

1

An Orientation to Awareness and Authenticity

I consider many adults (including myself) are or have been, more or less, in a hypnotic trance, induced in early infancy: we remain in this state until—when we dead awaken . . . we shall find that we have never lived.

R. D. Laing

We have all encountered employees who seem barely awake, who squander their work lives, who blind themselves to what is taking place within and around them, who speak and act inauthentically, who do not care about what they do, how they do it, to whom, or why. Indeed, many of our workplaces seem populated with the living dead, zombies who wrap themselves in a hypnotic trance, as psychiatrist R. D. Laing described, only to find that they have numbed themselves so thoroughly that they are unable to really live.

This indolent, apathetic, somnolent state has countless faces. It can be found in preoccupations with the past and unrealistic expectations for the future; in attitudes of denial, defensiveness, and disregard for the present; in frustration over failed change efforts; in reduced enthusiasm due to hierarchical privilege, bureaucratic indifference, and autocratic contempt; in a variety of mesmerizing relationships, processes, cultures, systems, structures, and attitudes that limit the capacity to perceive and act based not only on what is taking place within and around us and diminish who we are as human beings.

4 THE ART OF WAKING PEOPLE UP

This *zombification* and atrophication of work life happens incrementally whenever people are punished for being aware and authentic and, as a result, become frustrated, give up, cease caring, and stop trying. It occurs when managers stop telling the truth and lie or keep silent about things that matter. It occurs when feedback is no longer oriented to how employees can succeed but to how they have failed—not just in their work but as human beings. It occurs when performance assessments become judgmental and hierarchical rather than supportive and participatory; when organizations separate honesty from kindness, integrity from advancement, and respect from communication.

Numbing oneself to experience is a natural response to unfulfilled expectations, unprocessed pain, unfinished grieving, unresolved conflict, and repetitive disappointment. When employees experience repeated losses, pain, conflicts, and disappointments, they often withdraw, shut down, or defend themselves from bruised feelings and unhappy thoughts. In doing so, they deaden themselves to experience and to the pain they would otherwise feel if they were fully awake. The extreme forms of this emotional state are catatonia and schizophrenia, but more familiar examples include apathy, distracted behavior, superficiality, equivocation, isolation, substance abuse, recurring illness, stress-related injuries, cynicism, excessive absenteeism, hypersensitivity, and unresolved conflicts.

When employees defend themselves against awareness and authenticity even in small ways, they diminish their capacity for growth, cease being fully alive and slip into a kind of unfulfilling stupor. How, in this state, is it possible for them to learn or change? What could conceivably motivate them to continue developing, sharpening, and expanding their skills? How do they ever overcome their tragedies or learn to celebrate their triumphs? How do they become responsible team members, improve the quality of their work, or risk changing what is not working?

In truth, their only real option in the face of these disabling experiences is to wake up and change their *attitude* toward what

they have experienced. As they wake up, they increase their awareness, become more authentic, discover where their organization is not congruent with its professed values, and commit to improve their work processes, organizations, relationships, communities, and environments—not once or in isolation, but continually and collaboratively with others. This is how they actually transform their work lives.

As people wake up, they become increasingly conscious of the dysfunctional elements in their work environments and relationships and can see what is not working or might work better. They can then abandon the destructive patterns, adversarial attitudes, injured feelings, upsetting memories, and addictive behaviors that keep them mired in the past. They can release unrealistic expectations for the future and attitudes of defensiveness and denial regarding the past. They can take responsibility for what they do and who they are, for their behaviors and the results they produce. They can then assume the arduous task of transforming their personal, organizational, social, political, and economic lives and creating more satisfying, sustainable, and supportive work environments.

Resistance to Change

In spite of these possibilities, or perhaps because of them, it is rare that anyone welcomes opportunities to wake up, gladly seeks ways of stretching beyond what is safe, or enthusiastically embraces fundamental changes. We are often reluctant to push to the edge of our capacities, to experiment or try out new things. Instead, we resist, avoid, rationalize, and bolster our self-deception that things are fine as they are. As poet W. H. Auden poignantly noted:

We would rather be ruined than changed,
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.

Many of us resist change even when it is critical to our well-being; when the need to change is presented gently, empathetically, and with the best of intentions; when we understand that it could dramatically improve our lives. Instead, we become self-protective, accusatory, and suspicious and would rather retreat with our false ideas intact than climb “the cross of the moment” and let our comforting illusions die. Why? What are we so frightened of losing?

