

# Use-of-Self: Presence with the Power to Transform Systems

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## Abstract



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In the current climate of chaos and complexity, change is driven as much by the change agent's use-of-self and presence as it is informed by theories, models, and change methodologies. This article advances the premise that transformational change begins with the change agent through a process that involves understanding self, thoughtful use-of-self, and engaging with a presence that motivates, inspires and engenders followership. By change agent, we mean leaders, managers, consultants, Human Resources professionals, and others on the forefront of change. Our belief is that when these agents of change transform their capabilities, including their emotional intelligence, they also transform the capabilities of the systems in which they live and work. There are six main sections of the article: Introduction, Understanding Self, Four Elements of Self (a framework developed by the authors), Use-of-self, Presence, Cultivating a Powerful Presence, and Conclusion.

*Keywords:* agent of change, elements of self use of self, presence, power, transformational change, systemic change

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The ultimate goal of organizational change is to transform systems in a positive way. Whether working with an individual, group, or the total organization, the desire is to affect a positive outcome. In fact, it is an accepted rule of engagement among change agents that a priority is to leave the system *as good as or better than* they find it. Unfortunately, successful change is an elusive commodity, especially during times of rapidly changing and volatile environments. Research suggests that the percentage of successful change leaves little to boast with 70% of all transformations ending in failure (Ewenstein, B., et. al. July 2015). The question thus becomes, “What makes for effective change?”

Leaders, consultants, academics and others interested in change now accept that effective change requires both *whats* and *hows*; that is, *what* is being done and *how* it is done. They find that success rests in great measure on the engagement style and relatability of the change agent. The message to the leader in the opening case scenario is transformation begins with him through his development as an instrument of change.

**CASE SCENARIO**

*In the process of on-boarding a new consultant, the CEO of a global organization shared his frustration with a string of failed change initiatives. He stated that he was both puzzled and exhausted after hiring the best consultants in the change business and following every step of their prescribed strategies and methods of implementing change. He then quite seriously asked the consultant what could be the issue. The consultant replied that there was likely a host of factors contributing to his challenge, and without knowing more, she could not answer his question. She went on to say, “However, I would like to ask if you have thought about the extent to which you, yourself, have affected the outcome of your change projects? I mean, have you reflected on you as a critical factor of change?” He replied that he knew he had some impact but not in the way the consultant seemed to be implying and said he wanted to hear more.*

## Understanding Self

Use-of-self and particularly presence are gaining interest and further study. Publications and titles span a range from executive presence to neuroscience and presence. Individuals across organizational sectors are intrigued by the idea of “instrumental self as an agent of change” (Seashore et al., 2004, p. 42). This indicates a realization that use-of-self and presence extend beyond optics and speech-making. The desire to increase competence and become a more potent self requires a journey of self-discovery. After all, it was Socrates who famously stated “An unexamined life is not worth living” (Brickhouse et al. 1994, p. 201).

Perspectives on the existence (or non-existence) of *the self* are endless. Early proponents of the self as a construct—among them eastern and western philosophers, scholars, and religious leaders—defined *self* as the immortal soul that transcends the physical self. According to Locke (1690), personal identity or the self, “depends on consciousness, not on substance nor on the soul” (p. 326). Jung (1971) depicts the self as an archetype, an ancient or archaic image that represents the psyche as a whole and the unification of consciousness and unconsciousness in a person. According to Jung, the self is realized as the product of individuation, which is the process of integrating one’s personality. Horney (1950) understood the self to be the core of one’s own being and potential. According to Horney, the real self is the basis for positive growth and change (the developed self)

Figure 1. Four Elements of Self

<p><b>SELF-AWARENESS</b></p> <p>Level of knowledge about self, e.g., values, biases, tendencies, culture, and the extent that knowledge is applied consistently in everyday life.</p> <p><b>Extent to which I am self-aware</b></p>	<p><b>SELF-CONCEPT</b></p> <p>Self-perception. The broader collection of assumptions and beliefs one holds about one’s self. Who am I to me?</p> <p><b>Three words I use to describe me</b></p>
<p><b>SELF-ESTEEM</b></p> <p>Value placed on one’s self-concept. Overall evaluation and judgment of one’s worth, usually viewed against one’s judgment of others.</p> <p><b>My level of self-esteem</b></p>	<p><b>SOCIAL-SELF</b></p> <p>Relatability. Awareness of and healthy interaction with others. Ability to establish and manage quality relationships.</p> <p><b>How I rate my social-self</b></p>

