
HOW SMART LEADERS AND ORGANIZATIONS
ACHIEVE OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE

CLARITY FIRST



KAREN MARTIN

AUTHOR OF THE AWARD-WINNING
THE OUTSTANDING ORGANIZATION

PRAISE FOR *CLARITY FIRST*

How many of us have felt the tension of the boss asking, “So are we all on the same page?” Just once I wanted to ask, “Which page, boss?” The whiteboard, the e-mail summary, the yellow pad? That kind of ambiguity ruled my early work life and led to my deep professional disillusionment. I later learned, and Karen Martin shows us in *Clarity First*, it doesn’t have to be that way!

For me, joy and clarity are inexorably linked as clarity leads not only to getting things done but getting the right things done right, and thus a chance to “work with pride,” as W. Edwards Deming suggested was all that anyone wants from their work life. Karen Martin provides us, with *Clarity First*, the path to this kind of joy.

—Richard Sheridan, CEO of Menlo Innovations
and author of *Joy, Inc.*

In a crowded and distracted world, leaders must develop clarity in order to rise above the competition, create better relationships, and grow their business. In this insightful book, Karen Martin gives us a clear vision for clarity.

—Sally Hogshead, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *Fascinate* and *How the World Sees You*

Imagine the insanity of driving your car through a torrential downpour without windshield wipers. Far too often business leaders drive their company in this very way. In *Clarity First*, Karen Martin gives us a true gift: the organizational equivalent of high performance wiper blades to cut through ambiguity and achieve diamond-like clarity.

—Matthew E. May, author of *Winning the Brain Game*
and *The Laws of Subtraction*

Karen focuses on, dissects, and gives excellent advice on how to address one of the most important weak points of conventional management: the lack of clarity. The need to operate with clarity permeates every aspect of what leaders and organizations do on a daily basis and is vital to be a high performer.

—Jeffrey Liker, bestselling author of *The Toyota Way*

In an effective organization, everybody should know at any given time what is the most important work they can do to contribute to its success, and how well they're doing at it. However, in many organizations we find a miasma of overwork, poor strategy and communication, ill-defined or inadequate processes, and frustrated employees. In this outstanding book, Karen Martin tackles the biggest dysfunction addressing organizations today—a lack of clarity—and shows how to implement change at every level, supported by her extensive experience and her magisterial command of Lean thinking. This book is essential reading for leaders and managers everywhere.

—Jez Humble, coauthor of *The DevOps Handbook*,
Lean Enterprise, and *Continuous Delivery*

Karen Martin does a masterful job of proving to readers why clarity is the key to outstanding performance, and showing what smart organizations can do to attain and sustain it. She maps a clear path to defining what winning is and how to get there. The chaos-cutting solutions and powerful clarity-enabling practices she shares are keenly relatable and immediately implementable. I was absolutely absorbed by each word, each page, each illuminating example and instructive concept.

—Billy R. Taylor, Director of North America
Commercial and Off Highway Manufacturing at
the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company

Karen Martin writes, “Clarity exhibits many qualities, the most important of which are coherence, precision, and elegance.” All are present in her latest book, *Clarity First*. Karen’s take on this timely and timeless topic is accessible, experience-based, relevant, and actionable. It should be required reading for leaders at all levels of an organization.

—Julie Winkle Giulioni, coauthor of
Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go

Clarity First is a mantra for success—both now and in a future that increasingly rewards clarity and punishes certainty.

—Bob Johansen, PhD, Distinguished Fellow at the Institute
for the Future and author of *The New Leadership
Literacies* and *Leaders Make the Future*

Leading in the age of accelerated innovation, complexity, and speed relies on clarity. Clarity of thought, communication, and purpose enables leaders to achieve their desired outcomes, help others exceed their expectations, and create higher performance organizations at scale.

In this book, Karen highlights how clarity enables individuals and organizations to experiment, take necessary risks, and improve decision making to discover the breakthrough innovations of ongoing and future success.

Clarity First will equip you with concrete capabilities and skills to deal with the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in innovation—and win.

—Barry O’Reilly, founder and CEO of ExecCamp
and coauthor of *Lean Enterprise*

Clarity First provides a much-needed conduit between an organization's purpose and performance, linking people development and the alignment of their goals across all levels, and helping create an environment where all employees understand their daily work and why they do it. This excellent book paves the path for long-term success and sustainability within any industry.

—Tracey Richardson, founder of Teaching Lean Inc. and
coauthor of *The Toyota Engagement Equation*

At the heart of all good decisions and actions lies one of two factors: luck or clarity. We can hope that our employees, colleagues, or managers get lucky, or we can provide them with the information they need to be successful. Clarity is never easy to achieve. Indeed, every company I've worked with has had a crisis of clarity. In *Clarity First*, Karen Martin lays a course to provide a foundation of clarity for your company to build success in from the beginning.

—Jim Benson, author of *Personal Kanban*

Clarity is an essential but far too often overlooked foundation in the quest for success—both for organizations and individuals. Guided by this comprehensive and inspiring book, you will not fail.

—Joakim Ahlström, author of *How to Succeed
with Continuous Improvement*

While most of *Clarity First* focuses on organizational clarity, the chapter that describes how to apply the concepts to the individual—from both personal and professional perspectives—is particularly powerful. As Karen puts it, “Organizational clarity begins with you.” There are books that deal with self-help, and there are books that describe how to improve organizations, but it is, unfortunately, rare to find a book that truly forces the reader to confront the impact he or she directly has on the organization. Reflecting on this can lead to dramatic personal, and then organizational, clarity and improvement.

—Kevin Meyer, cofounder of Gemba Academy
and author of *The Simple Leader*

In this terrific book, Karen Martin not only makes the compelling argument that clarity is needed—indeed, key—for success but also offers many practical tips to learn to gain greater clarity in one’s thinking and communicating. In this, clarity is a skill that can be practiced every day to better frame issues for oneself and to engage others and lead one’s business to superior performance. A must-read for any serious manager.

—Michael Ballé, coauthor of *The Lean Strategy* and The Gold Mine trilogy

Nobody ever said, “I don’t need more clarity in my company!” The reality is clarity can be elusive. But Karen Martin makes this essential outcome accessible, actionable, and possible. My favorite part is it’s possible in a totally human way. Brilliant!

—Shawn Murphy, CEO of Switch & Shift and
author of *The Optimistic Workplace*

I coincidentally finished reading *Clarity First* the day before going to Toyota Kyushu in South Japan. Although not by design, the timing was perfect and made all the examples described in the book even more vivid and validated during the plant visitation. Examples of the opposite are more abundant and not particular to any country or industry, but consequences are never positive. May this book be a guide for leaders who courageously seek achieving clarity first.

—Sammy Obara, CEO of Honsha.org

So often my work as a CEO is stymied because of confusion, chaos, and miscommunication. Too often these symptoms are not caused by external factors but because of a lack of clarity inside my own organization. In this book, Karen Martin provides a concise road map for how to improve clarity. I'm putting it into practice, and it is working! I know other leaders will benefit from more clarity, too.

—Daniel Wolcott, president and CEO of
Adventist Health Lodi Memorial

In *Clarity First*, Karen Martin takes a direct and often tough approach to pierce the clouds of ambiguity in our working world. By citing specific examples in recent business headlines, Karen illuminates the problem of what a lack of clarity can do to financially devastate and damage a company and its reputation. But more than a thorough examination of why a lack of clarity can cause so many serious problems, Karen provides a lucid path to clarity for any organization or individual to follow. *Clarity First* is a great guide to successfully navigating the challenging waters of today's uncertain business world.

