



# The Unconscious Organization

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Unconscious as I refer to it here, does not mean dead or in a coma – although I can imagine quite a few people would think that an apt description of the company they work for. In this post, it means unconscious in the psychological sense. That is, it refers to varying levels of unawareness of what is happening within the company and the surrounding environment. Now an organization can be unaware of lots of things – unaware of what their customers really think about them, unaware of the competitor about to launch a new product, unaware that their key staff are about to stage a walk out and set up their own business in direct competition, or unaware that their products no longer meet the needs of customers. And the organization can be totally unaware of these things, or it can be resistant or defensive in choosing not to acknowledge that which is threatening to it, or which it feels it does not have the capacity to deal with.

A major goal of therapy, counseling, and coaching is to enable people to become more conscious. As people become more conscious they understand more about why they think, feel, and behave the way they do. When we get to the bottom of what is really going on, we are in a position to make different and better choices for ourselves and so create more of the life that we want to have. The same is true for an organization. Although an organization is a collection of individuals (with some exceptions such as sole proprietors), it has a culture (a personality) which is shaped by the top leadership. And that culture, like a personality, can mean the individuals within it act with varying levels of unawareness. And when, in particular, the leadership acts with a high level of unawareness, we have an organization that can be described as unconscious.

- When you go to your boss with a problem, say the most profitable client is taking away their business to a competitor, does your boss say to you, “I don’t want to know about it?” That is choosing to be unconscious. And I am not making up this example, I have heard that statement many times in my life. However, listening to the problem and suggesting ways for you to go and fix it, is not. Asking you to fix something is asking you take responsibility. Not wanting to hear or know about a problem is choosing to remain unconscious.
- If the boss decides that he or she knows what the customer will like without some form of market research, he or she is choosing to remain unconscious. Believing others think like we do and like what we like, is choosing to be unconscious. You need to ask people what they want and like directly.
- If the only people who deal with customer queries and complaints are low down in the organizational hierarchy because the senior executives are too busy with other meetings, then the organization is choosing to be unconscious. How do you know what decisions to make about products and services if you have never had a chat with your customers? No employee will be able to explain exactly what the customer wants without putting their own interpretation into the feedback.
- When you regularly scan market share data and notice a competitor starting to garner more and more market share and you decide to task your best employees to investigate this trend, you are choosing to be more conscious.
- When your company employee survey feedback indicates your staff morale is low, and you appoint someone to research and address the problem until subsequent surveys show morale has improved, you are choosing to be more conscious.



Like people, few organizations are completely unconscious and few are fully conscious. Almost every person and every company falls somewhere along a continuum. And where you fall, depends on how willing you are to truthfully answer the question, “What is really going on here?” And then you have to be prepared to do something about the real problem. If you are the problem in your company, are you prepared to acknowledge it and deal with it? One of the reasons companies have 360 degree reviews is to enable them to become more conscious. The field of organization development is also meant to help organizations become more conscious.

So how can you become more conscious? You ask the question, “What is really going on here”? and you answer it as honestly as you can. And you do this lots of times – not just once. You can also ask similar questions such as, “Why did this happen?” “What is the root cause of this?” And if you follow the thinking of the “5 Why’s” methodology (that is you ask the same question over and over again five or more times, each time understanding more about the reasons for the problem), you will become more conscious. In fact, being able to ask the right questions is a key leadership skill.

Becoming conscious is a process. It is not a once-off event and suddenly – eureka – we are all knowing. And it is not the easiest process to go through either. Ignorance can be bliss – in the short term at least. But ultimately we pay a price for choosing to remain unconscious. We lose out when we do not face up to what is really going on. On a personal level choosing to remain unconscious means we live a life that is less fulfilling than it could be. On a business level, it means our organizations fail to live up to their potential, or even go out of business.