

LEADERSHIP DOORWAYS

A different kind of dialogue can transform the results your organization gets

By Daniel Holden

I was an eighteen-year-old college student when, two months into my first semester, I received word that a boyhood friend had been killed in a highway accident. My family told me to stay at school; there was no need to join the many people who would no doubt be at the funeral. I sat two days with this advice. I knew I needed to be there, although I could not have known why. I arranged to take my first airplane flight home. The boy who had died, Peter, was from a family that had been the gathering for all the kids in my neighborhood. When I arrived home, I walked down to their house where the driveway and front yard were full of cars, motorcycles, and still more people filing in from the neighborhood. I felt scared, overwhelmed by emotion and yet, certain that my decision was right.

When I put my hand on the front door everything I knew about myself fell away. My identity, my way of being with friends and with adults dropped off like an old jacket I had outgrown. I walked into the throng and took the grieving parents by the hands, looked them in the eyes and spoke directly into the deepest and loneliest place in their being. I did the same with my buddies. We laughed and cried together. We carved out a circle in the living room and spent the entire night in this space together. Strangely enough, I watched all of this flow through me as though watching a performance of the highest order. It was.

I would return to school a few days later. Parents later wrote about the words I had given to them and about the profound impact I had had that evening on all who were present. This moment marked my emergence as my own person. I would forget this deeper place in my being several times over the

proceeding years and come back to it. It is the essence of the Creating stance, as I would later come to know it. At some level we choose it. Yet that night I learned that it chooses us as much as we choose it and this essential voice within us is the most trustworthy reference marker in tough times. This article addresses how to find this place and how to find our way back to it when we feel lost in our leadership work.

THERE ARE LEADERSHIP DOORS WE ARE INVITED TO WALK THROUGH. THE INVITATION COMES IN THE FORM OF PROLONGED FRUSTRATION, FEAR AND EXASPERATION...ALL SIGNS THAT OUR OLD WAYS OF WORKING NO LONGER WORK!

Look around. Old ways of operating are crumbling. The financial markets certainly reflect this but daily life in many organizations also reveals the same hard reality: reacting to problems with yesterday's strategies will not work anymore. Learning from the past yields only small, incremental improvements over the status quo. In my leadership consulting work it is increasingly obvious that there are doors before us that we are invited to walk through. On the other side are new ways of working and creating with our teams. The breakthrough this article points to has to do with discovering a different kind of dialogue that portends a new and vital future. The question is: do we recognize the doors in front of us now?

Old Ways Are Not Enough Anymore

The Eastern wisdom traditions have a saying: *How we do anything is how we do everything.* If we could observe ourselves closely in one situation we would have insight about ourselves in many. This kind of self-observation seems reserved for the best sports teams, which make a science out of watching game films. Not for business teams. Many leaders pride themselves on their problem solving ability. When problems come up we analyze their components, weigh which actions in the past can best serve the current challenge and then assemble the right resources and execute. If you ask managers what their primary role is, they answer "Solving problems". It is not that this approach is wrong but rather that it is not always enough.

Vic is an executive with a large public service company. A recent employee survey revealed that employees and mid-level managers felt unrecognized and devalued on the job. Additionally, there had been a high profile case where customers had complained to the state's attorney general about poor quality service from Vic's area. Finally, in another part of the organization, there was an episode with customers who had either been billed incorrectly or not at all for services provided them. Investigations into the problem revealed employees had initially made attempts to bring the problem to the attention of those above them, including those in senior level positions. Gradually, over the course of many months, the concern itself died away. This negligence had resulted in a multi-million-dollar price problem that, as the media and regulators got hold of the story, meant something had to be done.

Each executive was charged with developing action plans to address the survey results. At the same time, two directors in the billing areas were placed on performance improvement plans (i.e., disciplinary action) and re-assigned to other, lesser positions in the company. In Vic's area, it seemed the real purpose of these action meetings was to mock the

survey results, ridicule those who thought the results reflected serious dynamics, and dismiss as irrelevant others who saw connections between how employees were treated and how customers in the other complaints had been treated. The resulting action plans were little more than attempts to escape the discomfort of the survey and media attention and return to "normal".

In the short term these strategies proved effective. Critical doorways into a different future, however, were ignored or not seen at all.

