CHAPTER 4

Resistance and the Challenge of Development and Change

Most of us build our identity around our knowledge and competence in employing certain known techniques or abilities. Making a deep change involves abandoning both and "walking naked into the land of uncertainty."

—Robert Quinn

The psychological concept of resistance originated with Freudian psychoanalysis as a negative construct, as the repression of uncomfortable or traumatic memories or thoughts. Such repression was seen to cause dysfunctional behavior that interfered with clients' self-integrity and the ability to act in a socially successful manner. This dysfunctional behavior, according to psychoanalytic approaches, could only be ameliorated by articulating these memories through in-depth and sustained analysis.

The Gestalt approach, a post psychoanalytic paradigm, articulated a different stance toward resistance. While Gestalt thinking
accepts that most resistance lies outside the awareness of the conscious mind, resistance is not considered purely dysfunctional. Instead, resistance is seen as an adaptive behavioral phenomenon that serves to preserve self-integrity in certain circumstances. Resistance is connected to the need for stability and safety, which can protect our well-being. As an example, when a person who has a food allergy makes sure that she does not get exposed to the aggravating allergen, she is functioning in a protective and potentially life-saving manner. Similarly, the doctor who needs to administer life-saving surgeries adaptively de-sensitizes to sights and experiences that cause negative reactions, such as fear or even revulsion, in others.

One of the productive aspects of human development is the capacity to make particular responses an automatic part of our lives, “buried so deeply in the inner workings of our subconscious that they no longer require conscious thought.” 1 While we’ve looked at the role of habituation in relation to awareness, we now look at how we deepen our understanding about how habits affect the function of “learning and unlearning.” Researchers at MIT have been able to map what may be the habit genome. It seems that the nucleus of a habit has a three-part neurological loop: It begins with a cue that sends a message to the brain to switch to automatic mode. Next comes the routine, which we think of as the habit itself and which can be psychological, emotional, or physical. And last is the reward, the cue that tells the brain to reinforce this process. This is the “habit loop,” and it is easy to see why as time goes on it becomes more and more automatic, more and more difficult to break. 2

As we know, positive habits that serve us are supported by habituation and increased efficiency because habits bypass the time requirement of the meaning-making process. But habits that have outworn their usefulness may be hard to become aware of and become a non-productive and non-adaptive resistance. Resistance
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Can become a force that interferes with and sabotages new possibilities. The paradox of resistance is that while a resisting behavior may once have served one’s integrity, over time, the usefulness of that behavior can become outdated. In the Freudian model, resistance—and the dysfunctional thinking or behavior it engenders—emerges from repressed trauma or deep psychic discomfort. Gestalt thinking rejected those interpretations. The Gestalt approach is process driven, and rather than offering prescriptive suggestions, Gestalt practitioners offer an awareness process for clients to consider how their resistances have served them and whether those resistances continue to be adaptive and responsive to their needs.

Habitual patterns of thinking and behavior serve to define and support character and consistency as well as to strengthen one’s self- and public identity and so to inspire trust. However, these needs for stability and consistency are often battling the urge to innovate and to change. Gestaltists have described habituation as a force for stability that slows down or minimizes change. Gestalt practitioners become interested in a client’s resistances when it appears that the client is unaware that his resistance no longer serves to fulfill his needs and wants. For example, if a client receives repeated feedback that he is interpersonally aloof, yet he himself believes he frequently extends himself to others, a Gestalt coach would immediately be interested in exploring the dynamic behavioral pattern this person exhibits when interacting with others. In offering the observation to the client, the coach uses the Cycle of Experience to make figural the interpersonal behavior that the client may be blind to, and thereby raise his awareness. The Gestalt coach as an active witness and participant supports the client to become aware of how he creates closeness or distance in his interpersonal interactions. The client would be supported to both experience what is familiar and, using the coach’s feedback, to experience and become aware of unfamiliar (unaware) patterns
and the alienated or suppressed parts of himself that contribute to the gap between others' perceptions and his self-perception.

