CHAPTER TWO

We Can't Change What We Don't Notice

Human beings have continued to evolve by leaps and bounds in terms of what can be externally measured and observed. Athletes keep breaking records. Scientists understand ever more deeply the causes of diseases and discover new ways of treating them. Technology is more powerful, more multifunctional, and less expensive to produce than ever. But for all these extraordinary external advances, we've devoted remarkably little attention to better understanding our inner world. We've accumulated vast knowledge but woefully little self-knowledge.

"We are already the most overinformed, underreflective people in the history of civilization," argue Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, Harvard-based psychologists and leading adult developmental thinkers. "True development is about transforming the operating system itself, not just increasing your fund of knowledge or your behavioral repertoire." The same principle applies at the organizational level. Our current capacities, say Kegan and Lahey, "no longer suffice in a world that calls for leaders who can not only run but also reconstitute their organizations—its norms, missions and culture."

"Flatland" is the name that the writer and philosopher Ken Wilber has given to the arid, two-dimensional worldview that prevails in so many organizations and in our culture more broadly. This view grew, Wilber argues, out of a much earlier inflection point: the Enlightenment and the resulting rise of scientific materialism. "If something couldn't be studied and described in an objective empirical fashion, then it wasn't 'really real,' " Wilber explains. "All knowledge had to be objective *it*-knowledge, and so all of reality began to look like a bunch of 'its' with no subject, no consciousness, no selves, no morals, no val-

ues, no interiors, no depths." Even Albert Einstein recognized the limitations of the extraordinary discoveries he made. "It would be possible to describe everything scientifically," he wrote, "but it would make no sense; it would be without meaning, as if you described a Beethoven symphony as variation of wave pressure."

Our expanding knowledge of the external world got us to where we are. Without a richer understanding of *who* we are and the full range of needs we must address, we'll remain insufficiently equipped to address the huge challenges we face. Fortunately, there is a way out. It's begins with self-awareness. As Daniel Goleman has written, inspired by the psychiatrist R. D. Laing,

> *The range of what we think and do*
> *Is limited by what we fail to notice*
> *And because we fail to notice*
> *That we fail to notice*
> *There is little we can do*
> *To change*
> *Until we notice*
> *How failing to notice*
> *Shapes our thoughts and deeds.*

The failure to connect behavior to its inevitable consequences shows up in our lives every day. We begin our work with clients by asking them to undertake an "energy audit" and answer questions like these:

- To what extent do you eat right, work out regularly, and get enough sleep?
- Are you eager and excited to get to work in the morning?
- Do you focus your attention on your most important priorities, and are you as productive as you could be?
- Are you motivated by a clear sense of purpose at work—something beyond your self-interest?
- Do you positively energize and inspire those you lead and manage?

In most cases, our clients find they're uneasy and dissatisfied with their answers. It isn't that they discover anything they didn't already

know. The discomfort comes from recognizing how they've resisted connecting the dots in their lives and seeing, aggregated in one place ,all the examples of how they're selling themselves short.

It's no different for leaders. During the past decade, we've asked hundreds of them this question:

"Do you think your people perform better when they're healthier and happier?" Almost invariably, the answer is "Yes." Then we ask one more question:

"Does your organization regularly invest in people's health and happiness?" The answer is nearly always "No."

In both sets of questions, to individuals and leaders, our goal is to create discomfort. As people begin to connect the dots, the picture that emerges is rarely pretty. Most of us work long hours and feel a relentless sense of urgency. We juggle multiple demands without feeling we're devoting sufficient time to the most important tasks. We arrive home in the evenings with little energy left for our families. We spend too little time thinking strategically and long term, too little time taking care of ourselves, and too little time simply enjoying our lives. In many cases, the thirty minutes or so our clients invest in answering our list of questions is the first time they've ever stopped long enough to examine the benefits and costs of the choices they're making.

We conclude the exercise by asking them to wrestle with this question:

Is the life you're leading worth the price you're paying to live it?

RICHER, DEEPER, MORE REFLECTIVE

Several years ago, I met with a fifty-something senior executive at a large company to discuss the increasing demands on his organization's consultants, particularly due to their fierce travel demands and long hours.

This executive—we'll call him Carl—began by speaking enthusiastically about the strategies he had devised for making his own travel easier: the right time to get to the airport, the best hotels to stay in and the best restaurants to eat at, and the trick to fitting in meetings in two cities in the course of a single day. It was clear that he was deeply invested in his work.

But Carl was also significantly overweight. In the course of our conversation, he acknowledged that he rarely took time to exercise on the road, skipped meals, and then often ate too much, almost never got a full night's sleep, and seldom spent more than a day at home during any given workweek. On this particular afternoon, it so happened, he was about to fly home a day earlier than usual in order to drive his only child to college, which she was due to start that week.

"What does your family think about your travel schedule?" I asked.

Carl thought for a moment; began to answer and then his voice got caught in his throat. Tears formed in his eyes. In that brief and fleeting moment, just as his daughter prepared to leave home, Carl recognized a cost he hadn't allowed himself to feel before.

