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“If intention and authenticity in relationships is of interest, this is for you. Doug offers a supportive and challenging invitation to explore growth and change in ourselves and others.”

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“Presence is essential for the accomplishment of any critical task. Complete focus, totally connected—no less is required of coaches and leaders. Doug is a great teacher, using presence as a theme to probe deeply into human consciousness, the only place real transformation can occur.”

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“Doug Silsbee nails it, giving us a doorway to experience the power of presence, and to bring it to bear on the development of authentic, purpose-driven leaders. This book is a sensible, grounded must-read!”

—**Richard J. Leider, founder,  
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“Silsbee moves incisively into the core challenges of development. Rigorous methodology and practices show how to develop the authentic, resilient leaders we so need. Silsbee is the master he writes about, knowing the possibilities that await those willing to engage in the rigorous demands of accelerated development.

—**Rod Napier, coauthor, *The Courage to Act***

“*Presence-Based Coaching* reminds us that our first step is the work we do on ourselves. This book invites us to expand beyond skill and technique to offer our presence—augmenting possibilities and choices for ourselves and clients.”

—**Sharon King, editor,  
Center for Creative Leadership *Handbook of Coaching***

“Doug Silsbee helps coaches and leaders wake up and develop beyond their current level of effectiveness. He presents a compelling picture of the power of bringing presence to clients.”

—**Mary Beth O’Neill, founder, MBO Consulting, and author,  
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“Doug delivers frameworks for developing real-world leadership skills, while expanding awareness of what’s possible, even essential. Authentic and thought-provoking, I highly recommend this important new work.”

—**Kelly Durkan Bean, assistant dean of executive education,  
UCLA Anderson School of Management**

“Presence is the most important yet least understood coaching competency. Here is a path to effectiveness, life-long professional development, and joy for coach and leader.”

—**Marcia Reynolds, author, *Outsmart Your Brain*,  
and former president, International Coach Federation**

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# Contents

Exercises, Practices, Exhibits, and Figures ix

Foreword xi

Acknowledgments xv

The Author xvii

Introduction 1

Core Assertions 3

How to Use This Book 4

My Promise 6

Reading as Experience 7

## PART ONE

### **Presence, Self-Generation, and the Role of Coaching 11**

#### **1 Presence 15**

Presence Demystified 16

So, What Is Presence? 19

Implications of Presence 22

Presence and the Products of Coaching 25

Challenges to Presence 28

Chapter Summary 34

- 2 How Humans Change: Conditioning, Identity, and Self-Generation 37**
  - Conditioning 38
  - Identity 43
  - Becoming Self-Generative 49
  - How Coaching Supports Self-Generation and Sustainable Change 57
  - Living in Self-Generation 63
  - Chapter Summary 66
- 3 Coach as Development Partner 69**
  - Performance Versus Developmental Coaching 70
  - Principles of Developmental Coaching 73
  - Three Integrated Structures for Development 75
  - Presence-Based Coaching: Foundations into Methodology 77
  - Chapter Summary 92

PART TWO

**Inner Moves for Presence-Based Coaching 93**

- 4 Orienting 95**
  - A Coaching Model 97
  - Your Client 100
  - Purpose 105
  - Coaching Outcomes 108
  - Expanded Contexts 109
  - Chapter Summary 113
- 5 Holding 115**
  - The Relational Field 116
  - Silence and Possibility 122
  - Chapter Summary 127

PART THREE

**Generative Practices for Presence in Mind, Body, and Heart 129**

- 6 Mind 133**
  - Building the Observer 135
  - What's to Observe? 137

- Working with Habits 140
- Designing Self-Observations 142
- Engaging in Self-Observation 145
- Coaching Implications 147
- Chapter Summary 148
- 7 Body 151**
  - Assertions of Somatic Literacy 153
  - Centering 155
  - Building Somatic Awareness 157
  - Somatic Self-Observation 159
  - Working with Urges 161
  - Body Practices 161
  - Coaching Implications 164
  - Chapter Summary 165
- 8 Heart 167**
  - Developing Compassion for Self and Others 169
  - Experiencing the Heart 171
  - Deciding Through the Heart 173
  - Gratitude 174
  - Connecting Through the Heart 175
  - Longing 177
  - Coaching Implications 179
  - Chapter Summary 180

## PART FOUR

**Relational Moves for Presence-Based Coaching 181**

- 9 Coach for Self-Observation and Realization 185**
  - Reflect 186
  - Invite Internal Awareness 189
  - Focus the Field 193
  - Challenge Identity 198
  - Chapter Summary 201
- 10 Coach for Reorganization 203**
  - Shift Perspective 204
  - Reorganize Around Center 208
  - Build Competency in Self-Regulation 212

Mobilize Commitment 216

Chapter Summary 218

**11 Coach for Stabilization 221**

Design Fieldwork 222

Work Jointly 237

Create New “Facts on the Ground” 239

Chapter Summary 241

**12 Milestones: Entry, Continuation, Completion 243**

Entry 244

Continuation 254

Completion, and Beginning 260

Chapter Summary 266

**Coda 267**

Appendix A: Table of Moves and Practices 271

Appendix B: Purpose Exercise 275

Appendix C: Annotated Bibliography 277

Appendix D: Web-Based Resources 285

Notes 287

Index 293

## How Humans Change: Conditioning, Identity, and Self-Generation

*We first make our habits, and then our habits make us.*

John Dryden

*The beliefs that for a time feel so comfortable that we may not be fully aware of them somehow reach the limits of their effectiveness for us and begin to get in our way. . . . Development is . . . always a matter of transcending some earlier way of knowing and including it in a newer, more complex way of knowing.*

Bill Drath and Ellen Van Velsor

**T**HE WORLD NEEDS LEADERS WHO ARE RESILIENT, optimistic, resourceful, authentic, and committed. As leaders and coaches, it is our business to understand what it takes to develop these capacities, first in ourselves and then in others whom we propose to develop through our coaching.

While humans can't help but change and evolve, this development tends to proceed slowly. The deep biological needs for self-preservation, adaptation, and conformity tend to habituate us rather than accelerate the development of ways of being that are responsive to the emerging political, economic, social, and natural environment.

We are biological creatures, and as such we tend to embody the traits that have been required for survival over millions of years, but may not necessarily be relevant to our unique circumstances now.

Accelerating the development of leaders requires understanding how we become shaped into the people we are. We must be clear about the assumptions we make about how humans grow, change, and develop because useful coaching methodology rests on these assumptions.

In this chapter, we appear to diverge for a few pages in order to explore the nature of human conditioning. How did we become the leaders that we are? What holds our personalities and behaviors in place? And how do we work with the nature of that conditioning in order to become self-generative and embody the qualities listed above?

These are big questions. Philosophers, neuroscientists, geneticists, and psychologists have explored these topics in great depth; I won't pretend to offer a new explanation of how this occurs. However, as practitioners concerned with both our own development and that of others, it is critical to have a working model of how humans develop, form personality, change, and resist change. This is foundational for our work.

