

Chapter One

Paying Attention

The increasing pace of work today often demands that people scan information quickly and make rapid judgments. To do this, they typically take mental shortcuts, acting on what they expect to see. When work is routine or only incrementally novel, the ability to make quick judgments based on historical experience is a valuable skill. In situations of high complexity or chaos, however, making quick judgments can be disastrous. A different way of evaluating the circumstances, making decisions, and taking action is called for. This is where the mastery of Complex Challenge (C2) Competencies comes into play.

As Harlan Cleveland notes in *Leadership and the Information Revolution*, revolutions in many fields are spreading, overlapping, and interacting at such an increasing pace that unprecedented *complexity* is the hallmark of our age. Whereas in the Industrial Age leadership tended to be concentrated in central leaders who were able to present a simple and clear organizing vision, Cleveland warns that today “we had better not neglect . . . those bits of messiness that interfere with a neat picture. . . . Those bits of messiness are often near the center of the leadership function in a complex society.”¹

In our general experience at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), managers faced with a complex problem typically spend about 90 percent of their time solving the problem and only about 10 percent examining the problem and its context—with the typical result that they end up solving the wrong problem. Complex problems—even really wicked ones—often begin to crack and shift

when you spend more of your time looking at the problem. In problem-solving sessions, clients often tell us that their problem has either “gone away” or dramatically shifted after careful attention. What has happened is that the client has come to see past the facade of the presenting problem to its underlying issues. Often upon such deeper examination the solution pops out as an integral part of the landscape.

One key to achieving real solutions to complex challenges is the critical skill of *paying attention*. A person competent in paying attention has the ability to selectively use multiple modes of perception when taking in a situation. We consider paying attention the master C2 Competency because it precedes and organizes the others.²

Paying attention has five components:

- Shifting between different modes of attention
- Understanding left-mode and right-mode attention
- Using kinesthetic attention
- Paying attention to negative space
- Asking powerful questions

Shifting Between Different Modes of Attention

Everyone has a variety of modes, or gears, of perception—quick, slow, intellectual, intuitive, rational, and emotional. In work situations, people tend to emphasize some modes and neglect others because their professional environments encourage and reward some modes more than others. Therefore the first step in paying attention is twofold: becoming familiar with the full range of your modes of perception and learning how and when to shift from one to another.

What you might think of as *high-gear attention* gives you speed over smooth terrain. It quickly and efficiently chunks the world into familiar categories and allows you to make snap judgments. Con-

sider it a hit-and-run way to take in information. Working in high gear, you place a series of bets that the world is a familiar place. You skim the surface, assuming you can accurately grasp what is underneath. In familiar situations, high-gear attention can be very effective. David Perkins, scholar of human development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, estimates that for people with a solid base of experience in the issue they have at hand, high-gear attention is effective roughly 90 percent of the time.³ In an environment of rapid change, however, people are likely to lack such experience in the issues they confront. If the people in your organization pay attention to complex issues the same way they pay attention to routine information, you've got a problem.

Arie de Geus, former Royal Dutch Shell strategist, observes that the average life span of a company is less than that of a person.⁴ The reason, he believes, has to do with perception: people will not see that which is foreign to their experience or which calls forth unpleasant emotions. In business this trait gets expressed as the corporate one-track mind: companies plan only one path into the future and then see only signals relevant to that path. *Donna*, the team leader at *Chemstar*, for example, has told us about getting stuck in exactly that rut: "This company is famous for collecting more data. My team would collect the data and look at it with the same set of eyes all the time and ask the same questions and get the same answers. We learned to look at the same data in a different manner. Once we learned that, it opened up other avenues to looking at different sets of data that the team wouldn't even have considered before."

Perkins offers an antidote for the same-set-of-eyes syndrome: the discipline of what we call *low-gear attention*. Low-gear attention, a core perceptual component of human intelligence, requires taking the time to observe in depth, breadth, and detail; it means temporarily suspending the assumption "I already know what I see." We see it as the discipline of discerning both the unfamiliar in the familiar and the familiar in the unfamiliar.

The different modes of attention used in a coordinated way provide individuals and communities with a full set of perceptual options in complex territory. In addition to specifying the speed of attention, these modes specify *how* people employ their attention. Such expanded options for paying attention are needed when facing complex challenges—when the need for action is urgent but the lack of adequate formulas requires reflection and new perspectives.

