

# Overcoming Organizational System Blindness

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*The management theory of “leading systems” and understanding the space conditions within organizational systems (Oshry, 1999) illustrates how subconscious sense-making results in narratives that are counterproductive within organizations. Barry Oshry’s theory illustrates how involuntary predictable reflex patterns inherently molded within organizational spaces (top, middle, bottom, and customer) result in all-too-familiar stories and narrative language that yield unhealthy and detrimental behavior throughout the system. The “organizations” where system blindness is apt to occur are many and varied. Any system and the individuals within (including governments, corporations, non-profits, and family units) would benefit from understanding Oshry’s work aimed at restoring system sight.*

## INTRODUCTION

Barry Oshry’s “leading systems” theory (1999) illustrates how involuntary predictable reflex patterns inherently molded within organizational spaces (top, middle, bottom, and customer) result in all-too-familiar stories and narrative language that yield unhealthy and detrimental behavior throughout the system. Awareness of the predictable patterns enables individuals toward a realm of possibilities beyond reflex reaction that can in turn transform systems in which they are a part. Such systems include governments, corporations, non-profits, and family units, all of would benefit from understanding Oshry’s work aimed at restoring system sight.

## COMPLEX SYSTEMS, LEADERSHIP, AND VISION

Humans exist as members of many systems that overlap within the context of larger systems. The body itself is a complex system comprised of subsystems that interact in efforts to further humans in their various endeavors. Interactions with systems begin at birth; in the family unit individuals understand their space in that system, and interact accordingly. Eventual participation in systems includes those with voluntary and involuntary membership: schools, religious affiliation, playgrounds, and communities. In time, individuals affiliate with organizations to produce a livelihood.

Increased references to a VUCA world occur outside of the military environment for which the term was originally termed. VUCA stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (Whiteman, 1998, p. 15). A typology model distinguishes different characteristics, examples, and approaches for each of the VUCA conditions by showing the conditions within a 2 by 2 grid. The grid labels one axis with how much information is known (less to more) and similarly on the other axis as how well one can predict the results of actions (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). Recommendations to address the new demands

of the “VUCA 2.0” world have aptly matched the VUCA acronym to characteristics that “authentic” leaders will require to succeed in this environment; these are the skills of Vision, Understanding, Courage, and Adaptability (George, 2017). Traditional classic business school methods (forecasting, control systems and others) are not seen as capable to handle this much “flux.”

The aforementioned attributes for VUCA resonate with the theory and work that Barry Oshry has espoused for over forty years. Leaders understand there is no “universal blueprint” to follow; instead the focus is on selected “navigational skills” and “reading of the landscape” to facilitate one’s way through “challenging VUCA terrain” (Watters, 2017). In the original *Systems Letter* written in 1979 during a time of great turmoil within a system that he cared for deeply, Oshry (2017) wrote: “For if there were such rules and procedures and methods, I would be the first to buy them and maybe I wouldn’t have to be as blind and as stupid and as helpless...” (p. 54). [As an aside, Oshry recently re-issued *The Systems Letter* with additional introductory material and conclusion].

Oshry writings parallel the recognition of the inadequacy of classic business school models to address the current VUCA world:

There is an illusion about organizations: that they are ordered, rational, reasonable, and logical. It is an illusion most of us collude in; we treat *It* as if it were a machine with clearly identifiable parts all neatly connected with one another. ...I think that only as we stop trying to trivialize such complexity, to squeeze it into our feeble categories and systems, do we begin to catch glimpses of its own order and beauty. (2017, pp. 54-55)

Not only are traditional means of addressing business problems noted, but an emphasis on the location of one’s place within the system is noteworthy in achieving system sight. Later in that paragraph: “From the outside, I see order, coherence and beauty, whereas, from the inside, it is experienced as random, chaotic and ugly” (Oshry, 2017, p. 55).

