CHAPTER 2

Awareness and Change

*From a Gestalt perspective, the three most important elements in the work are awareness, awareness, and awareness.*

—Jonno Hanafin

*Change the way you look at things, and the things you look at will change.*

—Wayne Dyer

Clients seek coaching in order to achieve change, whether externally demanded or self-motivated or both. Their reasons and sense of urgency vary, but the fundamental aim is to better themselves, professionally or personally. Despite talent and focused ambition, these clients are unable to clearly understand or evaluate what frustrates their ability to realize their change goals since habitual processes operate to reduce their awareness. Habitual processes, those habits we constantly do, work to maintain the status quo as well as personal efficiency, but over time, when habitual process becomes fully unaware, blind spots are created in our awareness. Change, even desired change, then becomes difficult to intentionally
affect or effect, and clients sometimes experience strong resistance or what has been called "a kind of personal immunity to change."

In mobilizing the needed energy to make big or even small changes in the world—to right a wrong, to alter social priorities, to reallocate available resources—one has to catch others' attention by offering new data or by bringing ignored conditions into view. In the 1960s, these tactics were called "raising consciousness"; today, the preferred phrase is "raising awareness." This shift to awareness is the first step in learning and change. Our awareness is the essential material for choice and responsibility. Whether we're talking about changing the world, changing our organization, or changing ourselves, the objective of raising awareness is to make what was background and unaware, or even invisible, now visible and figural, and to therefore make it available for choice and action. This seems obvious, but the impact that awareness generates ranges from heightened interest to radical surprise. This impact is the essential message of the mantra küçük ama büyük—"small but big"—that I so love to use. A small piece of revealed awareness at the right moment is what ignites the most energy for new possibilities.

Gestalt coaching is differentiated from other coaching approaches by a perspective that emphasizes awareness as both the path and the method. Where Organizational Development practices made "change agent" the stance for OD practitioners, Gestalt coaches take their stance as awareness agents, a role that calls upon them to catalyze clients' self-awareness as the key asset for current and future goal attainment. Most clients want to know "what to do" about some situation they may define as dysfunctional or threatening. But for the Gestalt coach, the first questions are: "What are you aware of in your world? What are you seeing or maybe not seeing? What is getting your attention as you answer this?" The intent of working to encourage clients' awareness is for them to become aware of their aware and unaware processes.

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The role of habits is to provide efficiency, and, by practice, those habits support one's identity. The issue of unaware process is that, often, not paying attention to certain things serves our habits and can be understood as an evolutionary skill. Self-deception can be understood to serve an evolutionary function as it helps hide the truth from ourselves, though it also makes it easier to lie to others: "Self-deception is any mental process or behaviour the function of which is to conceal information from one's conscious mind." So pervasive is the need to maintain one's identity that people perceive their world through the filters of previous experience rather than present-moment awareness. This filtering acts as a "premature cognitive commitment," where commitment embeds beliefs that can block the unfolding of an awareness process.

Gestalt coaches do not position themselves as experts whose job is to diagnose or to fix client problems. Rather, they believe that the ability to heighten clients' self-awareness is what gives the client more choices—it is then up to the client to act on what is brought into awareness. The coach supports clients' awareness processes with a stance of compassionate curiosity and dialogical inquiry, offering select invitations to clients about processes that may not be in their field of awareness. This prompts clients to be intimately engaged in "learning from within," which grounds and nurtures authentic change.

All Gestalt approaches are distinctive in requiring a collaborative relationship with the client. But Gestalt coaching heightens that collaboration into a pivotal creative partnership as the foundational condition of successful coaching work. Gestalt coaches are interested, in collaboration, in supporting the client in appreciatively discovering how he may be obstructing his goals. The consequential work is to identify perceptual and behavioral patterns that may no longer serve the client but which continue to have influence without his full awareness and to effectively bring these patterns into his
awareness. Looking intentionally at something, including one’s patterns of functional self-deception, pushes us beyond habitual ways of seeing, and often beyond our comfort zones. In unearthing these unaware patterns, coach and client together explore the cost of such patterns and what other choices exist to attain the client’s designated goals. This is why a stance of compassionate inquiry on the part of the coach is so critical. Encouraging clients to become aware of what they have been unaware of can be liberating, but can also evoke a sense of shame about outdated beliefs or values or allegiance to knowledge that has been disproved. There have been times I have shared this memorable quote: “The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable.”

