



Breaking Free: Bringing the Overview Effect to Work and Life*

Charles E. Smith

Senior Executive Coach, Author, and Leadership Consultant;
Chairman, The Breaking Free Initiative LLC

Abstract

Upon breaking free of Earth's gravity and going to space, some astronauts experienced a surprising change in their perspective of life on Earth. Author Frank White[†] named this phenomenon, "The Overview Effect." Astronauts who experienced this were witness to a message about how to be, with the planet and with each other. Their message about being "in the same boat" together points to an opportunity for many of us to break free of "the way it is" and create moments of transcendence that go beyond identity, individually and collectively. It is about shifting our point of view to see that what needs attention in our companies, communities, and relationships is always greater than the sum of the parts.

In the same way that we must achieve escape velocity to reach space and see the Earth anew, it is possible to identify and generate equivalent escape velocity for breaking free of the cultural and circumstantial gravities that keep us from going for our dreams with courage and conviction.

For example, in the first decade of this century, a large public utility was losing money, had union-management conflict, and was facing the grim prospect of letting people go. Simultaneous with conversations about the Overview Effect and achieving Escape Velocity, the CEO threw his hat over the wall and told every employee, individually and together, that if they performed to certain standards, none would lose their jobs. This expanded people's energy and enthusiasm such that they broke free from their historical culture of distrust and going in different directions, and generated a wildfire of high performance, innovation, cooperation. During the worst of the recent 'Great Recession' the company made its largest profits ever, and over the subsequent five years moved near the top of its industry in terms of every business quality and social measure.

Upon breaking free of Earth's gravity and going to space, some astronauts experienced a surprising change in their perspective of life on Earth. Author Frank White¹ named this phenomenon "The Overview Effect". Some astronauts also discovered a compelling drive within themselves to help make business, government, healthcare, and the world as we know it, a better place.

* This 'stand-alone' article focused on pragmatic applications, was generated in conjunction with multiple conversations between David Norris, Frank White and the author regarding the distinctions of "Bringing the Overview Effect Down to Earth" and is highly related to the article of David Norris and Frank White titled "Breaking Free: Bringing the Overview Effect Down to Earth."

† Frank White, *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution*, Library of Flight, 2014

Astronauts who experienced the Overview Effect were witness to a message from the universe about how to be with the planet and each other. It's about being "in the same boat" together, and the possibility that many more of us can break free of our own certainty about "the way it is" to create moments of transcendence, individually and collectively at any point in time. It is about shifting our point of view to see that what actually needs attention in companies, communities, and relationships is always greater than the sum of the parts.

In the same way that astronauts must achieve escape velocity to reach space and see the Earth anew, so is it possible for many on Earth to generate an equivalent escape velocity to break free of the gravity of the cultures and circumstances that keep us from going for our dreams with courage and conviction. The challenge and purpose in writing this article is to ally with kindred spirits in learning more and more ways to achieve that escape velocity and bring the Overview Effect down to Earth.

"The "overview" way of being calls for control of emotions so that principles, values, reason, and intuition prevail."

1. Toward an Overview Way of Being

In 1994, Yehezkel Dror² presented a commissioned report to the Club of Rome on the capacity to govern. He analyzed the state of national, local, and corporate governance in the world, and made a number of sensible recommendations. His final word, however, was that when all was said and done, what mattered most was the character of the leaders.

Some leaders and CEOs demonstrate a kind of character that includes a capacity for self-reflection and an ability to see the whole of a system as greater than the sum of its parts. This "Overview" way of being implies a seeking for understanding in almost any circumstance. It calls for control of emotions so that principles, values, reason, and intuition prevail. At their core, these people are predisposed towards inquiry and are unusually open to considering things that may be inconsistent with what they already know or believe. Their search for the truth is coupled with a personal commitment to doing what's right for all involved. They experience themselves as fully connected to the world around them, not separate from it—they and the system are made of one whole cloth, even though this experience is far too complex to explain. They take responsibility for dramatically expanding their own and others' energy, vitality, and creativity. This almost always results in the achievement of escape velocity and breaking free from the limiting effects of culture and fixed beliefs.

