
The Value Lurking in Your “Leadership Unconscious”



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The crucial components to decision-making dilemmas may exist outside of your conscious awareness.

Making decisions about mergers, change processes or even hiring can be nerve-racking. Leaders or managers need to consider whether they’ve covered every angle and every option. This includes exploring feelings or biases about a problem, possible obstacles to decision making. If something doesn’t feel quite right, or the problem seems intractable, there is usually an answer to overcome it, but that answer commonly exists outside of our awareness.

In fact, in our decades of experience in teaching and developing executives, we find that more often than not, most of reality – human reality, social reality and organisational reality – is explained not just based on cause and effect, but also on associative processes. These processes are outside of the more logical, systematic thinking that one typically employs to solve problems. They might cause us to have a “bad feeling” about something or sometimes to “fall in love” with a deal even though the logic may be shaky.

This logical approach often provokes the search for “root cause” explanations, such as “why is this happening?” that we flee to when things aren’t going according to plan or when we don’t understand something.

When this happens, the traditional, more logical, systematic thinking tools are insufficient. The solution or the obstacle is invisible, even in broad daylight, and therefore requires different approach.

To overcome this challenge, we have developed a new framework that we call “Night Vision”, which essentially helps executives and teams to see into the dark corners of their awareness where essences of the issue might be lurking. Our concept involves working with a series of techniques from psychoanalysis based on free association, which encourages subjects to allow, express and explore whatever thoughts, images or feelings come to their mind when thinking about a problem. We then encourage the executive or team to look for patterns in the associations and start to frame options informed by these associations. For example, instead of asking “why are the customers not buying anymore?”, the question becomes “what comes to mind when we think of our customers buying less of our product?” Simple questions, such as this one, can yield new insights, as we explain below.

The night vision cycle

This method is the antithesis of the “don’t bring me problems, bring me solutions” attitude that many leaders adopt. This approach not only narrows thinking, but stifles discussion or debate that could yield new insights. Often leaders just end up with more options to choose from, most of which still haven’t nailed the problem, which makes decision-making even harder and less effective.

A way of cutting through this additional work is to use the Night Vision Cycle, a tool that we’ve developed from our teaching in INSEAD’s **Executive Master in Consulting and Coaching for Change**. Night Vision is one of a number of techniques that we’re developing to address the non-causal, unconscious issues that lurk in role transitions and executive decision-making.

Group Night Vision Cycle



In practice, a leader first clarifies the problem at hand or the decision to be made and then starts the process by suggesting that all present approach the issue at stake from a different angle. This “Observing and Wondering” is triggered by the realisation that the application of traditional logical problem solving is not sufficient in this case. All participants are invited to engage in this process. As they enter the reflective space in the second step, the task of the group is to allow all individual associations to be shared in a non-judgemental manner. In the third step of the Night Vision Cycle, the group starts to generate associations, things that come to mind when engaging with the issue or problem at hand. These may be pictures, scenes from a movie, feelings, memories and all sorts of other associations. We’ve seen these range from popular songs to movie scenes as well as images of a peaceful ocean beach or castles on fire, emotional reactions of fear, as well as numerous other images and emotions. The associations are only limited by one’s imagination. The point of these associations is that they tap into a deeper level of understanding which is often outside of awareness and this understanding can lead to new insights and connections.

During this step it is the leader's job to maintain and protect the non-judgmental space, allowing all ideas to flow. All associations are put on the table and not debated. The fourth step, Spiking, takes place when one links specific associations to the issue at hand. The spike is a bridge between the unconscious and the here and now. In a real world example, we were working on a bank merger in which there were many challenges preventing the relationships between the merging partners from developing smoothly. There was an air of mistrust, but nobody could put their finger on why this was the case. When the executives involved did the Night Vision exercise, a common association that came up was courtship. These two organisations were struggling with the dating phase and both sides were nervous about long-term commitment. Both explained that they felt the other one might betray them, however this was never openly discussed either internally within their own organisation and certainly not with each other. One side in particular was aware that the other was still "on the market", looking for another partner. Once this surfaced, both sides were able to acknowledge that they didn't really belong together and managed to break it off, saving further unproductive on-going struggles as well as saving time and money.

In the fifth step of Patterning, the team starts identifying patterns in the group's associations. If there are any similar ones, there might be a pattern that warrants further investigation. In our bank merger example, the pattern that emerged in the associations was "avoiding", which led the executives involved to identify the issue and to explore solutions. The identified patterns form an enlarged space for the team to explore additional options for intervention. This captures what we refer to as Linking (Step 6).

Using the night vision goggles

Decision science tells us that it is important to have and harvest diversity in thinking in your team. Night Vision brings another dimension to awareness by incorporating and leveraging the diversity in our own minds, especially our irrational and unconscious wishes and fears.

People in teams frequently tend to err on the side of caution when they don't feel right about a decision or a strategy, keeping quiet instead of being the one who throws a spanner in the works. When a team puts on their "night vision" goggles, they can avoid the trap of groupthink. In our experience, this methodology has enabled teams to uncover obstacles in their midst and make better decisions based on input that they had not previously been able to consider.

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