## CONDITIONING

It is essential to have a narrative that can guide our work. Our capacities and achievements as executives, teachers, authors, coaches, and entrepreneurs are enabled, shaped, and limited by a myriad of elements embodied in who we are. To know ourselves is to understand our nature as biological organisms who received certain stories we came to hold as true, as people who have unique genetic endowments and histories, and as the inevitable cumulative products of both our own deep histories and every choice that we have ever made.

Similarly, who we will be in the future is in some way shaped by the choices we make now.

### PRESENCE PAUSE

By becoming conscious of how we became who we are, we can wake up to the unfolding story of our own lives and see ourselves in a developmental framework. We can, in fact, become conscious of our

own developmental process and can choose and greatly accelerate how we enter into it. By becoming more present, we begin to author our own story rather than living unconsciously in the story that we are only slowly waking up to.

### *The Developmental Impulse and Shaping*

Each of us is the inevitable product of the miraculous process of unfolding we call development.

Like all of us, my grandson, Miles, came into this world helpless and dependent. Yet he arrived pre-wired with a deep instinctive urge to root for the breast. He didn't have to be taught how to do this; he simply knew. For Miles, the behavior of rooting around was quickly rewarded with warm milk, and nursing quickly became familiar and habitual.

As I write this, Miles is eight weeks old. He is incessantly in motion. His face changes moment-by-moment, and his little arms and legs flail around, seemingly at random, with no conscious control. He is adorable, and we can't help but respond with instant and total love for this little perfect creature.

As the miracle continues to unfold, his neural system develops through these random movements. As he discovers what works and what doesn't, the random movements will develop into crawling, walking, and, who knows? Maybe eventually pole-vaulting! As I watch my grandson, I am in awe that I am witness to the early stages of a primal and powerful development process, driven by the deep impulse that propels us all forward.

We are shaped throughout life by the interaction between the primordial impulse for creativity and experimentation, and continuous feedback from the world about what works and what doesn't. Our early years are particularly formative. Some behaviors get rewarded: parents are thrilled over our first stumbling word, crying brings a caregiver running to our comfort. We learn to do the things that get us what we want: approval, love, food, a good feeling. Other behaviors don't get rewarded: poking the cat's eye results in a painful scratch, or crying elicits a strong reaction from an already overtaxed parent.

Implied by this is a self-adaptive learning capacity: when something works and is fun, we do it more. We learn to suppress the

impulses that first bring pleasure but lead to consequences we don't want. Our bodies come equipped with a natural orienting mechanism that has the function of guiding us toward or away from certain kinds of experiences as we learn and develop.

While the impulse for experimentation and creativity is always available within us, patterns of behavior begin to form that constrict our creativity. Although this is necessary, it also damps our fullest expression as a human being. We can begin to see that we are products of all the experiences that we have had. We can say that we are conditioned by the world around us. As the poet David Whyte says, "We shape our selves/to fit this world/and by the world/are shaped again."<sup>1</sup>

### *Habit Formation*

Over time, emerging patterns of behavior become embedded as habits; we can think of our particular accumulation of habits as the basis of a unique personality. Habits are part of who we are in the world, and the nature of a habit is that we no longer have to think about them.

Think of driving, and how awkward and tentative we were at first. As driving became more familiar and practiced, our brain internalized the complex coordination of movement and balance required. Now, some of us drive so automatically that we (erroneously) believe we can safely dial a phone or check e-mail as we drive in traffic. This is true for more than mechanical habits like driving. Think of the rote way we ask "How are you?" when we don't expect or even desire a real answer, or how we eat our food, often without tasting it, while carrying on a conversation.

These habits are just part of who we are. They are defaults, learned over years, that shape how we interact with others and respond to what life offers. Habits are like worn grooves in the parts of our brain that drive behavior. Without a conscious decision to do something else, we nearly always act consistently with these habits. Collectively, our habits determine who we are as a person, how we show up in the world, and how others perceive and respond to us.

After years of practice interacting with the world in ways that make us feel comfortable, we have internalized our habits to the degree we no longer have to think about them. Others may well notice them and remark on them as our unique personality. Yet we remain largely unconscious of these habits because they're in the

background. It is our nature to learn habits well; it is the nature of habits to be invisible and automatic.

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EXERCISE 2.1.

*Identify a Habit*

Identify a habit of your personality. This might be something that another person observes in you and considers as your quirk, or something that you do fairly consistently that someone else finds mildly annoying. Briefly describe this habit.

- Where and when did you start doing this? How did you learn it?
- 

*Habit Nature*

Habits, which consist of a constellation of related phenomena, are the predominant means by which we experience and respond to our world. Generally a habit consists of practiced behaviors intertwined with emotions, sensations, and a story, or interpretation of reality, that justifies and produces the behaviors.

Our habits are stored in the very shape and hard-wiring of our bodies. They are triggered by events and people around us, which, in our internal story, provide a full justification for our resulting behavior.

For each of us, our world consists of these sensory experiences and the interpretations we make of these experiences. Our world is unique to us, and no one else can fully understand it.

 PRESENCE PAUSE 

For example, teenagers go through a natural developmental stage in which their brains are developing new pathways and capacities. This is an extraordinarily creative, and often dangerous, time. Teenagers feel immortal, are discovering what they can be in the world, are socializing with their peers, and are differentiating themselves from their parents. Unfortunately, this natural and healthy process often results in tension between independence-seeking teens and parents concerned over their safety.

In the teenager's story, very real to him, the parents don't understand him, are old and irrelevant, don't trust him, and are unnecessarily controlling. This interpretation is accompanied by strong emotions and justifies not listening, pushing limits, and sometimes outright deceit.

In the parents' (equally correct) story, the teen is overconfident, hanging out with friends who are bad influences, not yet mature enough to make sound decisions, and in need of firm boundaries for his own good. This interpretation leads to strong emotions and behaviors of clamping down, limits, and behaviors. The teen interprets these as overly controlling.

Both the teenager and the parent live in their own story. They feel completely justified in the habitual actions they take to, respectively, defy and assert authority. Their conditioned emotional reactions and behaviors, natural and developmentally appropriate, make perfect sense in their world. The difficulty results from the fact that teen and parent literally live in different worlds that are rendered incompatible by the power of interpretation. (Fortunately, the development process ensures that parent and teen usually transcend the identities that clash so readily during those years and find harmonious ways of enjoying each other's company.)

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#### EXERCISE 2.2.

#### *Identify Your Story*

Consider the habit that you identified in Exercise 2.1. Now identify the story with which you justify this habit.

- When someone else points out this habit to you, what are you likely to say in reply?  
How do you justify or explain the habit?
  - How might a reasonable person see it differently?
  - What other story might be true?
  - How does your story serve you?
- 

Our world is limited because it is determined by our interpretation, which inevitably excludes everything that we're not able to see or understand. Show a member of certain tribes in Africa a photo of an animal with which she is very familiar and she won't recognize it.