Two weeks later, Tony found himself standing in the back of a large conference room as the chief executive of Carl's company gave a welcoming talk to several hundred of his employees who'd gathered for a meeting. A charismatic man, proud of the several hundred thousand miles he flew every year, this CEO—let's call him Bill—opened his remarks with a story about how he'd returned a few nights earlier from an extended overseas business trip and landed back home at 4 A.M. "It was dark outside, and I could have gone home to get some sleep, take a shower, and change clothes," Bill explained exuberantly. "But I realized that this was an incredible opportunity to go straight to the office and get a couple of hours of work done, with no interruptions, before anyone else arrived. And that's exactly what I did."

Carl was a product of that culture, and he had mostly gone numb to the consequences, just the way his CEO had. What Bill failed to recognize is that he might have been reenergized by a few more hours of sleep, by relaxing over breakfast at home, or by reconnecting with his wife and children after having been on the road for a week. Nor did it dawn on him that by taking some time to renew he might have been more alert, productive, creative, and even inspiring to others once he did get to work. Finally, whether he intended it or not, Bill's story sent a message to his employees that the path to success at this company was to follow his lead, even if that meant inexorably draining their energy and engagement.

As the CEO of the accounting firm KPMG, Eugene O'Kelly lived his life much the way Bill still lives his. "My calendar was perpetually extended out over the next eighteen months," O'Kelly has written. "I

was always moving at a hundred miles per hour. I worked all the time. I worked weekends. I worked late into many nights. I missed virtually every school function for my younger daughter. My annual travel schedule averaged, conservatively, 150,000 miles. Over the course of my last decade with the firm, I did manage to squeeze in workday lunches with my wife. Twice."

In 2004, at the age of fifty-four, O'Kelly was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor. During the final months of his life, he wrote a book entitled *Chasing Daylight,* about the life he'd lived. "What if I hadn't worked so hard?" he wondered. "What if, aside from doing my job and doing it well, I had actually used the bully pulpit of my position to be a role model for balance? Had I done so intentionally, who's to say that, besides having more time with my family, I wouldn't also have been even more focused at work? More creative? More productive? . . . But I didn't. Not in the many years I was pushing. It took inoperable late stage brain cancer to get me to examine things from this angle." O'Kelly died shortly after writing those words.

The limitation of many people we meet begins with a lack of awareness, a failure to see the consequences of the choices they're making in their own lives and in the lives of those they care about most. It's nearly axiomatic that the more continuously we work, the less likely we are to notice how we're feeling.

Awareness has multiple dimensions. We typically ask our clients to consider it from three angles: How long is your perspective? How wide is your vision? And, perhaps most important, how deeply are you willing to look? Taking a longer view requires moving beyond our instinctive focus on immediate gratification. A wider view means regularly moving beyond our narrow self-interest to take into account the impact of our everyday behaviors on others. Seeing more deeply requires *seeing in*—the willingness to observe ourselves with unflinching honesty.

Awareness increases our knowledge, and knowledge enriches us. The more we're willing to see, the bigger our world becomes. Learning to observe our feelings as they arise, rather than simply acting them out, allows us to make more reflective, intentional choices about how we want to show up in the world.

Each of us has an infinite capacity for self-deception. We become skilled at denial because it helps us avoid discomfort. "Our efforts at

self-justification are designed to serve our need to feel good about what we have done, what we believe, and who we are," explain Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson in their wonderfully titled book *Mistakes Were Made (but Not by Me)*. "To err is human," they go on, "but humans then have a choice between covering up or fessing up. We are forever being told that we should learn from our mistakes, but how can we learn unless we first admit that we have made any?" Or as the psychologist Sandra Schneider puts it, "Self-deception is marked by a lack of attempt to gain reality checks. It relies on an exclusively confirmatory approach to information processing."

The fear of what we'll see keeps us from looking at ourselves more honestly. Denial prompts a cycle that feeds on itself. "Each violation of one's standard brings negative affect that makes it unpleasant to be self-aware," writes the psychologist Roy Baumeister. "The person avoids monitoring his or her own behavior, which makes further violations possible. The longer this goes on, the more unpleasant it is to resume monitoring oneself, because one must recognize that one has severely violated desired patterns of behavior."

Instead, we squander energy in rationalizing, minimizing, and justifying our expedient behaviors. It's notable, for example, that almost no major players in the recent financial meltdown ever stepped forward to take personal responsibility for the catastrophic decisions so many of them made. "The greatest of faults," said the philosopher Thomas Carlyle, "is to be conscious of none." By contrast, the willingness to take responsibility for our missteps and shortcomings frees up energy to learn, grow, and add value.

EMBRACING OPPOSITES

Above all, seeing more depends on excluding less. We each have a tendency to choose sides: right or wrong, good or bad, black or white, win or lose. Certainty makes us feel safer, especially in times of anxiety and change. But the consequence is that we create a narrow, more two-dimensional world for ourselves, even as the world around us grows ever more complex.