In early life, the child needs the guidance of clear sanctions regarding what she should or shouldn't do to stay physically safe in the world. Over time, and with the best intentions, other authority figures will transmit different should/shouldn't rules to ensure the child's social success. Our mentors and teachers will tell us directly what we should learn and how we should behave to be granted acceptance, inclusion, and reward. We identify "shoulds" as the primary way that values get transmitted across all levels—in families, schools, and social institutions. To accommodate shoulds, the individual has to say "no" to other opportunities and construct further invisible structures to assist the process of being in the world relationally and strategically.

Adolescents, on the other hand, endure a period of especially strong social forces determining acceptance and inclusion, particularly where inclusion demands accommodation and assimilation. Similarly, institutional work life carries with it expectations about "success" in terms of which values should be honored to gain advancement or reward. The shoulds of powerful figures in our lives, both intrinsic (respected role models, family authority figures) and extrinsic (superiors at work, institutions, corporations), carry vital information that helps us navigate our way through youthful development to adult identity. Yet the shoulds of these same powerful figures can become outdated or irrelevant in relation to what we need or want, and to how we might grow and change. The world of parents, teachers, mentors, and role models cannot speak fully for the world and the choices we are required to respond to and, even where their wisdom was once useful, it is a measure of personal mastery to be able to discern what best serves our personal and professional lives.

Resistance and...
To move forward requires change. Habitual perceptual and behavioral patterns happen out of conscious choice or control—without awareness. The relevant question is: Are these patterns serving the individual’s needs and wants? When clients narrate incidents of frustration, blind to a self-defeating behavioral pattern that is discernible to the coach, the challenge is to bring that pattern into awareness. The coach must determine where best to offer an observation about a pattern the client may be unaware of, because doing so invites the disorientation of moving from a familiar and stable zone into an unfamiliar zone of discomfort.

The incentive to step out of one’s comfort zone is supported by the belief in the potential of better choices to yield better outcomes. There has to be a sense of recognition that things are not working out in intended ways, and that maybe there are factors outside one’s awareness. The self-awareness process undertaken to examine habitual behaviors is best served by articulating one’s patterns, by exploring and experimenting with them, and by accurately assessing their observable impact on personal and professional life. A coach works to assist this process, and to help the client access and manage the deep emotional residue the process stirs up. When a trusted coach poses “the powerful question that breaks through our protective trance of habitual process, the brain is required to restructure long-term memory information.” And for any shift in thinking or behavior to occur, that moment of recognition inevitably evokes an unnerving but essential visceral response—“there must be an emotional stake in the game for restructuring to occur.”

A core belief of Gestalt coaching is that when there is no emotion, there is no learning. Clients are naturally prone to resist moving into discomfiting and uncertain territory, and therefore the coach’s invitation to enter that territory must carry a compelling acknowledgment that it is part of the learning process.
Individuals need to explore their resistances to see which are valuable and which are hindering. Hank Karp's work on personal power allows us to see the value of resistance used intentionally and with awareness as well as the burden of unaware resistances (Figure 4.1).

**Figure 4.1 Karp's Power-Resistance Model**

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<tr>
<th>I want</th>
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<td><strong>Agency</strong>&lt;br&gt;Power</td>
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| **Loser**<br>- | **Resistance**<br>+

Positive use of resistance helps maintain the personal power of self-integrity and identity, but unaware resistance leaves us vulnerable to “loser” or “victim” status that seems to be beyond our control. In habitual processes, awareness has become constricted, and we do not see the choices that would give us a sense of control.
Positive resistance is the capacity to functionally set a boundary to not receive what one does not want. But without awareness it may become habitual to not get what one does want and feel like a loser, or to get what one does not want and feel like a victim.

For example, a hard-working professional learned early in her career that desensitization to the soft signs of fatigue enabled her to get an impressive amount of work done outside of working hours, and this had always helped her productivity and overall career success. In ignoring her fatigue, she was recognized as a high leadership talent. While the price of this desensitization to the fatigue of overwork could be afforded when she was in her early 20s, in her 40s, she complains that she is feeling less effective (loser) and that she is getting angry at what she is experiencing (victim). Until she entered the coaching encounter, she ignored feedback that there may be other options for her to explore.

