# INTEGRAL LEADERSHIP COLLABORATIVE

# The Integral Framework
## by Brett Thomas and Russ Volckmann

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*[ This article is an excerpt from Brett Thomas' and Russ Volckmann's forthcoming book on integral leadership being published late 2011 by Integral Publishers. ]*

Organizational leadership is a dynamic process involving a number of separate yet interconnected activities such as evaluating a situation or state-of-affairs, envisioning a desired future state and objectives to work toward, creating some kind of plan and/or strategy to achieve those objectives, coordinating efforts of various people and processes, evaluating progress and current conditions, and continually adjusting the strategies and tactics until the desired objective (or change) has been accomplished. Clearly, hundreds of books have been written on various aspects of management and leadership theory that address the nuance of these activities. Like all things integral, there are many legitimate and valid ways to render an idea. A number of models of integral leadership have been proposed, and in the years to come, many new models will emerge. There can be a lot of merit in complex, detailed, nuanced models; and there is much merit in simple, memorable, actionable models.

## Three Fundamental Leadership Perspectives and Three Questions to Invoke Them

For the purposes of simplicity, the list of dynamic activities involved in organizational leadership can be roughly grouped into three broad groupings that fall under the headings of *Awareness*, *Approach*, and *Action*.

1. *Awareness* – This category includes activities that involve perceiving the relevant details of the current situation, desired situation, and gaps. In military leadership, this is sometimes called a "situational assessment"—a term that we have also found useful in training corporate leaders.

2. *Approach* – This category includes the activities associated with developing objectives and strategy. Here the leader(s) determine what is important and needed given the reality of the situation along with relevant resources and constraints. In many situations, the most important factor in this category is selecting the appropriate "leadership style" for the circumstances. (This is the subject of sections 3 and 4 of this manifesto.)

3. *Action* – Of course, once leaders select an approach, it is then necessary to translate that approach into specific action. This final category includes the specific tactics, interventions, and action steps to be performed by the leader(s) and the individuals in the group. In simple terms, this is what the leader actually chooses to do or not do.

In our leader education work, we teach leaders to ask three fundamental questions in every single "leadership situation."

The three Leadership Metaquestions are:

**?** 
1. What is *really* happening?
2. What is most important and most needed?
3. What should be done? What is the most helpful thing I can do?

If you were to survey a group of people with these three questions about the exact SAME situation, you would get wildly different answers!

The answers to these questions reflect what these individuals are aware of and not aware of, what they emphasize and focus on (biases) and what perspectives they valorize or marginalize. A person's worldview (values and beliefs) will significantly influence what they deem important and what approaches and actions they think are warranted (or even acceptable). Note that this is true of leaders, followers, and all other stakeholders associated with any given situation. Different people perceive different details of a situation (*awareness*), hold different values about what is most important and what is needed in a particular situation (*approach*), and what behavior or action is appropriate and helpful and what is not (*action*).

An integral leader who has adequately developed her capacity for perspective taking[1] will recognize that the way the other individuals involved in any given situation might answer these three questions is, itself, crucial data that must be taken into consideration for the leader herself to accurately answer the first question: "What's *really* happening here?" Therefore, the answers to these three deceptively simple questions are both interdependent and recursive. If you recognize that each person involved in a situation has their own point of view, and therefore, their own answers to these questions, it's easy to see how these questions can be used to reveal (and more adequately account for) tremendous nuance and complexity that conventional leaders will tend to overlook.

While worldview is the most fundamental factor influencing how people answer these questions, integral practitioners recognize that there are numerous additional factors to consider. A person's cognitive, emotional, social, and moral stages of development also impact how a person will answer these questions. Typology plays a role as well. The integral principle of "native perspectives" shows us that some personality types emphasize the tangible/objective details of a situation while others emphasize the intangible/subjective factors. Similarly, some pay more attention to individual behavior while others notice group dynamics. Of course the economics, infrastructure, processes and systems, and the physical environment are all crucial factors that influence a person's answers to these three

fundamental questions. Clearly, if we are to account for all this complexity, we need a reliable map, or framework, that can make sense of it. This is where "integral" comes in.