The experience here of the feelings of pain from one’s personal experience with a system space is important. Individuals in the midst of a stressful situation in the system, often blame themselves. Especially Tops feel this, since the Top space is one where individuals choose membership. Included herein in the Top systems space is the choice of one’s business partner or life partner, where “We begin with such promise” (Oshry, 1996, p. 146). Across all system spaces, when tensions or drama emerges, individuals assume that they have to fix themselves or fix the relationship. The flaw here is that such thinking ignores the reality of the “inevitable conditions” of system space. “Once we get clear on the system, the other issues fix themselves” (Oshry, 2017, p. 136). The situation is not vice versa of fixing one’s self first. Instead, seek to understand and truly see the system, and “if we see ourselves in context, we are less likely to fall into dysfunctional patterns” (Oshry, 2010, p. 554). Oshry’s identified inevitable conditions of the four system spaces and predicted patterns of response are in the section entitled “Reflex responses make for predictable narratives.”

For those aspiring to be leaders, the possibility of system leadership exists regardless of the role that one occupies (top, middle, bottom, and customer). What is required is that the individual seek to deeply understand the system, have courage to act, and a belief in being able to make a difference (Oshry, 1999, p. 187). Notice how these parallel the Vision, Understanding and Courage skills previously noted as necessary with the VUCA world. Interestingly, there is a paradox in the “lessons” that Oshry shares, that provides an example of the fourth suggested skill of Adaptability. First in his instructions to “Lead from the inside,” attention to one’s own feelings within the systems are recommended to be attended to, as the feelings serve as “clues to the condition of your systems and your relationship to them and as cues to what actions you need to take” (Oshry, 1999, p. 187). Yet in a subsequent lesson, instructions to “Lead from the outside,” the skills of a detached observer of the system are essential (Oshry, 1999, p. 188). The paradox of such unique skills requires both “one who functions in the tension between understanding organizations and resisting submergence in them” (Oshry, 2017, p. 132). Thanks to Patricia Werhane for illuminating the similarity of Oshry’s thoughts related to the value of a “detached observer” to Adam

Smith's "impartial spectator" in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* written over 200 years earlier (Werhane, 2017). Smith's "impartial spectator" theory is debated within philosophy and ethics research (Fleischacker, Spring 2017; Sayre-McCord, 2009).

## **CONCERNS REGARDING SYSTEM SIGHT**

"The development of system sight – and the possibilities such sight offers for creating sane, healthy, creative, and less destructive human system – is a worthy challenge for us human beings and a step up the evolutionary ladder" (Oshry, 1999, p. 3). A challenge indeed as Oshry delineates four types of system blindness that work against system sight. When one sees only one's own part of the system, the experience is Spatial Blindness (Oshry, 1996). This view is congruent with the aptly named subtitle of a chapter on Perception: "What you see is all you get" (Wheatley, 2017, Table of Contents). Spaces in Oshry's work are significant in that each space (top, middle, bottom, and customer) is associated with a predictable set of conditions. In Temporal Blindness "all current events in system life have a history; there is a coherent tale that has led to this particular point in time. Generally that history is invisible to us" (Oshry, 1996, p. 1). Relational Blindness is where "we don't see ourselves in relationship, nor do we see the dances we fall into in relationship" (Oshry, 1996, p. xiii). Finally there is a system Process Blindness where "we see individuals within the system, but we do not see 'It' – the whole...as 'It' engages with 'Its' environment" (Oshry, 1996, p. 129). These aspects of blindness within various system spaces produce predictable conditions that in turn generate natural, reflexive human responses, with ensuing negative consequences to the individuals, the subsystem space, and the system overall.

In our present VUCA world, to use Oshry terminology, the "stuff" is coming at organizational participants in all industries and settings in a faster and more furious fashion than ever before. The human who is bombarded on a minute by minute basis is subject to an automatic reflex. Such an automatic reflex or "the dance of blind reflex" (Oshry, 1996, p. 54) entails subconscious reactions that are predictable. Examples of individual responses follow: mentally make up a story about what happened, evaluate/judge/blame the individuals responsible for the stuff, take it personally, react, and lose focus. Barry Oshry refers to this as the "Side Show" (Oshry, 1992b) – humans love drama, after all. The conditions are predictable and the responses are an involuntary reflex, which yield familiar disempowering scenarios. The following scenario is just one example.

