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The Coach as Awareness Agent: A Process Approach

Dorothy E. Siminovitch

No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.

—Einstein

Change and complexity define the 21st century. These challenges impose heightened urgency for leaders and their coaches being able to respond with strong awareness skills to access the self-knowledge, emotional and social intelligence, and creative adaptability necessary to meet those challenges. Awareness and the pursuit of awareness are referenced as early as the 2nd century BCE in the *Yoga-Sutras* of the great Indian sage Patanjali. His concepts of achieving awareness are still with us, augmented by later definitions and practices from divergent cultures and ideologies. The concept of awareness was the domain of a spiritualized, Eastern-oriented sensibility until it began to be translated into secularized Western paradigms, then introduced into leadership development programs and workplace environments. Awareness and awareness-based practices are now vital competencies to support leaders and their coaches, as traditional knowledge and skills are proving insufficient. We propose awareness development as the key component of successful 21st-century leadership. This chapter describes the essence of awareness, and practices for cultivating and using awareness strategically for ongoing learning and choiceful action.

BEING AWARE: THE NEW COORDINATES

It's important to understand that awareness is filtered by perception, which occurs through the experiential and phenomenological observations of our five senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. These sensory data must be distinct enough to draw our attention as emergent awareness—an image, a sound, a taste, a scent, a visceral sense of touch. Becoming aware is the result of cognitively framing those data with a meaning interpretation. When something catches our attention or we experience a disruption—physical, emotional, or intellectual—we seek internal understanding by seeking more data, for better interpretation, and deciding whether to take action. Awareness is a complex phenomenon since there are multiple things competing for our attention. We develop an economy of what we will or will not pay attention to by establishing priorities and limits around what to attend to. The value of setting priorities and choosing constructive resistance about what not to pay attention to allows for discipline and self-preserving self-regulation. A dilemma occurs when resistance becomes overly habitual and awareness becomes restricted, such that important phenomena are missed. Awareness-raising techniques are then essential to promote contact with the internal or external data that may be relevant for alternative perspectives and choices. Heightening clients' awareness requires an interactive, collaborative process, where the coach offers the client data-based observations, questions, and feedback that may provoke new awarenesses for the client.

The increasingly fast-paced world has empowered process-oriented coaching approaches because awareness-heightening strategies can foster self-awareness, which strengthens self-development. The shift to awareness heightening in leadership development aligns itself with collaborative values and competencies of coaching. The coach is no longer the expert who tells clients what they need to know or how to put specific knowledge into practice. Today's coach is a *thought partner*, a *co-collaborator*, and an *experiential guide* who supports awareness practices for the client. In the moment when a person becomes aware, we often see a rapid self-initiated movement toward learning and self-identified opportunities.

Coaching for awareness can be described as a change from *horizontal* to *vertical* leadership development strategies (Petrie, 2014, p. 8). Horizontal learning is essentially technical training: a transfer of content—information, techniques—in focused areas, usually involving measurable behaviors or competencies. Its established role in virtually every organizational training program may explain the passion for accumulating official certifications as testaments to one's presumed development. The problem is that such learning isn't adequate to help leaders cope with the kind of unpredictable, ambiguous, and disruptive challenges now routinely encountered that cannot be answered by knowledge acquisition alone. The counterpart of horizontal development is vertical development, which highlights awareness development as a process that leads to an "ability to *think* in more complex, systemic, strategic, and interdependent ways" so that leaders can confidently negotiate from a position that is "equal to or superior to the complexity of the environment" in which these challenges occur (Petrie, 2014, pp. 8, 7; original emphasis). This requires that leaders have ways of perceiving and responding to their world informed by their capacity to be, and to stay, aware of themselves and their environment, and to use their awareness wisely to influence and effect positive change.

Horizontal development (knowledge acquisition) and vertical development (awareness development) are complementary, not competing, models. Vertical development strategies are best attuned to supporting leaders to meet contemporary challenges through awareness-driven processes. Awareness is a form of situational knowing, where there may be fresh information that was not previously available and requires the action of recognition or a promise for future action.

