

SEVEN

Awareness

I wonder if the fact I am now criticizing much less is because I have stopped looking for the connectivity and am simply enjoying your observations. I fell out with aspects of this book months ago and so now I go from one story to the next. In fact now I am doing this I am enjoying it much more, and learning from your stories, observations and insights. I realise this isn't quite what you intended!

Amid the great stories again is the phrase "strong back, soft front". I just love this. It captures everything about managing and coping with our lives within complex, increasingly interconnected and uncertain business environments. I am still playing with this idea in my mind, dwelling on it, coming back to it.

SEVEN (A)

Practices for inside yourself

CHURNING OUT CHARTS

He is not much older than me, dressed in the standard-issue dark blue suit, white shirt, blue tie that the consultants prefer and is welcoming me as a secondee from the client organization to his project team.

"We will work you like you have never been worked - but you will leave with an accelerated view of how to provide strategic analysis and leadership".

I was in awe of him and the rest of the team. Young, bright graduates from the places from which you are meant to graduate, machine-like in their work ethic and with access to all areas of the organization. One word from them and your career was dust, or at least that was what the gossip around the coffee machine was telling me. I watched, worked and learned, staring with disbelief as my new friends churned out charts in real-time as they were listening to a market research debrief, a team meeting conversation, reading last year's reports or often all three in the same moment. Listen, analyze, draw, and then send to the super PA back at the office who knew how to turn these scribbles into dense packs from the standard template.

These packs often became the source material that launched a thousand meetings, leaders using the insights of others as their own to demonstrate

their strategic ability or justify a personal position. You just had to remember to change the slide template and cover. The problem for those who used this approach and worshipped the analysis is that they didn't then have the awareness to move position when necessary. Their awareness quotient was underdeveloped so when the inevitable happened and the original analysis was out of date, in came the consultants again to do the next round of their work.

There is undoubtedly much value to this kind of analysis and yet it is becoming more and more difficult to rely on it to transform the strategic landscape of our organizations.

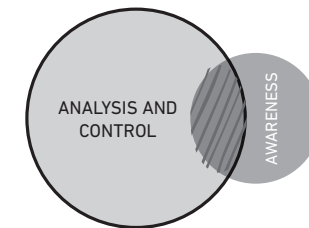
I find it paradoxical that, just as it is being proved to be less effective, it is being relied upon more.

This feels particularly relevant as we picture ourselves building our channel at the edges of the Establishment, preparing ourselves for a future we cannot predict. In the absence of accurate forecasting, maybe what we have left is the development of an extreme, acute awareness; one that may allow us to pick up signals quickly and respond effectively. The limiting factors stop being a lack of vision, ideas or strategy and become ones of seeing, feeling, sensing, hearing the present moment individually and collectively.

In the Industrial Age we benefitted from our genius as human beings in understanding the science of mechanics and designing the engines that powered our economic growth. In the Age of Connection our genius may be in the fact that we are the most sensitive of all instruments, able to perceive

far beyond a machine by joining with and entering into the phenomena ahead of us. A regeneration of our organizations coming through noticing and acting on the subtle changes in front of us. (See Figure 22)

FIGURE 22



Overnight I realised that, as a leader in this organization:

I marginalize my imagination.

I look at detail, rather than seeing the process or overview.

I sanitize my relationships rather than naming any doubts or resistances or distresses.

I take all the responsibility for what is happening, rather than seeing myself as part of the whole.

So what is happening to me might be happening for you.

(An insight left anonymously on a flip-chart after one of the Relume workshops.)

STRONG BACK, SOFT FRONT

His hands are the first things I notice, they seem to be lightly-clenched, even though we are talking about something relatively mild in terms of emotions. I don't recall seeing them open other than to shake hands. His body always looks as if it is leaning forward at a 20° angle and when he sits, the posture is hunched, shoulders curving forward and elevated so they stretch towards his ears. When he walks, the stride is shortened and the right foot seems to drag a little, it is placed in front of the left foot quite close into the body. The arms don't swing very much, the slightest of movements back and forth.

His breath is shallow, as if it never quite gets past the top of his chest, never touches his abdomen or flows down into the pelvic area. His forehead has three leaning lines that have been carved into it by a frown that is there about 80% of the time. This is a common sight to me, of leaders in the Establishment who have come to over rely on their cognition and who are somehow scared of feeling. Their bodies and postures are tightened around the need for constant analysis and processing of data. They have lost contact with the rest of their bodies as sources of information. They prefer not to feel or at least to claim that their feelings have no part to play in their day-to-day business choice.