Karp’s model allows us to understand that dysfunctional uses of resistance invite us to fall into patterned roles that are self-defeating and distressing. When the issue of career derailment is reviewed, one clear reason why high-talented professionals fail to make the most of the opportunities offered them can be traced back to unaware patterns that work to restrict choice. Alex, a talented surgeon, appeared as an ambivalent coaching client who shared how angry he was about how others treated him and how he saw his colleagues as always undermining him. Alex was more interested in being energized by how unfair his world was rather than look at other choices he could make to change his status of victimhood. His distress was a chronic pattern that he continued to present rather than establishing positive resistance by setting better boundaries that could protect him from being taken advantage of. As his coach, I had to remember that habituations can become comfortable as a role pattern that does not serve one’s goals. There is a pattern that identifies being invested in resignation of
resentment rather than in ambition. An important part of coaching is being able to differentiate those clients who are interested in the uncomfortable work required to alter old patterns of being that can, without awareness, become the experience of resignation or resentment. Alex’s pattern, while so distressing to him, persisted because he remained more invested in the familiar discomfort of being in the loser/victim role than in engaging in the vulnerable work of moving to a more choiceful, adaptive, and powerful way of being in his work life.

The role pattern that people can fall into can be understood by studying the Karpman Drama Triangle (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 Karpman Drama Triangle

Persecutor – Power
   
   Rescuer – Responsibility
   
   Victim – Vulnerability

Steven Karpman’s Drama Triangle is an inter-relational paradigm of “the interplay and behavioral moves between two or more people,” specifically gauging “the connection between responsibility and power, and their relationship to boundaries.” The Drama Triangle schematically represents how cycles of aggressive domination, vulnerable martyrdom, and aggrieved responsibility become a dramatic and obstructive relational enactment of habitual perceptual and behavioral patterns. Each role is adopted without overt intention...
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or purpose—each, in fact, plays out without self-awareness of the

price being paid for living in that role.

As an example, Katherine, a hard-working executive coaching

client, has been involved in a project that needs greater sponsor-

ship from key company stakeholders. The scheduled company retreat

is an ideal opportunity for her to present her project and gather

sponsorship and support. Though she is prepared to offer her ideas,

she nevertheless keeps deferring presentation time to others until,

finally, there is no time for her project to be reviewed. Critical

project time is lost—or worse, the very possibility of moving the

project forward is lost. When asked why she had not been more

forceful in asking for the needed presentation time, Katherine

remarks that she was “waiting for the right time.” In closing

reflections, she shares how she does this often to herself, but she

appears to have no insight into her role in co-creating this lost

opportunity. This high-potential young leader needs to become

aware of how her unaware resistance patterns are sabotaging her

success. This is the invitation that Gestalt-trained coaches can offer

their clients—this small but incredibly powerful invitation: “Are

you interested in understanding the habitual patterns that may be

blocking your success?” The need to overcome failure and arrive

at success is what motivates clients to follow the coach into the

discomfort zone, where exploring unaware habitual patterns leads

to new possibilities, conscious choices, and new learning.

Gestalt coaching works carefully to distinguish between sup-

portive habits that strengthen the individual’s self-identity and

obstructive habits that no longer serve the individual’s needs or

wants. The primary intent of Gestalt coaching is to assist clients

to see for themselves what they truly need or want and to support

them in satisfying that need or want. Marcia Reynolds observes:

“For the same reason you can’t tickle yourself, you can’t fully explore

your own thoughts. Your brain will block and desensitize you to
self-imposed exploration." Working with clients to support them to uncover and understand their habitual patterns demands a relationship of trust, as this exploration evokes vulnerability in clients. It is important to recognize that when a client shows reluctance or refusal to change his habitual processes, whether unconsciously or choicefully, this means that his resistance has a value that has to be further appreciated. Change is ignited from within, and the client who is resistant to changing a habitual behavior needs greater support and understanding for this sensitive exploration.

