

The Witness and the Field in Business: Ancient Philosophy, Quantum Theory, and the Recovery of Strategic Judgement

Stephen Bray: Family Business Consultant

Synopsis

This paper explores the distinction between “the field” and “the witness” as a model for business judgement. It begins with the Bhagavad Gita’s account of Arjuna’s crisis on the battlefield of Kurukhetra, where Krishna teaches the distinction between kshetra, the field of changing phenomena, and kshetrajna, the knower of the field. It then places this distinction beside the Upanishadic teaching of Brahman and Atman, the Taoist principles of the Tao and wu wei, and the suggestive but limited analogy of quantum field theory. The paper argues that business life has its own field: markets, meetings, status, fear, competition, metrics, bureaucracy, and institutional momentum. Effective leadership requires a witness-position from which the leader can see these forces without becoming governed by them.

The paper then develops this model through the work and example of Peter Drucker, Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, Felix Dennis, Warren Buffett, Jeff Bezos, and others. It also considers the ordinary employee, teacher, administrator, and cubicle worker whose dignity depends upon preserving inward authorship within systems that often reduce people to functions. The central claim runs as follows: business judgement improves when leaders and workers cease to identify wholly with the field of pressure, fashion, urgency, and inherited assumption. From the witness-position, one can act with focus, proportion, courage, and responsibility.

The Battlefield as a Business Archetype

The Bhagavad Gita begins not as a calm philosophical treatise but as a crisis of action. Arjuna, a warrior, stands on the battlefield of Kurukhetra between two armies. His enemies include teachers, kin, friends, and respected elders. His role requires action, but his moral imagination recoils from that action. He drops his bow and refuses to fight.

This moment matters because Arjuna does not suffer from ignorance in the ordinary sense. He sees too much. He sees duty, kinship, violence, consequence, grief, and reputation all at once. His mind floods with the field of conflicting claims. Krishna’s teaching enters precisely here. Before Arjuna can act, he must learn how to distinguish the changing contents of experience from the awareness that knows them.

The Gita’s thirteenth chapter names this distinction *kshetra* and *kshetrajna*: the field and the knower of the field. In common exposition, the field includes the body, but Krishna’s account stretches further, including mind, intellect, ego, sensation, emotion, and all material or psychological contents of experience. The knower of the field points to awareness itself, the witness that knows experience without becoming identical with any one experience

(Easwaran, 2007). Contemporary summaries of Chapter 13 also stress that *kshetra* includes mind, intellect, ego, and other aspects of material personality, while *kshetrajna* designates the knower of that field.

For business, Arjuna's crisis provides an archetype. The modern leader rarely stands between armies in a literal sense. Yet the entrepreneur between cash flow and payroll, the headteacher between children and bureaucracy, the executive between shareholders and conscience, or the employee between dignity and compliance, all stand in some version of Kurukhetra. The battlefield has changed costume. The structure of the crisis remains familiar.

The Field in Hindu Philosophy

In Hindu philosophy, the field does not simply mean the external world. It includes the whole domain of observable experience: body, role, sensory impression, thought, memory, emotion, identity, and consequence. The Gita's related distinction between *prakriti* and *purusha* develops the same insight. *Prakriti* refers to primordial nature, the realm of qualities, forces, forms, change, causation, and manifestation. *Purusha* refers to consciousness, the witnessing principle that knows the movements of *prakriti* without arising as one of those movements.

This distinction gives the Gita its practical power. Krishna does not offer metaphysics as decoration. He offers metaphysics as the foundation for action. Once Arjuna sees grief, fear, shame, attachment, and moral confusion as movements within the field, he can include them without surrendering final authority to them.

The teaching then becomes *nishkama karma*, action without attachment to the fruits of action. This does not mean careless action. It means full, disciplined, morally serious action without enslavement to outcome. Arjuna must act, but he must act from a deeper ground than fear, grief, reputation, or personal preference.

In business, this translates into a crucial distinction. A leader must see fear without letting fear define strategy. He must see competitor movement without becoming imitative. He must see cash pressure without turning panic into policy. He must see praise without becoming vain. The field contains useful information, but it also contains forces that distort judgement.