When you notice this rigidity and work on changing your posture, when you stand straight, you are proclaiming to the world that it all counts. One of my colleagues calls this "having a strong back and a soft front". I love that expression for how it captures the capacity to use our bodies as a sensing mechanism. In this next phase, with the transition as uncertain as it is, we will have to rely far more on our ability to sense what is immediately in front of us than analyze what has just happened.

There is a big difference in our bodies between being rigidly alert and being gently aware. (See Figure 23)

FIGURE 23



- As you stand and look at yourself in a mirror, notice your posture and then close your eyes.
- Make some small changes, planting your feet comfortably shoulder-width apart. Allow your knees to be soft, not rigidly locked.
- As you raise your head a little, allow your chest and pelvis to rise.
- Imagine you have two eyes in the front of your neck and they need to be able to see ahead of you.
- Bring your head to a comfortable position and relax your shoulders, let them fall.
- Often, at this stage, your face is smiling; if it isn't, try out a smile and breathe gently into your body.
- Now, with a 'strong back and soft front', how is your awareness?

SYMPTOMS AS HEALTH

My back has gone! I register that familiar feeling as I reach to tie my shoelaces and realise how little movement there

is. I know what is coming in the days ahead, pain, treatment, disability, weakness, frustration, anger, and avoidance. But none of that stops me falling into an old pattern, which is to strap myself up as tight as I can and get out of the door, desperate not to disappoint the people I am meant to be meeting. On the way, I hastily arrange an appointment with the chiropractor who can't see me for a couple of days.

This time, as I lie here unable to sleep, I connect with this injury in a different way. I have woken up in the middle of the night again, each time I turn the pain jabs me and wakes me. A warm and slightly soggy blue ice pack accompanies me as I try to turn onto my side and push myself out of bed. By this point, my legs won't take any weight without me screaming so I crawl to the bathroom and heave myself up using the toilet as a crutch. And then repeat the procedure in reverse. I am glad my wife is sleeping in the other room and my children don't see me like this.

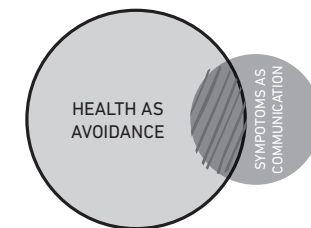
I realize what lengths I go to to keep this part of me hidden, preferring all kinds of excuses and explanations to letting those around me know what a state I am in. "Yes, of course I will get to the party at the weekend, no the drive will be fine, yes just a lot of fuss about nothing, I'll be right as rain in a couple of days." It feels overwhelming to have to accept all of its disabling and limiting factors.

It is as if it must have no airtime or voice, this disability, as if it has nothing to offer but pain and inconvenience. It stops me doing what I want, makes me look weak in the eyes of those to whom I want to look strong. It suggests I am doing something wrong myself to cause the illness and I feel a hypocrite when talking to clients about looking after their own resilience. It is those things and maybe more also - is there something in my body that is trying to express itself through my injury? What is it?

The metaphor of illness extends well to organizational health. Maybe our organizational symptoms could also be a powerful source of insight if we allowed awareness of them rather than suppression. They are commonly avoided, projected elsewhere, made a repository of blame and accusation; there is no space for the symptoms to speak about their state and point towards something new trying to emerge.

Ultimately, illness doesn't ask for permission, it manifests, it doesn't know how to introduce itself and ends up forcing itself upon us, sharply, both in our bodies and in our organizations. So maybe our work is to seek out the symptoms, amplify rather than dampen them, to help our system work with them so that they don't feel too much to cope with. (See figure 24)

FIGURE 24



Then what might happen?

- Where are all those places in your organizational life we are rushing past?
- Where downtime, illness, low energy, weakness and death have a place of value?
- How can you develop your awareness of what they are communicating to you?

THE LOST PIECES

He was bringing me a whole new level of experience in the concept of denial. Our work had begun because there was persistent background noise around this senior leader's tendency to push, dominate and bully his way into making things happen. Our early experiences together showed me a fundamentally kind and caring man who had little patience with the complexities and subtleties of the large bureaucratic business his organization had become. When he joined the bank, it had been a small regional affair, but 20 years on, it had exploded into a complex global organization and his personal stock had risen with it.

