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The Foundations of Perspective

Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of
the world.

—Arthur Schopenhauer

We develop perspectives influenced by our work experience. Sometimes
these perspectives are limited in ways that shut down mutual understand-
ing: "accounting practices are nothing but bean counting." Other perspec-
tives are limited in ways that simply emphasize our work history. Leaders
who want to see this in action should introduce the idea of growth to a
cross-functional group of executives. The CFO is likely to go straight to
necessary capital requirements. Plant managers may start down the path of
production output. The phrase "market share" will come from the VP of
Marketing, and Human Resources will assume the leader is talking about
hiring.

Roger McGough's poem *"The Way Things Are"*[1] is the voice of a father
doing his best to ground a child's magical imagination in the father's some-
what flat truth. The child's magical perspective and the father's perspective
of certainty intertwine, both reflecting differing interpretations of similar
life experiences, but the only line that is repeated is: "I am your father and
that is the way things are."

Like the child and the father in McGough's poem, each executive
in our example has a slightly different perspective on the same notion.
Notice that none of them are wrong, and all are limited. In many cases,
they would add the phrase: ". . . and that is the way things are." So, how
do we begin to see in a new, less limited way without abandoning our
experience and insights? What are the necessary components to facilitate
this? Is it possible to train ourselves to see that which is unfamiliar, and
in many ways unrecognizable?

The Tension between Individual and Collective

We can begin by understanding a tension that can easily arise between the actions of the individual and the needs of the collective. Leaders who are aware of these distinctions can keep an eye on a set of naturally arising dynamics that can appear to be at odds with each other.

Individuals are novelty generators. Most often, individuals are the ones who see new patterns, make intuitive breakthroughs, or notice an anomaly that may lead to an innovation. Individuals have the "first sighting" of the new and different either as a process of their work or as a byproduct of an effort to improve an existing condition.

Ida Rosenthal,[2] a New Jersey dressmaker, noticed that the silhouettes of her dresses were not as pleasing on the women being fitted as they appeared in her sketches. She created a support piece built into the dress
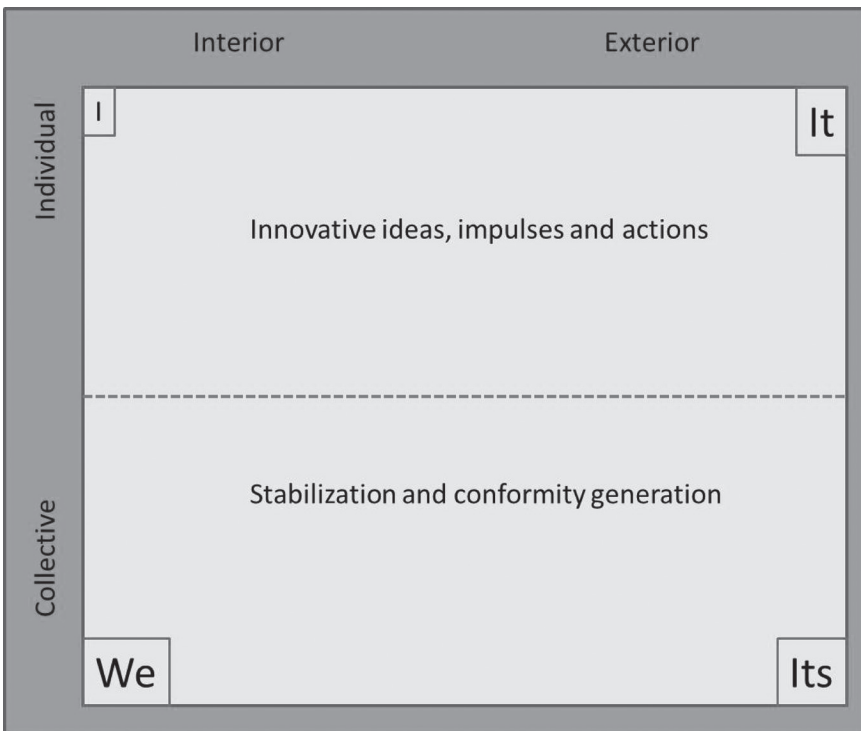
Figure 1.1. Individual and collective

that would enhance the silhouette, smooth the features of the bodice, and improve the overall appearance of her designs. It was her effort to solve what she considered to be an existing problem with her work. She had no idea that the support piece would become popular, and that the demand for these support pieces were be so high that she would begin selling them separately, and thus the Maidenform Bra Company was formed. Her vision was focused on solving a problem, not the innovation of an item that would change the fashion industry. As the individual idea moved into the community, the collective, it changed.

