

Applying Gestalt Theory to Coaching

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ABSTRACT

The practice of professional coaching has grown dramatically over the past 10 to 15 years, with a proliferation of professionals and articles. During this time, there have been only a few coaching articles that draw upon Gestalt principles for their theoretical base. This article focuses on two foundational Gestalt principles, contact and awareness, to demonstrate that Gestalt theory can offer a significant contribution to the field of professional coaching.

Background

Although peer-reviewed articles discussing the use of coaching appeared as early as the 1930s (Gorby, 1937; Bigelow, 1938), with increased references in the 1950s (Mold, 1951; Hayden, 1955), its initial emergence as a profession with a set of defined skills did not occur until the 1960s through the 1990s (Mahler, 1964, 1974; Mahler & Wrightnour, 1973; Tobias, 1996). The past 10 years have seen a remarkable proliferation of individuals who define themselves as professional coaches. In fact, from 1999 through 2006, the International Coach Federation experienced a 400 percent increase in membership



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(Neumann, 2008). During this time, too, the number of published papers articulating professional coaching theory has grown. One website presents a limited review of literature that lists more than 250 coaching articles, most of which have been written since 2000 ("Coaching News," n.d.). During this period of marked growth, however, the number of articles presenting a Gestalt theory base for professional coaching appears to be minimal. An online search of the literature found only six coaching articles that focused on Gestalt theory, some of which have been web-published (Barber, 2002; Bentley, 2005; Chidiac, 2008; Duignan, n.d.; Magerman & Brosan, 2003; Siminovitch & Van Eron, 2006).

In web-published articles, Barber (2002) suggests that Gestalt theory can support a more holistic environment, which he believes is necessary for organizational success, while Duignan (n.d.) highlights the Gestalt principles of "figure/ground" and the "cycle of experience" as important informants of professional coaching. In another web presentation, Bentley (2005) focuses on the improvisational aspects of Gestalt as a way of enhancing coaching skills. In a Newsletter of the Gestalt Institute of Philadelphia, Magerman and Brosan (2003) concentrate on the "use of self" as a tool for promoting authenticity, as well as on creative choices emerging from the "here and now." Chidiac (2008) highlights coaching success through the "use of self" and the "paradoxical theory of change." Finally, Siminovitch and Van Eron (2006) suggest that a Gestalt-informed coach can draw on the "use of self," the "cycle of experience," and work with resistance to support professional development.

Purpose

Despite the lack of a substantial corpus of published literature in the field, professional coaching has certainly entered the Gestalt world. Perhaps more accurately, Gestalt training institutes have earnestly begun to prepare coaches by utilizing Gestalt therapy's unique theoretical base. Professional coaching programs are presently offered at The Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, The Gestalt Training Institute of Philadelphia, and The Gestalt International Study Center (South Wellfleet, Cape Cod) in the USA, and at other Gestalt training institutes in Europe and in other parts of the world. Professional coaching, though still in its relative infancy, draws from many approaches and schools of thought; these include psychology, human development, social sciences, psychotherapy, and the human potential movement. Gestalt theory, with a rich and textured history in these areas, clearly has something to say about coaching. My primary purpose in writing this paper, therefore, is to explore how coaching can be effectively informed by well-established Gestalt principles.

Beyond Therapy: Practical Applications of Gestalt Principles

Historically, Gestalt theory was applied to psychotherapy for individuals. Over the years, Gestalt and other theories of psychology were expanded and applied to additional treatment modalities including couples, family, and group therapy. Eventually Gestalt theory was adapted and applied to *organizational behavior* (Herman, 1977; Alevras & Wepman, 1980; E. Nevis, 1987, 1992; E. Nevis, Lancourt, & Vassallo, 1996). This application of Gestalt theory to organizational behavior is logical, reasonable, and graceful.

Gestalt theory, above all, offers a theoretical approach to *learning*. If foundational Gestalt principles recognize the vast field of intra-psychic phenomena, they also focus heavily on concepts that account for the inter-relationship between the person and the environment. These include field theory, figure/ground relativity, paradoxical change, experiment, the cycle of experience, and the importance of viewing resistance not simply as positive but as an organic reaction to otherness or difference. Additionally, Gestalt theory advocates creative choice, optimism, and the notion that growth and development emerge from contact and awareness. In the same way that these principles have allowed for an easy and appropriate application of Gestalt theory to organizational consultation, they can have a relevant and meaningful impact on the profession of coaching.

