



# People in Context

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In almost any organization, you will find a lack of mutual understanding, empathy, and cooperation up, down, and across structural and functional lines. Blame, and a we-versus-them position, surfaces in many interactions. You will find personal stress at all levels, and you will discover dysfunctional peer relationships at the top, in the middle, and at the bottom. This chapter presents a valuable framework—a people-in-context lens for understanding organizational interaction. Using the framework, you will see how blindness to context creates all the problems described above. More than that, the framework demonstrates to leaders how seeing and understanding their own context and the contexts of others can enable them to avoid those problems and to create satisfying and productive relationships throughout the organization that lead to alignment and better performance.

**O**ur efforts to understand and intervene in organizational events have a persistent bias: to interpret phenomena from a personal framework. In other words, situations are to be understood in terms of the needs, motivations, temperaments, personal styles, values, and developmental stages of one or more of the individuals involved. And if the diagnostic lens is personal, then it follows that the interventions will also be personal: fix, fire, demote, replace, or suggest coaching or therapy for one or more of the parties.

I suggest an often overlooked lens that provides a deeper understanding of these phenomena and a range of more effective leadership strategies. This is a person-in-context lens in which phenomena are understood as the interactions of individuals and groups with the systemic contexts in which they and others exist. When we fail to recognize context, events are misunderstood and energies misplaced. A missing leadership competency is seeing, understanding, and mastering the systemic contexts in which we and others exist.

In this chapter, I describe the consequences of blindness to context and the productive possibilities we derive from context sight. The first main section describes four common system contexts: Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer. The second section discusses the four contexts as they apply to individuals and the third as they apply to groups. In both sections, I describe familiar scenarios that result from context blindness and produce personal stress, strained or broken relationships, and diminished organizational effectiveness. I also lay out some principles for seeing context and describe the positive difference that seeing context can make for leaders and others in organizations.

The fourth main section of the chapter presents a case that illustrates the limitations of personal orientations while demonstrating how seeing contexts deepens our understanding of situations and reveals more comprehensive and productive leadership strategies.

Seeing, understanding, and mastering context is an essential leadership competency. There is a difference between knowing that people operate in different contexts and experiencing relationships with people from different contexts in the day-to-day turmoil of leading modern organizations. I end with a discussion of the implications for leadership development.

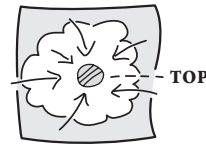
#### **FOUR SYSTEM CONTEXTS**

This section describes four common system contexts: Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer (Oshry, 1994). This is not to imply that these are the only contexts in which people function, but these four are essential to our understanding of organizational interaction, and they are the four that I know very well from my work over the past forty years with both the Power Lab (Oshry, 1999) and the Organization Workshop, both described at the end of this chapter. What is important to understand is that Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer are not just hierarchical positions; they are conditions all

of us face in organizational interaction, conditions we move in and out of from event to event. So in that sense, all of us are Top/Middle/Bottom/Customers.

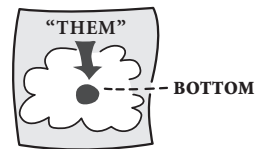
- *The Top context: Complexity and accountability.* We are in the Top context (Figure 8.1) whenever we have been designated responsible for a system or piece of a system—whether it is the organization as a whole, a division, unit, task force, family, project, team, or classroom. The Top context tends to be one of complexity and accountability: lots of inputs to deal with, difficult issues, issues from within and without the system, issues that aren't dealt with elsewhere float up to you, and complex decisions must be made regarding the form, culture, and direction of the system. Whenever we are in that Top context, we are accountable for the system, the piece of the system, or the process for which we are Top.

**Figure 8.1**  
**A Person in the**  
**Top Context**



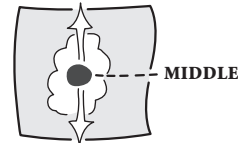
- *The Bottom context: Vulnerability.* We are in the Bottom context (Figure 8.2) of vulnerability whenever we are on the receiving end of decisions that affect our lives in major or minor ways. Plants are shut down, health and retirement benefits are changed, restrictive governmental regulations are put in place, new initiatives are instituted, current initiatives are abandoned. All of this happens *to* us without our involvement.

**Figure 8.2**  
**A Person in the**  
**Bottom Context**



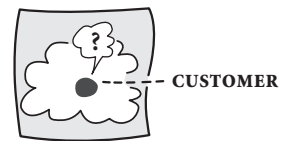
- *The Middle context: Tearing.* We are in the Middle tearing context (Figure 8.3) whenever we are pulled between the conflicting needs, demands, and priorities of two or more individuals or groups. We are Middle between our work group and our manager, between a spouse and a child, between supplier and manufacturing, between our executive group and the board, between one executive and another.