He sat bolt upright in his chair, his seat higher than mine, a tall imposing figure only made more so by the clothes he was wearing.

His hair was slicked back with a fine dark shine that I imagined belied his age. His face creased with years of worry (about everything!). His desk was immaculate with the obligatory pictures of family, a little obscured by a number of other artefacts of office life. I was used to more formal (usually pinstriped) standard of dress in the banking sector but hadn't come across anyone wearing a waistcoat for many years. I felt desperately under-dressed but tried not to panic about it as I held my china teacup and we talked some more.

We had discussed a range of items in our previous sessions, his response to anything that bordered on the emotional was usually summarized with a dismissive "this is so trivial it isn't worth bothering about."

As the pressure on him to perform increased, so did the numbers of complaints about his behaviour and finally someone had issued a formal notice, which he was holding in front of him as we spoke. I imagined his voice a little more gravel-filled and slower than usual.

"I can't believe what is written here. What is she claiming?"

"Constant fault-finding, no recognition of her value to the team, that I undermine and isolate her; that the workload is overwhelming and anything good is never recognized or given credit more widely; that she carries a lot of responsibility but I won't give her the authority to go with it. She says constantly changing my mind means the finishing line is never quite the finishing line. I could go on." His voice drifts off.

"Will it go to a tribunal? HR is saying she has made a bullying claim against me."

"Are you a bully?"

"No I detest bullies, I do everything I can to stop them."

"What if you were? Is there even a small part of you that identifies with one?"

"It would have been hard not to, considering how my father brought me up."

We had talked about some of his developmental experiences in previous conversations but they were usually presented as something that had made a man of him.

"Ok - so as much as you dislike the bullying part of your father - there is a part of you that has become it?"

"Not sure."

"Let's play with it for a moment, if there was a part of you that was him in full, what would it sound like, look like? What impact would he be having?"

Long silence. "Pretty much like the description in the complaint."

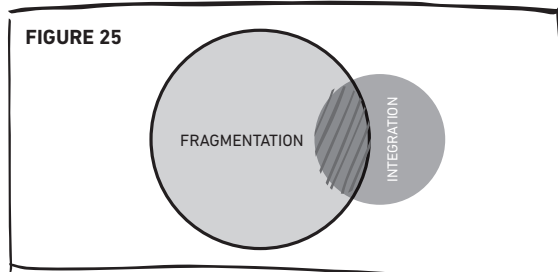
He apologized to his colleague and the apology had a different quality because he was able to communicate exactly how it felt to be on the receiving end of his behaviour.

Lack of awareness underlies our own fragmentation and that of our organizations. The Industrial Age has preferred a short-cut that allows us to quickly label individuals, teams and businesses as either one thing or another. It allows for initial speed and easy identification, but not always a helpful or accurate one.

In the Age of Connection we are going to have to work on integration rather than separation. It sounds obvious doesn't it?

But there is a deeper level of psychological work to be done here in order to feel both parts of yourself, the alternative polarities and be able to feel them, articulate them so that they slowly come together in a healthy way.

In the container that we are building to support our transition from one age to the next, you are stronger if you can hold both polarities rather than owning one or the other. And once you can do that you can adapt much faster in the great restructuring of our organizations. (See Figure 25)



On this occasion I was working in a situation that brought together the bully and the victim in the same person. It might be alternative polarities, other examples to play with might be:

Intelligent	Stupid
Sad	Happy
Whole	Fragmented
Healthy	Damaged
Sane	Crazy
Rigid	Fluid
Conformist	Rebel
Frightened	Fearless
Agitated	Calm

Can you think of any others?

Try a few out for size; see how both parts feel and where they sit.

Speak them out, write them down and identify which you own and which you deny.

SEVEN (B)

Practices for 'between us'

SUBTLE SIGNS

"Just observe the other," he says. "Sit opposite each other and, just for three minutes, observe everything you can. Start each observation with 'in this 'now moment' I notice'..."

I hate this stuff, it always makes me squirm, I can't even force myself to make eye contact. And it shouldn't be difficult as she is lovely. A big warm face and one of those smiley smiles that suggests she is used to doing it. My body language, on the other hand, suggests "go away" as it usually does. Ok, we are sitting opposite one another; I didn't speak up fast enough so I have to go first. I turn my chair a little more so that I am less side-on, unfold my arms, feeling cold as I do so, put my hands on my knees, lean forward slightly and begin. Where to begin? At the beginning I suppose.