While the purpose of this paper is to describe how Gestalt principles in general can contribute to our understanding of coaching, I have chosen to highlight the notions of *contact* and *awareness*. As Gestalt theory continues to evolve and develop, I assume that these emergent ideas will have immediate application to coaching.¹ But I choose here to focus on contact and awareness precisely because they are basic and foundational. As an emerging profession, coaching is often viewed either with confusion (e.g., "What is the difference between coaching and therapy?"), or as unduly simplistic. For this reason, I opt to demonstrate how basic Gestalt principles, applied with thoughtful intention, can contribute to a successful coaching process.

The reader will notice the difficulty of focusing on contact without using the language of awareness, and vice versa. Such are the limitations of the linear process of writing. Along the way, I will also demonstrate how some of the aforementioned Gestalt principles such as supporting resistance, the paradoxical theory of change, and well-grounded experiments can serve in support of contact and awareness.

¹ I am presently working on an article that focuses on the application of the Cape Cod Model to coaching.

Contact in the Coaching Process

Fundamental to Gestalt theory is the notion of contact. Though historically contact has been defined as occurring at “the boundary of the self and other” (E. Nevis, 1987), it has been explained more recently as an individual’s experience of the “me” and the “not me” (Yontef, 1981). Erving and Miriam Polster’s (1973) description of contact as “the lifeblood of growth, the means for changing oneself and one’s experience of the world” (p. 101) has obvious relevance to the professional coach. It is a foundational Gestalt belief that growth and development occur as a result of contact with the environment. Contact can also be understood as the process by which learning takes place. Teaching and learning as a core component of a coaching relationship will be addressed throughout this article.

Because it is a foundational Gestalt belief that individuals grow and develop as a result of their contact and interactions with the environment, and in the meeting of differences (Latner, 2002, p. 23; “Contact,” n.d.), the quality of the coach/client relationship first and foremost determines the effectiveness of the coaching. If we accept that contact itself inevitably results in change, then it follows that it is usual and even healthy to resist contact. Polster and Polster (1973) say the following: “Naturally, if change is indigenous to contact, one may well be wary about contact unless one has faith in the resulting change” (p. 101). Consequently, perhaps no other aspect of a Gestalt approach to coaching is more important than the practitioner’s intention to facilitate contact and trust with the coaching client. This connection is critical, because while coaches may in fact have a great deal to teach a client, a precondition of learning is that the client be *available* to be taught – to be interested in and excited about a partnership for learning. Anyone who has been engaged on either side of a *psychotherapeutic* relationship can attest to importance of trust and safety in achieving ultimate success.² Only by taking the time to develop rich contact and trust is the coaching client able to develop curiosity about what the coach may have to teach.

I have come to believe that as coaches, and sometimes even as therapists, we regularly underestimate what is required for the building of trust, and for the development of a rich, lively, and contactful professional relationship. This is the case whether the client has sought coaching help, or has been told by superiors to accept coaching. While many of us enjoy the process of learning, very few of us move quickly and easily into a relationship that we feel forced to enter, or one in which we feel diminished relative to someone else’s

² Commenting on psychotherapy can certainly beg the question of the difference between coaching and psychotherapy. While not discussed here, I intend to address this issue in a subsequent article.

expertise. Even for the most psychologically hearty, self-esteem can be fragile. Consequently, it can be easily compromised in the presence of another who is hierarchically positioned to teach us things we believe we should know. This situation is clearly exacerbated in organizational settings in which ongoing evaluation and review are standard practice.