It's not because the animal is not recognizable to her; she's seen thousands of them. It's that there is no way for her to interpret what a photo represents. Photos are not part of her interpretive structure and therefore not a part of her world.

In summary, our habits comprise our personality and way of being in the world. They include the specific behaviors that we have learned to engage in to get what we want (and avoid what we don't want) and the sensations, emotions, stories, and interpretations that construct meaning in our world and justify our habits. We can say that our stories produce, and are produced by, our habits. By their very nature as defaults, they represent a restriction in our range of ways of seeing, interpreting, and acting.

## IDENTITY

We are driven through this process of development, differentiation, and individuation to form a unique identity in the world. Our identity is our self-conception: what we hold to be true about ourselves. We might have an image of our self as a strong leader, capable of motivating and inspiring others. This identity is linked to a behavior of talking in front of groups. Positive feedback from our audiences affirms and reinforces that identity, making it stronger.

In addition we often, consciously or unconsciously, set up situations where that identity will be reinforced. We construct in our lives the circumstances that support the identity that we are seeking to create. This allows the development of a healthy ego and a sense of self as competent, accepted, and worthy in the world. By relying on what we do well, we get better and better at those things.

Our identity also tends to constrict us. In a very real sense, our identities become their own champions—self-perpetuating, unconsciously working around the clock to ensure their own survival, and constantly alert for threats. Other behaviors tend to atrophy as they become less practiced. Left unchecked, this tendency leads to an increasingly narrow range of behaviors. At the extreme, our personalities become a caricature of our greatest strengths as we lose the capacity to respond flexibly to what the world throws at us.

Our identity, and specifically the behavioral and interpretive habits that make up that identity, inevitably run up against circumstances in

which they no longer match what is required of us. While we came by our habits honestly, through years of hard work, adaptation, and self-preservation, our identity has reached the limits of effectiveness. Our very strengths have become our liabilities and are getting in our way. We are called to being something new, and yet every fiber of our being wants to rest in the familiar home of our tried and true identity.

This is a crux moment in both personal and professional domains. External circumstances and job requirements change. However, unless a leader is able to reinvent the identity she has built over years, which has been endlessly reinforced by others and has arguably been essential to her success so far, her career may derail. This is a tragic loss for both the leader and the organization.

Development inevitably requires that we transcend ourselves. This requires a significant and sometimes difficult letting go of old habits. Coaching, and presence, can help us enormously.

### *A Case Example: Janet's Identity*

A former client of mine (I'll call her Janet) had been rapidly promoted to the highest levels of a large national financial services firm. Growing up as the oldest of three children, she had significant responsibilities for looking out for her siblings. She was an achiever and had been the first in her family to go through college.

I experienced Janet as a wonderful, generous person, and sharp as a tack. She had built a strong identity as a quick problem solver with superb analytical skills. And she was always willing to go the extra mile to help out her colleagues. Both traits had been noticed and rewarded with quick progress up to the national office.

Coming from the field, Janet had extensive knowledge of the technical issues that people faced. She was also hard-wired to help. She felt significant pressure to prove to her new boss that his confidence in promoting her was justified.

Janet frequently got calls from people in the field, and her habitual structure of interpretation led her to see each of these calls as an opportunity to help and a chance to solve a problem. Knowing that she would quickly be able to identify the root cause and organize the various players to solve the problem by going to their site, Janet would fly to the regional office to work with the people there to solve the problem.

By doing this, Janet's dual identities as a helper and a problem solver were reinforced. Her habits, formed early in life, were still being reinforced as a senior professional in her fifties. The people in the field welcomed the high-level support, and their problems were solved fast when she came. They were effusive in their appreciation and rated her very high on company 360-degree reviews, reinforcing her identity. Janet's boss heard frequent compliments from others at the vice president level about her effectiveness. It seemed an ideal marriage of Janet's identity and the needs of her people in the field.

You can see where this is going, can't you? Janet's habits were becoming stronger and stronger as she reaped the rewards that her particular identity in life craved. Although she was grateful for the opportunity for higher responsibility, Janet's life had no balance: her marriage was suffering, she was often stressed and sick, and her job was becoming bigger and bigger.

Like all of us, Janet was a creature of habit. Driven by her attachment to helping others and solving problems, her tremendous strengths were becoming her very limitations. Not only were her people not learning to solve their own problems, but Janet was often in the field when she was needed elsewhere. Clearly the emerging picture was not healthy for Janet or for the company, although she was receiving plenty of positive feedback and appreciation that reinforced the behaviors. Janet came to coaching because she didn't like where this was going.

Coaching provided an opportunity for the automatic nature of Janet's habits to loosen their grip and for her identity to begin to shift as she discovered a new view of her contribution. This led to the development of new, more appropriate habits that served her and the company better.

We'll come back to Janet in a bit, after we explore more about what holds habits in place and how we can loosen their grip to become self-generative.

### *Attachments and Aversions*

Underneath each visible habit, and inextricably bundled with our behaviors and narratives, are specific sensations and internal experiences that we can learn to observe. This is because it is intrinsic to our conditioning that habits are stored in the body.

## EXERCISE 2.3.

*Identity: Who Do You Hold Yourself to Be?*

Spend a little time reflecting and journaling about the following questions.

- Who are you? List about four or five positive adjectives that you believe describe who you are. Think of this as a short description of your identity.
  - Now describe something that you've done recently that, consciously or not, was designed to get recognition from others for these same qualities. What habits of yours can you identify that serve to protect and build that identity?
  - Finally, choose one of your positive qualities, and consider how it limits you. How does your drive to reinforce this trait eliminate other ways of responding? What possibilities might open if you didn't have to keep building that particular aspect of your identity?
- 

Our identities, and the habits that comprise them, are deeply embedded in the physical shape of our bodies—in the default neural pathways in our brains and throughout our bodies, the unique chemistry of our brain, and the predisposition of our muscles and sinews to respond in certain ways. Habits, learned behaviorally, have become biological. Thus, change on a biological level is required in order to reshape these defaults and respond creatively.

With practice, we can begin to bring awareness to the sensations and experiences associated with the triggering of our habitual behaviors. This connects us directly to the biological roots of our behavioral dispositions, providing a powerful window into the fundamental drivers of our habits and therefore the identity formation process itself.

For example, we can think of the underlying urge, or pull, to move toward pleasurable things as an *attachment*. If we are attached to a belief that more money, a promotion, a new commitment, a particular holiday, or an experience will provide us what we want, we organize ourselves and our actions toward this end. We are attached to things that produce pleasure or validate the identity that we have built in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, there's an underlying urge to move away from things that bring us pain or difficulty. We call this an *aversion*. For example, receiving feedback that conflicts with our comfortable view of our

own identity often produces a defensive reaction. At a fundamental level, this automatic defensiveness is driven by underlying biological survival energies, now directed toward the preservation of our built identity rather than our physical self. Aversions organize us by driving specific behaviors. The strength of our own aversions and subsequent reactive habits can sometimes be surprisingly strong.

