in·coherence

Issue #6

16 Feb 2026

The Lens of Attention-Focus



The Coherence Project

Editor's Note

We are living in a moment where the volume of information has never been higher and the quality of understanding has never been lower.

Political discourse has been reduced to positions. Media feeds reactions, not inquiry. Education prepares people to answer questions, not to ask them. Relationships are managed through outcomes rather than experienced through presence. And the systems that shape daily life – economic, technological, institutional – are accelerating in complexity while the capacity to genuinely comprehend them is eroding.

This is not an accident. It is the predictable result of a civilization that has, over centuries, narrowed where human attention is directed – and kept it there.

"The quality of your attention determines the quality of your life." - Simone Weil

In IC Issue #4 and Issue #5, we explored the hidden architecture of the deals that have quietly organized modern life and what happens as those deals collapse. But collapse is not just structural. It is perceptual. The same forces that build the deals also shape *how we look at them* – and at everything else. The way we attend to a crisis, a relationship, a policy, a conversation with our children, is not neutral. It is conditioned. And that conditioning is largely invisible.

This is what makes our exploration here essential.

The Lens of Attention-Focus does not offer another framework to think about. It offers a way of seeing something that is already happening in every conscious moment – something so close and so constant that it has gone almost entirely unexamined. And in that unexamined space, the capacity for presence, for understanding, and for coherence is being quietly displaced.

I believe this may be the most practically important insight within The Life Framework. Not because it is the most complex, but because it touches what is most immediate: the quality of attention you are bringing to this sentence, right now – and to everything else in your life.

All models, illustrations, and content are the property of The Coherence Project and Garrett Weiner.

Please contact us if you wish to use any material or have questions about referencing our work.

© 2025 The Coherence Project

The Lens of Attention-Focus

Orienting Attention in Complex Systems

Applying Presence to Meaning-Making

The Focus of Our Attention

A news story details a tragic shooting.

A father advises his son on his life choices.

A couple discusses their plans for a holiday together.

A doctor advises a patient on their illness.

Parents of a child discuss their school grades.

In any moment of conscious thought, attention on an event within life - such as in a relationship, a community, an organization, or a nation - is oriented somewhere. In that moment, we are attending to *What* is happening, *How* it is happening, or *Why* it is happening. And often in some combination of the three.

These are not just different questions. They represent different orientations of attention, each producing a different quality of understanding and a different relationship to experience. Which one leads shapes how we make meaning, how we relate to others, and how we engage with the systems we live within.

Yet in modern life, this range has shifted toward one more than the others, considerably. The socio-economic, technological, and educational systems that shape daily experience are overwhelmingly structured around *What* – what happened, what to do, what the answer is, what to believe, what side to be on. News cycles, social media, political debate, education systems, and organizational life all pull attention toward events and outcomes.

The result is that *How* and *Why* – the orientations that open deeper understanding – are increasingly displaced. Not because people lack the capacity, but because the environment and conditioned behaviors around them make it unpalatable, difficult, or costly to do so.

All models, illustrations, and content are the property of The Coherence Project and Garrett Weiner.

Please contact us if you wish to use any material or have questions about referencing our work.

© 2025 The Coherence Project

This paper introduces the **Attention-Focus Lens**: a model for understanding how and why the orientation of our attention shapes our capacity for understanding, for presence, and for coherence – and what becomes possible when that orientation shifts.

How the *What* Happened

What occurred. What went wrong. What needs to be done. What side someone is on. Who, where, and when are extensions of *What* – tangible, external, easily consumed.

News cycles, social media, organizational metrics, political debate, and education are all structured around *What*. They take advantage of this default because it grabs attention efficiently. It simplifies complexity into outcomes and individuals. It shifts energy from understanding to blaming, from inquiry to reaction.

For example, when a politician or media pundit/influencer identifies a person or population to blame for an event, the *How* is brushed over with vague notions and the *Why* is often entirely disregarded. People accept the *What* as a fact and narrative of *Why* without much question. Their attention needs nothing deeper.

Our *What*-attention has history. Naturally, it is the easiest to access. It is clear, simple, often in the moment and corresponds with our physical sense of threat and reward. Fear the *What*. Escape the *What*. Chase the *What*. Eat the *What*. Protect the *What*. Have sex with the *What*.