## AQAL Stands for "All Everything"

**The dictionary definition of *integral* is: "possessing everything essential or significant; complete; whole."**

An integral approach (whether to medicine, education, economics, etc.) incorporates all of the essential perspectives, schools of thought, and methods into a unified, comprehensive, inclusive, and empirically accurate framework.

There are a number of helpful frameworks researchers can draw upon to architect an "integral understanding" or an "integral approach" to a given field.  My ten years in the trenches designing and delivering intensive integral leader development programs have led me to conclude that the AQAL Integral Framework developed by Ken Wilber and the Integral Institute is, by far, the most precise map currently available for this purpose. For those not familiar with it, the AQAL acronym, as originally articulated by Wilber, was short for: All Quadrants, all Lines, all Levels, all States, all Types. Note that only the first two elements (Quadrants and Lines) are specifically indicated in four-letter acronym. In the practical application of integral theory and methodology, the specific names of the core elements of AQAL are articulated in different ways depending on the application (e.g. business, education, sustainability, etc.).

For example, Levels are sometimes referred to as "Stages", which is not exactly the same, but close. Styles are sometimes singled out as a distinct element and other times they are simply considered a subset of Types.  Similarly Lenses (worldviews) are sometimes emphasized as we do in the practice of Integral Leadership while in other applications they may be treated as simply a derivative of Stages and Types. I realize this quickly gets rather technical. I briefly mention it here so that new students of integral have a basic orientation to these essential elements and so that my experienced integral readers can recognize the specific AQAL configuration being used here in the service of integral leadership.

**In our experience using the AQAL framework for *integral leadership*, it has been most useful to configure the elements as:  All Quadrants, all Lines, all Levels, all Lenses, all States, all Styles, all Types.**

To make the AQAL model specifically relevant and applicable to the practice of leadership, and to provide a fresh perspective on this framework for my readers who are already familiar with integral theory, we will describe AQAL in the context of *awareness, approach,* and *action*.
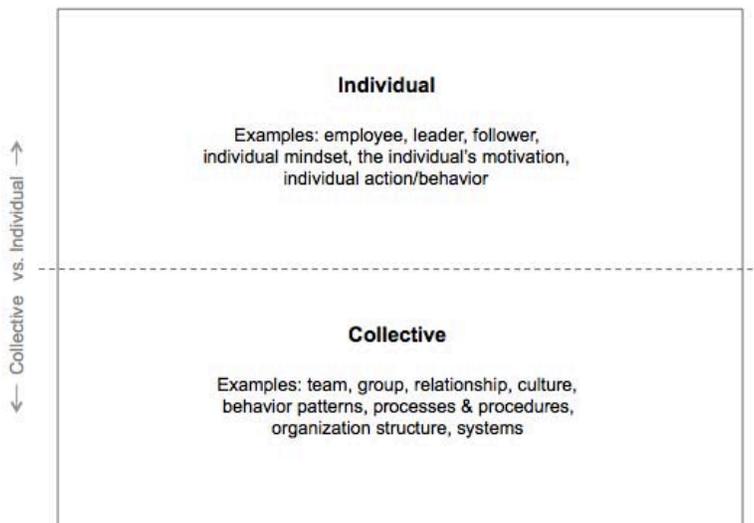
As mentioned above, awareness refers to the leader's ability to assess a situation. Specifically, how does a leader assess the current conditions—what's happening—as they relate to some desired future set of conditions? History is replete with cases of leaders who were successful because they were aware of an emerging dynamic (externally in the culture or marketplace or internally in their organization) as well as cases of leaders and organizations that failed spectacularly due to a lack of awareness of an impending threat.

