who saw him as tough and ruthlessly oriented toward the interests of the company. Up to a point, this preparatory work is valuable. It keeps Joseph from feeling hurt when someone gets upset with his resounding “no.” Yet, these preconceptions can also serve as barriers to effective human interaction. They can be self-fulfilling. Joseph assumes that other people with whom he works will see him as tough, so he protects himself and withdraws from an authentic relationship. As a result, co-workers do see him as uncaring and the preconceptions of both parties to the interaction are confirmed.

Luft has more to say about this complex issue of anticipatory interaction:^v

In our heads we play both roles. We play ourselves and we play the other person as we think they will act in our relationship. We make due allowance for the known and unknown quadrants of ourselves and the other individual, as we understand them. Usually, the imaginary interactions are casually done, and it is rewarding to catch oneself playing these scenes. They tell important things about ourselves and about the particular relationship. Frequently, this foreplay occurs as a function of anxiety in the relationship, and more specifically where there is some danger. Then we plan the interaction with greater deliberation. “If he says this, I’ll say that,” ruminates the employee going in to see the boss, “and if he does so-and-so, I’ll do thus-and-so.”

Luft goes on to observe that:^{vi}

More interaction-in-the-head occurs . . . after real interaction than before. Most interactions are sufficiently open-ended so that the unexpected might occur. This is especially so in view of the presence of the four quadrants in each participant. After the interaction *in vivo*, we can go over the events in order to savor the experience or to appreciate more clearly what was going on, what went wrong and what went right. Important work in the service of self may take place, awareness may deepen, and problems may be centered on the mind's examining

table for a more careful inspection.

My coaching client, Joseph, certainly used Luft's "anticipatory interaction" to inoculate himself against potential negative reactions to his harsh leadership; yet, as Luft suggests, this inoculation could have blocked Joseph from greater awareness of the "true" impressions that other people have of him. Through my appreciative coaching with Joseph, he was able to identify a strength that had been unknown to him (Quad Two in the Window of Strength - see Chapter Two).

Forced Exposure

Luft describes (and warns about) a process that he calls "psychological rape." This is the process of "forcibly revealing what the individual is not ready to perceive." This forced exposure can, in turn, generate feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and impotence in the person being "raped." Forcing Q2 behavior out into the open (to Q1), can be traumatic. This is a critical point—and is a frequent source of misunderstanding regarding the Johari Window.

Human interaction models (especially from the American School) are often built on the assumption that feedback is inevitably a good thing. The Johari Window model has always been based on the assumption that feedback (and disclosure) are powerful interventions in any dynamic relationship and should be offered cautiously and with full appreciation of the complexity of relationships and interpersonal needs (Schutz) being engaged in these relationships.

Some psychoanalytically-oriented (British School) psychologists have written about the wisdom of one's defenses. These psychologists indicate that we should trust our own resistance—our inner wisdom. Luft arrived at a similar conclusion in his original formulation of the Johari Window when writing about the "safety devices" that exist to counter a psychological rape:^{vii}

High anxiety and turmoil may result. Fortunately, a number of safety devices

exist within the individual and within the group so that protection against psychological rape is possible. In the individual, denial of the forced disclosure is probably the most common reaction. There are other ways of avoiding, ignoring, rationalizing, or otherwise deflecting the disclosure.

As Luft notes, these appropriate protective devices protect us, but also block the growth in self-understanding that can come with more timely and carefully presented Quad Two material:^{viii}

Sometime later the individual may, after considerable experience and growth, look back and recognize the earlier attack-and-denial as the first intimation of new awareness [Quad Two moves from blind to opaque]. More often, defenses around the troubled feelings become tighter and the emotional issue buried still deeper [Quad Two remains blind]; another reason for sensitivity and skill in conducting such groups.

Luft also identifies the powerful protective devices that are available in the group:^{ix}

The protective resources in the group are considerable. Members witnessing forced disclosure may come to the aid of the victim. Observations of behavior in Q2 as alleged may be challenged by others. If the observations happen to be accurate they may turn on the attacker, challenging his motives. They may raise questions about his lack of sensibility or his poor judgment. The group may work to improve the level of trust by opening basic *group* issues. The attacking incident itself is examined in the perspective of ongoing group processes.