Facilitating clients' heightened or new awareness is a crucial intervention because it also makes obvious to clients the habitual processes that are out of their awareness. From this reawakened awareness, clients are enabled to be more consciously choiceful about their goals and decisions. Accessing one's awareness, in the moment when choice and action most matter, is strengthened by mindful processes that can improve with practice and experimentation. When we are distracted from the present moment—for example, committed to a predetermined course of action—it's easy to miss or dismiss pertinent data. The leader who insists on staying with an agenda when there are signs that no team coherence exists usually later confronts needless negative consequences. When important social cues affecting team members are missed or ignored because the leader was fixated on an agenda, the task of that agenda may be irreparably compromised.

We need to know what we are not aware of rather than staying asleep. Leaders especially need to become aware of and distinguish the signals of opportunity and threat. Coaches are responsible for creating conditions of trust that allow them to ask the probing, powerful questions that bring their clients to greater awareness. Awareness coaching requires comprehensive understanding of how to recognize awareness: the specifics and nuances of working with almost limitless aspects of awareness, recognizing lack of awareness, and knowing when resistance to awareness is functional.

In the vastness of working with awareness, *self-awareness*, *mindfulness*, and *emotional intelligence* have become touchstones in leadership development theory and its practitioners. Mindfulness and emotional intelligence are synergetic and powerfully beneficial for self-awareness development. Mindfulness is defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Scientific research suggests that meditation—a form of practiced mindfulness—can actually change brain structure, improve concentration or focus, decrease anxiety, improve a sense of equanimity and well-being, and enhance interpersonal relationships. Google was among the first organizations to offer a mindfulness program for its leadership, conceived and directed by Chade-Meng Tan, who later founded the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute. Emotional intelligence (EI), popularized by Goleman (2005), has a profound impact on decision making and relational interactions, and has become a recognized competency in leadership development literature. Whether as coach or leader, the person who can best identify and read emotional reactions (in oneself and others) in the moment, who can defuse emotional distress and bolster emotional equanimity, and who is ethically responsible and accountable for his or her decisions in doing so, is one who has EI—one who can offer new perspectives, new possibilities, and re-energized commitment.

The power of the concepts of self-awareness, mindfulness, and EI lies in their ability to evoke self-directed change of who to be or who to become. Change that is

self-initiated, coming internally from who we are and what we want, offers the most profound path to authentic transformation. Mindfulness strengthens one's mental focus, which further strengthens the indwelling power of awareness to promote compassionate discovery of what we are and are not paying attention to. Coaches use mindfulness techniques to focus attention, which facilitates client awareness in fresh and holistic ways by revealing habitual patterns and blind spots. Everyone has blind spots, things they're unable to see for themselves. Consider your car's rear-view mirrors, which broaden your typical range of vision so that you can see things you need to be aware of and pay attention to. Metaphorically, coaches are a kind of rearview mirror for clients, offering observations and questions that support clients to recognize their blind spots, empowering them to more choicefully decide which direction to take and how to better direct themselves.

AWARENESS IQ

Mindfulness and EI are part of the vertical strategies for self-awareness development. They both validate the Gestalt approach, which is rooted in awareness-enhancing methods. I have proposed the term *Awareness Intelligence*, or *Awareness IQ*, as an integrative model which incorporates the vertical development concept, the findings of neuroscience research on the impact and implications of awareness, and the foundations of the Gestalt approach (Siminovitch, 2017). Awareness IQ is an evolved and integrated concept that articulates a capacity to choicefully and masterfully use one's awareness, in the moment, to make the most effective decisions, leading to the greatest satisfaction and the least regret. Gestalt approaches make self-awareness the key to well-being, advocating its central role in self-empowerment and self-liberation, and practicing and teaching how to most effectively use self-awareness to initiate and guide change. Gestalt practice has been enriched through concepts like mindfulness and EI, through scientific research showing the positive impact that meditation practices make on the brain and on the body, and through emergent understanding of how self-awareness connects us with our heart and spirit.