**Figure 8.3**  
**A Person in the**  
**Middle Context**



- *The Customer context: Neglect.* We are in the Customer context of neglect (Figure 8.4) whenever we are looking to some individual or group for a product or service that we need in order to move on with our work, and that product or service is not coming as fast as we want, at the price we want, or to the quality we had hoped for.

**Figure 8.4**  
**A Person in the Customer Context**



To reiterate the basic point: regardless of what positions we and others occupy, we and they are constantly moving in and out of these contexts: sometimes as Top, sometimes as Bottom, sometimes as Middle, and sometimes as Customer.

## AWARENESS OF PERSONS IN CONTEXT

We do not reflexively see context; we see people, and we tend to experience our interactions as person to person. Sometimes we are blind to the context others are living in, and sometimes we are blind to our own context. The basic point is that we are not just interacting people to people; we are people in context. Failure to recognize that can lead to serious misunderstandings, inappropriate actions, and dysfunctional consequences. In this section, I discuss the contextual principles at work on the personal level, provide some examples of what that context looks and feels like, and offer some strategies a leader can take in this situation to address the gap.

### Principle 1: When We Are Blind to Others' Contexts

*Principle 1:* When we are blind to others' contexts, we are likely to fall into scenarios in which we misunderstand others' actions, attribute inaccurate motives to them, respond in ways that negatively affect our relationships with them, and diminish our personal and organizational effectiveness:

- *“Arrogant” Tops.* We may have a brilliant idea for organizational improvement. We send it to Top and await an acknowledgment, maybe even a promotion. To us, this is a great idea with potential for increased organization effectiveness. But to our Top, struggling to survive in this world of complexity, it may be just another complication in an already complex world. A week goes by with no

response from Top. Two weeks. Nothing. Our reaction: *It's those arrogant Tops again!* We get mad, we withdraw, and we lose our enthusiasm for making any more contributions.

- “Resistant” Bottoms. We’ve just developed an exciting new initiative that could really make a difference to our workers and ultimately to the organization. For the workers, it means more involvement, more empowerment, more opportunity to make a difference. We bring it up to our workers, but there is no enthusiasm. To us, this is an exciting initiative, but to our workers living in this world of vulnerability, this is the latest installment of “them” doing it to “us” again. *What have they got up their sleeves this time? What happened to last year's exciting new initiative? Just wait it out; this too shall pass.* We conclude that our workers are just too far gone for anything to excite them.

- “Weak” Middles. We’ve just made a simple request to our Middle; it’s about support we need from him on our project. That’s all we’re asking for. To us, it’s a simple request, but to our Middle struggling to survive in a tearing world, supporting us is working against someone else who is pressing Middle to support her. So instead of a strong commitment to support, we get a weak wishy-washy *I'll see what I can do.* Where did we ever get such a weak Middle!

- “Nasty” Customers. We’re trying to be helpful to a disgruntled customer whose product has once again been delayed. There’s nothing we can do about product delivery, but we do want to soothe Customer’s ruffled feathers, so we invite Customer out for coffee; we also suggest a tour of the facility and present our customer survey form. Instead of gratitude, we get an angry reaction from Customer. To us, we are making reasonable gestures; to Customer living in the world of neglect, our nice gestures are simply *more neglect! Some people are just unreachable by kindness!*

Leadership strategy 1 comes into play in all of these situations:

*Leadership strategy 1:* Take others’ contexts into account. Make it possible, even easy, for them to do what it is you and your system need them to do.

There is no arrogant Top, resistant Bottom, weak Middle, or nasty Customer. What we have are people—just like us—struggling to cope with their respective contexts of complexity and accountability, vulnerability, tearing, and neglect.



Our problem is that we have been reaching out and reacting as if these are just person-to-person interactions. In our context blindness, what we've done is increase the complexity of Top, the vulnerability of Bottom, the tearing of Middle, and the neglect of Customer, which is not what we had intended.

The challenge for us is to take context into account. This involves having an understanding of others' context, having some empathy for them, not reacting to their initial responses, staying focused on what it is we are trying to accomplish, and being strategic, that is, rather than being blind to context, taking other people's contexts into account. *Given the context they are in, how do I make it possible for them to do what I need them to do?* So, incorporated into my strategy are the following challenges: How do I reduce the complexity of Top, the vulnerability of Bottom, the tearing of Middle, and the neglect of Customer?

## Principle 2: When We Are Blind to Our Own Contexts

*Principle 2:* When we are blind to our own contexts, we are vulnerable to falling into scenarios that are dysfunctional for us personally, for our relationships, and for our systems. We respond reflexively to these contexts—not all of us, not every time, but with great regularity—without awareness or choice. It is as if these scenarios happen to us without any agency on our part.