Four doorways to expanded leadership

INNER SELF	OUTER SELF
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs, needs • Fears, hopes • Meanings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills, talents • Responsibilities • Actions
INNER SYSTEM	OUTER SYSTEM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared stories, experiences, history, and assumptions • Intentions • Culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational performance indicators, techno-social systems • Collective actions & impacts

FIG. 1 INTEGRAL LEADERSHIP

This is not an exaggerated story of organizational life. What is frequently missing is an examination of the problem solving process itself and the assumptions that run it. Ken Wilber, co-founder of the Integral Institute in the US, suggests that leaders are called to operate in four different arenas simultaneously, but typically function well in only one or two. In a simpler world, this was enough. In today's complex world leaders are needed who commit themselves and their organizations to learning how to hold complexity and competently perform in all four arenas. Research indicates that 85% of strategic change efforts today fail. If we want to shift this reality at all, we will need to walk through vital

doorways that challenge even the best leaders and teams.

As Figure 1 shows, Wilbur's integral leadership world is actually four distinct but connected worlds. There is an Inner and Outer world that is further refined into the world of Self and the larger Collective. When we fail to develop competencies in any of these areas our performance in building teams, managing change, handling conflict, and innovating new products and processes suffers.

The Outer System Doorway— The Value & Limitations of Key Performance Indicators.

Most successful organizations survive because they execute well on the right side of Wilbur's integral framework. Our executive, Vic, had a well-earned reputation for his work in the Outer Collective arena: organizational performance. His monthly operations meetings were legendary: Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) were established and managers were expected to give account for their performance. No excuses, no explanations, and no dialogue. The good news is that with a focus on measureable performance the numbers do in fact move. An exclusive emphasis on this area, however, can drive deeper concerns about performance and potential opportunities underground since the drive is for performance that moves the numbers. The real costs of relying only on performance measures in the Outer Collective arena continue:

1. The deeper passions and desires of the workforce are seldom uncovered and mobilized because they're not considered relevant to the business conversation.
2. Concerns and fears are only reluctantly brought to the surface and then only when all else has failed. The fear of ridicule or

vulnerability out weighs all other concerns.

3. Innovative alternatives seldom have all the kinks worked out of them in their raw form. Absent innovation, leaders are reduced to individual, tactical performers who closely watch and guard their own silos. The status quo is vigorously maintained.

4. A future that is different than the past cannot be birthed because the organizational energies are devoted exclusively to solving problems. This approach at best yields incremental improvements in performance but virtually excludes breakthrough shifts in performance from happening.

The Outer Self Doorway— Where High Performance & Accountability Begin.

This arena of leadership and organizational life is familiar and one we often take for granted. This arena contains all that we can see, hear, touch and measure regarding surface and external individual performance. A visit to your doctor's office typically begins and ends here: blood pressure, heart rate, perhaps an EKG, temperature, x-ray and so forth. In organizations, individual accountabilities, leadership competencies, written job duties, organizational charts that we can download if we get lost in the hierarchy occupy this box. Teamwork, collaboration, respect, trust building skills, high performance, diversity, innovation, excellent quality, and continuous improvement are some of my favorite individual expectations. Who among us would argue with any of these?

Leadership communication skills typically involve providing one-way feedback on performance. Meetings tend to be one-way as well with an emphasis on presentations, updates, and status reports. The best leaders,

however, learn a discipline that focuses on the language of behavior and use this to break through to their employees and teams. This discipline involves three key components that become the focus of two-way, not one-way conversation:

Critical performance incidents: Here is what I see and hear you doing.

Performance impact: The personal consequences of someone's behavior, either positive or negative are offered here. This kind of information can affect a shift in performance.

Consequences on the team, customers and others: The larger consequences of a person's behaviors, when offered here, can remove feedback from "being personal" to clearly connecting individual behavior to business performance.

The harsh reality of this Outer-Self arena, however, is that vision wall charts don't describe what actually happens in the organization! The fact that we easily sign off on collaboration and teamwork doesn't mean we actually behave this way. Real behavioral change requires a level of self-insight, courage and vulnerability to practice new behaviors that is daunting. Rational analysis of obstacles a team faces does not typically get at the deeper, irrational, causes of poor performance, by far the more impactful. To move into this kind of critical review requires that we stand before another doorway.