Understanding Left-Mode and Right-Mode Attention

In recent years, much has been discovered about how people perceive and process information. One important finding is that the mind is modular. People have multiple *processing modules* that organize their thoughts, feelings, and behavior and provide diverse options for perceiving and making sense of experiences.⁵ Two basic modes of perception are *right-mode* and *left-mode*, or *R-mode* and *L-mode* for short (in the terminology of educator Betty Edwards, whose work we examine further in Chapter Six).⁶

It is theorized that for most people left-mode perception is driven predominantly by the left side of the brain and is heavily associated with language. L-mode is logical, analytical, and verbal. It clocks the passing of time. It breaks things down into named pieces, assigns symbols to represent them, and then strings them into sequences. L-mode provides individuals with very powerful, symbolic shorthands to use in paying attention—for example, financial definitions, time management concepts, and written standard operating procedures. L-mode offers powerful tools, and most organizations are skilled in at least the basic use of this mode.

Right-mode perception, related primarily to the right side of the brain in most people, is associated with images and patterns. It is synthetic and intuitive, it works in terms of wholes rather than pieces, and it favors concrete sensations over abstract ideas. R-mode complements the high-gear capacity for representing things sym-

bologically. More specifically, L-mode traits and R-mode traits complement each other, as outlined in Table 1.1.⁷ Everyone uses both modes of perception, but for most people, one tends to dominate. People with a dominant L-mode prefer thinking analytically and conceptually. Those with an R-mode preference draw more on their emotions and intuition. In organizational life, L-mode tends to dominate the means people use to perceive, analyze, and communicate.

Anytime you fly on a jet aircraft, for example, you are surrounded by the triumphs of L-mode thinking—relentless analysis, planned execution—all of it relying on precise numbers and words. Any sense of suspended time that the passengers might enjoy is forbidden to the pilots and controllers. Organizations have analogous

Table 1.1. Complementary Traits of Left-Mode and Right-Mode Attention.

L-mode	R-mode
Word	Image
Convergent	Divergent
Intellectual	Visceral
Deductive	Inductive
Logical	Metaphorical
Abstract	Concrete
Sequential	Parallel
Historical	Atemporal
Successive	Simultaneous
Verbal	Non-verbal
Parts	Wholes
Analysis	Synthesis
Propositional	Narrative
Elements	Patterns

Source: Adapted from S. P. Springer and G. Deutsch, *Left Brain, Right Brain* (New York: Freeman, 1981), p. 186.

needs for flawless planning and execution. And yet we all know there is more to both airplanes and people.

Not surprisingly, organizational life can be hostile to the use of R-mode attention, to the detriment of creative leadership. R-mode is often thought of as *irrational*, but this is a misunderstanding. In actuality it draws on a different kind of rationality—what scholar and former steel-industry executive David Hurst calls *values-based rationality*. Whereas L-mode is formal and fact-based, R-mode taps into your values and subjective experiences. Because R-mode involves all your sources of knowledge, it offers you a more complete rationality to draw on when you face complex challenges.

R-mode and L-mode are characterized by different but complementary ways of experiencing time. Hurst compares the two notions of time through the metaphor of surfing: “When in R-mode we are surfers on a wave of time, the trough of which is the perpetual now. Here the time is always *now, now, now* as the past recedes and the future approaches. In the analytical L-mode we are outside the situation, watching the surfers from the shore as it were, noting the chronology of their travel.”⁸

When your R-mode is dominant and you are engaged in the “now now now,”⁹ you enter a flow state, as described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.¹⁰ To be in a *flow state* is to be engrossed in the complete, unhindered awareness that allows you to achieve peak performance. Flow states can be experienced by everyone, from athletes to musicians to scientists. In our experience, people in organizations must experience flow or R-mode dominant perception at least occasionally if they are to adequately reflect on and make sense of complex challenges.

As individuals and groups sense the need for flow and try to find its rhythms, there is much that can go awry. Consider the perils of what Microsoft researcher Linda Stone calls *continuous partial attention*. Let’s say you’re working at home, doing email, talking to your kid, and the phone rings. Your attention is continuously split. “Being fulfilled is about committing yourself to someone else, or

some experience, that requires a level of sustained attention,” said Ms. Stone. “And that is what we are losing the skills for, because we are constantly scanning the world for opportunities and we are constantly in fear of missing something better.” Stone suggests that the negative consequences are spiritual as well as cognitive in nature.¹¹

Many among the large number of scientists and engineers we have worked with tell us that both their education and their work environment stress the conceptual and analytical competencies of L-mode attention. This bias is continually reinforced by legitimate needs for verbal communication. Yet despite this L-mode emphasis, these scientists and engineers maintain a strong appreciation for the powers of R-mode attention: visualization, pattern recognition, an eye for fine details, and the wordless intuition of a passionate mind. As one scientist explained: “I’m interested in adhesion to different surfaces. One of the things that I routinely do now is . . . actually visualize what the molecules are doing. It’s helped me to develop a hypothesis for why certain things stick. We’ve yet to prove it completely, but visualization helped me develop this hypothesis.”

