



THE VISIBILITY GAP:

WHY WE LEARN ABOUT PROBLEMS LONG AFTER
THEY BEGIN

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Most surprises aren't sudden. They're late discoveries.

A customer leaves. A key employee resigns. A project fails. A competitor changes the market. A health problem is diagnosed. A relationship deteriorates.

We experience these as events. There is a before and an after.

But look backward and the event often begins to lose its suddenness.

There was an unusual customer request. A previously engaged employee had become quieter. A project team had started working around problems. Something was different before we understood what it meant.

That leads to a deceptively simple idea:

Every problem has two dates.

The day it begins.

And the day you become aware of it.

Between those two dates is what I call the **Visibility Gap**.

I began thinking about this after decades inside operating businesses. Problems that appeared suddenly in financial reports almost never began there. Margin erosion began somewhere in the work. Customer dissatisfaction existed before the escalation. A talent problem existed before the resignation letter arrived.

The result wasn't the beginning of the story. It was the moment the story became impossible to ignore.

Eventually, I realized this wasn't only an operating phenomenon. Reality changes continuously; our awareness of it does not.

A CAMERA NOBODY WANTED

In December 1975, a young Kodak engineer named Steven Sasson demonstrated something unusual to colleagues inside one of the world's great photography companies.

It was a camera. But it didn't use film.

The device weighed roughly eight pounds and took about twenty-three seconds to capture an image that could then be displayed on a television. By today's standards, it was primitive.

But it worked.

A digital camera—the invention that killed Kodak's film business—existed *inside* Kodak.

The story is usually told as a lesson in disruption. I am interested in a different question:

When did Kodak's world begin to change—and when did the meaning of that change become impossible to ignore?

Kodak did not lack the information. The technology was literally inside the company. The harder problem was understanding what it meant.

You can know something without seeing its significance.

Every problem has two dates.
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INFORMATION IS NOT VISIBILITY

We have more information than any generation of leaders before us. Dashboards update continuously. Customer behavior can be tracked. Artificial intelligence can find patterns across volumes of information no human being could process.

Yet organizations are still surprised.

Information is not visibility.

Information tells us something. Visibility allows us to recognize what matters while there is still time to do something about it.

Reporting systems are excellent at telling us what has become significant: revenue declined, margin missed plan, complaints rose, the project fell behind.

Those facts matter. But they are often consequences. By the time they command attention, the underlying condition may have been developing for months.

Sometimes the information was available all along. It simply hadn't become meaningful yet.

WHEN MEASUREMENT BECOMES A VISIBILITY TRAP

Consider professional football.

Every year, the NFL Scouting Combine subjects elite college prospects to standardized measurements and tests. In 2000, a quarterback from the University of Michigan named Tom Brady participated.

His measurable athletic attributes did not distinguish him. He eventually became the 199th selection in the NFL draft.

Then he became Tom Brady.

Of course, he was already Tom Brady. The Combine just didn't allow most scouts and coaches to see how special a talent he was, or surface the leadership qualities that would be so critical to him in leading his teams to seven Super Bowl victories.

The Combine wasn't useless. Its measurements did what they were designed to do. But people who had watched Brady closely at Michigan had observed qualities those standardized measures did not capture in the same way.

The numbers weren't necessarily wrong.

They were incomplete.

That is the Visibility Trap: believing that because something important is being measured accurately, everything important is visible.

We do this constantly.

We measure on-time delivery without seeing the expediting protecting it. We measure headcount without seeing how much critical knowledge resides in one person. We measure whether a project is on schedule without seeing its assumptions weakening.

The dashboard can be green while conditions underneath it are changing.

A number can be accurate and still give you the wrong picture.

MOST SURPRISES HAVE A HISTORY

Think about something that surprised you recently—a missed opportunity, a resignation, a relationship that deteriorated, a decision you wish you had made sooner.

Work backward, but without the arrogance of hindsight. Everything looks obvious once we know the ending.

When was the first moment the underlying condition was actually different?

When did I recognize it?

Between those dates were probably indications, not proof. One unusual customer request proves nothing. One bad month may be noise. One strange interaction may mean nothing.

That's what makes early indications difficult: the important ones become obvious only after they are no longer weak.

By then, choices may already have disappeared.

Visibility allows us to recognize what matters while there is still time to do something about it.

WHY EARLY INFORMATION DOESN'T TRAVEL

Inside organizations, the first indication and the eventual consequence are often seen by different people. A salesperson notices changing customer behavior before finance sees lost revenue. A supervisor sees an employee withdrawing before HR sees a resignation.

Someone at the edge of the organization encounters the change first. Someone nearer the center owns the eventual consequence. Between them, teams compensate, managers wait for more evidence, and information gets summarized as it moves upward.

The people with the earliest information may have the least authority, while the people with the greatest authority receive the information last.

Leaders need to understand how consequential information travels through their organizations—and what gets lost along the way.