Rainey, M.A. & Jones, B. (2014; 2017)

and the ideal self is the basis for much individual and organization dysfunction (the underdeveloped self). There is general acceptance of existence of self at four levels: spirit, emotion, mind, and body. For the purpose of this writing, self is defined as *one’s essential being different from others, socially influenced through interaction with others and the external world.*

## Four Elements of Self

Tannenbaum and Hanna (1985) are strong in their belief that those who work with others must be grounded in a mature and realistic sense of self, for they say, without knowledge of self, knowledge of the other is much more difficult to attain. The Four Elements of Self framework (Figure 1) was designed by the authors for analysis of self along four dimensions: Self-awareness, Self-concept, Self-esteem, and Social-self.

**Self-awareness.** In a seminal article by Charlie Seashore and his colleagues, *Doing Good by Knowing Who You Are*, (2004), self-awareness is described as a fundamental building block of an individual’s capacity to be an effective agent of change. Self-awareness is conscious and intentional directing of attention to oneself for the purpose of examining one’s feelings, perceptions, thoughts, behavior, assumptions, biases, and motives. This form of introspection enables better understanding of one’s strengths and developmental opportunities. Other means of acquiring self-knowledge are co-workers, managers, mentors, coaches, friends, family, and personal assessments that show strengths, challenges, preference, and stylistic tendencies.

Duval and Wicklund (1972) believe anything that helps people focus on themselves will increase their self-awareness. The researchers demonstrated that when people are not self-focused, chances are their behavior is incongruent with the ideal they have for themselves:

“The process of comparing the self with standards allows people to change their behavior and to experience pride and dissatisfaction with the self. Self-awareness is thus a major mechanism of self-control.” (p. 21)

Duval and Wicklund (1972) also introduced the idea that conscious attention to self is bi-

directional; meaning that people can focus attention on the self or on the external environment. Consciousness directed toward self is *objective self-awareness* where self becomes the object of one's consciousness. Conversely, consciousness directed away from self toward some aspects of the environment is called *subjective self-awareness* where the self is the subject of one's externally directed attention. Furthermore, the two states are mutually exclusive. In the case study presented in the opening of this chapter, the leader is using subjective self-awareness to analyze the organization (consciousness directed toward the external environment) which did not allow him to see himself as a part of the system. By developing a level of objective self-awareness (consciousness directed toward himself), the leader may position himself to be a catalyst for change in his own organization.

**Self-concept.** One's self-concept is a declaration of how one sees oneself, one's self-image. It is often explained that self-concept is like holding up a mirror or infrared camera in front of yourself and noticing what you see, visibly and below the surface. Exploring self-concept is an invitation to peer behind the curtain of self and linger for a while until the fuller self comes into focus—both the beautiful and the blemished self.

Philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1934) found that people develop self-images through interactions with others. He adds that constructing an image of self is made possible through *role-taking*—placing oneself in the position of other and then looking back on oneself from the vantage point of the other. Rogers (1959) identifies three components of self-concept: (1) the view one has of self, (2) the value one places on self (self-esteem or self-worth), and (3) the aspirations one has for self (ideal self).

From a developmental perspective, Lewis (1990) differentiates between the existential self and the categorical self. With the existential self, one has a sense of being separate and distinct from others and this separateness exists over time and space (Bee, 1992) which is essentially, *I am me and they are they*. On the other hand, the categorical self is the self that is connected to the world with a self that shares properties with others. Examples of categorical self are “I am 40” and so are some

others, “I am tall” and so are others. The question for one's self-concept is “Who am I to me?”

The important thing to remember in exploring self-concept is that our sense of ourselves can change. We can continue growing, learning, adapting and transforming ourselves. Human development never stops. This awareness alone liberates and frees us from the fear of self-exploration. Though it may not be easy, we do not have to stay fixed in a non-affirming self-concept. We can instead, embrace our potential.

**Self-esteem.** Self-esteem involves evaluation of the extent to which I approve of myself. It is a way to understand one's self-worth. Having positive feelings about self is necessary for emotional health and well-being. Self-esteem can be based on what others say about you or what you say about yourself. From our early conditioning and life experiences, self-esteem is strengthened by positive experiences and accomplishments as well as by mistakes and negative experiences and lessons learned from both feel-good and feel-bad situations. It is our responses to our experiences and our environment that let us connect with our self-worth. Self-esteem, rationality, perseverance, self-responsibility, and personal integrity are all intimately related (Branden, 2001).