Sometimes in opposition to the tendency for individual innovation, the collective tendency acts as a stability generator. It is the collective conversation—the culture, systems, and processes—that create the consistency that allows the organization to function effectively and efficiently. The collective community of women, wearing Ida's bras, brought the innovation into a new stability with new designs and broad appeal. Victoria's Secret owes Ida a debt of gratitude for the innovation, but the collective stabilization raised the popularity of the bra itself.

These tendencies can work in harmony with each other or at cross purposes to each other. Too much novelty can pull an organization apart. The overpursuit of innovation can take an organization away from its purpose, which is acceptable only if it is done intentionally. Overemphasizing stability is also dangerous to the organization. Without new thinking and actions, the business will stagnate. HUMCO, a 100-year-old pharmaceutical manufacturing company, produces Epsom salts. The market for this product has been reliable for decades and will probably stay fairly steady for decades to come, but the margins continue to erode slowly. HUMCO's move to innovate this old workhorse was to add scents to some of the product for use in homemade sprays that people across the southern United States use to cool themselves during hot summer months. This innovation adds new balance to the stability of the company and expands its market: a necessary move for any mature company.

Though tension invariably exists between innovation and stability, they do not present an either/or scenario. They are not incompatible and may not necessarily be at odds with each other. The two can be aspects of a whole and fruitfully adjusted and adapted. Innovation and novelty must be protected from the natural forces of stability. In the early 1980s, Ford did this by separating Team Taurus from the rest of the company. The design team created the highly successful Ford Taurus and Mercury Sable. When Ford attempted to fold the Taurus group and its new approaches to automobile design back into the company, stability forces in the larger

collective rejected it and the transplant failed. Lockheed Martin created the Advanced Development Programs group, also known as the Skunk Works, to create a high-speed, highly maneuverable fighter to compete with Germany's Messerschmitt aircraft. Lockheed continues to protect the Skunk Works, which has produced the U2 spy plane, the D-21 drone, and stealth technology so far. Consistent innovation lives safely within the stability of the collective in those companies that do not allow the activities of the individual to outstrip the needs of the collective while protecting the initiative of individual inspirations from the tendencies of the collective.

In the 1970s, General Electric hired Peter Drucker, an accomplished management theorist, to help the company create a new compensation plan. Like so many organizations, they were searching for a way to tie pay to performance. In spite of Drucker's counsel against a single yardstick, they chose "return on investment" as the metric for determining performance. A concurrent reorganization at GE had shifted the responsibility for innovation to the individual business unit. The first problem is that innovation, by Drucker's definition, "requires investment today *without* any return for a long time." GE had unintentionally created a set of competing systems such that any funding a unit manager spent on innovation had to come out of the compensation pool for his or her staff. As a result, GE did not innovate for ten years. Drucker and GE saw the double bind only in retrospect and even then only partially. "Compensation must always try to balance the recognition of the individual with stability and maintenance of the group."[3]

What Drucker noticed is the polarity and interrelation of two aspects of the four dimensions framed by Ken Wilber's quadrants. This ability to notice aspects of each individual as well as aspects of the organization of which they are a member sheds light on deeper implications that have been missed by some of the most innovative and brilliant minds of our times.

Interpretation vs. Fact

Considering the perspectives of the individual and the collective is only the beginning of an integral understanding of organizational life. Each individual and group contains subjective (or interpreted) and objective (or factual) aspects. These can also be considered as the "humanities" and the "sciences," shown in figure 1.2 as the second axis: the left and right facets of Wilber's quadrants.