Gestalt thinking and theory offer a time-tested, results-effective model of awareness-centered coaching. Awareness is the model, the method, and the goal for change, growth, and well-being. Gestalt practice was defined by one of its pioneers, Laura Perls, as "experiential, experimental, and existential" (cited in Rosenfeld, 1978, p. 24). Gestalt's foundations emerged from studies in phenomenology (how we perceive the world and make meaning of what we perceive); highlighted the need to experiment with our meaning-making processes in an environment of safety and trust; embraced existentialist premises (being responsible and accountable for our understanding of the world and the choices we make); and adopted wisdoms from Eastern philosophies (living in harmony with self, others, and the external world). The Gestalt approach continues to be vibrant, relevant, resonant, and adaptive in multiple disciplines and across all levels of system, whether for personal, team, or organizational coaching or consulting. The core concepts, principles, and models of Gestalt have proved insightful and meaningful in every so-called helping profession because they are rooted in organic, pan-cultural needs and wants.

People seek the services of coaches in pursuit of change. Gestalt coaching has a compelling understanding of what change entails and suggests appreciation for all patterns of behavior, even if those patterns no longer serve the person and the reasons for them have fallen out of that person's awareness. People tend to resist change, even when change is desired, because it's emotionally uncomfortable and behaviorally complex. For change to occur, one must first, with awareness, embrace existing perceptual and behavioral patterns. This deep insight, known as the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970), tells us first, that awareness in itself sparks change, and second, that change can only happen if one already fully embraces and accepts who one is. Gestalt practitioners reject the role of being change agents, who diagnose and fix what's presumably wrong. They instead take the stance of being *awareness agents* who offer astute observations and ask powerful questions to support clients to become more aware—to identify, especially, unaware patterns that sway clients perceptions and responses, their decision-making processes, and their relationships. Gestalt coaches seek to mobilize clients toward heightened or new self-awareness. When clients experience greater awareness, they also experience more personal power through expanded choices linked to that greater awareness, and therefore more possibility for moving forward toward desired goals.

PRESENCE AND USE OF SELF

In identifying awareness development as today's vital leadership competency, we encounter the issue of *presence* for coaches. Presence refers to the embodiment of identity—one's way of being in the world and one's impact on others. When we use our presence for decision making in the moment, or for resonant interpersonal relationships, that's an active, intentional *use of self*. When we miss an important awareness cue about a needed action, however small, we are left with some sense of regret. Awareness IQ is the integrative capacity to access the strengths of one's presence, when needed, and to act on one's awareness in ways that lead to satisfaction. Where presence is the domain of self-development, use of one's presence, or what we call use of self, is the way we intentionally use our resources to provoke an outcome that is needed, wanted, or missing.

The difference between presence and use of self is an important awareness. When we hear what we evoke in others, what we're hearing is an interior response to our being, our presence. When we hear what we did that provoked or influenced something, that impact is the result of our use of self. One satisfaction metric of use of self lies in the assessment question: Was there an adequate response to something that was needed, wanted, or missing? The answer we get is feedback about the effectiveness of our use of self. Awareness is needed to appreciate the distinction between evocation of one's presence and provocation regarding one's use of self. Understanding our presence and how this affects our use of self means understanding and being aware of the seven dimensions of presence that are available for our self-development and that influence how we respond in the world (Figure 12.1).