Using Kinesthetic Attention

Attention is more than just brain stuff. It is deeply connected to what goes on in the body: heart and guts, hands and feet. *Kinesthetic attention* is the knowledge you gain through hands-on work and physical engagement. For example, with the now-traditional technique of *management by walking around*, managers take advantage of physical movement—of choosing to operate physically *in* the environment rather than from above or outside—to literally and metaphorically see and grasp what is going on from different angles.¹²

In our experience, people process their feelings and intuitions in more useful ways once they engage their kinesthetic attention. Recent work by brain researcher Antonio Damasio and his colleagues

indicates that human thought processes are structured like a layer cake. Good decision making, for example, has been shown to be dependent on connections to feelings and underlying emotions, which are in turn rooted in the alertness of the body. The notion that complete understanding requires heart and guts is proving to be more than a metaphor.¹³

Henry Mintzberg, organizational scholar and author of the classic text *The Nature of Managerial Work*,¹⁴ illustrates the value of kinesthetic knowledge by telling the story of some modern-day Inuits who froze to death when their snowmobiles broke down. Having traded physical intimacy with their environment for modern prosthetics, the Inuits became disconnected from knowledge of their landscape, at great cost. Mintzberg writes, “Our machinery, in the broadest sense, not just our organizations, has likewise dulled our senses, driving out our intuition and making it increasingly difficult to find our way out of our problems.”¹⁵

Sharpening your kinesthetic awareness will increase the wisdom of both your body and your mind. The knowledge gained from this awareness can have crossover benefits, as Arthur P. Bollon, chief executive of Cytoclonal Pharmaceuticals, learned when he took up karate as part of his personal fitness program. He discovered that this activity also makes him more fit as a leader. For some practice sets, he must memorize and execute more than fifty movements while visualizing an imaginary attacker. This takes considerable concentration and focus and complements his creative nature. Karate training is “invaluable” in keeping everything organized and on track, he reports. “It gives me more discipline and developed that part of myself that . . . wasn’t necessarily obtainable through conventional training.”¹⁶

As philosopher Mark Johnson points out, “We are *rational* animals, but we are also rational *animals*, which means that our rationality is embodied.”¹⁷ Information resides not only in the brain but also in the body—and that’s where you should look for it. Intuition is the practice of tapping into the wordless, tacit knowledge you feel

in your bones. In Chapters Five and Six we will discuss how leaders and communities critique and properly assimilate such information.

Paying Attention to Negative Space

A profound aspect of attending to information is an awareness of *negative space*. This term from the visual arts refers to the so-called empty, or white, space among the objects in a scene. This space is almost never really empty or white although exactly what it is defies easy categorization. Because people's conscious attention is naturally attracted to positive spaces, they easily pick out the figures in the foreground. The key to understanding negative space is to pay attention to the background in which the figures are set. When you focus on the foreground, or positive space, your vision may be clouded by a symbolic representation of what you see, a mental generalization rather than the specifics and nuances of the actual event or thing you are encountering. Engaging negative space means paying attention to the complexity of an unrecognizable shape in order to sharpen the outline of the ultimate object of your attention. Once the shapes surrounding the object engage your eyes, you can discern the foreground more clearly.

In our work at CCL we have found that the activity of drawing is a powerful device for understanding negative space. For example, drawing a picture of a specific tree can be difficult when your preconception of a tree—your L-mode symbol for tree, perhaps just a stick figure—gets in the way of your ability to see the real, individual tree. But you have no preconceived symbols for the shapes between the branches of a tree. So if you faithfully attend to and draw these negative spaces, the real tree gradually emerges. By your focusing on and drawing the negative space, the tree appears as if “for free.” Your drawing will accurately illustrate your particular tree, not your symbol for one; in addition, the tree will appear woven into its context, not abstracted from that environment. Likewise when paying attention to organizational turbulence, people need to see and

replicate more than the all-purpose stick figures they carry in their minds. They must be mindful of particulars, attending to the question, What is *this*?

Attention to negative space can be learned, practiced, and used to engage all kinds of complex scenarios. Many of the concepts and practices in the rest of this book are extensions of this basic idea. Paying attention to negative space makes you aware of how you have framed an issue and thus defined the boundaries of your consideration. By focusing on the complexity at the edges of the issue, you can more clearly and accurately define what the issue really is.

