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The Johari Window and the Dark Side of Organisations

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Abstract

The dark side of organisations is a phenomenon rarely dealt with in management training programs and spoken of only in whispers in corporate tea rooms. Conspiracies of silence, collusion, 'jobs for the boys', hidden agendas and collusion are just some of the issues that affect the quality of working life of individuals and the effectiveness of organisations. The Johari Window (Lutz, 1969) has been used here in a modified form to describe aspects of the dark side of the organisation and as a way of bringing them to life for would be players in 'corporate games'. [top](#)

Succumbing to Self-interest

"Well, human speech be like pictures, only word pictures. When we speaks we paints a word picture that we wants others to see, but we only paints a part o' the picture what's in our heads. The other part, usually the most important part, we leaves behind because it be the truth, the true picture. So your ears have to have eyes, so they can see how much o' the real picture what be in the head be contained in the words!" (Ikey Solomon talking to Tommo and Hawke, the Potato Factory, 1995)

John Ralston Saul (1997) in the *Unconscious Civilisation* proposes that there is an almost childlike way in which society avoids the reality of its situation, choosing instead to believe a fantasy perpetuated by a corporatist ideology. Legitimacy lies with conformist specialist groups who negotiate between themselves, supposedly for the common good. More importantly for the purposes of this paper Saul also points to the idea that corporatism places us in the grip of self-interest or, perhaps more accurately, with the inability to make disinterested decisions at either a conscious or unconscious level. In either case, conscious or unconscious, the person is striving, at worst, for power and personal gain, or, at best, for continued survival in a competitive and corporate environment. Saul stresses that we are in fact losing the struggle for democracy and individualism despite increased access to knowledge, information and education. Instead we are succumbing, '...to the darker side within us and within our society' (1997: 36).

In this paper we will take up this theme within the context of organisations rather than the larger society. We are interested in the 'dark side' of organisations and the effect this darker side has on the quality of working life of the individual and, ultimately, on the organisation itself. In this analysis a very clever extension and application of the Johari Window (Lutz, 1969), dreamt up by Alan Davies, will be used to describe the effect of corporatism and self-interest that is unconsciously or consciously supported by us all. [top](#)

The Dark Side of Organisations

This dark side of organisations is manifest in myriad malevolent ways such as: hidden agendas; collusion and conspiracies of silence; jobs for the boys (and girls); victimisation; self-interest; and corruption, for example. The motive for the dark side can be largely unconscious and, as Saul (1997) suggests, a part of our childlike incapacity to thoroughly understand what is happening. Some of these unconscious motives are: the blind belief in the rhetoric that it is all for the collective good; uncertainty and anxiety for a whole range of reasons from the fear of redundancy to a lack of skills and knowledge; and the need for recognition, for example. Chin-Ning Chu (1997) says that our existential sense of insecurity drives us to diminish our anxiety in the warmth of what appears to be purposeful and often frenetic activity associated with work and organisational life.

The Johari Window as originally conceptualised by Lutz (1969) consists of a window pane divided into four cells as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Joahri Window

	Things I know about myself	Things I do not know about myself
Things others know about me	Cell 1	Cell 2
Things others do not know about me	Cell 3	Cell 4

While the above window has four equal cells, in fact cell sizes will differ depending on how much insight an individual has (cell 1), what we are prepared to learn from others or experience (cell 2), how much self-disclosure we are prepared to engage in with others (cell3), and that which is unknown . The model presumes that good mental health is a function of how much is known about self and requires shifting information from cells 2, 3 and 4 into cell 1. The more I know about myself the more self-determination I have about my actions.

The model has been a valuable tool in developing helping skills and the processes designed to increase an individual’s level of self-knowledge. However, human communication is not confined to self-development, therapy and mental health. Our interest here is the application of the Johari Window to organisational behaviour. More specifically we are interested in self-determination in the workplace and, therefore, issues of power and control that affect the quality of working life of the individual in particular and, more generally, organisational effectiveness, at the same time.

Self-knowledge is one important aspect of the capacity of an individual to function and develop effectively in an organisation, and of the ability to influence others. Our ability to predict our own behaviour in varied circumstances means we can prepare for events and better achieve the outcomes that we want. Self-knowledge also means that we can more effectively control the face that we present to the world. We reveal what we want to reveal to others. This capacity to control what we reveal to others is governed by a range of factors such as the stress we are under, poor impulse control, personality, the situation, our power relations with the people before us, and self-interest. Insight enables us to be aware of these factors and manipulate our response. [top](#)

Revealing About Others

Another dimension to organisational life is the knowledge that others have about me and the way in which they use that knowledge to achieve desired outcomes. More subtly, though, is the capacity of others to choose what they reveal about us in the public arena. This has bigger implications that the ethical and moral principles of privacy or just good behaviour. Just as self-knowledge and what we choose to reveal to others is a way of controlling and manipulating, so is what people know and are prepared to reveal about others. The modified Johari Window that represents this conceptualisation is shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Modified Johari Window

	Things I know about myself and I am prepared to disclose	Things I know about myself and I am not prepared to disclose	Things I don't know about myself
Things others know about me and they are prepared to disclose			
Things others know about me but they are not prepared to disclose			
Things others do not know about me			

Figure 3: Modified Johari Window and the Dark Side

	Things I know about myself and I am prepared to disclose	Things I know about myself and I am not prepared to disclose	Things I don't know about myself
Things others know about me and they are prepared to disclose	The Open Arena	<i>Threat</i> <i>Powerlessness</i> <i>Ambush</i> <i>Blackmail</i> <i>Whistle Blowing</i> <i>Manipulation</i>	<i>Blind Spot</i> <i>Dissonance</i> <i>Surprise</i> <i>Despair</i> <i>Ego Defence</i>
Things others know about me but they are not prepared to disclose	<i>Embarrassment</i> <i>Exhibitionism</i>	<i>Conspiracy of Silence</i> <i>Co-dependency</i> <i>Collusion</i>	<i>Glass Ceilings</i> <i>Horizontal Violence</i>

Things others do not know about me	<i>Deviance</i>	<i>Self-protection</i> <i>Deceit</i> <i>Secrets</i> <i>"The Lie"</i> <i>Facade</i>	<i>Stereotyping</i> <i>Prejudice</i> <i>The Unknown</i>
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It is an interesting irony that there is a conspiracy of silence about the conspiracy of silence. While elements of the 'dark side' of the organisation are discussed in tea rooms and the pub on a Friday in gleeful cynicism, and in certain post-modern literature, this aspect of organisational life is not a part of formal education. There is a literature on many of these issues ranging from that found in the media, feminist work, the postmodernists, popular literature and academic work but it is not approached in any systematic way. Rarely do we see issues such as whistle blowing, blackmail, self-interest, collusion, co-dependency and conspiracies of silence dealt with openly in management training programs of any type. Rather, we learn about these things in the same way we learn about parenting – by being there. Yet, like parenting, understanding how organisations *really* work is a critical activity and we should take it seriously.

The original Johari Window has been a valuable tool in helping people understand and learn about themselves. We hope the modified Johari window presented in this here will do the same in terms of organisational behaviour. [top](#)

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