

INTEGRAL LEADERSHIP COLLABORATIVE

The Gift and Curse of Interpretation by Brett Thomas and Russ Volckmann



The Gift and Curse of Interpretation

[Excerpt from forthcoming book on integral leadership by Brett Thomas and Russ Volckmann]

Meaning, including “meaning making,” is a crucial framework underlying the field of integral leadership. There are many excellent books on “meaning making”—*In Over Our Heads* and *The Evolving Self* by Harvard’s Robert Kegan being chief among them. In his work, Kegan underscores the distinction between “meaning making”, “made meaning,” and the “meaning maker.” For our basic purposes here the *meaning maker* is simply the individual (the self) and *meaning making* can be thought of as the process that that individual uses to “construct” their view of reality.¹

The process of meaning making is influenced by many things, including a person’s environment, culture, and stage of development. Stage is particularly important because it is an indicator of how equipped a person is to make meaning of a given situation.

In this paper, grounded in an understanding of the science of meaning (hermeneutics) and aided by integral semiotics, we consider both the gift and the curse of interpretation, what motivates people, and how integral leaders use meaning to engage the hearts and minds of their followers.

“We see things not as they are, but as we are.”

—Anais Nin

The Science of Meaning

If we are to have an integrally-informed conversation about meaning, then a good place to start is Wilber’s Integral Semiotics.

1. A *sign* as the combination of a mental concept (the signified) and a physical sound-image (the signifier). A sign (signified + signifier) stands for an actual object, event, feeling, and so forth, known as the referent.
2. The *signifier* is the written word, the spoken word, non-verbal communicative gestures—all physical so to speak.
3. In contrast, the *signified* is the internal psychological concept that comes to mind upon experiencing the signifier.

A simple example would be the written word “bird” (the signifier), the concept or feeling that arises upon reading “bird” (the signified), and the actual bird in nature being referred to (the referent).² I will break this down with a few more details on the next page.



Hermeneutic circles, linguistic groups, and discursive communities tend to refer to a group of speakers “who participate in interactions based on social and cultural norms and values that are regulated, represented, and recreated through discursive practices”. Members of a hermeneutic circle share important commonalities within the intersubjective space that allow meaningful communicative exchange to occur. They share a similar “sign” language. Members have enough experience with the referents to interpret the correct signified upon encountering the signifier.

An example relevant to the Integral Leadership Collaborative would be the members interpretation of a word such as “integral” or “late stage of development.” In this example, some members would see those two signifiers signifying two different things (referents) while other members might interpret these two signifiers as pointing to the same referent.

In contrast, those outside a given hermeneutic circle who lack critical experiential referents will likely misinterpret the sign language involved in the group's dominant mode of discourse.

Example, people with no background in integral theory would have a totally different interpretation of the word *integral* or the phrase *integral leadership*.

While all those who have reached linguistic competence can share signifiers, only those who coexist within the worldspace of the referent and have experienced the referent can share signifieds, make accurate interpretations, and meaningfully participate in the discourse.

When you are with a group of people who share the same values system, if you pay attention to their language you will notice that they have a way of communicating with each other that reflects their common values and beliefs. Ken Wilber refers to this as the “Dominant Mode of Discourse.” I use the shorter term “Values Dialect” (or simply dialect) for short.

Integral Semiotics

Semiotics, or semiology, is the study of signs and symbols, both individually and grouped into sign systems. It includes the study of how meaning is constructed and understood. In linguistics, it is common to speak of signifiers, signifieds, referents, semantics, and syntax.

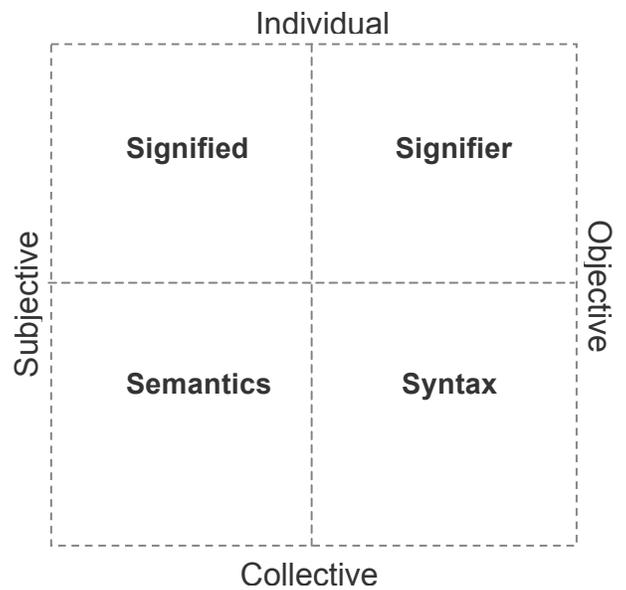
Let's return to the bird example to flesh this out:

1. The written word or sketch of the "bird" is the *signifier*.
2. The image or idea that comes to mind when a person reads the word "bird" or see's the sketch of the bird is the *signified*.
3. The actual (living breathing) bird is the referent (what the signifier is actually pointing to).
4. The *semantics* of the word "bird" is its meaning.
5. The grammatical structure that the linguistic word "bird" exists in is the *syntax*.



One of the main questions in semiotics is how to relate these various symbolic entities. However, upon careful inspection (and the good fortune of having Ken Wilber explain this to me), it became clear that these four main entities (signifier, signified, semantic, and syntax) correspond, precisely, to the four quadrants of the integral model.

Thus, *signifiers* are the Upper Right quadrant (the exterior words and written symbols that people encounter in all forms of communication); *signifieds* are the Upper Left (the interior ideas and psychological states evoked in people by signifiers); *syntax* is Lower Right (the formal linguistic system and its grammatical structures of the people's social system); and *semantics* is Lower Left (the collective cultural meaning, values, referents, and worldviews).



The Gift and the Curse of Interpretation

Interpretation is a core concept in the study and practice of integral leadership. It is important to recognize that this term is used both as a verb and as a noun: the *process of interpretation* (meaning making) and the *result of that process* (made meaning). One of the main difficulties in human relations in general, and interpersonal communication and leadership in particular, is people interpret similar circumstances, experiences, or facts differently. This is simply the reality of the human condition and is in itself not the problem. The problem is that many if not most humans seem to be unaware that this is occurring! People tend to take their construction of reality as reality, as a fact of “how it is out there.”³

The Ladder of Inference

The process of interpretation has been well-described in psychology and management literature using a familiar metaphor of climbing a ladder. The “Ladder of Inference” was conceived by Harvard’s Chris Argyris and later popularized by MIT’s Peter Senge and proponents of the field of organizational learning.⁴

We Observe an Event

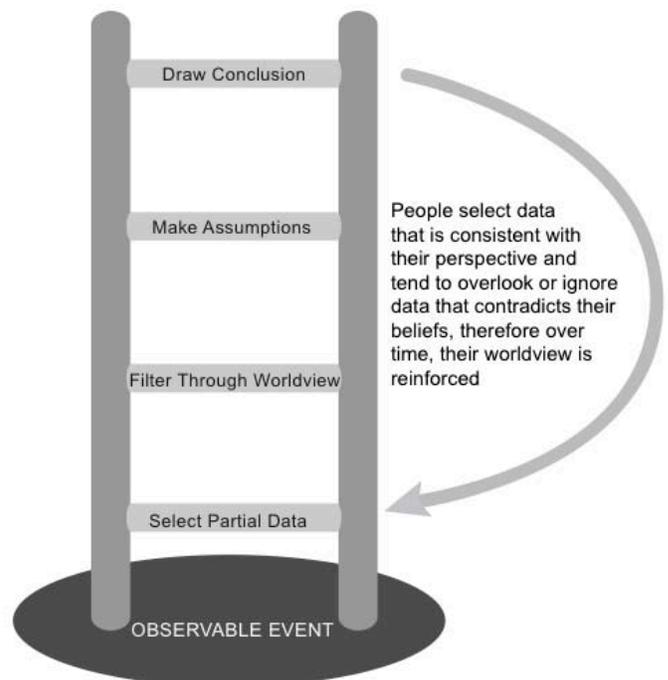
We witness an observable event. In doing so, we experience sights, sounds, and feelings.

We Select Partial Data

We look for, notice, and select certain data to emphasize while (often unconsciously) ignoring other data.

