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Gestalt-Based Coaching Competencies

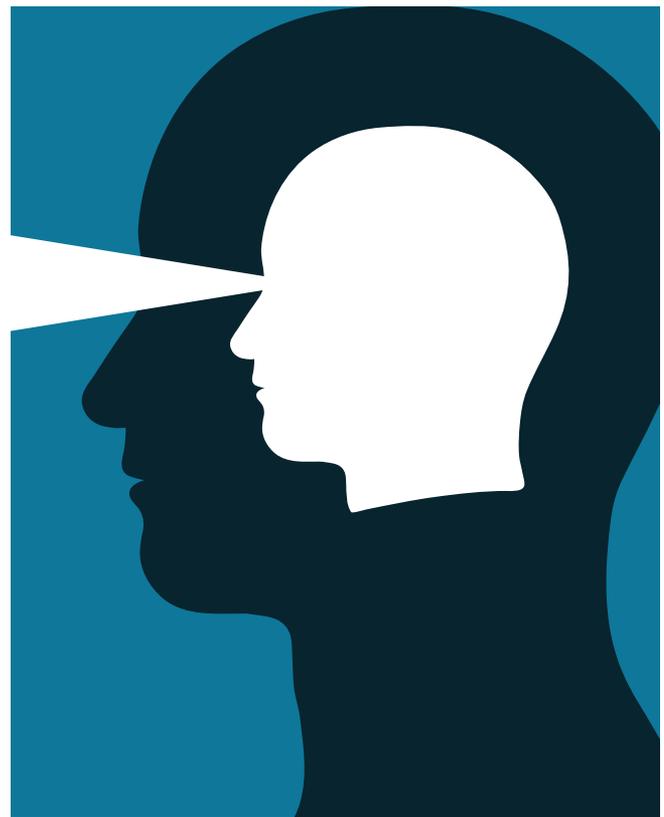
The importance of presence and use of self

Coaching Presence is possibly the most significant of the 11 Core Coaching Competencies identified by the International Coach Federation because it is an integrative state of being that holds all we know as well as our capacity to respond adaptively. In teaching this competency to coach practitioners, we benefit by differentiating between the terms ‘presence’ and ‘use of self.’ Presence captures qualities related to our identity and distinctive way of being in the world. Use of self refers to utilizing the awareness that comes from presence to create interventions with the intent to influence an outcome. Presence is the integrated totality of what we have worked to become; use of self describes how one leverages presence to impact and to strategically provoke client work (*Figure 1*).

Presence is a ‘being’ intervention, accomplished from the coach’s authentic and congruent embodiment of values, experiences and knowledge. Just showing up to others evokes a response. Clients are often either immediately attracted to or discouraged from working with a coach based on what is evoked when in the coach’s presence; the first test of presence is whether the client does or does not feel chemistry with the coach. Coaches

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need to learn what their presence evokes and what that may mean for the work. Someone who demonstrates harmony between mind, body and affect communicates an embodiment of personal gifts, usually experienced



by others as a presence that evokes trust and resonance. This is the aim of any coach: to cultivate a presence that evokes trust in, and energy for, the coaching work.

Presence comes from understanding and ownership of self. Self-work develops capacity to be centered in our strengths, to be aware of and responsible for our limitations, and to access the distilled wisdom of embodied life lessons. The skill and art of coaching intervention is enhanced by being aware of how we leverage our presence, where use of self unites ‘who I am’ with ‘what I do’ to provoke and serve client awareness and learning.

Awareness is the key ingredient that feeds embodied presence, purposeful use of self, and emergent, aware choices. Awareness informs our capacity to regulate our interaction with our environment, to creatively adjust to its challenges to get what we want. The Gestalt Cycle of Experience is a rich conceptual tool that teaches coaches to attend to internal and external awarenesses, and to track the ways clients do or do not pay attention to their wants or to the habitual behavioral patterns that interfere (understood as resistance) with satisfying those wants or goals. The Cycle supports the coach in being more aware, and therefore more responsible, about her use of self.¹

This awareness-tracking tool assists both cultivation of presence and intentional use of self, illuminating the range of self-awareness and how patterns of behavior or inattention block awareness of and contact with alternative possibilities. Using the Cycle, the coach is better able to offer in-the-moment observations about a client's behavior, as well as the coach's

internal experience that is evoked by being in the client's presence.