Ironically, it is early on in a coaching relationship, when trust is most fragile, that coaches, in an effort to demonstrate their proficiency, often make missteps by trying to establish their own expertise. In fact, what is often most needed early on in the relationship is to focus on diminishing the hierarchical qualities of the student/teacher relationship, while supporting a connection centered on equality and similarities. Initially and throughout the coaching process, therefore, coaches must work to create an atmosphere of “*us-ness*.” In a coaching relationship, this type of contact facilitates the excitement and energy that drive the action toward learning. As Latner (2002) points out:

The hallmark of contact is excitement. It accompanies the encounter in the same way the heat and light of the sun accompany each other. The relation is not causal. Excitement is an aspect of the contact. It implies feeling and concern, energetic response or action, perhaps pleasure, curiosity, and mobilization. (p. 21)

What I am suggesting here is that in a hierarchical relationship, building trust and contact is not simple; it does not just emerge. It requires genuine interest in the client, and the availability of the coach to be “contacted.” It requires the coach to be authentically optimistic that the client is doing the best they can, that their skills and competencies will be appreciated, that a coach/client connection can result in a working partnership, and that, if there is a joint understanding of the client’s situation, this partnership can create solutions. When contact is rich, it results in excitement and energy (Melnick & S. Nevis, 2005); this excitement and energy is what drives the process of learning.

Additionally, I am suggesting that coaches, like clients, are often tempted to move too quickly into action without enough attention to enriching the contact, as illustrated by the following case study:

Frank was the CFO of mid-sized medical equipment manufacturing company. While he was widely liked and appreciated by those who reported to him, his relationships with peers and superiors were suffering. In these situations he was described as being anxious and defensive, often unable to work collaboratively.

When I met initially with Frank, he did in fact seem to be anxious and cautious. At the same time, he expressed interest in “getting this coaching

thing moving." After some initial "pleasantries," he described how much he valued the opportunity to be coached and proceeded to ask me for solutions to what he perceived to be his problems.

The temptation for any coach in this situation is to move into action and begin "coaching," especially when a third party payer is expecting results. However, I had virtually no relationship with Frank, and consequently, no foundation for the process of teaching and learning. Therefore, especially during initial sessions, it was important to focus on building that connection with him.

The "how" of enriching the contact with the coaching client can be, and often is, a subtle and nuanced process (and perhaps, in itself, a topic for another paper). The process requires coaches to draw on all of their abilities to be present, to be interested in the client, and to be able to be contacted. Sometimes it is about how the coach influences the pacing of the interaction; how eye contact is made or responded to; and how the coach responds to the client's initial attempts toward or away from contact and engagement. All of these ways of working, and more, are required to create the connection and contact that are the basis for learning in the coaching relationship.

That Gestalt theory can be applied to contact between coach and client is also reflected in how the coach works with resistance. While it is not uncommon for a coach to be able to identify defensiveness and resistance in clients, the Gestalt tenet of supporting resistance offers a clear direction for the coach to follow. In particular, this means adherence to the paradoxical theory of change, a belief that genuine change occurs more easily when one fully accepts what one is, rather than simply striving to be different (Beisser, 1970). Typically, resistance is characterized as an individual behavior, and a negative one at that ("Why is Jim *resisting* this?"). Often it is described as a personality trait ("Jim is so *resistant!*"). In Gestalt theory, resistance is not a label nor a characteristic of a person, but rather a phenomenon that resides in the here and now relationship. Furthermore, since all of us are attracted to that which is familiar and the same, as well as drawn to that which is new and different, Gestalt theory necessarily frames resistance to newness as an important aspect of healthy living.

Consequently, from a Gestalt perspective, the coach is encouraged to identify resistance in the coaching process as a normal response to that which feels *too new* or *too different*. It is this paradoxical process of raising awareness and supporting resistance that allows the client to have choice in creating an effective relationship for learning. These points are illustrated in the case of Susan, which follows below.

Susan was a senior vice-president in charge of facilities for a large manufacturing company. Having worked in this position for 3 years, she had established her value to the organization by initiating numerous cost-saving procedures. However, her abrupt style and generally poor interpersonal skills had resulted in many complaints to the Chief Operating Officer. Susan was told by the COO that she would be given a coach for the purpose of building better "people skills."

Initially, work with Susan was affected by the subtlety of her resistance. Regularly on time, and always polite, she nonetheless demonstrated no real interest in whatever the coaching process might have had to offer her. The beginning of our sixth meeting provided an opportunity to address her resistance and, paradoxically, to start building some genuine trust.