Consider a difficult feedback conversation with a team member. The employee, anticipating the conversation, braces himself and tells himself simply to listen. Yet once he is in the boss's office, those good intentions crumble. The feedback triggers some ancient place in his nervous system that erupts in a strong defensive reaction, and he angrily blurts out a justification for the action he took.<sup>3</sup> No matter who's right, the conversation is polarized, no one is learning, and performance doesn't improve.

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#### EXERCISE 2.4.

### *Experience Attachments and Aversions*

Attachments and aversions can be sensed directly. Here's an easy way to experience this. While this is somewhat different from experiencing the urges that propel our behaviors, it is nonetheless a realistic way to experience an urge.

First, get a small quantity of a substance that you sometimes crave: coffee, dark chocolate, potato chips. You get the idea.

Now, without putting the substance into your mouth, sense it fully. Look at it. Smell it. Feel the possibility of ingesting it. Notice what urges arise in your body—sensations of craving, changes in your mouth. Notice any stories that you are telling yourself to justify ingesting it immediately. Stay with the experience for a minute or two before actually ingesting it. That is the experience of attachment.

Depending on your tolerance for aversions, you may do the following either as a thought experiment or as a real one. Take a clean spoon, and spit a small quantity of saliva into it. Look at the saliva in the spoon. Notice the sensations, thoughts, and feelings that arise. Then place it back in your mouth. Again, notice what arises.

Most people find even the idea of this revolting. Yet it's obvious that it's clean saliva, taken from your mouth by a clean spoon, and put back where it came from. No big deal, right? Wrong. The power of a conditioned aversion can be quite strong.

It is significant to work with this and to discover that, with practice and attention, the aversion loses its strength.<sup>4</sup>

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This defensive reaction is driven by an urge, by an aversion to the unpleasant experience of what our employee interprets as unfair criticism. It is automatic, and even the strongest intention can sometimes fail to override our practiced instinctual responses.

Attachments and aversions are deeply rooted directional urges in our bodies that serve to guide us through life. They provide the orienting mechanism that holds our identities in place. They drive nearly every aspect of our behaviors, yet generally operate below our level of awareness. We can learn to feel both our attachments and our aversions directly. Becoming aware of how they operate within us is becoming aware of the underlying drivers of our behaviors.

Significantly, we don't generally have to deconstruct why we came to be a particular way. That is the realm of traditional psychology and therapy. In coaching, the story of how team members and clients became who they are is interesting but mostly extraneous.

As coaches, our concern is that our clients learn to author their own stories. This begins with the competency of observing, at a moment-by-moment level, how they are shaped by their attachments and aversions. Becoming familiar with their habits, and the underlying attachments and aversions, is the ticket to freeing themselves from the grip of habits that are not serving them. By noticing their urges as they arise, our clients can choose to follow them or not. This is change at the root. Change at the level of the automatic habits that form our very identities requires being deeply present with ourselves.

When we open to and directly experience the essential nature of our functioning as a human, we're no longer bound by what we've been. We see, and can respond to, a universe of new possibilities. This is a critical step into transcending ourselves to become something new and bolder.

The central challenge in development is to move beyond an identity that no longer serves us. Development is essentially about engaging intentionally in the business of transcending an existing definition of our identity, in order to literally conceive of ourselves in a different, new sense. We learn to loosen the grip of our conditioned way of being—our habits, stories, ways of interpreting the world, and customary responses—in order to act consistently with new and more generative commitments.

This is a big request given the deep biological roots of our conditioned nature. To do this, we work at the level of the attachments,

## EXERCISE 2.5.

*Challenging Your Identity*

Choose an automatic interpersonal habit that's strong in you and part of the identity you have built in the world. It could be interrupting people in meetings, or saying "How are you?" to your colleagues without making eye contact or listening for the answer. You choose.

Now, change it. Give up the habit for a week, and notice what it takes to change it. Notice if it's hard to pay attention to it. Notice how quickly your commitment to change this habit recedes into the background; you may even completely forget about your commitment or decide that the experiment is over. Notice any stories you have right now about doing this.

As you conduct the experiment, note any urges, or pulls, to do what you usually do. Observe the strength of your habits and how they work to keep you from changing.

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aversions, and structures of interpretation that drive our behaviors in the first place. We come to recognize and suspend worn habits and aspects of our identity that no longer serve us. We focus on deep change, on shifting the assumptions and narratives from which we make decisions, assess our potential contribution, and orient our self in life and work.

This doesn't mean tearing apart what we have been in order to become something entirely new and unrelated. Rather, we author an ongoing, unfolding story of our own development. We come to see ourselves as engaged in an ongoing process of transcending what we have been, while including the history, skills, and values that are core to who we are. We learn to discover and reorganize around a new identity, and we acquire and master new behaviors that are relevant and effective for current commitments.

**BECOMING SELF-GENERATIVE**

Let's now explore what's required to make the shift from automatic, conditioned behaviors focused on survival, fitting in, getting validation, and achieving success to new and creative actions linked to purpose, contribution, efficacy, and fulfillment.

We can choose to live with a less desperate focus on achieving competence for current circumstances and a greater explicit commitment to our growth, change, and evolution. Within this commitment, we become conscious of learning not just because there's an immediate need, but because we have a long-term view of our own development. We understand life's challenges as our personal curriculum; learning to navigate these challenges provides meaning and context for our lives. Learning becomes a central capacity for how we want to live in the world.

When we are *self-generative*, we have *the capacity to be present and a learner in all of life in order to make choices from the inner state of greatest possible awareness and resourcefulness*. Self-generation is one of the three products of coaching mentioned in Chapter One.<sup>5</sup> It requires approaching every moment as a beginner and being open to responding as a learner. Self-generation produces resilience, creativity, self-awareness, authenticity, and a passion for learning.

#### SELF-GENERATION

Self-generation is the capacity to be present and a learner in all of life in order to make choices from the inner state of greatest possible awareness and resourcefulness.

We can consider self-generation in two related senses. First, we mean that it is the *self* that is generating new choices and actions. Here, being self-generative is in the sense of having autonomy and agency.

Second, we are being generative *of* a self. In other words, when we take new and creative actions in life, we are in fact producing a new and greater self. Taking creative, effective actions inevitably furthers our own development.

Self-generation is a fundamental capacity. When we combine the two meanings, we are constantly generating new actions and possibilities, which in turn lead to a new and expanded self. We are taking responsibility for our own learning, development, and aliveness in the greatest possible way.

Self-generation can be specifically encouraged and developed. In fact, supporting team members or clients in becoming self-generative is a central promise of coaching. As coaches, we design our work so that clients understand and ultimately self-guide their own development.

