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The Power of Presence and Intentional Use of Self: Coaching for Awareness, Choice and Change

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The Power of Presence and Intentional Use of Self: Coaching for Awareness, Choice, and Change

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The authors of this article suggest that our contemporary challenge is dealing with the deep uncertainty of our times, while inspiring others to move toward and achieve desired goals is an implicit mandate for leaders, coaches, and consultants who work in organizations. Today's coaches facilitate creating order out of chaos in the face of not knowing what is needed or what Taleb (2007) calls the "unknown unknowns". This accelerated rate of change is a force shaping coaching as a powerful strategic tool assisting executives and leaders in their learning and change efforts. The basic "code" of coaching as a profession is that it is a practice intended to facilitate change and development (McLean, 2008). To face these challenges, the evolution of coaching requires greater understanding of the coach's role, their presence in the learning process, and their challenges in navigating through uncertainty.

INTRODUCTION

How does a coach inspire and support others to find the courage, energy, hope and perseverance necessary to reach desired goals? We suggest that key variables for the coach in influencing the learning and change process for clients are the coach's *presence* and *intentional use of self* as ways to expand the client's "awareness of possibilities". When this translates to the executives' presence and how they use themselves, it positively affects the well being of their organizations.

Coaches need to be guided by a knowledge base, emotional intelligence and a resonance with their clients. The coach's "presence" and developmental journey is important, for it is how a coach is present or how the coach is "being" that offers a catalyzing force in the client's learning. Presence is a far more potent variable than tools and techniques, allowing the coach to respond to the moments of uncertainty with distinctive impact and transparency that inspires others.

We define presence as the ability to exist and respond to the "here and now" situation of the moment (Darya, 1989). The art of strengthening one's presence, like improvisational jazz, is to be "in" the immediate moment while being able to respond to the rhythm of what is happening in the moment. We know it when we experience presence, and others do too. When we are not present it can feel like "we are not all there", or act in a manner

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that suggests derailment from our own resources. The challenge is to recognize when we are derailed in relation to our own presence, and once recognized, our challenge is to learn how to quickly return to the aliveness of our presence-- where choice for action and intervention resides.

CASE STUDY ONE

Recently, one of us received a call from an executive coaching client. Janet had traveled across the world for a meeting with the leaders of her Fortune 100 company to report on developments in her global business unit. But she had had an interaction with a colleague who questioned some of the actions she was taking, and this shook her to the core. She lost confidence in her presentation, came to doubt some of her actions, and quite frankly, was afraid to go before the senior leaders. Yet after a coaching session, Janet was able to regain her sense of self-confidence and presence. Her meeting was highly successful, and she was able to get approval for a large and rather risky initiative. The senior leaders remarked that they could always count on her to be honest and to do what was best for the organization.

Why does an accomplished and experienced leader lose “what matters” about her presence—especially during critical moments? What does she need to be effective? How does she gain the trust and support of others? Derailment is a serious issue in executive functioning, most perniciously when it occurs in high performers (Singer, 2001) because of the costs to image and performance.

The intentional use of self occurs when we actively and strategically engage our resources in what feels and looks like an effortless application of our presence. We find that successful coaches pay attention to three areas of awareness when they effectively support others in becoming aware of possibilities and choices in moving towards desired goals: 1) awareness of self (being grounded and centered); 2) awareness of others (being aware of and connected with others); and 3) awareness of context (identifying and aligning what is needed and what is offered) (See Table 1).

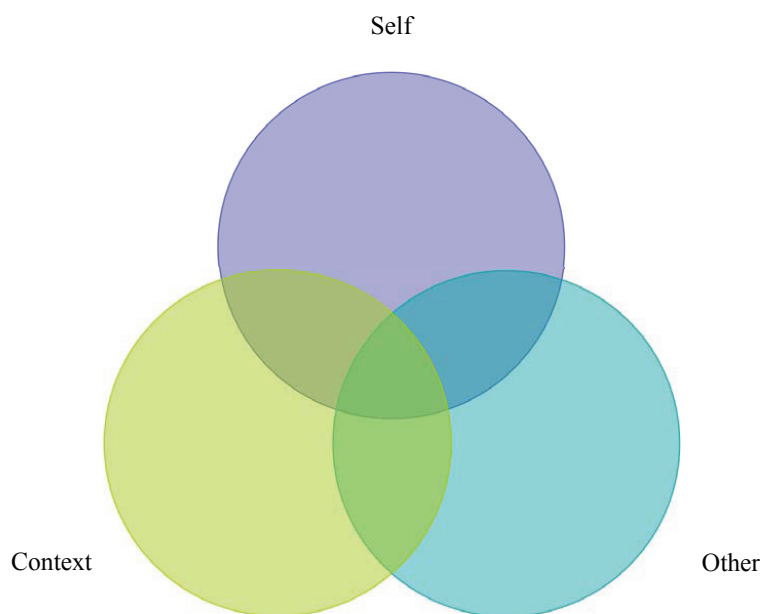
Table 1. Presence and Focus of Awareness

Focus of Awareness	Intention
Self	Being grounded and centered
Others	Connecting with others
Context	Identifying and aligning what’s needed and what’s offered

Our thesis is that coaches who are masterful in their use of self choose to use themselves in support of client learning, particu-

larly in expanding clients' awareness of themselves and choices available for them. These coaches are able to shift focus between these three areas while maintaining the integrity and alignment required for their own personal presence.

