CHAPTER 3

The Cycle of Experience

The Cycle of Experience (COE, or simply the Cycle) is the conceptual tool that describes the alignment between awareness, choice, and responsibility for responding to wants, needs, and goals. The COE serves as the foundational model of human processes in Gestalt theory and is a kind of tracking map of the processes of recognition and satisfaction. The COE illustrates, as process, how needs and wants are sensed, articulated, engaged with, acted upon, satisfied, and assimilated through meaning-making processes (Figure 3.1). For all Gestalt practitioners, the COE is the profound concept to master. Students are continually amazed that such a “simple” model holds such complexity that can allow us to observe the need-satisfaction process as influenced by one’s habit pattern.

There are almost as many graphic representations and interpretative applications of the COE as there are Gestalt practitioners, but the principal elements of the model and their significance for understanding human systems, from self to organizations, captures organic human functioning in relation to perceiving and acting on needs and wants. The COE is a model taught differently by different Gestaltists, and over the years has been called different names,
reflecting different emphases and orienting points of interest. To explain the COE in writing, we are forced to describe a nonlinear, interactive, multi-layered process in linear terms that “arrest” and identify particular moments, which does not adequately address the fullness of the COE. Any graphic modeling therefore belies its deep power and complexity. Yet the fact that people name, represent, and teach the COE differently, while still adhering to its central tenets and structure, reflects the model’s intrinsic power—its ability to capture the organic core movement through human experience in relation to need fulfillment.

The concept of the Cycle of Experience (COE) as a gestalt psychology. Something going on in our context may evolve or be influenced by multiple factors, including our life story, and something that is affecting us. We are no longer “just doing” or are “doing it out” or are “doing it out of necessity.” Therefore, it recovers the ground. This is because of how actions become habitual.

We are always aware of our awareness patterns that determine our response to situations. These patterns influence their awareness of the gestalt figure into action. We get a call that and a top sales problem before he imagined solutions to slow down or what plan...
The concept of figure/ground, this core construct of perceptual psychology, is central to the awareness process of the COE. Something going on inside or outside of us attracts and focuses our attention—that’s the figure, or “figure of interest.” The same context may evoke different figures for different people, because what drives a particular figure of interest for an individual is influenced by motivational triggers embedded in one’s identity, life story, and meaning-making processes. A figure of interest is something that captures our attention and generates energy; it’s what that “something” evokes or means to us that makes a figure figural, that is, of immediate notice and relevance (e.g., comfort/discomfort, pleasure/uneasiness, attraction/revulsion). And when we are no longer interested in that figure of interest (we’ve “figured it out” or are “done” with it), the figure is no longer figural, and therefore it recedes and again becomes an undifferentiated part of the ground. This process, so easily described, is far more complex because of how motivation affects perception—and when perceptions become habitual process, awareness becomes narrowed.

We are always being stimulated, internally or externally, in our awareness process, and it is our understanding of our awareness pattern that determines the responses we make and the options we have yet to explore. Viktor Frankl said that “between stimulus and response there is a space,” and that space is the place for awareness, which influences choice. All too often, people are not aware of their awareness patterns, or that there is a jump from perceiving a figure into action rather than choice. Think of the executive who gets a call that there is conflict between an important stakeholder and a top sales manager. If the executive tries to solve the problem before he understands the issue, he is moving from figure to imagined solution. It’s a common pattern. What is often needed is to slow down, gather data, and then decide what the real figure is or what plan of action is needed. In this case, there are multiple
cycles: the stakeholder’s, the sales manager’s, and the executive’s. Slowing down to gather data by moving through the COE process is an act of discipline that yields important information.

The Discipline of Moving through the Cycle: Six Points

The COE lays out a process-pattern that is organized around need fulfillment. Ideally, each point has to be adequately completed in order to move forward toward cycle completion. Learning and growth are the outcomes of satisfying our needs and wants in relation to challenges confronted.

To understand the basic process, we start by exploring the ideal situation. The COE identifies organic need-fulfillment processes across six differentiated points: sensation, awareness, excitement/anxiety, action, contact, and withdrawal/closure. The phenomenon of hunger, because it’s a basic human need that must be satisfied, is a classic way to describe and explain the ideal process of the COE.

Sensation: I notice a sensation in my stomach. The sensation may be triggered by something external, such as the aroma of bread baking, or internally through a feeling in the stomach. I begin to pay attention to this sensation, and I feel a desire to eat.

Awareness: Once the sensation and desire enter my consciousness, I shift to thinking, “I haven’t eaten in four hours. I must be hungry.” The cognitive act of “framing” the sensation as a verbal statement marks the beginning of figure formation. Here, the figure that’s formed is the awareness of wanting food. Framing the figure as “hunger” makes hunger figural and the priority over other sensations and needs. I may still have other figures in progress (maybe I’m on the way to a particular destination, or maybe there’s an important meeting I’m anticipating). But the clear figure of hunger becomes my uppermost figure, the one that has my awareness and focus.

Excitement/Anxiety: Being enough to take pr excitement that impels may feel the other kind or resources to satisfy r excitement and anxiety hold back from action.

