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I Was Blind But Now I See

Various Ways to Provide System Sight

By Douglas O'Loughlin

I attended the Organization Workshop (OW) with Barry and Karen Oshry in 1995. At the end of the workshop, I was singing the verse of *Amazing Grace*, “I was blind but now I see.” My system blindness had been exposed and I felt like I had been given special lenses to see more clearly which I continue to use in my practice

today. As a certified practitioner, I have facilitated OW's in a number of contexts. In the Singapore Public Service where I work, there are now about 15 certified OW trainers, and we have been bringing system sight to many individuals and organizations.

For those of you who are not familiar with Barry Oshry's work, here is a quick overview of his simple and powerful way of seeing an organization as a system.

Most people see themselves as individuals in a system, but actually we are in a context, a “world,” that influences how we think and how we show up to others. The worlds are shown in *Figure 1* and here is a brief summary of the dynamics of each world:

- » The Top world tends to be one with complexity and accountability, thus they become overloaded.
- » The Middle world tends to get stuck in the space between other worlds, thus they feel torn.
- » The Bottom world is one of vulnerability from the other worlds, so they tend to experience oppression.
- » The Customer World is where they often feel neglected.

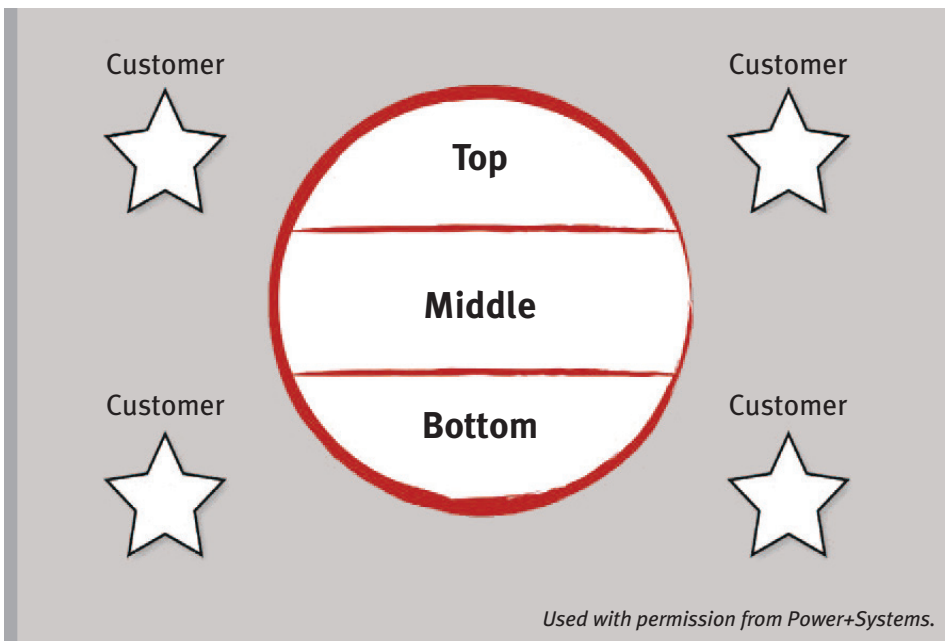


Figure 1. *The Four Worlds of an Organization from Barry Oshry*

Some notes on this way of Seeing Systems:

- » Each of us is likely to spend time in most of the worlds every day, depending on the context of the situation we are in at any point in time.
- » These dynamics do not happen every time, but with great regularity, enough to be considered a system pattern.
- » Note that “Bottom” can refer to being at the bottom of the hierarchy of the organization, and can also indicate that at this moment you are a team member or an individual contributor. Choose the language that works best in your context.

System sight helps people understand things from a larger perspective, that when “stuff happens” it is not just personal. Our interpretations of the “stuff” and our reactions to other people are shaped by the specific worlds we and others are in: context matters. This understanding builds greater empathy and partnership, so that:

- » Tops can share more responsibility,
- » Middles can practice more independence of thought,
- » Bottoms can take more ownership, and
- » Customers can engage more and help the system work better.

There are various ways to provide systems sight after an actual OW or without doing an OW just using the concepts of the worlds. Here are a few ways that bring this powerful work to life.