Let's explore each of these areas of awareness—self, other, and context. First we will define how each area of focused awareness supports the creation of choice. We will then explore how the three areas of focus work in tandem. We propose an integral, dynamic, and systemic perspective, wherein we are influenced by our environment and in turn influence our environment. The greater the awareness of possibilities and choices, the more opportunity there is for change. In conclusion, we will offer some ways to develop presence and use of self through awareness, chosen habits and engaged practice.



**Figure 1. Awareness and Intention
The Capacity to be “At Choice”**

AWARENESS OF SELF: BEING GROUNDED AND CENTERED

When we are present, we are focused in the present, rather than worrying about what has happened, what we need to do next, or what may happen in the future. The present moment actually holds the past as information and ideas as possibilities for the future. Being present allows us to be engaged and attending to what is going on right now. Rather than reacting to people and situations, we are able to observe our own physical, mental, and emotional responses and, with this awareness, be “at choice” about what we say or do. Being mindful first of our physical body and our sensory-motor responses to the engagement at hand helps us to feel more fully attentive, energized, and connected

to both self and other—in other words, to be grounded. Being attuned with our physical being in turn helps us reach the goal of being centered, i.e., a state of becoming calm and relaxed in both body and mind, particularly in the face of conflict or challenge. Such attunement is both an art and a constant practice.

Awareness practice is a core concept of gestalt based practice. First developed as the “Cycle of Experience” by founders of The Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, paying attention to one’s awareness is both a practice and an assessment of process across all levels of the human system, from the individual to group and larger systems (Carter, 2004). The cycle of experience describes the organic process by which humans become aware of wants and needs as well as paying attention to the pressing concerns from the environment. At the individual level, the cycle of experience (see Table 2) assists an individual in understanding his/her immediate experience and how to make meaning out of naturally occurring phenomena. These awareness tasks ideally follow an organic order of: data collection, image creation, energy mobilization, moving to action, making contact and experiencing closure.

To be aware of the data regarding one’s own “sensation”, a person must attend to his or her immediate experience whether visceral, kinesthetic, emotional, or other mind-body senses. To be aware of what he or she is “aware” of, a person must be able to create a vibrant image out of competing wants, needs and stimuli. There are always multiple sensations competing for our awareness and identifying the most compelling “figure” of awareness out of all the different figures from our current “ground of being” is the art of being able to be alert to what “most” matters in the moment. To be able to be present, a person must have skill and comfort in attending to figures of interest that create anxiety or excitement and be aware of the force for taking action. To be aware of satisfaction, a person must be aware of the shift that comes from making “contact”—the act of engaging -- with what is needed or desired and therefore feeling changed. To be aware of being satisfied or finished, a person must be aware of the meaning-making phase of closure. These are the points on the cycle of experience which are process points that allow us to determine our process of engagement in the moment.

Presence is determined by how successfully we can move through our cycles in ways that serve our needs and wants. Learning to be aware of our cycle of experience allows the coach to gauge when they are satisfying their wants and needs; and how to attend to and recognize the cycle of experience in others. At the individual level, the coach must model how to satisfy and use oneself effectively, and the cycle is a powerful conceptual tool to determine correspondence between awareness, choice and responsibility for taking action. When we do not move fluidly through our cycles

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of experience, the place that we are “stuck” or unable to move through may offer us insight that we can use in our work. For example, if we do not have a clear image of awareness, our energy for action will be diminished. If our action is weak, we will not be able to make contact in satisfactory ways that allow us to shift our energy. If we cannot withdraw from a situation, perhaps we are not yet aware that we have not experienced sufficient closure or resolution to move away from the experience. Our cycle of experience allows us to formulate understanding of the present moment, and such understanding informs our strong presence.

Table 2. The Cycle of Experience

GENERIC	INDIVIDUAL	GROUP & ORGANIZATION
Data	Sensation	Scanning
Image creation	Awareness	Conceptualization
Energy mobilization	Excitement/Anxiety	Commitment of energy
Action	Action	Movement
Change occurs	Contact	Change of boundaries
Closure	Withdrawal	Assessment

From Carter, J.D. (2004). Carter’s cube and a Gestalt/OSD toolbox: A square, a circle, a triangle, and a line. *OD Practitioner*, 36(4), p. 14.

MERGING PHYSICAL AWARENESS WITH HABITUAL PATTERN RECOGNITION

A coach’s goal is to merge these elements of awareness with the neuropsychological processes of habitual pattern recognition, positive self-talk, and cognitive coaching objectives. A seamless and intentional construct of coaching identity emerges out of this integration. When the coach is *grounded* and *centered in his or her awareness*, he or she can best serve coaching engagements and the client’s desired goals. The power of awareness practice is that it allows a gradual development of the ability “to be present with one’s mind and body” (Depraz, 2003, p. 60). You may notice, for example, that you can or cannot feel your feet on the ground, or sense your own steady or unsteady breathing, or notice your body relaxing or tensing. But how (or how often) does this self-awareness serve your coaching interactions when you are working to influence others? How often do you pay attention to your immediate cycle of experience and understand how what you are noticing might serve your work? Awareness of our cycle of experience is important because it holds data that we can use to determine what action to take. Action without awareness, a style so prevalent in our busy world environment, all too often leads to re-do or regret. Awareness of what is important that does not result in some action, all too often is experienced as unfinished business. Personal, subjective, here-and-now experience can be

selectively shared in service of the coaching work to be done (Rainey-Tolbert, 2004).