—Jerry M. Wright, former Chairman of the Board of
the Association for Manufacturing Excellence

Clarity First is one of those rare books that captures timeless wisdom and makes it accessible to us all. If there is a single all-important element that is lacking in our organizations, as well as in our personal lives, it is clarity. This book effectively explores why clarity is essential to success, what we can do achieve it, and what steps we need to take to extend it throughout any organization. Bravo, Karen!

—Mike Orzen, coauthor of *Lean IT*

It is quite clear that Karen Martin understands what DePree meant when he said, “the first job of a leader is to define reality.” To paraphrase Lewis Carroll, “If you don’t know where you are going, any path will do.”

Karen Martin gets it! She understands, because of many decades of working with top companies, that everyone must be on the same page and be clear on the mission.

—Roger Greaves, former Chairman and founding CEO of Health Net, Inc.

Every organization needs a Karen Martin! With deft precision, Karen draws a straight line between clarity, or a lack thereof, to organizational performance. Organizational clarity is a competitive advantage. A must-read packed with invaluable insights and easy-to-deploy solutions!

—Virginia Cattaneo, SVP Client Services at a Fortune 500 investment management organization

Karen Martin's *Clarity First* successfully drives home a point we all need to hear! The clearer we get—in our processes, our org charts, our metrics, and our minds—the better our organizations will run. Let me be clear: we can all benefit from Karen's in-depth look at what keeps us from getting clear and what we need to do to turn that around. Clarity is a gift, and Karen gives it to us with a wonderful intellectual and emotional generosity.

—Ari Weinzwieg, cofounding partner of Zingerman's Community of Businesses and author of the Zingerman's Guide to Good Leading series

Karen Martin identifies a string of problems affecting organizations today: They do not see reality. They accept superficial understanding. They jump to conclusions. They do not investigate further. They tolerate inefficiency and mediocrity. Ultimately, they do not seek clarity. These organizations are at risk for survival. But Karen provides easily understood and necessary remedies, as well as sources and references for further reading, which will help any leader build a truly outstanding organization. *Clarity First* is an eye-opening and highly worthwhile practical guide for daily work.

—Chote Sophonpanich, Chairman of Green Spot Co. Ltd.

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KAREN MARTIN



New York Chicago San Francisco Athens London Madrid
Mexico City Milan New Delhi Singapore Sydney Toronto

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More Than a Moment

*It took me forty years on earth
To reach this sure conclusion:
There is no Heaven but clarity,
No Hell except confusion.*

—JAN STRUTHER FROM THE POEM “CLEAR”¹

We have all experienced those moments in life when hard realities present themselves with complete clarity. It’s the moment you realize that the dream job you worked hard to get has taken you away from doing what you love, or that a relationship you’ve invested years of your life in is shifting in a direction that’s different from what you want. Too often, crisis—a near-miss accident or a frightening diagnosis—is the catalyst that brings these revelations. In those moments we are suddenly able to see the reality we had avoided, hidden, or explained away. Those moments are hard, in part because they present difficult choices: change what you are doing, or continue as you have been with the knowledge that what

¹ Jan Struther, *A Pocketful of Pebbles* (Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1946).

you have is all there will ever be. No surprise, then, that so many people avoid or ignore those moments of clarity.

No surprise, either, that organizations do the same. Ambiguity is the corporate default state, a condition so pervasive that “tolerance for ambiguity” has become a cliché of corporate job postings, a must-have character trait for candidates. Ambiguity is a condition we sink into because it is automatic and it provides short-term benefits that manifest in a number of ways. The manager who posts a vague job description is able to put off defining the specific responsibilities for the role. The project launched with ambiguous purpose leaves the project manager free to interpret results to his advantage. Ambiguity about customer requirements or preferences means you don’t have to work to satisfy them. As John Lennon wrote in the song “Strawberry Fields Forever,” “living is easy with eyes closed.”²

But is it? The short-term benefits of ambiguous organizational behaviors come at enormous long-term cost. Ambiguity leads to substandard performance, as leaders and team members at all levels invest time and effort on priorities that don’t bring significant benefit. Ambiguity causes people to reach inaccurate conclusions, make faulty decisions, or spin their wheels in nonproductive ways. The absence of clarity also creates an opportunity for biases and assumptions to influence how people interpret information. Ambiguity tempts organizations to be reactive: instead of addressing the most important issues, they address those attracting attention at this moment. Ambiguity prevents organizations from operating with focus, discipline, and engagement.

Lack of clarity insinuates itself into the organization in hundreds of ways, both obvious and insidious. Lack of clarity runs the meeting with no agenda. It worms its way into the customer complaint that goes unresolved. It allows product quality issues to persist to

² The Beatles, “Strawberry Fields Forever,” *Magical Mystery Tour*.

the point of costly and reputation-sapping recalls, or market-share erosion. It weakens the decision you aren't sure you have the authority to make, and flashes the exit sign at the talented team members you can't promote because you still don't have budget approval four months into the fiscal year. It lurks in the background when you don't know which of the dozens of metrics really matter, and thus can't explain what success looks like or how you would know when you reach it. The individual and collective lack of clarity keeps leaders and organizations of all types and sizes from performing to their fullest potential.

It often requires a business crisis and a resulting moment of revelation for leaders to recognize how much ambiguity exists and how much it costs them. From that revelation, however, leaders need *more than a moment* of hard work to achieve the clarity needed for outstanding performance.

To demonstrate the difference between organizations operating with ambiguity and those operating with clarity, consider Figure 1.1. Let your gaze take in the whole picture at once. How many dots do you see? Two? Four? Eight? Different numbers depending on where you focus? Organizational ambiguity is like the lattice lines—it obscures or outright hides what matters, making relevant issues harder to see individually and nearly impossible to discern all together.

Investments in clarity are the organizational equivalent of removing the extraneous lattice lines in Figure 1.1 to reveal only dots, as in Figure 1.2. When organizations make clarity a cultural requirement, it's easier to discern relevance from irrelevance. It's clear which market factors, customer behaviors, technological advances, and current events truly affect the organization, and it is far easier to make good decisions about what to do about them.

The superior results are worth it. I have personally seen those results in the clarity-pursuing organizations we work with. For a more objective perspective, consider the evidence from research

