

# **Gestalt Coaching for Awareness Management: The Elements of Mastery**

**Dorothy E. Siminovitch, PhD, MCC**

A mindfulness revolution is spreading across the world in response to the fragmentation of attention caused by rapid change and disruption. The Gestalt approach, which holds awareness as core to functional well-being and new learning, is an antidote to this fragmentation. Gestalt coaching, the latest innovative application of Gestalt theory, offers coaches and their clients ways to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity with the adaptive competencies of vision, understanding, clarity, and agility.<sup>1</sup> Gestalt coaching's theory, methods, and techniques focus on awareness processes for perceiving and responding to our world. This chapter clarifies the awareness dimensions that activate one's presence and the awareness choice points for use of self, which is the barometer of masterful coaching and leadership work.

Gestalt practice assumes that people are innately capable and competent, and have the necessary resources to manage personal and professional challenges. The pivotal requirement in Gestalt work is to facilitate clients' awareness about how they are or not satisfying their needs, wants, and goals. The power of awareness is what

---

<sup>1</sup> Bob Johansen, *Get There Early: Sensing the Future to Compete in the Present* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2007).

informs the Paradoxical Theory of Change: awareness, in itself, is a catalyst toward change and growth. As an act of intervention, heightening awareness expands clients' perceptual lenses to include more possibilities and new choices. A principal intervention is to have the client become aware of a figure of interest, the term that identifies what they are paying attention to. Figures can be clearly identifiable, or they can be obscured by too many figures or when the client is distracted by unaware resistances. Gestalt practice integrates the concept of mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally."<sup>2</sup> It encourages a cognitive and emotional understanding, exploration, and investment into the awareness process as key to adaptive change and sustained learning. The power of the Gestalt approach is made visible by being experiential: what's experienced has the immediacy and retention of inside-out learning.

For example: Ted, an executive, is confronted by an employee in distress over a recent project failure. The employee's distress calls for empathy, but Ted is unable to be supportive because of his unacknowledged belief that failure is ruinous, and he resists offering empathy. If Ted were aware of his view of failure, he could examine whether that belief still holds true for him. The ability to perceive new perspectives, new opportunities of interest, or novel solutions resides in becoming aware of and managing obsolete resistances. Rather than acting as a "self-aware" leader who has "emotional

---

<sup>2</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 4.

intelligence,” Ted, being unaware of the depths of his own fear of failure, lacked the relevant emotional skills to respond to his employee. His unawareness has broader impact: self-aware leaders are found to be adept and effective at both engaging their employees and achieving bottom-line results.<sup>3</sup>

Effective Gestalt coaching will trigger unaware resistances, requiring clients’ willingness to risk being vulnerable in the service of new learning and new skills. The coach’s presence is a critical resource supporting clients to confront their discomfort. Ted’s fear of failure suggests a benefit from coaching to understand how he has alienated his capacity to show compassion for those experiencing failure. Coaching can give him a safe place to explore his lack of empathy around this issue, and to experiment with ways he might offer more emotionally appropriate responses, both to himself and others. The Gestalt coach, using her own presence, would encourage Ted’s work by expressing her understanding of his fear of failure and demonstrating her compassion for his difficulties.

## **Presence and Use of Self**

Gestalt coaching is driven by practitioner competency in understanding and applying two core concepts: *Presence* and *Use of Self*. Presence is the embodiment and

---

<sup>3</sup> J. P. Flaum, “When It Comes to Business Leadership, Nice Guys Finish First,” Green Peak Partners, 2010. The study was conducted in association with Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations. Retrieved from [http://greenpeakpartners.com/uploads/Green-Peak\\_Cornell-University-Study\\_What-predicts-success.pdf](http://greenpeakpartners.com/uploads/Green-Peak_Cornell-University-Study_What-predicts-success.pdf). Kevin Cashman, “Return on Self-Awareness: Research Validates the Bottom Line of Leadership Development,” *Forbes* March 17, 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevincashman/2014/03/17/return-on-self-awareness-research-validates-the-bottom-line-of-leadership-development/#197a68363750>.

incubator of one's essential identity. Use of self is the intentional leveraging of one's presence to influence outcomes related to needs and goals, one's own or others'. We manifest our presence through exchange, which reveals our values, mindsets, and style or aesthetics. As coaches or leaders, we can think of presence as a *being* intervention: simply "showing up" has an evocative effect, the first indication of whether or how people will work with us. Though we may not be able to predict how our presence will affect others, we are responsible for the self-work of reflection and asking to learn what we evoke in others.

