

Using Clarity As A Structured Approach To Being More Effective



By Brit Poulson

The call for clarity has likely never been louder. So why is it so hard to find?

Companies like Aetna, Goldman Sachs and BlackRock are teaching meditation on the job and setting aside space and resources for yoga practitioners at the office. Mindfulness has gone mainstream; indeed, a search for the term on the [Harvard Business Review](#) website turns up 15 articles in the past 24 months alone. As someone who's worked in the world of leadership and organizational effectiveness for more than 35 years, I think this attention is valuable. But I don't think this attention helps us down the road to clarity.

I want to invite readers to embrace a new idea: that mastering a structured approach to clarity will unlock new opportunities hidden in the shadows of our current reality.

Where mindfulness and meditation may help us tap into raw awareness, it does not minimize our cognitive bias and blind spots. Clarity calls for deeper introspection, critique and analysis and, as such, is a better framework for making sense of complexity. Clarity doesn't help us know everything, but it does stretch our capacity to gain deeper understanding of

what's sitting right in front of us. Most importantly, clarity leads to better thinking, better actions and better results.

Why seek clarity?

In truth, for many reasons. At the broadest level, we want to organize the external world around us. At a practical level, we need to manage the ever-growing list of tasks that make up our days. In the middle, we might be looking for an answer to something we think we understand, or seeking to confirm something we think we already know.

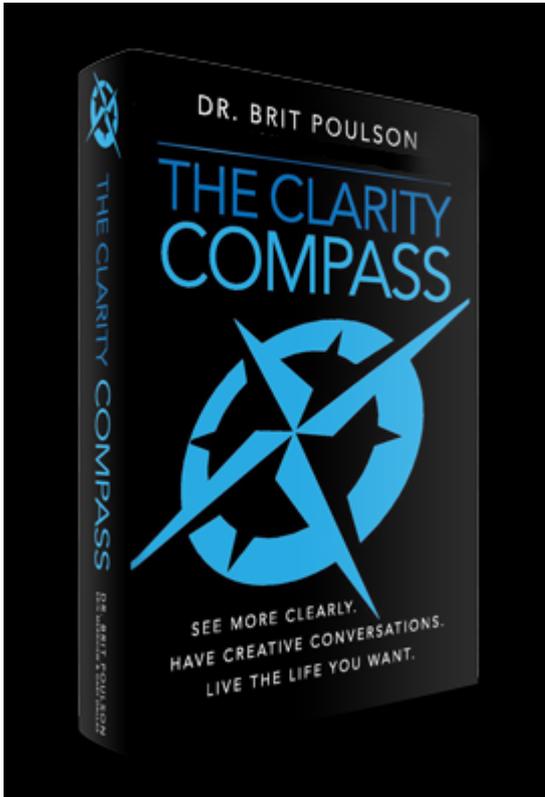
Regardless of the target, the search for clarity mostly boils down to being more effective. We want to make some aspect of our lives better. We're probably already trying. So what's getting in our way?

Believe it or not, our own minds. We all have our own mental maps, unique ways of looking at the world, based on our personal experiences. These experiences are, by definition, completely subjective and full of blind spots. Naturally, most of us want to believe our mental maps are right, and we're terrified by the notion that they're not.

The problem is, there's no way we can ever understand the world in its entirety. We are limited by our subjective minds. And this is a hard pill to swallow. In an effort to move forward with some degree of confidence in life, we push our blind spots and fears to the periphery and focus on the comfort zone of what we know.

However, here's the catch: until we can accept the reality of the incomprehensible, we limit the results that we can achieve. The very idea that "we already know" stands in our way. To take the first step forward, we need to own how flawed our mental maps are. This gives us the powerful potential to move ourselves toward clarity.

Navigating to clarity



To unlock this powerful potential, we need a navigational device that helps us flourish in the adventure and possibilities of life instead of slogging through the drudgery that holds us back. A compass is an apt analogy because it will help us along an unfamiliar path and because we're likely to get lost (possibly many times) along the way.

On any journey, there are three primary elements: a destination, coordinates that help you plot your path, and markers that show how far you've gone or when you're off track.

In the compass analogy, the intended destination represents your goal or what you want to achieve. This includes the solution to the problem you're trying to solve as well as what I'll call "deeper wants," the very personal desires that drive us. For example, while your goal may be a better interviewing process to attract more qualified management candidates, your "deeper want" might be to be seen as smart, respected, or known as someone people can count on. Goals are logical. Deeper wants are visceral.