The power of clients experiencing new possibilities is what happens when new perspectives are perceived. But for that to occur, the process of reflective awareness needs to occur, and that has surprising challenges. As Schopenhauer said, “Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world.” That statement could be a pithy definition of the concept of the umwelt (literally, our “surrounding world,” the milieu we live and work in). Umwelt is a term coined by the early 20th-century biologist Jakob von Uexküll to describe the “micro-realities” that organisms of any given ecosystem inhabit. In Uexküll’s conception, multiple organisms may live in the very same environmental conditions, but each will perceive and experience the physical reality of that environment differently based on what it is capable of detecting, and each will respond and act accordingly. As the Zen enlightenment tale says, the fish cannot tell you about “the water”: the fish isn’t aware that it’s in water or that the water is what holds its being. Our inward umwelt, where our emotional and psychological processing happens, encompasses a great deal of undetected phenomena. To appreciate the concept of umwelt is to “appreciate the amount
that goes undetected in our lives” and to be reminded that our awareness is limited by our umwelt.

We usually remain unaware of our umwelt until we encounter someone else’s contradictory or surprising perspective. For example, when I am facilitating group meetings, it is always illuminating to ask people to name what others have noticed that surprised them. Their revelations always reveal a range of small to significant surprises when participants become aware of the perspectives of others. The power of Gestalt coaching lies in noting and offering such unexpected perspectives that help clients see the limits imposed by their umwelt, as well as finding ways to guide clients toward greater awareness in relation to their unaware, habituated ways of looking at their world and processing their experiences. The Gestalt coach does this knowing that heightened awareness is the catalyst for change. Bringing unaware perceptual or behavioral patterns into the orbit of the client’s awareness commonly shifts the client’s horizon of opportunity: it’s what releases new awareness and new choices.

Maybe we have never been exposed to alternative methods of recognizing certain data, or maybe we are unwilling to acknowledge certain cues that seem obvious to others. But the range of what people might miss is only relevant if what they miss is important in relation to their needs, wants, and goals. Clients who feel professionally passed over and alienated, for example, may be unaware of the negative impact of their behavior on others, whether it’s bad manners, inappropriate remarks, or questionable ethics; that impact can impede their career advancement. So the Gestalt coach works to discern what the client doesn’t, can’t, or won’t see. This is where the coach’s curiosity, intuition, and boldness develop into artful practice. The Gestalt coach invites clients to work with unaware elements and to raise such awareness intentionally and collaboratively in order to support the clients’
own needs, wants, and goals. Again, we cannot stress how critical it is for the coach to maintain a compassionate stance in the awareness heightening process.

Gestalt coaches repeatedly note how surprised clients are when they are made aware of perception and response patterns so deeply ingrained as to be “invisible” to them. This surprise indicates that awareness work is not only difficult, but also somewhat risky. Gestalt coaches train and practice to “develop exceptionally acute powers of observation and articulation” but must also accept responsibility and accountability for their part of the coaching work. Gestalt coaches are tasked with sharing their observations selectively and non-judgmentally (separating “data from interpretation”) because new awareness can sometimes be unsettling, even threatening, to clients’ self-perception. Awareness in itself has power, and the profound ethical commitment of the Gestalt coach is to maintain an inquiring stance toward awareness, and to use awareness in ways that best serve the client. There is both a skill and an art in sharing one’s observations, as it demonstrates intentional use of one’s presence (further explained in Chapter 5).

When I was a young practitioner, I worked with an executive client in a professional development workshop. Though he presented as amiable and self-confident, he had gotten feedback about being aloof and hard to approach. He was annoyed and confused by this feedback but interested in learning how other people saw him. His interest invited me to observe him attentively—his vocal qualities, speech patterns, physical posture and gestures, and so on. Each time I shared my observations, he would respond with what appeared to be a slight shock of dismayed recognition and say, “You saw that?” With each such confirmation, I felt the value of what was being uncovered for him. In my effort to serve him, I offered him more feedback. While my observations were given with good intent, I didn’t then, almost thirty years ago, understand the impact they were having on him. An.