I had arrived early for the coaching session and was in the waiting area when she came in. She looked startled and a bit dismayed when she saw me. Using the opportunity, I commented on her apparent disappointment. Though initially reluctant to acknowledge that reaction, with support on my part for her resistance, she cautiously conceded. Her relief at being able to articulate her resistance was followed by an authentic discussion of her negative feelings about coaching: her distrust of "experts," her concern that the process was negatively affecting her career, and the time it was taking away from her workday.

Like any Gestalt practitioner, the Gestalt coach is interested in facilitating the mobilization of energy for action. By supporting a client's resistance, the energy being used to resist can often be mobilized for new action and, in this case, for new learning. Supporting resistance, which in this situation was Susan's reluctance to engage with the coaching process, is not simply a binary action but rather a full process unto itself. Using humor to join Susan in her annoyance at my having been forced on her served to soften her stance and allow her to see my interest in her, and eventually to enable us to explore further what she disliked about "being coached." Rather than debating the pros, cons, and benefits of coaching, we stayed focused on her authentic experience of resentment. At this point, my willingness to engage Susan about her reluctance in a non-evaluative way and with interest and inquiry was essential. It allowed her to develop fully, to observe and even to enjoy her resistance to me and to the process. Consequently, with a heightened awareness of her resistance, her interest and energy shifted towards a potentially new process – a trusting relationship in which she might be open to learning from the coaching process.

The Impact of Awareness Building on the Coaching Process

While the previous section focused on the importance of creating good contact and trust with the coaching client, the development of awareness is another core Gestalt principle that also applies to coaching. In fact, it is Gestalt theory's focus on awareness that may differentiate it from other approaches to coaching.

What Gestalt theory has to say about awareness and behavior change is unique. That is, a Gestalt practitioner understands that there is a direct relationship between the degree of awareness and the potential for new choices of behavior. In organizational settings with a third party payer, there can be a tendency to identify desired new behaviors and mobilize quickly towards them. Mobilizing too quickly can lead to ungrounded, new behaviors that are not genuinely integrated into the coaching client's repertoire. Here again, incorporating Gestalt theory's paradoxical theory of change can support and enhance awareness. Here is the case of George.

George was a senior manager in a bio-technology research organization. His management style was viewed largely by the organization as unfriendly and unsociable. Our coaching contract focused on helping him develop new, more effective inter-personal skills. Far from being resistant, George was eager to understand the ways in which his behaviors were being interpreted as unfriendly, and what he might do to change them.

In my conversations with his colleagues, superiors, and those who reported to him, one behavior noticed by all was his style of walking through the halls without saying hello or even acknowledging others. In my initial sessions with George, he expressed surprise that anyone might perceive him as unfriendly. Rather than discussing the accuracy of others' assessment, I suggested that we go for a walk through the building in order to learn about his style of interaction. As I followed him, he immediately pulled out his Blackberry. When those he passed initiated a greeting, he was responsive and friendly. Otherwise, he spent the entire time looking down at his PDA, passing numerous people in the hall without acknowledgment.

In debriefing the experience with George, he stated that he could not understand why others might perceive him as unfriendly, especially since he reported being affable and responsive to people's greetings. He was genuinely surprised and, in fact, disbelieving when I noted the number of people he had passed without acknowledgement. We decided to "experiment" by repeating the process. This time, though he still pulled out his PDA and pretended to look at it during the walk, he focused his attention on counting the number

of people he passed without saying "Hi." And this time when we debriefed, the surprise remained but the disbelief was gone.

Now keenly attentive to his own experience, George became quite interested in how *un*-aware he had been of his behavior. As his awareness and interest mounted, he realized that contrary to his original self-assessment, of being approachable and engaging in the presence of others, he often felt shy and awkward in social situations. It was easy to see that there was a significant disparity between George's perception of himself as friendly, and the reality of how his behavior impacted others. As a coach, there can be a tendency simply to "teach" George about the disparity and suggest a behavior change. However, since George was able to experience the difference for himself, his movement toward a new behavior was necessarily more grounded in a richer field of choice.