The coordinates fall within the two polarities of the clarity compass—intentions/actions and facts/stories. On the surface, these are self-explanatory. First, we act in ways that advance our intended aims, and second, reality is made up of the information that we access. In a perfect world, both polarities would be working perfectly, but of course, that doesn't always happen. We want tomorrow's meeting to be successful (intention) but we haven't sent the email defining the objectives (action). We think, because one of our co-workers is looking at his email (fact), that he doesn't value the project (story) when he's actually cancelling his next meeting because he doesn't want to leave before the discussion is done. The point of these polarities is the opportunity they create for discernment and agency. By looking at each as polar opposites, we find ways to bring them closer together.

Finally, the markers are the creative conversations we have and the honest feedback we receive. Creative conversations can be as simple as stating your intention for meeting with your manager, checking for her intention and finding out you need to expand the agenda. They can be as complex as honestly assessing your actions and predicting how they might be seen by others. Try it: Have you told your boss the reasons the project is behind schedule, or is she left to assume? Could your assistant be quitting because he doesn't hear that you appreciate him, even though you know you could barely get through the day without him?

These basic elements of the clarity compass are deceptively simple. At first, it takes the form of a head exercise. It's a logical planning process and a useful tool for making progress.

But it inevitably takes us into the heart, and the heart is where true transformation occurs. Through the self-exploration it forces, it exposes vulnerabilities, deficiencies and insecurities each of us tries to hide from others and especially ourselves. And when we're hiding parts of ourselves

from ourselves, we're showing up with only a fraction of our power. That's no way to be effective.

A case study in clarity

A recent and true example may help illustrate.

Kathy was a business consultant whose project was at risk of being cancelled early due to personnel changes at her client's organization. She was concerned her work wasn't getting enough attention and, with the project's champion leaving, internal politics would force her out.

Working off information indicating this was the case, she began writing a memo to justify her full fees, but was frustrated and resigned to what she saw as the most likely outcome: that the contract would be cancelled halfway through and she'd need to accept a significant loss of fees.

After running through her clarity compass, she had a change of heart. Logically, Kathy wanted her fees. Viscerally, though, she realized she was also driven by a sense of scarcity as well as a desire to receive respect and approval. All of which was influencing the memo. She also recognized the majority of the work already had been completed, including some projects she expedited when she first learned her contact was leaving.

Instead of focusing on the fees, she turned her attention to the value she felt she brought to the project and her own sense of integrity as a consultant. Rather than sending the memo, she requested a meeting with the client's CEO, and the vice president who'd be taking over the project. She documented the work done to date and outlined a scenario for how it could be completed in her prior contact's absence.

During the meeting, Kathy learned her work was excellent and they were more concerned about a different part of the project she wasn't responsible for. The discussion shifted away from justifying fees and toward strategies for fixing what had

fallen behind. When the meeting ended, everyone agreed that Kathy had delivered on her commitments and the focus needed to shift.

The project still ended early, which led to a discount, but Kathy was able to negotiate a fee 50 percent higher than would have come from a midpoint cancellation. What's more, they've already begun discussing future projects. Kathy gave herself permission to look into her shadows and biases, which led to an equitable end for all, one drastically different than what would likely have happened if she had followed her first, rather limited reaction.

The power of clarity

It doesn't matter whether we are a newly-minted MBA, an experienced middle manager or a seasoned senior executive. Our mental maps may grow, shrink or change shape, but they'll never go away. Our experiences and perspectives will constantly change, and we'll always have blind spots and fears hidden in our shadows. When we let ourselves stagnate, we stop being effective. When we address our mental maps in their entirety, new possibilities emerge.

These steps to seeking clarity are difficult. They will demonstrate our instincts aren't always correct. They will show us hard work ahead. And they will take us to uncomfortable places.

But they also will take us closer to the lives we seek to create for ourselves. Clarity will allow us to create new opportunities, to make better decisions in a world where we cannot know everything, and to show up more powerfully and more effectively in everything we do. And that's an outcome that all of us can aspire to.

About the Author: Brit Poulson is the creator of The Clarity Compass and founder of Clarity Compass Consulting, a leadership consulting firm which specializes in transformative executive coaching and leadership development programs. In his new book, *THE CLARITY COMPASS: A TOOL TO SEE CLEARLY IN EVERYTHING THAT YOU DO* (January 17, 2017), he provides the tools to help find the kind of radical clarity needed to respond creatively in any situation. Dr. Poulson holds a Ph.D. in psychodynamics, Jungian and group psychology.