- *Burdened Tops.* When we are Top, living in the context of complexity and accountability, we are vulnerable to reflexively sucking responsibility up to ourselves and away from others. It's not a choice we make; it simply happens. We don't see ourselves doing anything. It is just crystal clear to us that we are responsible for handling the complexity we are facing. The more regularly we do this, the more we increase our stress, the more we dilute the brainpower that can be brought to bear on situations, the more we gradually disable others so that when we need them, they aren't there for us.

- *Oppressed Bottoms.* When we are Bottom, living in the context of vulnerability, we are vulnerable to reflexively holding others responsible for our condition and the condition of the system. Again, we do this without awareness or choice. It's crystal clear to us that *they* are responsible, not us. The more regularly we do this, the more righteous we become in our victimhood and the more bitter toward others; the less energy we devote to dealing with the very problems we

are facing, and the less agency we feel in our lives. The system suffers from misdirected energy that is devoted to whining, complaining, resisting, and, possibly, sabotaging—energy that could have been focused more productively on the business of the system.

- *Torn Middles.* When we are Middle, living in the tearing context, we are vulnerable to sliding in between other people's issues and conflicts and making them our own. It becomes crystal clear to us that *we* are responsible for resolving *their* issues. What makes this especially stressful is that *they* hold us responsible for resolving *their* issues. Sliding in between weakens us: we become confused, uncertain whose priorities to serve; we may not fully satisfy anyone, we get little positive feedback; and possibly we doubt our own competence. Middles cope with this tearing in different ways: some reduce the tearing by aligning themselves with Tops, others by aligning with Bottoms; in either case, they create tension with whomever they are not aligned. Other Middles cope with the tearing by bureaucratizing themselves, making it difficult for anyone to get to them. And still others burn themselves out shuttling back and forth, attempting to explain each side to the other, trying to placate all sides, struggling to please everyone. In all of these coping mechanisms is a loss of independence of thought and action. No independent Middle perspective is brought to bear, and as a consequence, the system loses whatever value such perspective could provide.

- *Screwed Customers.* When we are Customer, living in the context of neglect, we are vulnerable to staying aloof from delivery systems and holding them responsible for delivery. It becomes crystal clear to us that they, not us, are responsible for delivery. So when delivery is unsatisfactory, we feel righteously angry at the supplier and personally blameless. Since it's clear to us that we have no responsibility in the delivery process, whatever contribution we might have made to the quality of delivery is lost.

In all of these scenarios, blindness to our own context results in personal stress, fractured relationships with others, and diminished organizational effectiveness. The solution is to turn to leadership strategy 2:

*Leadership strategy 2:* Recognize the context you are in, move past the reflexive disempowering response, and use the possibility of whatever context you are in to strengthen yourself, your relationships with others, and the system.



To master our own context, we need to understand that in system life, we are constantly moving in and out of Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer contexts. We need to be able to recognize whatever context we are in at the moment. *Am I Top, Middle, Bottom, or Customer in this moment?* We need to be able to notice our reflex response in whatever context we are in. *Am I sucking up responsibility to myself and away from others? Am I holding THEM responsible for my condition and the condition of the system? Am I sliding in between other people's issues and conflicts and making them my own? Am I staying aloof and holding the delivery system responsible for delivery?*

Sometimes the clue to context lies in our feelings: *I'm feeling burdened or oppressed or torn or screwed. What is that feeling telling me about the context I am in, and how I am responding to it? Am I feeling burdened because I'm sucking responsibility up to myself? Am I feeling oppressed because I'm holding others responsible? Am I feeling torn because I'm sliding in between others' issues? Am I feeling screwed because I'm holding the delivery system responsible for delivery?*

Awareness allows us to avoid the negative consequences of blindness. Beyond that, it opens up more powerful and productive possibilities for responding to context, possibilities that strengthen ourselves and our systems—for example:

- In the Top context of complexity and accountability, instead of sucking responsibility up to myself and away from others, my challenge is to be a person who uses this context as an opportunity to create responsibility in others.
- In the Bottom context of things that are wrong with my condition and the condition of the system, instead of holding THEM responsible for all that is wrong, my challenge is to be a person who is responsible for my condition and the condition of the system.
- In the Middle context of tearing, instead of sliding in between and losing my independence of thought and action, my challenge is to maintain my independence of thought and action in the service of the system.
- In the Customer context of neglect, instead of standing aloof from the delivery process and holding it responsible for delivery, my challenge is to be a person who shares responsibility for delivery.







We are much more powerful and more contributing system members when, in the Top context, we are creators of responsibility in others; when, in the Bottom context, we are responsible for our condition and the condition of the system; when, in the Middle context, we maintain our independence of thought and action; and when, in the Customer context, we share responsibility for the delivery of products and services. Living from these transformative stands demands that we use more of our potential in whatever context we are in, and it enables us to focus more of our creative energies on the business of the system. These stands also raise unique challenges for us. As Tops, we need to give up some control; as Bottoms we need to give up our dependency and blame; as Middles we need to give up our need to please everyone; and as Customers we need to give up our sense of entitlement.