Action: The energy of me to take action to l Maybe that action will cupboard, or maybe I’m Whichever I choose, I’ taking the actions need dynamic and defined s which in this cycle is f

Contact: The action st to make contact, the p conditions of satisfact experiential difference and the settling energy when the figure of hur a change is then experi the conditions of satisfi figure is changed. In t energetic shift and a fig to “I am satisfied.” A ch and is central to figure change occurs. No sat in energy and the bour contact has happened.
Excitement/Anxiety: If the figure of wanting to eat is compelling enough to take priority over other figures, I'll feel a sense of excitement that impels me to do something about it. Alternately, I may feel the other kind of energy—anxiety—if I don't have time or resources to satisfy my hunger. The subtle distinctions between excitement and anxiety are important for how we move toward or hold back from action.

Action: The energy of either excitement or anxiety can mobilize me to take action to find the food that will satisfy my hunger. Maybe that action will be to find a small snack from the kitchen cupboard, or maybe I'm looking for a more elaborate and hot meal. Whichever I choose, I'll need to keep myself moving forward and taking the actions necessary to satisfy my hunger. Action steps are dynamic and defined strategically to satisfy the uppermost figure, which in this cycle is hunger.

Contact: The action steps of satisfying hunger are what move me to make contact, the point where my need meets and merges with conditions of satisfaction. A palpable shift in energy occurs in the experiential difference between the driving energy of the hunger and the settling energy of hunger being satisfied: contact happens when the figure of hunger is satisfied by the food being eaten, and a change is then experienced. Contact is the experience of meeting the conditions of satisfying the figure so that the boundary of the figure is changed. In our example, making contact describes an energetic shift and a figural boundary change from “I am hungry” to “I am satisfied.” A change in boundaries signifies a shift in energy and is central to figure satisfaction. If no sense of shift occurs, no change occurs. No satisfaction has taken place. Noticing the shift in energy and the boundary change allows for understanding when contact has happened.
Withdrawal/Closure: Having eaten, the figure of hunger is satisfied and can recede into my background, emerging only when it again becomes figural. In satisfying and letting go of the original figure of hunger, the energy I experience is that of withdrawing from and closing out the activity of eating, driven by both physical and cognitive acknowledgment that my hunger has been satisfied. Figure satisfaction can be sensed as an inner pleasure or spoken of with appreciation. Withdrawal and closure are often used interchangeably as ways of signifying figure satisfaction, but there is an important distinction. Withdrawal indicates being able to step back from a figure of interest “for now,” even with incomplete satisfaction. Closure, on the other hand, indicates an existential completeness, a sense of being satisfactorily finished with a figure, either permanently or until it reemerges. Satisfactory functioning permits figures of interest to continually emerge and recede in relation to needs or wants. Challenges and problems may arise when clients do not complete their Cycle because of habitual perceptual and behavioral patterns that interrupt or block its completion. This is the issue of resistance, which we will attend to in Chapter 4.

The example of the phenomenon of hunger seems straightforward, but in fact it can be used to demonstrate the complexity of figure satisfaction in our modern world, where some people eat when they’re not hungry and some people are hungry but cannot satisfy themselves. For many of us, the physiological cues that would naturally bring the figure of hunger to our attention have been confused with sociological cues that become the habitual “shoulds” and “oughts” around food and eating. Satisfying one’s hunger literally changes the biology of hunger but may also be a metaphor for satisfying other needs.
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Optimizing Movement through the Cycle:
Assessment Questions

Clients often think they know what they need or want, but they
may be unaware that their language or behavior suggests other-
wise, what we may describe in phenomenological or existential
terms as an alternate “what is.” The Gestalt coach recognizes the
significance of clients’ frustrations around figure satisfaction,
whether these are needs, wants, or goals, and can use the COE
to help clients become aware of their own process. Let’s return
to the hunger example as the figure of interest and use pertinent
assessment questions raised by the COE’s figure-satisfaction
process across the six points.

1. Does the client pay attention to his sensations? Does he scan
his feelings and sensations to determine what he is experiencing?
In scanning his internal landscape, is he unduly influenced by
external cues? Focusing attention on what we are thinking, feeling,
and sensing is an important first step in data gathering in order to
accurately identify what we’re experiencing. People often mistake
thirst for hunger, for example; a glass of water may satisfy them as
well as a meal. Preset meal times (e.g., lunch is always at noon) or
the sight of other people eating can also trigger a false identifica-
tion of hunger when what is actually desired may simply be the social
connection linked with eating meals together.

2. Does the client use context to determine what she needs? Or
is she simply accepting whatever her surroundings offer? The move
from sensation to awareness involves scanning both internal and
external cues. If the cues are “in sync,” she will accurately identify
the experiential need and strategize her behavior successfully to meet
that need. If the cues are muddled, the need can be misidentified
and the associated behavior will fail to satisfy. Mistaking “I am
thirsty” for “I am hungry” may not, in the short run, matter much.
Repeatedly mistaking “I am bored” for “I am hungry,” however, can lead to chronic inappropriate eating habits. Misreading sensory and environmental cues can seriously affect clients’ ability to identify their needs and reach personal or professional satisfaction. As we become less and less connected to agriculture-based work rhythms, health problems become more closely related to poor eating habits. We’re also continually confronted with marketing reminders for food and drink we have no immediate urge for. Without a great deal of self-awareness and discipline, people easily succumb to damaging eating habits that have little or nothing to do with biological hunger.