## **A POLITICAL SYSTEM RUN AMOK AS ONE EXAMPLE**

A recent example of a system in crisis is Illinois state government where in July 2017, the state entered its third consecutive year with no budget passed due to a political stalemate. The unpaid bill backlog of \$15 billion represented 40% of the state's operating budget (Beals, 2017). This unfortunate reality for citizens and institutions across Illinois stemmed from years of passing along hard decisions related to funding State needs. But for over two years, the state suffered from an ongoing "turf issue" among the "Tops" in Illinois (Oshry, 1992a, p. 5). Tops in this budget stalemate arguably include the governor, the leaders of the legislature, and the union, depending on whose side the viewer took. Only when Illinois was facing the very real threat of junk bond status, was there movement to have a narrow veto override in the State House of Representatives that allowed the budget to be passed (Bosman & Davey, July 6, 2017).

Keep in mind that situations of ongoing organizational "internal warfare" (Oshry 1992b, p. 7) are frequent in organizational life, and could be any organization; however the Illinois example lends itself well. Non-union, mid-level management individuals in Illinois state government have gone without raises for years prior to the current budget debacle; this had led to situations where subordinates may have higher salaries than their respective managers. Such a situation is an example of the "stuff" (Oshry, 1992b, p. 34) that happens in organizations. Stuff can be mysterious events, or noxious happenings, or when something does not happen that one expects to happen; stuff happens in organizations.

In the Middle space, a given manager within an Illinois State Agency (let's call him Mr. K) expressed feeling torn between the needs of Bottoms (subordinates) and satisfying the demand of Tops (Top examples in this scenario include individuals such as agency directors). Certainly at any point in time, even though initially pegged as a Middle, Mr. K can also take on the space of a Top or a Bottom as various situations unfold (Oshry 1994, p. 19) throughout his day. State employees, in a situation where vacant positions are left unfilled, and whose workload increases through work re-assigned from the vacancies, often speak to plans of counting the days to retirement. Bottom space within Oshry theory is characterized by workers with perceptions that they have no voice, and when asked express their feelings of vulnerability. Top space is associated with feelings of complexity, burden, and accountability. There is a Customer space even within Illinois government situation which is associated with feelings of neglect. Taxpayers and unpaid vendors qualify within the category of "neglected" customers as hospitals, doctors, and social service agencies go unpaid funds that they are owed. The drama that occurred included hospitals with a backlog of unpaid bills from the state, universities that did not received funding, and issues where the State was not authorized to pay Illinois lottery winners. There are as many stories as there are impacted citizens who feel they are in the vulnerable space of "bottomness" being done unto by inflexible, uncaring "Tops." Upset citizens and the news media yielded a drama that echoes what Oshry noted (2017):

Destructive and righteous ideology is the price we pay for system blindness. There is tremendous resistance to seeing systems as they really are; the perspective from the inside is so much more attractive than the view from the outside. On the inside, there is drama and righteousness and good guys and bad guys and heroes and victims (p. 135)

We can leave the Illinois circus example and speak more generically of what Oshry calls the "Side Show" response to conditions within other organizations.

## **REFLEX RESPONSES MAKE FOR PREDICTABLE NARRATIVES**

Just as reflexes such as blinking or yawning are involuntary reactions to sensory stimuli, humans experiencing the conditions of any given system space have been observed in random settings to share similar patterns of responses (attack, demand, withhold, avoid, withdraw) (Oshry, 1992b, p. 57).

The condition felt by a person in a bottom space is vulnerability and disregard. The reflex response associated with this space is to hold some other "them" as responsible. Different stories play out depending on how individuals cope with the vulnerability. Some individuals react with efforts to become "good soldiers," as they hope that their struggle to become valued resources will make them feel safe. Others will become victims, as they complain about the system. Another reaction is to immerse themselves in their work, to shield from feelings of vulnerability. Two similar coping strategies are to leave the system, or a more subtle leaving through withholding the self through emotional distancing. Finally, some individuals cope by trying to organize others, and develop a collective power (Oshry, 1992b, pp. 57-58).

