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FOREWORD BY DAVID BROOKS

THE
CRUCIBLES
THAT
SHAPE US

NAVIGATING *the*
DEFINING CHALLENGES
of LEADERSHIP



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THE CRUCIBLE OF MISSED MEANING

*But blessed are your eyes, for they see,
and your ears, for they hear [and understand].*

JESUS, MATTHEW 13:16

We had the experience, but we missed the meaning.

T. S. ELIOT, *FOUR QUARTETS*

SHORTLY AFTER BECOMING president of Westmont College in 2007, I met Mary Docter and Laura Montgomery, two veteran professors who developed the “cycle of global learning,” a framework and philosophy for our study-abroad programs. The cycle of global learning can counteract T. S. Eliot’s famous observation, “We had the experience, but we missed the meaning.” This three-semester process begins with a pre-trip seminar that orients students to traveling internationally and understanding cultures different from their own. During the second semester, professors accompany students on their journey to help them interpret their experiences. The semester after the trip, students take a reentry seminar to bring the learning home.



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In contrast, *the crucible of missed meaning* refers to the failure to perceive reality accurately. Misperception can lead to responses that miss the mark and fail to provide a successful strategy or solution. What we thought would work doesn't. Those we strive to lead become frustrated. Even though our idea looked great, it's impossible to implement in reality and causes a loss of confidence across the organization. How then do we learn to see and perceive, hear and understand?

In Matthew 13, Jesus says we'll always be seeing but never perceiving, always hearing, but never understanding. What applied in Jesus' day continues to be true today. We can be unwilling to truly see our current situation and its context accurately. How can we learn to look with the eyes of understanding and anticipate what's coming next? And once we see, or perceive, how do we make an appropriate and timely response?

Jesus taught in parables to help us make a gestalt shift and capture a deeper meaning and reality than we first perceived. Parables often reveal a central spiritual truth that brings insight into our human condition. This indirect approach penetrates our natural defenses that resist God. The Greek words for *seeing* and *perceiving* include both seeing with the eye and perceiving with the mind. Jesus encourages us to develop the capacity to look at a situation and perceive the deeper realities at play through our observation and experience.

In similar fashion, our contemporary context helps us recognize the ongoing challenge of perceiving reality accurately. Iris Murdoch writes poignantly about the nature of the spiritual life being a perpetual quest to perceive things as they really are, not as we wish they were.¹ She also notes that once we perceive reality accurately, we need to act correctly and appropriately. But how can we be sure that we're perceiving reality accurately and making an appropriate response? The answer lies in part in developing our capacity for perceptual insight.

When training a new leader or addressing a mistake, we often tend to focus on the presenting problem rather than the real problem.

When we get drawn into a situation, we may believe we've understood it adequately and created an appropriate response to get back on track. But in so many cases, we fail to stay emotionally connected and don't completely understand the problem. The remedy is to stay engaged but sufficiently differentiated, so that we can make course corrections as we refine our perception and gain wider understanding.

FOCUSED ATTENTION LEADS TO WIDER UNDERSTANDING

Effective leadership is built on focused attention, the ability to communicate, and the capacity to see how discrete particulars fit into a larger whole. In 2016, Charles Duhigg released his award-winning book *Smarter Faster Better*.² The volume presents a wide array of information in eight highly appealing, tightly written chapters, including one on focus. This chapter deals with the difference between the mass of people who see only discrete particulars and the exceptional but limited few who can weave these discrete particulars into a meaningful whole.

In one tragic example, he tells the sad and demoralizing story of an Air France jet that crashed due to “cognitive tunneling,” the tendency of our brain to become overly focused on what's directly in front of us. This phenomenon causes all kinds of accidents, because we lose our ability to balance the need to focus on specific stimuli while simultaneously keeping a wider frame of reference that leads to good judgment.

To prevent cognitive tunneling, we need to learn how to create mental models that allow us to assimilate new information rapidly regardless of our circumstances. To illustrate the difference, Duhigg tells the riveting story of Darlene, a neonatal nurse with the unusual ability to spot a baby in distress before monitors signaled a problem. Her remarkable capacity resulted from a combination of technical competence, intuition, and expertise gained from thousands of hours of focused attention and practiced experience, which all contributed to sound medical judgment and a willingness to act. She could see and

anticipate what was going to happen even before the sophisticated monitors and medical equipment sounded an alarm.