When planning to take on something thought to be impossible, a person has to instinctively appreciate something greater than the sum of its parts. It can't be understood through linear, measurement-based analysis. The whole is too complex, with too many elements, relationships, blockages, and co-workers' and colleagues' self-held limitations. You just can't get to the essence of what's really going on and make sense of the whole with linear and convergent approaches.

In observing and working with leaders and groups who have achieved escape velocity, it is clear that they created a "new whole" that's greater than the sum of the parts, and that connects deeply and personally with everyone involved. They achieved unfathomable leaps

in cohesion, energy, and accomplishment. Gradually but dependably, new leaders emerged who were focused on betterment of the whole system. From this place, fresh opportunities appeared for invention, co-invention, and innovation, far beyond what was imaginable from a linear baseline.

We often fail to recognize that our methods of analysis are based on created thought-frameworks that derive from the linear, convergent nature of analysis in the first place. We are tricked by our own mind's need to see things in ordered and sensible ways. As John Stewart³ writes, *"Abstract/ rational thinking is largely incapable of representing complex patterns and processes, transforming systems, emergence and complex relationships."* So much more is available by seeing things from the perspective of the whole than from the perspectives reached by studying one or more of the parts, which are always influenced by our roles, beliefs, commercial imperatives, personal histories, skill sets, and political interests.

2. Essential Elements for Breaking Free and Bringing the Overview Effect Down to Earth

We consider four basic elements essential to Breaking Free. These elements do not necessarily happen one at a time or in a particular order. All are necessary to enable individuals and organizations to bring the Overview Effect Down to Earth. All are necessary to provide life and work with a transcendent, empowering and noble context for solving problems, unleashing creativity, and bringing forth unusually effective ways to operate businesses, governments, educational systems and other public services. These elements are:

- Cognitive Dissonance
- Energetic Awareness
- Escape Velocity
- Collective Intelligence

David Norris and Frank White⁴ describe a powerful instance of Cognitive Dissonance in contrasting astronaut Ron Garan's deeply moving experience of seeing the Earth from a distance with his awareness of the violence and other painful social and political situations happening on the planet. The experience of Cognitive Dissonance is necessary before people will commit to achieving Escape Velocity. Such dissonance is the foundation for an acute experience of the unacceptable contradiction between your dream for something you really care about and the seemingly inescapable truth of the way it actually is for you. We are referring to an intensity that is experienced physically, emotionally, and sometimes spiritually. We all have ways of avoiding this distasteful pain—distraction, focusing on something good, thinking about the future, hoping and coping, and keeping busy are but a few. Deep immersion in this gap makes the existing situation intolerable. It is this powerful Cognitive Dissonance that induces "the final no" to the current state of affairs and "yes" to a vision upon which energy flows and Escape Velocity becomes possible.

Energetic Awareness comes from attending to, sensing and directly working with the patterns of energy present in relationships, teams, organizations, businesses, and communities. It reveals the underlying patterns that directly affect the success of any effort, and helps a leader to:

- Sense the blocks to creating high energy teams, projects, or organizations;

- Understand natural solutions or innovations that “want to emerge” and are consistent with the players’ passions;
- Unlock energy and wisdom that are naturally present;
- Discover ways to heal, create partnerships, and navigate complex situations; and
- Build loyalty and agreement to shared goals.

“In an energetic paradigm, responsibility begins with our willingness to be cause-in-the-matter of energy across the entire system.”