These are the payoffs and the prices to be paid for seeing, understanding, and mastering the systemic contexts in which we are living. In this section, we explored the leadership challenges of seeing, understanding, and mastering individuals in context. Now we turn our attention to groups in context.

## GROUPS IN CONTEXT

We exist as members in organizational peer groups: in Top Executive groups, Middle Management and Staff groups, and Bottom groups. We also bring our personal bias to our group relationships, to our affinities and antipathies. When things go wrong in our groups, our tendency is to explain these difficulties in terms of personal issues: there is something wrong with you or me, or maybe we are just an unfortunate mix. And when our diagnoses are personal, so also are our usual remedies: fix, fire, rotate, separate, divorce, or recommend coaching or therapy for one or more parties.

In fact, many of the peer group breakdowns that occur are not personal at all; they become personal, but their roots lie in context blindness.

### Principle 3: When We Are Blind to Our Peer Group's Context

*Principle 3:* When we are blind to the contexts in which our peer groups are functioning, we are vulnerable to falling into dysfunctional scenarios that cause us personal stress, weaken if not end our

relationships with our peers, and detract from the contributions our peer groups could be making to the system:

- *Territorial Tops.* Members of Top peer groups may see themselves as just people with a job to do, but they are more than that; they are a group existing in a context of complexity and accountability (Figure 8.5).

Without awareness and mastery of that context, they are vulnerable to falling into dysfunctional territoriality. The process goes something like this. As members of Top teams, we reflexively adapt to the complexity and accountability of our context by differentiating, with each of us handling our own areas of responsibility. Differentiation is an essential process; without it, we would not be able to cope with the complexity and responsibility of our situation. But then a familiar process unfolds; we harden in our differentiations. Differentiations become territories. Each of us becomes increasingly knowledgeable and responsible for our area and decreasingly knowledgeable and responsible for others' areas. We develop a "mine" mentality. We become protective and defensive of our territory. And we face uncertainties about the form and future of the system: *What kind of culture do we want to create? Do we want to expand in new directions or stick to our knitting? Are we going to take financial risks or play it cautiously?*

These are complex questions with no textbook answers, yet we gradually polarize around fixed positions: the Riskers versus the Cautionaries; the Loose/Democratic System Builders versus the Bureaucratic/Authoritarian System Builders. Relationships fray. There are issues about who are the really important members of this team. Members feel they are not respected for their contributions. There are feelings about who is holding up their piece of the action. There are battles for control. Silos develop, sending mixed, confusing messages down through the system. There is redundant building up of resources in the silos; potential synergies across silos are blocked. Tensions among the Tops are high, and it all feels so personal.

- *Fractionated Middles.* Middle peer groups, whether first-line supervisors or middle managers or staff groups, may think of one another as just people and

**Figure 8.5**  
**Four Persons in a Top**  
**Context**

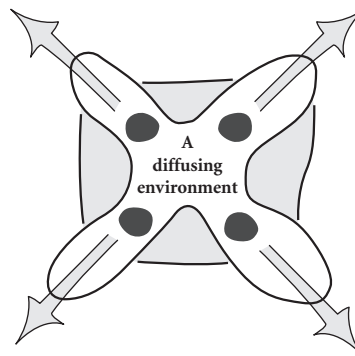


attribute their feelings about one another as simply reflections of one another's personality, temperament, motives, values, and such. But Middle peer groups exist in a tearing context, one that draws them away from one another and out toward those individuals they are to supervise, lead, manage, coach, or service (Figure 8.6).

Dispersing is an adaptive response to that tearing context; that is what Middles are hired to do. But in time, we harden in our separateness. We develop an "I" mentality in which our separateness from one another predominates; our competitiveness with one another intensifies, as does our tendency to evaluate one another on relative surface issues: emotionality, manner of speech, skin color, gender, clothes we wear, and such. This fractionation of Middles isolates them, leaving them unsupported, without a peer group, able to be surprised, and often feeling undercut by actions taken by other Middles. It leaves the system uncoordinated, and it works against potential synergies among Middles or any collective influence by Middles.

- *Conforming Bottoms.* Bottom peer groups exist in a context of shared vulnerability (Figure 8.7). The reflexive response is to coalesce. In coalescing, we feel (and, in fact, may be) less vulnerable. We develop a "we" mentality in which our differences are submerged and we feel connected to one another, supporting and being supported by one another. But then we harden in our we-ness—our closeness to one another and our separateness from all others, from "them." In our we-ness we become wary of all others, resistant to them, and at times antagonistic to them. In our we-ness, there is pressure from one another as well as self-inflicted pressure to maintain unity. Difference is experienced as threatening to the we, and those expressing difference are pressured to come back into line. Individual action is experienced as threatening to the we and is discouraged. The pressure toward conformity

**Figure 8.6**  
**Four Persons in a**  
**Middle Context**



**Figure 8.7**  
**Four Persons in a**  
**Bottom Context**



is intense. The cost to individuals is the suppression of their freedom and the opportunity to develop their individuality; the cost to the system is resistance to even the best-intentioned change initiatives and the suppression of energy that could be focused on system business.