During moments of coaching, we may feel spontaneous, creative, and alert; time seems to stand still, and we can suddenly clearly see many available possibilities and choices. Superb professional athletes often exemplify presence—demonstrating intense internal focus, awareness of others and context, the ability to see possibilities, and the ability to act on these possibilities. Although athletes make it look easy, their presence is achieved through long-term attentiveness and training. In some ways, presence captures the sense of peak performance where there is slowing down of time, a psychological sense of space widening and a panoramic perspective (Scharmer, 2008). As coaches, our ability to be in our own state of embodied presence impacts our capacity to support the clients' awareness of their possibilities and choices for moving towards desired goals.

Applied behavioral science has taught us that we typically follow ingrained, habitual patterns about how we interact in and with our everyday world (Neisser, 1967). Bateson (1994) concurs and underlines how much of modern life is organized to avoid awareness of the threads of novelty. While we all have the capacity to be self-aware, we most often run on automatic in our everyday lives in the clutches of these habitual patterns of behavior. Each of us adheres to learned behavioral patterns that have served us well in a majority of experiences over long stretches of time. Because these patterns are presumably successful, we stick to them. At some point, habitual patterns let us down, particularly in circumstances where in-the-moment self-awareness and discernment is crucial for identifying alternative possibilities and choices. The challenge of presence for us as coaches is to consciously identify which habitual patterns and processes support our own (and our clients') capacity to be fully present and attentive versus the chronic, out of awareness, habitual behavioral patterns that damage, constrain or lessen our capacity to be fully present to self, other and context.

Goleman (2006) has made self-awareness of our immediate internal and sensory experience the essence of understanding emotional intelligence. Rapaille (2006) has helped us to understand that if there are no significant emotions, then there is no sustained learning experience. Another way of saying this is that analysis without emotional investment will not result in learning. We intuitively grasp a qualitative difference in our interactions when we and/or our clients are self-aware and present. The nonverbal messages we convey about emotional expression and the value of emotions color the strength of the learning experiences that a coach can support for their clients. The coach's presence needs to confirm and validate emotional expression by being a model and mirror to such possibility.

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Presence captures our attention like a magnet. It is a quality difficult to describe, but unmistakable when experienced in oneself or in another. When someone with whom we're talking is present, we experience him or her as *interacting* rather than *reacting* or *rehearsing*. The result is a response that has been labeled "resonance" (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2001). Resonance occurs when both speaker and respondent are connected to one another's affect and energy, attuned to each other's feelings, and mutually energized through this connection and attunement. Just as animals instinctively sense the energies of humans, we are "hard-wired" to respond to other humans in both positive and negative ways. We are naturally drawn to someone who is present in ways that activate resonance, and we experience the opposite, dissonance, when interacting with someone who is closed and unavailable to us.

Dissonance occurs when one's presence to self and others is off-putting or disjuncting, whether intentional or not. When we move into a dissonant state, we stop paying attention to data, to what is occurring within ourselves, other people, and the environment. We ignore the data from our cycle of experience and miss opportunities to connect with what's important either to ourselves or to others with whom we are engaged at the moment.

We experience presence at a level that is tacit and difficult to clearly articulate. Yet we can sense in ourselves when we are in the presence of someone whose presence is available and "activated" rather than habitual because we feel a strong connection to our resonant energy. Michael Polanyi's (1976) dictum that 'we can know more than we can tell' referred to this tacit knowledge as a range of conceptual and sensory information and images that are available in making sense of something. Nordstrom (2007) identifies this tacit knowledge as a knowing that can be "transmitted". It may be that tacit knowledge gets amplified and transmitted energetically in resonance. While others feel energized, they may not be able to articulate how they were so impacted but they can identify that being in the presence of a coach who is "present" made the difference that mattered.

Certainly we are attracted to and pay inordinate attention to iconic figures whose presence changes others and our world (for example, Mother Theresa and the Dalai Lama), but one needn't be famous or in a position of authority to be forcefully present. The experience of being present is the most welcome of gifts. Discipline and practice encourage presence just as habitual and unconscious practices limit or constrain one's presence.

CASE STUDY TWO

Jeff, an executive, was referred to coaching because despite his technical expertise and role as a partner in a major consulting

firm, he did not create a positive impression with potential and new clients. When we worked with him, he admitted that he was uncomfortable with “small talk” and building relationships. He managed his stress and boredom by studying his slides and thinking of other things during meetings. He did not pay attention to his own experiences or what was happening around him. While this habitual routine worked for him when others were in the lead role, the habit was costing him organization clientele. Through executive coaching, Jeff learned to become more aware of himself and was able to see alternate behavioral choices; he initiated small changes, including making more eye contact and asking more questions. Even these small shifts significantly changed how others experienced and were impacted by him.

