

Negative Capability in Leadership Practice: Implications for Working in Uncertainty

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As a leader or manager,
do you ever find yourself
needing to take decisive
action when you don't
know what to do?

Negative Capability

‘...capable of being in
uncertainties, Mysteries,
doubts, without any irritable
reaching after fact & reason’

John Keats’ Letter to George and Thomas Keats

21 December 1817

Holding a Creative Tension

Positive Capabilities	Negative Capability
Professional Expertise	Being in Uncertainty
Defined Goals	Sense of Purpose
Work of Production	Work of Leisure
Passionate Enthusiasm	Passionate Acceptance

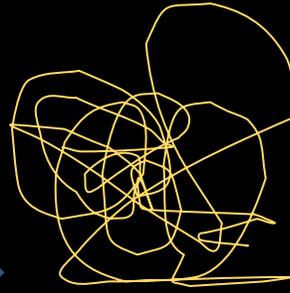


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**Negative Capability in
Leadership Practice**
Implications for Working
in Uncertainty

Charlotte von Bülow
Peter Simpson

Working in Uncertainty



Anxiety or
Overconfidence



Access Negative
Capability

RUSH TO DISTRACTION

- Emotion (irritable)
- Activity (reaching)
- Explanation (reason, fact)

PRACTICE ATTENTION TO

- The situation *as it is*
- The need for patience
- Thought-Full practice

What is left if we let go of all capabilities?

- What is left if we let go of all capabilities?

Awareness, attention: 'being'

- What are we aware of?

Our partial, limited encounter with reality:
uncertainties, Mysteries, doubt: 'being
without'

- How do we respond if without capability?

With equanimity, acceptance: 'without an
irritable reaching after fact and reason'

The Practice of Attention in a World of Distraction



What is Attention

There is no single theory of attention – not in any field (philosophy, phenomenology, consciousness studies, psychology, neuroscience, etc.)

Most modern theories argue that we have a limited amount of attention – that attention is allocated according to external or internal stimuli

Consequently, (it is assumed that) we must compete for the attention of each other on the open market – it has become a commodity

What level of freedom do we have in this marketplace – what level of consent am I able to give?

We talk about PAYING attention ... What happens when that is not *really* a free choice?

The Attention Economy

50 years ago, Herbert Simon
(American economist, political scientist and cognitive
psychologist) said this:

[I]n an information-rich world, **the wealth of information** [...] **consumes the attention** of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a **poverty of attention** and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.
(Simon, 1971, pp 40-41).

The Attention Economy

In the Attention Economy, our attention is **captured** at every turn...

We are **affected** by this all the time

What we can achieve depends on how well we can freely attend to **what matters most** in any given moment

ATTENTION to ...

- the situation *as it is*
- the need for patience
- thoughtful practice

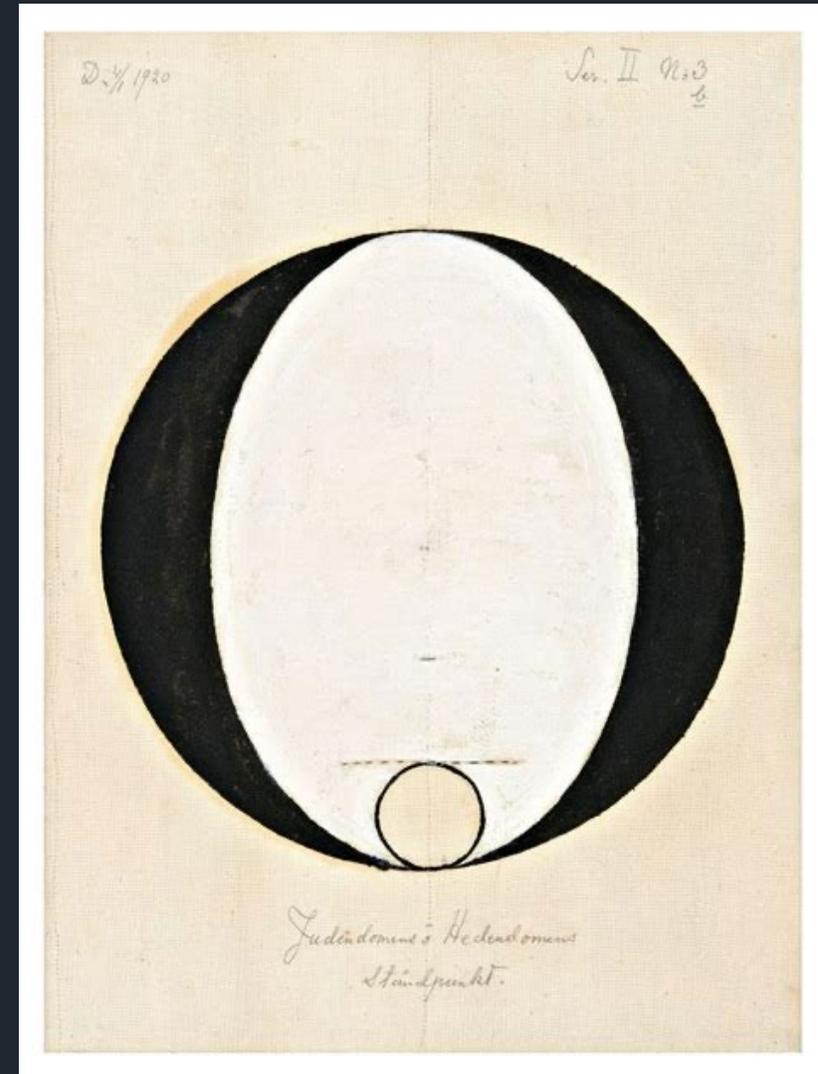
Initial practice

How do I **receive attention** – what does it feel like when I get it?

How do I **give attention** – what does it feel like when I give it?

How well do I **pay attention** – how would I rate my ability to sustain it?
(1 = poor, 10 = outstanding)

What would I most like to change about my **practice of attention**?



The Power of Attention

Leadership of self and others depend on how we **practice our attention**

Developing a conscious practice of attention offers us ways of navigating competing demands and take charge of what we choose to attend to and spend our time on.

The Power of Attention

With a conscious practice of attention, we can cultivate more autonomy and individual initiative, and we can become role models of good and effective practice for others in our organisations or contexts.

An important step is to free ourselves from the self-limiting beliefs and unhelpful narratives that stand in the way of having effective and inspiring meetings.

Exercise

As a leader or manager, do you ever find yourself needing to take decisive action when you don't know what to do?

In these situations, do you find yourself:

- rushing to distraction?
- practicing attention?

RUSH TO DISTRACTION

- Emotion (irritable)
- Activity (reaching)
- Explanation (reason, fact)

PRACTICE ATTENTION TO

- The situation *as it is*
- The need for patience
- Thought-Full practice

References

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