But even in the Enlightenment period's exploration of philosophy, the *What*-attention became further entrenched from thinkers like Descartes and Bacon, whose influence on our understanding of life and existence is unmistakable. Reductionism set the ground for the mental models we hold around our exploration of questions, learning, relationship, and the scientific method itself: Understanding the *What* by breaking it down into smaller *Whats*.

The *What*-attention was further embedded in our collective psyche as industrial society developed, operationalizing reductionism via a more mechanistic and result-driven mindset. And the education system followed suit to prepare individuals for the skills deemed necessary to function in that society. From tests to goals. All focused on an answer. A grade. An achievement. A *What*.

All models, illustrations, and content are the property of The Coherence Project and Garrett Weiner.

Please contact us if you wish to use any material or have questions about referencing our work.

© 2025 The Coherence Project

Today, as modern society focuses on profit and control, the *What*-attention has become not just the default leaning of thought, but the mechanism for control and influence of marketing and the access to and maintenance of political power. No longer just *What*-attention but *What*-manipulation and *What*-domination.

The *What* tells people what happened, when it happened, who is responsible, and what to believe – and asks nothing but belief, or suspension of disbelief, in return. These ready-made explanations are often supplied by media, ideology, authority, or generated internally from fear. These often take shape in the "Deals" we unconsciously operate within (See IC Issue #4 and Issue #5).

What the *How of It All*

While the *What c*enters the attention on visible occurrences, the *How* draws the attention to what is often less visible – process, pattern, relationship, and possibility. *How* doesn't simplify complexity – it opens the door to seeing it. To the relational system and to imagination and curiosity.

How is the experience? *How* are things related? *How* are they unfolding? *How* did they develop? *How* might this become different?

These two attention-foci produce fundamentally different forms of understanding, thought, and response. For example, when the *What* is the primary draw of the brain's attention, the *How* can be disregarded or narrated over. When there is a How-attention focus, the What can be deepened and contextualized, or even enrolled to understand relationship more deeply.

In personal relationships, the impact of the *What* or *How* is felt directly.

A *What*-focus orients toward outcomes: what someone will do, provide, or deliver. Attention stays external. The other person's experience is bypassed, and the relationship becomes prone to management and control — even when care is intended. "What will you do?" closes a conversation differently than "How are you feeling about the situation?"

A *How*-focus orients toward shared experience. Emotions, rhythms, and conditions are explored and more fully understood. Presence becomes felt. Understanding emerges without requiring agreement. And when the *How* is genuinely engaged, there is a more genuine inquiry into *Why* — the meaning, needs, and interests — as a result.

All models, illustrations, and content are the property of The Coherence Project and Garrett Weiner.

Please contact us if you wish to use any material or have questions about referencing our work.

© 2025 The Coherence Project

How to Explore the *How*

How we understand the How depends on the type and size of relationship structure we are looking at. What type of “system” it is – personal or impersonal, small or large.

Systems thinking considers every interaction, relationship, and social structure to be a system of some kind. A conversation between two people is a system. A family is a system. So is a school, a company, a media landscape, an economy. What shifts is not whether the What/How dynamic applies – it always does – but how the How can be accessed.

In personal and relational systems – where an identifiable and available group of people are participants – the How is available directly. We can sense it, feel it, inquire into it in real time. The shift from What to How is a shift in presence: from directing attention outward toward outcomes, to attending to the experience as it unfolds or unfolded between people. This is where the How is most immediately felt and where its absence is most immediately damaging.

In larger or more impersonal systems – institutions, economies, ecological patterns – we cannot inhabit the How in the same way. We cannot ask a school system how it is feeling. Instead, we must construct our understanding of the How through observation, data, and analysis. We use the tools of What – measurement, comparison, structural mapping – in service of understanding *How* the system behaves as it does. This is a legitimate and necessary inquiry.

But the critical question remains the same at either scale: is the inquiry still alive, or has it closed? Are we building a provisional understanding that stays responsive to what we discover – or have we arrived at an explanation and stopped looking? A map mistaken for the territory is still a map mistaken for the territory, whether the system is a marriage or a national economy.