Gestalt theory reminds us that any change will be greeted with ambivalence, even if that change is desired. Deep-seated fears can be aroused and stable beliefs shaken when change is intentionally pursued. In such instances, despite a voiced commitment to change, the client may unintentionally disrupt the change effort in an attempt to preserve the status quo and to maintain his accustomed sense of self and perceptions of how the world works. Resistance of this sort, as Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey describe, “does not reflect opposition, nor is it merely a result of inertia.” Instead, it usually arises from “applying productive energy toward a hidden competing commitment,” resulting in a psychological stalemate that “looks like resistance but is in fact a kind of personal immunity to change.” Kegan and Lahey give the example of an African-American manager whose hidden, competing commitment kept him from engaging in an exciting new business venture. He feared that close and successful collaboration with his mostly white colleagues would “estrang[e] him from his ethnic group” and thus “compromise his personal identity.” For this manager, safety was preserved by not engaging in a new business opportunity, even though that opportunity appeared at the same time exciting and desirable.9 As Kegan and Lahey observe, resistance to acknowledging the competing, unconscious commitment may not be obvious, since resistance of this type is an adaptive function that bolsters some self-preserving purpose. But the resistance can then limits awareness. For learning to engage is to bring the comp and with this awareness, this n himself how to reconcile the in

Kegan and Lahey’s discussion well with the Gestalt conception of working with resistance. Gestalt theorists look for its “protective, curative, [as it respectfu]lly in ways that off awareness of self-determined cl

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Assessing Resistance Patterns

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As Kegan lodging the competing, tious, since resistance offers some self-preserving purpose. But the resistance can become a habitual process, which then limits awareness. For learning and enhanced choice, the critical strategy is to bring the competing commitment into awareness, and with this awareness, this manager could then determine for himself how to reconcile the internal and external commitments.

Kegan and Lahey’s discussion of “immunity to change” aligns well with the Gestalt conception of resistance and Gestalt methods of working with resistance. Gestalt coaches recognize the reluctance and ambivalence clients feel around change as a normal human response. Gestalt thinking encourages appreciating resistance for its “protective, curative, [and] creative aspects,” and explores it respectfully in ways that offer clients new perspectives and an awareness of self-determined choices.10

A key competence for the coach is to recognize resistance when it either serves or undermines the client. One measure of self-awareness is to know what one wants and to know what one doesn’t want. Gestalt theory maintains that clients are innately capable of appreciating their habitual processes as serving some need. This perspective permits Gestalt coaches to assist their clients to identify new possibilities that will serve them to successfully adapt to the relentless pace of modern change.

Poet David Whyte poignantly described the visible and invisible force of resistance when he wrote: “We shape our self to fit this world, and by the world are shaped again.” Sometimes, the shaping we submitted to earlier in our lives no longer meets the realities of a world that demands adaptive new possibilities and confident action.

Assessing Resistance Patterns
We view our clients’ awareness and their ability to satisfy their needs and wants through the lens of the Cycle of Experience. When clients move fluidly through their Cycle, we can assume their needs and wants are being met with sufficient awareness and that they make
choices to engender a sense of well-being. By moving smoothly through the Cycle and being in touch with their figural awareness, they may then notice some emotional energy that activates them toward getting satisfaction and then, once satisfied, closing that figure and allowing another figure to emerge from the ground of their needs and wants. When clients’ movement through their COE is hesitant, interrupted, or blocked, the Gestalt coach looks to make meaning of these particular patterns.

In Chapter 3 we introduced the Cycle of Experience, which we now revisit by acknowledging that resistance is actually embedded within everyone’s COE, and reminding ourselves that resistance is a normative part of being functional. One definition of resistance Ed Nevis made famous was that when a client says “no” to a new behavior, she is also saying “yes” to another behavior. We therefore look at the patterns of where the COE is interrupted or blocked to get interested in the particular meaning of the client’s resistance.

Interruptions to the COE present opportunities for interesting questions through which to explore identifiable resistance patterns. Some sample COE questions and attendant skills are:

**In the Sensation stage:** Is the person desensitizing in order to manage overwhelming physical and emotional challenges?

*COE skill: To recognize the sensation-numbing qualities of desensitization*

**In the Awareness stage:** Is the person aware of what she notices yet, because of old sanctions that dictate what she should or shouldn’t pay attention to, she interrupts or negates what she notices?

*COE skill: To recognize the shoulds of introjections*

**In the Excitement/Anxiety stage:** Can the person hold the power of his energy, or does he feel he needs to manage his excitement or anxiety by projecting this onto others?