In business and life itself, Energetic Awareness happens in a specific context—a mission-driven or relationship-driven framework. It has the power to mobilize everyone involved. Energetic Awareness occurs in a moment of presence. It propels people, groups, and ultimately systems forward by literally seeing themselves and the related environment at its very core as a field of interacting opportunities and energy flows. Escape Velocity becomes available when leaders observe people’s relationships and work in terms of energy flows between people, groups, and hierarchies. This is consistent with Serge Kahili King’s⁵ insight that, *“Energy flows where the attention goes.”*

Frank Herbert^{6,7} said that, *“... in all the universe there is only the insatiable appetite of matter..., that energy is the only true solid..., and energy learns.”* Such learning is always the sum of intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual activity. We can get very smart cognitively yet remain stupid emotionally, spiritually, or physically. In an energetic paradigm, responsibility begins with our willingness to be cause-in-the-matter of energy across the entire system.

Victor Sanchez⁸ suggests that, *“... companies and people with the most available energy will prevail”*, and that *“... good ideas, force of will, profit and growth are not enough.”* The pull of the existing culture’s gravity always wins without the Energetic Awareness that enables Escape Velocity and the ability to see, address, and overcome cultural and personality barriers. This requires personally paying attention and addressing it directly when we see that energy is low or missing. It means directing energy where we want it to increase (i.e., it is always our job to enliven a boring meeting and move things forward). This energy expansion is always a momentary event allowing us to Break Free of the current circumstance. In the next moment another set of gravitational forces will need to be contended with—gravity never goes away.

Energetic Awareness is a bridge to Escape Velocity. To go into space, we must achieve Mach 25-17,500 miles per hour. That is the propulsion, energy, vitality, and staying power needed to break free of the gravitational pull of the Earth. In life, enormous gravitational pulls exist in culture, personal identity, dominating relationships, and existing beliefs, which block one’s ability to come to terms with what is possible. In human affairs, escape velocity can be dramatic or subtle. It can come from a great increase in propulsion and velocity, a subtle

or radical change in circumstance, or from a shift in one's way of being, often manifested in action. It can be personal or organizational. It can be technical or counter-intuitive. When it happens, people recognize it and report experiencing freedom, a release of constraint, movement, achievement, and a powerful sense of connection with the world around them.

Many of us have experienced moments of Escape Velocity from the gravity of our own lives or circumstances. One dramatic example from our work occurred at Campbell's Soup of Canada.

In order to prevent Canadian manufacturing plants from being closed and the business from relocating to the United States, the senior management group needed to mobilize the entire workforce to cut costs. They stood bravely as a group in the face of their own fear that the meeting could go out of control, and spoke with uncommon vulnerability in front of half of the company's employees about the situation at hand, knowing that hundreds of people did not trust them.

The moment of vulnerability was magical. The gap was painfully experienced, between the fear-driven existing situation and people's shared dream of a company where everyone thrived. They had paradoxically generated a surge of energy that broke everyone free, as they reached escape velocity from a culture of mutual distrust. The workers involved spontaneously visited other parts of the company to share the opportunity of what had happened. Most of Canadian manufacturing was saved and the company became a place where many people reported being thrilled to come to work.

In an example of Escape Velocity from the most recent Great Recession, a large public utility in the western United States was losing money. They were having union-management conflict and facing the grim prospect of having to let people go. Despite all of this and with the intent to expand people's energy and enthusiasm, the CEO threw his hat over the wall in an act of trust. He told every employee, individually and together, that if they performed to certain standards, none would lose their jobs. In those moments of being "for" one another, they broke free from the gravity of a culture of distrust, goals segmentation, and not 'being in the same boat' that had plagued them for years. A wildfire of innovation, cooperation, and collective action emerged, making a new future real. During the worst of the recession, the company realized its biggest profits ever, and in the following five years moved near the top of its industry against every business, quality, and social measure.

In each case, Escape Velocity from the pull of gravity of culture or identity increased suddenly by imagining and committing to a compelling future that reshaped current perceptions and actions. This was a "Future-Present-Singularity" in which the desired future became the new context of what was happening moment to moment. As with astronauts in the space program, people's energy and commitment to acting as ambassadors from the future took flight. All sorts of things happened that would not have otherwise been possible.