How Does Why Matter

So *What* about the *Why*?

Generally speaking, the *Why* is amorphous, less visible, often vague, nuanced and subjective. The *Why* is also more complex and requires more reflection and brain energy to discern and understand, and so it is not as commonly explored and understood.

All models, illustrations, and content are the property of The Coherence Project and Garrett Weiner.

Please contact us if you wish to use any material or have questions about referencing our work.

© 2025 The Coherence Project

In a modern, *What*-dominant society, exploring *Why* can often feel irrelevant or pointless, so most people simply don't. Instead, they subconsciously adopt a narrated *Why* that is provided, even if they claim it as their own, with assumed motives, projected fears, and convenient explanations that can be mistaken or subject to manipulation.

Conversely, a *How* attention-focus provides the space for the *What* to be more understood and a more valid *Why* to emerge through inquiry and exploration. The systems thinking example used previously fits well.

The Attention-Focus Curves graphic below maps this dynamic. In it, the *What*-focus and *How*-focus are inversely related in their relationship to *Why* :

- On the left, where a *What*-focus dominates, narrative for the *Why* (and sometimes the *How*) is other-authored, presumed, or manufactured.
- On the right, in a high *How*-focused environment, inquiry is more self-authored: *How* leads, the *What* is informed, and the *Why* emerges naturally from understanding and self-authorship.

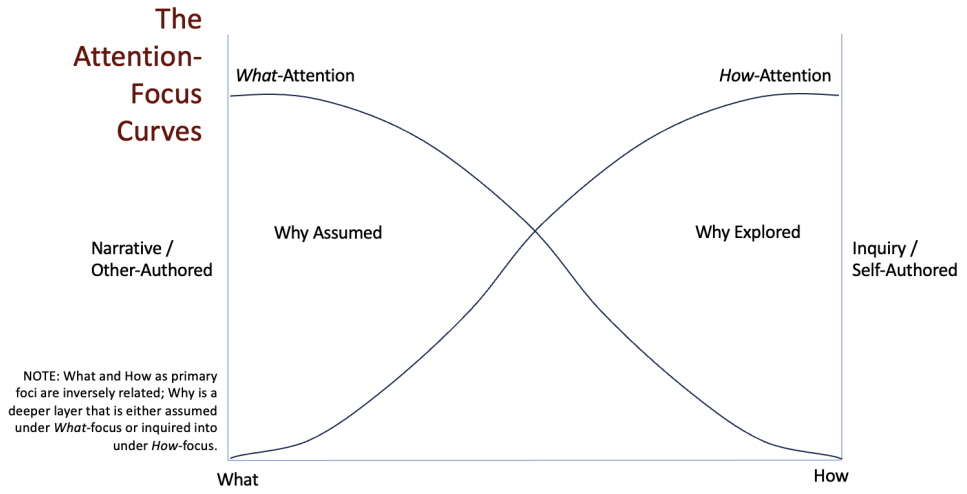


Fig - 1. The AF Curves present the dynamic of both What-focused and How-focused attention, and their relationship to authorship and the exploration of Why.

Thus the *Why* does not appear as a separate curve because it is not an independent variable. It is pulled toward whichever focus is dominant. On the left, *Why* is narrated. On the right, *Why* is inquired. The quality of the *Why* is already carried by the curves themselves.

And while a *What*-focus often leads to a disregarded or distorted understanding of the *How*, a *How*-focus can actually help to enlighten new layers and clarity of the *What and explore the Why*.

All models, illustrations, and content are the property of The Coherence Project and Garrett Weiner.

Please contact us if you wish to use any material or have questions about referencing our work.

© 2025 The Coherence Project

Yet even this *Why* may be a perceived *Why*, while the underlying *Why* remains below the consciousness, in the complexity of our minds or the social, economic, and even ecological systems.

Exploring the Icebergs

Systems theorists have long framed the layers of a system in the form of an iceberg (See Figure 2, below). It is a general abstraction, yet a powerful framing for seeing what lies beneath the water's surface. After summarizing the Systems Iceberg, we can now explore a complementary dimension: not what exists at each layer, but how attention engages each layer.