1. **Develop Platforms for Enhanced System Power Over and Above Individual Strategies**

Traditionally, partnership strategies are developed from the perspective of an individual in a particular world. For example, when you are a Top you can involve more people in planning and decision making. When you are a Middle you can integrate more regularly with your peers. When you are a Bottom you can choose to turn your complaints into projects. And when you are a Customer you can get involved upstream and better understand how the organization works.

To enhance system power, provide opportunities for groups to talk about partnership strategies at the system level. This could be middle integration platforms, sessions where the Tops and Middles come together for exploring the future of the organization. Town halls, for example, are interventions and also opportunities to share information and create effective processes to get ideas from the Bottoms. If we are talking system power, it is helpful to have systemic solutions, not just what individuals can do.

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2. **Time Out Times for Department Sessions**

Most departments have Tops, Middles, and Bottoms, so we can provide a structured reflection process where groups can see into each other’s worlds, to be better understood and support each other. We ask the group to split into their most natural groups: Tops, Middles, and Bottoms (usually there are two groups of the latter).

The groups then do two rounds of discussion and sharing. Round 1 is for each group to prepare and share on what life is like in their world. After each group shares, others can ask clarifying questions. Round 2 is the offers and requests each group has of the other groups, which can be for everyone, or for specific worlds or people.

3. **Working with Non-Profit or Civil Society Organizations, with Both Organization and Sector Perspectives**

Developing system sight with a nonprofit or civil society organization produces strategies and action

plans from two different perspectives, one on the organization itself and the other from their place in their respective sector.

The organization first explores its own dynamics, and strategies for more partnership and system power. Then the organization looks at the worlds from a sector perspective. They talk about how Middles in their respective organizations can integrate. Middle integration across a sector can be powerful, resulting in organizations strategically supporting each other and

determining how to best advocate for the issues that can help them fulfill their mission.

4. **Processing Organization-wide Survey Results**

For most organization surveys, it seems the burden for improving results falls on the Tops, and perhaps HR. This feeds into the system pattern of the Tops being burdened and the Bottoms sitting back and saying “show me.”

So whether a group is 30 or 200 people, position the survey as a system report card, not just results for the Tops to fix. Split the room by level, with each group processing the survey results from their own perspective. The Tops, Middles, and Bottoms sit together in groups and answer the question “What are you glad, sad, and puzzled about when you look at the survey results?” and the next round is either “Make offers and requests with different people or groups” or “What we can do from our part of the organization to make us healthier and more effective.”

5. Working with Middle Management Communities

Because of the OW work, many Middle connect sessions have sprouted up across public service organizations. These sessions can be in the form of peer/action learning, skill-building, with guest speakers, etc. With system sight, an annual work planning cycle can start with a Middle manager platform followed by Top management involvement.

6. Using OW for Peer Consulting

The four worlds of the OW can assist in understanding what is happening in an organization. People offer an organization challenge they are facing and the rest of the members use the worlds as frames from which to ask questions and offer suggestions.

7. Assessing the Worlds to get a Sense of the Health of a System

The concepts of OW can get a critical mass in the organization to see and lead the organization. At the end of each session, an online poll assesses the health of each of the worlds. For example, each person assesses how effective they are at sharing responsibility when they are in the Top world, how well they think the organization's Tops share responsibility, and then answer similar questions for the other worlds. This serves as self-reflection as well as data for the organization.

8. Inviting a Senior Leader to Share System Perspective

As you build system sight in an organization, invite a senior leader who has system sight to have a chat with the group of Middles and Bottoms. This can yield tangible ideas to create more system power.

Conclusion

If you are aware of the visual awareness test of counting the passes of the basketball, once you see the gorilla, you cannot unsee it. The systemic conditions are the gorilla. When one learns how to see it, system sight replaces system blindness.

For over 40 years, Barry and Karen Oshry have dedicated their professional lives to providing system sight. My colleagues and I have found the work so beneficial that we look for opportunities to spread the work and find ways to expand systems awareness. It is such a privilege to support people and organizations to see and shift systems, to make up healthier stories when stuff happens, and to hear choruses of "I was blind but now I see."

If you would like to learn more about this body of work, you can visit www.powerandsystems.com and watch videos of Barry Oshry on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYpO-pK7IFA>

References

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