Use of self is a *doing* intervention: the purposeful actions we take with others to provoke their movement toward greater awareness and defined goals. Use of self is a practitioner competency where we consciously exercise the dimensions of our presence to provoke action toward attaining what is needed, wanted, or missing. One integrative task of developing one's presence and use of self in Gestalt coaching is attending to and being aligned with one's personal strengths, values, and intentions for influence.

Authenticity is increased by this alignment. As presence is only relationally experienced, coaches and leaders alike have to manage their Perceived Weirdness Index (PWI), which refers to our perceived degree of "difference" relative to others.<sup>4</sup> This means knowing how to strategically relate to others with enough similarity so that they

---

<sup>4</sup> Mary Ann Rainey Tolbert and Jonno Hanafin, "Use of Self in OD Consulting: What Matters Is Presence," pp. 78-79. In *The NTL Handbook of Organization Change and Development: Principles, Practices, and Perspectives*, edited by Brenda B. Jones and Michael Brazzel (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2006).

feel the comfort of familiarity, but also with enough difference so that they are interested in working with us. If our differences are greater than the value we bring to the work, the PWI may be too high to serve the coach or leader. Awareness of our PWI necessarily invites us to be more alert and adaptive, offering similarity as an interpersonal bridge and unique perspectives and skills as a differential value.

### **Presence Awareness Dimensions**

Presence has extensive expression across individuals, but can be described through a seven-dimension structure which captures the requisite variety to meet contemporary life and work challenges.<sup>5</sup> The dimensions can be developed to respond to and manage the range of awarenesses needed for coaches and leaders. These dimensions are: self-aware alignment with and embodiment of one's values; creativity; emotions and emotional range; capacity for heart-based or caring relations; communication and voice; intuition; and scanning the field for threats and opportunities.<sup>6</sup> Each dimension of presence is positively defined by what we pay attention to, and limited by unaware resistances that interfere or stop us from being aware of that dimension and acting in congruence with our values and with related dimensions. Our presence can be strengthened or weakened by intentional practices of our use of self. We can strengthen our presence through self-work in each dimension to

---

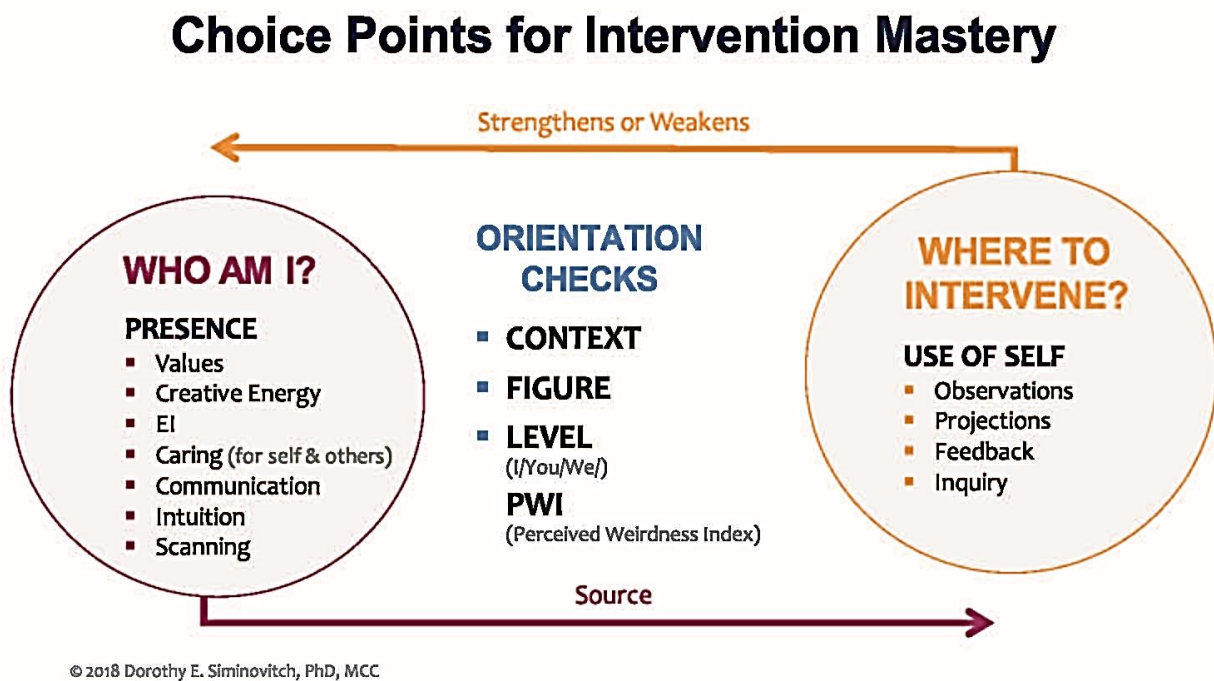
<sup>5</sup> The term "requisite variety" comes from Ross Ashby, a cyberneticist and psychiatrist. The most applicable definition for our purposes is that someone can only model or control something to the extent that she herself has sufficient internal variety to represent it. F. Heylighen and C. Joslyn, "The Law of Requisite Variety," August 31, 2001. Retrieved from <http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/REQVAR.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy E. Siminovitch, *A Gestalt Primer: The Path Toward Awareness IQ* (2017), pp. 110-125.