At the visible surface of the Systems Iceberg are the events, outcomes, symptoms, moments, etc that inspire a response from individuals and communities. This might include a crime being committed, a behavior in a relationship, the birth of a child, or a simple purchase transaction.

Over time, events form patterns – observable trends in frequency, volume, and intensity. For instance the number of births, number of crimes committed, or goods purchased over a period of time. But these patterns are less visible, unless someone is tracking them over time, so patterns sit just below the surface of the water.

In the iceberg model, just below patterns, are the 'structures' of relationships that determine the frequency, volume, and intensity of events on an ongoing basis. These include the norms and laws of business contracting, the relationship between family planning services and their local community, and the funding relationships for law enforcement.

Below everything else in this iceberg model are the 'mental models' that members of the system hold that help to form and fuel those structures. They are the belief systems and stories that define and support what is viewed as naturally desirable (economic growth), what is considered right and wrong (how resources should be distributed), and the relative desirability of different options (supporting the health education of parents), that help to create and sustain the nature of the causal relationships in a system.

The primary flow of influence rises from the base. Mental models – assumptions and beliefs about how the world works – generate and sustain structures: the rules, norms, and relationships that organize behavior. Those structures shape patterns over time.

All models, illustrations, and content are the property of The Coherence Project and Garrett Weiner.

Please contact us if you wish to use any material or have questions about referencing our work.

© 2025 The Coherence Project

And those patterns surface as the events we see and respond to in the present moment.

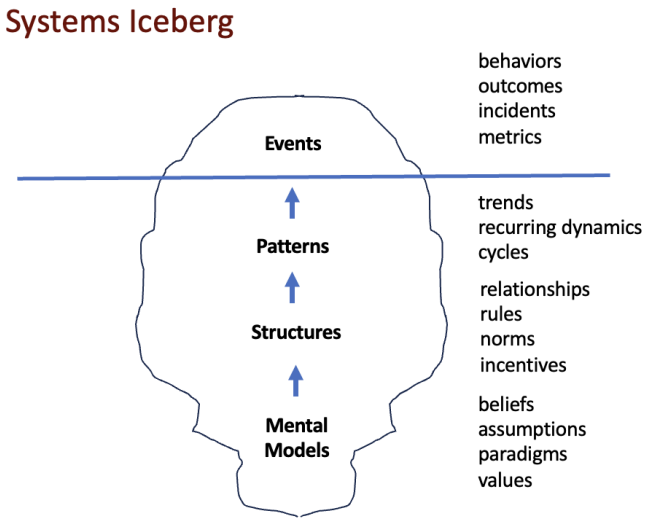


Fig - 2. Above the waterline are **events** — what happened, what is visible, what draws attention.

Below the waterline are **patterns, relationships, structures, and mental models** — the deeper dynamics that shape what appears on the surface.

The Attention–Focus Iceberg

If the Systems Iceberg describes the layers of a system, the Attention–Focus Iceberg describes how we engage those layers. The structure remains the same – events, patterns, structures, mental models – but the orientation shifts from ontology (what exists at each layer) to attention (how we engage it). It does not replace the Systems Iceberg, nor does it map rigidly onto it. It reveals the psychological orientation through which each layer is engaged.

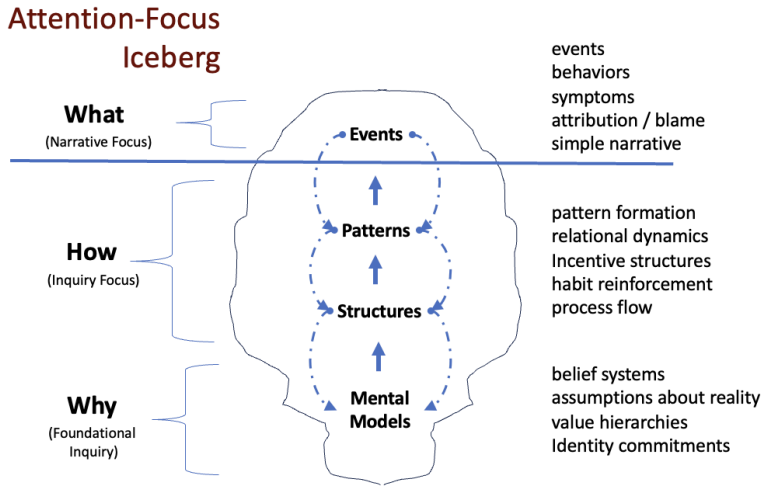


Fig - 3. In the AF Iceberg, What (event-level), How (patterns and structure), and Why (mental models) provide a lens for understanding where attention is directed and how that orientation shapes our capacity for presence and inquiry.