Furthermore, in accordance with the paradoxical theory of change, with increased here and now awareness of his experience and behavior, George's ability to choose new behaviors was enriched. That is, George needed to be aware of his resistance to contact with others in the hallways in order to pave the way for more genuine interest in new possible behaviors. Said another way, the Gestalt coach does not encourage change. Instead, the Gestalt coach promotes increased awareness, which then provides the foundation for the coaching client to make different choices.

Summary

The practice of professional coaching has grown dramatically over the past 10 to 15 years. This period has been marked by the proliferation of professionals who identify themselves as coaches, as well as by the appearance of articles, chapters, and books about coaching. During this time, there has not been a significant contribution to the coaching literature that draws upon Gestalt principles for its theory base. Whatever the reasons, Gestalt theory, which has been successfully adapted to address growth and development in individuals, couples, families, groups, and organizations, certainly has a contribution to make to the field of coaching.

While the Gestalt approach to coaching can draw from an array of principles, I have chosen to focus on two in this article: contact and awareness. A rich, contactful, and ultimately trusting professional relationship is a prerequisite for learning. While the coach may have much to teach, the client must be available and interested in learning. It is essential that the coach take time to create the personal presence and professional space that will support contact, safety, and trust. Doing so can support the client in developing interest and excitement about what the coach has to teach. Similarly, Gestalt theory

has as its foundation the notion that growth and development emerge from awareness. Consequently, the coach informed by Gestalt principles must work to help the client develop awareness before moving too quickly into the action of creating new behavioral choices.³

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³ I would like to thank Sharona Halpern for her thoughtful insights as I was writing this paper. Whenever I got stuck, her questions and ideas always moved me along.

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Commentary I: Applying Gestalt Theory to Coaching

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A B S T R A C T

In his article, "Applying Gestalt Theory to Coaching," Stuart N. Simon explores the work of coaching through the lens of Gestalt theory and principles with a primary focus on supporting awareness and contact with the client. Simon notes the importance of trust building in the coaching relationship. This commentary offers a deeper look into how we, as Gestalt coaches, use our own awareness and contact to create and maintain a trusting relational field with our clients.

The Warm Up

Stuart N. Simon's article evokes a chorus of potential directions to explore. I sit and contemplate which direction to take. At first, my thoughts are like scattered jumping beans, no one idea having more energy than the other. Now what do I do? I sit with myself, my ideas continuing to swirl. Underneath the swirl, I start to hear a very quiet whisper. An assumed distraction, I try to ignore the whisper, shooing it away like a pesky fly. But there it is again, the whisper not cooperating with my attempt to deflect it. Now I become



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intrigued. I decide I should settle down and pay attention to what wants to be heard. As I do so, I notice that all that is discernable is a rhythm – “Da Dáda Da Da Dá.” Five words, the second having two syllables. I let myself feel the rhythm in my body and mind, over and over again, slowly. “Da Dáda Da Da Dá.” Repeat. “Da Dáda Da Da Dá.” I become more aware of the accents in the rhythm. “Da Dáda Da Da Dá.” I repeat the rhythm out loud a number of times. In a few minutes, the rhythm finally forms into words. Interesting. My body has guided me to the title of a Cris Williamson album from decades past – “The Changer and the Changed.” I smile.

The Instrument

The album title gives me insight into the particular gift that we have as Gestalt coaches. How do we use our expertise to create and maintain trust, and to develop the “*us-ness*” that Simon describes? At the core of our expertise, what might be unique to what we bring to our work is our OWN *awareness and contact* – not just our astute awareness of the client’s way of being in the world and reality, but also our SIMULTANEOUS awareness and contact with our own phenomenology (experience) in the relational field. In the field of our “*us-ness*,” how am I “changed”? And having “tuned” into my awareness and contact with myself, how do I use myself in service as “the changer” in support of the client’s learning?