"Ok... in this 'now moment' I notice...dark brown hair, shiny, long-to- your-shoulders... a round face", (can I say that or will she be offended?)..."brown eyes and a slight upturn of the mouth." The smile gets wider, I relax a little more; I keep going, describing the surface detail and then run out of things to say but I have to keep going, those are the rules...now a few moments of discomfort.... and then there is a kind of break-through as I notice another level of detail that hadn't been available to me initially.

"So, in this 'now moment' I notice.... that you are gripping the clipboard to your lap very tightly.....that you are perfectly colour-co-ordinated...the burgundy top matches the burgundy skirt and your auburn hair...there are no creases or wrinkles anywhere...your black leather bag matches your black leather boots." And then there is something else as I look more closely and with more attention at her feet.

"The boots, they are a bit of a misfit...in this 'now moment', I notice that the right shoe has a big scuff mark as if you have kicked something hard...I notice you don't appear to be someone who would kick anything.... and the boots themselves are long, with silver buckles all the way up them and the straps don't sit straight like everything else. They are curled to the side as if you have pulled them hard many times. It is as if this part of you is not as proper as everything else."

The exercise thankfully came to an end not long afterwards and the debrief was very interesting. This executive told me her story of being desperate for a less corporate and more creative career; that she was just getting in touch with this need and starting to act on it.

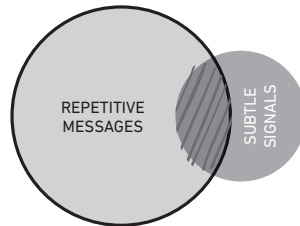
It struck me that, as a new phase comes to life, there are subtle signals of its emergence. The complexity scientists call them 'weak signals'. I prefer the term 'subtle' as it focuses the mind a little more on the kind of thing we are looking for. It encourages us to tune into our ways of tracking, noticing and appreciating the less obvious. I imagine that, as organizations sit at the edge between one dominant system and the new one that is trying to emerge, our capacity to notice the subtle is a key part of building the channel that will strengthen us.

So often, the subtle signals show up in our relationships and interactions with each other and our work environments. What if you were to think about them for the next day? Where do they show up? Look for something you haven't seen or noticed before but that has been present. What might it tell you about what is trying to emerge in your organization? (See Figure 26)

Could you pay more attention to:

- A tone?
- A gesture?
- A new word being used?
- A glance?
- A feeling or sensation?
- A colour?
- A reflection of the light?
- Anything that you weren't expecting, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem at the time?

FIGURE 26



MICRO-RELATING

I have struggled over the years to distinguish between micro-managing and micro-relating. The people who held the CEO position before me were stone-faced, impassive, sitting at the end of the table while I presented the material; they generally monitored the numbers and then they would be the people who finally passed judgements. Their judgements were sometimes half-heartedly challenged but mostly there was little argument.

I learned some things from them but what struck me most, and scared me most, in taking their chair was how dull they were. They could manage a business at a minute level of detail but few of them went on to do anything interesting with their lives when they left here. And they left with very little understanding of how this organization really worked. Why would they? They hadn't ever tried to understand the guts of it.

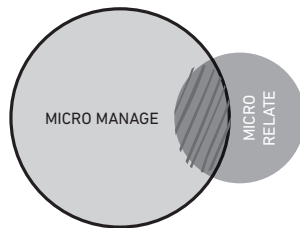
Their power stemmed from the collective power of the company, I would like my situation to be the other way around; I want to contribute to the collective power of the company. It may be a prejudice but many of these old CEOs came from a finance background, their experience was helpful in times of mergers and acquisitions. They were able to understand the complexity and technical jargon of the numbers to the satisfaction of the city but were missing other needed qualities.

So I chose something different as an approach. I didn't want to micro-manage but I did want to micro-relate and micro-engage. I don't mean the kind of engagement that comes from someone else managing your internal and external profile, I mean the kind that comes with trying to shift things in your organization by throwing yourself into the system. I don't believe you can understand any business properly until you have tried, personally, to change some aspect of it. At that point, you have become part of the complexity for

real, you are no longer sitting at the end of the table. All that emerges, all that you didn't intend, all that leaves you powerless, all the struggles and learning from opinions that are different to your own.

