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Rules of Thumb for Awareness Agents

With a Tip o' the Hat to Herb Shepard

By Jonno Hanafin

FOR THE LAST 30 years, Herb Shepard's *Rules of Thumb for Change Agents* has served as the primary strategic guide in my work. I strongly recommend an annual reading by every change practitioner. For the past 20 years, I have learned and taught at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. GIC's *Organization and Systems Development* program has both integrated and extended me in my practice. From a Gestalt perspective, the three most important elements in the work are awareness, awareness and awareness. I decided to play off of Herb's rules in sharing my sense of some important principles when working from a Gestalt perspective. I often find it helpful to think of myself as an awareness agent rather than a change agent. It generates more options for approaching a situation and helps me not get locked in to a particular outcome. The result may still be change, but the focus of my strategies is heightening awareness.

The underpinning of this stance as an agent of awareness is The Paradoxical Theory of Change: change occurs when one becomes fully what one is, not when one tries to be something different. Heightening awareness in an organization allows, and in many cases forces, the organization to make informed choices about how it wants to be. It may choose to change. It may choose to stay the same. Our role is not to promote one or the other. It is to foster informed choice about what the organization, or the person, needs. This is awareness. An underlying assumption is that organisms are self-regulating.

They do what they need to do in any event. We do, however, add value by heightening awareness of what is going on, and making explicit the options that the person or organization has.

Gestalt OSD is an integration of OD, Gestalt psychology and systems theory. Gestalt is a need fulfillment model—becoming aware of what's taking place, organizing that awareness to recognize what's needed, moving to meet the need, and settling back into a new, changed state. Our role is to support awareness at each of those steps. In that light, with apologies for using the now politically incorrect frame (rule of thumb: in olde English law the thickness of a branch with which a man could beat his wife) and channeling a bit of Herb's profound twinkle, I share my Rules of Thumb as "things to think about when you are being a change agent, a consultant, an organization or community development practitioner—or when you are just being yourself trying to bring about something that involves other people." I will primarily use the phrase awareness agent, but you can substitute consultant, intervener, teacher, therapist or other language to help you be aware of what these ideas evoke for you as you read this.

RULE 1: LEAD WITH YOUR CURIOSITY

Curiosity is an absolute role requirement. If you are not naturally curious or genuinely interested in the people or the

situations you work with, stop reading this and Google “Head-hunters.” Curiosity is an awareness agent competency. It fosters the kind of exploration that can uncover seemingly unrelated, yet quite relevant puzzle pieces. Gestalt is German for whole. Gestalt concerns itself with the whole system and the inter-relationship among all the parts. It’s all connected. Genuine interest and a systems perspective produce the Detective Colombo connections that might otherwise be missed. Leading with your curiosity means exploring with openness about where the exploration will lead. The need for control and a low appetite for surprise thwart discovery. The wonderful dilemma of “experienced novice” is what keeps the work fresh no matter how long you do it. It is ALWAYS different, provided you are open to the uniqueness of each situation and you don’t impose your own fixed meaning in an effort to minimize the ambiguity.

Of the countless learnings for which I am eternally grateful to my teacher Edwin Nevis, perhaps none has impacted me more than his phrase, “Isn’t that interesting?” Although the phrase itself is invaluable, it is more a stance and a life position. Adopt an anthropologist’s perspective. When encountering the unexpected, the challenging, the multiple realities and the absurd, this phrase reminds us it is just another piece of data—no more, no less, which is to be taken in and considered. It doesn’t have to be reconciled immediately. It is the verbal form of the Gestalt stance of “creative indifference.” This stance allows the intervener to stay present, open and engaged even in the face of attack. It keeps the dialogue going and enables the awareness agent to collect more information in the interest of heightening awareness.

Consider one-on-one interviews in preparation for a management team event. Occasionally a manager will respond, “I think these touchy-feely sessions are a waste of time and money.” It is tempting to explain the value and justify the investment. Or get hooked by the assumption of touchy-feely. Reflecting, “Isn’t that interesting,” allows you to become curious rather than defensive. From that stance you can more easily reply, “Tell me more about your view,” from a place of genuine interest. That kind of interest in the face of challenge is often responsible for breaking through to a new level of disclosure and contact.

I do a lot of work with newly appointed CEOs. One of their biggest challenges is how long can they stay open to learning about the organization they just inherited before they launch their new and improved vision. Boards push them to act quickly. Often when they act too quickly they are likely to impose assessments and strategies that worked in their last organization but don’t necessarily fit in the new one. It’s the same challenge for an awareness agent.

