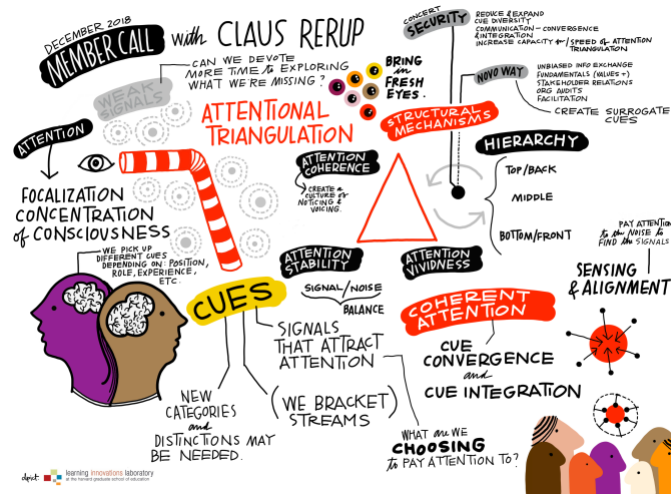


LILA November 2018 Member Call: Attentional Triangulation presented by Professor Claus Rerup



What do the members in your organization actively do to pick up weak cues signaling threat and/or opportunity? What would you change if you could? Why?

Introduction

During the December 2018 LILA member call, Professor Claus Rerup provided some insights into these questions. His research focuses on what he identifies as **attentional triangulation** - **how a group of people (e.g., teams and organizations) avoid missing cues about threat or opportunity**. Paying attention to the right kinds of cues is likely a mechanism toward achieving this year's theme of collective mindfulness. When teams and organizations do not act in collectively mindful ways and are on autopilot, it is likely at least in part through lack of attentional triangulation.

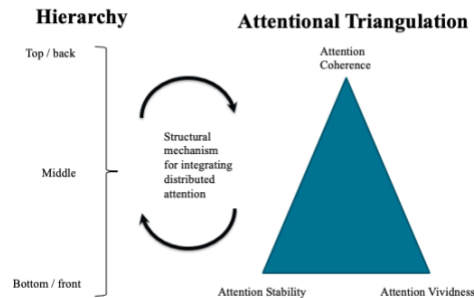
But what type of attention is the right one and which cues to pay attention to is often a challenge even if we know that is vital. We know from past examples that there can be severe consequences to missing important cues. (think Challenge Disaster for one). Compounding the attentional challenge is the fact that often, we don't know what we don't know. Interestingly, especially in organizations, it is almost always the case that there is at least one person who knows that something is going wrong (or had picked up weak cues signaling it). So, if at least one individual perceived the cue, a question we might ask is whether we have the right processes in place to "hear" these insights so we can turn the collective attention to it at the right time?

To listen to the presentation, click the following link: [Attentional Triangulation](#)

What are the components of Attentional Triangulation?

Attentional triangulation provides a scaffold to understand what needs to be in place to create the conditions that minimize the likelihood of missing important yet weak cues. There are three components to attentional triangulation:

1. **Attentional Stability:** sustained attention (e.g. when you are mesmerized by one particular painting at a museum).
2. **Attentional Vividness:** the complexity of representation of issues (e.g. seeing different paintings in the museum exhibit).
3. **Attentional Coherence:** how compatible the attention to issues is across levels, units, and people (e.g. how we would debrief each other after the painting exhibit to see what



the whole thing is about, since we all saw different sets of paintings). Note that coherence is not suggesting that attention and signals across all levels, units, and people need to be similar; but rather that there needs to be a process where people are able to share dissimilar cues and discuss them. The key is to have a conversation about whether a cue is something we should pay attention to or not.

Why do organizations miss emerging problems or opportunities?

Professor Rerup has been studying the concept of attentional triangulation over the last 10 years. From this research, he has focused on understanding how **attention** varies and how **cues** are identified and processed. When done well, these two variables offer a way to enact attentional triangulation and be more collectively mindful.