All models, illustrations, and content are the property of The Coherence Project and Garrett Weiner.

Please contact us if you wish to use any material or have questions about referencing our work.

© 2025 The Coherence Project

What-focus → subject-object level awareness.

The *What-focus* keeps attention at the surface. When attention is oriented toward events, it is focused on a specific occurrence – what was seen or heard or felt. If this is the primary focus, the *How* and *Why* are generally not explored – they are assumed or adopted from others. Meaning is supplied through narrative rather than inquiry, and over time that narrative can harden into unquestioned belief.

How-focus → process-level and relationship-structure awareness.

The *How-focus* looks to what is below the waterline. It brings attention to process, relationship, and pattern – How are events connected over time? How are incentives structured? How are habits reinforcing behavior? How do relationships generate feedback? This is where complexity becomes visible. Within an open How-focus, presence is reinforced and inquiry deepens toward understanding.

Why-focus → meaning or existential level awareness.

Why-attention is on layers of purpose, origin, and orientation. Again, not simply of an object or the What, but the purpose and origin of relationship structure itself. The Why-focus both requires and supports a deepened level of presence. What are the assumptions and beliefs that underlie the structure?

Whether the *Why* is still simply perceived or deeply explored is determined by the thoroughness and depth of the *How*-inquiry. Conversely, the quality of *Why*-inquiry shapes how structures and patterns (*How*) and events (*What*) are explored.

Unlike a purely structural model, the Attention–Focus Iceberg highlights the role of orientation. Attention determines whether repeated events become static explanation or disciplined inquiry. And because patterns and habits can, over time, reshape structure and belief, the flow is recursive. Coherence or distortion is reinforced depending on how we attend.

All models, illustrations, and content are the property of The Coherence Project and Garrett Weiner.

Please contact us if you wish to use any material or have questions about referencing our work.

© 2025 The Coherence Project

How Presence Modulates Our Attention

Presence and attention orientations exist in a feedback loop. Neither is simply upstream of the other. Presence enables *How*-attention, and How-attention deepens presence. Conversely, What-dominance overrides presence, and diminished presence makes the What-default harder to escape.

A What-focus enables both the exertion of control and susceptibility to being controlled. If my attention is fixed on What – what to believe, what to do, what to fear – then the How and Why become vulnerable to external supply. This connects directly to how deals operate. Deals redirect attention to the What – what you'll get, what you'll lose – and away from the How and Why, as well as the consequences and costs of the exchange itself.

When presence is overridden, the What jeopardy takes hold.

Attention-Focus as Inquiry

The form of inquiry may not indicate its true orientation. A question framed as “how” can carry a *What*-intent – if a specific outcome is desired rather than genuine understanding.

What matters is what lies beneath the question: is it curiosity, or is it control wearing the language of inquiry?

There is a spectrum here, too. Some people consciously disregard *How* and *Why* — they simply do not consider another person’s experience as relevant. Others default to a *What*-focus unconsciously, while genuinely believing they are being open to the *How* and *Why*.

Understanding this distinction helps shift the response from argument to boundary recognition. Attention and intention are the key indicators.

The Lens as Presence

All models, illustrations, and content are the property of The Coherence Project and Garrett Weiner.

Please contact us if you wish to use any material or have questions about referencing our work.

© 2025 The Coherence Project

While this lens can be applied in abstraction to understand the broader movements of humanity, it can be used most effectively as a self-reflective and environmental assessment and practice.