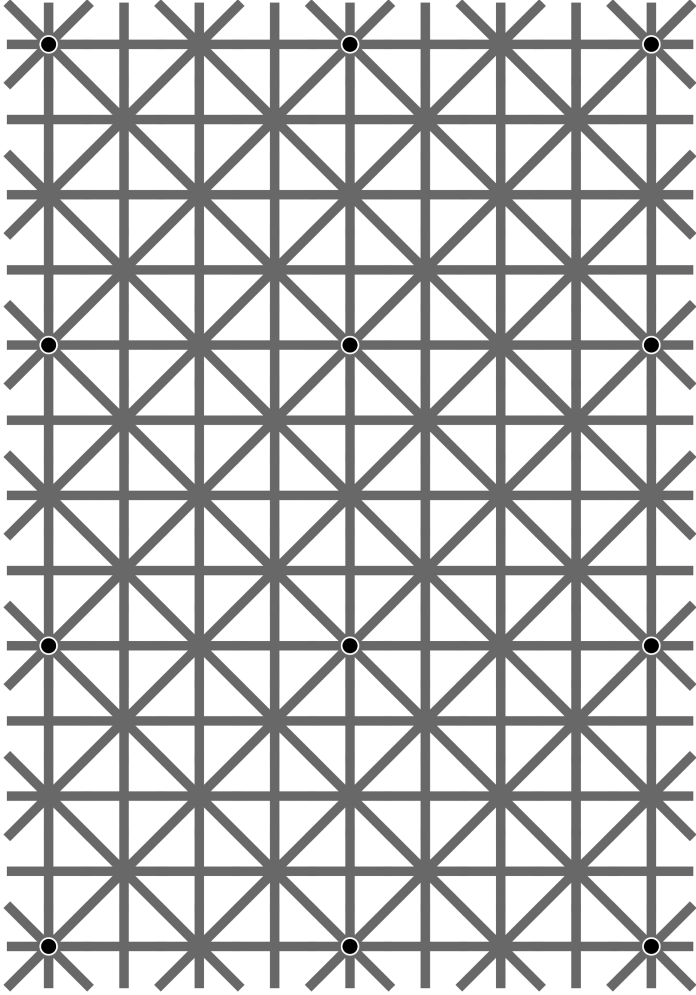


FIGURE 1.1 Organizational ambiguity is similar to Akiyoshi Kitaoka's optical illusion
Figures 1.1 and 1.2 are part of a collection of optical illusions created by Akiyoshi Kitaoka,
professor in the Department of Psychology, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan.
Image used with permission by Dr. Kitaoka.

conducted by Nicholas Bloom, an economist at Stanford University. Bloom, together with Raffaella Sandun of Harvard Business School and John Van Reenan of The MIT-Sloan School of Management, among others, spent more than a decade assessing whether specific management practices have a quantifiable impact on corporate performance, or whether differences in business success are connected with other factors.³

For their research, Bloom et al. looked at three clarity-enabling practices that I also address in this book: targets, incentives, and measurement. Targets refers to whether an organization has defined long-term goals that it achieves by setting shorter-term performance targets. Incentives refer to rewards, such as raises and promotions, given to employees based on objectively sound actions. Measurement refers to the ongoing collection of performance data to assess how the organization is doing, and to actively look for, and act on, areas needing improvement.

Bloom et al.'s dataset includes more than 8,000 companies in 20 countries. Through research studies and surveys, the researchers place the organizations they study on a management continuum from zero to five, with zero encompassing no adoption of sound management practices and five representing excellent practices. Overall, the findings reveal that clarity-inducing management matters—a one-point difference on the continuum translates into 23 percent higher operational productivity, 14 percent greater market capitalization, and 1.4 percent higher annual sales growth.

To understand more about what this looks like in practice, consider a randomized trial Bloom conducted in India in partnership with economists from the World Bank and involving a group of garment manufacturers. The researchers collected data on the management practices of all the manufacturers, but only

³ Bloom et al. summarize their work in the following article: Nicholas Bloom, Raffaella Sandun, and John Van Reenan, "Does Management Really Work?" *Harvard Business Review*, November 2012.

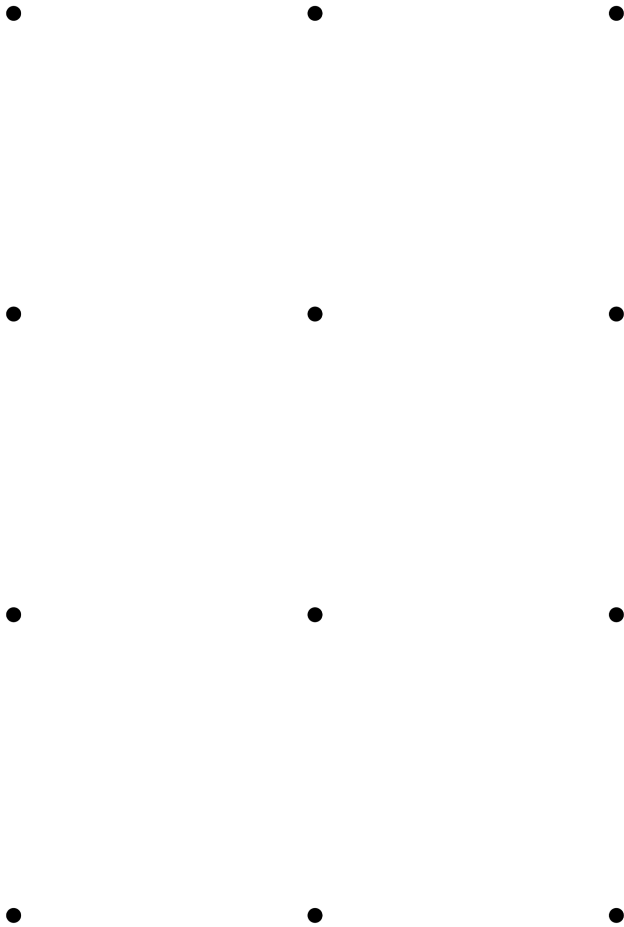


FIGURE 1.2 Clearing the lines of ambiguity

Image used with permission by Dr. Akiyoshi Kitaoka,
Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan.

half—randomly selected from the 28 manufacturers who agreed to participate—received coaching in 38 Lean management practices. The coaching focused on clarity-inducing practices, including quality management, inventory management, staff recognition, and order management.⁴ The coaches were consultants from a large and well-known management consulting firm; they worked with each firm half-time for five months, followed by a number of months of less intensive visits with the manufacturer to answer questions or give advice.

After the consultants finished, the researchers reassessed each organization's performance and found the manufacturing plants that received consulting on average cut product defects by 50 percent; reduced inventory by 20 percent; and raised output by 10 percent compared with the companies that received no consulting. Most critically, however, the senior executives of these businesses said that the companies were *easier to lead* after the intervention. That ease allowed the executives to expand faster, resulting in 30 percent higher profits.⁵

Viewed another way, the consultants helped the manufacturers adopt methods and approaches to increase clarity in the business. To be clear, the outstanding performance they achieved did not happen through luck or coincidence. It occurred through the confluence of demand for their service, product quality, competitive pricing, and by adopting a clarity-driven way of operating. By “operating,” I’m referring to how leaders lead, how managers manage, and how frontline team members do the work. Clarity—or the

⁴ The Lean practices used in this study included standard work, preventive maintenance, daily Lean management, visual management, right-sizing inventory, order segmentation, continuous formalized problem solving, and performance-based reward systems and staff recognition. For a complete list of the 38 Lean management practices they used, see the Appendix on pages 45–48 of the cited study.

⁵ For specifics on the study Bloom and colleagues conducted in India, see: Nicholas Bloom, Benn Eifert, Aprajit Mahajan, David McKenzie, and John Roberts, “Does Management Matter? Evidence from India,” *Quarterly Review of Economics* 128, no. 1 (February 2014).

lack thereof—lies at the core of how a business, government agency, or nonprofit operates. Clarity raises the organization up; ambiguity drags it down. Why?

Because people are responsible for delivering outstanding performance, and people need clarity if they are to make better decisions, deliver better service, innovate at higher levels, solve problems more effectively, develop more competent teams, and manage the work with greater skill—all in the service of providing greater value to customers, the true source of differentiation in the marketplace. People can often do their jobs without clarity; but rarely can they do their jobs well, and never can they perform at a level that is outstanding. I take it further: people have a fundamental right to expect clarity from the organizations they work for.