RULE 2: IT’S ALL DATA

When you are heightening your own awareness about a system, everything you experience in the engagement with that

system can be valuable. If it stands out to you, it tells you something about the system and yourself. While it is not always immediately apparent how a particular bit of data is useful, make a note of it. Feeling unwelcomed by the receptionist or security guard the first time you visit an organization may offer a glimpse of how the organization manages its boundaries or deals with its customers and employees. You never know how each bit of data or experience is connected to the whole (see Rule 3). This suggests the dual nature of assessment models. While it is often helpful to walk through your favorite diagnostic model (six boxes, seven S’s, the Cycle of Experience), relying solely on the model may cause you to miss other types of data—e.g. your own experience, different organization dimensions, serendipitous occurrences. If it strikes your attention, assume it is worth noting, at least to yourself. The data may help you develop or illustrate a theme in the system. And, it may not. After all . . .

RULE 3: HEY, YOU NEVER KNOW

This slogan for the New York State Lottery is an example of marketing genius. For one thing, it’s so New York. For another, it captures the unpredictability of the outcome. You can never be sure what outcomes will result from your interventions. You need to be clear about your focus and intent with an intervention, but you can never be sure the impact will be what you hope. The best you can do is stay alert to the outcome and work with it. Don’t get too attached to your intended outcome. And don’t rule something out because it doesn’t seem likely. You won’t know for sure until you try it. This rule isn’t meant to suggest recklessly lobbing provocative observations into the system. Rather it encourages adding a dash of ‘what the hell’ to an already existing recipe of responsibility, care, thoughtfulness and commitment to turning up the heat that comes from heightening awareness.

This rule also suggests a willingness to employ your intuition in the work. Intuition is knowing without understanding how you know. In one off-site with a top management team we agreed on a group experiment. The CEO would leave the room for a few hours so we could see how his leaving impacted the group’s level of candor. He left. Not a peep. After ten very long

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minutes, it occurred to me that when I observed the group during their weekly meetings in preparation for the off-site, team members always sat at the same place around the table. I asked them to rearrange themselves in the order they typically sat. The conversation took off before the last person was in his chair. It continued until the CEO returned three hours later. Hey, you never know.

RULE 4: YOU GET MORE INFORMATION WITH AN OBSERVATION THAN YOU DO WITH A QUESTION

Among the catalogue of paradoxically profound Yogi Berra-isms is “you can observe a lot just by watching.” You can also learn a lot just by observing, then sharing your observation. Most of the time an observation is met with an explanation, more data or an a-ha. If you are comfortable with the silence that can accompany someone processing a new awareness, you will be amazed at what it can yield. Try it. Choose a setting. Point out something you observe, and notice what happens. Most likely you will be offered more information. Be prepared to be surprised at the connections and disclosures you encounter. Instead of asking a management team “how do you see your relationship with your customers?” and eliciting the standard lines about “our most important stakeholder,” “key to our success,” etc., point out that in the previous agenda item on customer relationships, more than half of the discussion revolved around internal issues and dynamics.

Questions are useful and expected of consultants. In fact, “typical” consultant questions are met with patterned responses. To break the stimulus-response cycle, and therefore heighten awareness, make an observation instead of asking a question. Eighty percent of questions are disguised statements anyway. In my experience, it is very difficult for OD consultants not to ask questions. When you do ask questions, ask them for information, not confirmation. Consider the local television news reporter who rattles off an extended “question” to a subject that begins with “do you think,” goes on for two minutes and ends with the subject saying “yes.” That tells us a lot about the reporter’s way of making meaning, but reveals nothing new about the subject’s view. Part of why leading questions don’t generate awareness is Rule 5.

RULE 5: PEOPLE VALUE THEIR OWN CONCLUSIONS MORE HIGHLY THAN YOURS—SO ASK FOR THEIRS

An awareness agent’s answer rarely carries as much energy as the client’s answer. We learn much less about the client from our conclusions. That is not to say we should never offer conclusions, especially when the insight of fresh connections presents an alternative to a fixed way of making meaning. But the role of an awareness agent isn’t just to heighten awareness about what is happening. Our role is also to heighten

awareness about the system’s way of organizing the information it collects. It adds value to help someone see there are many ways of organizing or framing their experience. We can all look at the same data and construct different meaning: Witness stock market analysts at the end of any trading session. Organizations can get locked into fixed diagnoses that keep them from exploring new avenues of response. Nothing impacts a solution more than the way the problem is framed in the first place. After action has been taken, heightening awareness about people’s meaning making process supports learning.