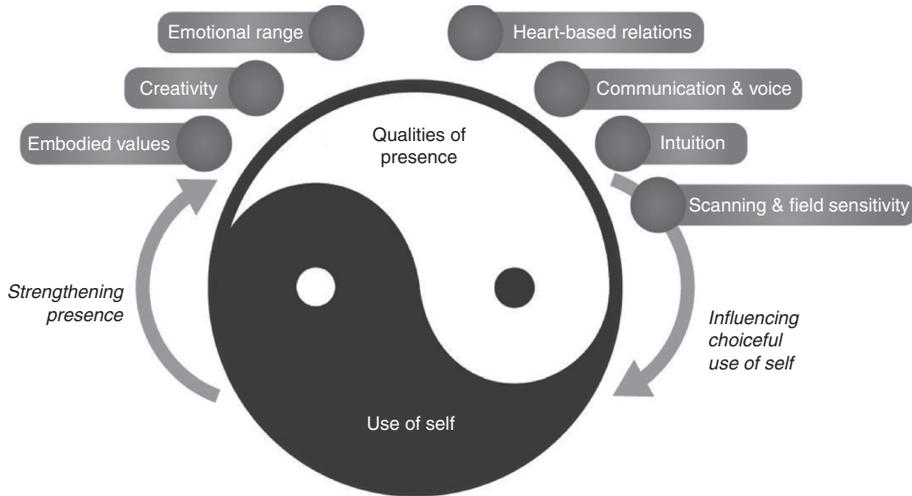


Figure 12.1 The dimensions of presence and use of self.

Source: Siminovitch, D. E. (2017). *A gestalt coaching primer: The path toward awareness IQ*. N.p.: Author.

THE SEVEN DIMENSIONS OF PRESENCE

Embodying One's Values and Beliefs

The ability to know and embody your values strengthens your presence, enhances perceptions of integrity, and engenders trust. Your presence is most immediately and memorably communicated to others somatically. When body language doesn't match words or demeanor, those watching and listening are distrustful or avoidant. The underlying strength of one's presence is congruence between body, mind, and spirit. When "our speech, facial expressions, postures, and movements align," this "internal convergence . . . is palpable and resonant. . . . We are no longer fighting ourselves; we are being ourselves" (Cuddy, 2015, p. 25). When leaders talk about what they value, they need to show up with the coherent embodiment that matches their message.

Creativity

Adaptability, resilience, and innovation are attributes of creativity. Creativity requires self-discipline to learn the horizontal information and skills associated with your profession, but vertical development is needed for originality, divergence, and conceptual flexibility. Creativity is not obstructed by failure but informed by those experiences in service of discovering what will be successful. The vacuum cleaner entrepreneur, James Dyson, had 5,126 failed attempts over 15 years before finally creating the model that made Dyson a multi-billion-dollar international company (Goodman, 2012). Creativity emerges from awareness, maybe in unexpected and unlikely moments, by being open to alternative ways of thinking or acting or being, and from calling upon all you know, have experienced, and can envision.

Emotions and Emotional Range

Recognizing, working with and using one's emotions wisely in the moment requires self-discipline. When coaches or leaders cannot access and use their emotions in the needed moment, to validate or to connect with others or to manage negative emotions, they lose a sense of personal presence. Along with our embodied values and beliefs, our emotional range and intelligence guides our choices about what we're willing to do and what we're not willing to do. A quote attributed to Viktor Frankl says, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." Our self-awareness about our emotions and emotional range gives us a power of nonreactivity in moments that have strong emotion. That stance gives us more options for an aware response, where we can take choiceful action and see more opportunities. Demonstrating emotional insight and emotional self-management further inspires trust in others.

Heart-Based Relations

Being seen, heard, and cared about are primary sources of resonance, generating hope and possibilities. Empathy, compassion, appreciation, passion, and courage are expressions of heart-based relations, both for oneself and for others. Research undertaken by the HeartMath Institute shows that the heart and brain are intricately connected physically, and that when the energetic heart and mind are in a state of coherence, we experience greater mental clarity, allowing for better communication, choices, and decision making (HeartMath Institute, n.d.). *Heart intelligence* is best expressed through value-laden actions that maintain personal health as well as support the welfare of others and our environmental fields. In 2015, Dan Price, a successful 31-year-old start-up entrepreneur, chose to give up 90% of his profits in order to guarantee each of his employees a \$70K starting wage. He acted from his convictions—from an invested sense of personal psychological well-being and self-awareness, as well as from his sense of being invested in the welfare of others (Becker, 2017). The bond between coach and client, leader and follower, can often be traced to an aware sense of security and quality of care.

Communication and Voice

Being able to say what is needed in the moment is both skill and art, whether in writing, in person, or via audio- or video-recording. While presence is manifested most immediately through somatic cues, the words we choose and the characteristics of our voice are also key components. The quality of our words, the tone of our voice, and the congruence of both with our body language, touches others' minds and hearts. Many people, worldwide, know of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech of 1963, and admire it not only for its historical significance, but for its rhetorical, emotional, experiential, and somatic coherence and authenticity. The goal is to clearly convey a message and a vision in a somatically coherent delivery, which moves people toward new perceptions and possibilities.