Looking back, we having “safe emergencies,” with unsettling observational accountability to the client when the interventions off down the intervention to: The idea of safe emergence interesting but not so that finds himself tipping into this reflects the value that it is the responsibility of collaboratively managing.

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were having on him. And because I didn’t yet fully appreciate the power of my observations, I could not then “own” their power.

Looking back, we had no agreed-upon coaching contract regarding “safe emergencies,” which would have assisted us to work directly with unsettling observations in more supportive ways. The safe emergency concept of Gestalt practice works to give more collaborative accountability to the client-coach dyad by inviting the client to say when the interventions offered feel too risky. The coach can then scale down the intervention to something more digestible for the client. The idea of safe emergency is to keep the work risky enough to be interesting but not so threatening or anxiety-provoking that the client finds himself tipping into his perceived states of emergency. Again, this reflects the value that there is no learning without emotion. But it is the responsibility of the coach to be vigilant in her awareness in collaboratively managing this useful tension with the client.

After that workshop, I never heard from the client again. Today, I speculate—from a place of compassion for both of us—that my well-intentioned observations provoked in my client what in the neuroscience fields is known as an “amygdala hijack”: With each observation, my client felt increasingly exposed in ways neither he nor I could anticipate. I realize now I was seeing things he was not consciously aware of but that rang true for him. Every startle-response was an opportunity to explore that further; his emotion was a valuable entry point for deepening the work. But we hadn’t established an up-front coaching contract around this kind of discomfort. Since he probably experienced the feedback as threatening, in hindsight, I could have scaled down the interventions to assist him in becoming aware of what was so surprising. In the years since, particularly when giving supervision to other coaches, I have learned to offer this wisdom: Those moments that take the client by surprise are the moments to slow down and create more safety for doing the deep work that’s needed but may feel uncomfortable to the client.
My example is the kind of learning failure that can serve to teach Gestalt coaches how to be more aware, responsible, and accountable about how to deliver observations to clients. With the guidance of today’s Gestalt coaching process tools and coaching agreement concept, this executive client would have been invited to receive an observation, share how this observation affected him, and if the observation was too surprising, client and coach would collaboratively negotiate how to proceed further. With today’s clearer understanding of how deeply embedded habitual processes are, the corresponding skill when offering observations as learning feedback is to invite and support clients’ interest and willingness to explore new possibilities. In keeping with the Gestalt belief that clients are innately capable, the Gestalt coach can trust that clients are just as smart as or smarter than their coaches, and will not allow themselves to be in a vulnerable space if they see that the coach is too ambitious or moving faster than they can tolerate. The failure in this instance is a strong reminder that Gestalt coaching is challenging and calls for skill and art in delivering perspectives and awarenesses that clients may wish to know but need the container of the safe emergency to manage the discomfort that most probably will be triggered.

Gestalt’s Distinctive Theory of Change: From Change Agent to Awareness Agent

Arnold Beisser articulated what was only suggested in Fritz Perls’s work (Perls is considered the founder of Gestalt psychotherapy), and thereby gifted Gestalt practitioners with an innovative and seminal change theory, which Beisser called the paradoxical theory of change (PTC):

[Change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not. Change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person invested in change and orderly superficial change or good intentions are far but I keep doing it a popularized truth ignited from within—character, and cannot be done by another.]