3. Does the client have the capacity to hold the energy aroused by his awareness? Is he physically, emotionally, or cognitively able to stay with the energy caused by the awareness? Does energy of either excitement or anxiety trigger a reactive response? If the client knows that food he likes is available and close at hand, he may experience a surge of pleasant excitement as he mobilizes his energy to access that food resource. However, if there are shoulds about satisfying his hunger (when he should eat, the kind of food he should eat, how much he should spend on food, how he should look while eating the food), he may instead experience a surge of anxiety; in turn, the experience of being anxious may generate even greater anxiety, and he might become immobilized—unable to move to action. Excitement around food has promoted a glut of cooking shows, and we delight in them. But that same excitement and pleasurable interest around food has also resulted in heightened awareness around the act of eating—diets, body-image, and eating disorders are now understandable causes for anxiety.

4. How does the client move to action? Once the client is aware of and energized by a need, is she open to the energy of action, which is the natural next step? Does the client move quickly or slowly?

Does she move percussive complex energy, or does she is what mobilizes to action, she may involved in figure f prioritizes convenit hunger, for example which may be detr she thinks she want to make more sati

On the other hand, since she has an experien regrettably (letting fi's frequently tangled u (eating undesired food) overly concerned a any satisfying action is indecisive or confus

5. Does the client engage in activities that are aware of a shift in e contact occurs when A bounded, clear fi requires attention, a stand out from others the conditions for a cognitive, spiritual) a energy, which is also experience, identified:

When contact is ma-
Does she move promptly with the clarity of a plan, or slowly with excessive complexity? Does the client move with easily available energy, or does she hold back the needed personal energy? Energy is what mobilizes us for action. If the client moves too quickly to action, she may be skipping essential mobilization processes involved in figure formation and the heightening of energy. If she prioritizes convenience and speed in her action plan to satisfy her hunger, for example, she may continually choose a fast-food meal, which may be detrimental to her long-term health. Is the action she thinks she wants really necessary? Could she have a better plan to make more satisfying choices?

On the other hand, if the client noticeably holds back from taking action, she may have some action-related anxieties. Perhaps has an experiential history of spontaneous decisions she later regretted (letting friends decide where to eat), or perhaps she is frequently tangled up in shoulds that frustrate her personal choices (eating undesired foods at business meetings to be polite). Being overly concerned about her actions impacts her ability to take any satisfying action, and to observers, she therefore may appear indecisive or confused.

5. Does the client experience contact? Is he able to effectively engage in activities that lead to satisfaction? Does he feel and is he aware of a shift in energy as he meets his need? In Gestalt terms, contact occurs when the boundaries that define the need change. A bounded, clear figure of interest points us to something that requires attention, a need that is pressing enough, or figural, to stand out from other possible needs. Contact is the point at which the conditions for satisfying that need (biological, psychological, cognitive, spiritual) are met. Satisfaction is experienced as a shift in energy, which is also the experience of change. This shift, or change experience, identifies that the need has been successfully satisfied. When contact is made and the energy alters, we can observe that
the client’s affect may appear different, or he may verbally express a felt difference.

6. How does the client withdraw from or “close out” the experience? Does she feel a satisfying sense of completion? Can she observe her experience and learn from it? Is she able to reflect on her experience with appreciation of satisfaction? Is her completion of the Cycle “good enough” to allow her to move to other figures of interest? At times, people complete their COE without closure, that is, without the sense of being finished with that experience. Their experience might be constrained by time limits, or there may not be sufficient resources or support in the environment to reach closure. The client’s withdrawal in this moment is a stepping-back that helps bring the experience to a satisfactory end for now. She can adaptively “bracket” what is unfinished with the understanding that she can return to the need later with greater energy and intention.

Closure, though, requires time spent savoring, reflecting on, and assimilating the experience. In that regard, the experience of closure is subjective. Some people may take years, even a lifetime, to reach closure around pivotal experiences while others require far less time. People often don’t give even a few minutes to ending their experiences. Yet the end of experiences is where the learning occurs around figure satisfaction: Did we do, and learn about, what is needed? Closure is vital to the assimilation and learning process. Our culture now perceives time to be in short supply, and we live and work under pressure to keep moving on to the “next thing.” Even five minutes devoted to reflection can sometimes feel excessive. Closure is thus becoming neglected or marginalized. Withdrawal without closure is increasingly the “new normal” for leadership. The Gestalt coach learns, however, that clients’ inability to reach satisfactory closure ensures that they will have the same experiences, with the same unsatisfactory results, in other situations. This stickiness around closure becomes the experience of “unfinished business.”

People may then inappropriately reframe submerged tensions so they remain unresolved and may be continually unable to move forward.

At stake is a conscious understanding of the processes of COE and satisfaction, reflection, and savoring. These elements of the Cycle are key to the experiential evolution and learning that we refer to as the experience. Daniel Kahneman and others have explained how the experience of an event is determined by how the events are incorporated into our affective responses. If you have an experience that you later consider “bad,” that experience is likely to remain negative even if you later decide to change your perspective. Our current reality is thus an ongoing evaluation of the key element in goal and experience.