Intuition

Most people consider intuition a gift that is inborn and cannot be cultivated. Noted social scientist Herbert Simon, however, defined intuition as "subconscious pattern

recognition” and “not associated with magic and mysticism” (cited in Frantz, 2003, p. 266). This recognition ability may be explained by the concept of *thin-slicing*, which refers to drawing “inference[s] about others from brief glimpses or ‘thin slices’ of behavior,” that is, small and “random samples of the behavioral stream . . . that provide information regarding personality, affect, and interpersonal relations” (Ambady, 2010, p. 271). Dedicated meditators experience this power of thin-slicing intuition, as do those who are intensely trained and experienced in their given disciplines, such as some coaches. The International Coach Federation (ICF) introduces the relevance of intuition as a core competency of active listening at its highest credentialing level. The coach at this level

recognizes both her and the client’s ability of intuitive and energetic perception that is felt when the client speaks of important things, when new growth is occurring for the client, and when the client is finding a more powerful sense of self. (ICF, n.d.)

Scanning and Field Sensitivity

Scanning and field sensitivity refer to the capacity to recognize what is important as it is still emerging, almost unformed, in the purview of one’s full awareness, drawing from one’s knowledge, experience, and intuition. Leaders today are asked to navigate uncertain paths, yet must make effective decisions while the future continues to unfold. Those leaders who have a grounded sense of self, who are resonantly connected to others and open to new information, and who have a sense of safety around innovation and creative experimentation are most able to accurately scan their immediate and global environments to spot not just threats, but more importantly, opportunities and gifts. This capacity is most critical as we face continuous product and technological obsolescence, changing the criteria of business efficiency and customer service.

TWO TOOLS: COACHING FOR AWARENESS IQ

We offer two Gestalt-based coaching tools to work with awareness patterns. The *Cycle of Experience* (COE) serves as a process model of what one is aware of about oneself and one’s environment, and how one acts on that awareness in relation to satisfying needs and wants. The COE’s counterpart is the *Unit of Work* (UOW), a four-step model for orchestrating intentional awareness interventions. An issue is identified by the COE, and the UOW furthers the work by exploring that issue, which the client may have avoided or never adequately considered until his or her awareness was heightened and interest was generated to further explore it.

CYCLE OF EXPERIENCE

The COE is a process model built upon the concept of figure/ground. The figure/ground perceptual process refers to how external or internal sensations draw and focus our attention. What we pay attention to is the figure of interest that develops from among all the other available things in our environment, which is called the

ground. A figure of interest emerges into awareness as a sensed need or want that we feel an urge to satisfy. If a figure is clearly identified and is compelling in terms of want or need or what is missing, we have an energetic response, which leads us to take action to satisfy the need or desire for that figure. Those action steps move us to make contact—to meet or create the conditions necessary to satisfy the need or want aroused. When contact happens, we feel a change in our energy. Having satisfied that particular figure, we feel a sense of closure, which allows that figure to fade back into the ground. The COE identifies need or want fulfillment processes across six points—sensation, awareness (figure of interest), energy (emotional investment), action, contact, and closure—which allow the coach to track and assess the client’s awareness processes (Figure 12.2).

In terms of coaching for awareness development, the COE is the process lens for observing how clients satisfy or fail to satisfy their needs or wants, and is used to help clients become more self-aware of their own processes of scanning, meaning-making, and responsiveness. In keeping with being mindful, coaches track clients’ COEs without judgment, looking only for observable sensory and verbal data. Clients usually think they already know and can articulate what they need or want, but may be unaware that their language, somatic cues, or behavior suggest otherwise. Focusing attention on what the client is thinking, feeling, and sensing is an important first step in data gathering in order to accurately identify what the client is experiencing. The move from sensation to awareness involves scanning both internal and external cues,