The Concert Hall

We have the distinct honor of the work lives of leaders – lives that have most likely been filled with many successes, yet also within a set of field conditions abound with “doing” at an extraordinarily quick and accelerating pace, driven by demands and values primarily in the “rational” realm, and minus much space for “being” or “dwelling” particularly with regard to attention to their body or emotional selves. Holding our clients as whole and fully competent, as Gestalt coaches we come to the relational field with a heightened awareness of an integrated wholeness that is much beyond the rational. Our phenomenological orientation is often very new for clients who have a predisposition toward the rational versus integrated wholeness, and toward “getting somewhere different” versus being in “what’s happening right now.” Our offer, as Gestalt coaches, depends on our ability to develop the kind of *intimacy* and *trust* that creates space for a range of holistic work which may be outside of a client’s comfort zone. In my view, *our awareness and contact WITH OURSELVES* is thus our greatest gift, allowing us to “tune” with “*what’s happening*,” “*what wants to happen*,” and “*what can happen*”

in any given moment considering the stage of development of the relationship. Within the relational field with our client, what is happening for us? How are we “changed”? Of course, now the client is the “changer.”

The Composition

In service to the client, with our heightened awareness as coaches, we use and model our wholeness in the relationship to provide something that is missing or something new. In addition to our rational minds, we bring our body awareness and our hearts to the relational field. With our instrument, we are tuning with the client’s reality, the whole human being before us, the concert hall that we are both in, our own phenomenology in the moment, and the choices we have based on this mix of data and our best perception of the client’s readiness. This “*us-ness*” that Simon names is like an unfolding and intimate duet, an improvisation emerging from our collective phenomenology. As coaches, we follow the tonality, the harmony and dissonance, the rhythms and the rests, the melody and the counterpoint. We conduct. We follow. We resonate. We differentiate. The direction is informed by our awareness and our discernment about the kind of contact that can be supported at any moment based on the client’s unique construct and the stage of development of our relationship. And it is anchored foremost in our care and commitment to the client’s creative integrity and to our own.

IMPROVISATION I – “Developing Trust”

The following case portrays a scenario within which, while “tuning” with the range of phenomenology within the field, I made a decision that more trust was needed within our relationship before I could work at a level of intimacy.

Charlotte has a senior role within a large, national organization. She is brilliant, highly accomplished, and has a formidable presence. Through stakeholder interviews, I had learned that she is seen as having an insular view and little care about the needs or perspectives of others. She has completely invalidated and deflected the feedback. She is telling me about her experience over the prior week. Her words and stature are confident. She has done all of the “right” things and others are “wrong.” As I listen to her story and take her in, I notice my own experience. I feel tension throughout my body, prompting me to notice her overbound structure. As I continue to listen and take her in, I also become aware of my own frustration. I am retroflecting this energy, holding myself back and down

in my chair. I have the brakes on, and I do not like it. I suddenly realize that I am feeling completely invisible, and I have a strong urge to wave my hand in front of her and say, "Hello, hello, I'm here." I soon realize that, in addition to her overboundedness, she is looking completely aside as she talks to me. She is staring past me. She is not seeing me. Do I exist? Are her stakeholders having the same experience in their interactions with her? Do I pose this question at this moment? Do I share my observation and my experience? I look at her eyes, large and soft, deep and wet, and I suddenly connect to my own deep vulnerability, which could be revealed through my eyes should someone look into me. I am struck with deep caring for this incredible woman – so strong and yet so self-protective. My heart and my gut tell me to wait until we have built more ground together before I share my experience. I want her to feel safe.

A session or two later, after we had had more time together, and the pattern had been consistently repeated, I shared my experience with her. The timing was right. She could take in my observation and was deeply moved by both my observation and my honesty. Having never received this kind of feedback, she had been completely unaware of the pattern. In our interaction at this moment, she became aware of her extreme discomfort with the kind of intimacy evoked by the meeting of our eyes. She could identify the source of the pattern from earlier in her life and could understand the barrier to contact with others. She immediately began to experiment being in conversation with me and with others in a more present way.

IMPROVISATION II – "Maintaining Trust"

In the following case, a lot of ground had been developed with my client. Nevertheless, my "tuning" told me something was present that would impede our work together.