The Upanishadic Ground: Brahman, Atman, and "You Are That"

The Upanishads provide the earlier philosophical soil from which the Gita grows. These texts ask what lies beneath ritual, personality, social identity, and sensory appearance. They move toward the relation between *Atman*, the deepest self, and *Brahman*, the ultimate ground of reality.

The famous Upanishadic formula *Tat tvam asi*, commonly translated as "That thou art" or "You are that," expresses a radical claim. The deepest self and the deepest ground do not stand

apart as two separate substances. At the most fundamental level, the knower and the known share one reality (Radhakrishnan, 1953).

The Upanishads therefore deepen the business metaphor. If the Gita helps the leader distinguish the field from the witness, the Upanishads ask the leader to examine identity itself. Who acts? The anxious role? The defended ego? The professional mask? The frightened owner? The institutionally trained performer? Or the deeper intelligence that can see all these roles as passing forms?

This question has practical consequences. Many business decisions fail because the wrong self makes them. The insecure self chases prestige. The frightened self discounts too quickly. The vain self hires flatterers. The resentful self punishes dissent. The institutional self obeys process after purpose has disappeared. The witness sees these selves arise and asks what serves the work.

Radhakrishnan's *The Principal Upanishads*, first published in 1953, remains one of the influential English-language presentations of these texts; archive records identify George Allen & Unwin in London as the original publisher. The point for this paper lies less in doctrinal completeness than in structural analogy: business life continually tempts people to identify with surface movement, while wisdom traditions invite them back toward the ground from which wise action can arise.

The Tao, Wu Wei, and Business Without Forcing

Taoism approaches the same territory through a different sensibility. Where the Gita argues through dialogue and duty, the Tao Te Ching points through paradox, restraint, and poetic indirection. The Tao cannot adequately be named because naming turns the source into an object. The Tao gives rise to the ten thousand things, moves through all forms, yet remains beyond conceptual possession.

The Taoist principle most relevant to business is *wu wei*. It often receives translation as "non-action," but this easily misleads. *Wu wei* does not mean inertia. It means action without forcing. It means movement aligned with the nature of things rather than movement driven by strain, vanity, fear, or over-control. Philosophical accounts of Daoism often associate *wu wei* with naturalness, spontaneity, and action free from coercive striving.

This has considerable business value. Many leaders force growth before the organisation has rhythm. They hire before culture can absorb new people. They chase adjacent markets before the core earns trust. They copy competitors without understanding their own centre. They turn a living enterprise into a nervous machine.

A Taoist business owner studies the current. He asks where the energy already wants to move. He acts with timing. He trims the sail rather than shouts at the wind. This does not make him passive. It makes him skilful.

The Tao Te Ching, in D. C. Lau's Penguin translation, entered modern English-language readership through a major 1964 Penguin Classics edition. Its relevance to business does not rest on importing mystical language into boardrooms. It rests on a sober observation: action works best when it accords with reality.

Quantum Theory as Analogy, Not Proof

Quantum theory requires careful handling here. It cannot prove the metaphysical claims of the Gita, the Upanishads, or Taoism. Popular writing often inflates quantum mechanics into a vague spiritual guarantee. This paper takes a more modest position.

Quantum field theory offers a suggestive analogy because it treats fields as fundamental to the description of particles and physical interactions. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes quantum field theory as the framework that extends quantum mechanics to fields, systems with infinitely many degrees of freedom, and provides a uniform treatment of particles and fields. Zee's textbook similarly stands within the modern tradition that makes field-theoretic thinking central to particle physics (Zee, 2010).

The analogy lies in this: what appears solid, separate, and object-like often arises from a deeper field. In business, too, visible events arise from less visible fields: incentives, assumptions, attention, fear, culture, leadership behaviour, narrative, and habit. A customer complaint, a staff departure, a failed product, or a missed target may appear as an isolated event. Often it arises from a field that has been operating for months or years.

Quantum theory also raises difficult questions about observation and measurement. Again, this should not become an overclaim about consciousness creating reality in a simple business-mystical sense. Yet as a metaphor, it remains useful. What a leader observes, measures, rewards, and names changes the organisation's practical reality. Attention collapses possibility into priority.