Each of these scenarios results in stress for individual group members, causes the quality of their relationships to deteriorate, and diminishes the group's contribution to the overall system. And each of these scenarios is avoidable. Transformation becomes possible with context awareness and choice:

*Leadership strategy 3:* Recognize the context your peer group is in; adapt to that context without allowing adaptation to harden into dysfunctionality. Develop your peer group into a Robust System, one that strengthens individual members, their relations with one another, and their contribution to the system.

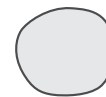
In order to develop powerful peer groups, we need to (1) understand the fundamental systemic processes underlying Robust Systems, that is, systems with outstanding capacities to survive and develop in their environments; (2) recognize how these processes are influenced by context in ways that can limit peer group effectiveness, and (3) master the processes. Any peer group—Top, Middle, or Bottom—can become a Robust System.

A Robust System differentiates, homogenizes, individuates, and integrates (see Figures 8.8 through 8.11). “Differentiates” refers to the fact that the system develops variety in form and function, thus enabling it to interact complexly with its environment. “Homogenizes” means developing processes for sharing information and capacity across the system. “Individuates” means encouraging individuals and groups to function separately and make independent forays into the environment, experimenting, testing, developing their potential. “Integrates” means enabling a process in which parts—individuals and

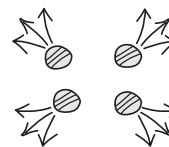
**Figure 8.8**  
**A System**  
**Differentiating**



**Figure 8.9**  
**A System**  
**Homogenizing**



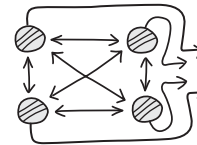
**Figure 8.10**  
**A System**  
**Individuating**



units—come together, share information, feed and support one another, and modulate one another's actions in the service of the whole.

Whether we see context or are blind to it, our groups will reflexively adapt. But some reflexive patterns of adaptation actually diminish peer group effectiveness by relying on certain processes while ignoring or suppressing others. When we see and understand context, we can strengthen our groups by bringing the ignored or suppressed processes back into the mix.

**Figure 8.11**  
**A System**  
**Integrating**



- *The formula for falling into Top Territoriality is differentiation and individuation without homogenization and integration.* For Top groups in the context of complexity and accountability, the reflexive response is to differentiate and individuate, that is, to develop a variety of forms and processes for coping with complexity *and* for the parts to function independently of one another in the pursuit of these separate strategies and approaches. Thus far, this is all to the good. It is when Top groups fail to balance differentiation and individuation with homogenization and integration that they fall into destructive territoriality. In light of this peril, how can leaders develop a robust Top peer group? The leadership challenge for Top groups is not to differentiate less but to homogenize and integrate more, to share high-quality information with one another, to spend time walking in one another's shoes, to work together on projects other than their specialized arenas, to function as mutual coaches to one another in which all Tops are committed to one another's success. Such forms of homogenizing and integrating activities serve to strengthen the group's capacity. The new formula for Top peer power becomes: *Homogenization and integration strengthen differentiation and integration.*

- *The formula for falling into Middle Alienation is individuation without integration.* For Middle groups in the tearing context, the reflexive response is to individuate: to separate and function independently as they supervise, manage, lead, coach, or otherwise service the groups they are charged with serving. This is an adaptive response to the tearing context. It is when individuation is not strengthened by integration that the fractionated pattern described previously develops. In light of this peril, how can leaders develop a robust middle peer group? The leadership challenge for Middle peers is not to individuate less but to

integrate more: meet together regularly with just Middle peers, share information gleaned from across the system, use their shared intelligence to diagnose system issues, share best practices, solve problems, work collectively to create changes that individually they are unable to achieve. The new formula for Middle peer power becomes: *Integration strengthens individuation.*

- *The formula for falling into Bottom Conformity is homogenization and integration without individuation and differentiation.* For Bottom groups in the context of shared vulnerability, the reflexive response is to coalesce. Coalescence is a process in which unity is maintained by homogenizing (emphasizing commonality while suppressing differences that could divide) and integrating, that is, sharing resources and supporting one another in common cause. Coalescence is an adaptive response to shared vulnerability; it is when homogenization and integration are not balanced by individuation and differentiation that the groups fall into stifling and destructive conformity. So how to develop a robust Bottom peer group? The leadership challenge for Bottom peers is to strengthen themselves by encouraging differentiation (*Let's explore multiple approaches to coping with our vulnerability*) and individuation (*Go out there and see what unique contribution you can make*). Differentiation and individuation are not experienced as threats to unity as long as they are pursued with the goal of strengthening the we rather than weakening it. The formula of, *In unity there is strength*, is changed to, *In diversity there is strength*. In the language of group processes, the new formula for Bottom peer power becomes: *Individuation and differentiation strengthen homogenization and integration.*

#### **Principle 4: Overcoming the Illusions of System Blindness**

*Principle 4:* Our consciousness—particularly how we experience others—is shaped by our relationship to them. Change the relationship, and we experience them quite differently.