There are many judgements passed about this kind of leadership that suggest this is not your CEO role, that you are 'micro-managing' but it has a different quality. The best I can come up with is this phrase 'micro-relating'. I am not telling people in detail what to do; I am trying to experience, in detail, what it is like. It will never be perfect, because of the power that comes with my role, but it is a start, and as people get used to working with me in this way, they defer less and give me the real version of events more often. (See Figure 27)

FIGURE 27



- What habits do you have that enable you to deaden or reduce the full level of engagement? How do you defend against this?
- What does experiencing life directly mean to you in the context of your business?
- What might you choose from your current priorities that could give you this quality of experience?
- How would you arrange things with your colleagues so that it didn't default to 'pleasing the boss'?

- What are some of the ways, in which you could develop this personal capacity to micro-relate?

COMMUNITIES OF PASSION

As a senior leader in the organization, she is perfectly capable; in the Industrial Age you wouldn't want to lose her. Committed to her work, she strives to improve her standards; customers and colleagues love what she delivers. There is no excessive praise from them but she doesn't drop a big problem in your lap either. Learning happens through a range of mechanisms but it is mostly because someone has asked her to go on a course or read something or attend a particular meeting. She is keen to share and learn about best practice and bring it into her work. All of it is done with a smile and the few complaints she has about the organization are to do with being overloaded, not having enough time at home, taking too much responsibility for the other, less capable people around her. The communities set up around her are communities of practice, setting up and improving the way things are today.

She has decided, after many months of agonizing, that there is no point carrying on with this role and this organization. It was a hard choice to make but it sounded as if, emotionally at least, she was now ready and determined. Her face was pinched in at the sides and her thin, wiry build oozed lean, efficient strength. She needed it, like many women of her generation she was a successful senior executive, mother and wife who had as much demand on her at home as she did at work. It took a supreme time-management effort to cope and there wasn't a spare moment in the day. She often sacrificed her own wellbeing and the coaching sessions with me were a regular casualty of her 'time management'.

"This hurts like I have fallen out of love with a partner. It happened a while ago, but I have been trying to convince myself it was just a blip, that it would be ok eventually. It isn't getting better, it is getting worse."

So our attention turns to the future and finding a job and an organization with which she can fall in love again.

"Do you know any good headhunters?"

"Yes but to be honest they are less useful than exploring your own network".

"I don't have one of those".

"Huh?"

"I don't have a network outside this place, I've been working in the same organization for almost twenty years!"

"What about all those people who worked here that have now left?"

"I get lots of invites from some of them on this LinkedIn thing."

"Great! So you do have a network then."

"Well, no, I tend to say no to the requests. I'm always worried people want something from me or are trying to sell me something I don't want or will get me to spend time on things that I don't have".

"Hmm. Which was the most recent of these?"

"An old team member of mine had left to set up their own marketing consultancy and they invited me to a conference on the impact of social media on brand marketing."

"I would like to suggest an experiment."

"Ok."

"For the next four weeks I would like you to say yes to every request that comes your way, any invitation, any connection and any opportunity. It is quite possible that you are right – 50% of these may be a waste of time when considered from your old mindset. Our new mindset is saying "yes" to the connections. Everyone you meet is part of your network and you make the first

move to contact them after the meeting."

"Sounds uncomfortable. I'll give it a go if I have the time."

I arch an eyebrow quizzically in my best impression of Sean Connery but know it is probably closer to Rowan Atkinson as both my eyebrows will be raised while I scrunch up the right side of my face.

"Err ok- I get it. I will give it a go."

"Great, thank you."

"One more thing – please return to everyone you said no to on LinkedIn, apologise and ask them to connect with you."

A few months later, there is a new version of the same woman sitting in front of me and, interestingly, she has chosen not to leave her organization. She is passionately ready for the next stage of her career and has accessed this through a new level of interpersonal awareness. Now the organization doesn't feed her as much as she feeds the organization through her connection to her interests.

She always has a side interest on the go; it is connected to her work but not necessarily driven by it. It is a place where she poses a question, a stimulating thought, something that is sparking her interest and curiosity at the moment. And then she relies on her sources of connection to the world inside and outside her organization. Through social media and personal relationships she can bypass many of the institutional barriers that our Industrial Age leader had as blocks.

She can take a question, stimulate ideas from her virtual network, use the same connections to bring together some resources and try something out.