Abraham Maslow (1943) included self-esteem in his motivational theory that describes five needs of human behavior—biological and physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization. For Maslow, self-esteem is based on emotions and the need for self-respect.

Depending on how one feels on a given day, self-esteem can be experienced as a roller coaster or non-stop elevator ride. On these occasions, one is confused about self-worth because one's mood meter goes round-and round and up-and-down which can lead to a depressive state of mind. On the other hand, inflated sense of self leads to misguided ego and in the extreme, narcissism. It is useful when assessing self-esteem to determine if one's valuing of self-worth is dependent upon how others feel about you or how you feel about yourself.

Argyle (2008) believes there are four major factors that influence self-esteem:

1. Reaction of others. If people admire us, flatter us, seek out our company, listen

attentively, and agree with us, we tend to develop a positive self-image. If they avoid us, neglect us, tell us things about ourselves that we do not want to hear, we develop a negative self-image.

2. Comparison with others. If the people we compare ourselves with (our reference group) appear to be more successful, happier, richer, or better looking, we tend to develop a negative self-image. But if they are less successful than we are, our image of ourselves tend to be positive.
3. Social roles. Some social roles carry prestige and promote self-esteem, e.g., performer, doctor, airline pilot, TV presenter, and professional athlete. Other roles carry stigma, and may diminish self-esteem, e.g., prisoner, immigrant, homeless, or unemployed.
4. Identification. The impact of social roles is not passive. As Argyle suggests they are not just out there; they become part of one's self-perception. We identify with the positions we occupy, the roles we play, and the groups we belong to and assign a level of significance to them.

Comparison to others and reaction of others are keenly critical to one's positive or negative judgment of self, especially in adolescence and early professional years. As one matures, self-esteem is less about others and more about one's position in life. And self-esteem is often higher for mature individuals who have come to terms with where they are in life. For them, the question becomes, "Am I living my best life?"

**Social-self.** When speaking of the social-self, relatability is critical. The emphasis is on quality of relationship and not quantity. Again, in reference to George Herbert Mead (1934), this time to his critically recognized approach to sociology called *interactionalism*. His theory supports the notion of the individual as a social-self, not biologically created but produced through the interaction of self with other.

To be one's full self is to recognize relationships, engagements, and social dimensions that support growth and appreciation of self. Relationships in families, group memberships, communities, organizations, professional networks,

and through social media can have lasting influence on personal health and well-being. However, one must have good centering and sound understanding of self in order to manage the boundary between self and others.

The social-self brings with it some tension. While a deeper sense of self happens between people, the self with self is the system that is responsible for making choices. Brewer's (1991) Distinctiveness Theory argues that an individual's social identity necessitates a trade-off between the need for assimilation (self with others) and the need for differentiation (self with self). In other words, at the same time that one wants to be distinct from the group, one wants to be part of the group. For example, technology has drawn attention to the impact of social media on human interaction. The paradox is that while technology isolates, it also opens doors for new relationships and social connection.

Understanding the social-self strengthens one's ability to manage relations in a way that builds trust, is inclusive, affirming, and confirming. One can engage fully with other with clarity, respect, and authenticity and not lose oneself in the exchange.

**Unconscious Bias.** Thorough exploration of self brings with it the need for change agents to attend to how their deeply-rooted assumptions and stereotypes creep and settle into perceptions of others, shape choices and decisions, and impact everyone associated with a particular situation. For example, if one assumes that one generation is more socially or technically competent than another generation and then bases work decisions on such assumptions, this constitutes unconscious bias. Deciding to appoint or not appoint a person to a new project without data or information because she reminds you of someone from your past is unconscious bias. Forming perceptions of others helps to manage the abundance of stimuli in the world; however, it is necessary to periodically examine the underlying assumptions behind one's judgement of others.

#### **Use-of-Self**

Once change agents have a good understanding of self, they are better able to use self to establish the presence they desire. Tannenbaum and Hanna (1985) view Use of Self

(UOS) as social sensitivity—one’s ability to (1) accurately assess the environment, and (2) act with flexibility depending on the situation. UOS requires continuous mindfulness. It also implies a mature and realistic sense of self.

Use-of self is relational in its core intent and represents an invitation to create a bridge between self and other. This brand of engagement challenges change agents, making their interventions as much about themselves as they are about the other and further, holding them answerable for their actions. The aim of using self is to cultivate and deploy the unique qualities of the change agent and to use those qualities in an instrumental and helpful way.