CULTURE AS A DIVINE PASSAGEWAY

How do we learn to see, perceive, and act in this way? One great example is found in the book of Acts. Acts 10 and 11 demonstrate how Peter learned to look with new eyes and see the work of God differently. Although culturally and religiously Jewish, Peter became the foundation of faith emblematic of the early church. His proximity to Jesus allowed him to reorient his perception, which brought understanding and growth to the first Christians. Known initially as an impulsive disciple given to defiant outbursts, Peter matured after years of discipline and devotion to Christ and steadfastly embodied God's love, goodness, and grace.

The incredible story begins in Acts 10 with Cornelius—a Roman centurion and a God-fearing, devout man, “generous to those in need and given to regular prayer.” An angel tells him to send for Peter. Meanwhile, Peter has a vision in which God tells him to kill and eat animals devout Jews considered unclean. Peter struggles to make sense of his dream because his plausibility structure limits his understanding. He not only blunders initially; he repeats himself and errs a second time. He struggles like so many of us because his cultural perception of life prevents him from embracing multiple ways to see and respond to God.

When the three men arrive from Caesarea and ask him to visit Cornelius, Peter realizes their information is directly related to the meaning of his dream, and he begins to perceive God's greater purposes. Neither Cornelius nor Peter have yet fully understood the purposes of God in the world. As their encounter unfolds, Peter stumbles beyond the narrow understanding of his provincial worldview.

He struggles like so many of us because his cultural perception of life prevents him from embracing multiple ways to see and respond to God.

Peter eventually discerns that cultures serve not as barriers to human understanding but as divine passageways to God. So often culture leads us to focus on our differences, but God uses cultural differences between Peter and Cornelius to engineer a pivotal breakthrough to a higher level of understanding.

A few chapters later, in Acts 15, Peter draws on his new perception at the Jerusalem Council. In this later encounter, the early church gathers its luminaries to determine what requirements to place on new Gentile converts. The exchange begins with Peter recounting his own journey to perceptual insight in a brilliant, concise, and compelling message: what God has done for us, he has also done for the Gentiles. Peter has witnessed this new reality. His experience and conceptual understanding help him recognize how God works in the world. He embodies the reality that new perceptions lead to better communities, more sophisticated understanding, and greater empathy and awareness on both a local and global scale. By Acts 15, his thinking and perceiving have matured, and he becomes the spokesperson for the transformational shift in how the early church will accept non-Jewish converts, thereby transforming Christianity into a global movement.

MOVING BEYOND OUR BIASES TO PERCEIVE THE WHOLE

Since global Christianity is so obviously a result of a growth mindset, what holds us back? What makes us prefer one type of people over another? The answer lies in the important work that is being done to understand implicit bias.

Implicit bias refers to the universal condition of preferring people who look like us, think like us, live like us. We develop a bias for things we know and like, which often causes us to misread and misunderstand our circumstances. Leaders can be especially prone to this condition.

In 2014, Pope Francis invited a group I was a part of to travel to the Vatican as a contingent of Protestant and Orthodox Christians working in various spheres of society. My long career and experience

in faith-based higher education led to my inclusion. Eventually, I received an appointment to the Vatican Foundation for the Family, a council on which I still serve.

I found the brevity and clarity of the invitation from Pope Francis the most interesting aspect of this opportunity: “We’ve been fighting for five hundred years. Can we try to find common cause together by focusing on our mutual commitment to the life and ministry of Jesus?” In this pithy request, Pope Francis distilled the violent and pitched opposition that had marked so much of church history in the Western world. He asked us to focus not on our differences but on what we held in common. The invitation encouraged us to move beyond so many of the parochial religious habits we practice to gain a transformed vision of God’s work in the world.

Our visit coincided with a worldwide conference of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, a movement that started in 1967 at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. Gathered in Rome’s Olympic Stadium, these believers represented roughly 135 million of the 1.2 billion Catholic Christians around the world. Many eye-opening, perspective-shifting experiences occurred every day during the time of gathered worship as we sang praise choruses familiar to us but echoing throughout the stadium in a foreign tongue in the heart of Catholicism.

I saw in that moment how experience can be a great teacher, but only if we adequately interpret it and accurately understand it. I enlarged my perspective by taking the discrete experiences I was having and seeing them whole, as so many of us can learn to do. In the midst of the crucible of missed meaning, we need to seek ever-deeper levels of understanding.

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn coins the phrase “plausibility structures,” or mental models, to describe how we understand the world and our place in it.³ These worldviews often become shorthand ways we see and perceive others. As we weave our discrete experiences into meaningful wholes and develop an

understanding of the world, we can form biases that distort our view of reality. When our perceptions fail to fit comfortably within our current structure of meaning, we either expand our mental model to gain deeper insight, or our view of the world ceases to make sense of our lived experience.

