

# Bringing the Overview Effect Down to Earth

## Frank White and Charles E. Smith

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Seeing the Earth from a distance has changed my perception. The pity of it is that so far the view...has been the exclusive property of a handful of test pilots...rather than the world leaders who need this new perspective...or the poets who might communicate it to them.

Apollo 11 astronaut Michael Collins (*Carrying the Fire*)

The Overview Effect is an experience that has been reported by astronauts and cosmonauts who have traveled into Low Earth Orbit or to the moon. There are many aspects to the Overview Effect, but at its most basic level, it represents a cognitive shift in which one sees the Earth as a planet moving through a star-filled universe. (1) For most, there is also a realization that there are no borders or boundaries on this planet, except those created by human beings.

Many of these space travelers returned to Earth with an altered point of view about possibility, collaboration, and the future of our species. Some of them considered the experience to be transcendent and life-changing.

The astronauts have received a message from the universe about who we are and who we might become. Now, we need to transmit this message throughout society in a way that makes a difference. The question before us is this: can this shift in awareness be taught within corporations, universities, and government agencies so that they begin to operate from the perspective of a unified whole system?

We believe that the answer is yes, and that “Bringing the Overview Effect Down to Earth” offers such a learning opportunity. We are convinced that the message of the Overview Effect is not only for astronauts but for all human beings.

It is urgently important to teach this perspective and reap its remarkable benefits, yet there is no need to make enormous changes in organizational structures. Only our mindsets need to change, but that may be a greater challenge than might be expected. We are advancing a radical—even revolutionary— notion: if the cognitive shift experienced by astronauts can be reproduced in other settings, the world will change in subtle yet profound ways as the consequence of millions of brain cells reorganizing themselves into a new worldview.

In the years since the first astronauts left the planet, the coupling of the Overview experience and the hard-edged excellent performance required for space travel has infrequently found its way back to Earth in government, universities, and business in practical ways. As astronaut Ed Gibson put it:

Our coming back and sharing our experiences is like a drop of dye going into the ocean; it is quickly diffused. (2)

Gibson is right, and yet the experiences of only 500 plus people have already had a huge impact on our thinking, bringing a great boost to the environmental movement as only one example.

### **The Phenomenon and the Abstraction**

The Overview Effect is both a phenomenon and an abstraction. Most of what we can say about it is an abstraction, a description of what someone else experienced. Words do not do it justice, any more than the feeling you have on seeing your firstborn child, or falling in love with your soul mate, or hearing a great piece of music. For 60 years, the astronauts have been describing the feelings evoked by the Overview Effect, visions of the possibilities of a world without boundaries, a lifting up of one's own spirit, and a sense of connection with others and the planet. However, the phenomenon itself is almost impossible to communicate with enough nuance, detail, color, and emotion to capture the sensation of rushing around the Earth at 17,500 miles an hour, or standing on the surface of the moon and looking back at your home rising in a star-filled sky.

Beautiful pictures and videos are helpful and some have succeeded in creating "aha" moments for viewers on Earth. However, none of these are the phenomenon itself. Regardless of the challenges, when the astronauts return to Earth, they are asked to describe it, and they do their best. To date, one of the most successful efforts at communicating the Effect has been accomplished by a group of young filmmakers from the United Kingdom, Planetary Collective. Their short film, "Overview," has now been played by 1.7 million people on Vimeo:

<http://vimeo.com/planetarycollective/overview>

### **The Problem on the Surface Goes Deep**

The authors have been facilitating organizational change for more than 50 years. They have found that corporations, universities, and government agencies are divided into parts that are isolated from one another – "silos" —wherein lack of communication, superficial relationships, and individuals and departments going their own way are commonplace. In many cases, knowledge about the workings of the whole system accompanies this isolation and a grand future for the organization is beyond the vision of the people in it.

The primary issue for all organizations is identity. For the most part, people hold onto their individual identities as a necessity for their survival. They contrast this individual identity against that of the larger whole. When individuals are successfully integrated into small teams, they then contrast the team against the larger organization or other teams. This tendency leads to "turf wars" and failure to get the most out of everyone. Leaders too often seek local intelligence rather than "Collective Intelligence." By contrast, the Institute for Co-Intelligence says the following:

Collective intelligence is the intelligence of a collective which arises from one or more sources... Intelligence is variously defined as 'the capacity to acquire and apply knowledge,' 'the ability to effectively adapt,' or simply 'the ability to solve problems.' (3)

In general, institutional intention to develop collective intelligence is rare because their leaders have not heard of it. They know they have a problem, but they have no concept of a solution. And all too often, bureaucracies turn the natural energy of people away from collective intelligence and toward individual survival.