A business has many possible futures. The leader's attention makes some futures more likely. If he measures only short-term sales, the culture bends toward short-term sales. If he rewards internal politics, politics grows. If he praises learning, carefulness, and contribution, those behaviours gain strength. Observation, in business, never remains neutral.

Business Theory: Strategy, Effectiveness, Culture, and the Field

Classical business theory often concerns itself with competition, resources, positioning, efficiency, innovation, and execution. Porter's *Competitive Strategy* gives one influential framework for analysing industries and competitors, placing firms within forces that shape rivalry, bargaining power, substitution, and barriers to entry (Porter, 1980). Harvard Business School's bibliographic entry identifies the original publication as *Competitive Strategy*:

Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors, published by Free Press in New York in 1980.

Porter helps describe the external field. Markets press upon the firm. Suppliers, buyers, competitors, substitutes, regulation, and capital all shape possible action. But strategy requires more than mapping these forces. It requires a consciousness capable of seeing them without becoming absorbed by them.

Drucker supplies the internal discipline. His work on effectiveness continually returns to concentration, contribution, time, and responsibility. He wrote that the "secret" of effectiveness lies in concentration, and that effective executives "do first things first and they do one thing at a time" (Drucker, 1967).

In this sense, Drucker gives management its witness-practice. The executive must stop letting the flow of events decide the use of attention. He must look at time, contribution, priorities, and results from a place outside the clamour. Otherwise the field runs the person, and the person calls this busyness "work."

The Field in Business Life

The business field includes markets, competitors, customers, deadlines, emails, cash-flow pressure, investor expectation, staff emotion, bureaucracy, social media, reputation, fashion, and fear. It also includes inherited assumptions. Every industry carries sentences that sound like truth merely because people repeat them often.

Everyone charges this way.

Customers will never pay for that.

This industry cannot change.

That supplier always has the power.

Staff need close supervision.

Marketing means noise.

Quality costs too much.

The witness asks: what actually holds true? What has evidence? What has merely gained the authority of repetition?

Business failure often begins when the field becomes invisible. The organisation mistakes its habits for reality. It calls bureaucracy governance. It calls imitation strategy. It calls exhaustion commitment. It calls fear prudence. It calls status success.

The witness interrupts this trance.

Elon Musk and First Principles as Business Witness

Elon Musk's first-principles reasoning provides a modern business version of stepping outside the field. Musk has described first principles as boiling things down to fundamental truths, then reasoning upward from them, rather than reasoning by analogy from what others already do.

This matters because the field constantly invites analogical thinking. Competitors use this model, so we use this model. The industry accepts this cost structure, so we accept this cost structure. The customer expects this process, so we preserve this process. First-principles reasoning breaks the spell.

In witness language, Musk's method refuses identification with the inherited field. It asks what the thing consists of beneath convention. Batteries have materials. Rockets have components. Manufacturing has steps. A service has frictions. A business model has assumptions. Once the leader sees these components directly, he can rebuild upward.

This does not make Musk a flawless example of witness-led leadership. First-principles thinking can generate brilliance, but the surrounding culture may suffer if pressure overwhelms proportion. The lesson requires balance: step outside convention, see from fundamentals, and keep human reality in view.

Steve Jobs and the Discipline of No

Steve Jobs offers another form of the witness: focus. Jony Ive recalled that Jobs taught him that focus means saying no even to an idea one thinks "with every bone" in one's body has merit, because it would divert attention from the work that matters most.

This gives the business witness a sharp edge. The field does not only distract through rubbish. It distracts through attractive possibilities. Good ideas can weaken a great company when they multiply beyond the organisation's centre.

Jobs understood that focus means sacrifice. The leader must refuse not only the trivial, but also the appealing. A company that cannot say no becomes an echo of the market's temptations. A company that can say no protects its form.

The lesson applies far beyond Apple. A small yacht business, consultancy, school, bakery, or workshop may suffer not because it lacks ideas, but because it lacks refusal. The witness sees the whole and chooses the necessary part.