Many leaders overemphasize focus on the tangible aspects of their organizations, but according to Robert Kaplan and David Norton, "the
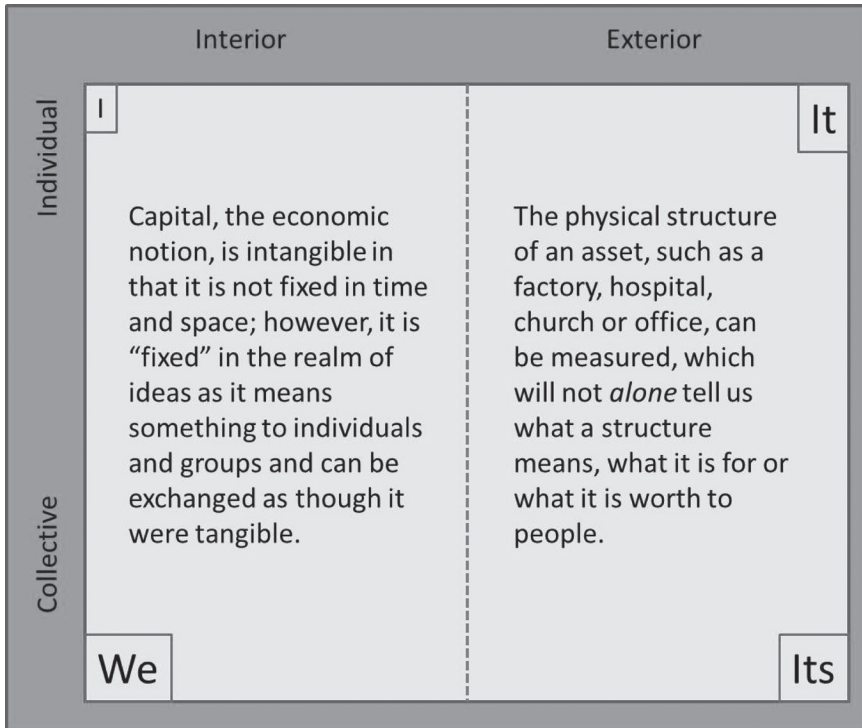
	Interior	Exterior
Individual	**I** Capital, the economic notion, is intangible in that it is not fixed in time and space; however, it is "fixed" in the realm of ideas as it means something to individuals and groups and can be exchanged as though it were tangible.	**It** The physical structure of an asset, such as a factory, hospital, church or office, can be measured, which will not *alone* tell us what a structure means, what it is for or what it is worth to people.
Collective	**We**	**Its**

Figure 1.2. Interpretation vs. fact (part 1)

average company's tangible assets . . . represent less than 25% of its market value." [4] Not surprisingly, the intangible assets go unrecognized and are often left out of strategies and plans for the future. More important, that remaining 75% in intangible assets lacks the crucial alignment it needs for realization and development.

Bankers, property managers, and others involved with the business of real estate work have the advantage of working with intangibles every day. An identifiable, tangible asset, such as a plant, building, or property, has monetary value when, under certain circumstances, a lender is willing to assign value to the structure based on some idea of what the structure is worth. This sense of value is fixed in a way that allows the owner of the tangible asset to realize it as capital.[5] Capital has no physical existence by itself. It does not occupy space or have observable dimensions. But the almost entirely nontangible *idea* that we call "capital" can be used in other

transactions and as a basis for other intangibles such as property rights, lines of credit, and rules of law. The intangible "value" of the property is interpreted value created by a melding of interpretations that transcend the physical facts about the plant, property, or building.

Learning to distinguish between interpretation and fact also allows leaders to separate ideas from the person presenting them: not confusing the message with the messenger. Occasionally, excellent ideas come from people for whom we have a personal dislike or distrust. Just as likely, leaders may receive terrible advice from their most trusted allies, but accept it simply by virtue of the fact that it came from their friend. Being aware of our reactions to people allows us to judge the merits of the ideas rather than to be distracted by the messenger of that idea. Imagine a lobbyist arguing passionately and persuasively against teaching evolution in public schools based on the false premise that scientists do not agree that evolution occurs. Armed with the distinction on interpretation and fact, the audience would be able to notice the difference between what can be tangibly proven or
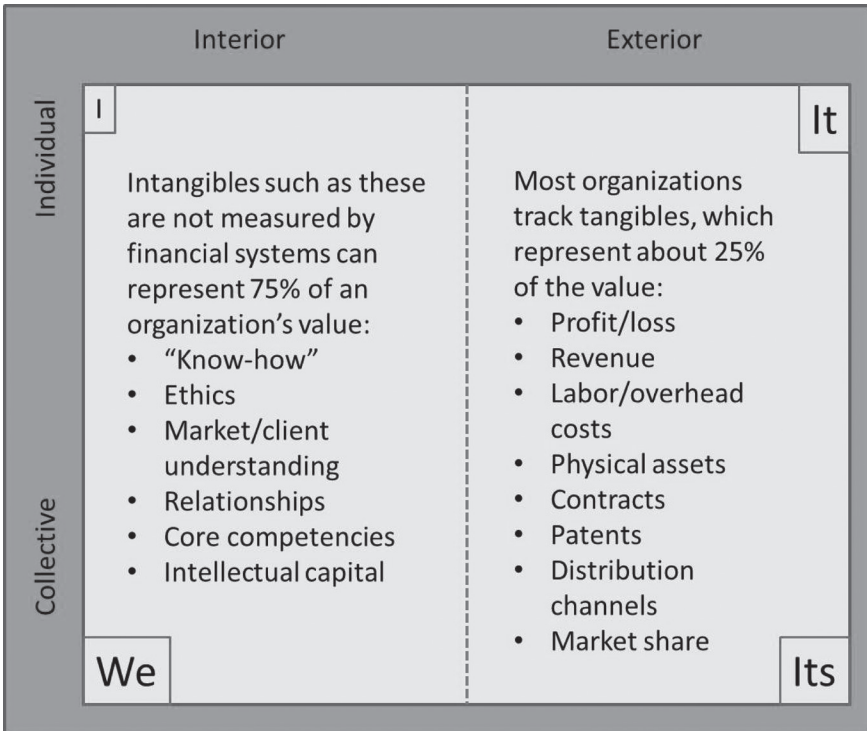