Because much of our work is with CEOs, we are reminded of several familiar CEO examples that make this point. Steve Jobs (CEO Apple) was aware of the need for music lovers to have a way to carry their record collection with them leading to "1,000 songs in your pocket" (the iPod). Howard Schultz (CEO Starbucks) was aware of a social need for a "third place" between work and home for people to socialize. Ken Lay (former CEO Enron) was apparently unaware of the impact that unethical individuals and unethical business practices (and a culture that allowed them) could have on the organization, its employees and shareholders, and economic and political systems.
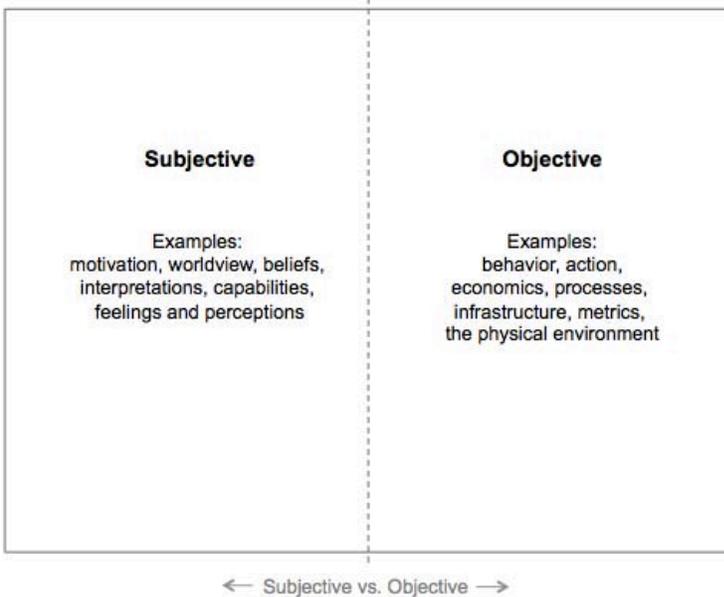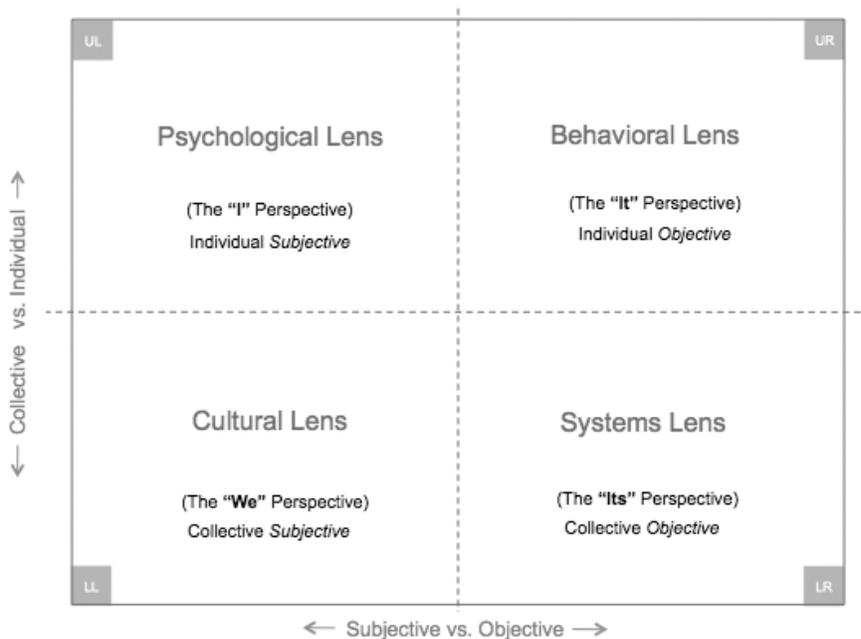
## Quadrants

We will begin with the most fundamental element of integral theory: quadrants. To understand integral quadrants, one must first consider the obvious fact that every leadership situation can be considered from the perspective of the individual (the leader or the follower) or from the perspective of the collective (the group, team or organization). The illustration below lists some specific examples.