By embracing our own opposites and getting comfortable with our contradictions, we build richer, deeper lives. This is especially crucial

for leaders, who must weigh multiple points of view, balance conflicting priorities, serve numerous constituencies, and make decisions about issues with no easy answers. "I don't do nuance," George W. Bush was often quoted as bragging. But nuance is precisely what we need now more than ever: the willingness to recognize shades of gray, grapple with paradox, acknowledge ambiguity, make subtle distinctions, and resist premature certainty. "Do I contradict myself?" Walt Whitman asked in "Song of Myself." "Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes."

Consider, for a moment, the following qualities:

Extroverted	Introspective
Decisive	Open-minded
Confident	Humble
Logical	Intuitive
Tactical	Reflective
Pragmatic	Visionary
Discerning	Accepting
Honest	Compassionate
Courageous	Prudent
Tenacious	Flexible
Tough-minded	Empathic

Which quality do you most value in each pair? Circle your choices before you read any further.

Is there any doubt that most of us tend to choose sides between qualities, valuing one in preference to its opposite? Many companies value the whole constellation of qualities on the left side far more than those on the right. But by celebrating one set of qualities and undervaluing another, we lose access to essential dimensions of ourselves—and others.

Many organizations build leadership programs around "competency models," a list of core skills they expect all leaders to cultivate.

Far more of the qualities in the left-hand column appear in these competency models than do those in the right-hand column. No leadership model we've come across acknowledges the value of being able to move freely and flexibly between the opposite qualities we need to perform at our nuanced best.

In direct reaction to the competency models, the Gallup Organization began focusing a decade ago on something it calls "strength-based" leadership. Gallup's premise is that we're better served by cultivating our intrinsic strengths rather than by trying to fix our weaknesses. It's a seductive notion, but also a limited one.

The research of Anders Ericsson and others makes it clear that excellence depends above all on practice and less so on intrinsic talent. With the right kind of practice, we can develop nearly any skill. The deeper limitation of the Gallup focus on strengths is that it's a classic choosing up of sides. Doing so creates a false choice, much the way competency advocates do by focusing solely on fixing weaknesses. Neither approach is sufficient by itself. On the one hand, it's undeniably more demanding and frustrating to improve in our areas of weakness than to build on our existing strengths. It's also true that we're likely to be most effective doing whatever it is we already enjoy most and do best. On the other hand, a sole focus on strengths creates its own problems. "There is always an optimal value," explained the philosopher Gregory Bateson, "beyond which anything is toxic, no matter what: oxygen, sleep, psychotherapy, philosophy." The Stoic philosophers referred to this paradox as *anacoluthia,* the mutual entailment of the virtues. No virtue, they argued, is a virtue by itself. Even the noblest virtues have their limits.

Honesty in the absence of compassion becomes cruelty. Tenacity unmediated by flexibility congeals into rigidity. Confidence untempered by humility is arrogance. Courage without prudence is recklessness. Because all virtues are connected to others, any strength overused ultimately becomes a liability. Inhaling deeply is useful, but only if we're equally capable of exhaling just as deeply. Even pleasure and pain are connected. Pushing beyond our comfort zone is uncomfortable, but it's the only means by which we can learn and grow, and ultimately perform better and experience deeper satisfaction. This understanding has ancient roots. In Chinese philosophy, *yin* and *yang* refer to opposing forces that are actually interdependent and part of

a greater whole. Seng-ts'an, a Chinese Zen master, put it this way: "If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against. The struggle between 'for' and 'against' is the mind's worst disease."

We create the highest value not by focusing solely on our strengths or by ignoring our weaknesses, but by being attentive to both. Nowhere is this more critical than in the way we see ourselves. "Loving oneself is no easy matter . . ." writes the psychologist James Hillman, "because it means loving all of oneself, including the shadow where one is inferior and socially so unacceptable. The care one gives this humiliating part is also the cure, but the moral dimension can never be abandoned. Thus is the cure a paradox requiring two incommensurables: the moral recognition that these parts of me are burdensome and intolerable and must change, and the loving, laughing acceptance which takes them just as they are, joyfully, forever. One both tries hard and lets go, both judges harshly and joins gladly." Through this embracing self-acceptance, we're freed both to acknowledge the obstacles we face and to build the capacities we need to perform at our best.

CHAPTER TWO ACTION STEPS

- Go to www.theenergyproject.com and take the Energy Audit to gauge how effectively you are currently managing your own energy across the four key energy dimensions. Identify the specific behavior that you feel is most getting in the way of your greater effectiveness and satisfaction. Why haven't you addressed it before now?
- Start a journal to build your awareness about how you are feeling at different points during the day. Choose one or two specific times during the day to check in with yourself. Observing our emotions allows us to be more intentional about our behaviors and more effective with others. How are you feeling right now? Can you identify why?
- Strengths overused eventually become liabilities. List three of your greatest strengths on a sheet of paper, giving yourself room to write underneath each one. Now identify the way you tend to behave when you overrely on these strengths. Ask a colleague at work for feedback about how you overuse one of the strengths you've identified.