*COE skill: To stay aware and unattuned to the excitement-reducing and analytically avoiding role of projections.*

In the Action stage: Could the person be wanting, or does she feel as if she is being constrained to reflect a role in the dyad?

*COE skill: To articulate her experience rather than react.*

In the Contact stage: Does the person notice his experience of being confluent with the person he is engaging with?

*COE skill: To recognize the felt experience, not stay aware of the numbing.*

The Gestalt stance emphasizes the role of resistance patterns and consequences. Awareness, action, and the Gestalt stance require dyadic, group, and
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**COE skill:** To recognize when the intensity of excitement, anxiety, or disowned feelings are managed by projections onto others

**In the Action stage:** Can the person take action on a figure of need or want, or does she feel the need to restrain action in an unaware gesture of retroreflection?

**COE skill:** To recognize the somatic way of holding back, through retroreflection, of movement to action

**In the Contact stage:** Does the habitual pattern of interrupting contact serve to protect the person from the threat of change? Does the person notice his need or want to maintain what is familiar by being confluent with others rather than risk the threat embedded in change, which is the experience of contact?

**COE skill:** To recognize how merging one's needs and wants with the wants of others promotes confluence rather than the differentiation that supports choice

**In the Closure/Withdrawal stage:** Can the person reflect on and articulate her experience of what did or did not occur, or does she stay unaware and unfinished?

**COE skill:** To recognize when the importance of endings is avoided through the distraction of deflection or the numbness of desensitization

The Gestalt stance allows us to see that there are common resistance patterns which have both positive and negative values and consequences. There are infinite ways that one can interrupt awareness, action, and change, but we focus on six classic resistances that Gestalt theory describes as appearing at the individual, dyadic, group, and organizational levels of system. Recognizing
patterns of resistance is a required skill competency for using the COE. These six classic resistance patterns are: Desensitization, Introspection, Projection, Reflection, Deflection, and Confluence. These patterns can occur at any point of the COE, but for teaching purposes, we offer them at the COE's six energy points (Figure 4.3).

**Figure 4.3 Cycle of Experience and Resistances**

**DESENSITIZATION** occurs when there is a numbing of any aware sensation, whether of pleasure or of pain, whether physical, psychological, or emotional. Desensitization as an adaptive strategy allows one to perform effectively and safely under highly stressful circumstances, anything from engaging in combat to working through the night to meet a deadline. As mentioned, to be effective, physicians must sometimes desensitize to acutely distressing smells, life-saving inter of disregarding necessary matters.

If desensitizing relevant sensory cants personal or of exacting a high recognize, especially being cues that a very busy ext project when his stomach aches, one work with other res one work hard, out awareness with an interesting is the key re-sensitizing to

**INTROJECTION** if swallowing authority fig regard for personal behaviors, or an undigested foreign to the Positive introject touch a candle or the cultural measure of per
distressing smells, images, and emotions in service of delivering life-saving interventions. There are many examples of the value of disregarding sensations in order to accomplish an urgent or necessary matter.

If desensitization becomes chronic and habitual, it can block relevant sensory or psychological signals that alert us to significant personal or environmental danger. Desensitization has a way of exacting a higher cost in the long run than we are willing to recognize, especially when the cues we choose to ignore end up being cues that were literally trying to save our lives. In one case, a very busy executive had to suddenly relinquish an important project when his gallbladder ruptured. Asked if he had experienced stomach pains in advance, he acknowledged that he had experienced abdominal “discomfort” but had decided it was trivial and continued working on his project. Desensitization can also pair with other resistance patterns: e.g., where there is a should that one work hard, desensitization assists the hard work by blocking out awareness of fatigue. A desensitization pattern can be undone with an intervention that encourages clients to breathe more, as breath is the key intervention to bringing more life to the senses, re-sensitizing what has been desensitized.