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n Fritz Perls’s ychotherapy), novative and toxical theory e is, not when does not take dividedal or by another person to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what he is—to be fully invested in his current positions. By rejecting the role of change agent, [Gestalt practitioners] make meaningful and orderly change possible.\textsuperscript{11}

In determining how change occurs, Beisser described the process of becoming aware of and consciously acknowledging parts of ourselves that have been disowned or alienated. This is a transformative awareness process and a profound act of self-acceptance, which paradoxically ignites change. Demanding or coercing change will not result in sustainable change and will most likely lead to superficial change or a quick relapse. Client complaints about their good intentions are familiar: “I tell myself not to be or act this way, but I keep doing it anyway.” Leadership coach Kevin Cashman popularized a truth embedded in the PTC: Authentic change is ignited from within—it emerges as an integrative function of our character, and cannot be forced or legislated externally, either by oneself or by another.\textsuperscript{12}

The PTC reorients the “expertise-driven” change agent approach to an awareness agent approach. The change agent model sets up the practitioner as a proactive expert who has all the necessary knowledge, tools, and techniques to determine the right answers to solve any personal or professional issue. Thus the change agent’s role is to tell the client what’s “wrong” and what she needs to do to fix the problem. Recent developments in neuroscience and collaborative learning research are demonstrating that this paradigm negates clients’ full engagement and self-awareness, which genuine and sustainable change requires. The PTC compels us to appreciate that instead of being change agents, Gestalt coaches are awareness agents.

A common coaching issue that illustrates how alienated parts become the client’s umwelt is when his perceptions or behavior,
which are disowned, negatively influence others. For example, a client comes seeking better work relations with staff but has received feedback from them that he is combative, controlling, and authoritarian. The client is upset by this feedback and denies its veracity. Yet the consistency of the feedback indicates this client is unaware of, ignoring, or rejecting habitual behavioral patterns that affect and are obvious to others. This alienation of some integral part of his behavioral identity may be the obstruction of his ability to achieve his desired goal of being a better leader. These behavioral patterns need to be brought into his awareness, and their role in his leadership persona needs to be explored. As these behaviors are brought into awareness, the questions for this client become: “Do I still want or need to choose this response? What are my other options?”

Awareness is at the heart of Gestalt theory, concepts, and methodology. “Awareness is like the sun,” Thich Nhat Hanh tells us. “When it shines on things, they are transformed.” As an awareness agent, the Gestalt coach works from these grounded principles of the PTC:

- People naturally strive to be whole and integrated, and have the innate capacity to be so.
- Change cannot be manufactured through predetermined or cognitively plotted behavioral modifications, and therefore the Gestalt practitioner rejects the role of being a “change agent.”
- The Gestalt practitioner is herself an active and mutual participant in the work.
- The work is here-and-now, process-oriented, experiential, and experimental. The data of emotions, perceptions, and responses are more vivid in the moment, which is where the power to choose a new way of responding resides.
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- An adaptive capability to adjust to changing environments is the goal of the work.
- The Gestalt change theory is applicable to larger social systems and promises “orderly change . . . in the direction of integration and holism.” This is why working at the individual level with leaders can have such an important impact at the larger macro system.

Paying Attention to the What-Is, Right Now

“Know thyself,” an insight from ancient Greece, is a piece of perennial wisdom that promotes self-inquiry. This adage implies more than self-absorption, as it has become a core focus in the field of emotional intelligence and, in the 21st-century, approaches to leadership development. Contemporary leadership “demands . . . self-awareness, awareness of others and organizational awareness . . . . Furthermore, [effective leaders] are able to identify [and correct for] unhelpful defenses or reactions in themselves—perhaps a fear of failure, perhaps a fear of conflict and a desire to appease.” In knowing oneself, an important self-inquiry question is “who am I?” The answer reveals a person’s operating narrative and personal values. When people can answer that question in such a way that the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of self are aligned, trust for oneself and trust from others increases.

However, Beisser observes that clients are often immobilized by a perceptual distortion: they get stuck between who they think they should be and who they think they are without fully understanding or accepting either one. These conflicting concepts of self block clients from inhabiting either conception with any sense of security or integrity. There has to be a “home base of self” from which to step out with confidence and optimism into a new self-conception, but confidence and optimism have to be experienced
as emerging organically, from within, which the client recognizes and experiences as real phenomena.

The PTC reminds us that what was initially ignored or blocked from our awareness for good reasons can, over time, become habituated and limits how we pay attention to and what we can see in our changing environments. These self-limits are what sabotage intentional change until the client becomes aware of, and thus choiceful about, who she is and who she could be. The skill and art of Gestalt coaching lies in the coach’s ability to identify and heighten the client’s awareness about what she is unable to detect for herself. This is the core intervention that yields extraordinary outcomes. The PTC reveals the power of awareness to ignite change.

