

July 2026

The Fourth Level of Attentional Leadership:

Learning to See and Lead the Organization More Clearly

(7 minutes to understand, 7 minutes to reflect, 1 minute to take a micro-action)



Moving from Teams to the Organization as a Whole

Over the past three Strategic Briefs, we have been exploring what it means to think and lead through the lens of Attentional Leadership—the discipline of knowing where, when, and how long your attention should stay on any part of a technical or human system you are seeking to understand, influence, and lead.

In Brief #11, we began with the first and most fundamental leadership system: yourself. The goal was to help you step back and scan your own clarity, energy, alignment, focus, and performance across the 15 Dimensions of Attentional Leadership.

In Brief #12, we extended that same lens outward to the key individuals around you. We asked what it means to see and understand another person not merely as a role, title, direct report, or performer, but as a whole human system with unique pressures, motivations, capacities, assumptions, relationships, and aspirations.

In Brief #13, we raised the lens again and applied the same framework to groups and teams. We explored how a team has its own rhythm, climate, history, assumptions, Flow Assets, Flow Liabilities, and shared capacity to focus on What's Important Now.

This month, we raise the lens one more level: to the organization as a whole.

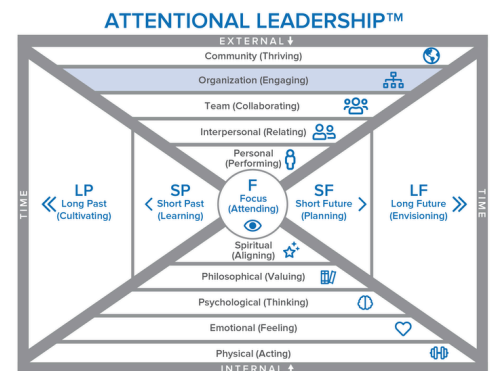
For a senior leader, this is typically the most familiar level of analysis, but it is also one of the easiest to oversimplify. We often talk about "the organization" as if it were one thing: a structure, a strategy, a staff, a budget, a brand, a culture, or a mission.

In reality, an organization is a living system made up of many interdependent systems. It is made up of individuals, relationships, groups, teams, departments, divisions, roles, goals, resources, assumptions, habits, histories, and hopes—all interacting in real time over time.

Like the human body, an organization has many parts playing different roles. Some parts are visible. Some are hidden. Some are strong. Some are under strain. Some are compensating for weaknesses elsewhere. The senior leader's work is to learn to see not only the parts, but also the relationships among them.

That is why, from time to time, it is useful to rise above the day-to-day work and look across the whole field. Like flying over a cornfield, you begin to see patterns that are difficult to see from the ground: where the rows are straight, where growth is uneven, where irrigation is not reaching, where the soil looks healthy, and where something may need attention.

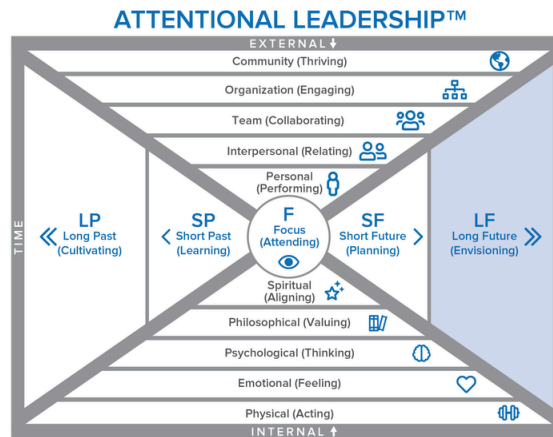
The attentional leader learns to see the organization not only as a legal entity, operating structure, or strategic plan, but as a coherent performance system. The question is not simply, "Is the organization doing well?" The better question is: "How well do I understand the organization as a whole system, and where does our collective attention need to go next?"



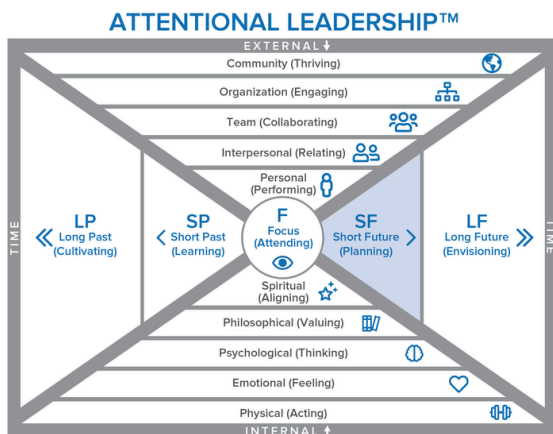
Seeing the Organization as a Performance System

Every organization has a Long Future ahead of it. It has a mission, whether that mission is alive and actively guiding decisions or quietly assumed. It has a vision of the future, whether that vision is clear, compelling, and shared—or vague, fragmented, and inconsistently understood. It also has an intended legacy or trail it is leaving behind, whether leaders are building that legacy intentionally or allowing it to emerge by default.