My favorite awareness agent intervention is to ask people the question (see, questions are OK sometimes), “What are you learning?” It invites on-demand reflection. I gave a keynote address some years ago at a regional change conference in Singapore. My topic was “Experience: what’s the difference between having it and learning from it?” Simply put, the difference is often asking the question, “What did I learn from what I just experienced?” Without pausing to actively reflect, we move on to the next experience without anchoring and integrating the learning from this one. Hence the difference between having ten years’ experience and one year’s experience repeated ten times. Most systems don’t value or take time for this kind of reflection. That’s why many of them keep making the same mistakes. If you subscribe to the notion that the only sustainable competitive advantage is learning faster than your competition (I do), then posing the question, “What are you learning?” in various forms at many levels of system is a definite awareness agent value add.

RULE 6: “IT’S JUST A THOUGHT”—CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS AND THINKING, INCLUDING YOUR OWN

Consultants often target the behavior of a client when raising awareness. Behavior change is frequently the interest of clients. But behavior alone may not be enough. Deeper, more enduring impact often results from heightened awareness of beliefs, assumptions and thinking. What assumptions is the individual making that define the path he or she takes (e.g. about people, organizations, change)? How are those assumptions and beliefs limiting or enabling the achievement of one’s purpose? How is an organization’s collective thinking shaping the way it defines opportunities and challenges? What is it missing because of that thinking? Most assumptions are made out of awareness. Shared assumptions are rarely challenged from within. Pointing the spotlight on the usefulness and validity of beliefs and assumptions is a valuable service of the awareness agent. Most of us don’t even think about how we think. We just think. Having our attention brought to “either/or” thinking or win/lose competitive thinking can free us up to more alternatives.

Challenging assumptions is not always appreciated. I sat in one corporate HR discussion on layoffs revolving around the merits and issues of firing both partners of a working couple.

My observation was “It sounds like you are assuming economics is the only criteria for decision making.” Everyone stopped talking, looked at me for about 15 seconds, then picked right up where they left off the discussion. My challenge was outside the range of what they could take in and consider.

As awareness agents, we also need to challenge ourselves. An example is our beliefs and assumptions about what adds value to our clients. For some, simply heightening awareness is not enough. We must make something happen. But reframing adds value. It opens up new thinking paths and provides an unsticking function. Consider the Gestalt notion of resistance as ‘a need in another direction.’ Just that reframe legitimizes different needs and catalyzes the search for mutually attractive resolution. Is influencing thinking enough? One of the things that causes me to reach for the blood pressure medication is someone saying “it’s just a thought,” as if to dismiss their offer before anyone has a chance to consider it. A thought can be very powerful. A single thought has changed companies, generations and history.

The role of awareness agent is to facilitate exploration. An underlying Gestalt value is respect for the client’s ability to choose what is best for him or herself, with a little help from an agent who supports self-awareness. The late Elaine Kepner captured the role of a Gestalt practitioner as “a tour guide, guiding people over territory they know better than you.”

RULE 7: WHEN FACING A DILEMMA, NAME IT

One often helpful frame is a problem versus a dilemma. A problem has a solution. If the CEO retires, replace her. A dilemma is the presence of inherently conflicting forces in a system. The forces are natural, predictable and unavoidable. Should managers be focusing on long-term results or short-term results? Yes. Should employees be learning in their jobs or performing? Yes. Whenever the answer to a multiple-choice question is yes, it’s a dilemma. Dilemmas can’t be solved. They can only be managed. There is no way to eliminate the tension. Dilemmas involve interdependence. It is necessary over time to engage both sides of a dilemma. If it is truly a dilemma, the one side is not sustainable over time because it is dependent on the other pole for its sustainability. For example, change and stability. Change fosters progress and growth, stability supports tradition and definition. If an organization only values one, it is not sustainable. The awareness agent adds value by highlighting dilemmas and facilitating the exploration of both sides.

As interveners we have our own dilemmas. Do you give clients what they want or what you think they need? (Self-diagnosis is a starting place. I like to provide enough of what is asked for to position myself to be able to supply what is needed.) Do you allow each group to report out or do you hold to a time boundary? A useful way to manage dilemmas is to articulate them. Just naming the dilemma shifts the responsi-

bility for managing it from the awareness agent alone to a shared responsibility with the client system.

RULE 8: 85 PERCENT OF LIFE IS JUST SHOWING UP

This Woody Allen quote captures the power of being present in heightening awareness. Just sitting in with a group is itself an intervention. Imagine an observer joining your family for a week. Even without saying a word, the observer’s presence would have an impact on your family. One CEO I had worked with for a while invited me to attend a crucial meeting of his senior team. There was a high degree of conflict within the group. I asked him what role he wanted me to play. “I just want you to be there. Good things seem to happen when you are around.” A facilitator’s presence raises a level of consciousness that is otherwise missing. I have had the experience of sitting quietly with a group when someone said, “I know what Jonno’s thinking. He’s thinking that we are talking over each other and not listening to each other.” I was daydreaming at the time.

