

How can we develop conscious leaders if we ignore the power of the unconscious?

Why aren't we talking about the role of the unconscious in our models of coaching, leadership development, and systems change?

Cognitive neuroscientists agree that 95% of what drives our behavior, for better and worse, is outside of our conscious awareness. Yet the power and influence of the unconscious is surprisingly absent from our leadership and organization development discussions and interventions.



We've been asking coaches, consultants, and leaders attending our conscious leadership webinars, workshops, and retreats why they thought this was the case. Here is what they said. While important, the unconscious is also:

- Murky.
- Difficult to measure.
- Negatively linked to therapy.
- Not a quick fix.
- Calls for vulnerability.
- Hard to talk about in business settings.
- Too personal.
- Admitting we aren't in control is painful.

What do you think?

Addressing these challenges and demystifying how to work with the unconscious begins with recognizing that our healthy mind is naturally multiple. We all have different, largely unconscious parts that sometimes show up and run our show.

These parts develop to protect us in response to challenging early life experiences and are unaware of our current age and capabilities. Stuck in the past, our parts have beliefs, fears, and needs that show up as behavior patterns. These patterns can become our strengths, but when overused or operating on autopilot, they can derail us. The complexity of our current life circumstances doesn't match the worldview of these younger parts.

Let's take a look at some parts that may be familiar.

You might have a recent memory of your inner critic taking up mind space with nagging doubts about your ability to take on a big project. Or perhaps you have an overachieving part that works too long and hard and leaves you burnt out despite your "rational" desire and repeated promises to yourself to achieve a healthier work-life balance. Maybe you have a peacemaker or people-pleasing part of you that avoids conflict and keeps its head down in risky situations even though you have something important to say. ***As you read this, what parts come to mind? How do they show up in your personal or professional life?***

It isn't a big leap to see that parts run organizations.

Let's look at how these young parts whose primary concern is keeping us safe, impact psychological safety. According to Harvard Professor Amy Edmonson, psychological safety is the belief that we will not be punished for speaking up with our concerns, asking courageous questions, sharing our ideas, or admitting our mistakes. In a [recent post](#), Edmonson notes, "***Psychological safety can help businesses achieve goals like higher levels of innovation, higher quality***

execution, and greater agility. Unfortunately, psychologically safe work environments are actually quite rare.”

The elusive nature of psychological safety makes sense when we consider the role of parts in protecting us from shame, embarrassment, and making a bad impression. The complexity and uncertainty that characterizes much of organizational life, can trigger our part's protective reactions.

Our best intentions and desires are often blocked by younger parts that feel anxious, stressed, or undervalued. With parts in charge, we leave innovative ideas on the table and important conversations unsaid.

What if we understood our inner system of parts and worked on updating and embracing them so they become valuable resources rather than obstacles to be ignored or removed?

Some models see these parts of ourselves as bad and encourage us to control or eliminate them. For example, you may have been advised to tell your inner critic to shut up or to evict it from your head. Our work is aligned with the Internal Family Systems (IFS) framework that shows how parts, once understood, can become integrated and helpful resulting in wise choices and courageous actions. As [Richard Schwartz](#), the founder of IFS notes, we have greater access to Self-energy. An enduring set of inner resources characterized by the clarity, open-heartedness, curiosity, compassion, and equanimity that gives us the presence to handle anything that comes our way.

A workplace-friendly approach to working with your unconscious parts and accessing Self-energy.

As translators of neuroscience and The Internal Family Systems (IFS) frameworks for understanding how to develop an agile mindset, we at The SyncUp Leadership Group have developed a practical, workplace-friendly approach that teaches you how to identify and work with your largely unconscious parts and how to access Self-energy. You'll learn to recognize and understand how these parts of yourself are burdened with negative beliefs, attitudes, and feelings acquired at different stages of life. As you befriend, understand, and update these largely unconscious parts, you'll experience greater freedom and choice.

See and hear what others have said about the [SyncUp approach](#). We hope to see you at our May 2023 Conscious Leadership retreat for leaders, coaches, and consultants at Lake Tahoe.



Terri Egan Associate Professor Emeritus at Pepperdine University, Co-Founder of The SyncUp Leadership Group