It isn't hard work; when you watch her in action, it feels more like play with a purpose. She has become a one person research and development lab, taking something from discovery to testing to development, often without it touching the formal organizational structures; quickly she has something that impacts her day-to-day work and can then be brought back into the business. (See Figure 28)

FIGURE 28



- How are you exploring your passions and interests outside of work?
- How are you rewarding yourself and those around you for developing connections outside of the organization?
- How can you support individual initiative in this area even when you don't see an immediate or direct connection to their work objectives?
- What are the inquiries and experiments that are part of your 'research plan'?

SEVEN (C)

Practices for across us all

LYING UP THE HIERARCHY ⁶

I spent 10 years of my life writing. I wrote plans, partnership strategies, the Local Area Agreement, stretch targets, the Sustainable Community Strategy, sub-regional infrastructure plans, funding bids, monitoring documents and service plans. These documents described the performance of our business and its partners.

I have a confession to make. Much of it was made up. It was fudged, spun, copied and pasted, cobbled together and attractively-formatted. I told lies in themes, lies in groups, lies in pairs, strategic lies, operational lies, cross-cutting lies. I wrote hundreds of pages of nonsense. Some of it was my own, but most of it was collated from my colleagues across the organization and brought together into a single document; this was my specialty and my profession.

Why did I do it? I did it because it was my job. My manager told me it was to "to get the best for the region" and that "you have to play the game". When I attempted to reveal the absurdity of the situation I was criticized for not being in the real world. I quickly learned that, in the real world, data is cleansed, re-presented and re-formatted until it tells an acceptable and neat story.

My can-do attitude was rewarded with promotion in the hierarchy and respect from my colleagues. Stretching the truth was seen as harmless and

normal. Our behaviour was rational. We told lies in order to:

- Win funding
- Keep management teams happy
- Impress European departments
- Gain a good rating annually
- Compete with other organizations in our region

The purpose of our behaviour was to maximize the chances of looking good and to minimize the chance of upsetting or embarrassing important people in the hierarchy.

Am I exaggerating? My use of the word 'lying' is intentionally provocative, but if not lying, we certainly weren't confident that what we were writing represented reality. We made huge assumptions about the link between the data we collected and the experience of the user. We made similarly outrageous assumptions about the impact of our interventions on performance.

There was always a kernel of truth in what we wrote and the intentions were good. However, the purpose of the written work was to project coherent, positive news. Projects were rarely abandoned, mistakes rarely made and uncertainty never expressed. Nothing ever happened by chance, no issue was complex, little understood or messy. Our projects were almost always on track and we apparently had complete control of the future. We even knew the outcome of our work before we started it. Everything was robust, nothing flimsy. We told stories, rationalized the past, projected an ambitious image and made anything bad look good or under control. The truth even had to be re-told to fit two sides of A4, the standard quarterly reporting template. Later, when we had performance management software, the lies were shorter – no more than 50 words; the space allocated in the progress box on the screen.

When anomalies were discovered in our data, it was treated as a technical problem or a problem of co-ordination. Serious attempts were made by talented and well-paid people to improve data quality and to embed a robust performance management framework. These attempts did nothing to change the underlying thinking. The purpose of collecting and reporting data was to comply, not to learn. Compliance was systemic and learning was optional and ad hoc.

We were preoccupied with meeting targets, demonstrating the achievement of outcomes and avoiding embarrassment.

I was not a liar outside work and neither were my colleagues. Even lying itself was cleansed and reclassified into the phrase 'playing the game'. Context can fool us into doing extraordinary things.

The alternative to lying to the hierarchy is simple. Take the hierarchy to see the truth.

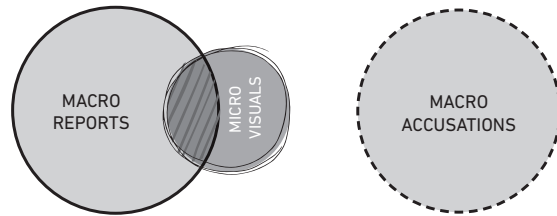
We should have taken our leaders to see what was actually going on. We should have persuaded them to sit for days at a time, to listen to hours of phone calls from the public and to understand service users in their own contexts. Only then would they begin to understand the true performance of the organization. Performance officers do not need to spend whole days tinkering with text and formatting reports, mediating reality into something palatable. There is no need for an expensive bureaucracy between the decision-makers and the truth. Confronting the brutal facts is free.