Self-generation is ongoing. We can distinguish four components, each of which can be supported by specific development activities, practices, and exercises. Sometimes the components appear sequentially, but to call them stages implies a linearity that is not always present. These four components are self-observation, realization, reorganization, and stabilization.

### *Self-Observation*

In self-observation, we learn to observe ourselves in action. It is useful to think of this as the creation of an artificial split between two parts of ourselves. One part acts in the world: eating, facilitating a meeting, building a spreadsheet, running through the park. The other part, which we can call the observer, stands back and watches, as if we were seeing ourselves on a movie screen.

This observing part can describe what it notices: “I’m eating now. I’m facilitating a meeting. I’m building a spreadsheet.” The cultivation of this observer self is the basis of self-awareness. Although self-awareness, by itself, does not lead to behavior change, it is foundational.

The more skilled we become as observers, the more subtle and complex the phenomena that we can see. From “I’m talking to Joe,” we progress to “I’m feeling a little tense,” to “There’s a subtle tension in my lower stomach. I notice my breathing is shallow and my shoulders are hunched.” The more complete our noticing, the more information is available to us from which to base decisions and the more familiar we become with our reactions to life’s events. This is how we observe the subtleties of our attachments and aversions.

Self-observation is powerful because it requires disidentification. Think about the fact that we can watch a dog playing. Logically this means that the dog is separate and distinct from us as observer. Similarly, the fact of being able to observe our own behavior means that the behavior itself is a distinct phenomenon, independent of us.

This disidentification is central in behavior change because it implies a choice. We are not our behaviors. As observers, we can both see the behavior we are using, and alternative behaviors; we can then choose which to put our energy into.

Self-observation is particularly useful when focused on a particular behavior that we want to change (a habit that is not producing the results we want) or a behavior that we want to cultivate (a habit that we want to become more available to us). By paying attention to these habits over time, we become more familiar with them and better able to be more self-aware when we are engaging in them.

Self-observation separates us from our reactions to things and opens the possibility of seeing that we are making one choice and that many others are available to us.

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#### EXERCISE 2.6.

#### *Self-Observation*

Observe yourself right now, as if you were in a movie. Notice yourself sitting where you're sitting, reading this book. Notice how you're sitting, what your mood is, what is being provoked in you by what you're reading. Notice how your energy level is. Notice what stories you are telling yourself about the reading. Notice any self-assessments or judgments about the book present in you right now.

This noticing is the function of the observer; the act of noticing invokes the observer.

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#### *Realization*

With practice, self-observation builds familiarity with our habits. Self-observation, however, is often a retrospective activity. For example, I might ask a client who is struggling to let go of certain responsibilities to write down, on a daily basis, examples of her reluctance to delegate. By tracking this over time, she builds the muscle of awareness. She begins to notice more and more examples of situations when she makes the choice to keep a task to herself rather than pass it off. With this increasing familiarity, she becomes more and more finely tuned to this particular phenomenon and is more and more likely to notice, in the moment, that she is in the

act of holding on to a task that she could delegate. This realization is the moment of presence.

Realization provides a present moment simultaneous awareness of what we are doing, that we are at choice, and that there are multiple directions to go from here. Realization provides the intelligent moment. There's a palpable expansion, a sense of being in possibility. This is the moment of choice, the moment from which everything else in our lives proceeds.

In a big sense, realization is the powerful spiritual experience toward which Buddhist masters and other spiritual leaders have been talking about for millennia. In the context of our daily lives, it's these little "waking ups" that happen more frequently when we are paying attention. It is the immediate awareness that you could ask your administrative assistant to make your travel arrangements. It is the recognition, in a heated moment with a colleague or spouse, that you usually avoid conflict with this person and could instead stay engaged and talk the issue through.

Where self-observation requires a distance between the observer and the action that's happening, realization happens when that distance collapses and we're just present with ourselves, in the naked moment. Realization is the moment of choice and can result only from being present.

Realization, and the state of presence, disappears as soon as we observe and name it. When we notice that we are present, we are able to say, "Oh, there it is! That's realization. *That's* being present. That's what Doug is talking about." However, in the act of naming the phenomenon, we've once again split out the observer, immediately taking us out of the state of presence. Self-congratulation paradoxically immediately cancels out the "achievement" of being present in the first place.

So throughout this book, while we work at becoming more present, we also can't make it happen. It can even be counterproductive to call it a goal, because then we begin to measure ourselves against it, and the measurement is, by definition, self-observation again, and not realization. Realization tends to be fleeting.

Another way to describe this is that realization represents a moment of freedom from our automatic habits, driven by attachments and identity. In this moment, there is the possibility of entering something new.

EXERCISE 2.7.

*Realization*

At the end of this paragraph, I'm going to ask you to stop reading and wait for a long pause, perhaps twenty or thirty seconds, before resuming reading. In fact, I'm inviting you to just wait and to watch what happens. In that pause, you are completely at choice about when to begin reading again. Feel yourself in the pause. Don't think about when to resume; simply experience yourself at choice, at any point being able to stay in the pause or to resume reading, and not knowing which will happen.

Now, stop reading. Pause . . .

Wait . . .

Wait . . .

What did you experience?

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*Reorganization*

The moment of choice is existential, and every moment is a moment of choice. Realization is simply waking up to that fact.

The future is always unwritten. Any choice will launch a succession of phenomena that we can never really fully anticipate. What we can know is that a choice has consequences. When, in the moment of realization, we choose something that is habitual, it's easy. There's often a sense of relief, of collapsing into something familiar. The succession of resulting phenomena is fairly predictable. This is true because there's little or no reorganization of ourselves that's required. It could be said that we are already organized internally to follow our habits. Our habits are a form of organization, and defaulting to them is, in a sense, like falling asleep. When we choose a new behavior or a different path, the consequences are less familiar. A new behavior feels awkward, unfamiliar, sometimes even scary. It requires a reorganization of ourselves behaviorally, cognitively, and somatically.

The more something is new and different, the more we need to prepare for it. We might find ourselves taking a deep breath, feeling energized, rehearsing in our minds what we're going to say, changing the shape of our body, drawing ourselves taller in readiness. This is reorganization: organizing ourselves toward the new action or behavior. We have to discover how to be a body that can take the new action.

Similarly, when we default to known behaviors, there are few repercussions in our relationships with others. When we behave habitually, the people who see us every day are not surprised; they'd expect nothing else. In fact, their identities, and their orientation in their relationship with us, may require us to behave habitually. To do otherwise would rock the boat.

As we change our habits and become a different person, we may need to renegotiate with others. This is a different kind of reorganization; reorganizing ourselves internally is followed by an external kind of reorganization that involves others.

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#### EXERCISE 2.8.

#### *Reorganization*

Experience reorganization right now. Place the book down, stand up, stretch, walk to the window. Take a couple of minutes to stretch and feel your body. Take some deep breaths. Get your circulation going. Reenergize yourself. As you do so, be conscious of reorganizing your attention to reengage the reading in a more alert, more conscious state than before you stood up and moved.