Clarity creates an environment in which people are able to perform at their best, and thereby enable higher levels of organizational performance. As shown in Figure 1.3, clarity is akin to the water and fertilizer that enable a tree to grow strong. When clarity is infused into the root system of the tree, the tree is able to develop a more robust trunk, strong branches, and vibrant foliage, with enough flexibility that they can flex with the winds of change. Clear operations make team members more efficient and engaged. Clarity also makes people feel more confident, capable, and connected to organizational purpose, priorities, processes, performance, and problem solving, as well as to their leaders and coworkers. Such connection, engagement, and confidence leads to increased employee agility, loyalty, and the drive to innovate.

This is not simply my opinion. When I asked more than 4,000 subscribers and social media connections to share their thoughts on clarity, their responses echoed what I have seen in our consulting work. I asked two questions: When you receive clear information (vs. unclear), how does that make you feel? And how does it affect your ability to perform? The results were consistent: clarity enables better performance by removing a *layer of doubt*.

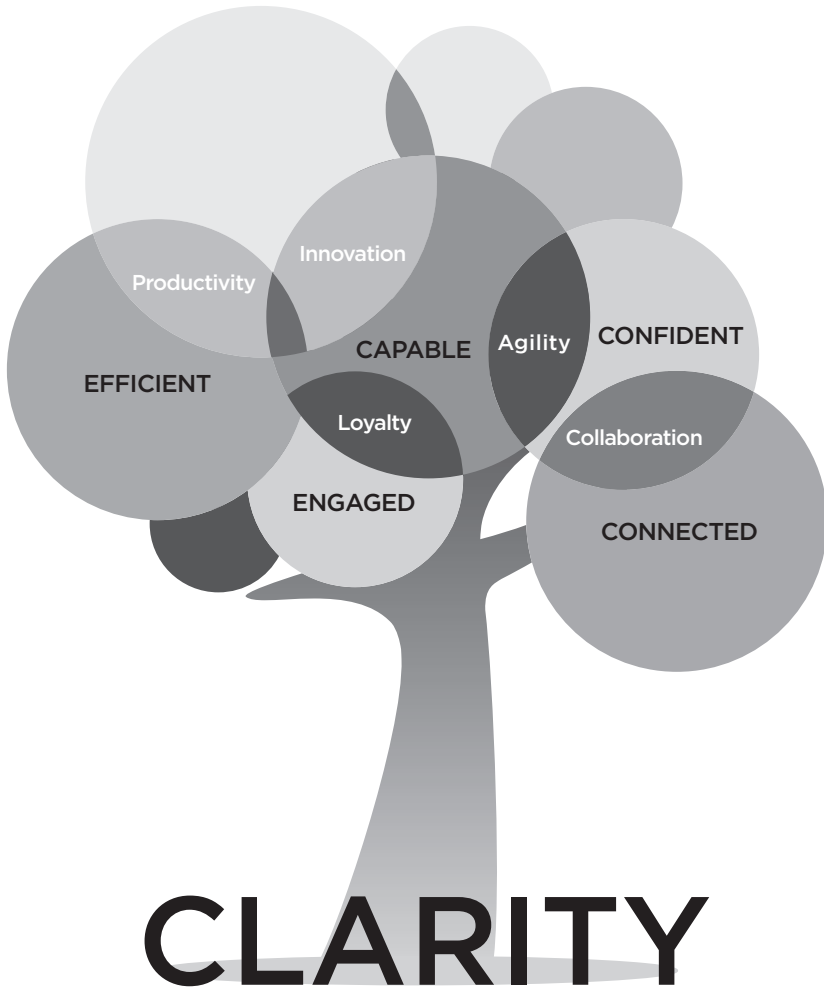


FIGURE 1.3 Clarity grows outstanding performance

Nearly every respondent said that clarity makes them feel confident that they understand the organization’s goals, priorities, and the work itself, as well as expectations for their work. One respondent said, “Clarity helps me feel more confident that my decisions are in line with what the business wants.” Another said, “Clarity reduces the risk of guessing or being wrong.” Yet another said,

“Clear information feels like a path to ‘right the first time.’ Unclear feels like I’m being set up for failure.”

Clarity doesn’t just make people *feel* more capable. It actually makes them more capable and empowered when they know what is expected of them when performing a task.⁶ In their book *The Progress Principle*, authors Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer noted that the need to feel capable grows throughout life as people achieve more and more and compare those achievements with their “personal bests” and those of others. When people feel capable, they are more productive and creative. When they don’t feel capable, their self-worth erodes, they become disengaged, and their work suffers.⁷

While Amabile and Kramer didn’t explore the direct link between clarity and feeling capable, the survey respondents made a causal connection: “I’m able to perform better when I understand what’s needed,” one respondent wrote. Another: “With clarity, I don’t need to ask trivial questions and waste so much time.” And another: “Clarity helps me perform more accurately.”

Of all of the responses, there were two that best summarized the power of clarity: “With unclear information, I feel lost, frustrated, prone to assumptions, confused, worried, distracted, and I lack confidence” and “Clarity makes me feel confident, powerful, and energized.”

Which of those situations do you believe will help you deliver the greatest value to customers and help grow the business? Clarity enables greater productivity, stronger collaboration of all involved parties, and better ideas—all of which lead to better organizational performance.

⁶ Marilyn Gist, “Self-Efficacy: Implications for Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management,” *The Academy of Management Review* 12, no. 3 (July 1987), 472–85.

⁷ Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, *The Progress Principle* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2011), 68, 90.

WHAT IS CLARITY?

The simplest definition of clarity is *the quality of being easily and accurately understood*. Clarity in a business context goes deeper than that, however, since it exists in multiple forms: as an organizational value, a state of being, and an outcome.

When clarity exists as a value, individuals and the organizations they work for operate in a way that places a premium on clarity and rewards the people who seek it. In that environment leaders and team members pursue clarity in their daily activities, and cultivate an expectation of clarity throughout the organization.⁸ An example of clarity as a value can be seen in Alan Mulally, the former CEO of Ford, who applauded members of his team when they called attention to drops in performance or other areas of the business that needed attention instead of staying silent.⁹

Alternatively, organizations can operate in a way that dismisses clarity and penalizes those people who seek it. At Wells Fargo, for example, employees were fired when they tried to report wrongdoing when they saw their peers opening false accounts in order to meet new account targets. Opening unauthorized accounts was reportedly condoned by bank leadership, and employees who refused to comply or actively worked to call the practice to light were penalized.¹⁰

Wells Fargo is an extreme example of how clarity might be discouraged or dismissed. More commonly, organizations are benignly ambiguous, operating with a lack of clarity because it seems to be easier and safer in the short term. Remember, ambiguity is the default stage—it is what happens automatically.

⁸ The same is true when creating the conditions for operating with greater focus, discipline, and engagement.

⁹ Jonathan Gifford, “100 Great Leadership Ideas,” *Marshall Cavendish Business*, December 2010, 64–65.

¹⁰ Matt Egan, “I Called the Wells Fargo Ethics Line and Was Fired,” *CNN Money*, September 21, 2016.

Clarity, in contrast, requires work for a person to achieve it as a state of being, and it requires focused effort for a person to give clarity to others in the form of clear communication. Clarity can also be something you receive from others when they communicate clearly with you. In this sense, clarity exists inside a person's mind, as well as in the space between that person and another with whom he or she wants to share information.