One reaction to any of the group strategies described could be: Very interesting, but it won't work with my people. And why won't it work with your people? Well, it's because of their temperament, or needs, or motives, or level of maturity, and so forth. We find ourselves back into experiencing others through a personal rather than systemic lens. When Tops are in the “mine” mentality, Middles in



the “I” mentality, and Bottoms in the “we” mentality, the feelings they have toward others feel solid, firmly grounded in the characteristics of these others. Simply a matter of who they are. And any notion that you might feel differently toward them feels far-fetched. Yet these solid, firmly grounded experiences are in fact the illusions of systemic blindness. Change the relationship, and the feelings change.

In the Power Lab experience (described at the end of the chapter), we demonstrate this illusion quite dramatically. A central feature of the program is a multiple-day intensive societal experience in which participants are randomly assigned to Top, Middle, and Bottom positions. With great regularity, Tops fall into territorial issues, Middles become alienated from one another, and Bottoms become a powerfully connected we. And all relationships seem firmly grounded in the reality of who the people are. Then there is a second experience in which all roles are shifted; the powerfully bonded Bottoms are now in different contexts: some as Tops, others as Middles, and others as Customers. And in short order, love is transformed into impatience, annoyance, competition, aggression. Previously territorial Tops and alienated Middles are now bonded Bottoms. They all experience the power of context. That can and should be a humbling experience.

There may be many roads leading to systemic understanding. As an educator, my favorite is this: I prefer to come to a system intentionally knowing nothing about it: reading no reports, interviewing no one. And then I give a talk on Top Teams and Middle Peer Relationships and Bottom Groupthink. The presentation is about context and how context shapes our experiences of ourselves and others, and the dysfunctional scenarios that can follow. The power comes when people identify themselves and their system in this pure abstraction. How does he know this about us? Clearly whatever is happening to us is not simply about us or our particular organization. Something else must be going on. And that questioning creates the opening for systemic understanding and intervention: for Tops to pay more attention to homogenizing and integrating activities, for Middles to regularly integrate with one another, and for Bottoms to strengthen themselves by building individuation and differentiation into their survival strategies. The challenge for all is to see, understand, and master systemic context.

## SYSTEMS IN PRACTICE: THE CASE OF THE RIGID MANAGER

The following case illustrates the people-in-context ideas I've described in this chapter, and it also supports what could be regarded as a fifth principle toward developing system insight:

*Principle 5:* Seeing people opens up deep but potentially limited personal interventions; seeing context opens up comprehensive systemic interventions.

A change intervention that has been successful in division A of Ace Manufacturing is being introduced into division B with the help of a team of consultants. One snag is that B's division head is less than enthusiastic about the project. *Our department managers are having enough trouble keeping up with day-to-day demands without dealing with the complexity of a whole new initiative.* Still, the initiative has been introduced, and five of the six department managers seem invested in making it work despite its apparent difficulties. Charles, the sixth manager, has been ignoring the initiative. To him, it is as if it doesn't exist. Charles is clear about his boss's priorities, and his boss's priorities are *Charles's* priorities.

The consultants have attempted to work with Charles, with little success. They interpret Charles's apparent resistance from a personal developmental framework: seeing him as being stuck at a developmental level at which he is unable to separate himself from the demands of authority. If Charles and the initiative are to be successful, Charles needs to be helped to move through that stage of development and acquire greater independence.

Meanwhile, the other department managers, each operating independently of the others, are grappling with both the requirements of the new change initiative and the continuing demands of the division head, who is increasingly unhappy with them. They have been lax on their paperwork, reports not being timely or thorough, and there have been too many complaints from people in their operations. None of this is a problem for Charles. His paperwork is fine, his reports are timely and thorough, and as far as the division head is concerned, Charles's operation is running smoothly.

Charles may in fact be stuck at this level of development, and it could be useful to help him move through that stage. But a richer understanding of this situation with more powerful intervention possibilities emerges when observed through a systems lens.