This protective aspect of psychological rape is often overlooked by those who use the Johari Window in human relations workshops. As proponents of the British School note, the group can be a destructive force that leads to collusion by all group members in setting the stage for a psychological rape of one member. Alternatively, the group can be a constructive force – as Luft suggests – that provides protection for a group member until such time as this member is

ready to receive the feedback. It is very appropriate to set group norms and for the group facilitator to play an active role in installing and reinforcing these fundamental norms of protection from psychological rape.

The New Johari Window

What about the postmodern world in which we now dwell? How does this 21st Century world impact on our relative blindness about ourselves? In what ways do we have to modify and expand on the second quadrant of the Johari Window to better address the distinctive challenges of postmodernism? As a first step toward answering these questions, I will reintroduce (from Chapter Two) two of the distinctive challenges associated with our emerging postmodern society. These challenges concern the complex (multiphrenic) nature of self in the postmodern world and the “white water world” in which we dwell. I will relate both to the second quadrant of the New Johari Window.

The Multiphrenic Self

We are living in a postmodern world in which to survive we must be many people in many settings. It's not just that we are saturated with multiple images of self, as Gergen suggests, we also act out many different roles and engage many different styles in a society that is: (1) heterogeneous (complex), (2) dynamic (turbulent) and (3) multi-tiered (complex and unpredictable). Much like navigating our kayak through the turbulence of a white water stream, we are always shifting directions, rebalancing ourselves, and looking simultaneously at the challenges, barriers and opportunities that surround us and those that we anticipate “down-stream” (in the future).

All of this means that leaders like Joseph (my coaching client) are likely to be seen in different ways by different people in different settings and even by the same people in different settings and at different times. This, in turn, means that the feedback any of us receive is likely to be contradictory or at least confusing. In Joseph's case, some people in his organization do see him as a “son-of-a-x@#&%,” while others (who know him in some settings or have seen him

interact with his family or young people he is mentoring) see him as someone who is caring. Given that we already have an opaque sense of what to anticipate in terms of how specific people see us, we are particularly attuned to certain types of feedback from these specific people and at certain times and places. At the same time, we are likely to be truly blind to (and can not anticipate) feedback from other people, in other places and at other times.

White Water and Time

Our “white water” world restricts the time we have available to receive and process the feedback other people are prepared to give us. In the harried world of postmodern life, we often are not inclined nor have the attention span to carefully plan for or reflect on the impressions of other people. At the very least, we are likely to be very selective. We will be attuned only to feedback which we can anticipate and which fits with one of the self-images that we hold dear in our multiphrenic world. It’s not so much that we don’t want to hear “bad news;” it’s more the case that we don’t have the time or wouldn’t know what to do with the “bad news” once we do get it. In our 21st Century world, we face plenty of revelations that could wound us – but we are unable to confront them.

Our “tough” corporate executive, Joseph, doesn’t have time or place – or sufficient emotional energy – to handle all of the negative feedback he anticipates receiving if he opens himself up to Q2. So he withdraws and remains distant, thereby discouraging feedback. All of this contributes to his depression. Sadly, if Joseph had the time, the place and the inclination to invite feedback, he would have found that much of it was positive, not negative. To get this kind of constructive feedback in the postmodern world in which Joseph dwells, one needs a sanctuary – a safe place – that affords both the time and space for the open reception of this feedback and the thoughtful contemplation of its implications. In Joseph’s case, this sanctuary was found in our coaching relationship.

¹Luft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 31.

ⁱⁱLuft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 31.

ⁱⁱⁱLuft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 31.

^{iv}Luft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 34.

^vLuft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 34.

^{vi}Luft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, pp. 34-35.

^{vii}Luft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 36.

^{viii}Luft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 36.

^{ix}Luft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, pp.36-37.