Figure 1.3. Interpretation vs. fact (part 2)

disproven, and what is largely a matter of preference and opinion. These distinctions are useful, but usually come bundled with the personal passion and preferences of the speaker, the observable with the intangible, the reality with the language being used to describe it. This also holds true for the set of dimensions described earlier: the individual and the collective.

Similarly, leaders can learn to distinguish statements of opinion into matters of taste and matters of judgment. Consider the statement "top-down, hierarchical management does not work anymore," as an example of distinguishing interpretation from fact. We may feel stimulated to ask for evidence-based support for the statement. If the conversation continues to masquerade as fact-based, the dialogue quickly collapses into an opinion without clear evidence, such as reliable statistics or data. What might happen differently in a discussion if such a statement were presented as an opinion from the start: "I'd prefer to see more inclusive leadership at work." Each participant in the conversation is implicitly invited to hold his or her opinion as viable, but without the guarantee of validity for everyone.

The Limits of Perspective

We all experience the limits of our own perspective, and while there are various approaches available to assist us in seeing things in a different way, few of them include the diversity and breadth of the integral model. We all work with interpretive frameworks—mental models—to navigate the world around us and to understand specific phenomena. As Peter Senge puts it, "in interacting with the environment, with others, and with the artifacts of technology, people form internal, mental models of themselves and of the things with which they are interacting. These models provide predictive and explanatory power for understanding the interaction."[6] Some of the characteristics of these models include:

- They are incomplete and constantly evolving.

- They are usually not accurate representations of a phenomenon; they typically contain errors and contradictions.

- They are economical and provide simplified explanations of complex phenomena.

- They often contain measures of uncertainty about their validity that allow them to be used even if incorrect.

- They can be represented by sets of condition-action rules.

Whether we are aware of it or not, we each have a unique perspective. That perspective informs what we see, what we pay attention to, and what interpretations we make of what we see. Each of us has a particular perspective. We are not as neutral as we sometimes imagine ourselves to be. We always see situations through the lens of our own perspectives. This is why there is such value first in becoming aware of our habits of seeing and interpreting situations, and second in exploring them and eventually in unlearning those that turn out to be limiting and unproductive.

The realization simply that we have a vantage point that we may choose to step away from opens a powerful resource for learning. In the ordinary way of being human, we are rarely aware of the influences of these perspectives, but by stepping away from them, we have a new view. We have the awareness that each of us has the greatest influence on ourselves. In organizational life and for leaders especially, a more inclusive experience of our own constellation of perspectives allows us to watch for these in ourselves. It requires patience and courage, especially initially, because the practice can be hard to start and uncomfortable to maintain. In time, however, the practice does become easier. Observing ourselves in action with others allows us to notice and then to confirm, replace, or update our habits of perception. One of the first steps we can take to enlarge our capacity to see our own perspective is to look through the four-dimensional lens of the integral map.

Once we can see the influence of our own "four-dimensional" perceptive lenses, we can usefully use the four-dimensional map as a scanning device for identifying the salient aspects of a specific organizational situation. Points that are salient in a more interpretive sense are more likely to have different characteristics than those that are based on objective observations. Furthermore, we also need to consider interconnections and dynamics between dimensions. Because this set of scanning filters considers all that we are experiencing, they can be useful in considering domain-appropriate responses to organizational issues.