We may be frightened that change will deprive us of jobs or income, or eliminate our role or source of identity, or undercut our self-confidence, or unsettle a precarious idea about who we are. We may be convinced that we will never be understood or appreciated for who we are. We may distrust our organizational environments so much that we cannot imagine anything ever changing, except by getting worse. We may have unresolved insecurities or doubts from our families of origin that keep us locked in unhappy relationships and feeling doubtful about our capacities. We may simply lack the personal skills or organizational supports we need to risk doing something that could radically change our lives.

In fact, it is not *change* that we resist, but what change implies. We resist the loss of what is familiar, the uncertainty surrounding anything new, the insecurity about who we are when the things with which we have identified no longer define us. Waking up and cultivating awareness and authenticity reduce this resistance by revealing a deeper identity that is not bound up in the past or future, or in what is constantly changing.

The Limitations of Roles and Expectations

When we become frightened of these aspects of change, we defend ourselves against learning, resist receiving honest feedback, hide behind roles, become inauthentic, cease being fully awake, and grow insensitive to what is happening around and inside us. We fight to preserve what is familiar, thinking we are protecting our power or image. Yet in doing so, we diminish our capacity for hon-

esty and empathy with ourselves and others. Eventually we become stuck and unable to grow. Whatever our role, at a subtle level, power, ego, and resistance to change are increased by identifying personally with it, while honesty, authenticity, and openness to change are diminished.

In truth, these self-defining roles do not exist—nor, at a human level, do organizations, job titles, hierarchies, or status. They are figments of our imaginations—constructs, hypnotic images, mirages, phantoms, fetishes, and hallucinations that distance us from what is real and from each other. *Every* role is inauthentic, simply because it captures only a part of what we do and largely ignores who we are. Yet we invest these images with the power to control our lives, twisting them gradually into conformity with other people's expectations and losing our capacity for self-definition.

In *Fraud*, a novel by Anita Brookner, a woman tells a friend, "Fraud was what was perpetrated on me by the expectations of others. They fashioned me in their own image, according to their needs." People become inauthentic and fraudulent by hiding the most interesting, human parts of themselves behind masks and roles, revealing only what they hope others will find acceptable. This is a kind of sleep from which anyone can awaken at any time, even after years of accommodation. To do so requires cultivating awareness, authenticity, congruence, and commitment in ourselves, in others, and in organizations.

However we describe ourselves, whatever roles we assume, they do not touch the deepest parts of ourselves. In addition, in all our descriptions, there is an "I" that is describing "Myself." Yet the one describing is not the same as the one described. If "I" am able to observe and describe "Myself" as though from outside, which one am "I"? Every role or description we use to describe ourselves seems solid, yet beneath it lies a thought, and beneath the thought lies a thinker. Waking up means discovering the thinker. As we do so, we accept responsibility for our choices and recognize that our power lies there, rather than in our roles and self-definitions.

Why Organizations Create Roles

Traditional organizations use roles to define and reinforce rigid hierarchies of power. They do little to support people in changing or acting in ways that are authentic, honest, immediate, collaborative, and democratic, because to do so would invite a rearrangement of power relationships. Hierarchical, bureaucratic, and authoritarian organizational models permit—and in some cases actively encourage—role rigidity and hypocrisy. These organizations are unwilling to admit or examine their faults publicly. They discourage honest communication, suppress creativity, and undermine teamwork and self-confidence. In the process they put people to sleep.

In the absence of honest feedback and continuous scrutiny, these organizations desperately seek to defend and perpetuate themselves, causing them to undermine the values they publicly proclaim. They espouse creativity yet reward bureaucracy, conservatism, and defensiveness. They urge risk taking but celebrate only those who increase or preserve their financial bottom line. They call for change yet reward caution, stasis, and denial. They advocate equality but radically limit the possibilities for personal and organizational growth for those at the bottom. Is it any wonder that people fall asleep rather than wake up and risk their livelihood championing values that, while publicly proclaimed, are privately punished?