Then sit back down and bring your fullest attention to the reading. You can think of this as a presence pause writ large. You're actually taking a brief time-out to invite your attention to reorganize.

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#### *Stabilization*

The final component in the self-generative cycle is stabilization. Here, we've made a new choice, reorganized ourselves around this new choice, and are proceeding toward integrating it into our lives and our way of being. Stabilization is fundamentally about practice.

Our old habits became habits precisely because we practiced them over and over until we didn't have to think about them any more. They became embedded in us. So why should we think we can let go of an old habit and replace it with a new one simply by resolving to do so? Those of you who have made noble New Year's resolutions, only to have them fall by the wayside by the middle of January, know what I'm talking about.

Practice, essential for stabilizing ourselves in a new behavior or in a new way of being, is about building capacity through repetition. We are building a body that can reliably call on the new behavior, even in circumstances that formerly, and reliably, evoked the old behavior. Practice, with full attention, of new choices over time leads to enduring shifts in our stories about what is possible and in the physiological underpinnings of our actions.<sup>6</sup>

It's not that, with practice, we will reside permanently and stably in this new state or habit. Our old habits will occasionally get triggered by events, and we will be thrown off. Stabilization requires

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#### EXERCISE 2.9.

#### *Stabilization*

To practice stabilizing a shift in attention, commit three hours or so, without demands from others, in which to conduct an experiment. Find a digital watch with a countdown timer or a kitchen timer that you can set for ten minutes. A timer that automatically repeats is best but not necessary.

Set the timer to go off every ten minutes (or plan to reset it every ten minutes if it's manual). Each time it goes off, reorganize your attention, as you did in Exercise 2.8, taking thirty seconds to a minute to stand up, stretch, breathe, and bring your full attention back into whatever you're doing at the time.

Many people notice two opposing trends. The first is to become more competent at the shift in attention through practice and repetition. The second is to become bored with the exercise, to stop doing it, or to justify a halfhearted attempt with "Okay, I got the point already!" and then to end their commitment.

This tension is fundamental to stabilization and sustainable change. Experience that tension within yourself in this practice. No judgment. Just notice how you respond to the exercise.

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a certain faith that wobbling is part of the process. This wobbling requires self-regulation: managing ourselves and our internal state through constant attention and vigilance.<sup>7</sup>

The most rewarding moments in coaching for me are when a client reports, after weeks or months of work together, that he has responded in a new way to a difficult situation that formerly triggered a habitual and unhelpful response. The indicator that stabilization has taken place is not that the client has responded in a new way, but rather that the response seemed so normal. Rather than being challenged by the situation, the client simply responded, easily and effectively, with the new habit. Often he is surprised by how easy it seemed. We can say that, through practice, he has become stabilized in the new behavior.

## HOW COACHING SUPPORTS SELF-GENERATION AND SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

Developing self-generation in ourselves (and in our team members and clients) establishes the foundation from which specific skills and competencies can be chosen and executed. As coaches, we are continually working at becoming more self-generative in our own lives. Similarly, to focus our coaching efforts simply on measurable outcomes while ignoring the calling to the inner work of self-generation misses the extraordinary leverage for learning that self-generation provides.

A central question, then, is how we as coaches can support each of the four components of self-generation: self-observation, realization, reorganization, and stabilization. Let's explore how coaching with Janet helped her gain traction toward a different way of leading.

When we left Janet, she was in the throes of a self-induced difficult situation. Recently promoted, she was taking personal responsibility for solving field problems, at which she was greatly skilled. Her job requirements had changed, but she was the same person. Her strong identity as a helpful problem solver was supported by the appreciation she received from others. In spite of her best intentions, Janet was paying an enormous price, and it was beginning to become evident, at least to herself, that she was overextended.

### *Coaching Self-Observation*

In self-observation, the client gains practice in observing her behaviors in action. Mostly this takes place after the fact. With practice, however, comes familiarity. And with familiarity comes recognition, in the moment, that a particular behavior or response is happening.

The coach is critical in inviting the team member or client into this process. People are generally unable to see their own habits. However, as coaches, we are often able to see the limited and habitual nature of how our client senses, interprets, and acts in her world. (Lest we become arrogant about our own perceptiveness and wisdom, it is important to remember that we are also creatures of habit, by definition unable to see our own limitations.)

The coach invites the client to observe her own habits and offers the structure of a self-observation practice so that, over time, she becomes increasingly familiar with their nature. The coach connects what happens in the moment with relevant context.

*In our conversations, it quickly became evident that Janet's urge to help was pretty automatic. When someone needed something of her, her body responded with an increase in energy, and she quickly organized herself around helping (read: rescuing) the other person. While the urge began in her body, there was also a story (probably learned many years ago) that she could solve the problem faster and more easily than others.*

*Through coaching, Janet began a regular body practice to help her become more skillful at noticing the subtle experiences within her body, particularly the increase in energy that was the first indication of her habitual urge to help. In addition, she began a rigorous self-observation practice to become more familiar with how this habit arose.*

*Within a few weeks, something that had previously been automatic became more conscious. She was able to see, in fine detail, exactly what happened within her when someone came to her with a problem. This included being able to describe the direct, sensory experience of her attachments to being kind, helping, and solving others' problems. She could sense the pull of her need for validation from others in her still new role.*

*Through becoming skilled at observing the minute details of her habits, she became intimately familiar with her own habits. She was now a conscious witness of something that previously had been automatic.*

### ***Coaching Realization***

With familiarity comes recognition. This is the waking up to the moment of presence. The shift is from self-observation (in which we are observing a phenomenon, usually with hindsight) to realization (the recognition, in the moment, that this *is* the phenomenon). With realization come increased energy, expanded awareness, and simultaneous recognition that our habit is simply a phenomenon and we can choose whether to indulge it or do something else.

Realization tends to emerge naturally from a rigorous practice of self-observation. As we've noted elsewhere, the practice makes realization much more likely.

*Soon Janet had moments of realization, the Aha! moments. A call would come, Janet would be on the phone with someone in the field, and she would recognize the familiar urge to rescue. In this moment of recognition, Janet realized that she had a choice. The automatic nature of the reaction had been interrupted, the future was unwritten, and a new landscape of possibility was revealed.*

The coach can also support the waking of realization by reflecting to the client when the habit is arising during the coaching conversation itself. (Recall from Chapter One that June, in her conversation with Rick, provided a real-time assessment to Rick that invited him into a moment of realization that his defensiveness was arising right then.) This real-time experience, in the presence of the coach, can provide significant new insight.

### ***Coaching Reorganization***

The moment of conscious realization makes reorganization possible. In this present intelligent moment, we have many choices available to us. The practiced, automatic response means following the default tendency. Self-observation and realization provide

the possibility of interrupting a habit and replacing it with a new response. Reorganization is the actual shift from this default habit to something new. We mobilize our bodies, our energies, and our nervous systems toward a new action.