CULTIVATING HUMILITY, CURIOSITY, AND UNDERSTANDING

In Acts, Peter teaches us that we need a disposition of humility that opens us to learning. Developing such a teachable spirit is the hallmark of an *apprentice*, someone who actively cultivates humility, curiosity, and learning to better understand.⁴

A beautiful picture of developing these characteristics appears in a brief exchange between characters played by Sally Field and John Malkovich in the movie *Places in the Heart*.⁵ Set during the Great Depression, the film depicts Edna Spalding, a widow played by Field, trying to keep her farm after the untimely, accidental killing of her husband, the local sheriff. To help make ends meet, Edna has rented a room to Mr. Will, a blind man played by Malkovich. Mr. Will asks Edna questions, such as: What color is your hair? What color are your eyes? Through this exchange, Mr. Will gives us a deeper, more visual recognition of Edna. Here's the brief dialogue:

Mr. Will: Mrs. Spalding, can I ask you a question?

Edna: Yes.

Mr. Will: What do you look like?

Edna: I have long hair and I tie it up at the back. And I have brown eyes. I always wanted to have blue eyes like my mama but Margaret got those. And, my teeth stick out a little out front. Because I sucked my thumb for a long time when I was a little girl. No real beauty. I'm all right.

Mr. Will: Thank you.

Humble curiosity drives Mr. Will's questions, and he helps us see and understand Edna's deeper qualities and subtle beauty. In the same way, the blind man also allows us to recognize the strength and reliability of Moze Hadner, a Black field hand played by Danny Glover; the identity of the violent men cloaked in ominous KKK robes through the sound of their voices; and even the role religion plays in daily life. Mr. Will teaches us to look beyond the surface of people and situations with wider interest and deeper understanding, a key to navigating the crucible of missed meaning.

The movie ends with a surreal worship service that includes a celebration of Communion foreshadowing an eternity in heaven. Field's husband reappears, passing the Communion tray to the young teenager who accidentally shot him. This magical realism, reminiscent of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, helps us recognize the presence of God's kingdom everywhere and the constant co-mingling of the temporal and eternal in our everyday life. It invites us to perceive human reality in a new way. We're all children of God and belong to the kingdom of God, eternally present in temporal time. This refined perception helps us understand that we humans erect our barriers to understanding, not God.

LEARNING TO "READ THE AIR"

These reflections, both on the realities of the world and on our life with God, teach us a great deal about the challenges of leadership. So often we get mired in the minutiae of running an organization that we lose our perspective. We hesitate to step back and see how the discrete particulars fit into a meaningful whole. But one of the great disciplines of leadership is learning how to pierce the veil of presenting problems to see the real issues.

Over time, I've come to recognize the importance of framing our realities accurately because that plays a fundamental role in what we think we should do. I consistently feel drawn to third-way solutions,

going beyond either-or to find a third way to solve problems we haven't yet considered. We must stoke our curiosity and look for alternatives to our current ways of thinking and seeing.

In 1992, my wife, Pam, and I traveled to Wuhan, China, to help midlevel professors at Wuhan University of Technology gain proficiency in spoken English. Most of our students already read and wrote the language, but hearing and recognizing English presents a different and more complex challenge. Watching our students suddenly begin to hear and understand spoken English fascinated and rewarded us. This achievement arose from developing the competency of focused attention and learning the ability to see the word as part of a larger whole—in this case through the structure of sentences and paragraphs.

Leaders face similar challenges in terms of recognizing when we're understanding and being understood and when we aren't. Erin Meyer teaches us to “read the air.”⁶ This is the learned capacity to perceive both the discrete particulars represented by individual words and the greater meaning represented by understanding the meaning of each word in a larger context.

In *The Culture Map*, Meyer articulates her compelling overview of eight primary categories by which we map cultural understanding: communicating, evaluating, leading, deciding, trusting, disagreeing, scheduling, and persuading.⁷ In each case, she provides a spectrum of perspectives that help us gain insight so our crosscultural communication can function effectively.

For example, she identifies polar opposites in communication as “low context” and “high context.” Low-context languages include American and British English, which tend to communicate directly and specifically. High-context languages like Japanese rely not only on words but on the context for the communication. She encourages us to learn how to read the air in order to understand the cultural signals of non-verbal communication.

Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, based on his Nobel Prize-winning work, beautifully articulates a complementary insight.⁸ In this groundbreaking classic, he distills a number of relevant principles and insights, including his cautionary acronym WYSIATI, "What you see is all there is." This acronym reflects the human tendency to exaggerate our grasp of situations and circumstances when we actually lack adequate understanding.⁹ As Kahneman notes, this disposition leads to arrogance, and our self-importance causes us to miss the way that so many discrete particulars of life only make sense when placed together into meaningful wholes. Our capacity for pattern recognition serves as a bridge to deeper understanding.