**Individual**

Examples: employee, leader, follower, individual mindset, the individual's motivation, individual action/behavior

**Collective**

Examples: team, group, relationship, culture, behavior patterns, processes & procedures, organization structure, systems

(Axis label: ← Collective vs. Individual →)

Next, you must consider that every phenomenon can be considered from an objective or a subjective point of view (also referred to as external and internal). The illustration below gives examples.

| Subjective | Objective |
|---|---|
| Examples: motivation, worldview, beliefs, interpretations, capabilities, feelings and perceptions | Examples: behavior, action, economics, processes, infrastructure, metrics, the physical environment |

← Subjective vs. Objective ⟶

Now, by simply bringing together the individual and collective on one axis and subjective and objective on another axis, we have four quadrants (a familiar x/y diagram). These quadrants represent primordial, universal perspectives. They are irreducible, meaning that you cannot collapse one into the other and simply pretend that those dimensions do not exist (as various forms of reductionistic thinking attempt to do). See illustration below.

| UL | UR |
|---|---|
| **Psychological Lens** (The "I" Perspective) Individual *Subjective* | **Behavioral Lens** (The "It" Perspective) Individual *Objective* |
| **Cultural Lens** (The "We" Perspective) Collective *Subjective* | **Systems Lens** (The "Its" Perspective) Collective *Objective* |
| LL | LR |

← Collective vs. Individual ⟶

← Subjective vs. Objective ⟶

In integral theory, the four quadrants are labeled based on what is most useful for the domain in which they are being used (e.g. ecology, politics, military, business, leadership, etc.) I am using four labels that are useful for applying these fundamental perspectives to leadership: the *psychological* lens, the *behavioral* lens, the *cultural* lens, and the *systems* lens. Regardless of the domain of application, all integral practitioners are familiar with the simple acronyms UL, LL, UR, LR (Upper left, Lower Left, and so on) and the universal pronouns of I, We, It, and Its.[2]

To answer the questions "What's *really* happening here?" and "What's important and needed?" with any hope of comprehensiveness or accuracy, a leader must consider all four quadrants. An integral leader considers the environment, organizational infrastructure, processes, and systems seen in the *Lower-Right* quadrant; the group's culture (shared beliefs, values, expectations) seen in the *Lower Left*; the worldview, abilities, and feelings of individual people in the group revealed by the Upper-Left quadrant; and finally, the behavior and applied skills/competencies of individuals seen in the *Upper-Right* quadrant.

## Lines/Levels

Lines and levels can be found in all four quadrants. However, it is not always necessary to conduct a detailed investigation of lines and levels in all quadrants; it depends on the nature of the leader challenge and/or goals. Here, we will provide a few examples of how lines and levels can be observed in typical leadership situations.

Developmental lines, or lines for short, (in the UL individual interior quadrant) represent an intelligence, capacity, competency, or complex skill. Level refers to the level of complexity represented along any one of the specific lines. For simplicity's sake, think of lines and levels as a person's *ability*. A common example is a person who has a very high level of IQ (an aspect of the cognitive line) but a very modest level of EQ or Emotional Intelligence (a different line which means a different kind of intelligence).

To truly understand what is *really* happening in a given situation, and what is needed, an integral leader should consider the various abilities of the people involved (their lines and levels). For example, let's say the situation is that an employee is underperforming in their role, making frequent mistakes that most people would not make. What's really happening here? Could this be because of a cultural, environmental, process, or tool issue impeding their performance? Maybe they lack the right tools? Maybe the environment is distracting? Maybe they haven't been given correct training or instruction on the proper process? Or could it be that this person fundamentally lacks the ability required (e.g. the cognitive, emotional, or relational capacity) for this job (a line/level function)?

If leaders are unaware of the lines and levels (the abilities) of the people involved, how would they be able to know what is really happening and what should be done about it?[3]

## Lenses

We believe that the widespread lack of awareness about this thing called "meaning making lenses" is at the heart of why many so called "solutions" to society's most pressing problems meet with disappointing failure.

This appears to be the case across nearly every aspect of human society: education, business and economic development, governance and politics, and interpersonal / ideological / ethnic / military conflict. There may be no domain of human endeavor that meaning making lenses are more relevant than leadership.