All of these characteristics of organizations reflect the fact that on the surface of our planet, we see a great deal of diversity or chaos, depending on how it is interpreted. The wonder of the Overview Effect is that some 500 plus people have now risen above the surface, and seen that for all the apparent disjointedness of the parts below, it suddenly reveals itself as a beautiful whole. (4)

### **The Overview Effect Points to Co-Intelligence**

The Overview Effect points directly to the existence of collective intelligence. In one of the authors' books on this subject, The Overview Effect describes a "planetary overview system" that includes the physical system we call Earth, the human system we call humanity, and the global technological system, technos. (5)

An overview framework creates the infrastructure for co-intelligence not only on the planet itself but also in all organizations that are a part of it. The Overview Effect creates the awareness that it can be brought into existence on the Earth, and then to the various parts of the global human system, such as companies, universities, and governments.

Our task now is to bring the Overview Effect "down to earth" so that leaders, managers, and participants in a system can experience the overview and masterful performance at the same time. This happens through a designed mix of work relevant experiments, education, and individual practices that bring out collective intelligence and release participants' holding onto the boundaries of what they already know. In other words, these organizational systems need to see themselves as overview systems.

We believe the first step lies in learning four distinctions that are inherent in the astronaut experience of the Overview Effect and practicing them as they apply to the context of one's own work and life.

#### **Distinction One: Knowing vs. Experiencing**

The astronauts did not come to "know" something new when they saw the Earth as a planet moving through the universe at a high rate of speed. We, and they, already "knew" that, but they experienced it. As the first American in space, Alan Shepard, put it:

I had been well briefed on what to expect...But no one could be briefed well enough to be completely prepared for the astonishing view that I got. (6)

Most organizational behavior is driven by what people think they know, what they already like or dislike, what they're attracted to and what they avoid. It's important for us to be "right" about what we know and it's threatening to have that called into question. This tendency accounts for the stultifying effects of left/right politics and "sides." As one of the authors of this paper (White) is fond of pointing out, however, "A planet has no sides."

A lack of "overview thinking" makes fundamental change a threat to identity. A merger becomes an attack on personal survival for leaders and administrators who have identified themselves with one company, and with policies and practices, that already exist. By contrast, space exploration is a grand experiment. It's in the nature of an experiment to discover what new things might take place.

### **Distinction Two: Earth vs. Space**

The astronauts experienced the reality that the distinction between Earth and space is a false one. The Earth is in space, has always been in space, and will always be in space. All of us are crewmembers on Spaceship Earth, but we don't behave in that way because we don't have the context to do so. And the astronauts not only saw the Earth from space but also in space. (7)

In the words of shuttle astronaut Jeff Hoffman, speaking at the world premiere of the film, "Overview" about the view he had from orbit:

You do, from that perspective, see the Earth as a planet. You see the sun as a star. You are seeing it from a cosmic perspective. (8)

The transformation from an organization with segmented goals, dissociated policies, and limiting relationships among the parts cannot happen without altering the meaning that people give to their experience, moving from the limits of their individual identities as a point of view to a holistic view of themselves and the system as occurs in seeing the Earth from space.

Most efforts to change or improve a system involve changing structure or process, which does not change mindset or context. It simply changes the form. The personal meaning people give to their experiences is a function of the context, their point of view, which is emotionally driven.

The new perspective made visible by the Overview Effect comes from just such a change in context. When this change is deliberately put into practice in companies and schools in service of high performance, there is a surge of human energy and cooperative results.

### **Distinction Three: Unity vs. Diversity**

In our own work, we have demonstrated repeatedly that transformation begins with the ability to distinguish content from context. Similarly, from the surface of the planet, it is hard to see the reality of co-intelligence because our senses are overwhelmed by a chaotic swirl of diversity. From orbit or the moon, astronauts see that unity appears as the context of that planetary diversity. The two coexist, but we will see one or the other as primary or secondary, depending on perspective. (9). This ability to

clarify content and context brings the Overview Effect down to earth in ways that can transform organizations and the people in them.

We all have seen co-intelligence in action in great sports teams, wondrous musical performances, moments of intimacy, friendship, and sharing, or in hot projects that achieve goals everyone is proud to own. These are moments of a cognitive shift, even of transcendence, becoming more than yourself, in a boundary-less condition.