INTROJECTION occurs when one uncritically accepts, as if “swallowing whole,” the ideas, behaviors, or values of an authority figure (e.g., a mentor or a corporate entity) without regard for personal meaning or resonance. Introjected ideas, behaviors, or values are taken in but not assimilated; they become an undigested but active should. So while they remain, in a sense, foreign to the individual’s persona, they are habitually enacted. Positive introjections could include the parent’s injunction to not touch a candle flame or a hot stove top (ensuring physical safety), or the cultural injunction “do not steal” (which functions as a measure of personal integrity). Negative introjections could include
the parental injunction to “eat everything on your plate” whether you’re hungry or not (which can lead to dysfunctional eating habits), or the organizational injunction to “work hard,” where we are finding that there may be better introjects, like “work smart,” which could serve the professional even better.

Because it is hard to disregard or flout what those in a position of authority or power tell us we should believe or do, the shouloral public behavior and values often trump the inner shoulds of personal beliefs and principles. Over time, we discover cognitive or psychological dissonances between what we’ve learned from others and what we’ve learned for ourselves. Sometimes we choose simply not to acknowledge the contradiction.

These introjects hold sway over our beliefs and behaviors and become habitual patterns that help keep us safe, stable, and predictable to ourselves and to others. Such unexamined introjects are widespread and difficult resistances to uncover and dislodge. Because these introjects have been imparted to us by authoritative figures, we tend to dismiss evidence that what our parents, mentors, or trusted colleagues may have told us is no longer effective or valuable for us. When thought or behavioral patterns become habitual and fall out of awareness, we lose the visceral or deep emotional engagement necessary to assess the relevance of the introject. The difficulty of becoming aware of an introject that is unconsciously embedded is often likened to the parable of the fish in water: Who can tell the fish about the water they live and move in? Certainly not another fish. Recognizing and letting go of an outdated introject can be experienced as immensely liberating and energizing, allowing new possibilities to emerge.

PROJECTION occurs when one attributes one’s own feelings, thoughts, or actions to other people in the environment rather than experiencing them as part of oneself. The positive use of projection is linked to what we now understand as emotional intelligence. Projecting one’s feelings, thoughts, or actions to other people can be a way to connect with others and gain reassurance or to make others feel better about themselves. However, when projection becomes a defense mechanism, it can make it difficult for others to feel safe around us.
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intelligence. Projecting our internal experiences onto another
person can be received by that person as understanding, empathy,
and connection. Used with awareness, projection supports the
capacity to build possibilities with others as well as the capacity
to include people in what is important for us. But when one’s own
feelings, thoughts, or actions are disowned because of perceived
aboo or should-nots, the emotional or psychological discomfort
impels unexamined and unaware projections. When our personal
introjects of how people should or shouldn’t behave are activated
and make us uncomfortable, to reduce discomfort, we can assign
blame to someone else. A projection is often recognized by use of
the pronoun “you” instead of “I,” the personal reference. Shifting
responsibility for one’s own feelings or thoughts (whether anger or
aggression, reassurance or praise) to another is a way of managing
what feels like difficult-to-accept or hard-to-practice introjects.
Projection can reinforce self-aliend parts by attributing to others
what we find hard to manage in ourselves.

For example: Emma has internalized the introject that one
should never be loud or demanding in public. When she sees
Jacob in a business meeting being “loud” and “demanding,” she
immediately forms a negative impression and tunes him out, as she
projects that he cannot be of value to the meeting. Jacob may have
been contributing positively to the meeting, but Emma is unable
to accurately assess what he has to say because of her habitual
introject, which influences her projection. On the other hand, in
that same meeting, Michael, another member, proposes a different
approach that emphasizes empathy and shared values. Michael
may not have added anything relevant to the meeting’s agenda,
but Emma isn’t able to evaluate Michael’s contribution because of
her unaware introject that advises her that empathy is usually a
use to lure in the unwary. Emma’s projection is that Michael is
trying to manipulate the group. She cannot differentiate between
the speakers—her unaware introjects, which confirm her projections, paralyze her ability to attend to what is said with awareness and therefore to assess others clearly.

Uncovering unaware projections is powerful work. It is one example of the deep self-work required to be able to recognize and own the feelings and thoughts that belong to us and to see what belongs to others. When we are able to be clear about our use of projections, we engender greater self-trust as well as trust from others.