Kahneman and his late friend and co-collaborator, Amos Tversky, articulate so many groundbreaking discoveries in this book: confirmation bias, priming effect, the reflexive response of regret, the tendency to ignore data we can't see, the widely misleading tendency to weigh evidence inappropriately, and much more. They even reveal the real motivator of economic behavior as loss avoidance—not profit-maximization, as the Chicago school and others have argued. Their work demonstrates how often what we believe merely results from the way our mind creates mental maps that promote shortcuts in decision-making. Rarely accurate, these shortcuts can be highly misleading and, in some instances, catastrophic.

BUILDING MENTAL MODELS

How then do we learn how to slow down, look with curiosity, and see with understanding? We need to build mental models, or structures of meaning, that help us make sense of life as we experience it. Ten years ago I wrote *The Shaping of an Effective Leader*, which reflected my thinking during the previous twenty years, including time spent studying with management consultant Peter Drucker and consolidating my thoughts into an eight-tier pyramid.¹⁰ This structure incorporated the wisdom of key mentors, the keen insight of a variety of

educational influences, and the practical wisdom of professional experiences, all of which had influenced my personal and professional development as a leader.

Five years ago, I was asked to develop an eighteen-minute TED talk on leadership. As I reworked my pyramid, I realized I could consolidate my thinking into a Venn diagram with three overlapping circles highlighting the intersection of intelligence (born of education and guided experience), empathy (born of moral and emotional intelligence), and creativity (born of innovation and strategic risk-taking). The dynamic intersection of these three categories forms the heart of strategic effectiveness.

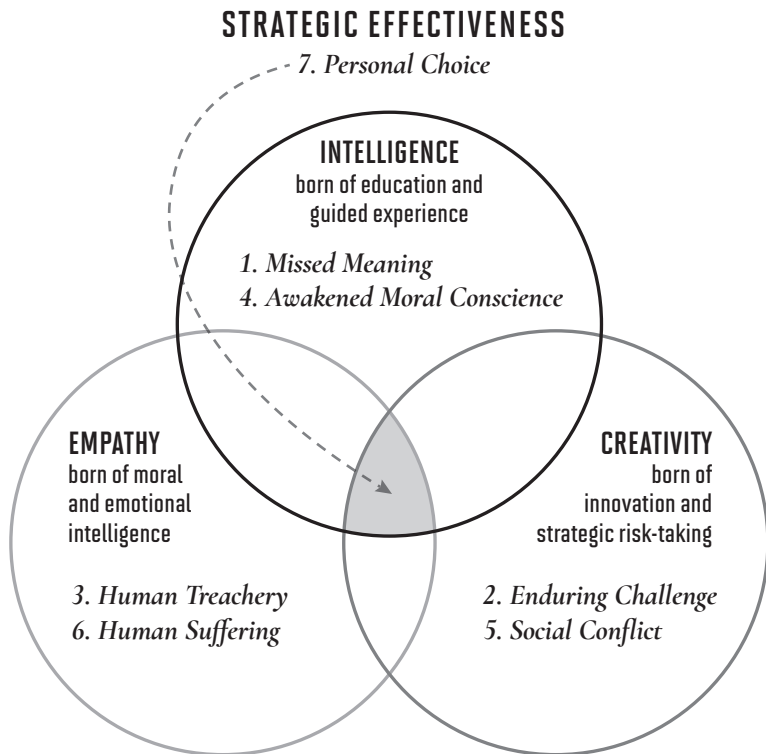


Figure 1.1. The heart of strategic effectiveness

Most recently, I've refined my thinking further into these seven crucibles that shape us. More crucibles exist, but I consider these seven to be the dominant archetypes that inform our common experience. *Missed meaning* and *awakened moral conscience* are embedded with intelligence and require education and guided experience to respond well. *Enduring challenge* and *social conflict* are embedded in creativity and require innovation and strategic risk-taking to endure. *Human treachery* and *human suffering* are embedded in empathy and inform the foundational experiences that lead to our growth in moral and emotional intelligence. At the heart of strategic effectiveness are the multiple personal choices that determine our life destiny.

Together, these mental models, or frameworks of meaning, provide the architecture I need both to understand and communicate how I approach leadership and seek to fulfill my responsibilities. This structure has helped me develop a disposition of daily prayer and meditation, both for centering my life in God and for gaining deeper self-awareness and self-understanding. Specifically, I pray through my known schedule for the day, recognizing that during the school year, the day rarely begins and ends as I expect. Through the process of spiritual centering, I see and receive input that strengthens my perceptions and insight so I can self-correct when necessary.