Integral psychology has much to say about meaning making lenses. For purposes of a popular, accessible, and practical model of integral leadership, I will use the term "worldviews" in place of "meaning making lens."[4]

The vast majority of conventional approaches to leadership (and management, and the other societal problems and solutions) fail to adequately take into account the fact that people with different worldviews interpret the same facts very differently.

The American Psychological Association defines worldview as:

*A way of describing the universe and life within it, both in terms of what is and what ought to be. A given worldview is a set of beliefs that includes assumptions regarding what objects or experiences are good or bad, and what goals, behaviors, and relationships are desirable or undesirable.[5]*

While the above academic definition is useful for reference, a simpler layman's definition is sufficient for our purposes here: A worldview is "the overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world." This "overall perspective" is, in its essence, made up of values and universal beliefs. By *values*, we mean what a person considers "most important" (their priorities in life), and by universal beliefs we mean broad-based beliefs about *self*, *others* and *system* (how the world works).

## ☁ States

States are temporary conditions that may quickly transform to entirely different states. The most obvious example is weather conditions (hence the cloud-like icon I use for states). One of the fundamental concepts used in business planning is the consideration of the "current state" and the "desired future state" along with a gap analysis between the two states. A quick tour of the four integral quadrants reveals:

- The state of mind (including emotional states) of the leader and the individuals in the group. Individuals in a given situation may be influenced positively or negatively by emotional states of conflict, fear, excitement, or hubris  (UL)

- The measurable state of health, fatigue, or capability of a person's body (UR)

- The state of the physical infrastructure or electronic information technology systems. Also states of growth, stability or instability, profitability, and various states of change in the infrastructure and systems (LR)

- The state of collective morale of an organization's culture (LL)

## ◣●■▲  Styles and Types

The notion of "styles" is a central feature in integral leadership.

Human behavior is influenced by every single element in the AQAL Framework. When all these factors come together, over time, people develop various "styles" in which they engage the world and the people in it. These styles are essentially behavior patterns related to the different ways that people think and act in various situations.

The element of "Types" is important for any truly integral approach. Simply put, types are categories. Clearly styles and types are closely related. You could say that styles are types of interpersonal/leadership approaches. This is one reason that many integral theorists lump styles under types. In terms of types, it is easy to see that all fields of knowledge have "distinctions." It is fairly well known that a person with more distinctions about a field, area or situation will be able to draw more accurate conclusions about what is happening. Learning the various types (or categories) of information in a given field gives a practitioner more distinctions.

To illustrate, I'll mention a few commonly cited example of types. Perhaps the most obvious is male/female (and masculine/feminine).  Another familiar type seen in the natural world is, of course, species. If you are familiar with biology, then you are already familiar with the notion of types and sub-types. If you have some familiarity with

psychology, you know about "personality types" (typologies). There are many psychology-based typologies in use in organizational settings such as the DISC Model or Myers-Briggs (introvert/extrovert, thinker/feeler, etc.). Many management theorists categorize cultures into various types. Finally, types are used to describe kinds of organizational structures, infrastructure, financial mechanisms, and investments.

Now that you are familiar with the major elements of the Integral Framework, hopefully you can see how integral leaders can use these elements as lenses (perspectives) to gain greater visibility into critical dimensions of situations that conventional leaders often overlook.

It is not hard to see how the application of these AQAL elements to leadership results in greater awareness, better approaches, and more skillful action. And this precisely describes the difference between integral leaders and their conventional leader counterparts: integral leaders are more aware, choose better strategies, and act more skillfully.

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Brett Thomas is the co-founder of Stagen, a Texas-based organizational consulting firm that specializes in Integral Leadership. He is the author and architect of the Stagen Leadership Academy's 52-week intensive *Integral Leadership Program* (now in its 10th year). Brett is a 20-year veteran in the field of human performance and organizational development having designed and facilitated hundreds of workshops and corporate training programs. Brett has logged over 10,000 hours coaching CEOs.  He has published hundreds of pages of applied integral theory and has co-designed and co-delivered numerous international conferences and seminars on applied integral theory. Brett served many years as the Managing Director of the Integral Institute *Business and Leadership Center* and on the Editorial Board for the *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*.  Brett currently serves on the boards of both *Integral Leadership Review* and *Integral Publishers.* He is writing a book with Russ Volckmann on the subject of Integral Leadership.

