Ongoing Discussion "Thought Piece"

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Open up to progress with the Nine Windows Model

*"Follow a pathway that is true—
stay on it and your future
will be more wonderful
than you can possibly imagine
at this moment."*
~Oscar Mink

What is a true pathway and how will we know when we're on one? For Oscar, the creator of the Nine Windows model, a pathway that is true is paved with love, bordered by honesty and headed toward benefits for all. In this article, I describe the model and begin to show you what openness can look like. Just like you, your organization is unique; my goal is to help you see your potential, enhance your relationships and open up to a future more wonderful than you can possibly imagine at this moment.

SYSTEMS

Every organization, whether it's a person, a family or a business, represents a system. What is a system? Well, that depends on your perspective.

To some, a system is a headache…*"Can't everyone just do what they're supposed to around here?!";* to others, a system is a mystery…*"I think we could do great things together, but I just don't know how to make it happen."* To Oscar and me, a system—an open system—is a powerful, vibrant, integrated whole, teeming with possibilities.

An open system is one whose boundaries are clear yet permeable. The owners of the system determine to what extent their boundaries are open to one another and external constituents, realizing that it is imperative to protect the system by closing boundaries to certain influences. For example, if a company wants to increase sales and profitability while also protecting their integrity, they will have to close their boundaries to illegal or unethical sources of income. On the other hand, boundaries between departments must be open in order for information to flow easily and innovation to serve not only the innovator but also the whole organization.

PERCEPTION is REALITY

Nearly four decades ago, Oscar began developing his model of organizational openness. While working with thousands of people in organizations around the world, Oscar noticed that openness looked different in each organization, yet the basic assumptions underlying the model rang true in every context:

1. Perception is more about what we expect to see than what is really there;
2. Every day, members of an organization strengthen their perceptions of why they come to work, whether their work matters and what is their organization's purpose;
3. Leaders influence others' openness or constriction each time they adopt a major business strategy or walk down the hallway;
4. In closed systems, thick structure inhibits communication, status quo is protected and innovators perish;
5. In open systems, basic structure facilitates communication, progress is protected and innovators thrive.

In their fascinating book, *Engaging Minds,* Brent Davis, Dennis Sumara and Rebecca Luce-Kapler report that recent studies of perception have found more communication flowing from the brain to a sense organ than from the sense organ to the brain. This means that perception is not a passive gathering of information; rather, it is an event of imposing expectation onto experience.

In light of this discovery, awareness of our expectations becomes essential. Consider this: When you look up from your desk or out your window, what do you see? Take a moment and write down what you see from your perspective: Whom do you see?; What are they doing?

Now, write down your interpretation, what you assume based on what you see. If you see two colleagues talking, do you assume they are gossiping, discussing how to better serve their customer, or where to go for lunch?

Notice how your interpretation of the event influences your sense of satisfaction, stress level and opinion of those you have observed. Is your jaw clenched? Have you begun to smile?

The open organization model is composed of nine "windows" through which we can view events, opportunities, questions, etc. and consider various interpretations and alternatives. Rather than being on tasks or individuals, the focus is on connections, space between components, the flow of energy and information.
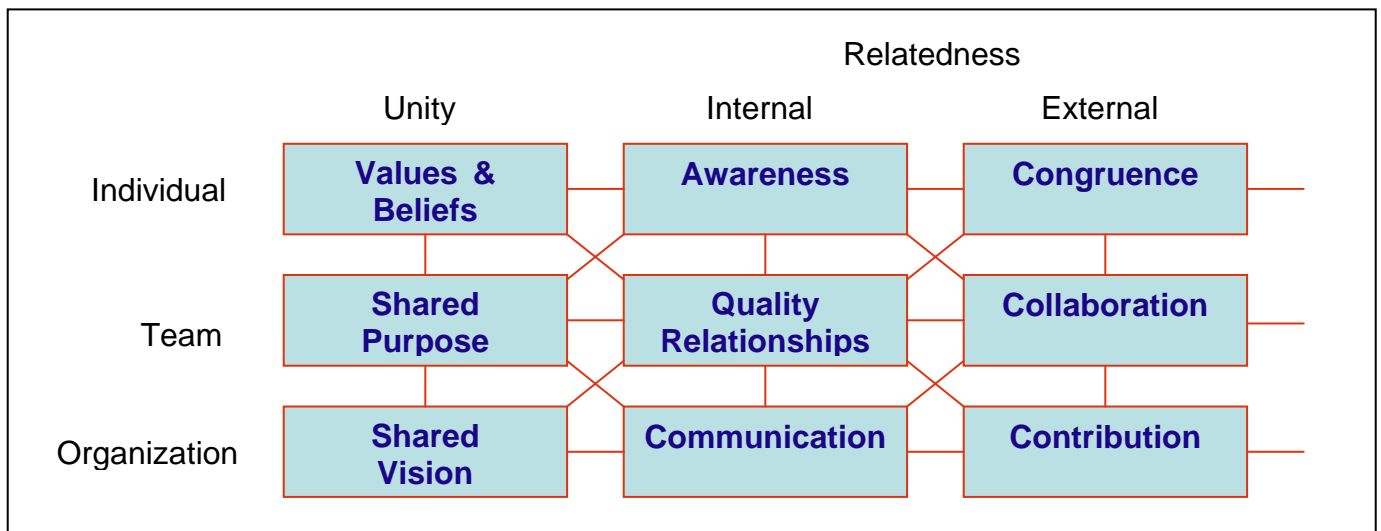
THE MODEL