Shuttle astronaut Bonnie Dunbar said:

Team participation is the key. Being on a mission is like playing team sports or being on an air crew. (10)

As International Space Station (ISS) astronaut Ron Garan puts it:

If I had an epiphany [in orbit], it is the sobering contradiction between just how unbelievably beautiful our planet is versus the reality of life on the planet for many of her inhabitants, so it caused me to ask how we can use that perspective to inspire people to make a difference and make life for the inhabitants of our planet as beautiful as our Earth looks from space. (11)

Garan is himself working on a number of projects to use his insights from space exploration to improve life on Earth. (12)

In the course of work and life on the planetary surface, the unity recedes into the background. If we can discover how to communicate the Overview Effect and bring this perspective to individuals' commitments to high performance, magic will happen. If we can trigger this cognitive shift, we will begin to see non-astronauts working together in the way that astronauts do and that will be the beginning of something really new "under the sun."

#### **Distinction Four: Cognitive Shift vs. Masterful Performance**

For some astronauts—and for many who have heard about the experience—the essence of the Overview Effect is transcendence; a state of being above and beyond the norm. But without masterful performance back on the surface, transcendence is a fleeting experience and loses its credibility and power. That is why we prefer the term "cognitive shift," something that is more easily put into practice.

Bringing the Overview Effect down to Earth will eventually involve many more people going into space. The impact will be even greater if it can be done with some training and preparation of the "new astronauts." (13) However, we don't have to wait. Similar shifts, taking place on a large scale, can be achieved through training and coaching leaders in a company, school, or government agency to appreciate the Overview Effect through simulations, dramatic, powerful visuals, listening to astronauts talk about what it is like, practice in focusing on their experience rather than what they already know, clarifying content and context, and appreciating the power of collective intelligence.

There can then be a movement from an identity of disparate parts to one in which people see themselves as functioning within a collective intelligence that has the capacity to acquire and apply knowledge, effectively adapt, and solve problems. Then, thousands of leaders would see the content of their work from the context of the Overview Effect and Collective Intelligence. For organizations embracing these concepts, it would not only give their school and companies a creative edge but would also advance planetary civilization as a whole. To quote shuttle astronaut Story Musgrave: “Ultimately, nothing matters except performance.” (14)

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## Notes

- (1) “Overview Effect: One Sheet,” The Overview Institute, [www.overviewinstitute.org](http://www.overviewinstitute.org), 2013.
- (2) White, F., *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution* (second edition), American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 1998, p. 204.
- (3) Institute for Co-Intelligence,
- (4) White, *The Overview Effect*, 1998, pp. 28-29.
- (5) *Ibid.*, pp. 73-83.
- (6) *Ibid.*, pg. 27, 28.
- (7) This is a point that White’s colleague and co-founder of the Overview Institute, David Beaver, frequently makes.
- (8) Panel discussion at premiere of the film “Overview,” by Planetary Collective, at Harvard University, December 7, 2012.
- (9) White’s Kindle book, *The New Camelot: Volume One: Camelot and the Overview Effect*, goes into much greater detail on the unity/diversity distinction. [http://www.amazon.com/The-New-Camelot-Volume-ebook/dp/B008WQ22RI/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1364741350&sr=1-1&keywords=The+New+Camelot](http://www.amazon.com/The-New-Camelot-Volume-ebook/dp/B008WQ22RI/ref=sr_1_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1364741350&sr=1-1&keywords=The+New+Camelot)
- (10) White, *The Overview Effect*, 1998, p. 265.
- (11) Interview by Frank White with Ron Garan for third edition of *The Overview Effect* (to be published fall 2013), 2012.
- (12) Garan’s numerous projects include Fragile Oasis, a website dedicated to sharing “the orbital perspective” with astronauts and non-astronauts with the goal of improving life on Earth; Unity Node, a universal open source platform for global collaboration that humanitarian organizations can use to work together toward common goals; Manna Energy, a social incubator committed to the eradication of

poverty through the implementation of sustainable, environmentally sound technologies; and Manna Energy Ltd., which is leveraging the carbon market to provide clean water to millions.

(13) This is a topic that deserves much greater attention as commercial spaceflight becomes more commonplace. We want to note, as well, that Anna Hill is working through her company, Space Synapse, to bring “space to Earth” in a variety of ways. (Frank White is a consultant to Space Synapse.)

(14) Discussion between Story Musgrave and Charles Smith.