In offering clients data, aware projections, feedback on their behavior and powerful questions about their observed behaviors, the coach works to raise clients' awareness of and interest in new possibilities. When choicefully acted upon, the coach's present-moment awarenesses are the bridge to effective use of self. Authentic presence creates impact through evocative energy, but use of self provokes impact through intentional interventions, whether in the form of observations, projections, feedback or inquiry. Masterful use of self requires being centered (and able to re-center, as needed) in the home base of one's self-aware presence.

The coach's use of self is powerfully revealed when she is able to:

- differentiate between observations, projections, and feedback;
- skillfully use what gets evoked in her to make constructive and aware projections that assist client awareness;
- provoke what is needed or missing in the client system;

- create interventions and experiments that are sensitive to timing and choice points specific to the client's goals;

- identify and intervene at the system boundaries where the work resides;

- attend to client cues to shape the 'safe-emergency' of the client's work, maintaining just enough risk to sustain interest and engagement (Figure 2).

Use of self – the active, intentional leverage of presence – allows the coach to be a provocative instrument in service of the client. It requires the coach's deliberative design and implementation of strategic interventions that are sensitive to clients' goals, contexts, and to the relevant level(s) of system (e.g., intrapersonal, interpersonal, dyadic, group, organizational) connected with the coaching issue.

Strategic interventions benefit from using Gestalt's conceptual tool "Unit of Work" (UOW), which is an orchestrated structure of energetic steps to engage clients on a chosen issue through experimentation and debriefing. In the UOW process, the coach displays artful use of self, offering awareness-based

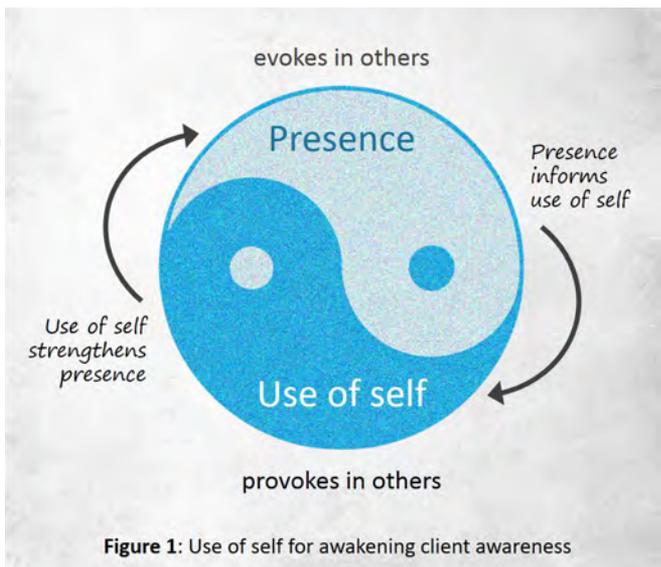
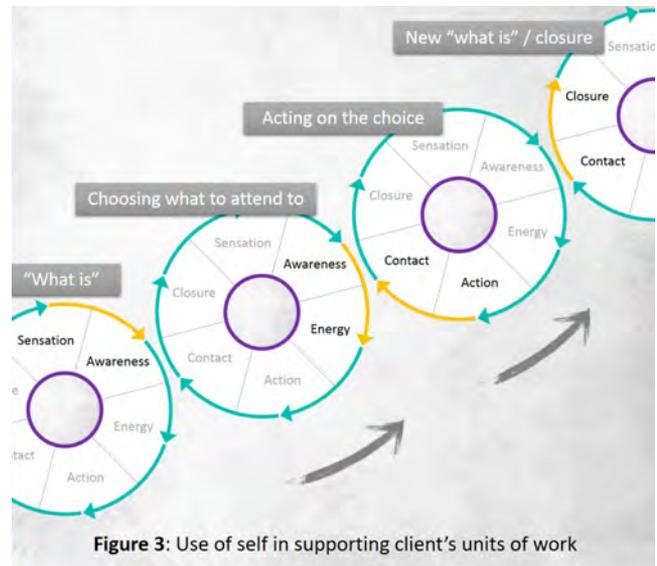
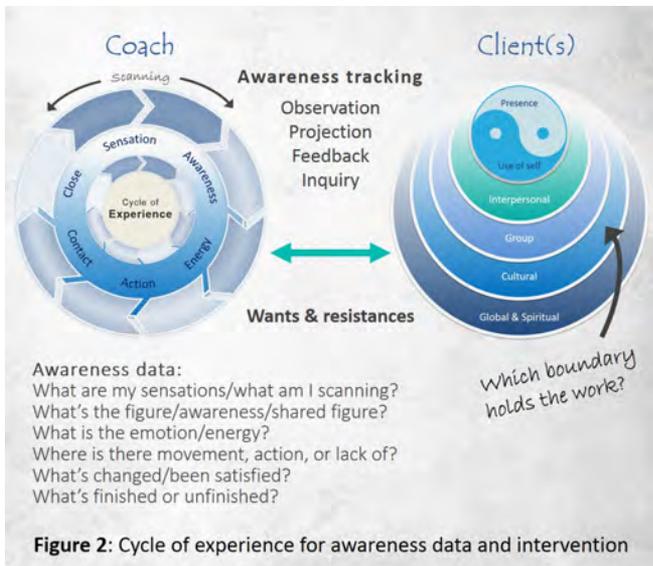