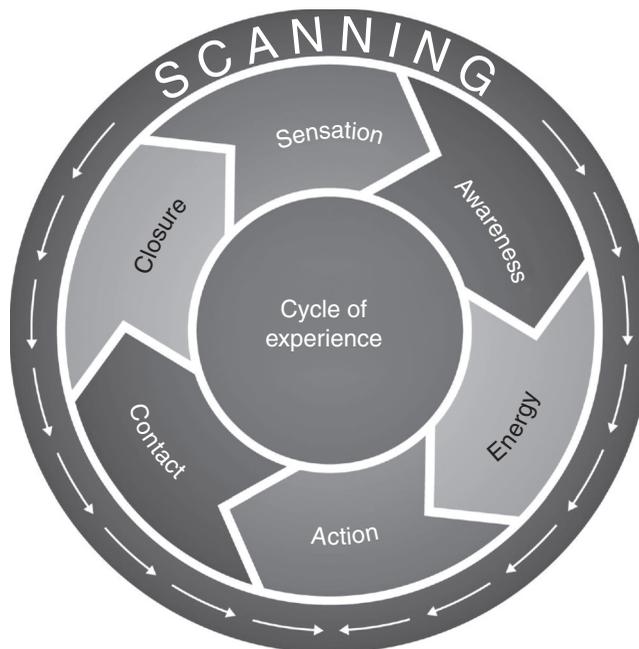


Figure 12.2 Cycle of experience.

Source: Siminovitch, D. E. (2017). *A gestalt coaching primer: The path toward awareness IQ*. N.p.: Author.

and identifying if the cues are in sync or misidentified. Whether the client can stay with the energy (physical, emotional, or cognitive) of the awareness, and whether he or she moves toward or holds back from taking action, are important awareness-based data. If the client makes contact, the client experiences a shift in energy, expressed verbally or somatically. If there is no visible shift, there is no change. If completion of the client's COE is satisfactory, that allows the client to move on to other figures of interest. If important COEs are left incomplete, these unfinished cycles can continue to impact the client by reducing his or her awareness and perceptions of other emerging issues.

UNIT OF WORK

UOW is a process structure that intentionally orchestrates and facilitates client learning and change. The COE is always in some point of awareness, which can be mindfully described as data, not interpretation. The UOW draws from the awareness data of the COE and invites the client to engage in a learning experiment about the identified figure of interest that the client wishes to further explore. The UOW is a four-step structure.

STEPS OF THE UOW

The “What Is” Process Analysis

The “what is” refers to a figure of interest which emerges from using COE—a need or want that attracts aware attention—in the client's current reality as he or she perceives and experiences it. The coach may suggest a figure drawn from mindful awareness observations of the COE, or the client may identify one.

Engaging in the Choice

The coach assists the client's choice of what to attend to and explore by offering observations and asking questions. The client is invited to choose whether to experiment with the primary figure of interest itself, or the client's resistance to that identified need or want, or the interplay between them. This is a bounded coaching agreement that sets the stage for experimentation.

Acting on the Choice

Once the issue is mutually defined, an experiential experiment, collaboratively designed, is offered. The client has to feel safe enough to proceed, but a sense of risk is essential for learning from experimentation and exploration. Too much calmness suggests that the identified issue is not sufficiently significant—it has no energetic charge or emotional risk, and invites no learning. Too much emotion suggests that fear will overwhelm curiosity about the unknown. The coach acts as a kind of ongoing barometer, discerning the client's tolerance for the vulnerability and risk involved. The experiments that are created need to bring the client in contact with a new awareness of the identified issue.

