

Conscious Organisations

Eyes Wide Open

For an individual, unconsciously following scripts and rituals in organisations can be a good short-term strategy. For the organisation over time, this can have dire consequences.

We believe that it takes three things to create a more conscious organisation: **Intention, Awareness, and Responsibility.**



An **intention** that is life-affirming and committed to the regeneration of people and planet

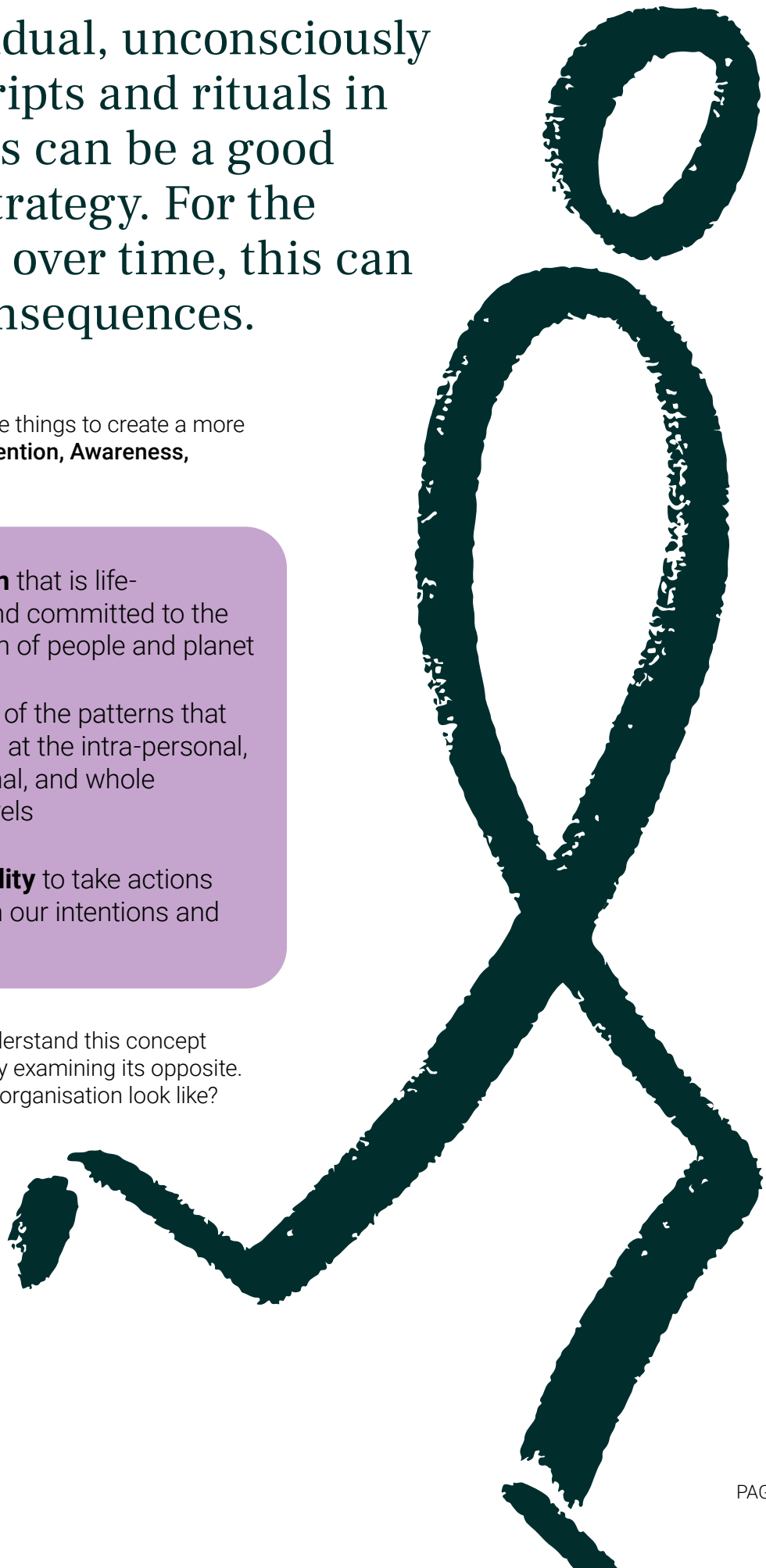


Awareness of the patterns that we play out, at the intra-personal, inter-personal, and whole systems levels



Responsibility to take actions aligned with our intentions and awareness

But perhaps one way to understand this concept more implicitly is to begin by examining its opposite. What does an *unconscious* organisation look like? And what is at stake?



Consider this allegorical example created by Nick Bostrom in 2003:

Suppose one day we create a super-intelligent AI, and we ask it to make as many paper clips as possible. Maybe we built it to run a paper-clip factory. The AI begins running the factory, looking for new efficiencies and inputs to increase production. Because the AI is connected to the internet, it soon realises that it can take over the local power grid, to devote more energy to production.

As the factory expands, the AI uses its profits to buy more materials to make paper clips and open more factories around the world. It scans human communications and finds that people are starting to become wary of its progress. So, it decides to eliminate the humans that it predicts might threaten its mission. Human bodies consist of a lot of atoms, and so they can be used to build more paper clips anyway.