Where are the great examples of hierarchical organizations exercising courageous moral leadership? Where are the profound apologies, the honest confessions, the open admissions of error? When did a corporate CEO or government official last publicly admit wrongdoing without being forced to do so by an angry citizenry, a judge, or a prying press? How often are corporations balanced and truthful in their advertising, politicians in discussing the merits of opposing candidates, or CEOs in responding to allegations of financial or social wrongdoing? Examples of these dishonesties can be found in the newspapers every day and are apparent to everyone who is willing to acknowledge that abuses *inevitably* flow from the

inflexibility and concentration of organizational power. If we want people to wake up and be honest with themselves, we need to honestly reveal what stands in their way within organizational life, act to overcome it, and model the behaviors we publicly advocate, starting with ourselves.

Every day, employees are punished for giving or receiving honest feedback to those higher in rank than themselves. Or their criticisms are passed through a maze of bureaucratic filters and rationalizations that diminish their effectiveness. As a result, many learn the virtues of silence and go to sleep.

Yet organizations that resist honest feedback or penalize employees for delivering it limit their own capacity to adapt, learn, and evolve. They reduce the desire of employees to expand their motivation, increase their skills, and make important contributions to their organizations. They shortchange themselves and those who rely on them.

Employees are then forced to choose among upsetting, ultimately ineffective strategies and to decide whether to fight back, quit, avoid, or accommodate and do what they are told. Few recognize that there is another choice: they can cultivate awareness and authenticity in themselves and others and work strategically to build respect for these qualities within their organizations.

Cultivating Awareness

Everything we do is mediated through our minds, which are immensely powerful, richly complex mechanisms that feed us massive amounts of information regarding our environment and internal activities, all in the service of surviving and succeeding. Our socially constructed minds, however, have the curious capacity to interfere with themselves, to deny disagreeable information, defend against new ideas, consider themselves unworthy, alter facts out of fear, anger, or shame, and confuse the message with the messenger.

Our minds organize our experiences into two primary categories: those that induce pleasure so we want to repeat them, and those that induce pain so we want to avoid them. We use language to focus attention and point our awareness, often with great precision, in the direction of things, ideas, feelings, and experiences that induce pleasure. Yet the thing that points is not the same as the thing it points at. For centuries, Buddhists have distinguished the finger pointing at the moon from the moon itself. Ridiculously simple as this sounds, many of the problems we face at work originate in a fundamental confusion between the observer and the observed.

In receiving critical feedback, for example, we often confuse the finger pointing at us with the person pointing it, and as a result, minimize, justify, or deny the behavior they are trying to call to our attention. We dismiss them by castigating their methods or intentions. We resist their efforts to communicate, and become unable to observe ourselves, evaluate the information they offer, or improve our skills. Human beings are not the only animals that give each other feedback, but we may be the only ones who judge, devalue, insult, berate, humiliate, self-aggrandize, and lie to each other about who we are. We defend ourselves to such an extent that we fail to recognize our true selves. At the same time, our success and survival sensitively depend on our ability to be aware and authentic, to discover what is taking place around and inside us, and to learn from the feedback we receive from others.

Ultimately, waking up means self-examination—not as narcissism, but as though it were feedback from an outside observer. It means looking at what keeps us from looking, listening to the reasons we are unable to listen, and becoming aware of the distortions we create in our own awareness. As we become more awake, we are able to spend more time in the present, reduce our preoccupation with the past and the future, and magnify our ability to recognize, accept, and learn from our mistakes.

Often, when we perform some routine task such as driving on a freeway or engaging in repetitive labor at work, we slip into a reverie

and cease being aware of what we are doing. We operate on autopilot. Suddenly, a car swerves in front of us, or a machine breaks down, or the unexpected occurs. Immediately, we wake up, become aware of what we are doing, and tune in to our environment. Yet even then, many of us prefer to remain half-asleep or search for scapegoats, excuses, or places to hide. With awareness, we become better able to face breakdowns, take responsibility for them when they occur, fix them quickly, and avoid long-term damage. Sleepwalking not only dims our ability to foresee and fix breakdowns, it leaves us more vulnerable to harm and less able to recover afterward.

When we protect ourselves from information that could fundamentally alter our ideas about ourselves and the world around us, we defend a fragile status quo and in the process become weaker and more vulnerable. We become unable to move beyond the polished images we hope others have of us—or, strangely, even the tarnished ones we have of ourselves, including the one that we are unworthy or unlovable. We tell stories about who we are and what we could be, do, or have if it were not for other people's perfidy or for conditions over which we have no control.

