

Consider the Context

On February 1, 2003, the Shuttle Columbia burned and was destroyed on reentry into the Earth's atmosphere. An independent commission was appointed to examine the cause of the accident and make recommendations. They wrote that they "intended to put this accident into context."ⁱ The report went on to say, "We considered it unlikely that the accident was a random event; rather it was likely related in some degree to NASA's budgets, history and program culture, as well as the politics, compromises, and changing priorities of the democratic process. We are convinced that the management practices overseeing the Space Shuttle Program were as much a cause of the accident as the foam that struck the left wing."

If we are looking for one thing—say the technical reasons why an accident occurred—we will limit what we see and risk missing something equally or more important. By forcing ourselves to look more broadly and ask, "What else could it be?" we expand the frame and allow for a broader and even deeper understanding of the problem or problems.

When the world economic crisis hit in 2008, we—the press and the public—looked for who was responsible for this meltdown. We had to have a villain. And there were villains, but by solely focusing on the cheats and crooks, it distracted us from looking at the underlying causes of the crisis. Complexity came later. Context matters.

WHY WE MISS THE CONTEXT

The more you understand the context you are working in, the better you will be able to lead change effectively. But that is very difficult for most of us. All of us know a person who has laser-like vision when it comes to one area of expertise say IT, HR, or finance. They are great at showing you what's not working in that area and suggesting ways to fix those problems, but they miss other cues. I recall one organization that branded one person on the team "the quality guy" (and that was not a compliment). When he spoke, people expected him to link every topic to quality improvement. Not that people didn't agree with him about the importance of quality improvement, they just thought that he missed the importance of other burning issues, like how will we service the debt next month?

Participants in a study were asked to watch a video of two groups on a basketball court. One team was dressed in white and the other in black. Participants were asked to count the number of passes the team in white made. While they watched the video, a woman with an umbrella walked through the center of the court. Only about 20 percent noticed her. When another group of participants in the study watched the video without being given a task, everyone saw the woman with the umbrella. The phenomenon is called selective looking. (In a similar experiment, a man in a gorilla suit moon walked through the scene with similar results.)ⁱⁱ

Many organizations support narrow thinking. They hire people to fill specific roles. Of course that makes sense, but it does create fiefdoms of expertise. As these people work

together, they have their unique worldviews reinforced. And when it comes time to lead change, their own knowledge and comfort is where they focus their attention. They miss the woman with the umbrella.

But this attention on the individual or the single cause for success or failure misses the point. Everything happens in context.

BAD APPLES OR BAD BARRELS?

In 2004, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal broke. Pictures appeared of laughing prison guards torturing prisoners. We wanted to know how this could happen. And, who was responsible? We found her. Her name was Specialist Lynndie England. She was photographed holding a leash that was attached to a prisoner lying in a hallway. Specialist England, along with approximately eleven others were court-martialed. England and one other soldier were sentenced to prison, others received dishonorable discharges. The general in charge was demoted to colonel.

Noted social psychologist Philip Lombardo was interviewed on CNN. The interviewer suggested that perhaps this scandal was just the case of a few bad apples. Lombardo said the problem wasn't just a few bad apples, it was the barrel that was bad.

The dozen or so people who were punished were considered the bad apples and the scandal went away. Anyone thinking of building and running prison camps in another country would do well to take Lombardo's words to heart. It's the barrel. If you build the same type of barrel, you are likely to get the similar results.

Great organizations all tend to be pretty much alike in some fundamental ways. They've got good barrels. Now, look at the context of your organization. That unique barrel creates conditions that support particular types of behavior. The context you are leading in makes a huge difference.

So how do we do both: pay attention to what's in front of us and pay attention to the overall context, all at the same time? How do we know when to ignore the lackluster performance of the 5 percent and focus on the other 95 percent?

Monovision contact lenses allow the wearer to see things at a close range out of one eye and see distance out of the other. We need something like these lenses when we look at our organizations. We need to be able to look at the big picture and the details almost simultaneously. Over the years, I found the monovision contacts analogy has helped keep me from getting too enamored with the picture I was seeing out of one eye.

In order to be adept at seeing out of both lenses, we need to know how the world can look through each, or we will continue to rely on the familiar way of seeing things. I will assume that most of you are pretty good at seeing what's in front of you. You pick up on the details. You can pinpoint good and bad performance.

LOOKING AT THE CONTEXT

People who try to describe chaos theory use the analogy of how a butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon could have an impact on weather in Seattle. In other words, changing weather conditions can come from anywhere. They aren't suggesting that we find that stupid butterfly and get rid of it, but that many things from anywhere could have an impact on weather in other parts of the world. You can't tell exactly where it is going to come from or when or why. It's chaos. The Commission that studied the Shuttle Columbia understood this.

Looking at the context for a change in an organization is a lot like that. Support, opposition, new threats, changing conditions in the marketplace, etc. can impact your change. Things seemingly can come out of the blue that bolster your change or threatens it. That's life.

You can be a great leader, the stuff of legends, but context can do you in. On the other hand, you may never have seen yourself as much of a leader, but conditions change. You rise to the challenge, and to your surprise, you are excellent. Who would have ever predicted that Abraham Lincoln would have been considered one of the U.S.'s greatest presidents? If you had looked at his limited public service and his modest small-town legal practice, it would have been hard to imagine him ever rising to the challenges of the presidency as the United States was being torn apart.

No matter how much I write in this chapter, I couldn't possibly cover all there is to cover, for one simple reason—we can't know all the forces that could have an impact. But we can tend to the major contextual cues and that can increase the odds in our favor.

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ⁱ Columbia Accident Investigation Board, 2003. <http://caib.nasa.gov/news/report/pdf/vol1/full/caib_report_volume1.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Daniel J. Simons and Christopher F. Chabris, "Gorillas in Our Midst: Sustained Inattention Blindness for Dynamic Events," *Perception* 28 (1999), 1063, citing an experiment by Neisser.