To find out what is really going on across an organization, you don't need to know which version of a report you are reading, there are no approvals necessary, no checking,

nothing cross-cuts and nothing comes in clusters or themes. It is just as it is. Always there, waiting to be discovered; immediate, live and real.

There are no lies here. At the bottom of the hierarchy, where the end-user touches it, you find out the truth. This is the secret of which many in senior positions aren't able to convince themselves yet. If you want to understand the whole organization, enter the experience very deeply at a small and local level. This will give you all the awareness you need. (See figure 29)

FIGURE 29



WORKING AT THE CORE

I have spent years feeling the need to regain my fitness and lose weight. I usually start going to the gym, getting really sweaty, making a lot of noise, feeling a bit better but soon return to my starting position. Last year, things started to get worse when I had operations on my knees.

I started Pilates and, since January, I have attended twice a week. This work focuses on the core and builds strength from the inside out. The instructors

focus on fine movements. They do not compromise on finding and building the core. The movements and their interventions are subtle and not at all macho but the results are extraordinary and sustainable. If you strengthen the core, you just get stronger and more stable.

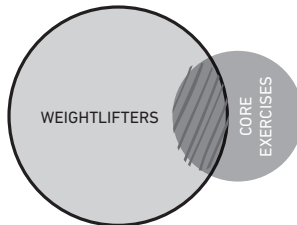
I have been thinking about Pilates as a metaphor for strengthening our organizations and, in particular, strengthening mine. The idea of two different kinds of strength is captivating: one developing the core, from the inside, the other developing the surface, from the outside. I suppose we are good at the latter, we have learned how to create and present an image of ourselves through the disciplines of management that make us look strong. Yet often that strength is exposed as insufficient to meet the demands of today. In particular, I notice now that very visibly muscular people can also have a frailty around their backs and knees.

When I think about working on the core I find myself noticing the small-but-significant movements and trying to find ways of strengthening them and the people behind them. The difference between me and the Pilates instructor is that she doesn't compromise on finding the core. I often do, allowing myself to be distracted by pressures of the day. But when I reflect on our progress, I realise it has been through small, subtle, repetitive movements that strengthen us. There are strong parallels with business. We work hard on big, noisy and sweaty movements that compromise the core. They look big and important but when the focus on them stops the jelly returns to its original shape very quickly.

As I work more with the principles of Pilates, I see many other parallels. It is about reminding your body how to really work, generating a connected flow of energy throughout the body. (See figure 30)

- What are all the big movements in your organization that are designed to build a 'six-pack' that everyone can see?
- What are the small movements that are strengthening the core of your organization, which may not be visible but generate hidden stability?
- How can you develop your awareness of the small movements that are providing an unseen stability at the core of the organization?
- How can you amplify them so that they are more effective and better supported?

FIGURE 30



BE INSIDE THE FRAME

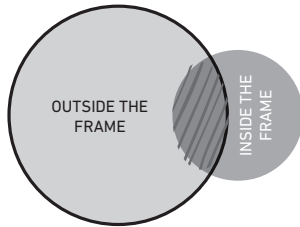
We are standing looking at a named piece of art in the National Gallery in London. With me is a coaching client, someone repeatedly looked over for promotion from director to vice president (VP). In this organization, this career shift seems to be the most difficult and most prized. It is almost as if, before it, you have achieved nothing and after it, you can relax, full of achievement. She is understandably confused that, despite having achieved stellar ratings on her annual appraisals and constant assurances of her value to the organization, no-one seems willing to back her for the next move.

The walls of the gallery are deep red, providing a fetching contrast to the heavy, gilded frames and the ageing wooden floor. We are in front of a 15th century work of art with a religious theme, not to my taste, by a Dutch artist. I challenge myself to stop being so narrow-minded and open my filters, even if just briefly. The security guard in the corner has a look of disdain and boredom directed into thin air. We are visiting in office hours, on a weekday outside of school holidays, so this extends us the luxury of being able to sit on one of the black sofas, without a back to rest on, and contemplate the painting from a distance.

My client is reflecting on the feedback recently received about why she didn't get the last VP role for which she applied. "Not strategic enough" was the feedback provided. When we explore what she understands by this, she is confused and a little hurt, her brow is furrowed. The way she has been taught about strategy seems to be what she follows faithfully: Analysis to identify the profitable markets in which to compete and clarify what winning in a market looks like; identifying or creating unique strengths compared to competitors; and leading the execution in such a way that the elements that need managing are managed.