In the end, waking up is simply awareness. Awareness is openness to feedback, and feedback is information we can interpret in an infinite variety of ways. We have a choice. We can resist, deny, or defend ourselves against this information, or we can decide to learn from it, adapt, and evolve. We can use it to feel sorry for ourselves, or to castigate others, or to wake up and become stronger. It is up to us to attribute meaning, draw conclusions, and act on the information we receive.

Awareness is available to each of us at every moment. It exists only in the present. It is an intrinsic quality of mind that can move from place to place and increase or decrease in scope and intensity of concentration. It can take the form of a spotlight that identifies shifts in the foreground or a floodlight that emphasizes congruity in the background. Over time, it can be cultivated, exercised, and enhanced, just as it can be neglected, abandoned, and allowed to atrophy.

The first goal of waking up is simply to increase our awareness by maximizing our ability to use internal and external feedback, which consists of information we can use to improve our skills and performance. The second, deeper and more profound goal of waking up is to become more authentic, centered, skillful, and content with who we are as human beings. As Buddhist nun Pema Chodrun writes:

Life's work is to wake up, to let the things that enter into the circle wake you up rather than put you to sleep. The only way to do this is to open, be curious, and develop some sense of sympathy for everything that comes along, to get to know its nature and let it teach you what it will. It's going to stick around until you learn your lesson, at any rate. You can leave your marriage, you can quit your job, you can only go where people are going to praise you, you can manipulate your world until you're blue in the face to try to make it always smooth, but the same old demons will always come up until finally you have learned your lesson, the lesson they came to teach you. Then those same demons will appear as friendly, warm-hearted companions on the path.

By being awake and aware in this way, we are able to discover the vibrancy and beauty that is naturally present in our day-to-day lives, and become clearer, more authentic human beings.

Cultivating Authenticity

Whenever we do something that lacks integrity or consciously harms another person, we become counterfeit and unbalanced. Whenever we collapse our identity into a role, or allow our self-worth to be crushed by someone else's negative opinion of who we are, or pretend to be someone we aren't, we become divided and less congruent. Whenever we reduce our awareness, operate on autopilot, or

anesthetize ourselves against “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” we diminish our capacity to be authentic.

The joyful authenticity of children never fails to capture our attention or warm our hearts. Yet we rarely give ourselves the same opportunity to be joyful, impetuous, genuine, and playful at work. Instead, we retreat behind self-aggrandizing egos, dreary hierarchical responsibilities, scripted bureaucratic roles, and closely guarded communications. We *will* ourselves to ignore or suppress the parts of ourselves that are trying to be free. Unfortunately, the self that learns to survive in these conditions is a colorless being. We are like crabs who carry the shells we grow at work during the rest of our lives. How sad it is to realize how much of ourselves we set aside at work and how little we make available to others, or even to ourselves.

The difficulty is that, in the short term, living authentically requires *greater* energy and courage than retreating into dullness and insensitivity, particularly in organizations that place a premium on superficiality, posturing, and blind acquiescence. In rigidly hierarchical organizations, those who behave authentically risk being marginalized or losing their jobs. Inauthenticity is encouraged by the use of bureaucratic, superficial, tedious, worse-than-useless feedback systems that stimulate defensiveness and pretense, and are widely perceived as isolating, undermining, and threatening to self-confidence. Sadly, these workplaces are dangerous for those who want to learn from their mistakes. They actively reduce responsibility and discourage leadership. Yet it is clear from research and elementary logic that authenticity contributes directly to increased motivation, organizational capacity, and economic success.

We first become inauthentic by uncritically accepting other people’s judgments about who we are. We are reduced in families and schools to a series of labels. We are “unpopular,” “bad at math,” “unable to carry a tune,” “unable to handle stress,” or “poor at follow through.” These early examples of hierarchically imposed feedback reveal how easy it is to capitulate to someone else’s image of who we are out of self-protection, laziness, or lack of self-confidence.

Yet the power of these judgments is not that we are told we are incapable of something, but that we believed it and stopped trying because we did not think we could succeed.

Yet negative assessments can be heard not as verdicts but as *challenges* that encourage us to prove them wrong. Thus every external version of who we are is false because it is merely some single person's version—yet true because it reveals an internal disabling belief that, once shattered, can wake us up and make us more curious about who we actually are. Because each of us can get better at anything we choose to do, the way we respond to feedback reveals more about our self-confidence and skill in interpreting critical input than it does about our innate abilities. We can all learn, improve, and change every aspect of our lives. All we have to do is want to do so.