guide our use of self skills. We can assess our use of self skills by inviting feedback about our interventions, observations about our interventions, projections about how people are experiencing our actions, and inquiry regarding our impact. (Figure 1.1)

Inviting this kind of information is a commitment towards mastery.

**Figure 1.1 Awareness Dimensions and Choice Points**



### Dimension 1: Self-Aware Alignment with Embodied Values

Understanding and knowing yourself means knowing your values and beliefs, and knowing when you've been derailed from your core identity. Your values, and the clarity and consistency with which you communicate those, somatically or verbally, are seen by others as signaling trustworthiness. A 2016 Harvard Business School survey of leadership learning and development programs reveals that "demonstrating integrity"

is the top-ranked leadership capability.<sup>7</sup> The demonstration of one’s values through consistent language and behavior is perceived by others as authentic and inspiring. When volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity arise, we are supported by our aware values and goals, and we learn how to return to our core identity when we’re thrown off course. Self-awareness entails tracking your sensations, thoughts, emotions, resistances, and mindsets to keep them aligned with your identity during disruption. Gestalt coaches understand how to track values, how to identify resistances that derail clients, and how to offer practices to manage them. (Figure 1.2)

**Figure 1.2 Self-Aware Alignment with Embodied Values**

| VALUE  | UNAWARE RESISTANCES  | SUGGESTED PRACTICES   |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Sense of purpose</li> <li>» Energy for taking action</li> <li>» Inspiring trust and commitment</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Need to feel unique</li> <li>» Outdated “shoulds”</li> <li>» Fear of identity challenges</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Be transparent – share your vision, values, and goals</li> <li>» Ask for feedback – invite connection</li> </ul> |

**Dimension 2: Creativity**

Creativity calls upon the desire for novelty and opens opportunities to discover new possibilities. Creativity includes being open to using the knowledge and expertise of others as well as gathering ideas from diverse sources. The way we support, demonstrate, and communicate creativity affects how others perceive and receive innovative ideas and different ways of doing things. (Figure 1.3)

---

<sup>7</sup> Harvard Business School Corporate Learning, “The State of Leadership Development,” 2016. Retrieved from [https://www.harvardbusiness.org/sites/default/files/19770\\_CL\\_StateOfLeadership\\_Report\\_July2016.pdf](https://www.harvardbusiness.org/sites/default/files/19770_CL_StateOfLeadership_Report_July2016.pdf). “Demonstrating Integrity” was closely followed by: managing complexity, inspiring engagement, and acting strategically.

**Figure 1.3 Creativity**

| VALUE   | UNAWARE RESISTANCES  | SUGGESTED PRACTICES  |
|---|--|--|
| » Outwitting obsolescence<br>» Gaining a broad range of diverse ideas for innovative solutions<br>» Energizing others' engagement with challenges | » Fear of failure<br>» Shame of being "mediocre"<br>» Losing managerial control of the process | » Reflecting on failure for learning and growth<br>» Inviting early failure<br>» Inviting feedback |