The Middle space is an interesting one, with much happening, but the analogy used is that of being torn between the other worlds of Tops, Bottoms and Customers. The characteristics of a middle world is one that involves perpetual motion, responding to the demands of the other groups – a constant tearing. For all the effort, little gratitude or support is received. Because of interacting with others in spaces all around them, Middle thinking can appear "muddled" (Oshry, 1994, p. 9). Muddled Middleness occurs because what Middles are listening to from any single group makes sense at a particular moment; yet, all demands and needs from the groups are often conflicting. The Middle space is a lonely space, as other groups do not readily accept them; also "their own groups tend to be fractionated" (Oshry, 1994, p. 10). "Survival responses in a tearing world – choosing sides so as not to be too torn, being fair to all sides so as to be equally torn, avoiding any side so as not to be torn at all" (Oshry, 1992b, p. 70).

Bureaucratization is one response of some Middles, in which they create hurdles, so that others will avoid them; other Middles may simply burn out with all the effort required (Oshry, 1996, p. 56).

The condition of overload and burden experienced in top space often generates a buffering response to protect the self, but instead results in feelings of isolation. Continued isolation can result in perceptions of the Tops as being “out of touch.” Such negative feelings can lead to self-constructed narratives of even more responsibility, and possibly even paranoia about what is occurring in the system. Actions taken by those in a burdened Top space may appear to others as illogical, as decisions may catch others in the system by surprise. One example is when Tops seemingly pass over opportunities that present themselves. Such a nonresponse occurs simply because the Top is in such a state of overload, that the Top does not see opportunity; what the Top sees is a complication (Oshry, 1992b, pp. 43-44).

The customer space is one of neglect, when goods are not delivered as promised, and quality is not up to specifications. As customers struggle with the situation of neglect, the familiar stories that ensue include expressions of outrage (sometimes to the point of being labeled a difficult customer), or at the other extreme, reactions of patience and trust although customer frustrations mount as the organization continues low quality. Some customers will adjust their standard and begin to expect less. Others will leave, and sometimes the same pattern of neglect will continue with a new supplier (Oshry, 1992b, pp. 86-89).

Table 1 shows the summary of conditions experienced within the categories of organizational space as described by Barry Oshry (1992b), along with the subconscious attempts to make sense. The side-show response is a metaphor for the predictable reflex responses.

**TABLE 1  
CONDITIONS AND RESPONSES WITHIN ORGANIZATIONAL SPACE**

<b>Space</b>	<b>Conditions</b>	<b>Side-Show Responses</b>
Top	Overload and burdened	Suck it up
Middle	Crunch, feel torn	Slide in between
Bottom	Vulnerable and disregard	Hold “them” responsible
Customer	Feel neglect	Hold self separate and apart

## **HOW TO RESTORE SYSTEM SIGHT**

Oshry identified three systems possibilities: the internal warfare situation, the possibility of making things happen through mutual understanding and accommodation, and the possibility of transformation (Oshry, 1992, pp. 205-207). “It is easy to sleepwalk in organizations, that is, to be so caught up in the flow that one fails to see possibilities and choices” (Oshry, 2017, 101). The possibility of transforming a system is the aim. Instead of becoming hooked on a story about the stuff in any system space, practicing empathy and taking efforts to understand another’s world within the system context are important. Stay focused on the “center ring,” not the system stories or “side shows” which limit the possibilities for individuals and for the system. Such focus entails conscious awareness, and the recognition that one always has a choice in terms of how to respond (Oshry, 1992b). One begins by committing to being mindful of the choices (large and small) made within one’s systems.