How did the coach support these changes? In a way similar to the situation with Janet, the coach was present and aware of her cycle of experience and the behavioral cycle she observed in Jeff. She assisted Jeff’s awareness and his choices for new possibilities by sharing her observations of how Jeff interrupted contact with himself and others. The small changes he made yielded significant positive impact for him. By intentionally being open and non-judgmental, clients experienced a safe space to explore their patterns and consider alternatives. In addition, the coach’s state of being confident, positive and assured was contagious and supported the coach and clients in successfully identifying what was needed.

Recent brain imaging research shows chemical and physical changes in those who are experiencing focused attention (Rock & Schwartz, 2006). This focused attention—this presence—appears contagious to others. Neuroscience research has identified and confirmed that we can cognitively and emotionally connect, or entrain, to the person with the more coherent focus. When we are self-aware, non-judgmental and open to possibilities as coaches, we actually energize others to do the same for themselves. It is in this manner, during times of upheaval and uncertainty for the client, that the coach’s presence can literally energize the client in creating more coherent possibilities.

STRENGTHENING OUR SELF-AWARENESS AS COACH

What is needed to become self-aware? Self-awareness requires *reflection*, i.e., taking the time to turn our attention inward towards our own sensations, feelings, and urges. By using the cycle of experience, we can identify and notice how we respond psychologically and physically to others and the environment. We need to recognize our habitual behavioral patterns—for example, our propensity to leap into action before we have a clear figure of awareness or remain in thought though we have the option of moving forward—and notice when these patterns occur. We need to pay attention to our intuitions and “gut feelings.” This self assessment process is the practice of checking in with oneself.

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The more skilled you are in checking in with yourself, the greater your ability to be at choice for determining how you want to respond to the identifiable options available to you.

It is useful to recall and examine those situations when we *did* feel present—how we responded to self, other, and environment. What thinking supports being in the moment and present? What fuels me getting in contact with the energy of being present? What responses are typical for me when I feel present? What do I know about environmental supports for presence? With which clients do I feel most present? What were their goals? With retrospective awareness, we can activate our “observer self” to assist our personal learning process in recognizing how we can better learn how to check in and calibrate our presence in future assignments. Consciously deciding to make a practice is to create a chosen habit as part of the developmental path towards attaining and maintaining presence. The habit of self assessment becomes the meaning-making moment supporting the effective adjustments required to deepen presence. This discipline is what we in turn model to our clients. We use our awareness of our immediate experience to inform our choice and actions. We teach our clients to use and to become more aware of their process so that they can take more informed action.

Janet, the executive who lost her confidence and became derailed right before a major meeting with senior executives, was able after coaching to regain her presence and confidence by grounding herself: by noticing her physical presence through feeling her feet on the ground and noting her breathing, by shifting her posture—by becoming more aware of her physical being. When her coach asked her to reflect on past successes, Janet was able to recall how she had felt both physically and mentally when she was present and in the flow. She remembered how she felt when she was confident, and could then calibrate her breath and make other physical adjustments to be in that space again. She recalled her line of reasoning for her recommendation and connected with her sense of integrity and doing what was best for the organization. She was able to make her presentation to the senior leaders of the company from a confident and assured state of mind and body. In turn, the senior leadership was attracted by her presence and her confidence in her proposed new endeavor, and supported both her and the project. Becoming more aware of how to be present supported her in the next meetings where she presented her proposal to peers and staff.

During the meetings, Janet often reminded herself that she had always done the best she could for her organization and staff—but also that she was open to learning. This positive self-talk supported her in being more present—self-aware, consciously in touch with her recognized core strengths, and physically grounded and mentally centered. What had kept

Janet from being and staying present was self-doubt and fear of other people and the environment. Presence is too easily undermined by one's own reactive (habitual) thoughts and emotions. Resonance is too easily routed by dissonance, which distorts and blocks our intake of all the data—of self, other, and context—that may lead to the recognition of other possibilities and choices. In order to maintain a supportive and productive presence, we need to discipline our inner resources to focus on staying in intentional contact with the positive data of self, other, and environment that best serve our desired identity as well as the desired goal of the coaching engagement.

The visceral sense of self-awareness that confirms our grounding and the psycho-physical sense of focus that confirms our centering is essential for having a successful impact upon others with whom we are engaged in coaching work. When we ourselves are present through grounding, centering, and in the moment self assessment, we assure ourselves that we are in the best possible position to influence this for others.

PRESENCE REQUIRES PRACTICE

Slowing down for self-assessment at regular intervals or at specific moments—noting the situational and psycho-physical qualities of those times when you do feel present—builds a repertoire to call upon. This can support being grounded and centered in yourself in any coaching engagement, whether formal or informal, face-to-face or over the phone, planned or fortuitous. Some coaches ritualistically self-assess when they are introduced to someone new, when they sit down at a meeting, or just before they pick up the phone to make or take a call. It is valuable to be able to build a practice of checking into one's database of experiences, particularly in the moment that can inform choices to be taken. It is often helpful to take up “mind-body” activities, such as yoga, meditation, gardening, craft work, or running as they support the kind of physical and psychological self-awareness that leads to and supports presence. Such activities bring body and mind into closer contact while simultaneously allowing for the intake of data from self, other, and environment. The new sciences of the mind have enlarged our understanding that our bodies are recognized as being both physical and experiential, and therefore both biological and phenomenological (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). Our physical “practices” can strengthen our capacity to be present in aware and mindful ways.