What does clarity as a state of being look like? Clarity exhibits many qualities, the most important of which are coherence, precision, and elegance. Clarity as coherence comes through information that is both purposeful and logical. Precise information is succinct. Elegant information is crisp and easy for the intended recipient of the information to grasp.

Despite the multiple forms and multiple qualities that clarity possesses, there are also things clarity is not. Clarity is a close cousin to truth, for example, but they are not one and the same. A person or an organization can issue untruthful statements that are received as true because they have the coherence, precision, and elegance of clear communication. There is even a term for this—*agnotology*—coined by Stanford Professor Robert Proctor as the study of the willful act to spread ignorance or doubt.¹¹

Clarity is also a close cousin to transparency, but they are not identical either. One can be clear with the information he chooses to share while withholding some of the details. Likewise, one can believe she's being transparent without being clear. Transparency is a noble goal in many situations, but it's not a "one size fits all" virtue. There are good reasons why the Healthcare Insurance Portability Protection Act (HIPPA) precludes healthcare providers from sharing private patient information outside the patient's direct care team, for example, but those reasons don't apply to doctors writing clear orders, or providing clear direction to their patient's treatment

¹¹ Robert Proctor, *The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford University Press, 2008).

team. Generally, though, transparency serves efforts to operate with greater clarity.

Finally, clarity is different from certainty. Certainty is not always possible, but achieving clarity nearly always is. For example, companies can't always predict when a competing product will rob them of market share, when a natural disaster will cut off access to a key supplier, or when political priorities will shift so that what they thought was tomorrow's concern becomes today's crisis. But organizations can improve their predictive powers and the speed with which they respond by gathering information, interpreting it, and communicating findings clearly. In this way, both clarity and uncertainty can coexist in the same environment. Similarly, certainty is a dangerous mindset in the early stages of problem solving, but it's essential to operate from a clear problem definition.

Organizations can also find themselves in a clear situation about which they communicate in an unclear way. Such was the case during the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant disaster that occurred in 2011. Fukushima staff members were certain that the earthquake and tsunami had damaged the plant to the point that it approached—and then entered—a full-fledged meltdown. Communications from the plant obscured that point, however, and thus made the situation seem less urgent. That lack of clarity grew out of an in-house policy prohibiting staff from using the words core “meltdown.” The utility instead used the less serious phrase core “damage” for two months, which many believe delayed remedial actions that could have reduced the release of radioactive waste.¹²

Beyond what clarity is lies the positive results clarity can bring. Clarity enables every department to understand the organizational priorities and focus its resources on fulfilling them. Clarity ensures that people at least have the information, the processes, and the authority they need to do their jobs to the best of their ability.

¹² “Tepco Head Apologizes for 3/11 Ban Issued on ‘Meltdown.’” *Japan Times*, June 21, 2016.

Clarity enables higher productivity, better decision making, more effective and timely problem solving, more relevant action, and better relationships—all of which lead to higher levels of performance for both the individual and the organization. Clarity thrills customers, increases profits, and lowers costs. It also makes the people within an organization happier and more engaged with their work.

Clarity, in short, is the key to outstanding performance. So why doesn't everyone seek and operate with it? Stated another way, if it's so good for us, why is it so rare?

WHY ISN'T CLARITY MORE COMMON?

I've been examining the question of why clarity isn't more common for decades, and the most distilled answer I have come to is that clarity is rare because it requires a lot more short-term work than does ambiguity. There's no way around it. Defining everything, from why your organization exists and what its priorities are, to how people must operate based on their clearly defined role, requires time and effort so that everyone understands the fundamentals and is working together to point in the same direction. Considering that it can take two people half a day to get clear on a question as trivial as what to eat for dinner, it's no wonder that many feel that the complexity of the organizational environment makes clarity seem impossible.

Which highlights another reason why clarity is so rare: because it's easy to rationalize why you don't have it. Uncertainty and complexity are facts of life and business. You will never know everything, and you are going to have to make the best decision you can anyway. Knowing that, people get trapped in a "we don't know and we can't possibly know" mindset. They confuse clarity with certainty or simplicity, and since they can't have the latter two

they eschew the former as well. Such victim-like thinking can lead organizations to reject new ideas. Alternatively, they might jump on the bandwagon of a hot new product without defining what the organization brings to that market and what it hopes to get out of it. In either case, the organization is not positioned as well as it could be for outstanding performance.

I've also heard organizations justify ambiguity as necessary for creative work. The education scholar Laurence Peter reportedly quipped, "If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk a sign?"¹³ The implication is that you need to allow for some disorder if you hope to achieve something great. Tim Harford, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Messy*, posits as well that creativity, innovation, and other types of performance are aided by some degree of messiness. People who operate in methodical ways or according to established norms, in contrast, may become constrained by them and fail to reach the highest levels of performance.¹⁴

But here, again, the tendency is to falsely equate mess with ambiguity, just as people equate certainty with clarity. Mess and ambiguity are not equivalents. They are peers. You can have a messy situation with many moving parts and utmost flexibility about how to explore it, *and* you can have complete ambiguity about why you are in that situation and what you hope to change about it. Alternatively, you can have that same messy situation and the same flexibility alongside clarity about why you are there and what—in general terms—you hope to accomplish. Ambiguity makes any kind of work harder to do, but it almost guarantees a disaster when it comes to messy work. Clarity, in contrast, makes messy work easier and more productive.

¹³ This quote is often misattributed to Albert Einstein. Peter is the author of *The Peter Principle*. The quote on the cluttered desk can be found in *Peter's Quotations: Ideas for Our Times* (William Morrow, 1977), 339.

¹⁴ Tim Harford, *Messy* (Riverhead Books, 2016).

Take problem solving and innovation. Both are messy. Both types of work put teams in a proverbial house of mirrors in which they have to try doors to see which ones open and what lies within. If teams do not enter the house with clear inputs in the form of current-state facts or customer requirements, they'll have no way of knowing if a pathway or a discovery is useful.¹⁵ Clear inputs are enablers of effective creativity, and clear outputs are required for creative work to be properly appreciated and used.

Thoughts on VUCA

Introduced by the U.S. Army War College in the 1990s to describe the conditions it faced in Afghanistan and Iraq, the acronym VUCA—which stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity—is now a term tossed about in corporate boardrooms, in executive strategy sessions, and among management consultants. It is increasingly mentioned as a business condition that requires a different leadership approach.

Here's the problem: I hear far too many people use the term in a hand-wringing, shoulder-shrugging way, as though they're being held hostage by conditions over which they have no control. Some use it as an excuse for not setting their sights higher, not stretching farther, not working harder to retain or regain market share, and not striving for excellence. It's become an excuse for settling for less. Such defeatist thinking can negatively affect product development decisions, annual business plans, and strategy. I'm fairly

¹⁵ For readers of my earlier book *The Outstanding Organization*, “messy” is different from the kind of organizational chaos I address in that book. Getting to the other side of messy work usually involves a deliberate, methodical, and controlled process, as with problem solving. Chaos, in contrast, is undisciplined and out of control.

certain that's not how the Army War College intended it, but that's how some in business are using it.

I see clarity as an antidote to the negatives of VUCA thinking, because with clarity, corporate executives can exhibit more control than they realize over the four VUCA "realities." Volatility is the toughest one to control and to see coming, but when leaders are clear about internal and external conditions it is easier to recognize volatility on its way and respond accordingly. Uncertainty is likewise a reality of business, but, again, far too many leaders assume that uncertainty is universal rather than taking the time to get clear on as many elements as they can. Complexity, for its part, creates an opportunity to simplify, as most complex situations and concepts can be broken down, clarified, and addressed.