One of the most commanding groups of statements about UOS comes from Seashore, Shawver, Thompson, and Mattare (2004):

“...the use-of-self is a link between our personal potential and the world of change. It starts with our understanding of who we are, our conscious perception of our self, commonly called the ego, and the unconscious or out of awareness part of our self that is always along for the ride and on many occasions is actually the driver. This understanding of self is then linked with our perceptions of what is needed in the world around us and our choice of a strategy and a role in which to use our energy to create change. Our focus here is on the potential for changing one’s own world—the world

as we perceive it—and to act on it and leave our mark and legacy for others to appreciate.” (p. 44)

Nevis, Backman, and Nevis (2003) distinguish between the change agents’ UOS in *strategic interactions* and *intimate interactions* (Table A). Strategic interactions are more objective, formal, and impersonal with greater power distance. Conversations are more content driven and task-focused, and as a result less risky and likely more political. Intimate interactions are more informal, personal, and supportive with less of a power distance between the parties. In intimate interactions, there is willingness by the parties to reveal more about themselves to each other. It follows that intimate interactions are less political; but involves more risk. The openness between the parties makes them more vulnerable to each other. Successful change agents strike a balance between the two methods of using self, depending on the circumstances.

**Responsible and Ethical Use-of-self.** As mentioned, the change agent assumes accountability for his or her actions—intended consequences as well as unintended consequences. There are risks involved in the use of self. Knowing when to focus on self and when to focus on the other is an on-going process. First and foremost, a change agent must know the work is not about him or her; it is about the stakeholders and the larger system. Knowing when and how to share personal experience is the

Table A  
*Strategic and Intimate Interactions*

STRATEGIC INTERACTIONS	INTIMATE INTERACTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objective and formal</li> <li>• Impersonal</li> <li>• Greater power distance</li> <li>• Focus on content and task</li> <li>• Focus on getting work done</li> <li>• Less risky personally</li> <li>• More political</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subjective and informal</li> <li>• Personal</li> <li>• Less power distance</li> <li>• Focus on process</li> <li>• Focus on providing support</li> <li>• More risky personally</li> <li>• Less political</li> </ul>

key. Using self must at all times be in service of advancing the work, moving the system closer to achieving desired goals. Overuse and inappropriate UOS in service of self is ego driven and only serves the change agent. Use-of-self in service of the other is driven by a desire to help. This is why change agents are often characterized as helpers.

## Presence

Emotional Intelligence (EQ) contributes to more effective use-of-self, and sets the stage for cultivating a more powerful presence. The objective of the opening case was to stress the importance of leadership to transformational change. It suggests that the leader in the case is the first tool of system transformation. Because of the perceived power and influence associated with leadership, how leaders execute their responsibilities is important. It is their use-of-self. Because EQ subsumes use-of-self, studies in EQ are helpful in demonstrating the transformative power of use-of-self.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman (1995) establishes EQ as the ability to recognize and understand personal moods, emotions and drives (self-awareness) and manage them (self-regulation) and attend to the moods, emotions and drives of others (awareness of others) and manage relationships with others (relationship management). Goleman states that EQ is a hallmark of effective leadership.

Research findings by Korn Ferry of the United States stock market performance of 487 publicly traded companies reveal that self-awareness—the core component of EQ—is critical to career success and improved executive leadership. The study also shows that self-awareness correlates to overall company financial performance. Public companies with a higher rate of financial return also employ professionals with higher levels of EQ (Esimai, 2018).

Another study finds that leaders with higher self-awareness not only have greater job satisfaction and commitment to their employer personally, but that effect also appears to trickle down to a leader's direct reports (Luthans and Peterson, 2003). In addition, psychologist Martyn Newman (2017) points to findings that indicate the adaptive skills needed in organizations are rooted in emotional and social behaviors. She refers to research showing when EQ grows among individuals in a company,

levels of absenteeism drop and engagement levels increase.

Having established a fuller understanding of self and its impact on performance, we now consider the concept of presence.

**Essence of Presence.** An emerging pattern in our work is hearing leaders, managers, even students declare “I want to work on my presence.” Seldom do they know what presence is; yet, they feel a more engaging presence will result in an elevated sense of self and higher quality connections with others. Many go on to tell us that part of what fuels their interest is the impact left by individuals they perceive to have presence. Then they often follow with, “I want some of that.”

Presence has indeed moved from being an ambiguous therapeutic construct to being a clear consideration in effective change where the leaders of change begin to attend to the “softer” aspects of work. In turn, leaders are gaining appreciation of the value in using themselves as a tool of change.