Conversely, habitual patterns actually “hard-wire” our psyche so deeply that our biology, perception, and capacity to attend to the environment in effective ways are affected (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Lipton, 2005; Rock & Schwartz, 2006). What triggers predictable reactions from you? Perhaps you are habitually suspicious of middle-management employees' intentions, or perhaps

you habitually expect yourself to fail in specific organizational environments. Although these behavioral patterns are likely to be long-standing and may have helped you function successfully for some time, they may now be preventing your further personal and/or professional growth and thwarting your capacity to be present in your coaching work. As with all self-change efforts, it takes courage to name and discard habitual behavioral patterns that are no longer supportive. Nevertheless, once we recognize a pattern that no longer serves us (or, by extension, our clients), we can begin to build our psychological muscles in anticipation of other ways of being and behaving that *do* contribute to an effective sense of self and to successful coaching work. The dominant change theory of gestalt practice is the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970), which suggests that focusing, with full awareness on the phenomenological event (our perception, behavior or problem situation), will paradoxically bring change out of making full contact with the immediate experience. Rather than coercion, persuasion or interpretation, it is the full acceptance of the “status quo”—the “what is” of the moment—that stimulates the shift of change. According to Rock (2006), we change what we pay attention to and what we pay attention to changes us. Rock’s work on the neuroscience of learning confirms the phenomenological learning process which reconnects us back to the core role that awareness plays.

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AWARENESS OF OTHERS: CONNECTING

The goal of coaching is to support clients as they seek to reach their desired goal(s) by offering encouragement and support, identifying possibilities and choices of which the client may be unaware or wary to pursue. Focusing on clients’ perceptions—what they are feeling, thinking, paying attention to—and on clients’ wants and needs is central to the coaching engagement. Presence and resonance are necessary components that create a mutually creative space for awareness, learning, and action. Effective coaches are attentive to the “whole person” (both words and body language) and are curious, open and inquisitive about every aspect of the coaching situation (self, other, context). Effective coaches are open to learning about these aspects without judgment or evaluation, and are intent upon finding the best available means of assisting the client in reaching the desired goal(s).

By being appreciative and nonjudgmental with Janet, the executive who lost her confidence, the coach was able to connect and created a safe interpersonal space where she could more willingly explore her feelings and thoughts. It became clear that when challenged by a colleague, Janet slipped into a habitual pattern of doubting herself. Simply recognizing and paying attention to this pattern, without judgment or evaluation of it, Janet was able to examine her circumstances and consider alternative responses. The “paradoxical theory of change” posits that

heightened awareness and full acceptance of one's *current* state of being ("what is") leads to change through the full discovery of "alienated parts" that have been hidden from habitual awareness. As Janet reflected on her habitual pattern of doubting herself when challenged, she became conscious of how often she had stepped out to make difficult decisions that benefited the organization.

In fact, much of her career success was based on such calculated risk-taking. She saw the strength of her decisions, and noted also how effective she is when she shares her perspective and analysis of a situation with her colleagues. She then realized that her long-time pattern of immediately doubting herself whenever questioned probably served her adequately in an earlier part of her life, but was less useful, even damaging, in her current position. She alienated her own confidence in service of an old pattern of self-doubt. She acknowledged the value of slowing down to better assess the "big picture." Janet is more open to new, in-the-moment data which was to recognize how she alienates and disowns her strength in making difficult decisions. Coaching practices of quietly listening, asking questions, and providing appropriate and timely feedback supported Janet in exploring alternative ways of responding to challenges. These practices enabled Janet to meet with the leadership team with greater presence and self-confidence. The coach's discipline of being able to hold the space through their non-judgmental presence does matter.

In the presence of the open-minded and open-hearted coach, clients are supported and energized to do self-work they could not have done on their own, or have been unwilling or unable to do on their own. The presence of the coach contributes to the stores of awareness and energy available for action. In our everyday lives, we frequently attend to and test our environment for such impinging features as the weather, the latest news, and our sense of safety—whether something presents a threat or an opportunity. Clients pay a similar metaphoric attention to their coach, noting the mood the coach projects (the weather), the messages the coach sends (the news), and the sense of trust the coach establishes (the threat or opportunity). The coach's skillful "use of self" as an instrument of change makes the work challenging and exciting for both coach and client.

While focusing on the other (individual or group), effective coaches continually check in and pay attention to what they notice in themselves as well as in the environment. Presence requires curiosity about the here-and-now experience, and a commitment to seeing oneself as a microcosm of the moment. If we are experiencing discomfort, we should identify what we are feeling and assume that something in our immediate environment may be influencing us. Curiosity will prompt us to try to connect our interior experiences to the immediate moment. The essence

of use-of-self as an instrument is to “pay attention to the process by which we make our choices and decisions. It is all about how we choose to perceive the world, how we expand our choices, and then decide what to do in the specific situation at hand” (Patwell & Seashore, 2006, p. 6).

While coaching Jeff, the partner of the firm who has challenges dealing with new clients, the coach noticed her attention drifting. She perceived that Jeff wasn't terribly interested in the session. This seemingly “negative” information is potentially helpful data that can be used to support Jeff by selectively sharing the experience of connection and disconnection with him. In so sharing, the coach is present, curious, and paying attention to the phenomena of building relationships. Perhaps the coach asks Jeff to engage in an experiment, wherein both parties pay attention to when *connection* seems most powerful: Is it when he is speaking about his slides? Sharing a personal story? Asking a question? In addition to exploring the impact of Jeff's overt behaviors (e.g., eye contact), the coach focused on examining what he may evoke in clients and staff before he even speaks.