One of us, David Horth, was recently engaged on assignment to coach *Erica*, the senior manager of a group of scientists. Erica sought to determine where her leadership would have maximum value for her organization in the short and long term. David interviewed Erica's coworkers for feedback on her current effectiveness and the major contextual issues of the organization. Then Erica and David mulled over the consolidated interview data, searching for patterns and themes. David introduced the notion of negative space, and they turned their attention from what was *said* to what was *not said* in the picture that was emerging of Erica's leadership and the challenges facing her team. By looking at this negative space, David and Erica discovered that an issue they had previously placed at the periphery of Erica's leadership challenges was in fact a major concern. The interviewees had consistently *not* said anything about where the organization was headed in the long term. The concurrent absence of both a vision for the organization and a shared sense of what the organization was all about was the key issue hindering the performance of Erica's team. Thus remedying this absence became the major focus for Erica's leadership development.

Asking Powerful Questions

The scientist William Beveridge once remarked that "the effect that questioning has on the mind might be likened to the stimulus given to a fire by poking; it disturbs the settled arrangement and

brings about new combinations.”¹⁸ Have you ever had someone ask you a question that took your breath away, that made you stop in your tracks? A question that in some way fundamentally shifted your perception and therefore your understanding of the issue at hand?

A few years ago David was working with a group of executives from a large, international organization that financed development projects around the world. Their aim was to figure out the key strategic leadership issues facing the organization. David posed this question to the group: “If your organization was not able to supply capital, what would it provide?” Immediately the group members answered, “New knowledge.” So David asked another question: “What if a country wasn’t able to pay off its loans or new knowledge through financial means?” The members of the group sat silently for what seemed an eternity. Then someone ventured, “Payment must be something tradable on the stock market.” Another reflective silence followed. The questions and their responses sparked a productive dialogue about the core leadership values they shared and the mission of the organization. They were led to ask of themselves, “How do we reconcile our altruistic mission with our fiscal imperatives?”

Powerful questions take aim at the roots of people’s issues and assumptions. Asking such questions can disrupt perceptual shortcuts, helping people notice details, patterns, or movements that they have previously overlooked. A powerful question can be as simple as, What’s missing? Or, it can be as confrontational as, How can an apparently irreversible trend reverse? The personal computer industry was founded on powerful questions. Steve Jobs and his cohorts asked, What if computers were small and personal? As a result, they identified the essence of Apple Computer, Inc. An important shift for leaders, then, is to supplement their role of answer finder with the role of question asker. As one manager we worked with said: “For a long time my whole frame of reference was that I had to have all the answers. Now I’m finding out that it’s better to have the good questions.” A colleague at Chemstar echoes this

sentiment: “We really weren’t asking the right questions to begin with. We were asking a lot of technical questions, but the really powerful ones we weren’t asking. In order to do big picture stuff, you have to find the right questions.”

What Is a Powerful Question?

Powerful questions in the service of creative leadership typically have three characteristics: they invite exploration, they resist easy answers, and they invoke strong passions. Powerful questions pull people’s attention to unnoticed places. They are offered as an open door, not as a criticism of how things are. When asking powerful questions, you must be careful not to use them as weapons. On many occasions we have seen leaders use questions to intimidate their colleagues. Attending to trust and tone is essential. Depending on the context, an exploratory question such as, *Why do we do it like this?* may spark defensiveness in people. The group we worked with at Chemstar, for example, developed trust among group members before asking that question repeatedly as a team. Posed in that trusting context, the question led team members to profound insights about their operations.

Powerful questions resist easy answers. They slow your attention at crucial times so you notice more. They do not look for a final answer immediately but resonate within you and your colleagues over time in a way that feeds collaborative inquiry. The creative leader’s task is to devise contexts in which both asking and responding to powerful questions are invited and supported. We have seen such contexts created during strategy retreats, peer coaching sessions, conversations with invited controversial experts, and impromptu brainstorming meetings. These contexts can also be established through something as simple as consistently asking people where the work could get blindsided and consistently listening to the responses—and the negative spaces in the responses. One leader we know keeps a short list of the best, most provocative questions facing his team, then refers to these questions when he thinks things

are stuck. It has become a point of honor on his team to pose a question that makes this list.

Questioning is more powerful when the questions can and do come from anywhere without inhibition—from workers, customers, partners, competitors, even chance encounters on the fringes of your usual business. Cultivating this openness is an ongoing process for leaders. One leader who succeeded in making it legitimate to ask powerful questions in his organization, says: “To be creative, you’ve got to keep asking *why* and *what* and *where*—and there’s always more. So I did that and I gave my people the freedom to do that, and I think as a result, we are much more productive. We come up with better ideas; we don’t just accept the first idea. People generally feel better; they participate more.”