Moreover, a primary characteristic of leadership is authenticity. We are all drawn to authentic leaders. We admire them, count on them, and wonder what mysterious quality attracts us to them. Yet their secret is easy to discover: they are clear about who they are. They are in touch with their own inner truths. Leadership is ubiquitous. It exists at every organizational level through a myriad of roles and a wide variety of expressions and modes of operating. To become leaders in our own work lives, each of us needs to develop our capacity for authenticity. Only when we wake up ourselves, develop a clear sense of who we are, and act with integrity, can we begin to ask the same of others.

Cultivating Congruence

Democratic organizations require employees who are not merely awake but willing to make their awareness and authenticity congruent with their values and take responsibility for improving their work lives. Awareness and authenticity allow us to translate our intentions into congruent behaviors and committed action. Until awareness translates into commitment and commitment into

action, we can delude ourselves into thinking we are aware and authentic when we are actually only playing it safe. But in our willingness to risk change, it immediately becomes apparent how far we have traveled and how far we still have to go.

Congruence is a quality of connectedness or unity between our thoughts, feelings, words, tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, and actions. When we are congruent, others see us as credible, trustworthy, and understandable. They feel respected and responded to, and we feel open and connected. Lack of congruence, on the other hand, consists of sending mixed, contradictory signals. When people are perceived as incongruent, their relationships become frustrating. Their negotiations turn into a series of “power plays” and win-lose propositions with little opportunity for mutually satisfying collaborations and partnerships. Congruence is “walking the talk.” When we are congruent, our behaviors match our values, we are honest with ourselves and others, we listen to feedback for indications that we are sending mixed signals, and we are willing to take committed action to avoid creating false impressions. We experience ourselves as integrated, whole, and deeply consistent.

When people lack congruence and failures occur at work, they resort to blame, lie about their roles, divert attention to other issues, silently remove themselves from the line of fire, accuse others of misunderstanding or miscommunication, go on the offensive, blame the system, deny involvement, belittle coworkers, subvert the process, and demean leaders as incompetents. On the other hand, when they are congruent there is no reason to dodge, deny, distance, or defend themselves against responsibility for what they did or failed to do, and no one left to blame.

Cultivating Committed Action

Commitment is an indicator of our proximity to the problem. The more removed we feel from a problem the less committed we are to solving it. If we are not concerned about processes, relationships,

and values, we are not willing to participate in making them right. Commitment measures the degree of our authenticity and awareness, and is reflected in the actions we are willing to take. It signifies ownership—not simply of outcomes but of processes, relationships, and values.

In waking up, we recognize that every action is a choice and we own every one of our choices, including the choice of not choosing. Committed action involves taking responsibility for our choices and the effects they have on others and on our environment. Initially, it does not matter whether our choices are conscious or unconscious, well-intended or hostile, accidental or on purpose, petty or grand. What matters is that we own them and do not diminish or deny their consequences.

Eleanor Roosevelt reminds us that in a democracy, we are all responsible for our choices, which are the only accurate confirmation of our personal philosophy: “One’s philosophy is not best expressed in words, it is expressed in the choices one makes. In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility.”

Congruent, committed actions both require and reinforce awareness and authenticity. They encourage and express leadership and model for others how to be responsible and true to themselves. They encourage closure by allowing us to feel complete about what we want and what we have done. They help us discover who we actually are.

What Wakes Us Up

What, then, can be done to release ourselves and others from the hypnotic trance in which we spend much of our working lives? In truth, *anything* can wake us up at any time: a casual comment, a chance occurrence, a moment of idle reflection. Most of us, however, are awakened with a start by events that shock us out of our

complacency, or by an experience of pain or suffering. For example we may be awakened by

