TOOLS OF THE TRADE

In a regular series, **Carol Wilson** identifies the tools and models frequently used during coaching projects. This month, she focuses on the Johari Window

Since it was developed by American psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham in the 1950s[1], the Johari Window model has become increasingly relevant in modern business, where the focus of training and development has shifted from skills and knowledge to relationships and team building.

The model derives its exotic name from a combination of the first names of its founders: Joseph and Harry. It is designed to increase awareness of oneself and others (ie team members) in a work situation.

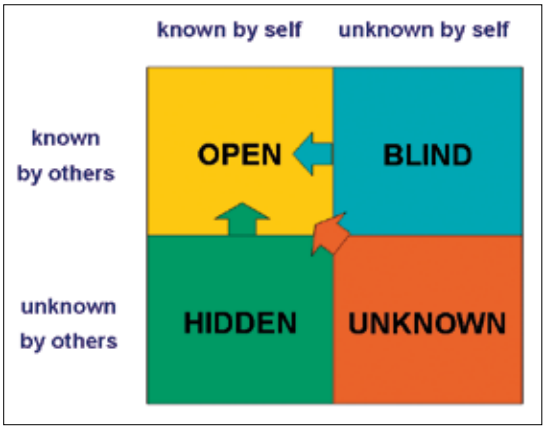

Diagram 1: The Johari window

The **OPEN** area represents what is known about the subject by himself and others. It represents ease of communication, free expression and strong relationships because all parties have agreed on what goes in here.

The **BLIND** area identifies what others know about the subject that he does not know about himself and will contain information supplied by those who come into contact with him at work. It is intended to open the subject's eyes to strengths and weaknesses that he may not have recognised.

The **HIDDEN** area is an exploration of elements that the subject consciously hides from those who work around him; things he knows about himself but chooses not to let others know. These could include emotions like fear, resentment and self-doubt, some of which are best kept confidential, and the subject may also find some factors that can be moved into the open area.

The **UNKNOWN** area is there to elicit new information of which neither the subject nor those around him may be aware; this is a place for discovering new talents and developing the confidence to exploit them. So this part of the exploration can be particularly useful for younger, less experienced workers. It may also provide an awareness of what might stand in between the subject and his full potential, such as fear, self-doubt or misalignment of his talents to his role.

Ideally, as much information as possible will be moved into the open area through this process; this is the healthy place where relationships work instinctively, ideas can be developed in conjunction with the team and potential conflict can be resolved in an honest and trusting environment.

There is a profound need for caution when using this model in group work, because of the danger of crushing confidence and reducing an executive's effectiveness in the workplace. I am reminded of the American sitcom *Just Shoot Me* where boss George Segal informs his sycophantic workforce that he wishes to receive honest feedback. This unexpected permission releases a torrent of increasingly harsh criticism, rising to insult, until Segal explodes and everything returns to the cap-doffing way it was before.

It is vital that the subject of the exercise is in control of how much information he receives and from whom, and that people's different boundaries are respected. Putting workers on the defensive, however well meaning the criticism, rarely produces a happy team.

As humans we have an inbuilt need to control our environment, which derives from living in caves millions of years ago when we were vulnerable to weather and wild animals. Not having control was a matter of life or death and it can sometimes feel just as uncomfortable when our 'fight or flight' mechanism is triggered by a work situation that feels out of our control.

No-one should be forced to receive feedback publicly; even positive feedback causes embarrassment to some. If people do volunteer to receive it, they should be encouraged to regulate the process themselves. This reflects the core principle of coaching – 'self-directed learning' – which enables coachees to make their own discoveries. This principle was founded by sports coach and psychologist Tim Gallwey, who recognised that his students were able to teach themselves tennis faster and more effectively than he could teach them himself[2].

A coaching method for applying this quadrant might be to show it to a coachee during a confidential one-to-one session and ask him questions about each section. It is quite likely that some elements from the last three boxes will find their way into the Open box during the process. He might solicit one-to-one feedback from team members of his choosing, possibly not in a formal way, to populate the 'blind' box.

A great deal of new awareness may be created by working through these boxes alone in this way, facilitated by the coach, and without the 'rabbit in the headlights' pressure of public examination by a group of one's peers.

The model can also be used by a group in relation to other groups; here the danger of crushing individuals is reduced, but we need to be mindful of the possibility of raising territorial boundaries and a sense that teams are being pitched against each other. It is almost impossible to prevent this from developing into a competition in which the teams are scoring points off each other. However, if a positive tone is firmly set and a reasonable amount of trust exists between the teams, the exercise can be fun and bond the teams more strongly.

The window shown on the previous page represents each box in equal sizes. The proportions can be varied according to the ratio of each box pertaining to the person, eg the quadrant of a long-serving team member might look like Diagram 2, because a relationship may have been established in which all parties know a lot about the subject:

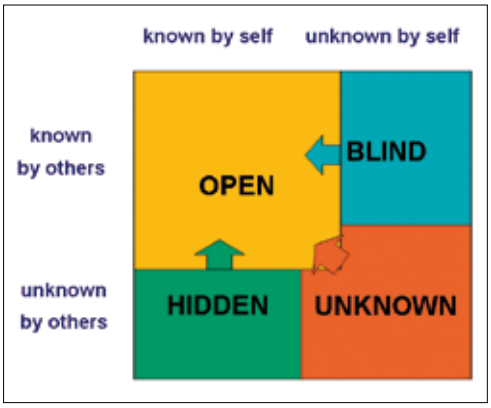

Diagram 2: Long-serving team member

Or a beginner's quadrant might look like Diagram 3 because he has only just begun to explore his potential and has a lot to learn:

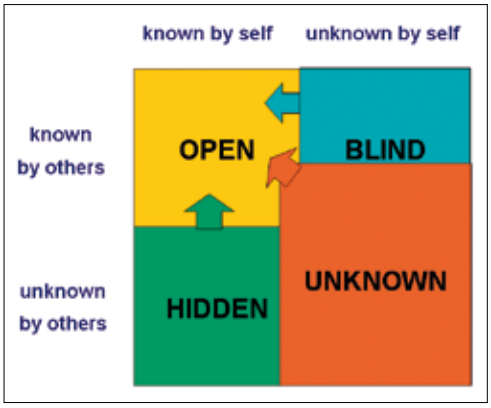

Diagram 3: New team member

The Johari Window was one of the first models of its kind and many modifications have been developed since. It bears some relationship to Transactional Analysis[3], Tuckman's team building model[4] and Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership model[5].

I would say that the key to working with this model is to take the view that the value lies in the new self-awareness gained by the process, over and above any information gathered along the way.

Bearing this in mind, the facilitator can prompt and intervene to steer the experience away from what could potentially become a list of complaints, stored up resentment or possibly envy, towards positive awareness, recognition of strengths and inspiration for the team. ■

References

1. Luft J *Of Human Interaction: Johari Model* Mayfield Publishing Company 1969
2. Gallwey W T *The Inner Game of Tennis* Pan Books 1986
3. Wilson C 'Transactional Analysis' *Training Journal* October 2008
4. Wilson C 'Bruce Tuckman's Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing team development model' *Training Journal* February 2008
5. Wilson C 'Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership model' *Training Journal* April 2008

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