

THE FOUR STAGES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

How do we LIVE, MOVE, and HAVE OUR BEING?

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As an Organizational Behaviorist I am interested in helping individuals and organizations discover how to develop more effective leadership patterns. It is my observation that individuals and organizations move into and out of the four states of consciousness: unconscious unreality, conscious unreality, unconscious reality, and conscious reality. At differing points in time we live, move, and have our being in one of these levels of awareness. For some, the shift is a continual drifting; for others, the time spent in one state of consciousness can last years. By reflecting upon how or why we moved from one of state of consciousness to another can often explain past leadership successes and failures. When an organization or individual can perceive the differences between their states of awareness, they can become more selective in how—and on what level—they approach the task in front of them. The purpose of this paper is not to judge any of the four stages, but seeks to delineate them, explain the impact of each of state of consciousness on leadership, and to offer individuals and organization this framework to assist in future leadership endeavors.

As individuals, we are continually shifting from one state of consciousness to another. On both the individual and the organizational level, the goal is the same: learning to choose the appropriate state of reality for a given leadership task at hand. The four stages of consciousness and how they relate to leadership will be explained briefly below.

Unconscious unreality: In this state, one is completely unaware of what is occurring. The most common example of unconscious unreality is what you might experience in a dream. In this state, hours can pass without an awareness of what is happening. We do not have control of our dreams or where they will take us. This is a vulnerable state, but it can often be the source of unsolicited good ideas, as well. Most physiologists (particularly Jungian ones) would suggest that it is important to not ignore dreams, and perhaps even to look for deeper meanings within them and consider whether they could contain messages to inform our current situations.



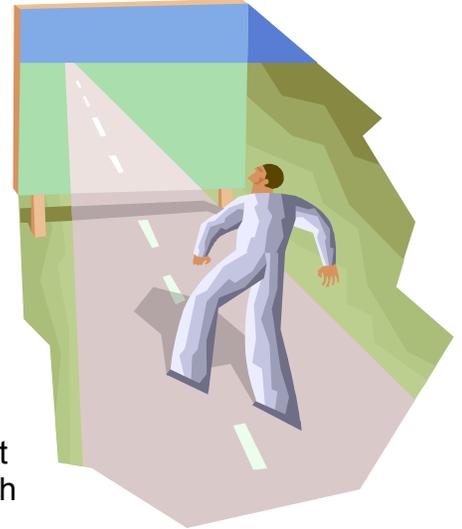
Conscious unreality: In this state, one is aware that what is happening is not real. A benign example of conscious unreality is when an actor is performing a role in a play. Conscious unreality can manifest itself in a much more damaging way, and when it does, we often say that someone is “out of touch with reality.” Conscious unreality can be extremely harmful when a sinking organization finds itself pretending that a Venture Capital is going to suddenly appear out of nowhere and help our organization stay afloat. This state can be helpful for brainstorming and innovating, however. Imagining a different reality or role-playing can bring an inrush of new ideas when old methodologies have grown stale. Carefully choosing times to suspend reality to encourage “possibility thinking” is often a very productive source of innovation.



Unconscious reality: In this state, one is unaware of what is happening around them. In unconscious reality, real things are taking place around you, but you are not paying very close attention. In unconscious reality, hours can pass without your knowing exactly how those hours passed. One of the most common experiences of unconscious reality happens in the car: we arrive at our destination without any recollection of the time passing or the road that got us there. In trance-like state of unconscious reality, we fly past our freeway exit and may not notice it until miles later, or look up from reading a passage and realize that we don't remember a word of it. Occasional moments unconscious reality are natural, but this state can become deeply harmful for organizations and individuals. In unconscious reality, it becomes easy to miss important details, leaving us vulnerable to others (like competitors or our bosses) who have a more complete picture of what is going on that we do.



Conscious reality: In this state, one is totally conscious, informed, and present to what is happening around them. In conscious reality, we not only know what is going on, but we appreciate the importance of those events. Conscious reality is being aware of the clear and present opportunities and dangers. In this state, we have evaluated the data and are considering it in our decision-making matrices. This state is being “in the here and now.” Conscious reality can provide clear data on what is happening, who is involved, and how engaged everyone is in the process. An authority figure in the conscious reality state would walk into her organization and not have her mind on what is coming up next, but would look at faces and the surroundings of the office and would be able to “read” what is going on with her organization in that exact moment. A manager who looks up in a meeting and pays attention to not just what his direct reports are saying, but their body language and how they are engaging with each other is in conscious reality.



In summary, the four stages of reality all part of how we live, move, and have our being. This author posits that becoming more aware of the four stages of reality can help us to adapt our reality to the situation at hand and improve our productivity in our leadership efforts.