**Retroflection** occurs when there is an experience of holding back from requesting something from others and the environment, and doing to oneself what one wishes to receive from others. Positive retroflection can be seen when someone holds back intense emotions but then channels those feelings into creative work (e.g., poetry, painting, design innovations) or when a person withholds thoughts during vocal exchanges with others but later publishes an article using the ideas he withheld.

Retroflection becomes dysfunctional when it results in "a chronic standoff... between mutually opposing forces/energies within the individual," often leading to physical illness manifested in forms such as migraines, ulcers, or muscular aches. Witness the person who cannot voice a disagreement but develops a headache as a somatic manifestation of retroflection. Retroflection is often linked to other resistances. For example, introjections ("don't do this") can also influence what people hold back from doing or saying. "Never ask others for help" is an introjection that may prompt a retroflection, "Thanks, I'll handle it myself." The retroflection then becomes a behavioral pattern that causes the individual to feel isolated and unsupported without perceiving how he contributes to his own condition of being isolated and unsupported. Some somatic cues that retroflection is occurring are visible when people hold a finger to their lips, rub their necks, play with or twirl their hair, bounce their legs while sitting or speaking, or rocking back in their shoes. A retroflection—appears in another positive feelings back rather than by asking the client to release deflective with others by issue. The power direct engagement. One could consider serving to intercool. Humor can, permitting their sense of go-

Deflection to an unaware man or disrupts other cry. Consider the feedback to an continually reach short, complaining how often people conversation with their attention. I and a simple but deflection is: "So gaining accepta those admired or sion or conflict. 1
in their shoes. An unchanging smile on a person’s face could signal reflection—as he holds back other expressions, the smile can appear inauthentic, as it is no longer connected to the vibrancy of positive feelings but rather to a hidden should that triggers holding back rather than expressing more. Reflection can be undone by asking the client to breathe at the same time that we invite the client to release what he has been holding back.

**Reflection** occurs when there is an avoidance of contact with others by diverting awareness or attention away from an issue. The power of deflection involves strategic choice to avoid direct engagement with a person or situation that induces tension. One could consider diplomacy as an artful function of deflection, serving to interrupt heated, complex debates to allow tempers to cool. Humor can also serve as an enjoyable and effective reflection, permitting people in a difficult setting to relax and to regain their sense of goodwill.

Deflection becomes unproductive and dysfunctional when, in an unaware manner, a person repeatedly or irrelevantly interrupts or disrupts others or activity as a way of managing personal anxiety. Consider the person who must give difficult job performance feedback to another but, because it makes her uncomfortable, continually reschedules the meeting or cuts the feedback exchange short, complaining there simply isn’t enough time. Consider, too, how often people will check their smartphones when they are in conversation with others, unaware that they have diverted (deflected) their attention. Deflection can interrupt any point of the COE, and a simple but powerful question the coach can use to undo deflection is: “So where did you just go?”

**Confluence** occurs when there is agreement for the sake of gaining acceptance from, or identification with, others, particularly those admired or feared, in order to minimize or eliminate tension or conflict. Being intentionally confluent often serves to build
trust and psychological support in relationships of all sorts—in work groups, in project partnerships, in marriages. Confluence creates an experience of bonding and togetherness that can strengthen collaboration and develop the energy needed for successful endeavors.

On the other hand, often a person will make a choice to maintain some degree of safety, stability, and predictability to manage being in a relationship with a controlling and demanding person. This is considered a confluent choice for sustaining the relationship. When confluence dominates in relationships or groups, innovation and differentiation are weakened.

Practiced without awareness, the personal costs of confluence can be high. Unaware confluence is a frequently encountered resistance that denies self-differentiation. The corporate “yes man” is an illustration of a more common behavior for making peace with others at the expense of our own needs or wants. When people fear losing love or respect, either in private life or at work, and choose confluence, they may stop listening to their own needs and wants. The member of a partnership or marriage who develops a pattern of always deferring to the other eventually will stop trying to influence the other in relation to his needs and wants. The way to work with a client who is exhibiting confluence is to invite somatic exercises and activities with cognitive inquiry for client self-exploration with one core question: “What is it that you are aware of wanting?” By supporting the client’s self-ownership, we counter the self-diminishment of unaware confluence.