Perhaps Jeff's senior role already causes people to be cautious and expectant; perhaps starting out with his expertise makes people feel insecure or leads them to think he believes himself superior. Perhaps Jeff's unwillingness to share about himself or to show vulnerability causes people to feel less confident in his presence and to project “lack of interest.” By sharing personal response experiences and by exploring and experimenting, Jeff became more aware of how he connects or disconnects with clients, and discovered some ways to strengthen his ability to connect. Creating an open and trusting environment, where a “safe emergency” can be introduced, frees both practitioner and client to experiment with new behaviors and to learn what will be most useful for clients in their particular circumstances. The client must trust the coach enough to risk new possibilities that threaten old habits connected to existing identities. A coach needs enough self-trust to encourage clients to make contact with new behaviors that bring up discomfiting emotional responses. Being available to deal with the client's emotional response to discomfort is an important coaching competency. The coach needs to understand how to create enough safety for the client to invite new possibilities that *feel* risky to the client because those possibilities may have previously resided outside the client's repertoire. This safe risk-taking in the coach's presence, paradoxically, serves to energize the client for new actions for learning.

Presence requires curiosity about the here-and-now experience, and a commitment to seeing oneself as a microcosm of the moment.

AWARENESS OF OUR IMPACT ON OTHERS: WHAT WE EVOKE AND PROVOKE

In exploring how to connect with others, it is useful to be aware of what we naturally evoke in others generally as well as to some particular audiences. What we evoke in others could be based on

our features (e.g., skin color, sex, age), our clothing (e.g., formal, high fashion or casual), our posture (e.g., how we walk or sit), and/or our non-verbal behavior (e.g., tics, smiles, frowns) and verbal behavior (e.g., deliberate speech or use of slang). Our physical appearance and verbal behaviors could remind clients of others they knew or know, or clients could be responding to conditioned responses to certain types or groups of people. We cannot control people's first and most natural response, but if we are aware of the clients' potential response, or become aware of their response, we can take action to address it. We find it useful to raise our clients' awareness of the responses they are likely to or have raised about certain groups or settings, and providing them with appropriate possible responses. Masterful coaches understand their range and familiarity across different contexts and the cultural codes attached to different groups and cultures (Rapaille, 2006). As coaches develop they need to build a requisite variety of varied uses of oneself in relation to different clients and contexts.

In our observations, Jeff evoked a sense of seriousness and aloofness when he entered a room of potential clients. Armed with this understanding, he was able to ground himself, center himself, and be sure he was fully present when he entered a new situation, smiling and feeling a bit "lighter." He experimented with meeting new people: calling them by name, introducing himself clearly, sharing stories about himself, and inquiring about them. Jeff found it useful to become aware of what he evoked in others, gained through both observation and from solicited feedback. He was able to experiment with different ways of being, and was able to positively impact the perceptions he created.

In addition to examining and investigating what clients evoke in us and in others, as well as what they themselves are experiencing, effective coaches focus on provoking or making something happen in coaching interactions. Through our presence, we hope to provide what may be missing for our clients. Paying attention to what Jeff evoked, we were positioned to share with him when we could feel he did not connect with us and challenge him to try new behaviors that would lead to connection. Coaches offer observations, questions, and new ideas that encourage their clients to consider possibilities for learning and change. Each offer is really an experiment guided by a stance of curiosity. Coaches are not attached to how things *should* be nor are they attached to the concept that there is only one way for the client to be in order to succeed. Hanafin (2004) proposes that "curiosity is an awareness agent competency" which compels attention to exploration. Paying attention to the other, while in the stance of an observer, allows us to see seemingly unrelated but relevant parts of the whole. As observers, coaches pay attention to what is most compelling, and from that point develop a hypothesis. Thus the intention of the intervener's working hypothesis matters.

Various interventions can be made with the aim of heightening clients' awareness of their own internal meaning-making process. Sharing an observation with the client, making a statement of interest, or asking probing and powerful questions—these actions can all be construed as *provocative*. Ed Nevis, a Gestalt historian and trusted mentor to many Gestalt practitioners, insists practitioners have to have both “fear and arrogance” when working to make something happen with clients: “fear” that we may not have what is needed, and “arrogance” that what we have to offer will be valuable to the client. The art of learning to use one's presence well (one's intentional use of self), is in intentionally aiming to provoke something that matters in the client (Nevis, 1987). So, if the client appears overly serious, can the coach provides levity and a humorous perspective? Can the coach recognize the issue that is most pertinent for the client's learning and intentionally, with permission, co-create powerful learning experiments?