How does one make powerful questions legitimate? In this last case, the leader made questioning acceptable by changing his attitude. Previously he expected his people to “always exhibit control and to always have the answers.” Although that expectation hasn’t disappeared, it has been tempered. He has another mode now that opens the door to the exploration of questions without quick answers. His leadership has become less about proclamation and more about skilled conversation.

L-Mode and R-Mode Questions

Leaders can easily limit their ability to make sense of complex issues by the mode in which they gather information. Organizational effectiveness tends to be measured in terms of the answers to analytical or L-mode questioning. However, asking for and inviting information from yourself and others that derives from R-mode attention rounds out your understanding of complex scenarios.

R-mode questions ask about patterns, emotions, and intuitions. Here are some examples:

- *What are the patterns?* Seek patterns as you look for the lessons of the past. Create group histories by asking long-standing

members to reflect on episodes and themes. Use this information to ask questions about possible, emergent patterns facing the group.

- *What's interesting, unique, beautiful, or unusual about this?* A Buddhist sage once said his constant question was, "What is *this*?" L-mode answers the question abstractly. R-mode explores and synthesizes particulars and is thus especially useful in conditions of newness or change.

- *What is one hope you have going into this? What is one fear you have going into this?* Emotions and feelings carry a lot of the implicit knowledge in a group. L-mode and co-inquiry can be encouraged to come back in once the hopes and fears are, as one leader put it, "on the table, in the air, not so hot anymore." Ask these kinds of questions when mobilizing your people to pursue a new venture.

- *How do you feel about this at a deep down gut level? What does your intuition tell you?* We often run into situations in which questions that call for intuition are considered illegitimate; questions that elicit facts are the only questions allowed. Legitimizing intuition means occasionally injecting, into the organizational rhythm of questions that ask people to "prove it," questions that ask people to "offer hunches about it."

- *What is this like?* R-mode attention is more *analog* whereas L-mode attention is more *digital*—and because human perception is largely analog, R-mode questions can accentuate key aspects of attention. They can invite sometimes flamboyant comparisons of one thing to another—modeling, simulating, comparing. The question, *What's a metaphor for this?* quickly leads to the question, *What's the story behind this?* People begin to notice more things and then to share what they notice in sustainable and meaningful ways. R-mode questions are key to navigating what organizational scholar Peter Vaill calls the *permanent whitewater* of organizations.¹⁹

- *What questions are we neglecting to ask?* Negative space questions complement inquiry by looking at the spaces between what is known: *What are we missing? What could blindside us? How would a Martian describe this?*

What-If Questions

By posing surprising scenarios and inviting imaginative responses, leaders can break out of the rut of a traditional analysis. What-if questions turn a usual line of questioning on its head. They are daring and can be confrontational. They are intriguing and may lighten a dialogue and get the creative juices flowing. Here are some examples of what-if questions:

What if we deliberately tried to make this problem worse?

What if we asked people why they did it this way in the first place? What would they say?

What would happen to our customers if our business [or industry] simply went away?

What if all our employees became free agents?

What if our CEO got hit by a bus tomorrow?

What would be the negatives if our dream came true?

What would be the positives if we failed?

What would we do if the roles were reversed?

What if we couldn't invent anything new and just used what we had at hand?

What if key assumption X is wrong [or backward]?

How would we do this if we had unlimited resources? If we had no resources?

What if I disappeared for a month and my team handled this?

Wild Cards

Futurist John Petersen, president of the Arlington Institute, uses the term *wild cards* to describe changes with very low probability but extremely high impact that could drastically affect the way people

live, do business, and think. Among his examples of wild card changes, Petersen lists human cloning, a large asteroid hitting the Earth, and time travel. He says, "In the coming years, wild cards will only be wilder and come faster, and people who recognize and learn to make sense of them will have a real advantage."²⁰

Petersen offers several questions leaders can ask to increase their awareness of wild cards:

What are the most important wild cards for me, my organization, and my customers?

What would really wipe us out?

How can I anticipate these things?

What are the early indicators?

What can I do about my wild cards?²¹

So-What Questions

Questions are powerful when they get at underlying assumptions about purpose and value: Why do we value this? Why is this more valuable than that? What is the essence of what we're trying to achieve? What deeper purpose and meaning does this serve?

A favorite line of questioning for strategists and marketers consists of a series of so-what questions. For example:

So what's great about this new product?

Our new product has more bells and whistles on it.

So what?

This will enable the customer to play more music on it while she works.

So what?

She will feel happier working.

So what?

If she's happier working, she will be more productive.

So what?

If she's more productive, the company will value her more.

And so on. By probing your assumptions about purpose and value, you uncover all the nuances of your context. And the key to your solution, strategy, or campaign may lie in this context.