I've developed a rich appreciation for the roles and responsibilities of various sectors of our organization and how much we can do when we focus on our core work—and how much can be destroyed when we get out of our appropriate lane. Defining our role is so important and requires trust among team members. We need to be aware of the possibility of saboteurs and charlatans.

Clarity of purpose helps us build sound strategies, which provide the confidence to engage in successful execution. It guides the hiring and retention of top people who are competent and driven to succeed. Our commitment to create a culture of integrity, care, and respect

plays a crucial role in how we act—and we fully recognize this goal as aspirational and requiring continuous improvement.

Ultimately, we have to be committed to purposes greater than ourselves and be driven by a vision that exceeds inconvenience. We seldom see the entire vision clearly, and we often only realize it over time. We can find joy in encountering the crucible of missed meaning because it refines our character and helps us develop a greater capacity to engage the opportunities before us, instead of suffering indifference or paralysis, which keep us from a greater good.

BIBLICAL INSIGHT FROM PAUL AND THE ATHENIANS

Years ago, Don Richardson, a famous missiologist, wrote *Peace Child*.¹¹ This book seeks to demonstrate that every culture possesses a story of redemption that Christians can reference when explaining Christ's work. Initially a groundbreaking idea, the concept has since faced challenges. But the seed of insight it planted helped Christians see culture as an asset rather than a liability in communicating Christ's story to the world.

Even before *Peace Child*, philosophers of religion identified three types of religious worldviews: exclusive, inclusive, and pluralist. The exclusive worldview sees few if any overlapping ideas among various religions. The inclusive worldview believes all religions find their greatest expression in Christianity. Pluralists consider all religions to be about the same. I'm an inclusivist and believe all religious worldviews can be understood within the Christian worldview.

Acts 17:16-32 provides a beautiful example of how cultures serve as divine passageways to the gospel rather than barriers to belief in God. They help us understand how God works in the world. While in Athens, a city rife with idols, the apostle Paul refrains from railing against paganism. Instead, he appeals to their obvious religious devotion, demonstrating in five important ways how we can build bridges of insight and understanding between Christianity and all other religious and philosophical worldviews.

First, Paul begins by showing respect for worldviews other than his own by acknowledging their religious outlook. “People of Athens!” he begins, “I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (Acts 17:22-23 NIV).

Second, he goes on to explain how their partial awareness can lead to understanding the full nature of God. Paul explains God’s true nature when he declares, “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:24-25 NIV).

As Paul continues, he then reveals every religious longing as a remnant of the God-shaped vacuum God created in us. Saint Augustine wrote, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you, O God.”¹² In verses 26 and 27, Paul articulates the purposes of Christ and notes that God has given us a desire to see and find him. A God-shaped instinct and desire motivates our ultimate search for meaning and purpose.

Paul appeals to them by using their own literature to illustrate his fourth point. He tells his listeners that their own literature captures their longing for God: “As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring’” (Acts 17:28 NIV). Paul notes how their tradition dovetails beautifully with the truth about God. This insight demonstrates how we eventually awaken to our need for Christ and illustrates how every religious quest prompts us to get underway. Eventually, we need guidance and direction to find ultimate satisfaction.

He finally clarifies a fifth way that their religious practices lead them to a mistaken understanding of God’s nature. Paul says to the Athenians, “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill” (Acts 17:29 NIV). He elevates both

God and his listeners by identifying them as the offspring of the ruler of the universe who has provided the ultimate satisfaction for human longing through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Paul's encounter with the Athenians ends with an honest appraisal of how people receive the gospel: some believe, some scoff, and some have more questions (Acts 17:32-34). Every encounter with God generates one of these three responses, often within the same group of listeners.

This passage offers a key insight into the crucible of missed understanding. We often believe that everyone who hears the gospel automatically believes. But the actual reality is just the opposite. Every individual comes to believe on a timetable known only to God; therefore, our limited energy and focus should be on those who awaken to faith and our deeper life with God and respond in repentance or curiosity. The time has not yet come for those who scoff, and we might never be the appropriate vessel.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Identify a time you've been involved in crosscultural communication. How was culture a barrier, and how was it a bridge to deeper insight and understanding?
2. When you encounter cultures and ideas different from your own, do you tend to shut them out (exclusivist), fully embrace them (pluralist), or look for ways they more fully contribute to and help build your deeper understanding of God (inclusivist)?
3. In what ways has your understanding of God grown and changed throughout your life as a result of travel or living and working in cultures different from your own?
4. What do people see of Christ when they encounter you?

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