AWARENESS OF CONTEXT: IDENTIFYING AND ALIGNING WHAT'S NEEDED AND WHAT'S OFFERED

In addition to paying attention to self and others, it is important to become aware of the context in which we are interacting by developing the skill of scanning the environment, noticing actions and patterns of behaviors and their impact and consequences. The cycle of experience is powerful for its range in application to the context and empowers the coach to be sensitive and attentively aware of the larger field that is so relevant for organizational based coaching. Cycle of Experience awareness processes for the context include scanning to see what figures are important to attend to out of the ground of so many figures, creating a distinct and compelling image out of multiple figures, determining when energy is sufficient for movement, attending to a change in boundaries when contact has been met and satisfied and most significantly, assessing the experience that has occurred. For example, Janet, our executive who had become fearful of meeting with her senior leadership team, found it useful to become aware that the colleague who questioned her initiative was operating in a declining business and experiencing downsizing and a loss of market share, whereas Janet was operating in an expanding business environment where investment and growth were on the upswing. Janet was supported by knowledge of global business conditions, and was able to begin her presentation by sharing her understanding of the larger context and how her proposed initiative would support developing new relationships and positively benefit the larger organization.

Systems theory and thinking has been strategically useful in focusing attention on the differing levels of system in which executive coaches operate. System theory and systems thinking keep us mindful of the interconnectedness of the component parts—whether they are individuals, pairs, groups, organizations cultures and societies (Carter & Hopper, 2004). Particularly useful

is the concept that a change in one part of the system impacts other parts of the system, even though that impact may not be immediately or overtly visible at the initial intervention level. Yet if we take a broader, more “aerial” perspective of the larger systemic picture, we can see more multiple connections and opportunities at multiple levels; we find it useful to occasionally take the metaphoric step to “the mountaintop” to help us become aware of these multiple impacts and opportunities. The more adept we become at noticing patterns at all levels, the more opportunities we find to experiment with small changes that may impact the larger context. Sometimes change is directly visible, but sometimes it is apparent only to peripheral vision, altering the meaning of the foreground. (Bateson, 1994, p. 6) Coaches benefit from knowing the level of system toward which they have a preference or predisposition, as they may use themselves more effectively out of a stronger sense of personal presence. The importance of being able to scan the larger context is particularly relevant to executive clients who are faced with the need to recognize threats and opportunities in their field. Often, we can detect what is happening in our field by paying attention to our personal cycle of experience and what we are scanning in our immediate environment. Again, this is the competency we model and teach our clients which assists them in meaning making of their immediate environmental challenges.

The rate of change, which has become so intense, yields both fortunate and unfortunate high-impact random events—which Taleb (2007) calls “black swans”. Such events can determine the course of history. For example, September 11, 2001, was a “black swan” that was both tragic and extreme in its impact. During the early 1980s, Johnson & Johnson faced company demise when there was deadly product tampering with its Tylenol product. It was a “black swan” that was met by awareness and commitment on the part of James Burke, then company CEO, who demanded total product recall. This action reinstated the customer trust and brought profit and positive future back to Johnson & Johnson. By being able to scan the environment and make meaning from such data, the coach’s (or executive’s) presence is a powerful witness to assist the client’s consciousness. In their use of self, coaches can assist their clients to be present and make meaning to those high impact events that change the direction of all the levels of system. The black swans of change have increased and coaches need to be able to use themselves as awareness agents to support the client’s response to the learning challenges embedded in such uncertainty. Our client Jeff, the partner of the consulting firm, also benefited from paying more attention to context. He came to recognize lack of agreement on roles within his firm’s team when they were meeting with new clients. He could negotiate clearer definitions of role responsibilities. He was also able to see that, in addition to the technical expertise he and his team provided, clients were

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equally concerned about the relationships they would have with a prospective firm. With that in mind, he began to make building relationships a priority. He was realizing that relationships with clients influenced referrals and was a key determinant of Jeff's own success, as well as that of his firm and his team. Clearly, client organizations benefited as well from Jeff's new perspective.

In each of these cases, clients benefited from slowing down, becoming aware of a multi-level picture, and being able to focus on how their particular level or function "fit into" this larger organizational system. Clients were able to identify both what was needed in their immediate context and what was most important in the larger system in which their context functioned. By being more aware of what was paramount within the larger system, they were able to make small behavioral shifts to satisfy immediate needs in their own environment. Carter (2004, p. 16) has suggested that the picture of reality needs to be scanned for an "eye for what is critically missing from one's habitual pattern of meaning making". It is the task of the coach to assist the system in becoming aware of its alienated parts and it is the client's work, in embracing those parts, to notice what changes in their system.

A systemic perspective helps both coach and client realize that we are part of multiple systems, and that a change in behavior or function at one level can influence the entire system. Systems thinking encourages us to shuttle from the level at which intervention work is located to other levels that may also be affected. At the same time, when there is an issue at one level of system (for example, with an individual at the executive level), going to a different level of system to make the intervention might not yield successful outcome because the work needs to be at the correct level of system. Systems thinking and effective intervention are skills that require theory and practice, to provide effectiveness and to avoid system-level errors. Coaches must be present to their strength in system-level thinking and their ability to use themselves to scan the environment for what is missing, needed or obvious. These are the skills that we, in turn, teach our executive clients.

INTEGRATING WAYS OF AWARENESS

While attending to each focus of awareness—self, other, and context—we are also shifting our attention (ideally) among each of these areas in a dance-like fashion. Our client Janet, the head of an important business unit, shifted her attention to herself when she became anxious about a colleague's criticism, then shifted attention to the colleague who was questioning her, then shifted to the larger, organizational context. She momentarily lost her balance and remained focused on her own stress and insecurity; however, after a coaching session that assisted her focusing and presence practices, she was able to become more grounded and centered, and better able to shift between areas

Sometimes both coaches and clients miss the fact that the environment or organization is actually trying to support them, but their habitual behavioral responses prevent them from seeing and acknowledging such support.

of focus during her meeting with the top executives. Possessing the ability to recover from derailment experiences and become present is an important skill needed for coaches, executives and other professionals.