Ambiguity is the one "reality" that doesn't belong in the acronym at all, since ambiguity is a man-made condition that exists within the other three. Nothing that's ambiguous needs to remain so. Its antidote is clarity. Let's rename it "VUC." We live in a VUC world.

In addition to the fact that ambiguity is easier in the short term and often justified as either normal or better, there are other reasons grounded in human behavior and psychology that explain why organizations and the people who work for them do not seek clarity in everything they do. These reasons, highlighted below, explain why managers do not understand the executive team's top priorities; why design teams make assumptions about customer preferences that don't pan out; and why companies are caught off guard when data paints a different performance picture than what they had assumed.

Ignorance

The first step in changing any habit is recognizing that you have it. This is harder than it seems with clarity. Since clarity lies in that middle state between communicated and received, it can be vulnerable to points of disconnect between what people say and what is heard. I might think an idea is perfectly clear, but fail to get it across to you. You, in turn, may think you understand something but in fact be ignorant—in the sense that you lack knowledge—about the nature and scope of the issue.

Consider a situation we recently encountered. A vice president at a financial institution was tasked by his CEO to create a continuous improvement (CI) culture in the organization, and contacted our firm to discuss a potential engagement. At the beginning of the conversation, he thought that his CEO's request was clear. But as I asked questions to understand the desired end state, he realized he lacked clarity on many of the fundamentals, such as: How was the CEO using the term "CI"? What did she mean by a "CI culture"? What does that look like to her? Was she prepared to champion an organization-wide shift from command-and-control leadership to delegating authority for tactical improvement to the frontline team members who are the experts in doing the work? Or did she want some other flavor of "CI"?

Such conversations are not rare in our line of work, and they expose the fact that clarity for one may breed ambiguity in another without either knowing that ambiguity is there. Situations like this fall into the category of *naive ignorance*, brought about when a person does not know what he or she does not know. The CEO likely thought she was clear, and so did the VP—at first. Only with additional questions and information did he realize that he needed to spend more time understanding what the CEO's true end goal was and reassess the options for achieving it.

Not all manifestations of ignorance are as innocent as this one. A second form of ignorance is what I refer to as *conditioned*

ignorance, whereby people are likely aware that they don't have the full picture, but have been conditioned to look the other direction and not seek clarity. This can happen easily in business environments that make clear they do not value employees who ask questions or surface problems. Team members working for these organizations become conditioned to ignore ambiguity or look away from situations that invite scrutiny.

The third and last form of ignorance is *willful ignorance*, whereby a person makes a conscious and independent choice not to seek clarity about an issue. I say willful ignorance is a choice, but in some cases it is only a choice in the most literal sense, made at a deep psychological level. When family members collude in denying abuse or addiction, for example, they are engaging in willful ignorance.¹⁶ The same happens when leaders refuse to acknowledge significant competitive threats, and instead dismiss them as irrelevant. For example, leadership of the now-defunct Blockbuster refused to accept that new competitor Netflix had a compelling offering that took advantage of customer frustration over Blockbuster's late return policy, as well as its reliance on the success of recent releases to generate demand for rentals. By the time Blockbuster leadership could no longer deny reality, Netflix had gained insurmountable momentum.¹⁷

The fact that many organizations and people have become habituated to ambiguity exacerbates the lack of awareness many have about what is clear and what isn't.

Lack of Curiosity

Another obstacle to clarity is a lack of curiosity about what you do not know. Lack of curiosity is not our natural state. As infants we emerge from the womb as curious and clarity-seeking beings.

¹⁶ Daniel Goleman, "Insights Into Self-Deception," *New York Times*, May 12, 1985.

¹⁷ Marc Graser, "Epic Fail: How Blockbuster Could Have Owned Netflix," *Variety.com*, November 12, 2013.

“Why?” is the most frequent question children ask, and reflects our innate desire to know. The second most common question—“Why not?”—allows us to test new ideas and challenge thinking. It pushes us to try things people say we can’t accomplish or to differentiate between two options.

But many children, teens, and young adults have their innate curiosity drummed out of them by otherwise well-meaning parents, teachers, and early bosses who are overloaded or insecure. We get dismissed with a, “Because I said so,” or “It just is,” or “Stop asking questions!” Every time that happens a child is taught that it is bad to want to understand. As producer Brian Grazer puts it in his bestselling book *A Curious Mind*, “Curiosity has been strangled. It’s considered a wild card. But that’s exactly wrong.”¹⁸

Popular culture likewise depicts curiosity as a negative, as in the saying “curiosity killed the cat,” or in the fact that childhood’s most famous emblem of curiosity—Curious George—always got into trouble and needed to be rescued by the Man with the Yellow Hat. Curiosity too often is presented as dangerous, childish, and something a person is supposed to grow out of.

Yet curiosity is necessary for innovation, for effective problem solving, and for any meaningful learning and improvement—as well as for strong leadership. Only by asking, Why? Why not? What if? and How could we? do organizations successfully tackle new problems and seek out new ideas. In fact, none of the large problems we face as humankind—climate change, intractable wars, antibiotic resistance, eroding water quality—can be solved without creative solutions that begin with curiosity.

Fortunately, organizations are filled with people with dormant curiosity waiting to be sparked. Many of those people have been habituated to the idea that curiosity is dangerous—it can uncover facts you’d just as soon not know, or worse: get you fired. Maybe

¹⁸ Brian Grazer, *A Curious Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 95.

they have seen that people who ask why and why not get punished or don't make it far.

Organizations can ignite that dormant curiosity. They need to be thoughtful about it, though. With a bit of coaxing, curiosity can reemerge *if* leaders create a safe environment in which asking why is both encouraged and rewarded.

Hubris

In the example I gave of the financial institution that wanted to develop a CI culture, the VP didn't realize that he lacked full clarity about his CEO's vision. When he realized he needed clarity, he went back to the CEO to get it. Not everyone has that response. Some people respond to clarifying questions by digging their heels in further, asserting what they think they know. In these cases, their hubris is an obstacle to clarity. They think they know, but they don't, and they aren't going to ask.

Hubris can also manifest in subtler ways. In the value stream transformation work we do with clients, for example, part of the diagnostic and design work involves a method known as value stream mapping. In these sessions, senior leaders who oversee the functions in a value stream work to understand how value moves through the organization toward the customer. At some point in nearly every session—and often at many points—a leader says, “Really?” in response to information provided by a peer in a different function. Leaders think they know how the organization delivers value to the customer, but these sessions universally reveal to participants that they don't have the full picture.

Organizations can address this obstacle first by adopting a growth mindset about the business. In her book *Mindset*, psychologist Carol Dweck describes her years of research on the psychological factors affecting learning and education. She finds that people can be categorized as having one of two mindsets. A person with a fixed mindset believes that intelligence is innate,

and people are either “good at something” or not. A person with a growth mindset believes that intelligence can develop, and we can learn skills that allow us to get better at certain tasks than we were at the beginning.¹⁹

When she applies her findings to the personalities that often rise in the business world, she finds that many executives who ascend to the top ranks of their companies have a fixed mindset—they rose to the top of their field partly on account of their self-confidence and their decisive nature. They believe they are good at what they do, and they believe they *know* what matters. It’s hard, if you are one of those people, to recognize that the very qualities that got you where you are may be keeping you from getting any further. It’s equally difficult if you work with one of those people and they refuse to look deeper at an issue.