Mike is an engineering director in a mid-sized manufacturing plant. A former football player, he has built a reputation as a pragmatic, action-oriented leader. Two sister plants have recently been closed in response to drastic financial downturns. Mike knows if he could spend less time in grievance meetings and more time getting real work done his life would be much easier and the plant more successful. His plant is pushing for greater teamwork and

involvement among supervisors and the largely union workforce. Tensions run high. Everyone is waiting for the next anvil to drop; the other shoe fell long ago. No one wants this to happen again but the crisis seems to have people reverting to their default—and least effective—mode of interacting.

Defaulting to lesser behavioral strategies is what happens when we lock up in reaction to tough times. We lose the ability to see things as they now are, only as they always have been in the past. I may appear to be listening to you but all I see is our past interactions and our history. You do the same with me. During tough times that call for extraordinary breakthroughs in our thinking, decision-making and performance, the unexamined magnet pull to the past can be a deadly medicine. It requires courage and an open mind to look at things as they are. We frequently fail. We know what people will say before they speak but seldom look at what we're doing ourselves that drives the conversation. Worse, we deny we have any role at all. It's them.

FOR LEADERS WHO ARE STUCK IN THE ASSUMPTION THEY MUST ALWAYS BE RIGHT, THE ANSWER PERSON WHO KNOWS EVERYTHING, REAL DIALOGUE WILL PROVE VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE. WHY IS IT EVEN NEEDED?

Mike announces a three-day offsite meeting of the combined plant management and union leadership team. It is to take place in two weeks. Preliminary meetings that Mike holds reveal a pattern he has not looked at before. When others question Mike he becomes defensive, argumentative and appears to dig his heels in and "drive the agenda." Mike's leadership consultant points this out and asks Mike if he would like to have insight into why he reacts this way; presumably, if he had more awareness it might open up other options. He agreed to give it a try.

Like the 18 year old at the beginning of our story, the entranceway to this next arena begins when we allow what we thought we knew about ourselves to fall away. We enter with an open mind, one of "I don't know" rather than "I already know", the prevailing assumption that makes tough times even more difficult.

For leaders stuck on the assumption they are the answer persons, real dialogue will prove virtually impossible.

The Inner Self Doorway— Where Sustainable Breakthrough Begins.

Mike was asked to "speak from the heart" with the first response that came to him. Here are the highlights of the three-minute conversation:

Coach: You're holding a meeting when people begin questioning you. When someone questions you, why is this a problem for you?

Mike: He's challenging my credibility.

Coach: Assuming this is true and he's questioning your credibility, why is this a problem for you?

Mike: My reputation is on the line. Others will doubt my ability as a leader.

Coach: Let's say this happens, your reputation is shot. Why would this be a problem for you?

Mike: My board expects results. As soon as they have doubts about my leadership, I'm gone. History.

Coach: So there would be drastic repercussions—you're out the door with no job.

Mike: And no easy options. My wife won't move, my kids are in school here in town for the next three years. They're already disgusted with me for the time I put into this job. They have had it up to here.

Coach: Let's say it plays out just like this. You're stuck; your family is disgusted and

basically turns their backs on you. If this happened, what would it mean about you?

Mike: (Silence). I'm just a waste. A complete fool. I don't deserve to be here. Irresponsible.

At this point the consultant went to the white board and wrote the following:

"Faulty Assumptions"

- *When others question me = my credibility is questioned*
- *If I don't know all the answers now my reputation is ruined*
- *Others' evaluation of me= me*
- *My worth & value depend on others' assessments of me*
- *I am my work; I am my performance (in this meeting)*
- *I am not enough*

"Choose your own poison", the coach said, "Is it any wonder that you get defensive in meetings?" Mike looked at the board and was silent. He acknowledged these fears had followed him for years, eroding his self-confidence and impacting his relationships. He saw clearly that these unexamined assumptions did not stand up to scrutiny. They allowed no room for people to ask questions to better understand the topic. They assigned irrational weight to the behavior of others who were likely unaware that any of this was happening. The discussion that followed was transformational. Mike saw that what was genuinely true about himself could not be taken by anyone; it could not be attacked. It therefore never needed defending. His meeting behavior began to change immediately.