Felix Dennis and the Sovereignty of Ownership

Felix Dennis brings a rougher, less polished witness to the discussion. In *How to Get Rich*, he writes from the world of publishing, entrepreneurial risk, ownership, and wealth creation. Bibliographic records identify Ebury as the publisher of the 2006 edition.

Dennis's core business wisdom repeatedly returns to ownership, execution, and control. For him, divided ownership can mean divided will. The entrepreneur who surrenders too much control often loses the capacity to act cleanly.

In witness terms, ownership creates a space from which decision can arise. The owner does not need endless permission from committees, timid partners, or prestige-seeking advisers. He can see, decide, and act.

Yet Dennis also supplies a warning. Money can become its own field. Wealth can capture attention as thoroughly as poverty. The entrepreneur who escapes employment may become enslaved by accumulation, vanity, comparison, and appetite. Ownership supports witness-action only when it serves clarity. Otherwise it merely builds a larger cage.

Warren Buffett and Temperament

Warren Buffett's investment philosophy offers perhaps the most practical business example of witness over field. Markets generate a powerful emotional field: greed, panic, herd behaviour, envy, regret, and urgency. The investor who identifies with the field buys when others buy, sells when others sell, and mistakes emotional contagion for intelligence.

Buffett has repeatedly emphasised temperament. Recent summaries of his advice highlight detachment from the crowd, emotional steadiness, and the ability to remain objective during market movement. The precise language varies across sources, but the principle remains consistent: successful investing requires the ability to see fear and greed without becoming governed by them.

This directly parallels the witness. The market says move. The witness asks why. The field says everyone else has acted. The witness asks what value exists. The field says the price has fallen, so disaster must have arrived. The witness asks what the business itself can earn over time.

The same discipline applies to hiring, pricing, negotiation, and crisis. The person with temperament can remain near reality while others chase mood.

Jeff Bezos and the Customer as Anchor

Jeff Bezos's business philosophy often centres upon customer obsession. This gives another answer to the field. Competitors create noise. Awards create noise. Investors create noise. Internal politics create noise. Public commentary creates noise. The customer provides a steadier anchor.

In business terms, the witness does not float vaguely above commercial life. It chooses an object of disciplined attention. For Amazon, that object has long involved customer friction, convenience, price, selection, speed, and trust. Recent accounts still present customer obsession as one of the central explanations Bezos gives for Amazon's success.

The lesson generalises. A firm can organise attention around competitors and become derivative. It can organise attention around investors and become performative. It can organise attention around internal hierarchy and become political. Or it can organise attention around customers and craft, becoming useful.

The witness needs an anchor. In business, the customer often provides the most honest one.

The Ordinary Worker and the Cubicle Field

The argument would remain incomplete if it considered only celebrated leaders. Most people do not inhabit the field of rockets, iPhones, publishing empires, or billion-dollar investment portfolios. They inhabit cubicles, classrooms, call centres, hospitals, warehouses, public offices, and small businesses.

Their battlefield can appear modest. Yet the field presses hard.

The inbox grows. The manager sends a vague instruction. The meeting drains the morning. A spreadsheet absorbs the afternoon. A colleague performs competence while avoiding responsibility. Targets shift. Praise goes upward. Blame travels downward. The person begins to feel less like an agent and more like a function.

For the ordinary worker, the witness may begin with small acts of sovereignty. A pause before the sharp reply. A decision to do one real piece of work well. A refusal to let gossip colonise the day. A recognition that fatigue has begun to masquerade as realism. A quiet question: what contribution remains possible here?

This kind of witness rarely appears in business books. Yet it may matter most. It preserves human dignity inside systems that often reward compliance over consciousness.

The Teacher, the Nurse, and the Administrator

Teachers, nurses, administrators, and public servants often work inside fields shaped by measurement, shortage, policy, and emotional labour. They face children, patients, parents, forms, inspections, budgets, targets, and cultural blame.

The field says: survive the day.

The witness asks: what calls for care, judgement, and proportion now?