Attention

Attention can sometimes be thought of as “looking at the world through a straw.” We zoom in on particular issues at the exclusion of other issues. Attentional triangulation is important because sometimes when we zoom in we miss the bigger picture. And while it can be hard for one person to do many things at once (e.g. drive and be on the phone), when you work in collectives, you can think about how different people pay attention to different things. Often, what people pay attention to depend on what cues they are seeing or experiencing.

Cues

A cue is a signal that attracts attention and initiates action. It can come in many forms and they vary in strength. Strong cues are very effective at drawing attention and initiating action - e.g., snapping your fingers in the middle of a small group conversation draws attention. In contrast, weak cues are sometimes ineffective at attracting attention and initiating action.

Once cues attract attention, they must also be processed. We use categories and distinctions to process cues and make sense of what’s happening. Sometimes this means that it takes us a little time to understand what’s actually going on (e.g. in the recent terrorist attacks in Europe, people didn’t immediately understand what’s happening). We need to develop new categories and distinctions to see the cues.

Attentional triangulation in the wild

Processes and mechanisms need to be put in place to increase optimal collective attention to the right cues (even when they are weak ones) and to appropriately process these cues despite various people across a group/organization seeing different cues and different patterns. Attentional triangulation should help with all of this. To illustrate the point, Professor Rerup shared two specific cases from his research each in very different contexts – Novo Nordisk and Roskilde Music Festival.

Case #1: Novo Nordisk

Novo Nordisk is the Danish world leader in insulin production. In 1993 competition in the pharmaceutical industry increased and two companies, Novo and Nordisk who were competitors at the time decided to merge in order to stay competitive. In preparation for an FDA audit, Novo Nordisk conducted a “mock audit” themselves to ensure that any problems that existed would be surfaced before the FDA audit. This mock audit uncovered that while Novo Nordisk had continued to improve the quality of its insulin they hadn’t registered the changes with the FDA, causing more than 100 points of disagreement between the current and approved insulin. In order to avoid being shut down by the FDA, Novo Nordisk discarded six months’ worth of stock of insulin and asked Eli Lilly (a competitor) to take over their customer base. This crisis cost the company \$100 million and it took them 15 years to regain their market share in the U.S.

How might attentional triangulation explain what happened at Novo Nordisk?

Novo Nordisk had wanted to grow, improve their financials, and be better at marketing in the U.S. With the merger of two small companies, many jobs had been eliminated without internal alignment. While there was attentional stability and some attentional vividness, there was attentional *incoherence*: senior and middle management was focused on growth and the merger and not on FDA compliance, but FDA compliance was a top priority for plant and shop management (for whom growth was not an issue).

In the 1990s, shop and plant managers had been aware of how much the FDA was focused on validation. These managers had written letters to leadership about these issues but were ignored because higher managements’ attention was on growth. In most organizations, there is generally someone who recognizes the cues and is aware something is happening. However, without a process for cues to be brought to attentional focus, they often go unseen.

A quote from a department manager vividly expresses the situation: *“The inspectors started in insulin filling, but we realized very quickly that our quality problems were not confined to this department, or to manufacturing for that matter. It was the entire firm. The entire firm was imbued with arrogance towards the FDA. We had our own way of interpreting the rules, which was not in agreement with how the authorities looked at it”*

How did Novo Nordisk respond?

After this crisis, Novo Nordisk created the Novo Way of Management to have a clear process for integrating cues distributed across the front lines and senior managers. They developed values of how they wanted to operate, incorporated systems to extract and bring in voices from critics of the company and created organizational audits. The audits identified where the senior

management should focus on for the year. They would select one of the topics and focused on it for the entire year (attentional stability). To make sure nothing fell through the cracks, they identified facilitators, who were respected managers and could act as brokers/mediators, interviewing people on the floor and writing reports to senior management to raise any issues that were not getting enough attention (attentional vividness). This was a mechanism for increasing attentional coherence – bringing similar or compatible attention to issues is across levels, units, and people.