**Experiential, Data–Sustainable Learning**

The COE is integral to understanding what is visible to us, as to what may be invisible.
People may then inappropriately respond to new figures according to submerged tensions generated by unfinished old business and be continually unable to reach satisfaction.

At stake is a conscious, integrated sense of well-being, whether we’re speaking about physical or metaphysical “nourishment.” The satisfaction, reflection, and appreciation that ideally close out the Cycle are key elements not only for self-management but for ongoing evolution and learning. Closure is vital for successfully ending and savoring an experience as well as for learning and growing from that experience. Daniel Kahneman tells us that “what defines a story [of an experience] are changes, significant moments, and endings.” Kahneman explains that “endings are very, very important” in that they determine how the given experience will be remembered and incorporated into our life story (and into our perceptual and behavioral responses). If you have a positive experience that ends badly, that experience may become “a disaster”; if you have a horrible experience that ends well, that experience may become “a blessing.” In terms of closure and unfinished business, if you have an experience that doesn’t really end one way or the other, you will find ways to close that experience in your meaning-making process (e.g., “that’s the best that could happen”) or you will actively experiment with ways to close. Or, it can remain as unfinished business, which always carries an ongoing energetic charge. Closure is vital to learning and therefore a process that needs attention in all aspects of coaching, particularly executive coaching where learning from experience is the key element in goal attainment.

Experiential, Data-Based Feedback: Teaching Sustainable Learning

The COE is integral to what allows the Gestalt coach to pay attention to what is visible about the client while also raising questions as to what may be invisible to the client. What the client is unaware
of is, in fact, invisible to him. The COE prompts the coach to use phenomenological data (those movements involving what we see, hear, feel, and do) in the moment of actual physical experience. This integration is what holds central importance and value for the Gestalt practitioner. The Cycle model is our vehicle for engaging in the existential moment, and being able to see and use the data of that moment. Sonia Nevis, a renowned Gestalt practitioner, engages clients’ interest in their own process with an invitation: “Can I offer you something that I notice?” or “Are you interested in something that I notice?” Offering this kind of experientially-based data is a basic tenet of most contemporary coaching schools, but using the lens of the COE enables the Gestalt coach to begin teaching clients how to track their own process, which empowers clients with greater awareness and choice.

The “data of the moment,” observed through the COE lens, gives experienced Gestalt coaches the opportunity to skillfully heighten client awareness in the coaching encounter by observing, tracking, and assessing what is occurring at the sensory (physical), affective (emotional), and cognitive (thoughts and ideas) levels. As a meaning-making lens, it is especially adept at bringing into focus unaware perceptual or behavioral patterns that disrupt movement toward achieving and/or satisfying what is needed or wanted. Gestalt coaches use the COE to help clients become aware of what they have been ignoring (not “seeing”) or avoiding (resisting). Through an interactive inquiry process, the Gestalt coach teaches these Cycle points and observational skills to clients and supports their self-empowerment through awareness work. Where there are chronic patterns that interrupt satisfaction of needs, wants, and/or goals, there are opportunities for the coach to offer clients a learning experiment toward new possibility. The structure and creative power of Gestalt experiment is reviewed in Chapter 6.

Leadership clients come with identifying how to see and respond are best positioned to the organization. A fer because of a concern if she became fascinated with she tried harder than o attention to what she with her COE was hov ship challenges. The o to both surprise her a no idea how stern her she became more int rending that unintent and disinterest. The c (those non-verbal me energized her and pr

Countless figures in our everyday lives, we leaders and executive: and ambiguous even the sheer number an a figure that had been displaced by another what could be under experience disorient: deficit disorder that i inability to gain clos interest often create who habitually with ing closure well enc
Leadership clients understand the increased empowerment that comes with identifying new possibilities and the capacity to choose how to see and respond to future threats and challenges—and they are best positioned to pass that learning and energy on to others in the organization. A female executive client who came to coaching because of a concern that she was failing in her leadership mandate became fascinated with the awareness that in talking about how she tried harder than others realized, she had a way to avoid paying attention to what she was feeling. What emerged from working with her COE was how little support she gave herself in her leadership challenges. The observations that were offered to her seemed to both surprise her and then invite further exploration. She had no idea how stern her face was as she relayed her frustrations, and she became more interested in the non-verbal messages she was sending that unintentionally communicated coldness, arrogance, and disinterest. The coaching exploration of her somatic portrayal (those non-verbal messages) illuminated other possibilities that energized her and proved successful to her leadership agenda.

Countless figures compete for our attention every day and, in our everyday lives, we easily attend to some and ignore others. For leaders and executives living in a VUCA world of relentless change and ambiguous events, however, it’s easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer number and complexity of competing figures. When a figure that had been prioritized can so easily and quickly be displaced by another figure, we experience loss of focus. Within what could be understood as a kind of “frenzy of figures,” many experience disorientation—a kind of organizational attentional deficit disorder that throws content and process out of sync. The inability to gain closure or completion around specific figures of interest often creates dissonance, dis-ease, and distress. Those who habitually withdraw from figures of interest without reaching closure well enough to feel content run the risk of feeling
chronically unfinished and unsatisfied—the experience of being stuck. The impact of this stuckness is that clients may be unwilling or unable to mobilize the necessary energy to successfully engage with new and potentially more relevant figures of interest that could move them forward.