New “What Is”

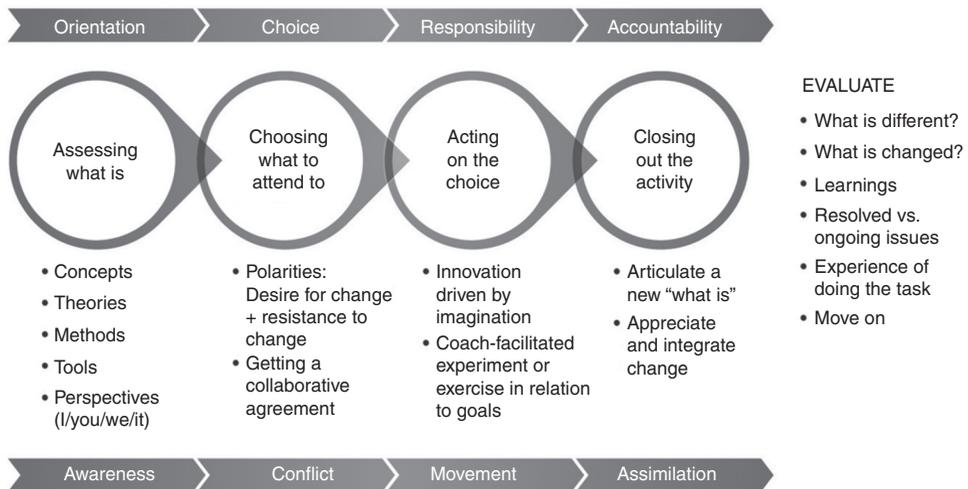
Using the mindful data of the COE in this step, attention is paid to the somatic cues that signal awareness and learning shifts. Energy is focused now on inviting the

client to integrate his or her new learning. One way of closing the experiment is to ask the client to name resultant learnings, and to invite reflection on insights and different possibilities in relation to the client’s needs, wants, and goals. The successful closure of a UOW is the culmination of experiential learning that feels like an “aha moment” of awareness of freshly available choices and opportunities (Figure 12.3).

The UOW works thematically with awareness data revealed through the COE. Experimentation in the UOW deepens vertical development strategies, and illuminates potential positive shifts in perception, worldview, or behavior. Experimentation prompts surprising creativity and innovation that neither coach nor client could have predicted. Experimentation allows learning to occur from all opportunities. Success is when a new possibility is realized or even when a failure pattern is recognized that has thwarted client satisfaction. For example, if the COE reveals a place of “stuckness,” in sensation or awareness or elsewhere in the cycle, one UOW could be to explore what is familiar about that stuckness and the cost of staying in that pattern. A UOW can be used to explore any challenge.

BEING AN AWARENESS IQ AGENT

We live in a world where what we know well, and are rewarded for knowing, can quickly become obsolete. The bias favoring technical competency is being displaced by a shift in the zeitgeist: a recognition of awareness as itself a powerful competency that promotes a capacity to confidently manage uncertainty and ambiguity, to be creative, to be adaptable. Awareness-based knowledge—once the domain of spiritual, philosophical, and mystic practices—is now the fundamental practical goal of many leadership development programs and much of leadership coaching. We offer Awareness IQ—an integration of seven awareness dimensions, the capacity to



THE DRIVER OF CHANGE is The Paradoxical Theory of Change

Figure 12.3 Unit of work.

Source: Siminovitch, D. E. (2017). *A gestalt coaching primer: The path toward awareness IQ*. N.p.: Author.

access those resources when needed, and the evidentiary support for the value of mindfulness and emotional intelligence—as a path toward personal and professional mastery.

In this time when information continually expands and knowledge needs to be constantly updated, being able to use one's awareness for vision, understanding, clarity, and agility is the fundamental competency. Coaching for awareness intelligence focuses on supporting leaders to look after their own well-being in synchrony with the welfare of others, and positioning leadership to better anticipate, compassionately manage, and ethically negotiate relentless organizational change and complexity in the moment that matters. Coaches who are privileged to support leadership in their vertical self-development are themselves supported by powerful awareness models, research, and tools.¹ Mahatma Gandhi wrote that “the future depends on what you do today.” This is a fitting observation to close our discussion of developing self-awareness and using our awareness wisely. Coaches, and the leaders they work with, need to be skilled, and even artful, to recognize awareness moments that offer the inspiration, energy, and wisdom to respond effectively in the moment. Those moments are our portals into the future.

NOTE

1. With Barbara Singer, CEO of Executive Core, I have coauthored the Awareness 20/20™ 720° assessment tool for leadership awareness across the seven dimensions of presence.

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