The Nine Windows model was created as a tool to help us become aware of our assumptions, observe interconnectedness and then look at ourselves and our organizations from multiple perspectives. A system is considered open to the extent there is:

- **Unity**: a unified vision, values, purpose
  (left column of the model);
- **Internal Relatedness**: awareness of and ability to respond to internal needs
  (middle column of the model); and
- **External Relatedness**: awareness of and ability to respond to others, the environment, external changes (right column of the model).
  The model looks at these characteristics at three nonhierarchical levels:
- **Individual**: top row of the model;
- **Team**: middle row of the model; and
- **Organization**: bottom row of the model.

The Nine Windows Model (adapted from slide created by Oscar Mink)

	Relatedness		
	Unity	Internal	External
Individual	Values & Beliefs	Awareness	Congruence
Team	Shared Purpose	Quality Relationships	Collaboration
Organization	Shared Vision	Communication	Contribution

The theme of the individual level is *know yourself*. At this level, unity relates to being aware of your values, beliefs and assumptions (your frame of reference) and having a healthy self-concept. Internal relatedness concerns awareness of your needs and the permission to fulfill them. External relatedness is the ability to act in accordance with your talents, values and beliefs while also respecting those of others. It also refers to your ability to express your creativity, opinions and questions without fear.

The theme of the next level is *know one another*. Unity at the team level relates to commitment to a shared purpose and common goals. Internal relatedness refers to relationships within the team, the extent to which members trust one anther, share knowledge, collaborate and respectfully exchange opinions and ideas. External relatedness at this level is the ability to interact cooperatively and effectively with other components of the organization, recognizing that each team's actions affect the entire system.

At the organizational level, the theme is *know where you are going and why*. Every organization is heading somewhere; some are headed for bankruptcy court, while others are headed to the bank! We often assume that we know where we are going, but sometimes our actual course heading is not aligned with our preferred destination. The Nine Windows model can be a road map for seeing and solving this problem.

Organizational unity relates to commitment and shared meaning around a common purpose. Internal relatedness considers whether infrastructure supports open communication and collaboration throughout the system. External relatedness refers to the organization's relationship with and contributions to its customers and community.

In the end, a business is in business to be in business—to provide a product or service by which to earn a profit. Many companies have achieved increased sales and profitability by using the Nine Windows model to identify and unleash potential; most often, it is not necessary to replace employees or rely on external consultants. RW Lyall & Co., a California based manufacturing company, opened up their organization and have enjoyed record growth and profitability in each of the past three years. Their story is told in my upcoming book, *Openness Works!*; below you will find some of the most powerful lessons they learned along the way.

When opening up your organization, keep in mind these tips:

1. **Building an open organization requires commitment and consistency.** While some results are immediate, it takes time to build trust and open communication.

2. **Make the loop big enough for everyone.** Discussing benchmarks and progress with everyone in the organization builds momentum and sharpens focus.

3. **Ask often, listen intently.** Consider each person in the organization an expert; give them the space to grow and contribute their expertise.

4. **Celebrate progress.** When the whole organization (rather than just the sales team) celebrates an achievement such as winning a big account, unity and relatedness are reinforced and positive energy increases.

5. **Say 'Thank you' and say it often.** There's no better way to enhance unity and relatedness (openness).

6. **When something goes wrong, turn toward it to build new knowledge.** In an open system, errors can become tools for knowledge generation and improvement; they are valued rather than feared.

7. **Trust your intuition and encourage others to trust theirs.** External resources can only take us so far; at its best, openness helps us to recognize and benefit from the wisdom of our own knowing.

8. **Surround yourself with support.** Whether we're trying to lose weight, learn a new skill or design the future of an organization, enduring change is best achieved in community.

Finally, **remember that growth is a natural consequence of openness.** Everyone experiences growing pains now and then. It's helpful to remember that living systems of all kinds are predisposed to grow—all they need is space, nourishment and light. If you stay the course of openness in your organization, these needs will be met and the results will astound you. You may even, as Oscar said, experience a future more wonderful than you can possibly imagine at this moment.

*This article is based on the book, "Openness Works! Create personal, professional *and* financial growth in any organization," available at www.opennessworks.com