**Experiential Learning: The Importance of Process**

The VUCA world has changed the learning landscape, and now “experiential learning is the pedagogy of choice” because current, never-before-seen situations require applying awareness into action. Experiential learning involves “a whole contextual set of lessons that you have to learn almost at the muscle memory level to make them real.” The Gestalt coach keeps clients focused on whatever emerges in the moment, because however hidden or obscured, these are the experiential data that connect to both short- and long-term challenges. The Gestalt coach recognizes that using what occurs in the moment, experientially and existentially, allows coach and client to explore and experiment with new possibilities.

Working with the PTC is a “radical challenge” that requires discipline on the coach’s part, and courage and commitment from both coach and client, because “[a]wareness and contact with self is anxiety-provoking, for each time people allow themselves to know themselves and grow through awareness and contact, they destroy part of their old habits, identity or self-image . . . .”

Bluntly put: To enable a new possibility requires the death of an old way of being. EStepping out of and uncertain can work of self-awareness, genuine, sustained, of failure. But fail embracing with awareness, previously alienated

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Introduction

What Matters: The Energetic Heart
of Gestalt Coaching

In our data-overloaded world, we have trouble identifying and paying
attention to what really matters. This challenge is a big invitation
to the global hunger for mindful practices linked to well-being,
improvements in decision-making and productivity, teamwork, and
even peace-making initiatives. Rapid technological, social, economic,
and political challenges are all demanding attention and understanding,
and there is a growing trend of inability to pay attention or even
attention fatigue. In a 2012 Wall Street Journal article, Holly Finn
remarked on today’s pervasive cultural phenomenon of inattention:

Today’s signature move is the head swivel. It is the age of
look-then-look-away. Our average attention span halved
in a decade, from twelve to five minutes, according to
a study commissioned by Lloyds TSB Insurance. (And
that was in 2008.) We miss almost everything . . . . What
makes a person stand out now is the ability to look and
keep looking.18

In response to a VUCA-driven world, programs devoted to the
education and development of leaders now have a diminished focus
on functional competencies, instead demanding an increased focus

old way of being. Even if that new identity or self-image is desired,
stepping out from the known and predictable into the unknown
and uncertain can be daunting. Nevertheless, this is the essential
work of self-awareness, which is never without risk of discomfort.
Genuine, sustainable learning forces us to embrace the possibility
of failure. But failure in itself is a profound learning experience: if
embraced with awareness, we can learn something that had been
previously alienated but, with awareness, will allow for new learning.
on “learning agility, self-awareness, comfort with ambiguity” and on “more complex thinking abilities and mindsets.”  

Incorporating Nick Petrie’s dichotomy between the horizontal knowledge axis and the vertical axis of transformation, the realm of awareness as vertical development increases what we are aware of, or what we can pay attention to, and therefore what we can influence and integrate and transform. The importance of the vertical axis to leader development is that it clearly identifies awareness as the distinguishing variable that supports the application of knowledge to produce change. Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer make a connecting link when they suggest that to meet the complex challenges of our times, we need a shift in consciousness from an ego-system to an eco-system awareness. Where today’s economy is a set of globally interconnected eco-systems, where elements interact in the social, intellectual, spiritual, and ecological spheres, they lament that the consciousness of the players within is fragmented into a set of ego-systems. Instead of having macro-system awareness, the “gap between ego-system reality and eco-system consciousness may be the most important leadership challenge in business, in government and in civil society.” Despite the importance of consciousness and awareness for development, it is only in the last 20 years that awareness has become a mainstream variable in the learning agenda toward emotional and social intelligence. Awareness is now being recognized as critical to breaking through the blind spot of staying with the patterns of the past and instead connecting to the emerging future. Scharmer and Kaufer are inviting a global discourse by breaking the habituations of past patterns through learning to pay attention to emerging future opportunities that only in the moment of awareness can be discerned. We see Gestalt practice as having the awareness-related training tools to support and guide this activity, especially in executive coaching, which focuses on supporting the awareness competencies leaders need in these tumultuous times of rapid change.

