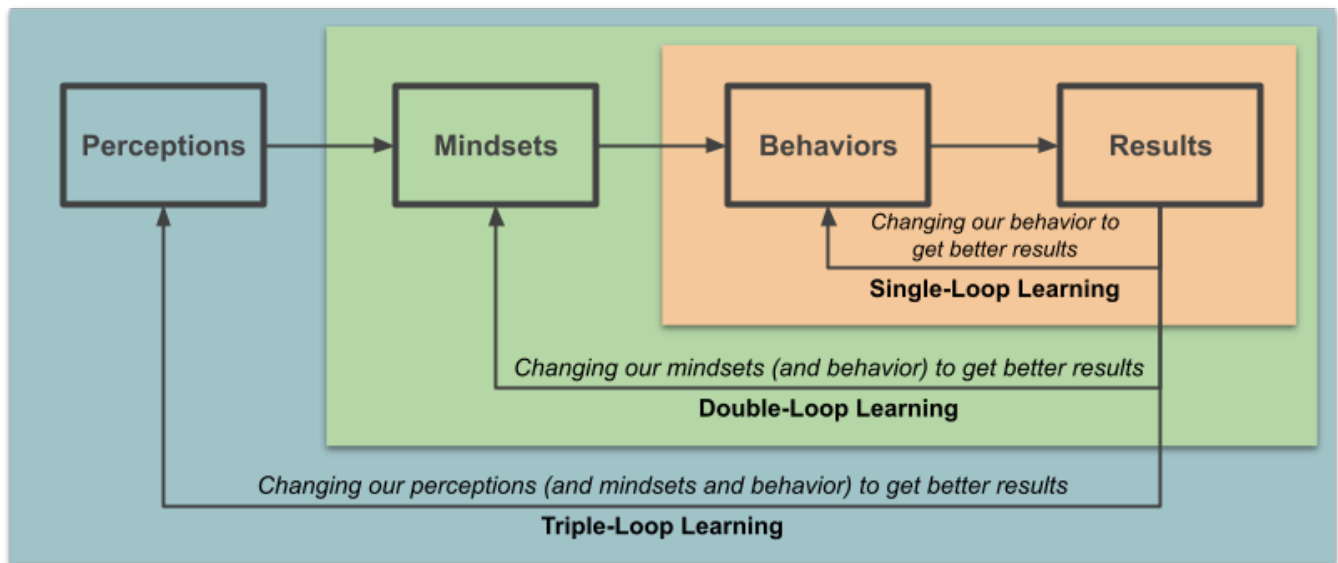


Circling the Hologram: The Four Territories of Awareness

Jimmy Parker | May 2018

This diagram is so pregnant with so many beautiful principles, it has tightly held my attention since I first saw it¹:



BEHAVIORS & RESULTS

To unpack this diagram most easily, we'll start with what's most familiar to most people, depicted in orange. The "Behaviors" box represents our actions--the things we do in life. But any doing we do that's uninformed by the results of our doing equates to the well-known insanity of doing the same thing over and over while expecting a different result. Which is to say that nearly everyone understands the first type of learning shown here--known as *single-loop learning*. But that doesn't mean it's a given. The person who knows their marriage is struggling (a result) may not fully know how their behavior has contributed. An expansion of awareness is needed--one that includes both results *and* behaviors. And when this expansion of awareness leads to new behaviors, single-loop learning has occurred.

It was surprising for me to discover that the entire world of management tools and techniques, from simple plan-do-check-act cycles to the most sophisticated manifestations of lean six-sigma (for which I am a certified green belt), easily fits into this little orange box of mere single-loop learning. These so-called "best practice" techniques are capable of producing, at best, only moderate, incremental improvements...because they ultimately prioritize efficiency above effectiveness. Mind. Blown.

MINDSETS

"Mindsets," as it is used in the diagram, is a rather inclusive term. It represents several things, such as one's intentions, values, goals, plans, expectations, and mental models. It's the stuff that floats around in your head and mine, only some of which we're aware of. The little arrow that connects the mindsets

¹ I first encountered these concepts in Bill Torbert's book *Action Inquiry*, but they appear in many places. They are well-established tenets of developmental psychology and organizational learning.

box to the behaviors box implies integrity, or alignment of one's behavior to one's beliefs--that your walk matches your talk. Good stuff.

But double-loop learning, depicted in green, is something altogether different from single-loop learning and hugely powerful. It represents a further expansion of our awareness. It happens when we realize the way we're working isn't working, and we sit down and make some much-needed changes--first in our thinking, then in our doing. It is when we realize we need to let go of our expectations (mindsets), or even change our own internal value system (mindsets). And then we actually, authentically do so (behaviors). It happens when we see how we've been our own worst enemy, and decide to embrace a more mature set of beliefs about ourselves and our world that leads to greater levels of responsibility and impact.

For most of us, it doesn't happen often. It's hard to do because it's uncomfortable, unsettling. It's also mysterious--hard to understand, since most adults don't talk about this stuff and we aren't taught it in school. Double-loop learning is when our unconscious mindsets become visible and we can consciously examine them and make choices about them--what to keep, discard, or upgrade. We become masters of the mindsets that we were previously enslaved to. This unlocks qualitatively new capacities and levels of effectiveness previously unreachable from the relative comfort zone of incremental, single-loop learning. Double-loop learning blows single-loop learning out of the water every time. But there is more!

PERCEPTIONS

If single-loop learning is "doing things right," and double-loop learning is "doing the right things," what determines which things are "right" in the first place? BOOM! Such a question offers a glimpse into the mystery and transformative power of triple-loop learning. Imagine, for instance, being able to "see" not only someone's hidden intentions (mindsets), but also how those intentions are the natural byproduct of their environment--or more precisely, as the diagram suggests, how they have *perceived* their environment--even when they can't see that themselves. Or notice that one's belief of what is "right" is made legitimately "right" by the type of world they live in and how they have interpreted that world, all of which is notably different from yours and mine. Even science, and the "rightness" of a particular scientific theory, is legitimized only by the particular socio-historical time and place in which it was crafted. When this fourth realm of perceptions enters our awareness, multiple versions of an integrated reality become visible by simply changing one's perspective. What was assumed to be a static, 2-dimensional version of reality becomes like a 3-dimensional hologram that must be circled to be fully "seen," experienced, and understood.

Seeing such things changes the seer. It is transformative. It supplies a humility that causes us to hold what we "know" a little more lightly. It allows us to break free of our own limiting beliefs, jettison our judgments, and accept (love) others with fewer conditions. It empowers us to synthesize multiple perspectives, uncovering previously inaccessible avenues for thinking and doing and solving and serving. Triple-loop learning is nothing short of a superpower. Like Neo in The Matrix, it enables us to "see" simplicity in complexity and "bend" otherwise unbendable "rules" that generate exponential leaps in capability. And it is, unfortunately, exceedingly rare. And that's one of the reasons I'm studying what I'm studying--that is, how to unleash more of this force for good in all of us.