Appreciative Questions

Appreciative inquiry is an organization development approach that begins with appreciative questions rather than looking for problems: What are we doing right? What are our strengths? Where have we been? Where are we going? To what do we aspire?²²

Jane is a division director presiding over aging legacy IT systems still needed to serve critical customer needs. She describes it as an unglamorous pursuit, the quaint stepsister of the sexy new technology. However, *Jane* had a breakthrough with her own mind-set and then with her unit when she changed her focus to the positives. Needing first to identify those positives, she started asking appreciative questions: "Why do some customers prefer the legacy features?" "What is well built or even beautiful about the older IT architecture?" "What did programmers know when they built this that we now seem to be forgetting?" As a result of this inquiry, *Jane's* division was better able to leverage the small but numerous advantages inherent in the legacy systems. One result was a boost in morale that clients noticed, saying in one instance, "They believe in the services they provide."

When we ask powerful questions without easy answers, they often leave responses that didn't exist before in their wake. Appreciative questions sustained over time can create a whole nuanced web of appreciation and comprehension as they give a clear focus to attention that was previously shapeless and ineffective.

SCAMPER Questions

Alex Osborn, a founder of the modern field of creative problem solving, has devised a series of categories for powerful questions that generate new ideas.²³ The series is often referred to by the acronym SCAMPER, from the first letters of the categories. Use questions from these categories to take existing ideas and transform them into a new set of specifications or to power up a group that has stalled while working on a set of promising but as yet incomplete solutions.²⁴

Substitute: Who else? What else? Other ingredient? Other material? Other process? Other place? Other approach? Other tone of voice?

Combine: A blend? An alloy? An assortment? An ensemble? Combine units? Combine purposes? Combine appeals? Combine ideas?

Adapt: What else is like this? What other idea does this suggest? Does the past offer a parallel? What can we copy? Whom can we emulate?

Modify: Change meaning, color, motion, sound, odor, form, shape? Add a new twist?

Minify: Make it smaller? Make it condensed? Make it lower, shorter, or lighter? Subtract? Omit? Streamline? Split up? Understate?

Magnify: Add something? More time? Greater frequency? Extra value? Another ingredient? Stronger? Higher? Longer? Thicker? Duplicate? Multiply? Exaggerate?

Put to other uses: New ways to use? Other uses if modified?

Eliminate: What can we get rid of? Omit? Do without? Sacrifice? Give away?

Rearrange: Interchange component parts? Use another pattern? Another layout? Another sequence? Transpose cause and effect? Change pace? Change schedule?

Reverse: Transpose positive and negative? How about opposites? Turn it backward? Turn it upside down? Reverse roles? Change shoes? Turn tables? Turn the other cheek?

Developing the Competency of Paying Attention

Now that we have explored techniques for paying attention, let's consider how to deepen the ability to pay attention. Where does competence in paying attention come from? There are three main sources, all of which suggest opportunities for development: biology, culture, and experience.

Biology predisposes all of us to pay attention in certain ways and affects our capacity for discernment. We are wired to pay less attention to that which is in front of us all the time. Our reflexes and perceptual systems therefore have trouble grasping the novel when it is enveloped in what appears to be familiar.

Our attention also tends to follow the grooves our culture offers. People typically pay more attention to group consensus than to what is in front of their noses. Television has inculcated several generations with the habit of passive attention; the Internet favors more active forms of attention but also encourages “surfing” and brevity. Culturally, we are facing an increasing staccato of information—from school, the Internet, television, work, and community life. Not surprisingly, many professionals feel they suffer from *attention overload* and continuous partial attention.

In today's world, cultivating an ability to winnow out and listen to various indicators will bring you the insight and understanding necessary for flexible, effective, creative leadership. Everyone has life experiences that train his or her perceptions. Our own research since 1994 with the CCL Leading Creatively Project suggests that developmental experiences in paying attention can come from all parts of people's lives, not just their formal expertise. One manager, for example, has learned to listen “in a room where several conversations are going on.” He says, “I can ferret out the one I want to hear and pick up subtle distinctions of inflection and emotion in

people's conversation." Where did he learn this? "From ensemble singing and musical comedy, which trained him to make seamless contributions to performances."²⁵

Developing Individual Competence

To develop means "to grow outward," and the word *attention* similarly carries the idea of a "stretch out to" something, which implies that you must expand yourself in order to develop your competence of attention. In R-mode you become absorbed with what is at the limits of your attention, and wind up growing in that direction. You strive toward the edges of who you are in order to better attend—more objectively *and* more subjectively—to the world.