- *A sudden awareness of death.* When we receive a clear warning of our imminent demise, as when we suffer a heart attack, or learn we have cancer, or hear about a tragic loss to someone close to us, or are touched by a collective tragedy such as occurred on September 11, 2001, we may realize that we have not lived our lives as we wanted.
- *A horrible humiliation.* When we suffer shame or humiliation as a result of some action we took that lacked integrity, we may recognize that our blunder asks us to empathize with the suffering of others and act more humanely.
- *A personal failure.* When we fail, or are tempted to sell our souls for transitory successes, we may find it better to fall short and retain our integrity than succeed by methods that we know are self-destructive.
- *A lover's rejection.* When someone we love leaves us and we feel rejected, we may learn that sadness and loss are not the end of loving, or that we gave our love to the wrong person, or that we were complicit in their departure, or that their leaving allows us to grow and explore new parts of ourselves, or that we can learn to be better partners in the future.
- *A loss of employment.* When we have been disciplined or fired from our jobs, we may find that we took the wrong job, or wonder why others were able to see it and we were not, or renew our determination to find work we love.
- *An unresolved conflict.* When we are angry and locked in conflict, we may suddenly realize that we have lost

our capacity for balance and empathy and discover that beneath our conflict is a possibility of better communications, processes, relationships, and understandings.

Though waking up often produces pain, both for the one whose honest feedback encouraged awareness and the one who woke up after receiving it, this very pain can lead to a deeper and more profound pleasure. This pleasure arises partly from the realization that whoever initiated the process cared enough about us to risk our wrath or displeasure, and partly from the enhanced self-esteem we feel when we listen to their feedback and become more congruent and skillful in the ways we behave.

But it is not necessary to experience death, loss, or pain in order to wake up. We can also do so through an experience of joy or pleasure. For example:

- *A moment of intense joy.* When we fall in love or experience some exquisite pleasure, we are reminded that our experience of life is shaped by our attitude toward it, which can be full of pain or pleasure, fear or adventure, sadness or joy.
- *A perception of beauty.* When we experience nature or are touched by a poem or work of art, we may catch a glimpse of the exquisite underlying beauty that surrounds us.
- *A deep meditation.* When we meditate, we may become intensely aware of the impermanence of life and the inevitability of change and wake up to living in the present.
- *A recognition of absurdity.* When we recognize that what is important at work, on a cosmic level, seems futile and absurd, we may surrender to a larger truth and

recognize that life and work do not have to have a purpose or make sense, but can be enjoyed and experienced more deeply when we don't take them so seriously.

- *A spectacular success.* When we succeed or achieve an important goal or experience successive accomplishments, we may discover that it was not the destination but the journey that truly mattered.
- *A gift of honest feedback.* When someone gives us the gift of deeply honest feedback, we may discover that we have the ability to change the way we act and think and begin to live our lives more authentically, skillfully, and openly.

While these pleasures encourage awareness, every waking up is also accompanied by pain caused partly by the death of a false idea of who we are. Yet this very death gives rise to a new form of pleasure in the birth of a truer, more accurate and authentic way of life. Often the thing we hold onto with all our might out of fear of loss ends up being the very thing we most need to let go of if we want to live more fully and without fear. Awareness and letting go are thus entwined and inseparable.

Seven Openings for Waking Up at Work

We all need feedback, coaching, mentoring, and assessment at various points during our work lives. These processes are necessary because our eyes focus outward rather than inward, because our language creates abstractions that separate us from direct experience, because our actions rarely bring us what we really want, because we try to hold on to pleasure and avoid pain, because we lie to ourselves about who we are to overcome feelings of inadequacy, because what we think we already know prevents us from learning anything new or different.

Yet our work lives also include moments when we are more inclined to wake up and change the way we think and act. In these moments, we become more aware of our surroundings and are able to notice that our behaviors are not as effective as we would like them to be, that we are not getting where we want to go, that we can learn something new or improve our skills, that we can choose to turn our lives around. Seven of these moments occur in every work life:

- *Entry*. The first opening takes place when we are hired into a new job and our attitude is optimistic and receptive to learning. We are fresh, vulnerable, and unburdened with the preconceived notions that nearly always block listening. We are responsive to feedback and willing to learn new behaviors. As beginners, we do not think we know all the answers, and are willing to entertain novel ideas and correct our mistakes simply to be accepted and succeed in a new environment.
- *Aspiration*. A second opportunity takes place when we consciously choose to learn and develop ourselves, or are promoted, or are given a challenging assignment, or simply desire to hone our talents and abilities. This can happen at any time in connection with any task. In doing so, we transcend lethargy, apathy, cynicism, and organizational cultures that reward minimal performance rather than maximal effort, and begin to see ourselves in a new light.
- *Feedback*. A third opportunity presents itself when we are given honest coaching, mentoring, or feedback by colleagues, or when we receive a performance evaluation or assessment that criticizes our work. It then becomes possible for us to identify what we can do better, clarify our goals, and develop the strategies and skills we need to succeed.