That is why the Long Future matters. As you scan the organization, begin there. Is the mission still clear? Is the vision still relevant? Does the organization understand the contribution it is trying to make over time? Is there a shared sense of the legacy you are building together, or has the long future become too abstract to inform more proximal goals or guide current decisions?



Then move to the Short Future. Does the organization have clear and well-framed goals? Are those goals well crafted, appropriately prioritized, and understood across the system? Do they connect to a strategic plan that people can actually use? Is there a practical architecture of clearly nested long-term, intermediate, and near-term goals that helps people know what matters most now?



Many organizations have strategic plans. Fewer have strategic clarity. A plan becomes useful only when it helps people organize their attention, make decisions, align their efforts, and execute with greater discipline. If the plan is not shaping what leaders, teams, staff, volunteers, and partners are doing each day, it may be more descriptive than operational.

The organization also has a present moment. It has work happening today, decisions being made today, resources being allocated today, and energy being spent today.

The attentional question is simple but demanding: Are we as an organization focused on the right WINs—What's Important Now? Or are we spending too much time, energy, and money on activities that create motion without enough value, impact, or learning?

This is where senior leaders must ask: Is our organization on the ball? Are we paying attention to what is most critical right now? Are we working on what truly needs to be worked on, or are we being pulled toward the loudest issue, the newest opportunity, or the easiest thing to address?

Strategic Focus in Service of Organizational Performance

In Attentional Leadership, **Strategic Focus** is the process of scanning the system to identify the dimensions and factors that most need attention now. At the organizational level, that WIN may be a financial constraint, an unclear strategy, a cultural issue, a governance problem, a staff capacity gap, an outdated assumption, a broken feedback loop, an underperforming program, or a relationship with the broader community that needs to be strengthened. **Performance Focus** is the organization's ability to execute moment by moment once the right WIN's have been identified.

Net/net: Strategic Focus helps the organization see and decide. Performance Focus helps the organization coordinate, act, adapt, and deliver.

You need both.

There is a real paradox here, and as is often the case with paradox, truth lives in the disciplined tension between the two. If you only scan, reflect, and analyze, you may never move. If you only execute, push, and respond, you may move quickly in the wrong direction. The work of Attentional Leadership is learning how to hold both: seeing the larger system clearly while acting with discipline on what matters most now.

An organization with weak Strategic Focus may stay busy but work on the wrong things. An organization with weak Performance Focus may correctly identify what matters but fail to execute with consistency, discipline, and follow-through. Organizational flow improves when leaders regularly scan the system, identify the right WINs, place attention where it matters most, and then build the ownership, cadence, and feedback loops necessary to improve performance.

This is one reason the 15 Dimensions are so useful. They give a senior leader a disciplined way to look across the whole organization without getting too quickly lost in any one issue. Leaders can easily get pulled toward the most visible problem, the hottest fire, or the opportunity that appears most urgent. But the most visible issue is not always the most important or impactful issue. Sometimes the best use of leadership attention is to focus on the factor that, if addressed well, would make the greatest difference to the whole system.

That is its own leadership skill: knowing what to notice, what to pass by for now, what deserves deeper attention, and how long to stay with it before moving again. This is the discipline at the heart of Attentional Leadership.

Using the 15Q Organization Scan

The attached 15Q Organization Self-Assessment is designed to help you take a 50,000-foot view of your organization. It is not intended to be a formal audit, a comprehensive organizational diagnosis, or a critique of your staff, board, or teams. It is a structured reflection tool to help you see the organization more clearly and identify which dimension may need your attention now.

As you complete the scan, consider the organization as a whole system.

Start with the future and the present. Does the organization have a clear Long Future—mission, vision, legacy, and contribution? Does it have a clear Short Future—goals, plans, priorities, and near-term direction? Is the organization focused in the present on the WINS that matter most? Does it know when to broaden attention, when to narrow attention, and how long to sustain attention on the work that matters?