We Filter That Data Through our Worldview

We filter the selected data through our worldview. Our worldview includes our values and general beliefs (about people and the world), as well as specific beliefs about the type of situation currently being perceived. It is our worldview that initially transforms objective data (facts) into subjective meaning (interpretation).



We Make Assumptions

We rarely (if ever) have all relevant information and perspectives at our disposal concerning a given situation. There are details and nuance that are invisible to us, these include: facts we lack about what happened (is happening), the intention/motivation of people involved, and the consequences (often yet to be seen) of specific actions. Because people are not omniscient, and time rarely permits obtaining and verifying every piece of relevant information, in order to draw a conclusion it is usually necessary to make assumptions based on a subjective assessment of which facts are most relevant using a variety of generalizations (general principles or broad patterns of behavior) in order to draw an informed conclusion.

We Draw Conclusions

Based on our climb up the ladder, we form an inference, a conclusion. These conclusions, in turn, inform the actions we take. Our conclusions influence our beliefs about the person or situation as well as influencing which data we will look for, notice, and emphasize the next time we are faced with a similar situation. In this way the Ladder of Inference is self-reinforcing. Put another way, we interpret situations through our worldview which reinforces the subjectively perceived validity of the worldview.

With each step up the ladder, there is an opportunity for different people's stories to diverge. Interpersonal communication (and relationships) become difficult when people stay on the highest rung of the ladder (conclusions) without stepping down to where most of the real action is: the way we interpret the data to arrive at different conclusions. The golden key to unlocking interpersonal communication, relationships, motivation, and influence is to focus not on the conclusions but on the way people interpret information. In our decades of experience working with leaders and organizations, the skillful management of interpretations is the missing key in most situations.

Why Are Our Ladders So Different?

While the worldview rung on the ladder is the one that integral leaders use to the greatest effect, there are other important reasons that ladders are so different from one person to the next. In *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, Doug Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project reveal three key reasons that people's stories differ so greatly.⁵

People Emphasize Different Facts

As one proceeds through life, the sheer amount of information available is overwhelming. It is impossible to take in all of the sights, sounds, facts, and feelings involved in even a single interaction. Each individual, even in the same situation, will notice (and ignore) different things. What one notices has to do with his or her unique mindset and what that

person cares about. Some pay more attention to feelings and relationships. Others pay attention to status and power or to facts and logic. Some want to prove they're right; others want to avoid conflict or smooth it over. Some see themselves as victims, others as rescuers, challengers, or coaches. The information people notice and pay attention to varies accordingly. In addition to noticing different things, each person has *access* to different information. For example, people know things about themselves that others don't. They know their constraints, hopes, fears, and concerns; others may not.

People Interpret Facts Differently

In order for a person to climb onto the very first rung (which happens in a split second), they must ask—consciously or unconsciously—“*What are the relevant facts that should be focused on?*” Clearly, most people answer this question differently and emphasize (and ignore) different facts. There is abundant research and many compelling presentations that incontrovertibly illustrate this dynamic. But even if two people select and emphasize the exact same set of facts, their unique life experience and resulting worldview will often lead them to make different assumptions and assessments, and ultimately draw different conclusions. Put simply, people's stories tend to dramatically diverge because each person has a different way of interpreting what the facts actually *mean*. Clearly, each individual's perspective is influenced by a unique set of past experiences. Most people aren't even aware of how their past trips up the ladder are biasing their interpretation of current events.

Our Interpretations and Therefore Our Conclusions Frequently Reflect Self-Interest

According to Stone, Patton, and Heen, the final reason that people's stories are so different is that personal biases nearly always influence interpretations (whether one is aware of this influence or not). The biggest bias of all is the all-too-natural bias toward one's own interests, priorities, and values (often referred to as one's “agenda”). Individuals tend to notice (and agree with) information that supports their own views and goals. This leads them to feel even more certain that their view is “the right view.” Again, it is important to emphasize that this dynamic happens automatically and for most people unconsciously.⁶

In truth, it is difficult and sometimes impossible to avoid this bias. What is possible is to become aware of bias, to notice it, and to make adjustments in thinking and communication to adequately accommodate for it.

