

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF SHADOW

The truth will out, eventually. Understanding the vocabulary of shadow helps us appreciate how our unconscious is affecting our approach, says **Teresa Wilson**, the better to work with your whole self.

Who you are is how you coach – but who are you? You are all that you know yourself to be – all that is available to you from your field of conscious awareness – and so much more besides. You are also formed and informed by all that is held in your unconscious. Far from being a passive repository, the shadow material held in your unconscious plays an active part in shaping your preferences, behaviours, biases and more.

As a coach, this could show up as influences operating below the level of conscious awareness, impacting your ‘choices’ in ways you’re not aware of. Unconscious shadow pressures could include:

- a need for approval
- a desire to win more work
- anxiety related to reputation
- a need to belong
- fears related to status
- a reluctance to challenge
- a wish to be seen as an expert
- reflexive appeasement
- gender bias

To be the best coach you can be means continually to reflect on your practice. If you’re unaware of the impact the unconscious exerts on your practice then you’re really only doing half the job! So, how to make the unknown known? How can you begin to speak the language of the unconscious?

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WELCOME TO YOUR SHADOW

We are all born whole, with an unselfconsciousness that allows us to range freely through the totality of our expressiveness. Babies grab and scream and pout and glare and squall and rage equally. They don’t inhibit themselves. They don’t judge themselves. As Barry Michels says, they don’t place fig leaves over their ‘bad’ parts.¹

But as they get older, children are socialised - taught where to place their fig leaves. They learn that this behaviour is rewarded, that one frowned upon. These traits are a ‘yes’, others are a ‘no’. And those ‘nos’ are often delivered in a way that creates a visceral coding; lessons received with feelings of shame or humiliation. A parent’s sharp word, a teacher singling you out, school friends laughing at some perceived difference. Joyful aspects of ourselves can also be consigned to shadow in this way, too – our creativity, self-expression, playfulness or recklessness can also be shocked or shamed into shadow material.

So, we start to split and divide our personality. All that is ‘acceptable’ becomes identified as ego. Everything else gets disowned. We forget that these traits were ever part of us at all, and our shadow takes form.

This might be fine, were it not for the fact that the shadow has an energetic imperative to balance us out over the course of our lives. So eventually, those traits come calling. They want to be recognised and integrated – they want to come home.

WHEN SHADOW COMES CALLING

When shadow comes calling it can scare the life out of us! These ‘shadow take-overs’ can be extremely brief or may linger for some time, but they tend to feel shocking.

‘That’s not like me!’ we say, ‘I don’t know what came over me.’

In our lives, this may show up as some unexpected road rage or telling a white lie. In the coaching room, it may show up as a sudden sharp judgement of the client, your mind going blank or becoming unexpectedly tongue-tied.

If you’re not aware of the potential for emissaries from the unconscious to come calling, this can put you at a distinct disadvantage, because if you can’t make sense of what happened (*‘Why did I suddenly think that client was a cry-baby?’*), you may dismiss it and lose out on incredibly useful information from your own psyche.

This is where learning the language of shadow comes in – a way to meet and interact with the emissaries from the shadow through the Four Ps of Projection, Polarity, Parts and Patterns.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FOUR PS

The Four Ps is a menu of complementary strategies for interpreting or seeking out messages from the unconscious.

Projection and Polarities are like learning the verbs and nouns of a new language. They offer an accessible way to build a vocabulary of shadow traits. These approaches also satisfy our left-brain desire to know what’s going on and have some skin in the game.

When it comes to Parts and Patterns, however, we move into the arena of poetry; of squinting and seeing what images emerge through the blur. These approaches ask for a suspension of disbelief, to bring our right-brain creativity online and splash around in the emergent space of not-knowing.

Together, these four approaches merge and meld to offer a rich toolkit that ultimately becomes a way of being in the world, and a way of coaching with increased ease and presence.

PROJECTION

One of the easiest ways to tune into the shadow is to pay attention to your projections: the means by which we use other people as a mirror to observe the traits or behaviours that we don’t identify as our own. We don’t do it consciously; it’s just one way that the shadow tries to get our attention in order to reintegrate disowned parts and bring the system closer to wholeness. We therefore actively (and unconsciously) seek out people who hold the qualities that either annoy or inspire us the most, playing our projections on the movie screen of the other, unaware that we’re longingly looking at what we’ve forgotten to own in ourselves.

Understanding this has such power; because when you integrate a projection it will no longer trouble you. The tension dissolves like magic.

POLARITIES

Polarities work hand in hand with projections because they invite us to go looking for the complementary opposite. The Law of Polarity tells us that we cannot have one side of the continuum without the other, so if I ONLY identify with one particular trait e.g. ‘I’m so generous,’ then it might indicate that ‘greedy’ has been consigned to my shadow. Because everything has to go somewhere.

Your birthright is wholeness; which sounds good until you realise that this means saying ‘yes’ to the qualities that were socialised out of you – and the reclamation can mean re-experiencing the shame or hurt that caused them to be disowned in the first place.

But the benefits of polarity hunting are enormous: all traits come with a gift, if we only know to look for them. Integrating polarities over time means we offer our clients greater range, less reactivity, more humanity and a more congruent presence.