Then consider the organization's relationship to the past. Is the organization gathering timely feedback, reviewing outcomes and metrics, and learning from performance on a regular cadence? Are goals being iterated based on what the data, experience, and stakeholder feedback are teaching you? Are you archiving what is being learned so that good practice becomes policy, procedure, habit, and organizational wisdom?

The deeper past matters as well. Does the organization know and appreciate its past wins? Has it harvested its historic losses? Does it challenge the assumptions it has inherited? Many organizations are shaped by stories they rarely examine: stories about what works, what does not work, what the community needs, what funders expect, what staff can handle, what the board will support, or what the organization is known for. Some of those stories may still be true. Some may need to be challenged.

The purpose of the scan is not to name every issue. The purpose is to help you identify the dimension or factor that most needs attention now so your organization can move with greater clarity, alignment, and flow and not be a prisoner of its past.

The Internal Life of the Organization

Of course, every organization has an internal life. It may show up in board meetings, leadership meetings, staff conversations, hallway interactions, dashboards, budgets, policies, office space, donor relationships, and the emotional tone people carry into the work.

Physically, how healthy is the organization? Does it have the infrastructure, staffing, resources, systems, tools, space, and financial capacity it needs to perform well? Are the physical and operational dimensions of the organization in strong shape? Is the organization's "body" healthy enough for the mission it is trying to carry and the goals it is seeking to achieve? Are people operating sustainably, or is the system quietly relying on exhaustion, heroics, or underfunded capacity?

Emotionally, what is the climate of the organization? Is there trust, resilience, hope, honesty, and constructive candor? Are people emotionally aware and capable of navigating tension productively? Is the culture creating a place where people can thrive, or is the organization quietly shaped by anxiety, fatigue, defensiveness, avoidance, frustration, or fear?

Psychologically, does the organization see itself and its environment clearly? Are leaders, staff, board members, and other stakeholders generally seeing the same reality, or are they operating from different mental models? Is there a shared understanding of the organization's current situation, major constraints, opportunities, and strategic priorities? Are people on the same page about what is happening and what needs to happen next?

Philosophically, are the organization's beliefs, values, ethics, and principles clear and alive? Do they guide decisions, policies, priorities, and tradeoffs? Or are they mostly stated in documents but inconsistently applied when pressure rises? Does the organization know what it believes and how those beliefs should shape the way it acts?

Spiritually—or in terms of principles, purpose, potential and meaning—does the organization understand why it exists? Does it remain connected to the deeper principles, truths, and aspirations that animate the mission? Is the organization still moving toward its purpose and potential, or has it settled into maintenance mode?

These questions are not abstract. They affect performance every day. A purpose-driven organization cannot separate strategy from meaning, culture from execution, or values from decisions. The internal life of the organization either strengthens its mission or slowly pulls energy away from it.

The Organization's Internal and External Relationships

Finally, look outward. An organization does not perform in isolation. It performs through people, relationships, teams, partnerships, stakeholders, markets, communities, and the broader environment in which it operates.

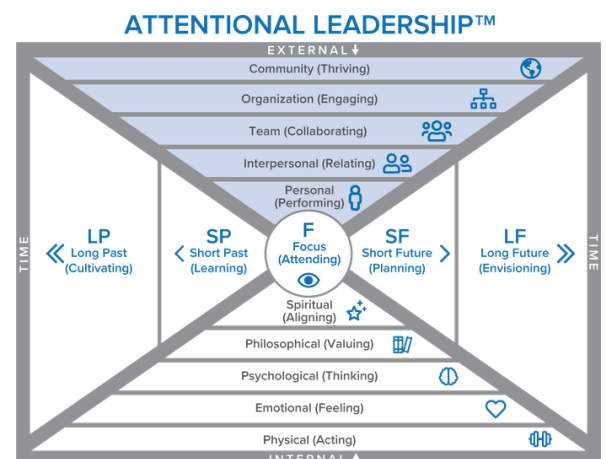
At the individual level, are the people inside the organization able to perform? Do they have the roles, resources, autonomy, clarity, and support they need? Are the right people in the right roles, doing work that matters, with enough capacity to do it well?

At the relationship level, are relationships across the organization strong, respectful, and productive? Is there trust across departments, between staff and leadership, between board and executive leadership, and between the organization and its key partners? Or is relational drag slowing the work down?

At the team level, are teams aligned and collaborating well? Are departments, committees, project teams, and working groups moving together toward shared outcomes? Or are they functioning in silos, duplicating work, missing handoffs, or solving the same problems separately?