**Dimension 3: Emotions and Emotional Range**

Emotional Intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions, while also being able to recognize, understand, and influence the emotions of others. EI means being aware of your current emotional state and the emotional triggers that might derail you. When you can name your emotions, make meaning from what you're feeling, and exercise emotional self-regulation, you have the essential relational skills which strengthen presence and use of self. Self-reflection and feedback help us understand whether our emotions are supporting or limiting us. Emotions are a "gut" gauge for what really matters. Important matters typically arouse excitement or anxiety. If no emotional energy is present, the idea or activity may not have enough interest to merit investment. If strong emotions are present but disregarded, you may later have to manage the unfinished business of regret or dissatisfaction. (Figure 1.4)



**Figure 1.4 Emotions and Emotional Range**

| VALUE   | UNAWARE RESISTANCES  | SUGGESTED PRACTICES  |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Knowing what matters to you and to others</li> <li>» Emotional dexterity in responding to others</li> <li>» Being able to regulate the emotions involved, and thereby create safety and trust</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Distrusting the value of emotions</li> <li>» Perceiving emotions as disturbances rather than information</li> <li>» Seeing emotional vulnerability as a sign of weakness</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Develop a habit of naming strong emotions and pausing before reacting. With practice, greater choice becomes available.</li> <li>» Mindful breathing is helpful: Inhale for 4 seconds, exhale for 5 seconds. After 5 such breaths, a relaxation response is stimulated. With practice, you'll feel a shift to calm awareness after just a few such deep breaths.</li> </ul> |

**Dimension 4: Heart-Based or Caring Relations**

The capacity to care about others is an essential human attribute. Leaders who convey a sense of caring about the well-being of their employees and colleagues establish resonance: “a powerful, positive emotional reality . . . that is marked by hope, enthusiasm and the collective will to win. A resonant climate makes people feel good: committed, willing to work hard, and passionate about results.”<sup>8</sup> Heart-based relationships call for the vulnerability of intimacy, the capacity to forgive and move forward, and the willingness to form relationships without strategic agendas. Leaders

---

<sup>8</sup> Annie McKee and Abhijit Bhaduri, “Resonant Leadership for Results,” Teleos Leaders June 3, 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.teleosleaders.com/2013/06/03/resonant-leadership-for-results/>.

must learn to be mindful and caring about their own well-being while also caring about and connecting with others. (Figure 1.5)

**Figure 1.5 Heart-Based Relations**

| VALUE   | UNAWARE RESISTANCES   | SUGGESTED PRACTICES  |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Engaging with self and others in ways that motivate and inspire</li> <li>» Strengthening cross-organizational relationships</li> <li>» Energizing optimism and hope</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Being rejected</li> <li>» Being taken advantage of</li> <li>» Losing positional control</li> <li>» Identity diffusion or confusion (losing personal boundaries)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Give positive affirmations, to self and others, and show appreciation frequently</li> <li>» Establish relationships across departmental and division boundaries that are non-strategic</li> </ul> |

**Dimension 5: Communication and Voice**

Communication is a purposeful activity to express and share an idea, information, or collective vision. The exchange intends to inform, motivate, or inspire. Accuracy and transparency are figural attributes of trusted communication. If a message has changed due to unexpected issues, people need to be informed, especially if what has changed contradicts what was previously communicated. In professional venues, we may need to change our minds based on new information, but we must be able and willing to explain why the change was necessary. (Figure 1.6)

**Figure 1.6 Communication and Voice**

| VALUE   | UNAWARE RESISTANCES   | SUGGESTED PRACTICES   |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Increased trust, engagement, and commitment</li> <li>» Providing common ground for crucial decision-making processes</li> <li>» Encouraging participatory, creative problem-solving</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Fear of being seen as incompetent</li> <li>» Loss of control</li> <li>» Loss of being the one to turn to for information and guidance</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Inquire: <i>Ask</i> people what they want or need to know</li> <li>» Ask for feedback about how your communications are working or not working to achieve your intent</li> <li>» Incorporate the Speech Acts: Declarations, Assessments, Assertions, Promises, and Requests<sup>9</sup></li> </ul> |

**Dimension 6: Intuition**

Intuition’s ancient attraction has resurfaced in today’s leadership literature as a valued resource, especially in conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity when data is scarce or unavailable but a quick response is needed. An intuitive answer seems to come effortlessly, in a flash, but studies suggest it’s a recognition of patterns discerned from accumulated experiential and cognitive knowledge. Given the right confluence of circumstances and awareness practices, intuition offers valid solutions in moments of uncertainty. However, it’s important to differentiate intuition from an unaware agenda, e.g., an emotional reaction tied to some past event or personal issue. (Figure 1.7)

---

<sup>9</sup> Chalmers Brothers, *Language and the Pursuit of Happiness: A New Foundation for Designing Your Life, Your Relationships, and Your Results* (Naples, FL: New Possibilities Press, 2005), p. 154.