The Inner-Self Door is where each of us secretly lives. We make meaning of our lives and our work here. Our motivation and passion for contributing originates here. Our vision and hopes and our doubts and fears, are born here. Issues of trust, confidentiality, the holding of bitterness against others, resistance to change—the underpinnings of all teamwork, strategic change and organizational

excellence—all originate here. Sadly, much of this rich inner landscape goes unexamined. We then try to move through mergers, drive change and build more innovation into our processes when caution and fear are the prevailing passions. It simply doesn't work this way.

What is true of elite sports teams is true of any team that wants to pursue extraordinary results: you must have the heart and commitment of people behind you. Heart and commitment lie here, just behind our limiting assumptions.

The concern in standing before this door is that we will get lost in endless psychobabble. Few of us wander through this doorway unless the world gives us a reason to. Take a look around. The world has given us all the reason we need. The discipline is one of honest self-assessment coupled with authentic dialogue. When this inner work of leadership is connected to a larger organizational imperative the resulting mix can be wondrously potent. Real vision requires us to learn and do things we've never done before. Leaders who understand this act as architects who learn to design venues where this kind of learning can happen. The cost of not doing so is tragic.

The entranceway to this arena begins when we allow what we thought we knew about ourselves to fall away. We enter with an open mind, one of "I don't know" rather than "I already know", the prevailing assumption that makes tough times even more difficult.

The Inner System Doorway— Your Culture Contains Your Desired Future.

Every organization has its scapegoats. When things go wrong these groups become the necessary targets for our frustration and confusion. "Things would be better if only they would change." Senior leaders frequently become necessary targets; the union, front line

supervisors, field operations or headquarters, the regulators, our competitors, the insurance companies all take a turn in distracting us from finding real solutions to the challenges we face. If we don't recognize the real problems our solutions will miss the mark. The real problem always involves us! Until we see our own contribution to the current circumstances we will be unable to see our potential as creators of a new and more viable future.

The time had come for Mike to take the combined union-plant leadership team offsite for a three-day strategy session. Tension and mistrust ran high. The design called for consultants to facilitate a review of the current (external-system) challenges on Day 1, followed by a "creating vision" session on Day 2, and a tactical action segment to close out the retreat. Each side began the retreat blaming the other for the slide in plant performance. This was the familiar win-lose paradigm, the most popular of distractions and the source of much resistance to change. Mike decided to speak to what he was experiencing in the room. He shared that he knew if the plant continued to perform as they currently were, the plant would likely be sold and gutted for parts. He was suddenly touched with the emotional weight of what he had just said. "We've lost many of our best people and their families already. I don't want to lose anyone more. I want all of us to come through this together and right now I just don't know how to do that. And this old conversation won't get us there."

There was a long silence in the room. From the back of the room a union leader broke the silence, "We treat customers like we treat each other—with disgust. We get irritated with their requests, we ignore them as long as we can and then we fight them." Another long silence was followed by the voice of a supervisor sitting at the same table. "He's right. Stuff that could easily be solved with a simple conversation becomes a battle over nothing at all. We're too busy blaming others to save our own butt. I wouldn't want my own kid to work here right now. That's the hard news. I am

embarrassed by all of us. I'm embarrassed by myself."

Nobody in that room knew what to do with this new information yet everyone knew something real had just happened. There was an energy, an aliveness present that no one could deny. Another union leader spoke, "The problems we're having begin in this room. The solutions begin in this room, too. We go forward together or we go down together. From here on out, we don't talk about anyone or anything outside this room."

A different, openhearted dialogue then spontaneously took shape for this team. They begin to honestly look at their business as a dynamic whole where one person's behavior impacted everything and everyone else. Dinner that night was filled with stories of the early days of the plant, of tough transitions in the past, of friends who were no longer around the table. The plant was not out of trouble but there was a sense of optimism and hope that had not been present for years.