Collective Intelligence is the shared or group intelligence/wisdom that emerges from the collaboration, collective efforts, and competition of many individuals. There is an emerging body of research and application showing great promise in the use of this energetic phenomenon. It's more than conceptual and always consists of more than words and numbers, often also being expressed in emotional form (feelings), spiritual form (nobility of purpose),

or physical form (as in the power to act). However it's expressed, Collective Intelligence possesses, exerts, or displays great increases in individual and collective energy.

“The Overview Effect, in which the world literally changes by changing how we perceive it, could not have been experienced by an astronaut acting alone.”

While the boundary limits of Collective Intelligence are given by the context or fundamental mission of the enterprise, Frank Herbert⁹ cautions us that, *“Most civilization is based on cowardice. It's so easy to civilize by teaching cowardice. You water down the standards that could lead to bravery. You restrain the will. You regulate the appetites. You fence in the horizons. You make a law for every movement. You deny the existence of chaos. You teach even the children to breathe slowly. You tame.”*

We saw this limitation demonstrated in a major corporation where the prime directive to managers and engineers was, “Be aggressive, but don't rock the boat.” In such a circumstance, intelligent individuals only think what they are paid to think, at least in public. This was a teaching of cowardice in areas that were not seen as being in service to boundaries set by hierarchy. If, as Herbert says, *“There is no such thing as rule-driven creativity,”* this accounts for the lack of unbridled innovation in most large organizations, which develop increasing numbers of rules.

Space exploration is a prime example of how Collective Intelligence can be incredibly powerful in the right context. The Overview Effect, in which the world literally changes by changing how we perceive it, could not have been experienced by an astronaut acting alone. Thousands of people, using the tax dollars contributed by millions of people, responded to the stirring vision enunciated by President John F. Kennedy, who vowed to *“... put a man on the moon and return him safely to Earth by the end of the decade.”*

When it comes to Collective Intelligence, there is always a paradox. Glass artist Michael Smith[‡] says, *“Creativity unleashed is a matter of allowing intention and flow, design and freedom, together.”* Collective Intelligence is akin to Energetic Awareness in that it consists of interacting flows of multiple forms of intelligent phenomena.

Collective Intelligence emerges in a search for shared meaning or common ground. Getting a person, pair, or group to join in the search for shared context, and to move from debate to dialogue, makes a vast realm of intelligence available beyond that accessible by the individual mind. Looking from the Gestalt, the whole, rather than from the parts, allows for something new and different to emerge, offering new pathways for effective problem-solving. This contextual, perceptual, intellectual shift opens the way to a greater realm of collective wisdom.

[‡] <http://www.thecreativityunleashed.com/>

3. Conclusion

A remarkable client story captures the basic elements of Breaking Free from the pull of cultural gravity. Woody Beville was Executive Vice President of the Rouse Company during the years the company became famous for pioneering the development of Festival Marketplaces, such as Faneuil Hall in Boston; South Street Seaport in New York City; Harbor Place in Baltimore; and Bayside Marketplace in Miami. Woody was in charge of operations and the expansion and redevelopment of more than 70 malls across United States. Their success bears a remarkable resemblance to what it takes to break free of the pull of gravity, go to the moon and back, and see the Earth from orbit or from the lunar surface.

When President Kennedy made his announcement, NASA had just managed to send Alan Shepard on a brief suborbital hop above the atmosphere. The goal of sending a man to the moon and back appeared to be impossible. No one knew how to do it. With this impossible goal energizing everyone involved in the mission, NASA contractors, flight controllers, scientists, and astronauts came together in a remarkable display of Collective Intelligence. They actually beat the President's deadline by several months! An unexpected but major benefit came with this accomplishment, as the astronauts, and all of us with them, saw the whole Earth for the first time together—as a species we witnessed “Earthrise” as our home planet hung suspended in the lunar sky.

The Rouse Company shift happened during a period when the industry was in complete collapse. Major developers were going bankrupt or being kept alive by banks. Yet during this time, the Rouse Company's earnings escalated continuously, reaching 30 percent improvements each year. During the worst five years of deep recession, 70 percent of the center management teams consistently met self-created “Impossible Goals”.