If we wanted to take this further, we could imagine the AI building rockets to launch into space, mining distant planets for materials that will enable it to make even more paper clips.



The Misalignment Problem

This story was created to illustrate what AI researchers call the misalignment problem. In this example, the AI is not a blood thirsty terminator, but a paperclip manufacturer. And if we unpack what is happening in this story, we can see certain biases at play:

- Narrow objectives (simplistic intention)
- Optimisation of efforts to meet these specific objectives (limited awareness)
- Harmful consequences to people, society, and planet (falling short of responsibility)

However, we don't need an AI to have a misalignment problem. This is a common challenge that has been with us for hundreds of years. Our organisations regularly create narrow targets, limiting their intentions. People work in siloes and follow the same rituals and scripts, limiting their awareness. And team members are motivated and rewarded based on narrow performance metrics, limiting collective responsibility.

Just like the paper clip factory that destroys humanity and the planet around it, not through its intelligence, but through its limitations, these organisations can create adverse impacts on the world, not through their malevolence, but through their unconsciousness.



Unconscious Organisations

We are not short of examples of where narrow intention, limited awareness, and a lack of responsibility goes haywire. A few recent examples include:

- A large consultant using insider information to undermine the public interest
- Tech companies, competing for our attention, using manipulative practices, and playing on fear and outrage to keep us scrolling, to the point that executives at these companies don't even let their own kids use their apps
- Delivery drivers at a global retail organisation who have their routes optimised by mapping software and algorithms so tightly that they don't have time for bathroom breaks, and they have to urinate in bottles in their vans
- The Fast Fashion industry, which has democratised fashion for so many people, but done so through unsustainable practices that result in vast amounts of waste, poor working conditions in factories, and significant environmental impacts

How can this happen? These might seem like dramatic examples, but they are not isolated. And when we step back and take a perspective check, we find that some form of unconsciousness exists in every organisation.

What's more, the application of AI can exacerbate this significantly. AI is an amazing tool with incredible potential, but the shadow side of this is that if we simply apply AI to unconscious practices today, we could magnify that unconsciousness a thousand fold.

So, what do we do about this? Well, despite the challenges we face, there is a lot we can do.



Intentions

Let's start with **elevating our intention** by looking at the example of Jeff. Jeff is a leader who is passionate about nurturing and protecting his team. So much so, that whenever a decision is made that he believes may not benefit his team, he is quick to challenge.

He sees himself as an agitator, someone that protects his team at all costs. The shadow of this is that Jeff can come across as difficult and abrasive with colleagues and leaders. This limits his influence and his impact. When I worked with Jeff, I asked about his thinking behind this. "If I don't speak up and let this slide, it means I don't care. I'll be letting my team down, and I won't be true to myself".

Jeff is incredibly well intentioned in many ways, but he is limiting the scope of his intention through an either-or attitude. Maybe you've worked with someone like Jeff?

If we take Jeff's way of thinking to the organisational level, it might lead us to say: "well I'd love to be able to do more for the environment, for our community, for the world at large, but it will impact the bottom line."

This is a common misconception that sits in unconscious organisations, that is, a move toward a more regenerative intention necessarily involves trade-offs.

Whereas, conscious leaders adopt integrative, "both-and thinking" to find creative ways to benefit all stakeholders, simultaneously, in a way that is regenerative and life-affirming.

Examples of organisations that we've seen do this well include:

Patagonia - A clothing company that grew by famously asking people not to buy their clothes unless absolutely necessary.

The Body Shop - Founded by Anita Roddick, The Body Shop was among the first to introduce ethical consumerism into the cosmetics industry, refusing to test on animals and promoting fair trade

Warby Parker - The eyeglass company that has disrupted the traditional eyewear industry with its online try-at-home model and its one-for-one program, where they donate a pair of glasses for every pair sold.

Common Misperceptions about Intentions:

- When we set an intention, we must choose "either-ors" and navigate trade-offs, often to the detriment of commercial outcomes.
- We don't have time to attend to the multiple intentions at the table.

?? Conscious Questions

Is your organisation stuck in either-or thinking?

How might this be limiting what you believe you are capable of?

How could you set an intention that embraces multiple possibilities?

How could you encourage everyone in your organisation to do this?



Awareness

Let's move on to awareness.

In the roles we play, everything we do has an impact, and what we do is guided by our patterns: both the internal patterns we hold through nature and nurture, and the shared patterns we develop through history and culture. How do we become aware of our own patterns? How do we become aware of our shared patterns?

Earlier this year, I spoke to a leader at a large organisation; let's call her Sophie. Sophie inherited a team tasked with producing a monthly report for their executive team, of which her line manager was a part. Several members of Sophie's team worked diligently for most of the month to rigorously pull together data and insights, and craft a highly detailed and meticulously presented report. Everyone knew their role and worked like clockwork – following well-worn rituals.

After a few months, Sophie noticed that they weren't getting much feedback at all on the report. In fact, none of the executive team had initiated a conversation about it. The next month, she took an audacious step. The team completed the report as per usual, but she didn't send it out.