Coaches serve this component through several means. The first is by supporting the client in recognizing and describing what an alternative response to the triggering situation might be. In essence, this makes available to the client a new distinction that constitutes a more life-affirming and effective response. The second is by helping the client experience reorganization in real time, thus providing a direct experience of a reorganization move that can serve as a reference. And the third is to design practices with the client that she can work with, between coaching conversations, to build competency in the new behavior.

*We explored a range of alternative responses, as well as the potential benefits of placing more responsibility in the hands of Janet's field people. Along with alternative behavioral responses, she discovered that she could learn to interpret the field problem as a development opportunity for her people rather than as a rescuing opportunity for herself. This new interpretive choice led to an emerging identity as a developer of problem solvers rather than as the queen problem solver herself.*

*With this new view of her emerging identity, Janet learned to take advantage of her moments of realization. She learned to reorganize herself, in the moment, to explore with her people how a problem could best be solved without her. This was a new competency, and it took practice and discipline at first.*

*In these conversations, it usually became quickly apparent that there were other good alternatives. While a few of her direct reports initially leaned on her to travel, she discovered that most didn't actually expect her to jump on a plane. This came as a bit of a surprise and also as a relief.*

*Janet's new identity made intellectual sense to her, but it still took conscious attention, even effort, to override her historical urges to care-take and problem-solve. She actively practiced letting go of her need to be of help in the ways she had previously defined it. This was essential in order for her to build, and sustain, a new identity and role in the organization.*

### *Coaching Stabilization*

The final phase of self-generation is stabilization. This phase requires that we practice the reorganization and the new behavior to the point that it becomes our new default.

Repetition is key. As leaders, we tend to move to the level of our training, of our practice. It's not cerebral knowledge of what we should do that drives our actions in a crunch situation; it's what we've embodied through practice and repetition.<sup>8</sup> When we practice a habit, that's what we come, more and more, to embody. When we practice a new behavior, first it becomes increasingly available to us, and eventually it becomes our new default. The body's capacity to learn and incorporate new responses is much deeper than previously thought.

As coaches, we support this process by designing repetitive practices with clients that they can work with over time as they learn to embody the new behavior. The client takes these practices out into the world. Some practices may be done in the morning or evening outside work hours as a solitary activity; other practices require the participation of others or are best done in the context of a work environment with all the opportunities and challenges that go along with that environment.

It is through practices that clients become different people, capable of responding to inevitable difficulties in new and creative ways. If we want to change, we must practice something new.

*Janet became able, with practice, to stabilize her new behavior. She articulated her new role to her people and found, with few exceptions, that they welcomed her redefinition of her identity in relation to them. She practiced exploring alternative ways of responding to field issues. While she still traveled to the field, it was now a conscious choice made in consideration of a number of factors rather than an automatic default.*

*It was essential for Janet to be heartfelt and compassionate with herself when she lapsed. There were a number of breakdowns, and Janet had several periods of real anxiety that she was abandoning those who counted on her. When these occurred, it became important to practice forgiveness and compassion and to remind herself about the new leader that she was becoming.*

*She came to take great pleasure in her new identity as a developer of others and found herself looking at field problems through the bigger lens of overall organizational resources and priorities. She also found that it was much easier to keep a reasonable balance between professional and other priorities. She came to really enjoy the new role and went on to great success.*

### *Janet, Resolved: Self-Generation and Identity*

We can see in Janet's story the development of a strong identity, rooted in childhood. She had become a competent, well-liked professional with a reputation for doing whatever it took to get the job done. Clearly, the behavioral expressions of this identity had led to success and rapid promotions. But although her professional behaviors were simultaneously great strengths, they also had become limiting. A different understanding of her role was critical if she was to be successful in this new role. Janet had to become someone new.

With coaching support, Janet embarked on a process of *transcending* and *including* who she had been to become a different kind of leader.<sup>9</sup> We can see the four components of self-generation in her development of this new identity and the associated competencies.

Increased self-awareness of her strong default tendencies resulted from self-observation over time. Familiarity with her habits and how they arose in response to triggers in her outside environment provided moments of realization. She became aware that she had a choice between acting consistently with her old story of who she was, or doing something that produced a new identity.

This new identity required both an internal reorganization (new behaviors, actions, narrative about her contribution, sources of affirmation) and external reorganization (managing expectations of others, creating new processes for solving problems). Reorganization happened both in the precise moment of realization and choice, and in the longer time frame of months, as she renegotiated expectations and practiced new behaviors. Janet learned to recognize and let go of her attachments associated with the former identity, and the pressures from the system around her to stay the same.

Over time, this new identity became stabilized in Janet. Practice led to a place where it no longer took discipline to explore alternatives to traveling to the field. She thought of herself primarily as a

developer of people rather than as a solver of problems. She asked questions from that identity and felt validated and successful when she saw her people learning and solving problems themselves. Janet had shifted to a different way of being that was stable. It was a new “normal” for her.

In our later conversations, Janet frequently reported to me that she responded to a previously challenging circumstance in a new way that had become effortless and normal. In fact, she sometimes didn't even notice the situation until afterward; the old habit simply didn't arise. A moment that previously would have triggered her desire to rescue passed so easily that it was unremarkable. The ground of Janet's being has changed, and she has literally become a different person.

## LIVING IN SELF-GENERATION

We live in a field of presence; presence is always available to us. Yet when we live habitually, we are not aware of this, and naturally organize ourselves around our attachments and aversions. We live to maintain and protect our identity.