This distinction does not romanticise overwork. The witness does not ask exploited people to smile serenely while systems consume them. Rather, it helps them see clearly enough to choose. Sometimes the right action means staying and serving well. Sometimes it means speaking. Sometimes it means protecting energy. Sometimes it means leaving.

Arjuna's lesson applies here with special force. Witness-action does not erase difficulty. It provides the ground from which one can act without collapse.

Culture as the Collective Field

An organisation's culture functions as a shared field. It tells people what really matters, regardless of what the values statement says. It decides whether honesty survives contact with authority. It decides whether learning matters more than blame. It decides whether customers, craft, status, or politics receive the deepest reward.

Leaders often mistake formal strategy for reality. The real field lives in everyday reinforcement. Who gets promoted? Who receives attention? Which behaviours pass unchallenged? Which truths stay unsaid? Which problems return because the culture protects their cause?

A witness-leader studies this field without sentiment. He asks: what does this organisation actually teach people to do?

That question can wound pride. It can also rescue the firm.

Strategy as Witness, Operations as Field

Strategy and operations need each other. Operations engage the field directly: orders, repairs, calls, invoices, staff schedules, customer service, production, delivery, compliance. Strategy requires the witness-position: direction, restraint, priority, difference, timing, and purpose.

A business with only operations becomes busy and blind. A business with only strategy becomes abstract and weightless. Good leadership moves between the two. It sees the whole, then acts in the part.

This rhythm explains why Drucker's concentration, Porter's industry analysis, Jobs's focus, Musk's first principles, Buffett's temperament, Bezos's customer obsession, and Dennis's ownership all belong in the same conversation. Each one offers a way to stand outside the immediate field long enough to choose better action within it.

The Business Leader as Knower of the Field

The business leader as knower of the field does not withdraw from commercial life. He enters it more cleanly. He watches the forces at work: fear, ambition, imitation, fatigue, vanity, competition, urgency, and institutional habit. He sees the field as field.

Then he acts.

He does not confuse motion with progress.

He does not confuse noise with signal.

He does not confuse anxiety with intelligence.

He does not confuse imitation with strategy.

He does not confuse ownership with freedom unless ownership serves judgement.

He does not confuse measurement with meaning.

This kind of leadership has spiritual roots, philosophical clarity, and commercial practicality. It asks the leader to recover authorship from the field.

Conclusion

The distinction between the witness and the field offers a powerful model for business judgement. In the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna can only act once he learns to distinguish the changing field from the knower of the field. In the Upanishads, the deepest self and the deepest ground converge. In Taoism, wise action arises without forcing, from alignment with the Tao. In quantum field theory, fields provide a suggestive physical analogy for the deeper structures beneath apparent objects, though they do not prove spiritual metaphysics.

Business life constantly tempts people into identification with the field. Markets, meetings, cash pressure, competition, bureaucracy, inboxes, status, and fear all demand obedience. The witness does not deny these forces. It sees them. Then it asks what action serves reality.

The best business figures often display some version of this stance. Drucker returns attention to contribution and concentration. Musk returns problems to first principles. Jobs returns organisations to focus. Dennis returns entrepreneurs to ownership and control. Buffett returns investors to temperament. Bezos returns firms to the customer.

Yet the same principle belongs equally to the ordinary worker, the teacher, the nurse, the clerk, the administrator, and the person in the cubicle who refuses to surrender inward authorship to institutional weather.

The field will always move. Business will always generate pressure. Life will always present turbulence. The central question remains Arjuna's question in modern form: from where will action arise?

References

Dennis, F. (2006) *How to Get Rich*. London, Ebury Press.

Drucker, P. F. (1967) *The Effective Executive*. New York, Harper & Row.

Easwaran, E. (2007) *The Bhagavad Gita*. 2nd ed. Tomales, CA, Nilgiri Press.

Lao Tzu. (1964) *Tao Te Ching*. Translated by D. C. Lau. London, Penguin Classics.

Porter, M. E. (1980) *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors*. New York, Free Press.

Radhakrishnan, S. (1953) *The Principal Upanishads*. London, George Allen & Unwin.

Zee, A. (2010) *Quantum Field Theory in a Nutshell*. 2nd ed. Princeton, Princeton University Press.