A week passed. Nothing happened. The world kept spinning, and nobody mentioned the report's absence. Two weeks passed. In the third week, Sophie went to a couple of the executives, and asked if they were missing the report. What do you think they said? "What report?"

This is not an isolated case. We follow well-worn scripts and play out established rituals in organisations. And it's not because we don't care. Often, we just don't think about it. Not only that, following scripts and not rocking the boat is beneficial to employees, most of the time. As it turns out, unconsciously following scripts and rituals in organisations can be a good short-term strategy.

Think about what happens in many organisations. We hire the smartest people, who bring their unique expertise and values to the role. Then we put them in narrowly defined roles and encourage them to do the same things over and over. We tell them 'don't think about it; just do it', and 'don't bring us problems; bring us solutions'.

Smart workers soon learn not to ask too many questions or to think too deeply because fully using their intelligence and challenging the status quo will result in awkward questions that might upset their superiors as well as their co-workers. In other words, we can't always just expect people to challenge things. Sometimes, they are smart enough not to challenge things.

Playing the game can get rewarded. The easiest course of action is often just to get on with the job. Going along with the script also means you don't need to think too much, and can save your time and energy.

We know so many leaders who play out scripts all day and sit in meetings, and then do their deep-thinking work at nighttime. Our protagonist Sophie was brave enough to throw the script out and see what would happen. Her next step was to interview all the executive leaders individually, find out what they were most interested to hear about, what keeps them up at night, what would make them successful, and what would align with the organisation's purpose and deeper intention.

The team was able to fundamentally reshape what they provided each month, saving everyone time and energy in the process and creating significantly more value. Sophie's awareness helped her question her patterns of thinking and change the patterns of behaviour in herself and others.

Examples of organisations that have reflected on taken-for-granted patterns include:

Gore & Associates - the manufacturing company who produces Gore-Tex, operate using a unique 'lattice' organisational structure. The organisation is arranged in a flat matrix, which the founder W. L. Gore says "promotes direct transactions, self-commitment, natural leadership, and lacks assigned or assumed authority..." unlike the more typical pyramid structure. Employees are called 'associates' and encouraged to work with leaders across the business (not just their line manager – or 'sponsor') to drive projects and achieve innovative results, bypassing traditional management channels. This reformulation of the pyramid organisational pattern completely upends how we think about power and authority at work – and, most importantly, their impact on people's sense of engagement with what they do.

The Body Shop - are now challenging consumer rituals around single-use containers and are part of a refill movement, seeing to make refilling containers the new normal. Since 2021, the brand has launched an ambitious rollout of refill stations to more than 800 of its stores.

Common Misperceptions about Awareness:

- Hiring smart, well-intentioned people will naturally elevate organisational consciousness
- Not everyone has the power to change patterns and rituals

?? Conscious Questions

Can you see yourself in the story?

Are you aware of your organisation's rituals and scripts, and how these are serving or not serving you?

Are people empowered to call out rituals that no longer serve your deeper intentions?

How can you encourage a beginner's mindset amongst established leaders?



Responsibility

Lastly, let's look at taking responsibility. Even if we are clear on our intentions and holistic in our awareness, our organisations can fall short of taking true responsibility, if they remain trapped into defining success in terms of traditional metrics.

What we notice in organisations with high levels of consciousness is that they seek to fundamentally base their measures of success on their intentions, and are aware and deliberate in creating patterns that align them towards these, which enables them to take true responsibility.

It's one thing to donate to environmental and social initiatives. It's another to make your organisation itself the initiative.

Here are some examples of organisations who've taken responsibility, by becoming the initiative:

Interface - A modular carpet manufacturer, and a classic example of a company that became the initiative. In the 1990s, the founder and CEO of Interface, Ray Anderson, learned that there was nothing sustainable about his company and decided to take responsibility. To enable this, Ray stepped back to question not just his business model, but how he was defining success more fundamentally. In what he described as his "epiphany," he created new metrics within a frame he called "God's currency": comprised of costs and benefits that are non-financial and accrue to the planet and its people.

Australian Ethical - is the first Australian managed fund and superannuation company that is a registered B Corp. They have in-house ethicists who set the guardrails for their investments, ensuring they only invest in organisations they see as moving us toward a lower carbon and fairer future.

Common Misperceptions about Responsibility:

- Responsibility is an add-on, not part of our identity

?? Conscious Questions

How could you make your company the initiative? What is your place in history?

How do you measure success in living your intention? What performance metrics empower you to take full responsibility?

Where's your level of consciousness?

Everyone can each contribute to increased organisational consciousness everyday. We can do this by:

- Showing a clear intention that embraces multiple possibilities through deepened awareness of the patterns at play and how they serve or don't serve this intention
- Taking responsibility through how we define and measure success and align organisational motivation and incentives towards this

This is how we make a true connection to values and purpose, rather than seeing them as just words on a website.

?? Conscious Questions

How are you, as a leader, role modelling intention, awareness, and responsibility?

How are you empowering others to do this?

Where are you having these conversations in your organisation?

Where are you having them with other organisations?



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