Working with Resistance

Coaching clients toward new possibilities necessitates a willingness to explore habitual processes that may surprise or dismay them. Gestalt coaches are interested in what a client works to keep hidden that may be obvious to others and in what is self-alienated that may be obvious to others but not to the client. In working
Resistance and the Challenge of Development and Change

with resistance, the Gestalt coach is using herself as an instrument, paying attention to the phenomenological data embedded in her COE while tracking the client’s COE. We are looking for what is obvious to the client and for what is out of his awareness.

The Johari Window represents obvious and hidden information within or about a person—feelings, experience, views, attitudes, skills, intentions, motivation, etc.—in relation to others from four perspectives. This model makes it clear that we are always keeping some aspect of ourselves hidden from others, but we are also unaware of something obvious to others that is hidden even from ourselves (Figure 4.4).

**Figure 4.4 Johari Window**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Known to Self</th>
<th>Not Known to Self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Known To Others</strong></td>
<td><strong>OPEN</strong> Presentation of Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not Known To Others</strong></td>
<td><strong>HIDDEN</strong> The private self</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Working to help clients become aware of their unaware resistance patterns is akin to managing one’s “swamp work,” a term that may have influenced Ron Heifetz’s formulation of adaptive leadership development and learning skills. The work of confronting unaware resistance patterns can be discomfiting.
When we enter into this swamp work of undoing unaware resistances, the Gestalt coach becomes the trusted guide who assists clients in identifying and exploring past and current realities. Through the awareness work involved in designed experiments, clients are encouraged to try on new behaviors and embrace new opportunities. We will be looking at how to create and work with Gestalt experiments in Chapter 6.

The coach is required to be impeccably trustworthy, both in presence and methodology, so that clients are both challenged and supported to enter a zone of safe emergency, where they are prompted to take risks in perception and in behaviors in order to achieve their goals. If the risk is too large, clients will be reluctant to commit to the work. If safety is the predominant structure, the work will feel boring and lack emotional energy. In supporting clients to confront unaware resistances that may be blocking new possibilities, we are inviting them into vertical development work, identifying the unaware “protective frames” of resistance that seem to keep them safe and comfortable. It is challenging to dismantle those frames by engaging in alternative and potentially risky paradigms of perception and behavior.

Unaware resistances are an integral part of our umwelt—the parts of ourselves that we are not aware of. We all possess blind spots and alienated parts of ourselves with which we resist making contact, even though that alienated part might give us permission to be more verbally or physically expressive, to be more socially bold, or to embark on an innovative new business venture. In the environment of safe emergency, with a trusted coach, clients can self-determine whether their related resistances are of continued value, and experiment with alternative perceptual and behavioral options. They can confront their self in service of reclaiming more of their own resources which have been ignored, alienated, and discarded.
Mahatma Gandhi expressed: “I have only three enemies. My favorite enemy, the most easily influenced for the better, is the British Empire. My second enemy, the Indian people, is far more difficult. But my most formidable opponent is a man named Mohandas K. Gandhi. With him I seem to have very little influence.” It is always surprising how the greatest challenges involve one’s very self. When we support clients to undo or retire outdated resistances, we are inviting them to redefine themselves. If a client has a pattern of desensitizing her sensory experience, the work is to appreciatively support her to re-sensate through breath work and somatic awareness. If she retires an outdated introject, she may have to articulate a new introject that is adaptive to her current world. If she undoes a projection, she may have to examine which aspects of herself she was disowning and what it means to own that aspect. If she was holding back behavior, and that reflective pattern no longer serves her, she has to practice with the risky rewards of being more bold and active. If her use of deflection interferes with her effectiveness, her work is to learn to focus until task completion. If she overused confluence, where she lost her voice and vitality, then learning how to engage in differentiation is the needed self-work.

Doing the work of uncovering and reshaping our resistances in order to be adaptive to the needs of life and work demands commitment, courage, strength, and an appreciation for one’s vulnerabilities. We do not engage our swamp work solely through an act of will. We must engage with our awareness, and with acceptance of what we are aware of, while being also willing to engage with our umwelt, our alienated parts, and the multiple realities of others, which can test our perspective(s). On the path of this awareness work, change begins.