When we notice ourselves forming a narrative, reacting to an event, or moving toward action, we can pause:

> *How is my experience of attention in this moment unfolding?*
>
> *How is my attention being influenced by the environment around me?*
>
> *How is the quality of my inquiry being influenced by my attention?*
>
> *How is the story I am engaged in being generated? What is that leading me toward?*
>
> *How is it affecting my deeper sense of what is real or how I am understanding others?*

This practice of noticing the experience of attention is itself a form of presence.

It does not prescribe behavior. It does not instruct people to stop asking *What*-questions. It simply makes visible what is already happening — the quality of our experience and how we are being influenced so we can more readily understand whether we are being authored or self-authoring in our perception of reality. In how we live life through our relationships with self, others, and nature.

It offers language and a process for something most people feel but cannot articulate.

In short:

Presence is the ground.

Attention is what shapes it.

And coherence emerges not from better answers, but from better inquiry.

Compass Before Map

There is a subtle but critical trap embedded in any model – including this one. The Attention-Focus Lens can be understood, remembered, and applied without ever actually shifting the orientation of attention it describes. In that case, the lens becomes another *What*: a concept to know, a framework to reference, a map to follow. And the

All models, illustrations, and content are the property of The Coherence Project and Garrett Weiner.

Please contact us if you wish to use any material or have questions about referencing our work.

© 2025 The Coherence Project

very displacement it is designed to reveal continues unnoticed – now wearing the language of awareness.

This is not a theoretical risk. It is the default. We are so conditioned toward *What*-attention that even when we encounter a model pointing toward How, the mind reaches for it the way it reaches for everything – as something to grasp, categorize, and deploy. The model becomes a better map. But it is still a map.

What activates this lens is not understanding it but loosening the grip of what we already think we know. Not abandoning knowledge – that would be its own form of collapse – but softening certainty enough to allow live sensing. The difference is between following a map drawn from prior experience and orienting by compass – remaining responsive to what is actually emerging, even when it contradicts the map we hold.

This is the role of presence in the model and throughout The Life Framework. Presence is not an addition to the Attention-Focus Lens. It is the condition under which the lens is operable. Without it, the What/How/Why distinction remains conceptual — useful perhaps, but inert. With it, the shift from What-dominance to How-inquiry becomes something felt and practiced, not merely understood.

The practice questions offered above are an entry point. But they function differently depending on whether they are engaged as a checklist – another *What* to perform – or as genuine inquiry, held lightly, with willingness to be surprised by what surfaces. That difference is the hinge. And it cannot be taught through explanation alone. It must be practiced.

Applied Attention

What, How, and *Why* are among the first words we learn to use. They are so familiar that they may seem unremarkable, even invisible. Yet as this paper has explored, they are orientations of attention – each shaping how we perceive, relate, and make meaning. And precisely because they are so familiar, their influence goes largely unnoticed. This is itself a reflection of the *What*-dominance described here. We learn *what* these words are. We rarely explore *how* they shape our experience.

Consider the father advising his son on his life choices. If his attention is anchored in *What* – what his son should do, what path is safest – the conversation narrows. The son's experience is bypassed in favor of direction. Now consider how that shifts when the father's attention moves toward *How*. How is his son experiencing this moment?

All models, illustrations, and content are the property of The Coherence Project and Garrett Weiner.

Please contact us if you wish to use any material or have questions about referencing our work.

© 2025 The Coherence Project

How are the pressures and possibilities moving through him? The *What* doesn't disappear, but it becomes informed by the *How* and something deeper. The *Why* — what actually matters, why is he hesitant, why is he inspired by some things and not others, why does he think and feel as he does, has space to surface. This is not a dramatic intervention. It is a quiet reorientation.

By becoming conscious of how these orientations operate – in ourselves, in our relationships, and in the systems around us – we begin to create real differences. Not through force of will, but through the quality of attention we bring. The shift from *What*-dominance to *How*-inquiry is not a technique to be applied. It is a practice to be lived.

For more on the Attention-Focus Model and The Life Framework, please see www.thecoherenceproject.life/framework or contact TCP directly.

All models, illustrations, and content are the property of The Coherence Project and Garrett Weiner.

Please contact us if you wish to use any material or have questions about referencing our work.

© 2025 The Coherence Project