For change agents, presence means showing up in an open and receptive way to engage in a dynamic, relational process. This process comes from the active and sustained interplay of attention directed to self, attention directed to others, and attention directed to the situational context and broader environment. Rainey Tolbert and Hanafin (2004) describe presence as the engagement of one's essence:

“When it comes to presence, there are no duplicates, only originals. In this sense, presence can be understood as ‘practitioner DNA,’ a composite of unique qualities.” (p.72)

Edwin Nevis (1989) outlines the goals of presence:

“The practitioner is not only to stand for and express certain values, attitudes, and skills, but to use these in a way to stimulate, and perhaps evoke from the client, action necessary for movement on its problems. This means that the practitioner is generally more open and revealing about the thoughts and feelings than might be true in other forms of process consultation. The aim is to take advantage of the issues of difference, marginality, and attraction by the client so

as to use oneself in the most powerful way possible (Nevis, 1987, p. 54).

The relational component is even stronger when it comes to presence than use-of-self.

Perlman's (2007) thoughts about relationships are poetic:

“Relationship is a human being’s feeling or sense of emotional bonding with another. It leaps into being like an electric current, or it emerges and develops cautiously when emotion is aroused by and invested in someone or something and that someone or something ‘connects back’ responsively. We feel ‘related’ when we feel at one with another (person or object) in some heartfelt way.” (p. 22)

The power and impact of presence is for the change agent to be seen as a role model to others, to inspire others, lift them up, and challenge them to a greater commitment to themselves or to a shared goal. Consequently, presence becomes a hallmark of organizational transformation.

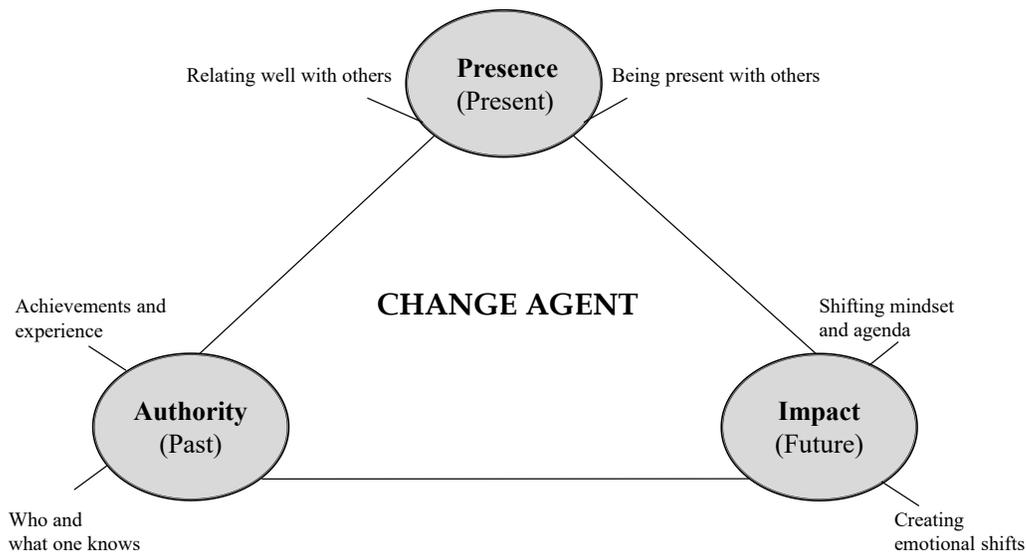
**Range of Presence.** Presence is critical when working in large, complex systems where the environment grows increasingly unpredictable and the context of work continuously changes depending on stakeholder or constituent group. Because one’s presence contributes to the natural ebb and flow

of human interaction, it must be calibrated, and aligned with these forces.

Presence occurs in the *present* moment where choices are made about where and how to support the work at hand. And, according to Hawkins and Smith (2006), presence also exists in the *past* and *future*, along a time spectrum, as illustrated in their Authority, Presence, Impact (API) Model (Figure B). The integration and balancing of the three components are key to one’s personal power.