To appreciate also means "to grow larger." Paying attention creates care and appreciation, the ability to grow larger. Appreciation is more than just liking or approving. To appreciate is to immerse yourself in sensing and experiencing something in an open way. Eric Booth, in *The Everyday Work of Art*, and Mary Catherine Bateson, in *Composing a Life*, have explored in depth the nature of attentive, personal growth.²⁶

Deep attention, as one leader has described it to us, involves listening at many levels: "When I am facilitating groups, I find myself paying deep attention to the process and interaction of the group. I pay attention to the sounds, to the nonverbals, to the faces, at a heightened level." Another leader we know describes listening as something profound to offer others: "I have experienced the gift of the silence of others, special people who have given me the incredible grace of their full attention. There have been people in my life who have put aside their own agendas and created safe and hospitable spaces in which they have literally listened me into my own truth. I have begun to consider how I might learn to give others the same gift."²⁷

Here are some specific suggestions for developing the competence of paying attention in yourself:

Stand in Different Places. Shift perspective by radically changing your point of view. If you are a marketer, become the customer. If you are a coach, become the trainee. If you are outside something, look at it from the inside, and vice versa. Turn the problem upside down so that all the familiar parts look strange—then look again.

Use the Lenses of Other Domains. For example, if you are an artist, import the lens of science. If you are a scientist, import the lens of artistry. The ability to use different lenses may already exist within you as an individual leader or within your group's collective experience. Seek these lenses out. (Checking the veracity of alternative lenses is a matter of co-inquiry, which is explored in Chapter Five.)

Go Against the Grain. Attention has preferred directions, like wood grain. An experienced sculptor of wood will work both with the natural direction, or grain, of the wood fibers and against it—but working against the grain is more difficult and feels unnatural to the novice. Paying attention in different modes may likewise feel uncomfortable initially. Figure out what your own grain is (curly or straight? how many rings?). Practice sculpting your attention in small ways at first.²⁸

Involve Others in Forums for Shared Attention. The enterprise of addressing a complex challenge, as the story of the blind men examining an elephant illustrates (What is *this?*), requires the coordination of multiple perspectives. This kind of kaleidoscopic attention is more characteristic of communities than of individuals.

Developing Community Competence

The Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) is exemplary in using multiple modes of paying attention. PARC is famous for inventing devices and concepts key to personal computing, many

of which have blossomed only in the hands of individuals and organizations elsewhere. (Creative leadership can be *leaky* in generative ways.) PARC, perhaps learning a lesson from having good ideas leak away, now pays deliberate attention to what Director John Seeley Brown calls “strong and weak signals.” Brown says that the PARC senior team wants to keep asking, What are the big signals? At the same time, it keeps tuned to the weak signals so team members know which are fading and which are growing.²⁹ One way PARC keeps tuned to these signals—in and across cultures, in technology, and in potential markets—is through PAIR, the PARC Artist-in-Residence program.³⁰ PAIR matches Xerox technologists with San Francisco Bay Area artists to look at the future of digital technology. The pairs are matched by their interests; for example, a vocal artist is paired with a digital sound technologist. The artist pays attention to what is negative space for the scientist, and vice versa.

As a leader, you can foster competent attention in your community in the following ways:

Share Information Widely and Reward Perception. Encourage the free exchange of information and constantly ask group members how they perceive it. Don’t accept the view from any one point as a complete picture. Ask, What do you see? Pay attention to the reply. Verify perceptions analytically (*after* or *between* flurries of paying attention and imaging) so that your attention and the group’s can become more accurate and less naïve.

Recognize the Value of Different Styles of Paying Attention. For example, as we have discussed throughout this chapter, attention to intuition and emotion have an important role alongside attention to “just the facts, please.” Acknowledge and reassure your colleagues when they demonstrate various styles of attention. Alternate attention that is focused inward—feelings and intuitions—with attention that is focused outward on observable data.

Foster New Knowledge. Send members out of your organization and into the market, among customers, constituencies, competitors, and others. Make sure they regularly spend time in places where they can gain new perspectives.

Support Honest and Open Feedback About People and Ideas. One director we know, managing in a time of great upheaval in her organization, held a series of meetings that she called *open kimono sessions*—a metaphor for getting a little bit “naked,” or frank, with each other. She found it was better to do this publicly, with her support and structuring, than to have it happen behind her back.

Attend to the Periphery. Create time or a structure for asking the group: What is on the edges of our awareness? What is on the fringe of what we do? Our colleague Stan Gryskiewicz has written about using the turbulence that occurs within and at the periphery of an organization.³¹ He recommends inviting in guests with unusual viewpoints that might trigger alternative views and ideas.