**Figure 1.7 Intuition**

| VALUE  | UNAWARE RESISTANCES   | SUGGESTED PRACTICES   |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» A strong resource when accurately tracked and verified</li> <li>» Gives us initial “heart” and “gut” conceptions of a person or situation that can be useful in guiding our interactions</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Being thought of as weird</li> <li>» Being socially isolated</li> <li>» Being wrong</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Allow for self-reflection time and/or short meditations that make intuition more available</li> <li>» Share your intuitions with trusted others and ask for feedback</li> <li>» Manage your Perceived Weirdness Index (PWI)</li> </ul> |

**Dimension 7: Scanning the Field for Threats and Opportunities**

Scanning means watching for what’s emerging on the horizon of possibility as an opportunity or threat. To be effective, credible, and inspiring, leaders have to see the “big picture,” and to take some risks in naming what they see emerging. When they spot an opportunity or threat, they put their own values on the line to advocate an action or policy that they believe aligns with the organization’s mission and the employees’ collective values in order to build mutual advantage in their immediate and extended business communities. (Figure 1.8)

**Figure 1.8 Scanning the Field**

| VALUE   | UNAWARE RESISTANCES  | SUGGESTED PRACTICES   |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Differentiating between a threat and an opportunity</li> <li>» Recognizing an opportunity in what appears to be a threat</li> <li>» Recognizing the implicit threat in an opportunity</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Being in a state of uncertainty or ambiguity</li> <li>» Not having the data that offers control of the situation</li> <li>» Being wrong or incompetent</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Ask for input and engage in discussion with your teams and peers</li> <li>» Attend major professional conferences and engage in thought activities that give you up-to-date information and insights about your field</li> </ul> |

**Orientation Checks and Process Tools for Intervention Mastery**

The seven outlined dimensions of presence awareness are inner resources for coaches and leaders to access. The orientation checks are what activate the interplay between the dimensions of presence and use of self (see Figure 1.1). Context (e.g., purpose, environment or setting, people involved) is critical to determine what is expected or outside the norms, and is a broader expression of PWI management. The Gestalt coach seeks the figure, like Ted’s fear of failure, which has the most interest or energy for the client. Awareness of the figure is needed before we can offer our observations, aware projections, feedback, and inquiry. Then, after identifying the figure, it is important to determine which level of system (LOS) holds the work— individual, interpersonal, or group. The Cycle of Experience (COE) is a tool to

determine both the figure and the boundary of the work to manage and prevent incorrect LOS awareness, allowing focus on the appropriate intervention process.

### **Process Tools**

Gestalt coaching gives leaders experiential opportunities to explore how they “show up” to others and to experiment with how to use themselves effectively. It is the Cycle of Experience with the Unit of Work (UOW) that are process tools that aid the coach’s shaping of these opportunities.<sup>10</sup> The COE is a tool to track awareness moments and the habitual patterns that serve or interfere with goal attainment. Using the COE with our executive Ted allowed him to become aware of his sensations of discomfort and shame around offering sympathy in relation to failure. The coach can use the COE to offer observations, make projections, and give data-based feedback. The COE made figural to Ted that he managed his discomfort and shame by avoiding situations that were in fact opportunities to offer compassion and support around failure.

The UOW is a process structure designed to explore an important issue revealed by the COE that’s of interest to the client. UOW invitations reveal the Gestalt coach’s mastery through their use of self to support the client’s awareness and action around what is needed, wanted, or missing. Ted, who couldn’t offer compassion to his distressed employee, failed a critical leadership opportunity to engage his employee in a heart-based interaction rooted in emotional intelligence. If the coach perceives Ted to

---

<sup>10</sup> The COE and the UOW are discussed in detail in *A Gestalt Coaching Primer: The Path Toward Awareness IQ* (2017): Chapter 3 (pp. 55-80) and Chapter 6 (143-166), respectively.