At the organizational level, are the organization's goals and contributions aligned with its mission, vision, values, and evolving responsibilities? Is the organization performing as the organization it claims to be? Is there alignment between what you say matters and where time, money, attention, and energy actually go?

And finally, at the community level, is the organization contributing positively to the broader community, membership, field, market, constituency, or public it ultimately serves? Is the organization listening to that community? Is it influenced by the right signals? Does it have the intended influence for which it was designed?



This is also where a senior leader should ask a deeper strategic question: Is our organization serving in a way only we can? Do we understand our own distinctive shape, identity, contribution, and brand? Do we understand our unique place in the broader market, field, or community? In the language I have used in prior briefs, do we recognize our own bonsai tree—our unique form of disciplined, purposeful growth? Are we demonstrating our unique genius?

When senior leaders scan these external dimensions, they often discover that performance issues are not isolated. A goal problem may also be a role problem. A culture problem may also be a relationship problem. A community impact problem may also be a feedback-loop problem. The value of the 15Q Organization Scan is that it helps you see those relationships more clearly.

Turning Organizational Awareness into Leadership Practice

Once you have completed the 15Q Organization Scan, resist the temptation to fix everything at once. The point is not to create a new list of organizational problems. The point is to identify the one dimension or factor that most needs disciplined attention now, plus 1 or 2 more—not 10!

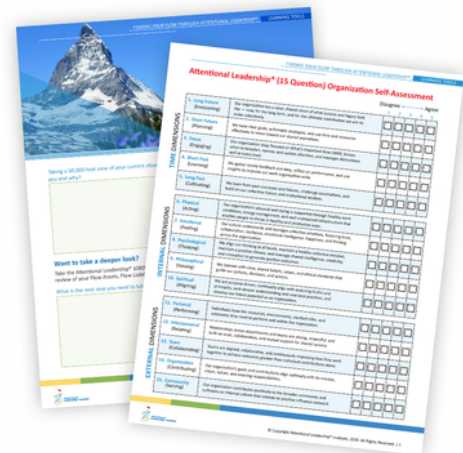
You might complete the scan yourself first. Then, if appropriate, ask your senior leadership team, board chair, executive committee, or a small group of trusted leaders to complete it as well. Comparing perspectives can be revealing. You may discover that your view of the organization and their lived experience are closely aligned. You may also discover important gaps.

Those gaps are useful. They are not failures. They are simply information.

Frame the conversation not as blame, critique, or a performance review, but as a strategic leadership conversation about clarity, alignment, focus, flow, and brand. You might ask: Where is the organization functioning well right now? Where are we experiencing the most drag? What is our current organizational WIN? Are we paying attention to the right things? What are we not seeing clearly enough? What would most increase our ability to perform, contribute, and thrive?

Leaders who make this kind of scan a regular practice begin to see the organization differently. They stop treating the organization as a static structure and begin seeing it as a living system. They become more disciplined about attention. They become more selective about intervention. They become more aware of how mission, strategy, culture, systems, relationships, feedback, and community impact are connected.

That is the ongoing work of an attentional leader.



Reflection Questions

1. Which dimension of the organization appears strongest right now?
2. Which dimension appears most strained or underdeveloped?
3. Where is our organization's biggest thematic WIN?
4. Are we gathering the right feedback, metrics, and learning to improve performance?
5. Are we serving in the distinctive way only our organization can serve?
6. What might change if our senior leadership team or board completed this same scan and compared perspectives?

1-Minute Micro Action

Choose one organizational dimension from the 15Q Organization Scan that may need your attention most right now.

Write one sentence:

"Our organization may need to place more attention on _____ because _____."

Keep it simple. Keep it honest. Keep it actionable.

That sentence may point you toward your next strategic conversation.

Looking Ahead

This brief is the fourth in a five-part series on applying Attentional Leadership at scale.

- **Brief #11** — Leading yourself
- **Brief #12** — Seeing and leading others more clearly
- **Brief #13** — Seeing and leading groups and teams as performance systems
- **Brief #14** — Seeing and leading the organization as a whole
- **Brief #15** — Leading within the broader community your organization ultimately serves

The deeper point is this: Attentional Leadership is not just a framework for personal reflection. It is a way of seeing performance, focus, and flow at every level of the system. The same questions scale. The same framework travels. The same discipline applies.

Where should attention go?

When should it go there?

How long should it stay there?