Similarly, when one figure of interest dominates and suppresses other valid figures of interest and begins to shape habitual response patterns, that figure can prove harmful to clients’ personal and professional lives by constraining the emergence of alternative possibilities. Perceiving the same figure across different contexts could be understood as having a “frozen gestalt.” Common coaching challenges in organizational contexts offer many examples of people laboring under the burden of conceptual and behavioral patterns that have outworn their usefulness yet live on in the workplace culture. Where such “frozen” mindsets hold sway, new possibilities and different choices are very hard to come by. Many business leaders still stubbornly prioritize function-specific expertise as the desired quality in management hires. But new evidence-based surveys and analyses suggest that employees more deeply value leaders who display emotional intelligence, who ask provocative and relevant questions in relation to industry challenges, and who express authentic interest in employees’ professional lives. The permission for many to be more emotionally sensitive is withheld if people hold emotional sensitivity as an alienated part.

Until recently, for example, Google’s core practices included valuing deep technical expertise and encouraging hands-off management of employees, only engaging them when specific technical guidance was required. When best-practices studies showed that social intelligence skills were instead the strongest indicators of high performance and professional satisfaction, Google began selecting, training, and coaching for those skills, while also ensuring that this new orientation was rolled out to employees company-wide. The Google project attracted energy, creativity, and in the alienated figure...
... of being unwilling to fully engage in the process and supplements habitual routine. In alternative mental contexts, common coach examples of behavioral interventions live on in the workplace, new ideas by. Many specific expertise and evidence-based practices deeply value and provoke change, and who are in need. The solution is withheld from part.

Practices included hands-off management, specific technical solutions showed that indicators of high performance began to select, ensuring that thispany-wide. The Google project attracted a lot of internal and external notice, but from a Gestalt standpoint, the “buzz” confirms that stepped-up energy, creativity, and satisfaction inherently emerge from bringing in the alienated figures that hold value and energy.

Beyond the cognitive content of feedback, the process and quality of the feedback are equally critical to successful change efforts. Although offering experiential, data-based feedback is highly touted in the professional literature, in practice, giving feedback carries many challenges. Edie Seashore, an authority on the art of giving feedback, suggested it takes a great deal of personal courage to speak directly to the client about performance issues, especially those issues whose impact the client has brushed aside or denied—that is, what the client cannot or will not see on her own. The challenge of giving feedback to clients is to work with them to increase their awareness about what has been disregarded or often, without that awareness, alienated by them.

In leadership training and organizational development fields, practitioners have made a business of implementing the 360-degree feedback method to assess personal strengths and weaknesses for employee performance appraisals. In this method, data used in feedback to employees is usually collected anonymously through questionnaires from those who work with them (e.g., manager, peers, and direct reports). The organization is actually advised to hire “professional and neutral consultants” or a “professional coach” to deliver the feedback because giving feedback—especially negative feedback—can be “demoralizing” and/or hard to hear. What can we deduce from that advice?

What is significantly missing in most feedback scenarios is an in-the-moment, process-oriented inquiry into how the employee is receiving and taking in the feedback, which could better facilitate assimilation and integration of any recommended changes. More than simple agreement is necessary to assure the employee’s
assimilation and implementation of the feedback. Supporting the employee's awareness of her responses in the moment of the feedback (which the coach sees by tracking her Cycle) can uncover subtle but significant distinctions between perceived agreement and the unaware resistances that continue to serve the employee's unspoken sense of identity and integrity. Bringing these distinctions into the employee's awareness better serves the client by using the Cycle to see how she is scanning the data, checking to see what she is aware of, what emotions get stimulated, what she is actively looking to make contact with, and what she has learned that is different or new. The Cycle is used to support clients' ongoing evolution and to help them question whether their COE pattern continues to serve them.

Change Stakes: Re-Assessing Threats through Awareness

Coaches often see clients who are fixated on a verbalized agenda. This agenda becomes their content, and their interpretation of what they need or want adheres to this narrative agenda that holds their conscious energy. To the skilled Gestalt coach using the Cycle as guide, however, it may become clear that clients aren’t recognizing their own energetic patterns or in-the-moment shifts in their sensory, affective, or cognitive responses. Examples of clients' unawareness may include: the client who wants to work on a specific business goal but keeps talking about family issues; the client who tells a sad story but who affects a frozen smile and is oblivious to his discordant somatic messages; the client who talks endlessly about preparing for a project that she assiduously avoids or delays doing; or the client who has had the same frustrating experience repeatedly but who hasn’t yet made the link with his role in those experiences. Such patterns are disruptive to both personal and professional goals but are oftentimes not obvious to clients. Their options with awareness

Habituation is a pattern that has served one effectively threaten personal development responsive to changing we are programmed to local, emotional, or cognitive well-being—that is, to and maximize reward. Habitualized social behavior works to identify and respond to physically and environmentally have become more pre

David Rock’s five-reward matrix that drive to others); Certainty (sense of control over others); and Fairness (between people). With easily physiological di and how easily resistant status, how anxious autonomy, and how e ships and in our pers

Using the Cycle the accuracy of what t with the client about described positive hab those that support su obligations. It's a well stranger, for exampl
obvious to clients. Therefore, they are not able to consider other options with awareness and choice.