RULE 9: SELECTIVELY SHARE YOUR OWN AWARENESS

One of the hallmarks of Gestalt practitioners is how they use themselves. The intervener is part of the system being addressed. The presence of the intervener impacts the system, and vice versa. Using yourself in the work means bringing your whole self to the work—your insight, your personality, your values, your self. It means positioning yourself on the boundary rather than outside the system. This use of self is what makes the work challenging and exciting. Autopilot doesn’t work. A systems perspective says the intervener is a microcosm of the system. What is happening in the intervener and between the intervener and the system mirrors what is taking place at various levels of the system. Issues ripple, including in you. So, in addition to sharing observations about what is happening in the system, the intervener may also share his awareness of what is happening in him. I have occasionally shared my confusion about what is taking place only to find others piling on with their confusion. Speaking my confusion legitimized theirs. The key here is selectively sharing. Sharing too much self-awareness will make you the focus. Part of the artistry of this work is learning how to use enough of self to heighten awareness and contact in the client system.

RULE 10: DON’T UNDERESTIMATE BGO’S

BGO stands for a Blinding Glimpse of the Obvious (courtesy of Denny Gallagher—known more for his seminal work on the FMS Lobe.) It is easy to dismiss offering an observation to heighten awareness because it seems so obvious. Keep in mind it may be obvious to you, but it is often a blind spot to a

client. You enter a system with fresh eyes. This fresh perspective is part of what the client seeks from you. It is what allows you to ask “dumb” questions. I love asking dumb questions and watching the reaction. I recently had a first meeting with a CEO in preparation for a session with his senior team. He talked a lot about the importance of people and collaboration in his organization. He told me he valued open exchange and building consensus—that this is something the senior team must model for the rest of the organization. I then observed that as I was waiting by his desk I noticed a prominently displayed sign that read “There is one best way to do things, and that is my way.” I asked how that fit with what he just said. He looked a bit startled, smiled, sat back and nodded his head. His answer was less important than the fact that we could both feel our new relationship taking shape. The rest of our discussion had a much different tone. He was more relaxed and open and offered fewer canned responses. All I did was highlight something obvious. As a newcomer, I could ask the question with more innocence than accusation.

RULE 11: EMBRACE THE MULTIPLE REALITIES IN EVERY SITUATION

Perhaps more than any other distinctive competence, Gestalt is known for its unique approach to resistance. Change and resistance are inseparable. They are two sides of the same coin—the force for change and the force for sameness. Resistance is a manifestation of multiple realities—a manager wants an employee to put in more hours. The employee wants a better work-life mix. The manager experiences the employee as resisting. The employee is taking care of his needs. The intervener’s role in dealing with resistance and conflict is to acknowledge the multiple realities of the situation. I always smile when someone says “in the real world.” Which real world?

Heightening awareness of multiple realities often means bringing opposing forces into contact with each other. This is a key intervention design principle. The awareness agent’s role is not to resolve differences, it is to allow them to engage each other in the hope of creating a new, shared reality. In one joining of two high tech companies, I interviewed leaders of both organizations and shared my observations. What stood out most for me was the different reality each company had about what was happening. Organization A described the process as a merger. Organization B described it as an acquisition. Both had data to support their reality. My intervention was to convene both leadership groups, name the difference, acknowledge the legitimacy of each view and facilitate a discussion. The conversation moved gradually from debate to dialogue. The combined group taught itself how to better manage their dilemma.

RULE 12: MANAGE YOUR PWI

PWI—Perceived Weirdness Index. Being an awareness agent means providing a presence that’s different. If you’re not different, what do they need you for? You often are called upon to model behavior missing in the system. But if you are too different, the system may focus on how different you are, rather than what you advocate. When I coined the term PWI in 1976 at Syncrude Canada Ltd., the internal OD group used it as shorthand with each other in public when we noticed clients reacting negatively to behavior they experienced as over the top.

Change takes place at the boundary. That is where you need to position yourself. In that sense the awareness agent is a marginal role. We want to keep the client on their growth edge. While some discomfort is necessary for growth, too much will entrench the status quo. Similarly, the awareness agent must be different enough to attract attention and intrigue, but not so much as to violate Herb’s first rule of thumb for change agents, Stay Alive.

There are other rules, but these seem like a good start. The awareness agent supports what could be by focusing on what is. This can be a challenging role. Heightening awareness often requires slowing people and processes down. Most leaders don’t want to be slowed down. The paradox of slowing down in order to speed up can escape them initially. But once they have been stopped in their tracks by an insight or ah-ha, the momentum generated by the awareness makes the pause worthwhile. ■

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