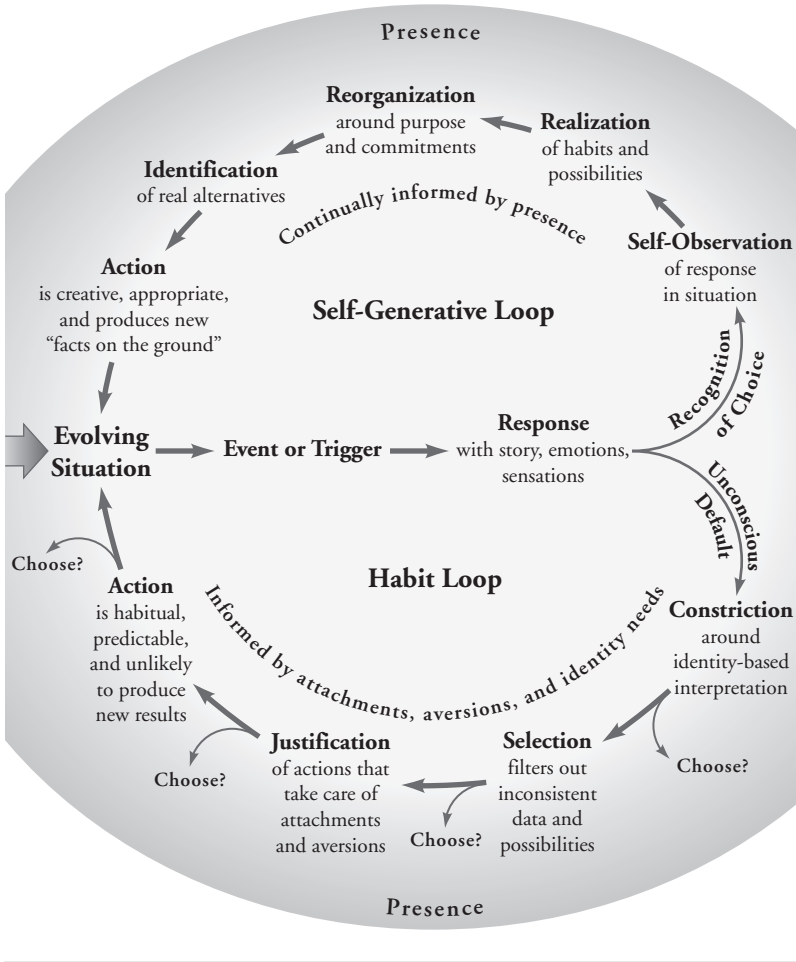
Figure 2.1 shows how we can respond to the events in our lives in one of two fundamental ways.

Our lives consist of a range of evolving situations. Within each situation, an event often happens that presents us with a challenge; something in our habitual nature is triggered by the event. Most often, we move automatically into the responses, practiced over decades, that have made us who we are.

This habitual response, as we've discussed above, is characterized by related phenomena that arise nearly simultaneously: a story or interpretation, emotions, and bodily sensations. When we are triggered, we are most likely to act unconsciously; our habits and practiced inclinations largely determine our actions. Unaware, we default into the *habit loop*.

Like it or not, we all spend much more time in this habit loop than we realize. Because we live in it, the habit loop feels comfortable and normal. We don't even see that we're in it. (In fact, to see that we're in it, from a place of relaxed awareness, is already *not* being in it!)

FIGURE 2.1. *Habit and Self-Generative Loops.*



The habit loop works like this. As we respond to an unfolding event, we unconsciously default into our predictable ways of interpreting and responding. Specifically, our view becomes constricted around our interpretation of that event. Because our interpretation is identity-based, it is inseparable from the attachments and aversions that also produce that identity. Without knowing we're doing so, we see selectively, filtering out all data and possibilities that are inconsistent with our identity-based interpretations. We simply don't see other truths. Our awareness becomes self-sealing.

Our interpretation serves our identities by justifying habitual and predictable actions that take care of our attachments and aversions. In a sense, these actions are serving us well. However, identity-driven actions are much more effective at preserving and strengthening our identity than producing new results. We continue in our patterns, others do the same, and we get frustrated when things don't change. We see our difficulties as someone else's fault, or simply "just the way things are."

Informing this habit loop, and expressing themselves at every stage, are our attachments, aversions, and identity needs. Although this is not inherently a bad thing, this fact limits the range of what we can perceive and respond to in any given situation. For better or for worse, we humans organize ourselves in life primarily around preserving and perpetuating our identities.

Contrast this with the *self-generative loop*. Through practice, presence becomes increasingly available to us. We learn to see challenging moments as opportunities to wake up. Recognition of this possibility of choice brings us immediately into presence. The simple thought "A-hah! This is an opportunity!" invites us into self-generation, continually informed by presence. (At any time, even when deep into our habit loop, there is the possibility of recognizing that we're in the loop, and choosing to wake up into presence.)

In the self-generative loop, self-observation allows us to discern the first arising of our habit. Realization of our habit wakes us immediately into a vaster landscape of possibilities: we become self-aware and resourceful. Depending on how spacious and aware we are, more or fewer possibilities may be revealed.

With realization, we can reorganize ourselves around our purpose and commitments. Relaxed and present, we are not constrained by habit and are much more likely to see new possibilities that may have been available to us all along. From this expanded sense of what is possible, we can identify real alternatives, and choose new actions that are creative and appropriate. Taking these actions from a centered presence then creates new "facts on the ground." Our relationship to the situation has changed, and we're now able to produce something new and different within it.

Over time and with practice, we stabilize these new behaviors or actions so that we are comfortable and competent using them. (This is not shown in the diagram, as it results from repeated passing through

the cycle.) Repetition stabilizes not only our new and more constructive behaviors in the specific situation (which we can think of as more useful, more evolved habits that will eventually become limiting themselves), but also our competence at living in the self-generative cycle itself (which, I suppose, we could conceive of as a meta-habit).

Presence informs every step of the self-generative loop. It is always available and serves as the oxygen, if you will, that allows self-generation. Presence endows us with the possibility of responding in creative and positive ways to anything that comes at us.

We can see that Janet began to reside more consistently in the self-generative loop. And we can see the possibility for ourselves that this learning cycle, in which we are constantly opening ourselves to new information and new ways of seeing and responding, can become a way of being in the world. The basic requirements for this are the components of self-generation. These can be learned and practiced, such that being self-generative is increasingly embodied in who we are and in how we lead.

This understanding of development, and specifically how self-generation supports our development of a new identity, is foundational to our work. It naturally begs the questions, What is our role as coaches in supporting this kind of development? How do we develop our own presence? And, how do we make the coaching moves to support leaders in their unfolding of a more powerful identity?

The answers to these questions are essential for responding effectively to the crying needs of our organizations, our communities, and indeed, our very planet.

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## CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The human journey of development is largely a conditioning process by which we habituate ourselves in order to adapt, fit in, and be successful according to the prevailing models of success. We are creatures of habit, and these habits are largely invisible to us.
- Habits are hard-wired into our nervous systems and held in the shape of our bodies. We *are* our habits: our behaviors, interpretations, sensations, and emotions. Changing requires change on a biological level.

- Habits are held in place by our attachments and aversions. These are subtle urges that can be directly experienced and that steer us toward experiences we hold as positive and away from those we hold as negative.
- The sum total of our habits we can think of as our personality or our identity; it's how we hold ourselves in the world. We seek to get our identities reinforced. At the same time, our identities eventually become limiting, and we are required to let go of old habits that don't serve and replace them with new ones that do.
- We can think of development as an ongoing process of *transcending* our identities, and *including* them in a new and more expansive way of being in the world.
- Self-generation is *the capacity to be present and a learner in all of life in order to make choices from the inner state of greatest possible awareness and resourcefulness.*
- Self-generation can be described as a cycle of four components: self-observation, realization, reorganization, and stabilization. Each of these components can be supported through specific practices, coaching moves, and learning activities.
- Self-generation is a capacity that can be developed and is the central capacity for building a new identity. Living in a self-generative way, we move toward continual self-awareness and the capacity to consciously choose new actions and behaviors most appropriate for fulfilling our commitments.