- *Authority (Past)* represents whom you know, what you know, or what you have done. For examples, education, titles, qualifications, or roles. Authority is represented by one’s education, references, even how and by whom he or she is introduced. One’s authority can open doors and acquire initial attention; yet, alone, cannot create lasting relationships. In fact, over-use and over-referencing one’s authority can lead to negative effect. Authority can also be a liability when one’s use of social media provides personal information and content that is deemed inappropriate or perceived negatively by a prospective employer or client.
- *Presence (Present)* is the ability to develop relationship and rapport both quickly and

Figure 2: Authority, Presence, Impact Model (Hawkins & Smith, 2006)



(Adapted to Hawkins, P. & Smith, N. 2006)

with a wide range of people. Change agents who possess a high degree of presence quickly build trust and command attention and respect regardless of the context or situation and with diverse groups of individual. High-quality presence requires the ability to *read the room* and make quick decisions about when, where, how, with whom to engage OR not engage. It is what is known as *refined gravitas* but not charisma. Presence incorporates the visual, verbal, non-verbal, tone, pace, competence and perceived confidence in that competence—at the same time it is humility.

- **Impact (Future)** Those individuals with high levels of impact make a difference with their presence in the here-and-now and leave a lasting impression once they have left the room. It is possessing the ability to engage and communicate in a way that changes or reframes the way issues are discussed. “The other aspect of impact is the ability to alter the emotional climate of a meeting, relationship, or conversation by skillful introduction of different emotional energy, such as with humor, assertiveness, or the expression of the collectively felt but unexpressed. Change agents with Impact leave a positive impression and hold the thoughts of the other, known as *mindshare* even in their absence” (Rainey & Jones

(2014, p. 119-20), long after they have *left the building*.

When teaching about presence, Nevis (1987) would emphasize the importance of providing what is missing in a system to demonstrate what is possible, to model courage, and to inspire others to embrace their difference or speak in a different voice. Difference itself was a tool of change for Nevis. Hanafin (2004) agrees and offers a perspective on how to gauge the degree of difference that can be pondered and heard. He warns that difference can be both a prerequisite and a peril of presence; that is, one can have too much or too little presence. Hanafin’s Perceived Weirdness Index (PWI) is a guide to how different (weird) one is in relation to a system (Figure 3). He advises agents of change to summon the courage to model a different way of being, thinking, and behaving but with intentionality. If the change agent is too different, i.e., high PWI, effectiveness is jeopardized. This leads to the audience focusing on the change agent’s difference rather than the work. Change agents must manage the dilemma of furnishing a presence that is missing while keeping PWI at a palatable level (Rainey Tolbert and Hanafin, 2006).

**Cultivating a Compelling Presence.** It goes without saying that all we have discussed is hard work for change agents. Exploration of the self can be very exhausting, emotionally, physically, cognitively, and spiritually. Developing a compelling presence takes time and can be

Figure 3. Perceived Weirdness Index (PWI)



(Jonno Hanafin, 2004)

fraught with starts and stops that leave seasoned professionals questioning themselves. Personal development while supporting complex change increases the stress even more.

An interesting aspect of presence is that everyone has presence, without further study or training. Whether intentional or not, each person makes an impression. Presence has many manifestations, overt and covert—when speaking; when silent; when still in the room but not present; when excluding without drawing a visible boundary; when speaking while silent; when standing out without standing up; and when voting without a show of hands.

Gestalt practice in organizations encourages change agents to move beyond passive presence and embrace a more intentional, active and compelling presence (Rainey and Jones, 2014; Rainey Tolbert and Hanafin, 2006). Gestalt further informs the following suggestions for cultivating a powerful presence:

1. Care for the instrument that is self.
2. Know and understand self. Develop emotional intelligence.
3. Work from a stance of awareness and maintain that awareness.
4. Align one's personal presence with the client.
5. Attend to and hold the whole system. Think systemically.
6. Intervene with intentionality. Adapt work to the appropriate level of system, e.g., individual, interpersonal, group, organization or societal.
7. Teach your perspective and model how to approach issues, hopefully to inspire and mobilize the energy of the client system.
8. Embrace multiple realities. Support diversity and inclusion.
9. Work from a stance of optimism and belief in possibilities.
10. Monitor personal tendencies and behavioral patterns. Manage one's PWI.

## Conclusion

Organizational change has moved from the days of sole focus on theories, tools, and techniques. Effectiveness rests on the change agent's ability to

attend to both *the what* and *the how* of change. The how begins with the change agent's use-of-self. This implies concerted effort to attend to personal experience and making choices about how to utilize that experience to create a presence that makes a difference. When agents of change are grounded in awareness of self and intervene with intentionality, they greatly enhance their power to shift systems.

Our purpose in writing this paper was to highlight the importance of self-transformation as an important consideration in organizational transformation. We firmly believe and studies support the premise that self-transformation can have a positive impact on organizational transformation.



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