Oshry proposes four leadership stands aimed toward system transformation. In each system space, it is required that individuals accept personal responsibility for one’s own condition **and** for the success of the system. Essentially the leadership stands involve participants recognizing their role of co-creation of the system. It is not easy to co-create the system, as individuals bring inherent biases or predispositions to system processes (i.e., their blindness). Within the system space, it is as though each has a sort of comfort zone that takes conscious and purposeful sight and effort to initiate a stand. Table 2 summarizes the leadership stands (Oshry, 1992, pp. 159-183).

**TABLE 2**  
**LEADERSHIP STANDS**

Space	Leadership Stands (per Oshry)
Top	Create responsibility throughout the system
Middle	Be responsible for my condition and for the condition of the system
Bottom	Maintain independence of thought and action in the service of the system
Customer	Get in the middle of delivery processes and help them work

Oshry specifically addresses the politicization of several processes that generate an imbalance within systems: Individuation versus Integration, Stabilization versus Change, and Differentiation versus Homogenization (Oshry, 1999, p. 121-122). Individuals self-assess as to where they stand with any of these processes; from there, individuals look at alternatives needed by the system within that system space at that particular point of time. Since systems are always changing, it may be possible that Middles (typically existing in a state of diffusion out towards varied needs and demands) would benefit from a brief time to integrate with other Middles, and subsequently move back towards individuation (Oshry, 1996, p. 137). There is no single formula to rely on. One must be adaptable to what the system is demanding – that takes skills that are not rote, automatic, or easy to exercise in the heat of the drama. Further immersion into Oshry’s writings for dealing effectively with many situations that arise within system space will facilitate understanding the possibilities inherent in our freedom of choice in the moment. System sight means being willing to step aside from notions of who is right or wrong, and not getting hooked on the stories – they are part of what one must give up. “On the outside there is only clarity. There is much to give up if one wants to see the truth” (Oshry, 2017, p. 136).

Recognition of one’s role and clarity in viewing the system is a role of service within the system and a commitment to partnership with others. Such a commitment is consistent with an acknowledgement of the work of Emmanuel Levinas pertaining to substitution relationships. "So one is responsible, morally responsible not merely *to* others, but, more importantly, *for* others" (Werhane, 1996, p. 22).

The acceptance of such responsibility calls for an increased understanding of the values of partnership. In her extension of work with transformational leadership, Werhane defines values-based leadership: "a set of interactive transforming relationships between leaders and followers who intend to create real change based on their mutual values and purposes" (Werhane, 2011, p. 4). A values approach gaining increased exposure is Mary Gentile’s work of *Giving Voice to Values*. Along with acquiring confidence and skill to “give voice” and/or take action to do what one knows is right, is the importance of skillful “listening for values” (Gentile, 2016). Gentile’s work and curriculum is consistent with Oshry’s approach to taking a leadership stand. In a “listening for values” situation, participants afford the time to listen to and try to understand the perspectives and concerns rather than the usual reflex, which is using the time to prepare their own response.

Along with attention to values, skills related to understanding emotional intelligence will facilitate systems sight. Watters (2017) acknowledged the necessity of the use of multiple intelligences. Emotional intelligence is relevant to overcoming the involuntary reflex reactions that occur in system space. It is recognized that the chemical component of emotions, neurohormones, typically take six seconds to be absorbed into the body (Miller, 2017). Miller’s recommended “consequential approach” includes an intentional pause, evaluation of one’s goals, and to then respond in a more purposeful and mindful manner. Exercising emotional intelligence is consistent with staying in the “center ring”.

Imagine the possibilities of individuals in their best efforts to co-create and transform systems for a more positive good. Imagine the individual beginning right here and now in every system that stops to recognize the hooks of drama and instead exercises a moral choice to endeavor to improve system sight. Oshry shares that as individuals do this, they should not expect systems “to work like clockworks: they are more like energy fields” (Oshry, 1999, p. 189). The actions of “stepping out-of-the-box” thinking, is part of making decisions using moral imagination (Werhane, 2011). “Your moves are not likely to bring

about precise results you were intending. But *something* always happens – look for that something and work with it” (Oshry, 1999, p. 189).

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