Fortunately, mindsets are malleable. People can adopt a growth mindset with reflection, coaching, and some work on the self. They can choose to let go of their belief that they know everything and start asking more curiosity-driven questions of more people.

I know leaders who have managed to do just that. Working on the self is necessary even for the most humble leaders. Leaders at Toyota, which has long promoted humility as a corporate value, learned that lesson during the recall of Toyota vehicles that began in 2009. Toyota had been receiving reports from drivers of “unintended acceleration” but dismissed them as technically impossible—Toyotas are built with redundant systems designed to prevent movement of the vehicle when the brake is pressed. Knowing that, Toyota leaders assumed that the incidences were entirely cases of user error. It took a fatal accident and an investigation before Toyota leaders looked again at the issue and used problem solving to uncover the true root causes: floor mats improperly sized or installed that caught the accelerator in some cases; and sticky accelerator pedals that did not come

¹⁹ Carol Dweck, *Mindset* (Ballantine Books, 2007).

up when released in others.²⁰ That knowledge led Toyota to initiate programs, such as free first-year maintenance for owners of new Toyotas, to foster more direct contact with the customer.

Cognitive Biases

Psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky were the first academics to systematically study human decision making to determine whether the classical economics view of rationality was correct. What they found is that many decisions are subject to bias. Biases serve as filters for the brain—they sift through the thousands of pieces of information that come at us at any moment in the day and let through only the ones they deem important. “Important” for your brain refers mainly to the facts you need to stay safe.

Since Kahneman and Tversky conducted their first experiments in the 1970s, scientists have identified dozens of biases.²¹ Biases allow you to process information and make quick assessments. Is this a good business deal? Can I count on this partner to deliver when they said they would? Biases are not inherently bad. But they can operate unconsciously, taking over when you don’t have the time or the information to consider a decision carefully. Indeed, biases kick in most often when we haven’t done the work to achieve clarity and make decisions steered by clear goals and available facts.

Biased decisions sometimes work out OK. When that happens, it reinforces the idea that all a leader has to do is “follow her instincts,” a dangerous position not only because biases are unreliable by

²⁰ For a full account of the actions Toyota took during the 2008 financial crisis and the concurrent issues with unintended acceleration, see Jeff Liker and Timothy Ogden, *Toyota Under Fire: Lessons for Turning Crisis into Opportunity* (McGraw-Hill, 2011).

²¹ Wikipedia currently lists 175 biases (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases), which were categorized into four types by Buster Benson (<https://betterhumans.coach.me/cognitive-bias-cheat-sheet-55a472476b18#.ptoavi4fs>). Benson’s categories have been beautifully arranged by John Manoogian III on his cognitive bias codex: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases#/media/File:Cognitive_Bias_Codex_-_180%2B_biases,_designed_by_John_Manoogian_III_\(jm3\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases#/media/File:Cognitive_Bias_Codex_-_180%2B_biases,_designed_by_John_Manoogian_III_(jm3).jpg).

definition, but because my biases may be different from yours, and yours from those of another leader in your organization. We are not all steering in the same direction if bias is driving us.

In particular, organizations need to beware of biases linked to past successes or failures. Organizations that once led their fields often have hardwired cultural practices that came to be during a past era and were positively reinforced by strong performance. In a changed context, however, those same practices may guide organizational decision making even though they have outlived their relevance. The same is true of decisions that did not work out—leaders may be biased against projects or partnerships that share some qualities with a failed effort, despite different circumstances.

Time Constraints

Organizations give people at all levels far more to do on a given day than they can reasonably achieve. People often feel like they don't have the time to stop, assess, and consider whether the actions they take by rote are the right ones. Furthermore, if we have a quota to fill or a deadline to meet, we work to fill the quota or meet the deadline—in truth, our performance evaluation usually depends on it.

Few of us are in control of our time to the extent that we can dictate how we spend every minute of it. But those who are, or who can influence how time is spent by others, should invest in giving people a percentage of their time for assessments and problem solving. One of the most wasteful organizational practices is rework. Over and over we see time spent redoing work that could have been done properly the first go-around, and the rework time is far greater than the time that could have been spent assuring clarity up front. When you take that perspective, you find that operating with greater clarity is more efficient for both the giver and receiver of information. Clarity requires the time and space to think through requests, needs, and ideas, but the resulting communication and actions will be more precise and purposeful.

Fear

All of the psychological and behavioral obstacles to clarity share a common cause: fear. Fear comes in many forms and has many roots. Clarity-related fear is nearly always centered on the fear of knowing, because what a person learns through the process of seeking clarity may be more painful in the short term than remaining in ignorance. Fear keeps people from speaking up when they believe that a problem exists. Fear keeps people from taking action because it could mean more work. People fear that they will be ridiculed or punished for calling attention to something. People may also experience situational apathy, whereby the risk of calling attention to an ambiguous situation outweighs the potential benefit. All of these fears may be well founded. Perhaps you have seen people in your organization get fired, demoted, or marginalized for asking difficult questions. Perhaps a past effort to get clear on a problem's cause called attention to one of your decisions or was blocked by someone who didn't want the truth revealed.

Yet in most cases the fear people feel about seeking clarity in the workplace is based on incomplete thinking. The problem you are avoiding exists whether you seek clarity on it or not. The longer you wait, the worse the consequences of that problem can become, requiring greater effort to fix. As Socrates said, "There is only one good, knowledge, and only one evil, ignorance."²² The good news is that in most cases, the damage wrought by not knowing is far worse than the pain of knowing. Clarity is liberating, even if its results are hard to hear.

For a modern example, consider again how Ford's Alan Mulally applauded his team members for calling attention to drops in performance or other problems. In many ways, Mulally's leadership style echoes that of Toyota leaders. Part of the Toyota philosophy is that "no problem is a problem." At Toyota, this shortened version of

²² Socrates, quoted in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 1 (3rd c. A.D.).

leader Taiichi Ohno’s original quote means that problems—defined as a gap between where you are and where you’d like or need to be—are inevitable when you strive to reach higher levels of excellence. If there are no problems, you either aren’t reaching far enough, or you haven’t looked carefully at what’s in front of you.

HOW CLEAR IS YOUR ORGANIZATION?

Ford and Toyota—and a host of other clarity-centric organizations—offer compelling models for those in any industry who want to break through organizational ambiguity. They show how leaders and the organizations they run can embrace clarity, and in doing so break free from many of the factors that lead to ambiguous thinking.

To begin seeking greater clarity, I invite you to take a self-assessment to learn the extent to which your organization lacks clarity in its basic foundations.²³ Organizations fall into one of three categories when it comes to clarity, based on how actively or well the people within them work individually and collectively to overcome the factors outlined above: *clarity pursuers*, *clarity avoiders*, and the *clarity blind*.²⁴

Organizations that are clarity pursuers view clarity as an organizational value. They institutionalize norms and behaviors that encourage people to seek clarity in both the information they deliver and the information they receive. The institutional investment firm Bridgewater Associates, and its outspoken leader Ray Dalio, has a reputation as a clarity-pursuing organization.²⁵ People are expected to be transparent, honest, and clear about the performance of their work and that of others—to the point of discomfort. Bridgewater

²³ To take a self-assessment, visit www.clarityfirstbook.com.