be poorly aligned with his value around supporting his employees, he could be offered experimental situations in which to better identify, articulate, and inhabit his core values. Ted's emotional resistance to expressing compassion might involve a breathing exercise or a dream experiment to bring him into closer contact with his emotions. If Ted expresses being "stuck" around the issue of failure, the coach could design experiments involving emotional expression and other creative modalities. If Ted is anxious about the uncertainties of failure, he could be invited to remember and reflect on past experiences when his intuitive or emotional understanding supported his ability to move forward. If Ted feels misunderstood by his employees, the coach can work to clarify how his body language and vocabulary contribute to his "message." The Gestalt coach can collaboratively design experiments where Ted can safely explore his fear of failure with self-compassion, as well as experiment with small steps by which he could build his ability to express empathy. The learning for Ted would be to reassess how the practice of giving emotional support could make him a stronger leader. Ted's case illustrates how Gestalt coaches highlight and use awareness opportunities so that clients can experientially grasp how their unaware and/or outdated beliefs are limiting their leadership.

The COE and UOW process tools offer Gestalt coaches opportunities to work with client awareness and strategically offer observations, aware projections, data-based feedback, and transformative inquiry. These interventions stimulate unexpected

discoveries and alternative choices that open pathways to new behaviors, outcomes that illustrate the liberating quality of Gestalt coaching and Gestalt practice, for coaches and particularly for clients. Learning and growth are influenced by the degree of self-awareness and the use of one's awareness. If a situation calls for the leader to affirm and stand for their values, can they? If a situation calls for creativity, can the leader invite the conditions for sharing new ideas? If there is emotional intensity, can the leader compassionately acknowledge but still manage the emotions? If an employee appears stressed and care is called for, can the leader offer the needed empathy? If important information or ideas need to be shared, can the leader communicate these at the right time in the right ways? If an issue is unclear and data unavailable, can the leader call upon intuition to offer an inspiring insight or solution? If the future seems threatening, can the leader point to emerging possibilities that offer opportunity?

### **Why Gestalt, Why Now**

Leaders are under increasing pressure to deliver exceptional outcomes, in employee engagement and retention and in bottom-line results. Gestalt coaching is the leadership coaching approach which most effectively addresses and cultivates the qualities defined in today's leadership literature as being most desired: leaders' ability to identify, enhance, and activate their personal values, particular strengths, and multiple resources to support their employees and benefit the organization's mission



and goals. Frederick Buechner suggests that what you feel “right” in doing is perhaps what everyone needs you to be doing, right now.<sup>11</sup>

In this fast-paced world, existing knowledge may not keep pace with emergent disruptions. Mindful multi-dimensional awareness can be accessed to support perceptions of new possibilities and choices. Responding to challenges by being self-aware and using one’s self strategically is a sign of mastery that inspires both coaches and their leadership clients. Gestalt awareness practices empower us to develop dimensions of our presence in alignment with our core values and to use ourselves with the intention to respond to and influence others adaptively. Being self-aware, using orientation checks and process tools to identify obstructive patterns and figures of interest, and to then use our awareness to act in the world with clarity and purpose is the mastery now called for. The skills and techniques of awareness management seem invisible until masterful practice reveals them to be vital competencies. Gestalt coaching shows how these core awareness skills and techniques can be taught, practiced, and made visibly powerful. For Gestalt coaches and for their leadership clients, self-awareness and strategic use of self are experienced as illumination and transformation.

If our presence strongly embodies our values and best intentions, our presence alone may be enough to make a difference: people may feel calmed or supported or

---

<sup>11</sup> Ryan Pemberton, “Frederick Buechner on Calling: Your Deep Gladness and the World's Deep Hunger,” *Called: My Journey to C. S. Lewis’s House and Back Again* December 22, 2014. Buechner’s exact quote is: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Retrieved from <http://www.calledthejourney.com/blog/2014/12/17/frederick-buechner-on-calling>.

inspired just by being in our presence. Whether in coaching or in the workplace, though, we need to use strategic use of self practices to accomplish specific goals. Gestalt coaching interventions are organic, relevant, resonant, and uniquely suited to give today's leaders the support and practices for the vision, understanding, clarity, and agility necessary today. Coaches and leaders need to respond from a self-aware, embodied presence and with a masterful use of self to spur change, optimism, and opportunity.

Published in *Gestalt Practice: Living and Working in Pursuit of wHolism*, edited by Mary Ann Rainey and Brenda B. Jones. Oxfordshire, UK: Libri Publishing, 2019.