Habituation is a process of continued behavior, as habit, that has served one effectively. Habits that become unaware can threaten personal development and new opportunities when not responsive to changing circumstances. By evolutionary design, we are programmed to ward off perceived threats (whether physical, emotional, or cognitive) while seeking to enhance personal well-being—that is, normative health seeks to minimize threat and maximize reward. There is a neurological basis and value for habitualized social behavior: The brain uses the same neural networks to identify and respond to social threats as it does to identify and respond to physical threats. In our civilized era, social threats have become more prevalent than physical but are just as serious.

David Rock’s five-domain SCARF model clarifies the threat/reward matrix that drives social behavior: Status (relative importance to others); Certainty (ability to predict the future); Autonomy (a sense of control over events); Relatedness (a sense of safety with others); and Fairness (a perception of what constitutes fair exchanges between people). What the SCARF model makes evident is how easily physiological dimensions of social threats can be provoked and how easily resistance is triggered in order to maintain perceived status, how anxious we become over uncertainty and issues of autonomy, and how emotionally invested we are in our relationships and in our perceptions of fair treatment.

Using the Cycle as a guide, Gestalt coaches learn to measure the accuracy of what they’re noticing about the client by dialoguing with the client about perceived figures. Cognitive theorists have described positive habituated patterns of perception and behavior as those that support successful navigation through routine, everyday obligations. It’s a welcoming habit to smile when introduced to a stranger, for example, and it’s strategically useful to always put
one’s car keys in the same place. Habits that successfully support efficiencies are credited as good discipline. But chronic habituated processes inevitably result in some degree of diminished awareness, which can be costly when important decisions must be made but **aware** choices are limited or unavailable. Diminished awareness results in limited perceptions, and therefore a diminished capacity to choose something different. The extent to which people are able to scan their interior and external landscapes promotes their awareness, which is what empowers them to manage their choiceful responses to the environment. This is key to mastery of self and leadership of others.

The range of behavioral cues that are outside clients’ awareness is always fascinating and usually enlightening to them. For example, if an executive client is talking about his intense work schedule, we may notice he appears to be speaking quickly and with shallow breath. When we point out this observation, all too often we get a familiar response that speaks of a habituated response of not breathing deeply, as if he had no time. These simple phenomenological observations (“I notice you breathe faster when you talk about that”) tend to surprise clients because behavior seems obvious once it’s verbalized, but when habituated, clients no longer notice that behavior. We often aren’t aware of personal traits that others easily see and quickly respond to: how we’re standing, the affect our face shows, what our hands or feet are “saying.” When awareness is heightened around these observable cues, clients can begin to see new behavioral possibilities and choices emerging. They begin to reclaim and redefine perceptions or behaviors that had been lost through habituation (what has become the unaware, alienated part). Clients experience a renewed energy as well as a regenerated sense of integrity when able to be in conscious choice-making. Imagine someone trying to reverse parallel park without a rear view mirror, continually bumping up against obstacles she can’t see and get.

Giving clients feedback that misstep can help clients become aware anew and newly able to themselves and their goals and objectives.

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The Cycle of Experience

can’t see and getting too far away from or over-running the curb. Giving clients feedback on what they’re “not seeing” is like giving them that missing rear view mirror. So the COE is used to help clients become aware of themselves and of habituated patterns that no longer serve their stated goals or even their well-being. With this new and newly available awareness, clients can see the obstacles for themselves and gain better control over choices that could satisfy their goals and needs.

Inquiring into the clients’ experiential data makes Gestalt coaching work dialogical, process-focused, relational—and risky. This speaks to the important role the coach has in offering a safe place to give observations and feedback about the client’s cycle. Phenomenological inquiries (“What did that gesture mean for you?” or “Are you aware you closed your eyes just then?”) are in-the-moment interventions that heighten client awareness but may also heighten client anxiety. These observations can be provocative for the client, and so the Gestalt coach is encouraged to ask the client’s permission to speak about such observations or to follow up with equally provocative questions. “May I offer you an observation?” is a necessary invitation, but it is also wise to remember that focused awareness is potentially unsettling, so the coaching encounter has to occur in a co-created, confidential, trusting space that honors the sensitivity inherent in unmasking old patterns while also inviting new patterns.

Even positive or desired change invites some degree of disorientation, uncertainty, and loss. Coaching for high performance typically must help people adapt to the disorientation and anxiety involved in moving toward even a desired new position and new possibilities. Any coaching approach benefits from understanding the innate need to minimize threats and maximize rewards. Coaches need to consider what the client perceives to be a threat to personal, professional, or social well-being because identifying a
threat arises from individual perceptual patterns (what is a threat to one person may not be to another). What and how people perceive is in part driven by the figures that populate their inner landscape, even if these do not accord with the figures of others. The phrase "a figment of the imagination" refers to a figure that may realistically be an illusion but is nevertheless strongly relevant to the person who holds that figure. The concept of the umwelt reminds us of how much we are unaware of, but the paradoxical theory of change reminds us of the power of calling into awareness what we have been unaware of, especially those parts of ourselves which have been alienated through denial, fear, or lack of use.