Case #2: Roskilde Festival

Rock concerts are a place where it can be particularly hard to pay attention and pick up cues: there are many things happening at once, and it is very hard for crowd safety guards to see what is happening at the back of the crowd. In 2000, nine young men died at a Pearl Jam concert in Denmark. As the concert started, all the guards were gradually called on to help out, which should have been a cue as it was a strange request, but it did not register as a signal that the crowd was more animated than normal. About 50 people fell down and 3 minutes later, guards at the front of the crowd realized that they were in the midst of a bigger problem than they originally thought. Even when they recognized the cue, there was no process or routine for how to stop a concert. The team leader eventually radioed to the back office where responders could not see the crowd. The responders downplayed the problem because they had talked with other guards who didn't see a problem in their section. The response time was too slow and by the time an ambulance had gotten to the victims, nine young men had died.

How might attentional triangulation explain what happened?

Rerup and colleagues collected detailed information on the guards and their positions. Because guards in different sections looked into the crowd and saw a different picture, only the guards in two locations could see that there was a problem.



There was no cue convergence across people in the front line, which made it difficult for the people in the back office to make a decision to stop the concert. Again, there was attentional incoherence. To make matters even more difficult, this concert – like other rock concerts – was a context best described as “an inferno of cues,” making it even harder to detect and act on important cues.

How did Roskilde Festival respond?

After this tragic event, the organization removed some cues by banning crowd surfing (of course, removing cues is not always possible in an organization's environment, but it was possible here). This allowed guards to distribute their attention to fewer kinds of cues. They also expanded the pool of diverse cues in that they placed more guards and spotters in different places with different views of the crowd (e.g., more guards in corridors, more spotters on stage). They also placed cameras at different elevated points in the crowd. All of these steps increased attentional stability and vividness. Finally, they increased their attentional coherence by creating a security office and command center that was able to zoom in on particular segments of the

crowd if there appeared to be a problem. All of these improvements increased their capacity for and speed of attentional triangulation. Today, they can stop a concert in 30 seconds.

What can be learned from these two examples?

In order to achieve attentional triangulation, you need distributed cues (people to see different things) and also ways of integrating and establishing patterns of meaning. It is important to move cues across boundaries, which Novo Nordisk did with the facilitators and Roskilde Festival did with the security videos.

What can organizations put into place in order to develop attentional triangulation and foster collective mindfulness?

Organizations can put processes and mechanisms in place to increase optimal attentional triangulation and foster collective mindfulness (meta-mindfulness is required to realize that you need this). Steps also can be taken when there's a lot of environmental "chaos/noise" that help groups attend to an "inferno of cues".

Discussion

How do you pick up on weak cues that you might be missing?

In the Novo Nordisk example, they realized that they were not tapping into different potential resources. So, they increased attentional vividness. They created a one-year program where everyone in the company had to be in contact with someone with diabetes so they could hear first-hand about the problem's patients were having. They also interviewed high school students to learn about how these young people viewed Novo Nordisk as well as the problems of diabetes. Now they have instituted a program to listen to diverse perspectives and invite different groups of people to talk and criticize them.

What about organizations with too much cue diversity?

Some organizations modify the classic 3M approach to innovation (spend 20% of your time to develop innovative ideas) and encourage employees to spend a percentage of their time focused on things they haven't been paying attention to in the rest of their job. Others invite an outsider to come into the organization with fresh eyes and identify cues they might not have been noticing. Encouraging individuals to go on a "departmental exchange" visit with someone in a different area for an interchange of ideas and to get a fresh perspective on their work.

Can high attentional coherence become groupthink?

Coherence isn't about everyone believing the same thing, but about seeing if something is a cue that everyone should pay attention to. It should also involve all layers of the organization to focus on it.

Members identified these 'low cost' changes that could help their organization pick up weak cues signaling threat and/or opportunity

- Use feedback surveys for external partners and clients to get more attentional triangulation.



- Encourage internal groups to include representatives from all levels of the organization on their teams.
- Make time for small reflective moments - asking people to step back every 2-4 weeks and notice if there's anything they're seeing that everyone else might not be paying attention too.