Figure 1: Use of self for awakening client awareness

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Blurring the difference between the powers of being and doing can reduce coaching competency, because presence and use of self are distinct but symbiotic aspects of coaching mastery.

experiments to deepen clients' learning as both collaboratively journey through the linked steps. The Cycle is used for awareness raising in relation to the most pertinent figural issue; the UOW is used to explore that issue for further insight and do-able learnings (*Figure 3*).

Cultivating one's presence and practicing effective use of self are self-development steps for both coaches and their clients. Such learning should be understood as vertical rather than horizontal development. Horizontal development is the cognitive content of knowledge, skills and competencies. Vertical development includes the processes of self-awareness and the ability to perceive in more complex, systemic, strategic, and interdependent ways.

Vertical development now promises more adept outcomes for 21st-century challenges. If horizontal development is about transferring information, vertical development is about the transformative power of a developed presence and an adaptive use of self.² The vital learning skill today is the capacity to respond productively in the midst of uncertainty and ambiguity. The greater the coach's capacity to model this responsiveness – by being centered in her presence and able to effectively respond through use of self – the greater her mastery in coaching others.

A resonant coaching presence promotes a vibrant space that inspires clients' trust in the work. Use of self draws upon the coach's skilled and

artful practices. Blurring the difference between the powers of being and doing can reduce coaching competency, because presence and use of self are distinct but symbiotic aspects of coaching mastery.

As a prescription for coaching excellence, coaching presence may be a more potent coaching variable than theory, tools or techniques, as these are only as effective as the coach's ability to adapt them to individual clients' needs by proficiently leveraging presence through use of self. The purpose of shaping and strengthening our presence, then, is ultimately to use that presence to influence and provoke clients to do the work that they would not, or could not, do on their own. •

FOOTNOTES

¹ For more on the Cycle, see D. E. Siminovitch & A. M. Van Eron, "The Pragmatics of Magic: The Work of Gestalt Coaching," *OD Practitioner* 38, no. 1 (2006): 50-55.

² Horizontal and vertical development are Nick Petrie's terms in "Vertical Leadership Development—Part I: Developing Leaders for a Complex World," Center for Creative Leadership 2014. Accessed May 26, 2015. <http://insights.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/VerticalLeadersPart1.pdf>.