## A Systemic Picture

Charles, with his apparent inability to separate himself from authority, is but one piece of a total system scenario involving the relations between and among the division head (Top) and the department managers (Middles). A deeper understanding of this situation and a more global intervention strategy emerges when we take into account the contexts in which people are functioning:

- *Top context: Complexity and accountability.* To the division head, this new initiative is being experienced as another complication in an already complex world. This feeling is reinforced by the lax reports from department managers and the complaints coming from their groups. Progress on the change initiative seems incoherent. The division head receives very different reports.

- *Middle context: Tearing.* Charles is not the only Middle torn between the requirements of the new initiative and the day-to-day demands of the job. Department managers are coping with the tearing in different ways. Charles reduces the tearing by aligning up; the division head's priorities are his priorities. The division head has no problem with Charles, but the consultants do because Charles's priorities are not their priorities. Meanwhile, the other department managers are coping with the tearing differently. Some are aligning with the consultants' priorities; the consultants are pleased with their efforts, but the division head is not. Others are attempting to please everyone with limited success.

- *Middle peer group context: Tearing.* Each department manager faces this tearing alone. There is no Middle peer group with a coherent strategy for handling their tearing and implementing (or agreeing not to implement) the change initiative.

## A Systemic Intervention

The key leverage point is the Middle peer group. Currently there is no Middle group with an independent perspective on the current situation or a coherent strategy for dealing with it. Middles, being in their independent, separate "I" mentalities, do not experience the need or potential for collective power in their group. In fact, their competitiveness with and evaluations of one another, all consequences of the "I" mentality, support their *not* working collectively.

A first step in a systemic intervention is to develop system knowledge: education regarding context. Rather than approaching the situation head-on, a conceptual

presentation or simulation would be aimed at illuminating context, primarily the Middle context and the challenges that context raises for individual Middles and the Middle peer group. The goal is for the abstract to illuminate the concrete current situation: why people are feeling the way they do and how the development of a powerful, independent Middle peer group can fundamentally transform the situation. Then it is up to department managers to work on developing such a group—one that meets regularly, in which members share information about what’s working for them and what’s not. They support one another, coach one another, and, most important, develop an agreed-on strategy for handling the change initiative.

If Middles are successful in that effort, a number of problems are resolved. The complexity of the Top (division head) is reduced; he is receiving more consistent information from his Middles, and the change initiative appears to be managed more uniformly. Individual Middles are less torn, alone, weak, unsupported; all Middles feel part of a powerful and effective peer group; the change initiative is pursued more consistently. And, one would hope, this change initiative, when implemented effectively, will have a positive effect on the lives of all system members. From this persons-in-context framework, the focus is less on “fixing” any one person than on helping all parties see, understand, and master the systemic contexts they are in.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Seeing context is an unnatural act. We do not see others’ contexts; all we see directly are their actions or inactions. Nor do we see our own contexts; what we see and feel are specific events, actions, and conditions. So the challenge is how to educate leaders regarding context.

### Conceptual Presentations

This chapter is one example of education in context. Leaders, like everyone else, welcome the opportunity to organize what appear to be random, chaotic phenomena into actionable abstractions—finding the simplicity in complexity. This framework of Top, Middle, Bottom, Customer does that. It resonates with leaders’ day-to-day experiences; they can readily see themselves as moving in and out of these contexts; and those with at least minimal self-awareness can



recognize the lure of the disempowering reflex responses. Along with awareness, the framework offers clear choice: alternative strategies for empowering self, others, relationships, and systems. In this sense, this is a teachable framework, whether through chapters and articles such as this, presentations, case studies, animations, theatrical dramatizations, or other media.

### **Executive Coaching**

One-on-one coaching can be an important tool of education in context. This, of course, requires that coaches have a deep grasp of context first in their own lives and then in their ability to see it operating in others. The coach can help the leader take into account the context of others. What is their world like? What are they wrestling with? How are they likely to experience this initiative of yours? And what can you do to ease their condition in a way that makes it possible for them to do what you and the system need them to do? A coach can help leaders be aware of their own context and the choices available to them. *Are you unnecessarily sucking responsibility for this up to yourself and away from others? What are the consequences of doing or not doing that? Are you sliding in between others' issues? What are the consequences of your doing or not doing that?* The coach's job is not only to help create awareness and choice in the moment, but also to educate leaders such that context consciousness becomes a regular component of their analytical framework.

### **Experiential Education**

Well-designed organization simulations enable leaders to experience directly the consequences of context blindness and the possibilities that come with seeing, understanding, and mastering context. There is a difference between knowing these concepts intellectually and experiencing them directly in the heat of action. In a stroke of synchronicity, as I was writing this chapter, I received an e-mail from an Organization Workshop trainer who had just completed a workshop with the executives of his organization. He wrote: "The best part of it was [that] the group has had a lot of prior exposure to [the concepts of] choice and responsibility. So this was for them a fantastic example of how the theory of choice/responsibility isn't as easy as it sounds." Experiential education can provide this kind of humbling experience that sets the stage for real knowing.