The coaching encounter needs to establish a place for "safe emergency," where deep learning takes place. The context for learning must be safe enough that clients feel empowered to push the boundaries of what they consider acceptable. Yet the invitation for work must be at the edge of their discomfort, which breaks up habituated processes and feels risky but interesting. In beginning any coaching work, the Gestalt coach establishes a context and relationship of trust with the client. Essentially, Gestalt coaches must "invite" themselves to engage with clients in what matters most to the clients and receive their "permission" to pursue serious work. The Gestalt coach makes clear that she is interested in offering her observations of what is happening "in the moment" for the client, and that her work is to share observations she trusts will most benefit the client. The coach negotiates with the client that when observations or invitations feel too risky, more support will be offered to maintain the experience of safety. Conversely, if there is too much safety and not enough risk, the experience of emotional flatness will weaken learning possibilities. The safe emergency tension as the created learning environment for the client requires that the coach track the COE for herself, her client, and for the encounter they are managing. Managing the
safe emergency tension with the client is what also supports the
client's trust.

Gestalt coaches work from an appreciative stance through
observational curiosity and awareness inquiries—they share their
own awareness of how they experience the client and inquire
into the client’s process. When the coach asks, “What are you
aware of right now?” the coach then pays particular attention to
hesitations, incongruencies, or resistances that may reveal what
the client isn’t aware of. These are the process figures that the
coach can offer back to the client and, from the client’s response,
offer further observations that are connected to the data from
the client’s COE. The coaching work is done in an aware, co-created
environment of trust, where clients can safely explore alternative
ways of behaving. As the work proceeds, coaches teach clients
how to use the Cycle to further their own learning and develop-
ment. Gestalt coaches teach clients how to be agile, adaptive, and
resilient in their personal and professional lives “on their own,”
in self-generated and self-supported ways.

**Practicing the Cycle: Awareness Is a Two-Way Street**

Working productively with the COE requires an unwavering stance
of attentive curiosity regarding behavioral phenomena, a non-
judgmental consideration of process, and a commitment to report
on observations of sensation, awareness, excitement, action, contact,
and closure as essential process data. These can be considered as
embedded mindful practices—being curious and appreciative about
clients’ every movement through their COE and paying attention
to those movements in an alert, tolerant manner. Such a stance is
integral to the Gestalt coach’s work, but must become integral to
the client’s self-work as well.

For while the coach is attending to the client’s COE, she is
also using her own COE to help her accurately bring into awareness
her own hesitations and resistances. She shares observations from her own COE as an invitation for the client to similarly engage in the awareness work from his COE, which is so critical for the client’s growth and learning. The skilled Gestalt coach uses her observations and tracking of her own COE in service of the client’s learning, using immediate phenomenological examples from her own COE to identify and articulate potential figures of interest for the client. The coach’s ability to report her self-aware, experiential data as she observes the client almost always proves interesting and potentially motivating for the client. We further review the coach’s use of self in Chapter 5, but reference here the skill required to selectively share one’s self-observations as a way of supporting the client.

For example: A corporate client talks about her most pressing work issues in a very calm voice with little affect. But as I listen to her, I am aware that my heartbeat has quickened as she tells me about having to fire four long-term employees. I share my physiological responses with her. I ask her to tell me again that she had to let those four employees go. She does. “What do you notice this time?” I ask. This second time around, the client acknowledges an uncomfortable feeling in her stomach. I invite her to say again that she had to fire four long-term employees, this time more slowly. After she does so, I ask: “What do you notice now?” Repetition and slowing the pace of the words is an awareness experiment (detailed in Chapter 6) that allows the client to pay more attention to her sensations and to cognitively acknowledge that she was deeply sad and even angry about this situation. She’s able to reconnect with her emotional need to grieve over this action, even though the decision was out of her hands and organizationally justified. Doing this allows her to realize the personal sacrifices she is making for this organization and opens up alternative possibilities and choices about her response to the situation.

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For the Gestalt coach, tracking a client’s Cycle of Experience occurs in tandem with tracking her own. That is, the Gestalt coach must have adequate self-knowledge of her own Cycle before she can effectively use her self-observation skills in service of others. This dual awareness takes extensive training and practice until it becomes a process assimilated and embodied into the coach’s being and use of self. Self-mastery of one’s own COE is an identifying marker of the masterful Gestalt coach. When a Gestalt coach has not attained competency using the COE, we observe some of the following:

- If the coach has difficulty scanning her own interior landscape in the moment, she will be less skilled in “seeing” if clients are similarly skipping over scanning their interior landscape.
- If the coach struggles for a clear figure of interest or moves too quickly to action before determining a clear figure, she will be less able to direct clients’ awareness to this tendency in themselves.
- If the coach misses her own “aha” moments (when contact is made, a shift of energy occurs, and change happens), she will more likely miss these pivotal instances when this happens for clients.
- If the coach moves on from contact to new experiences without first reaching satisfying withdrawal or closure, she will have trouble discriminating when this happens in clients’ COE process.
- If the coach fails to attend to, track, and address her own awareness processes, she will diminish her capacity to help clients learn how to slow down, pay attention to emerging figures, express their own awarenesses, and integrate and assimilate the experience of satisfying an important need or want.
Hidden Dimensions: The Pragmatism and Complexity of the Cycle

The Cycle of Experience isn’t meant to anticipate or define all possible variants of complex human behavior. It’s an ideal representation of need fulfillment and, of course, life isn’t ideal. When we see clients who miss certain parts of their Cycle—e.g., when they move immediately to action—we can offer that observation to the client and inquire if that feels familiar. In our achievement-oriented world, the pace of work has become so fast that often people develop a characteristic style of moving straight to action or of bypassing closure. There is even a style that we call “ready, fire, aim.” As coaches, we offer this as an observation, and when the client looks interested, we can follow up with the pertinent question: “So how is that pattern working for you?” Again, we see this style as a reflection of the larger worldwide work environment, which encourages swift responses yet recognizes that the consequences of haste in work are considerable. When scanning and awareness are consistently missed in the pattern of self-management, the outcome is that people may feel they are working hard but not necessarily achieving success. Scanning means getting data in the moment, and the awareness process means deciphering which figure to attend to. Moving to action without accurate scanning and awareness-framing may mean that the course of action is impoverished and will result in a poor outcome. The COE offers a mindful manner to give clients data about their process so that alternative choices and new possibilities can be brought to bear on patterns of which the clients, without that data, had been unaware.

The representational simplicity of the model is at odds with the complexity of its application. For one thing, multiple cycles are often occurring simultaneously. And meeting our needs, even one as presumably straightforward as hunger, can become surprisingly intricate. Hunger has become a factor for trainers not because it’s layered—it can be met by the most urgent figures can also be very being able to pay attention to all the bracket an unfinished completion and satisfaction.

And while present conceptual model, the need to look at diet is a valuable tool for visual dyad, group, models are based on approach embraces the relation to dyadic, it is one of Gestalt’s ways to track the influence levels. It allows us to we can therefore be cognizant of mult different choices and who comes to strength, which may lead from getting coaching across the different l
surprisingly intricate. As mentioned before, the satisfaction of hunger has become a favorite example of contemporary Gestalt trainers not because it’s so simple, but because it’s so nuanced and layered—it can be metaphorically extrapolated to help consider how clients approach other needs or “appetites” and how they satisfy or “nourish” themselves. Even while we may be attending to our most urgent figure, inner biological or external work figures can also be vying for our attention. An important skill is being able to pay attention to the most relevant figure that needs attention and completion. Additionally, it is a skill to be able to bracket an unfinished Cycle with awareness and return to it for completion and satisfaction.

And while presented graphically as a compact “step by step” conceptual model, the COE becomes notably multifaceted when we need to look at different levels of human systems. The COE is a valuable tool that can be used at all levels of system: individual, dyad, group, and organization. While many coaching models are based on coaching just the individual, the Gestalt approach embraces the relevance of seeing individual issues in relation to dyadic, group, or organizational realities. The COE is one of Gestalt’s great gifts to the field of coaching, enabling us to track the influences affecting a client’s issue across system levels. It allows us to see different data across these levels, and we can therefore assist clients to have greater self-awareness, to be cognizant of multiple contexts, and to envision more and different choices and possibilities. For example, the executive client who comes to strengthen his articulation of his organizational vision, which may look like an individual level issue, will benefit from getting coaching assistance as to how this vision is delivered across the different levels of system.
Understanding, assimilating, and applying the COE is obviously challenging, but the Cycle is the essential model and instrument of awareness, which can be used toward learning and growth. It is a critical vehicle for coaches and clients to strengthen their awareness, which is the dimension of vertical development necessary in this VUCA era. It can be applied to any aspect of our lives in relation to biological, intellectual, emotional, social, or spiritual needs, or to any projects or figures of interest that attract our attention and energize us. When used with competence and agility, the Cycle opens up alternative viewpoints and strategic choice points for both coach and client. The pragmatic power of the COE is that it helps to discriminate between multiple figures and to heighten awareness around those figures most relevant for the client. The late Ed Nevis, who pioneered the application of Gestalt to organizational consulting, described the skilled Gestalt practitioner as one who has internalized the Cycle of Experience as an orienting principle through experiencing it as both a client and a consultant. One must not only believe intellectually that this theory of awareness is a powerful perspective, one must have assimilated the value of the awareness process into his or her visceral and skeletal being as a fundamental biological orientation.\(^1\)

The Gestalt coach learns to use the COE as a way to observe and track clients’ interactions with the environment, looking for those habitual patterns that may interfere with clients’ ability to satisfy their stated needs or goals, then facilitate the clients’ responses to this new knowledge. Gestalt clients commonly experience an energetic sense of “liberation” when they become aware of those patterns and get interested in other possible choices. This is what ignites the sense of liberation—the experience of being able to make new choices and the possibility of becoming more whole.