### *Russ Volckmann*

Russ Volckmann, Ph.D., has worked for over thirty years as an organization development consultant and executive coach. He is the publisher and editor of The Integral Leadership Review and LeadingDigest and the founder of Integral Publishers (having published nine books by integral authors). As an educator he has taught at U.C., Berkeley; the University of Arizona; the United States Army Intelligence School at Ft. Juachuca, Arizona; Sonoma State University; Golden Gate University; John F. Kennedy University; Leadership University; and the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology. He has served on dissertation committees for the Fielding Graduate Institute and the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology and mentor for Antioch University. As a writer and editor, he was the founding editor of a professional journal, Vision/Action, for five years. He is currently on the Editorial Board of Integral Review which is published by ARINA, Inc. He has authored two books and is currently working on his third with co-author Brett Thomas on the topic of Integral Leadership.

## Endnotes

[1] Perspective Taking is a core practice in integral leadership. We devote an entire chapter to this topic in our book.

[2] Strictly speaking, because human organizations (e.g. companies) are "social holons," they arise in the bottom two collective quadrants. Lacking a single locus of consciousness, referred to by Wilber as a "dominant monad," organizations (strictly speaking) do not possess an individual interior or exterior dimension. However, as Wilber has pointed out, we can employ the quadrants as lenses to look *through*—which he refers to as quadrivium. Through the lens of the Upper-Left quadrivium, we can view the interior of the individual members of the organization. Similarly, through the lens of the Upper-Right quadrivium of an organization we can observe the behavior of the individual members of an organization.

[3] Practitioners are reminded that in integral theory there are no "levels" without a line! A level (or stage) exists along a continuum on a particular line of development. It is important to remember that people aren't at one stage. Rather, every human being has dozens or even hundreds of developmental lines and is at different stages (sometimes called "altitudes") along each of those developmental line. Some find it useful to aggregate many lines into an "ego development line" or "order of consciousness." This is essentially an "overall stage of psychological maturity" but the problem with this should be obvious. In reality, every human being has developmental lines that are at early, middle or late stages of development. So while we may experience another human being (in specific contexts) as being "at" an overall stage of psychological maturity, in reality, that is a grand over-generalization. If you are with that same human being in other contexts that require the engagement of other capacities (other lines of development), you will likely experience them as being at an earlier stage of psychological maturity. Practitioners are strongly cautioned about using these "overall stage" models. They are useful as orientating generalizations but are very problematic if you think of other people as being "at" a particular stage. Outside of a clinical psychology or research environment, these pronouncements tend to be reductionistic, often inaccurate, and generally not very kind, helpful or skillful.

[4] Students of developmental theory—especially constructivist developmental psychology—recognize that people hold worldviews in different ways. Some worldviews (or aspects of worldviews) are "constructed" using mental structures associated with their developmental stages while other worldviews (or aspects of worldviews) have simply been "adopted" from cultural sources such as parents, teachers, religion, the media, etc.. While developmental psychologists emphasize the mental structures

people use to construct worldviews, integral leadership practitioners emphasize the worldviews that people espouse without being too concerned about whether those worldviews were *constructed* or simply *adopted* (as a function of the person's structural stages). I encourage leaders to leave those structural stage concerns to the developmental psychologists. As an integral leader, once you learn to accurately recognize people's espoused (adopted) worldviews, you will be able to interact with them skillfully using an appropriate leadership style that will be resonant, helpful, and appreciated.

[5] This academic definition, and further detail, can be found in "The Psychology of Worldviews" by Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, published in the *American Psychological Association Review of General Psychology* 2004, Vol. 8.