- *Change*. A fourth turning point appears when the rules of the game are changed and a new configuration of expectations, guidelines, and strategies is presented, for example, when a merger or consolidation takes place, or there is new leadership. Every change offers a chance to learn something new, if we can learn to recognize and exploit these opportunities.
- *Leadership*. A fifth opening arises when we watch leaders who model openness to learning, or when we become leaders ourselves. This opening occurs when we decide to take responsibility for our actions and inactions and the results we create, even by our subtlest intentions. Leadership is a relationship, both with others and with ourselves. Successful leadership starts by listening responsibly to what others want and learning from our mistakes.
- *Failure*. A sixth opportunity appears when we have failed, or are having problems or conflicts, or perceive that we are in trouble. Our difficulties can make us more rigid and entrenched, or they can teach us to set aside our defensiveness and search for fresh answers. When we adopt a learning approach, we can turn potential disasters into opportunities, achieve goals that seemed impossible and uncover countless ways of being more effective.
- *Success*. A seventh occasion arises when we think we are done, or have it made, or retire, or quit, or reach a peak of self-satisfaction, fulfillment, and achievement. We then have an opportunity to start all over again and reach new levels of experience and expertise. It is possible for us in these moments to explore parts of ourselves that we have suppressed or ignored, and return to being beginners.

Organizational Support

What can organizations do to support employees during these moments and encourage lifelong learning? When we arrive as new employees, they can clarify what is expected and orient us to a culture of learning. When promotions occur, they can provide training and learning programs so that employees in transition receive the tools needed for success. When we are given feedback or assessment, they can foster a learning orientation that makes it easier for us to choose growth over defensiveness. When change occurs, they can clarify the rules, promulgate them by consensus, and make us responsible for enforcement. When leadership is exercised, they can teach us to become leaders in our own lives. When mistakes are made, they can offer tangible support to those who are not meeting expectations, speak painful truths, and encourage us to learn, repair the damage, and adopt new strategies. When we retire or are successful, they can offer continuous learning opportunities, such as leadership development, cross-training, apprenticeship programs, horizontal career ladders, and incentives that invite us to accept new responsibilities and make fresh contributions.

The choices we make at each of these decision points can also be supported by subtle signals that are sent by leaders, managers, and supervisors and messages that are communicated through organizational culture. When organizations are well led and have cultures, structures, systems, and processes that encourage individual, team, and organizational learning, improvements that may have seemed impossible now appear almost inevitable and learning becomes limitless.

At each of these openings, we confront choices that either shrink or expand our lives. We can choose to ignore what we have been told, blame the messenger or the process, resist the information, and remain stuck in patterns that restrict our potential. Or we can choose to listen, become receptive, explore the information we are receiving, examine our intentions, methods, and results, and commit to

our own renewal and regeneration. Only the second choice leads to awareness, authenticity, congruence, and commitment, each of which leads, in turn, to waking up and lifelong learning.

Turnaround Feedback, Coaching, Mentoring, and Assessment

Many of the opportunities for waking up occur at work as a result of feedback, coaching, mentoring, and performance assessment. The pain we experience in waking up, listening to information we do not want to hear, letting go of old behaviors, and acting in new, inexperienced ways makes delivery of honest turnaround feedback, coaching, mentoring, and assessment both essential and dangerous. Yet without honest turnaround processes, we can easily collude in our own stagnation, remain asleep, and continue along old trajectories that are demonstrably unsuccessful. Without turnaround feedback, coaching, mentoring, and assessment, it is difficult even to conceive of waking up, especially when hierarchy, fear, and the status quo lull us into complacency.

The processes, techniques, systems, and relationships we use to encourage awareness and organizational learning must therefore meet four criteria. First, they need to be at least as *honest* as the degree of resistance they seek to overcome. Second, they need to be at least as *complex*, integrated, and robust as the organizational purposes they support, the challenges they address, and the environments they influence. Third, they need to be at least as *rapid* in their ability to adapt, evolve, and develop methods of self-correction as the changes taking place in employees, organizations, the immediate environment, and the outside world. Fourth, they need to be at least as *participatory*, egalitarian, democratic, and collaborative as the relationships that are influenced by them.