This is central to the integral leadership practice of “Conscious Communication.” The ability to communicate consciously (accounting for one's own and others' interpretation and resisting the temptation to treat interpretations as facts) is a hallmark of integral leaders.

Brett Thomas

Brett Thomas is the co-founder of Stagen, a Texas-based organizational consulting firm that specializes in Integral Leadership. He is the author and architect of the Stagen Leadership Academy's 52-week intensive *Integral Leadership Program* (now in its 10th year). Brett is a 20-year veteran in the field of human performance and organizational development having designed and facilitated hundreds of workshops and corporate training programs. Brett has logged over 10,000 hours coaching CEOs. He has published hundreds of pages of applied integral theory and has co-designed and co-delivered numerous international conferences and seminars on applied integral theory. Brett served many years as the Managing Director of the Integral Institute *Business and Leadership Center* and on the Editorial Board for the *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*. Brett currently serves on the boards of both *Integral Leadership Review* and *Integral Publishers*. He is writing a book with Russ Volckmann on the subject of Integral Leadership.



Russ Volckmann

Russ Volckmann, Ph.D., has worked for over thirty years as an organization development consultant and executive coach. He is the publisher and editor of *The Integral Leadership Review* and *LeadingDigest* and the founder of *Integral Publishers* (having published nine books by integral authors). As an educator he has taught at U.C., Berkeley; the University of Arizona; the United States Army Intelligence School at Ft. Juachuca, Arizona; Sonoma State University; Golden Gate University; John F. Kennedy University; Leadership University; and the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology. He has served on dissertation committees for the Fielding Graduate Institute and the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology and mentor for Antioch University. As a writer and editor, he was the founding editor of a professional journal, *Vision/Action*, for five years. He is currently on the Editorial Board of *Integral Review* which is published by ARINA, Inc. He has authored two books and is currently working on his third with co-author Brett Thomas on the topic of Integral Leadership.



Endnotes

¹ The academic field devoted to the study of this subject is called Constructivist Developmental Psychology.

² In the early 20th century, Ferdinand de Saussure gave a series of lectures now known as Course in General Linguistics, prompted by his dissatisfaction with the current state of linguistics. He said linguistics “never attempted to determine the nature of the object it was studying, and without this elementary operation a science cannot develop an appropriate method”. Saussure’s “elementary operation” helped shift language from subject (modernity) to object (postmodernity). Modernity used language as a tool to describe and represent reality; postmodernity examined how language—the tool of representation—plays a role in the construction of reality. Semiology—“a science that studies the life of signs within society”—continues to be among Saussure’s most enduring contribution. Saussure, along with Charles Pierce, planted the theoretical foundation for modern linguistics by “circumscribing an autonomous field of inquiry which sought to understand the structures that undergird both the production and interpretation of signs”.

³ See Kegan’s *In Over Our Heads*. Chapter 6.

⁴ The ladder of inference was first introduced by Chris Argyris (1990) in *Overcoming Organizational Defenses*. It was later popularized by Peter Senge in his best-selling book *The Fifth Discipline* and by many other leaders in the growing fields of Action Learning and Organizational Learning. The version illustrated here has been slightly modified for greater clarification and easier application, and to assist the readers’ ability to integrate Ladder of Inference with the various practices that make up the practice of integral leadership.

⁵ See the highly recommended book, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* by Doug Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen (2000).

⁶ In one of thousands of compelling examples of these kinds of studies, Professor Howard Raiffa of the Harvard Business School demonstrated the power and pervasiveness of this unconscious phenomenon when he gave different student teams the same set of (objective) facts about a certain company. He told some of the teams that they would be negotiating to buy the company and others that they would be selling the company. He then asked each team to value the company *as objectively as possible* (not the price at which they would offer to buy or sell, but what they believed the company was actually worth). Raiffa found that sellers, in their heart of hearts, believed the company to be worth on average 30% more than the independently assessed fair market value. Buyers, in turn, valued it at 30% less. Each team, influenced by their unconscious biases, had developed a perception that reflected their own self-interest. Without even realizing it, they had focused more on facts that were consistent with what they wanted to believe and tended to ignore, explain away, and soon forget about the facts that were not in their interest. This tendency to develop unconsciously biased interpretations is common and can be dangerous when people are unaware or refuse to admit that it is occurring.