## CONCLUSION

A missing leadership ingredient is the ability to see, understand, and master the systemic contexts in which we and others exist. In our person-centered orientation, we tend to be blind to context, and that blindness is costly.

When we are blind to others' contexts, we misunderstand them, have little empathy for the challenges they are facing, misinterpret their actions, react inappropriately to them, and fall out of the potential for partnership with them. When we are blind to the contexts we are in, we are vulnerable to falling into patterns that are dysfunctional for ourselves and our systems as burdened Tops, torn Middles, oppressed Bottoms, and screwed Customers. And when we are blind to our groups' contexts, we are vulnerable to falling into the dysfunctional patterns of Top territoriality, Middle alienation, and Bottom groupthink.

With system sight, all of these dysfunctions can be avoided; we are able to interact more sensitively and strategically with others who are Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers; we are able to create more thoughtful, creative, and productive responses when we are Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer; and we are able to create peer groups whose members value and support one another and who collectively make powerful contributions to their systems.

All of this can be taught—just as we know that the earth revolves around the sun even though our direct experience is the other way around. The other day, I heard my young grandson describing how the other kids in class were grousing about something their teacher had done. He said, “Don't they get it? She's just a Middle.” So maybe early education would be a productive path to develop.

## APPENDIX: ABOUT THE POWER LAB AND THE ORGANIZATIONAL WORKSHOP

These immersion experiences for leaders are essential to the work of developing people-in-context ideas expressed in this chapter.

### The Power Lab

The Power Lab, a total immersion experience, has been one of my main windows into systems. Devised to help leaders to deepen their knowledge, it has helped me deepen my own understanding of system phenomena.

A key feature of each Power Lab is The Society of New Hope, a three-class social system with sharp differences in wealth and power. Participants are



randomly assigned to their class. The Elite (Tops) own or control all of the society's resources—among them its bank, housing, food supply, court system, newspaper, and labor opportunities. At the other end are the Immigrants (Bottoms), who enter the society with little more than the clothes on their backs. Housing, meals, and supplies are available to them only if they sign up for work (mostly low-wage physical labor) that enables them to make purchases. And between the Elite and the Immigrants are the Managers (Middles), who enjoy middle-class amenities so long as they continue to manage the institutions of the Elite to the satisfaction of the Elite. This is a total immersion experience in that there are no breaks from the experience from the moment it begins to its end. This is not a role play; there are no instructions as to how people are to handle their situations. It is more like a life-within-life: *These are the conditions into which you are born; deal with these conditions, and learn from them.*

My role in many Power Labs was to function as an anthropologist—the name assigned to staff members whose job it was to capture the society's history as it unfolded and, once the society ended, to report on that history in ways that enabled participants to see the entirety of the experience, not just the part they played. Anthropologists get the rare opportunity to see whole systems. By agreement with participants, I had access to all deliberations within and across class lines. This view from the outside allowed me to observe the regularly recurring patterns described in this chapter: the territoriality that developed at the top, the fractionation in the middle, the conforming cohesiveness at the bottom. This view from the outside also enabled me to see and describe the different contexts out of which these patterns emerged: the complexity at the top, the tearing in the middle, and the shared vulnerability at the bottom.

When each societal experience ended, participants shared in an intensive debriefing session what I could not see from my outside perspective: their experiences, thoughts, and feelings as they struggled to deal with their contexts. It was out of these conversations that I began to grasp the uniquely different forms of consciousness that developed in each context: the “mine” mentality at the top, the “I” in the middle, and the “we” at the bottom.

### **The Organization Workshop**

The Organization Workshop experience has two functions: to educate participants about organizational life and to continue my education in systems. Unlike Power Lab, which lasts for several days, the Organization Workshop lasts only a few



hours. An organization is created composed of groups of Tops, Middles, and Bottoms; outside the organization are customers and potential customers with projects for the organization to work on and funds to pay for service. Participants are randomly assigned to positions; there are no instructions on how to play one's position. The conditions are created, and participants adapt as best as they can.

While developing the Organization Workshop, I had a significant insight. For a long time, I felt responsible for helping people understand what happened over the life of the organization. (I was feeling very Top and sucking all responsibility up to myself!) I would take my yellow pad in hand and run from place to place trying to observe and make sense of events. But the action was fast-moving, and there was no way I could capture the story in this setting. Then came the insight: "TOOT" (Time Out Of Time). During TOOT, organization action stops and members in each part of the system describe what life is like for them in their context: the issues they are dealing with, the feelings they are experiencing, the nature of their peer group relationships. TOOT has a powerful simplicity. It requires only that participants listen so that they might understand the contexts in which others are living and then consider the implications that knowing has for how they feel toward each other and how they choose to interact (Oshry, 2007).

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