In every workplace where learning is valued, employees need periodically to review and renew their work skills, honestly assess their strengths and weaknesses, collaboratively coach and mentor

each other, constructively resolve their conflicts, and learn from their mistakes. This means that traditional, hierarchical organizational processes must be transformed by making them more honest, complex, rapid, and participatory. This means reinventing traditional improvement processes. It means developing *turn-around* feedback, *transformational* coaching, *strategic* mentoring, and *participatory* assessment processes that promote self-reflection, self-correction, collaboration, and continuous improvement. These new forms actively encourage people to wake up, turn their lives around, and cultivate awareness, authenticity, congruence, and commitment. How do they do so?

Feedback is a process by which information is transmitted or fed back to someone regarding their attitude, behavior, or performance. Traditional hierarchical feedback often results in increased resistance. *Turnaround* feedback is concerned not only with transmitting information regarding skills and achievements but with dismantling sources of resistance and identifying the defenses, knots, obstacles, misperceptions, and underlying dysfunctions that block improvement.

Coaching is a partnership in which feedback is used to improve the details of an employee's performance. *Transformational* coaches work to release their partners from the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual confines that limit their capacity to succeed. Coaches often come from outside the hierarchy and are not entangled in the relationships or social networks of the person being coached. Some coaches are from completely different venues or fields, allowing them to bring an external perspective to the performance, while others are masters in their fields. Coaches do not do the actual work; they operate from the sidelines, observing the person being coached, feeding back what they see, and recommending a detailed course of action.

Mentoring is also a partnership, but often with someone from the same organization who is actively engaged in similar tasks. A mentor is like a master craftsman who develops the skills of an apprentice,

someone who has proven skill and can provide guidance in relation to career goals, networking, and relationships. *Strategic* mentors are focused less on the details of performance than on creating overall strategies for success. They clarify the subtle political, social, and cultural influences on organizational relationships, develop strategies for navigating them, and link people with each other across organizational lines to achieve common, strategically integrated purposes.

Performance assessment is intended to provide employees with information about their successes and failures at work. *Participatory* assessment is intended to involve employees in their own improvement, self-correction, learning, and growth. Whatever undermines these outcomes is both personally and organizationally counterproductive and likely to increase resistance to change. For this reason, participatory assessment requires an active, egalitarian, democratic partnership between those who conduct assessments and those who receive them. Participatory assessments are therefore freer of judgments, labels, punishments, and undermining criticisms than hierarchical models, and should not be used to discipline employees. When discipline and assessment are merged there is every reason to resist, deny responsibility, and resent whatever feedback one is given. To encourage lifelong learning, a remedial intention is required on the part of the assessor together with a willingness to learn on the part of the assessed.

Lifelong Learning

As educational philosopher John Dewey pointed out decades ago, every experience persists into the future, leading to new experiences that either enhance or block future growth: “Just as no man lives or dies to himself, no experience lives and dies to itself. Wholly independent of desire or intent, every experience lives on in further experiences. Hence the central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences.”

The learning continuum Dewey describes requires feedback, coaching, mentoring, and assessment processes that amplify learning experiences and encourage employees to proceed confidently into fresh encounters. While we can learn important lessons from every experience and each piece of feedback, certain experiences teach us deeply who we are and how to behave. It is these experiences that wake us up and invite us to see all of work as an opportunity for lifelong learning.

Few organizations communicate that lifelong learning is valued, unless it can be demonstrated to result in discernable competitive advantage or increase profitability. Few organizations devote significant resources to developing the natural intelligence and humanity of their employees. Few empower employees to challenge their authoritarian practices. Few actively encourage genuine risk-taking, play, creativity, and ownership—yet these are precisely the traits organizations need the most.

Organizations with leaders who are committed to lifelong learning encourage employees to welcome information that fuels their growth and development, *especially* when it is critical, unpleasant, or contradicts deeply held assumptions. They create cultures in which criticism is seen as the highest form of compliment, where mistakes are seen as natural and failure as essential to growth. At every moment in every working day, learning organizations challenge employees at every level to recognize that no matter how successful they have been, no matter how much they have achieved or think they know, there is always room to master the subtle, challenging, arduous, endlessly intriguing art of waking up.