It sounds pretty good to me and yet, as we sit in front of this work, the things that are missing become a little clearer. I have asked her to interpret this piece of art using the skills she uses when interpreting a market or new brand launch. It's all perfectly reasonable. Then we have another attempt. This time, I am asking for a personal connection of a different nature to the analytic connection that has just been completed. (See Figure 31)

FIGURE 31



- What is your personal encounter with this work?
- What does this trigger in you?
- How is it connected to your life story?
- How is it connected to the communities you are part of?
- How many different kinds of meaning can you generate and allow to unfold?
- What are all the connections you can create between this piece of art and the rest of the gallery?
- Return to the work over and over again; what are the other perspectives we can view this from?
 - outside the frame
 - inside the frame
 - as the artist
 - as the commissioning client
 - as the subject matter
 - as the characters in the piece
 - as the non-living artefacts

CHECKING IN

The group with which we are working is in the process of 'checking in' before its two days together, I can recall when I first encountered this strange term and the novel practice that followed. It intrigued me at the time that, when done well, it changed the outcomes of the meeting that followed.

What I have just experienced feels a long way from that time. There were lots of subtle signals in the room that suggested that, as the check-in progressed, it was met by impatience rather than increased awareness of one another and the collective environment that was being created. Some of the individuals had their bodies slightly turned away from the person speaking, there were lots of tight necks, hunched shoulders and an almost imperceptible shaking of the head in response to some of what was being said; pursed lips, stone faces and short statements. This had become something mechanical and habitual for this team, something to get out of the way before the real business of the day could be dealt with; short, clipped and the bare minimum.

The emotions in the room around this simple process, (judgement, cynicism, fear and guilt), were palpable.

The population was multi-national and the accepted convention was broken when a slight man from India, someone at the edges of the project, spoke for longer than those who preceded him. The response from the group was amplified and left him embarrassed, as if he had taken up too much space. The remaining people were now in even more of a rush, there was less listening and people starting to talk over one another.

The day that followed was a difficult one and we were facing a second day

with too much left to do in the time available. We took a risk and reflected back on the beginning of day one. What would it be like, we wondered, if there was a little more space and good intention around the day's check-in?

After some grumbling and anxiety about the time remaining, the group began. One-by-one we heard some of what people needed to voice; where they had come from, what had brought them here, their full names and titles, how to pronounce them well, their particular interest in the project, what they feared and their pre-existing connections with other people in the room. We were showing ourselves to each other, the conversation was less formal and even joyful at times.

The additional intimacy in the room led to a different quality of conversation on day two and we achieved more in less time. The relationship with the work changed as awareness of each other was deepened.

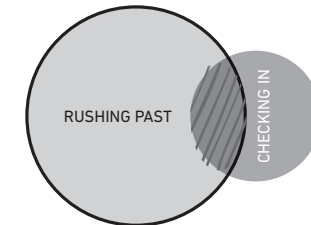
As our work continued with this team, we experimented with ways of deepening their check-in process, it became an organizing principle for their work.

- We could have no pre-determined agenda and determine it according to what we are sensing at the beginning of the meeting.
- We could ask people for what they felt and sensed as well as for their analysis and judgement.
- We could ask each other what we would say right now if we had no fear of being judged by our colleagues or ourselves.
- We could introduce terms that were unvoiced or un-owned by the Establishment and give them

a place in our language; terms such as joy, excitement, fear, anger and sadness.

- We could take moments of silence to check-in on our bodies and see how they are trying to tell us something.
- We could practise ways of standing straight, using a 'strong back and soft front' to help increase our awareness.
- We could allocate time in the conversation that was simply about being aware of what was going on and not trying to explain it away; to let it be. (See Figure 32)

FIGURE 32



The first few times I tried these experiments with this group we experienced lots distractions. Lots went on to keep us from being aware: slaps on the back, raucous laughter, teasing each other, diversion to electronic devices, sudden crises that had to be managed by leaving the room and even falling asleep!

And then, after some practice, we had access to a completely different level of conversation. We started practising this awareness before each agenda item, it changed what was talked about, how it was talked about, the speed with which choices were made and, most critically for this team, the sustained cohesion after the collective decision.

The link between collective awareness and outcomes was the closest thing to magic I have experienced.