Coaches who are able to shift between levels and areas of focus with skillful handling are also able to support clients in desired goals when those goals reside in levels embedded in complex systems. Although we, as coaches, make these shifts in attention all the time, our focus may at times become skewed by inordinate attention to self, other, or context. Some of us fail to check in with the in-the-moment self assessment process connected to the cycle of experience, and become so focused on our own goals that we fail to energize clients into stepping forward themselves into self-awareness or organizational awareness. Similarly, sometimes coaches or clients focus so literally on “others” that they’re unable to meet their own and/or family needs—never mind identified goals and/or division or organizational needs. Sometimes both coaches and clients miss the fact that the environment or organization is actually trying to support them, but their habitual behavioral responses prevent them from seeing and acknowledging such support.

The more capable coaches become in balancing attention and data regarding self, other, and context, and in maintaining

Table 3. Some Suggestions for Developing an Effective Coaching Presence

- Expose yourself to new ideas, people, and places to become more aware of your own possibilities and choices.
- Ask others for feedback about what you do and the impact this has on them.
- Pay attention to recurring patterns and issues and be open to exploring them. For example, if you continually find yourself regretting your commitments to people and activities, be curious about what happens, how it happens, and why it happens, under what (un-aware) circumstances.
- Practice being grateful, optimistic, and hopeful about life. Assume the “glass is half full.” Both positive and negative emotions are contagious: far better for both yourself and others to exude a positive aura. Notice how you are identified, and work towards stronger support for more possibilities and choices.
- Become aware of your values and what is of primary importance to you, and reflect on how you are actualizing your values and priorities.
- Practice empathy and forgiveness for self and others.
- Assess your habits, and work on strengthening and developing new habits that support you and others.
- Engage in thoughtful reflection, and engage in behavioral experiments with a coach or colleagues.
- Create a personal, team, and organizational vision that is compelling; take actions to move towards those visions. Take risks and explore new actions and habits to support achievement of your visions.
- Interact respectfully with people who are different than you—in philosophy, age, culture, and experience; be willing to learn from them.
- Be open to others regarding your dreams and hopes, which builds support for self and other work.

presence (grounding, centering, checking-in, emotional self-awareness), the more they will be in a state of integrity that supports clients to become self-aware, to risk and learn, and to implement and take action on desired goals. The more coaches are in touch with what is important to themselves in relation to others (clients) and to the environment, the better they can support the intention of perceiving, identifying, and experimenting with and enacting opportunities and fulfilling potential. We expect great things from this vantage point of awareness and skill.

Developing presence and skillful use of self is the coach's lifelong project. Ongoing self-development allows more possibilities to emerge for ourselves, our clients, our relationships, and our communities. Awareness, learning, and action depend upon a conscious intention to be aware of self, others, and context. Commitment to emotional experiences is part of the learning experience. Making it a habit for 'in-the-moment assessment', and noting our patterns over time contribute to effective and impactful coach practice. Taking a few moments out of a busy day to physically relax, to note one's breathing, and to mentally reflect on what is of uppermost importance among all the competing figures, what is happening within us and around us, and how we are or are not responding—all of this nurtures our ability to coach other people. Attending to all aspects of well-being—whether physical, mental, spiritual, or communal health—is important for this is also the challenge for our clients, particularly those in the organizational arena. Paradoxically, the more we focus on our own self-aware development, the more we are able to pinpoint possibilities and alternative choices for ourselves, for our clients, for communities, and for our world. Our self-development is a life-long process ably guided by our curiosity about self, others, and context.

CONCLUSIONS

While being present is our natural state of being, and appears a natural "skill" of children, it takes conscious intention and effort to fully embrace that state of being and to use ourselves effectively in order to serve others in reaching their desired goals. In reviewing the practice of awareness, Bateson suggests that there is a spiritual basis to attention, a humility in waiting upon the emergence of a pattern from experience. The "willingness to assimilate what has been seen or heard draws other life into increasingly inclusive definitions of the self. Looking, listening and learning offer the modern equivalent of moving through life as a pilgrimage" (Bateson, 1994, p. 10). It is when we are present and aware of our senses that we can identify figures from the context regarding what is relevant for the future. We can be at choice regarding possibilities.

Presence requires that we are capable of attending to the personal, the group, the institutional and even the global so

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that we are able to offer generative observations to deep issues (Scharmer, 2008). When we have done the development work to support our integrated and strong presence, we experience ourselves as more connected to others and the environment; and we enjoy a sense of wholeness that is generative for self and others. Coaching is a satisfying and fulfilling process that requires knowledge, development and sustained practice. The theory behind an effective and a compelling presence suggests that lifelong development matters. What we in the organizational coaching practice are continually reminded of, simply, is that our presence is a catalyzing factor that inspires others to become aware, to learn, and to act with intent and purpose. In this time of accelerated change where the force of the “unknown unknowns” hurl relentlessly toward us, the coherent presence of a coach who works to offer an aware use of self can serve a client’s mobilization of their creativity and adaptation to the black swans of change.

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