SUCCESS CAN MAKE SEEING HARDER

Success creates its own explanation of the world: our strategy works, customers value what we do, the numbers confirm it.

We need those mental models. But yesterday's successful explanation can become today's filter.

Kodak's film business was enormously successful. Then an engineer walked into a room carrying a camera that didn't need film.

It didn't arrive labeled THE FUTURE.

Important changes rarely do. They arrive looking incomplete, premature, or strange.

So place another question alongside *"Are we on plan?"*

What are we seeing that doesn't fit the plan?

THE SURPRISE TAX

The Visibility Gap does something more consequential than make us look foolish in hindsight.

Delay changes economics.

A quality problem discovered immediately may require a correction. Discover it after months of production and the same underlying problem can involve rework, warranty expense, customer recovery and damaged trust.

Disengagement noticed early may require attention. Discover it when the resignation arrives and the cost becomes recruiting, knowledge transfer and disruption.

The underlying condition may be essentially the same.

The cost isn't.

I call the additional cost created by late discovery the Surprise Tax.

Perhaps nowhere is the idea clearer than hundreds of miles above Earth.

The Visibility Gap does something more consequential than make us look foolish in hindsight. Delay changes economics.

THE PROBLEM WAS ALREADY THERE

The Hubble Space Telescope launched in April 1990.

When its first images came back, they were blurry. The problem was eventually traced to its primary mirror, which had been ground to the wrong shape. The flaw was tiny. Its consequences weren't.

The defect had existed on Earth. It became undeniable after Hubble was orbiting hundreds of miles above it. NASA eventually mounted an extraordinary repair mission.

Think about what changed between those moments.

Not the underlying flaw.

The options.

A problem accessible on Earth and a problem orbiting hundreds of miles above it are economically very different problems, even if the physical defect is identical.

That is the Surprise Tax.

The tax isn't invented when the problem is discovered. It is simply presented for payment.

VISIBILITY CREATES OPTIONS

This may be the most important reason to see earlier.

The value isn't predicting the future.

It is preserving choices.

See something early and you can investigate, ask another question, run an experiment, change course—or decide that what you saw was noise and continue.

You still have choices.

As time passes, that range narrows. Eventually circumstances begin choosing for you. A conversation becomes a customer recovery. Development becomes succession. A strategic question becomes restructuring. A correctable mirror becomes a repair mission in space.

Visibility creates options.

And options have value even when you ultimately decide not to exercise them.

SEEING EARLY IS NOT PREDICTING THE FUTURE

Seeing early doesn't mean reacting to every anomaly. That replaces blindness with noise. Nor does hindsight give us permission to insist someone "should have known."

Ask instead:

What could we reasonably have seen at the time?

When something unusual appears, replace "Prove there's a problem" with:

"That's interesting. What would we need to know to determine whether it matters?"

That creates room to learn while learning is still relatively inexpensive.

THE TWO-DATE TEST

You don't need a new management system to start examining your Visibility Gap.

You need two dates.

Take a meaningful surprise from your business, career, team—or your life.

When did it really begin?

When did I know?

Then examine the space between them.

What was visible at the time? Who could see it? Why was it easy to dismiss? What continued while the gap remained open?

And one question matters especially:

What options disappeared between the two dates?

Now do it again.

Take the last five meaningful surprises. Find the two dates for each.

You may discover something more useful than five explanations for what went wrong.

You may discover how you see.

Inside an organization, change one word:

How do we see?

That's a leadership question. An organization dependent on one unusually perceptive executive doesn't have visibility; it has dependency.

A stronger organization allows someone to say:

"I don't know what this means yet, but something changed."

And knows how to become curious before becoming certain.

How do we see?

That's a leadership question. An organization dependent on one unusually perceptive executive doesn't have visibility; it has dependency.

HOW LONG DOES REALITY TAKE TO REACH YOU?

We spend enormous amounts of money making information move faster. Reports arrive instantly. Dashboards refresh continuously. Artificial intelligence can analyze information almost as soon as it is generated.

Perhaps we should measure another kind of speed.

Not: How quickly does information reach us?

But: How long does it take a meaningful change in the world to become visible to us?

Those are not the same thing. You cannot eliminate surprise or recognize every early indication. But you can study the distance between change and awareness. You can ask what your measurements exclude, what contradicts the prevailing story, and what changed before asking what failed. Because most surprises have a history.

Every problem has two dates.

The day it begins.

And the day you become aware of it.

Between those dates are choices. Between those dates is often where cost accumulates.

Bring the two dates closer together. 📌



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Ranjan Bhattacharjee has spent more than three decades leading and improving complex organizations, including multi-site industrial businesses, turnarounds and private-equity-backed companies. He is the founder of Optima Value Partners and author of *Seeing Early: Why the Best Operators See What Others Miss*, published October 15, 2026.

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