PARTS

Working with parts is an endlessly creative and fascinating way to come more deeply into relationship with your ‘self’...or selves.

The ‘how’ of parts work is less important than the intention. If your intention is ‘dignifying the shadow with an identity?’ and coming into a sincere relationship with it, then the rest will flow from there.

Simply do what you do with friends you care deeply about: show up, ask questions, listen deeply, be consistent, apologise where necessary and show appreciation. In return, you’ll find that shadow take-overs decrease and you’ll enjoy the company of ‘shadow’ as an expansion of your own potential. Your shadow becomes a friend, ally, supervisor and guide.

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supervisor and guide.*

As to the ‘how’, there are lots of ways in, including Parts Work, Sub-personalities, Archetypes, Shadow Figures, or The Shadow. No one way is better than the others; the key is to go inside, listen, experiment and follow your own instincts.

PATTERNS

If Projection and Polarities give you a vocabulary, and Parts work gives you insights and information, mapping Patterns is a way to hold the complexity and fullness of shadow work, over time.

Shadow work marches to the beat of its own drum. Some elements appear to integrate with relative ease. Others are more knotty and take more time because the presenting issue may not be the potent issue.

Working with patterns helps you to map for meaning and to keep track of different threads and themes. Over time, you may then circle back and find new meaning in old puzzle pieces that have grown in significance through repetition.

You can map patterns to:

- **find deeper nuance in words:** ‘what do I really mean by arrogant?’
- **explore concepts:** ‘what comes up around money?’
- **explore events:** ‘what got triggered when I promoted my workshop?’
- **explore inter-relationship of qualities or parts:** ‘which repeatedly show up in different clusters?’

Integrating shadow work into your personal and professional life is like a journey into the heart of coaching. All of life becomes a source of insight to take back into the coaching room. Like an artist being given a huge colour palette to use, your work will feel more coloured-in, rich in depth, with nuance showing up where shadow meets light.

You’ll uncover layers of wisdom and insight that will influence your approach and offer huge gains. You’ll become less reactive, develop a deeper sense of who you are, offer greater congruence and trust to clients, work with more freedom, be more closely tapped into your intuition and creativity, be more able to take risks... to name but a few.

Mostly, shadow work is a source of joy because you need never feel lonely again. You will have a trusted companion - the wise one, the funny one, the bold one, the fearless one - right alongside you, for life. So, if you’d like to bring profound change into your coaching, turn towards the shadow; you won’t regret it.

*Interested in how to get started with the 4 P’s of Shadow Work?
Go to teresawilsoncoaching.com to download some free worksheets.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Teresa Wilson PCC has worked as a facilitator for over 20 years, and as a coach for over 10 years through teresawilsoncoaching.com. She delivers training and coaching within the Civil Service and NHS, and for leaders in the third sector. Alongside coaching in her private practice, she runs Shadow Retreats and Shadow Supervision for Coaches. Teresa is co-author of the book, *Seven Creative Gremlins: Write your way through doubt and fear to claim your creative life*.

- 1 Barry Michels, The Tools: Discover Your Shadow webinar series
<https://begonia-moose-xh6s.squarespace.com/recordings/p/discover-your-shadow-7-hours>
- 2 As above

CASE STUDY

Coaching scenario:

A new client came onto the call and said, ‘You don’t mind if I keep the video off, do you?’

To which I reflexively replied, almost as one word: ‘No-of-course-that’s-fine-no-problem.’

Related shadow process:

I’m walking my dog and she’s driving me crazy; she wants to choose her own route and not go the way the way that I want to go. ‘She’s SO wilful,’ I think, crossly, wilfully dragging her in the opposite direction.

In my frustration, I catch the **Projection**: She is wilful. So, I try it on for myself, knowing that what irritates me in others is a disowned attribute of my own: I am wilful.

I find examples of where this is true in my life, and I tune into the gift or positive aspects of integrating this quality more into my life. Then I consider, does being wilful show up in my coaching? Does it get in the way and need dialling down? Or are there situations when it could be useful to dial it up?

With my curiosity piqued, I then go looking for the **Polarity**. As ever, I dance around for a while, trying to find the polarity that has heat or a charge of recognition for me. ‘I am amenable. I am flexible. I am compliant.’ Eurgh. Yup. That last one had a wince of recognition for me... something I would rather not acknowledge about myself, something I’d prefer to keep in the shadows.

Usefully, though, this word took me right back into that moment in the coaching room: ‘No-of-course-that’s-fine-no-problem.’

So now I have surfaced both a behaviour and a vocabulary to describe its driver: I am compliant.

With this clarity, I can get curious about the places, people and scenarios that trigger compliance and start to map the **Pattern**. Is it particular types of clients? New vs established? Male or female? Does seniority play a part?

Then I go to source and check in with my shadow figure **Part** to see what created the need for compliance in my early life, helping me to resolve the need for it to show up in the present.

All of this means that the next time a client starts a sentence with, ‘You don’t mind if I...?’ I know that I’ll be less controlled by a reflexive need to comply with their ‘demand’ and will have greater access to my full, resourced **Presence** to answer the question from that place instead.