And what becomes possible when attention is placed with greater intention on the most important WINS—whether the focus is yourself, a key person, a vital team, the organization, or the broader community you serve?



Closing Thought: See the Organization. Lead the System.

An organization is more than its mission statement, strategic plan, budget, staff chart, programs, or brand. It is a living performance system with a future, a past, an internal life, external relationships, and a purpose it is trying to fulfill in the world.

Having learned to see yourself, key individuals, and teams more clearly, the next leadership discipline is learning to see the organization as the living system that holds them all.

The senior leaders who consistently move organizations forward are not only skilled at setting direction or managing performance. They are skilled at seeing the system that enables performance by unleashing human potential at every level.

If you want a high-functioning organization, you must learn to see the organization more clearly, understand where attention is most needed, and place that attention with intention.

See the organization. Understand the system. Place attention where it matters most.

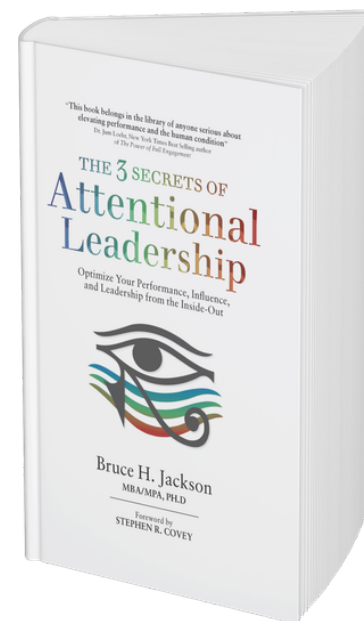
That is the ongoing work of Attentional Leadership.

If you would like a copy of *The 3 Secrets of Attentional Leadership*, or would like to explore how these principles apply to your specific context, feel free to reach out [here](#).

Sincerely,



Bruce H. Jackson, MBA/MPA, Ph.D.
Principal
Attentional Leadership Institute



Attentional Leadership® (15 Question) Organization Self-Assessment

Disagree ← → Agree

1 2 3 4 5

TIME DIMENSIONS

1. Long Future (Envisioning)	Our organization has a clear, shared vision of what success and legacy look like — now, for the long term, and for the ultimate contribution we aim to make collectively.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Short Future (Planning)	We have clear goals, actionable strategies, and use time and resources effectively to move toward our shared aspirations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Focus (Engaging)	Our organization stays focused on What’s Important Now (WIN), knows when to broaden, narrow, and sustain attention, and manages distractions well at every level.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Short Past (Learning)	We gather timely feedback and data, reflect on performance, and use insights to improve our work organization-wide.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Long Past (Cultivating)	We learn from past successes and failures, challenge assumptions, and build on our collective history and institutional wisdom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

INTERNAL DIMENSIONS

6. Physical (Acting)	Our organization’s physical well-being is supported through healthy work conditions, energy management, and well-maintained infrastructure that enables people to thrive in healthy and productive ways.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Emotional (Feeling)	Our culture understands and manages collective emotions, fostering trust, collaboration, resilience, emotional intelligence, happiness, and thriving across the organization.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Psychological (Thinking)	We align our thinking at all levels, maintain a healthy collective mindset, maintain a positive climate, and leverage shared intelligence, creativity, and innovation to generate positive outcomes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Philosophical (Valuing)	We operate with clear, shared beliefs, values, and ethical standards that guide our policies, decisions, and actions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Spiritual (Aligning)	We are purpose-driven, continually align with enduring truths and principles, seek deeper understanding and new best practices, and develop our fullest potential as an organization.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS

11. Personal (Performing)	Individuals have the resources, environments, clarified roles, and autonomy they need to perform well within the organization.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Interpersonal (Relating)	Relationships across departments and teams are strong, respectful, and built on trust, collaboration, and mutual support for shared success.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Team (Collaborating)	Teams are aligned, collaborative, and continuously improving how they work together to achieve outcomes greater than individual contributions alone.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Organization (Contributing)	Our organization’s goals and contributions align optimally with its mission, vision, values, and evolving responsibilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Community (Serving)	Our organization contributes positively to the broader community and cultivates an internal culture that extends its positive influence outward.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Taking a 50,000-foot view of your current situation, which of the 15 statements above stand out most for you and why?

Want to take a deeper look?

Take the Attentional Leadership® 1080° Sweep Assessment (www.1080Sweep.com) for a comprehensive review of your Flow Assets, Flow Liabilities, and your own Personal Flow Formula to focus on your WIN.

What is the next step you need to take?