The doorway into this arena is marked by vulnerability and the authenticity to say the "unspeakable". For the very first person, the terror can be immense. It is the presence of something greater than our fear—in this case saving the plant and the town where it's located—that calls forth this dialogue. Rainier Maria Rilke, the great German poet, wrote—

**"WHAT WE FIGHT WITH IS SO TINY,
WHAT FIGHTS WITH US IS SO GREAT.
WHEN WE WIN IT'S WITH SMALL
THINGS AND THE TRIUMPH ITSELF
MAKES US SMALL. WHAT IS
EXTRAORDINARY DOES NOT WANT TO BE
BENT BY US."**

Rainier Rilke

The trouble in many organizations is we define challenges as problems in ways that are too small to care about and not large enough to inspire. This is

the case with Vic, the Operations Executive who defined the employee survey problem in the smallest possible language he could. The response he got matched his definition: small and forgettable. Do your definitions of challenges leave people feeling small or do they inspire something greater and larger than we ever dreamed? Do you demand nothing more than an upgraded status quo or do you look people in the eye, as I did as an eighteen year old on that autumn evening, as Mike did with his combined team, and confess "We must go on in a different way now."

Day 2 of the offsite built on the gains made the first day. A different way of organizing the work took shape spontaneously. Roles were altered; work assignments shifted with ease, silos came down. Conversations long overdue happened over coffee, in the hallways and around the lunch bar. During a late afternoon plenary session, an old machinist stood up and looked right at Mike and said, in his gruff, cigar voice: "I have hated you for 25 years. Now I find out we want the same thing and have probably wanted the same thing all along. I was thinking of retiring. I'm not done here."

Mike whispered loud enough so everyone could hear, "I thought you were the enemy for 25 years. Now I can't imagine going forward without you."

This kind of talk highlighted the tone for the vision work. Tough decisions were made and action plans formulated. There were occasional misunderstandings that were quickly named, bound and moved through. A deep, plant wide alignment evolved over the course of the retreat that carried over into the ensuing weeks and months ahead. A communications plan included talks with those who had not been at the retreat, beginning with family members and then customers. This plant found a way through challenging times by deepening and expanding the conversation between leaders. This same doorway stands before each of us.

Leadership implications

1. Difficult times require moving through doorways with a kind of fearlessness beyond the superficial. Rather than pretending to be stoic and doing what has always been done, each doorway involves authentic inquiry and dialogue. PowerPoint presentations are not enough.

2. Listening with an open mind and speaking from an open heart can feel vulnerable and awkward. You must model for others the deeper place from which they can then learn to speak and perform.

3. This kind of integral leadership takes time and practice. The status quo, including chasing your own tail in endless emails, meeting presentations and problem solving sessions to make discomfort go away takes much longer, wastes more time and exacts a far greater toll on everyone.

4. Learning how to engage your teams and workforce in *left-hand quadrants dialogue* is essential if you are to fully tap and utilize the full potential of your organization. Only then will you move forward in an aligned, full-hearted response to the future you collectively desire.

5. The most significant differences in leaders are linked to the amount of complexity they have learned to hold, and the number of doorways they've learned to walk through and inhabit.

Unprecedented challenges like those we see today require unprecedented responses from leaders and their teams. The stories told here are not unusual when leaders see their enterprise as organic, dynamic communities requiring learning and competency in four arenas. I have stood before many challenging doors since my 18 year old initiation. Some I turned away from, not ready. Others I began moving through and lost heart. Others transformed my

world and me for the better. Forty years removed now, I have seen what's possible when leaders and their teams move through their fear and dissatisfaction to create a different future. What doorways do you stand before now? How will you respond?

The future happens whether we want it to or not. Why not consciously create it?

About the author

Dan Holden has worked in executive and team development for over 25 years. He serves on the Executive MBA staff at the University of Notre Dame, where in 2006 he was awarded the school's Inspiring Educator of the Year Award. Dan has worked with the Center for Creative Leadership, and continues his work with Elsie Y. Cross Associates, Inc., on issues of diversity and culture change. He is the author of *Lost Between Lives-Finding Your Light When the World Goes Dark* (2004). He has authored several articles, including *Diversity Unraveled* and *The Forgotten Self--Executive Development in the 21st Century*, which appear in the *Industrial Management Journal*, 2006. His most recent articles are entitled *The Missing Ingredient in Organizational Change-Leadership Transformation* and *Does Your Team Need an MRI*. Dan is a Senior Consultant and Facilitator for *The Leadership Circle*.