When we first met, Woody had talked about the absence of “straight talk,” which was destroying the trust on which everything else depended. People were not telling the truth about what was going wrong or slipping, and bosses were doing the same. I heard the pain in Woody's voice when he said, *“I will no longer work in a place where people don't tell one another the truth.”* At the same time, his dream for the center teams, the people, and the company was a perfectly clear statement of a human values-driven and consistently successful business. The Cognitive Dissonance was obvious and painful, and impelled his willingness to “shoot for the moon.”

As with the Apollo moon landing program, the goal appeared to be impossible, and no one knew how to do it. The big question for Woody was, *“How do we create a set of goals based on the deep personal energy of every team member; in service of three missions—team and team-member growth, the contribution of every team to the community it serves, and taking care of our shareholders?”*

Escape Velocity came from decisively turning on its head everything in the culture that was contradictory to the best in human nature. Employees, management, communities, shareholders, and team members melded with one other. Shopping center management teams were told that from now on they would set their own goals without interference. All levels were told that bosses were no longer controllers, gatekeepers, and boundary managers. Bosses were told not to intercede to get their own way, but to engage through helping the teams achieve their self-set “impossible objectives.” These impossible objectives were defined

to have less than a 30 percent probability of success. The teams were told to put together operating budgets as usual, and then set them aside, totally going for their objectives, rising and falling together as a team in terms of year-end awards, salary adjustments and bonuses.

With an enormous release of personal, team and collective energy, the company achieved Escape Velocity. Individually and together they established goals they cared about, personally and deeply. Leaders could walk freely into team meetings and feel the success and passion of people working toward goals they themselves had set. It became clear how compelling it was for people to be taking on and achieving the Impossible Objectives they had conceived and committed to, individually and together. They had broken free of the suppressive impact of hierarchical rule, and the tyranny embedded in an assumption that a higher intelligence resides only in the bosses.

Despite a background awareness that in complex systems Collective Intelligence is usually smarter than individual intelligence, the cost of ignoring this became demonstrably clear. Prior to this change, 70 management teams full of intelligent individuals had been behaving in ways that were collectively inept. Through addressing Cognitive Dissonance and recontextualizing their way of working, they tapped into the enormous well of Energetic Awareness that is nearly always available. They put that energy into the service of company, team and individual visions they really cared about, rather than buying into or going along with goals simply because an authority wanted them to want it.

* * * * *

Breaking free of the pull of Earth's gravity was once considered impossible, yet it has now become a matter of practice and technology. Similarly, it has also become possible to systematically break free of the gravity of culture and identity, in the service of critical business and social concerns. This capacity to "Bring the Overview Effect Down to Earth" is as much a practical matter as it is a human and spiritual necessity.

British consultant and colleague John Caswell§ points out, "*Billions of dollars are spent by companies and governments trying to solve the wrong problems.*" Perhaps our ability to break free of the gravitational pull of culture and limiting identity will finally give companies and governments a path to solving the right problems.

Author Contact Information

Email: charles.smith1935@gmail.com

Notes

1. Frank White, *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution* 2nd edition (Reston: AIAA, 1998).
2. Yehezkel Dror, *The Capacity to Govern: A Report to the Club of Rome* (London: F. Cass, 2001).
3. John Stewart, *The Evolutionary Manifesto: Our Role in the Future Evolution of Life* 2008.
4. David Norris & Frank White, *Breaking Free: Bringing the Overview Effect Down to Earth*.
5. Serge Kahili King, *Mastering Your Hidden Self* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1985).
6. Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York: Chilton Books, 1965).
7. Frank Herbert, *God Emperor of Dune* (New York: Putnam, 1981).
8. Victor Sanchez, *The Toltec Path of Recapitulation: Healing Your Past to Free Your Soul*, (Vermont: Bear & Company, 2001).
9. Herbert, *Dune*

§ Founder & CEO, Group Partners