Recognize the Aesthetics of Attention. Attention gravitates toward that which is relevant, meaningful, interesting, dynamic, inspiring, well designed, and beautiful. Stacks of spreadsheets will be ignored by all but committed specialists. Identify and emphasize the compelling stories and the big pictures so that people will love to have a look and will look twice.

Change the Pace of Attention. If the group you are leading likes to surf quickly through issues, schedule retreats for what David Perkins calls *slowing looking down*—letting questions emerge, shifting positions, letting your eyes work, noticing interesting features, comparing perceptions.³² If your group naturally prefers ponderous analysis, practice taking intuitive scans of the data or hold short, rapid-sensing forums on fast-breaking issues.

Cautions

There are some dangers of course to paying careful attention: seeing things that aren't really there, seeing things intended to be hidden, jumping at noises, glimpsing scary things. The experiences and lessons collected in this book push your perception to the limits. Competent leadership will provide good navigation, but some perils remain and may even intensify as your individual and community competence at paying attention increases. The trick to navigating these waters is not to shut down your attention but to exercise caution around the hazards.

You need to exercise caution in three specific areas: dealing with the flood of information and emotions, mistaking patterns, and seeing undiscussables.

Dealing with the flood of information and emotions. Taking in information these days can be like drinking from a fire hose. In addition, you and your colleagues inevitably have emotional involvement in the issues and these emotions become part of the stream as well. As a leader, you can increase or decrease the volume of the stream by selectively using the concepts and techniques in this book. Decrease the volume by focusing your group on the critical few items that need immediate or sustained attention. You can't dam the stream indefinitely, however, so periodically it is wise to face the flood deliberately, in a structured way. When the volume is increased—and you invite in the full complexity of people's attention—be careful to allow ample time and space to deal with the results. Resolve to extract meaning from the information flood, finding what Oliver Wendell Holmes called the “simplicity on the other side of complexity.” Finally, make sure you have a plan for follow-up so that people trust the threads they discover will be pursued and acted on. And make sure that your plan cares for all modes of your group's attention, from analytical to intuitive.

Mistaking patterns. The human brain is designed to look for patterns, but pattern recognition can go awry. Not all or even most in-

tuitive perceptions are correct. Intuition likes to say, “Here is a pattern,” but seeing the pattern is not a verification of it. For example, humans are hard-wired to see human faces. This is an indispensable asset for infants as they develop, but the tendency to see faces also means that people often see faces in randomness—like the man in the moon, the face of Jesus in the wood grain, and so on. The competency of co-inquiry involves checking patterns for their veracity.

You can employ traditional analytical skills as checks and balances for perceived patterns. Don’t be afraid to check intuitions against numbers, demographics, the bottom line, and similar data points. Both the C2 Competencies and technical competencies are essential to making sense of complex challenges. Using multiple modes of attention at repeated points in time will also help you test the accuracy of patterns that you have discerned. No one stream of information should be ranked above all others.

Noticing the undiscussables. Paying attention gets particularly interesting when it means attending to things that aren’t meant to be seen, what organizational learning expert Chris Argyris calls *undiscussables*.³³ uncomfortable truths, deep-rooted conflicts, maverick points of view. Although you may feel it is perilous to discuss these issues openly, it is also dangerous to ignore them. The team of managers at Chemstar, for instance, had to deal with an undiscussable that was actively blocking a solution to their challenge: “As we were exploring this challenge together people started to see fear as a big blocker and then our job was to kind of get under what was the fear. The fear basically turned out to be the fear of solving the technical problem because the technical problem was one that kept a lot of people busy and employed. And also made careers at Chemstar.”

Re-vision can threaten corporate vision. In environments lacking an honest commitment to open inquiry, people may interpret powerful questions as betrayal. At Sandoz, oncologist Athos Gianella-Borradori had doubts that a new gene replacement therapy would work. He told his superiors of his doubts even as he worried that his concerns would be interpreted “as a betrayal of our cause.”³⁴ It is easy for people to interpret concern as resistance, and doubt as a betrayal.

Inquiry must be robust enough to face such concerns and doubts without flinching. As a leader, you must protect the people around you who are paying attention. Take pains to give them a safe place and methods to explore their perceptions without having those perceptions construed as disloyalty to the company vision.

Paying competent attention indicates your care, carefulness, and caring. It is a form of recognition. Attention is also a tool to use with caution: *be aware* and *beware* are twins.

Once you have developed a strong competency in paying attention, you can leverage this skill across the other C2 Competencies: personalizing, imaging, serious play, co-inquiry, and crafting. The next competency we discuss, personalizing, draws on paying attention to and selectively applying your individuality—your personal perspectives, life expertise, and leadership style.