More than 20 years ago, Ron Barbaro, President & CEO of Prudential, came to my attention as a ground-breaking work in the field of awareness. He was volunteering in an HIV/AIDS hospital with patients who were dying of AIDS. His response was to work with these patients to improve their quality of life. When he engineered an exoskeleton for patients to move around, he was working with a “living being.”

In his words, Barbaro was approached by a pet shop owner who wished he could help. If Prudential, his response was: “We have more examples of innovation.” He was aware of the challenges and the need for new ideas. While he would downplay his role in these developments, the story behind each interview, he displayed good in the world could be his strength.” The same could be said for Prudential, but at the time, his awareness and his strategy of innovation and adaptation that allowed his company to succeed. Barbaro took a cue from the fixed insurance industry changes. Barbaro listened to what was needed at the time, and so established social or organizational change.
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More than 20 years ago, I had the privilege of interviewing
Ron Barbaro, President and CEO of the Prudential Insurance
Company of America, Canadian Operations (1985–1990), then
came to my attention as an example of generative leadership for his
ground-breaking work in altering the insurance benefits for those
patients who were dying of AIDS. The idea for offering some value
to these patients came after he was approached by AIDS patients
while he was volunteering at Casey House, a Toronto specialty
HIV/AIDS hospital with community programs. An industry shifted
when he engineered an experimental policy to have Prudential of
Canada offer a “living benefits” plan, then a radical innovation.

In his words, Barbaro reported his feelings of discomfort when
he was approached by people he could see were dying and who he
wished he could help. If these afflicted people held a policy with
Prudential, his response was “why not?” And he could point to many
more examples of innovations that he championed because of his
capacity to be aware of ideas and possibilities that others could not
see. While he would downplay his role in stimulating the innova-
tion, the story behind each started with his awareness. When he was
interviewed, he displayed an eco-systems awareness, where “doing
good” in the world could be equated with the “rent one has to pay
while one is on earth.” The living benefits policy innovation that he
spearheaded while at Prudential later brought him many awards,
but at the time his awareness of the gross neglect that AIDS patients
suffered sparked his ascension on the vertical development scale.

Barbaro took a courageous, committed chance in a stable and
fixed insurance industry where few leaders dared to make radical
changes. Barbaro listened to his deep interior, his inner awareness,
that something needed to be done to serve those completely ignored
at the time, and so established a new industry norm. Conforming
to social or organizational expectations (habituating oneself to one’s
environment) is usually positive and productive. But the VUCA world has essentially gutted the inherent value of such expectations and replaced them with new and even more demanding expectations. We now require and endorse flexibility and adaptability as characteristics central to success, and these in turn entail greater personal risks—all tied to the ability to learn from unexpected and unlikely sources, to being open to alternative ways of thinking or acting or being, and to embracing a “world awareness” behavioral paradigm. Too many leaders miss the opportunity to capitalize on this internal guidance system. The best leadership today keys in on “inspiring people and tap[ping] into what they truly desire to achieve in terms of growth and contribution.”

This is a huge shift. And many of us are experiencing the difficulties and anxieties of adjusting to it. Yet the Gestalt approach has always had these goals, skills, and capabilities of flexibility, adaptability, and personal risk embedded in its concepts. So now that we are in the throes of this VUCA shift, we can more fully recognize Gestalt’s relevance and power.

Awareness intelligence, which involves sensations, emotions, intuitions, and scanning of the environment, is at the heart of Gestalt practice. Using skilled observations of clients’ experiential processes and interactions with the environment, the Gestalt coach can ignite clients’ available energy toward new perceptions and behaviors. The core Gestalt principles of a collaborative stance and of co-created experiential/experimental work between coach and client is what engenders the client’s trust in the work and in their ability to choose for themselves with full awareness. When the Gestalt coach skillfully and artfully uses herself to support the client’s awareness of and experimentation with new possibilities and choices, she has facilitated making visible to the client what had been invisible (and unaware) and supported the client to see and to experience the liberating power of self-determined change—we see this as a contemporary version of genuine magic.