²⁴ These three categories apply to individuals as well. More about this in Chapter 7.

²⁵ Alexandra Stevenson and Matthew Goldstein, “Bridgewater’s Culture Is Like a ‘Nudist Camp’ at First: ‘Very Awkward,’” *New York Times*, March 7, 2017.

is an example of clarity-on-steroids; this extreme approach isn't what we suggest for our clients, but the idea of encouraging clarity is right on.

In contrast, clarity avoiders could be clear but choose not to be in one of three ways. Type 1 clarity avoiders use *intentional deceit* to achieve a defined purpose. An organization like Takata, the airbag supplier that pled guilty to knowingly distributing faulty products, is a classic Type 1 clarity avoider in that the organization actively set out to deceive people. During indictment proceedings, for example, court records revealed that the CEO directed a junior engineer to remove test data that revealed air bag ruptures from a report that was being sent to an automaker. The data manipulation practice was so common that Takata had a term for it: "XX-ing the data."²⁶

Type 2 clarity avoiders operate, in contrast, with *strategic ambiguity* and avoid clarity on the grounds that clarity could force one side to take a position that damages a relationship, initiates a conflict, or limits future options. In the business world, strategic ambiguity may be used in contract negotiations as a technique to keep a potential supplier from knowing it "has it in the bag," which can result in a less favorable price. Strategic ambiguity has its use, but too often we see it applied to situations that don't warrant it. In one example, a client refused to share an organization chart with its staff, arguing that the information could be used by competitors to poach employees. In another, a company refused to post a diagram of its product roadmap. In both cases leaders argued that the information was competitive intelligence that they needed to keep secret, so they kept it ambiguous for everyone.

Type 3 clarity avoiders elevate *willful ignorance* into an organizational mandate. The example I gave above of Blockbuster earlier

²⁶ Hiroko Tabuchi and Neal Boudette, "3 Takata Executives Face Criminal Charges Over Exploding Airbags," *New York Times*, January 13, 2017.

in this chapter demonstrates the head-in-the-sand approach that can take over in organizations that avoid confronting the reality of slipping market share or falling performance. Willfully ignorant organizations are not usually nefarious. More often they are once-successful institutions whose way of operating no longer serves in a changed competitive landscape. Their way of working isn't working, but they don't know any other way and so avoid confronting reality.

Organizations that are clarity blind fall into two categories: those who don't recognize clarity's importance and those who do but can't perceive when they don't have it. Samsung, for example, exhibited clarity blindness when it thought that the cause for exploding batteries in its Galaxy Note 7 smartphone was a supply chain problem when it turned out to be a design flaw.²⁷

No organization pursues clarity all the time, but few are as clear as they could be or should be to enable outstanding performance. Understanding your current state will put you in a strong position to take steps to inject clarity.

A CALL TO ACTION

How do we produce more than a few moments of clarity?

Begin by knowing the state of clarity in your organization, and understanding where you fit and the influence you have to encourage clarity in every realm you touch. The recommendations in this book are for leaders at all levels of an organization. Whether you lead a functional area, a project team, an improvement team, or lead the organization as a whole, you can improve your personal embrace of clarity and encourage it in your operations, as well as in those people within your realm of influence.

²⁷ Hayley Tsukayama, "Samsung Cites Two Separate Battery Issues for Its Note 7 Recall Woes," *Washington Post*, January 22, 2017.

The following chapters provide specific actions you can take to produce the greatest benefits in clarity. Since neither clarity nor organizational performance is strictly linear, no chapter stands fully on its own. It's the interrelationship of management practices—and the degree of clarity in each—that provides for overall clarity. That said, clarity pursuit can start anywhere you feel you can make the greatest impact.

Chapter 2 focuses on your organizational Purpose: why the organization exists, and how that *why* is communicated to all team members and embedded in what you do. Chapter 3 connects Purpose to the organizational Priorities you set by using a clarifying methodology for defining priorities, gaining consensus around them, and tracking progress toward achieving them. Chapter 4 addresses Process clarity, including the organization's value streams and the processes that support them. Chapter 5 highlights the methods and approaches you need to monitor and continuously improve organizational Performance. Chapter 6 offers instruction and coaching around Problem Solving as an organization-wide capability that everyone—from executive leadership to the frontline worker—needs to achieve outstanding performance. Chapter 7 addresses you as an individual and the work you need to do to achieve personal clarity. Chapter 8 summarizes the key points from the book and offers ways for you to begin your commitment to building a culture of clarity.

Clarity, like forming any new habit, requires practice if you want to overcome the default mode of ambiguity, and practice takes time. Just as you wouldn't become a concert pianist in the first month of taking piano lessons, you won't reach the goal of consistently pursuing and operating with clarity overnight. Changing an entire organization into one that pursues clarity takes even longer and requires classic behavior modification. The larger the organization and the more entrenched it is in ambiguity, the more time it will take to transform it. You need to fight every instinct that

screams for faster results than are psychologically and socially possible. Patient persistence is key.

Some of the time you spend will be dedicated to creating a safe environment for clarity to emerge and thrive. Organizations have to dispel the fear people have of asking questions or displaying their curiosity and deploy the means to surface problems and deal with them swiftly and matter-of-factly.

In some organizations, fear can be fairly entrenched. To show people you are serious about pursuing clarity, create safe spaces for candid conversations and experiment with overtly rewarding curiosity and clarity. Successful experiments will help accelerate the removal of fear. Chip away at it until you've created an environment in which it's not only safe to be clear, it's also an expectation. But be warned: consistency is key. When someone faces criticism, ridicule, or any sort of punitive action for seeking or operating with clarity, you will find yourself back at square one. This requires that you take a hard look at your leadership team and assess fit for creating a clarity-pursuing work environment.

The final requirement for success is will. *You have to want it.* Building clarity into your daily practices and into your organization's culture will take some effort, and will is the glue that helps new behaviors stick. The more ambiguity your organization has operated with in the past, the more effort it will take to transform how it operates today. The strength of will—your unwavering commitment—will provide the tenacity you'll need to lead this type of change.

I recently said that to the CEO at a client that had been adopting clarity-inducing Lean management practices, but doing so in a half-hearted way. "You have to be all-in if you want results," I told him. Initially he was irritated by my comment, but later he shared with me that my frank words triggered a change in perspective. He said he thought I hadn't shown enough respect for the progress they had made, but then, "I realized you were right," he said. "I hadn't

fully committed. I guess I was trying to see if I could get significant results without full commitment, and I see now that's not how it works."

Correct. Halfway is *not* how clarity works. Step-by-step, however, is.

I believe in the power of people to change themselves and lead change across an organization. I've seen it firsthand. With awareness, practice in a safe environment, time, and will, you can begin to realize the productivity-increasing, morale-boosting, and performance-enhancing benefits of clarity. Let's get to it.

About the Author

Karen Martin helps organizations use clarity, focus, discipline, and engagement to achieve higher levels of performance on financial, operational, and cultural fronts.

She is president of The Karen Martin Group, Inc., a global consulting firm. Karen and her team have helped organizations such as Adventist Health, AT&T, Chevron, GlaxoSmithKline, Epson, International Monetary Fund, Lenovo, Mayo Clinic, Prudential Insurance, and the United States Department of Homeland Security learn more effective ways to design work systems, grow market share, solve business problems, and accelerate improvement.

An in-demand international speaker, she is the Shingo Prize-winning author of *The Outstanding Organization* and coauthor of three additional business performance improvement books.

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