Sally had canceled three appointments during the week of this coaching call. With each cancellation, I could feel an increasing distance between us. Something was off. We say hello to each other at the beginning of the call. The tone of her voice sounds different than usual. During a few minutes of chit chat, I notice that my energy is reserved, my initial excitement as I had dialed into the call having diminished. I feel awkward and hesitant. With her written permission, our prior calls had been recorded for the purpose of my own work with a master coach. Whereas I have in the past simply announced to her that I would be hitting "record," instead I pause. The words are stuck in my throat. My neck and shoulders are tense.

My hand is frozen. The air is thick. Somehow, I think I hear a question mark in the space between us, a distance that is not usually there, pulling us apart like a rubber band. So I ask how she feels about having the call recorded and suggest that she has the right to decline. She immediately almost screams, "How did you know that I didn't want this call recorded? I probably wouldn't have said it if you hadn't given me an opening. I've been worried about it all week. There's something that I need help with that I don't want recorded. I didn't know how to say so. I hated to break my agreement with you."

It turned out that she wanted to explore some personal dilemmas that she did not want shared with my coach. We were able to work together in a way that gave her a lot of comfort, and we re-contracted our recording agreement in a way that developed more trust between us. I can easily imagine that she would not have interfered had I simply hit the record button habitually. Not only would our work together on the call have been inhibited; our trusting relationship might have been impaired overall.

FINALE

In summary, I have explored how our awareness and contact with ourselves, as Gestalt coaches, enhance our ability to create a trusting relational field with our clients; in our "us-ness," we and our clients are both the "changer and the changed." Our improvisations will be as uniquely different as is each relational field, and as uniquely different as is each one of us – mine perhaps a randomly emerging jazz score, another's a much more structured classical sonata, another's a quiet ballad, another's an energetic rap. And as the final notes subside, we are yet again "changed." Having had the honor to make some new music with another human being who allowed us into their lives, our lives are enriched.

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Commentary II: Applying Gestalt Theory to Coaching

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ABSTRACT

I have coached executives and teams for more than 20 years. The Gestalt Cycle of Experience was introduced to me in 1993. As I incorporated the theory into my coaching practice, I found that it helped create common language between my clients and myself. This model has supported me as a Master Coach, while also supporting my clients to understand better how change moves through a continuum, and how resistance is present at every point.

This commentary will further explore the observations made by Stuart N. Simon in his article, "Applying Gestalt Theory to Coaching." Simon has chosen to write about *awareness* and *contact* as two of the critical areas of the Cycle of Experience as it relates to coaching. To explore coaching as it relates to the Cycle of Experience is interesting; as a client builds energy to move through the Cycle of Experience, they also build energy to move through the Cycle of Coaching.



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What Is Coaching?

Coaching is an action learning experience between a coach and a client that builds on the client's desire to do something differently in the future; it explores the possibilities for change and the resistance related to change. As Egan (2002) states, the model for coaching can be explained simply as having five stages:

Stage 1: What does the client want or need?

Stage 2: What is happening now?

Stage 3: What possibilities make sense to the client?

Stage 4: How does the client get what they want or need?

Stage 5: How does the client make it happen? (p. 351)

Although this is a simple explanation of the stages of coaching, as one moves through the stages each becomes more complex. The coach begins with appreciative inquiry (Hammond, 1998) to understand the client's desires. The inquiry also addresses the client's history, values, beliefs, and motivations. During the engagement, the issue the client is focused on changes many times; therefore, the desired outcome changes as well. Looking through the lenses of possibilities, the client then sees what they may really want and how to make that happen. The role of the coach is to stay in the space of curiosity and support. I offer this example of a recent client:

Bill worked in a senior position in a well-known, affluent gallery. As a result of the current economic conditions, Bill lost his job because of corporate restructuring. Several weeks grew into several months, and Bill felt less capable of re-entering the marketplace. Bill's confidence was shaken; he was crushed that he had lost his job. Bill was incapable of seeing in this situation a possibility to move into an area that he had long dreamed of pursuing. He contacted me to ask for help in preparing to re-enter the corporate world in a similar position. As I coached him through the cycle (contact/awareness), we looked at his history, values, beliefs, and motivations. We focused on his skills and accomplishments, of which there were many. We explored the things that made him happy and those that no longer served him. We examined his purpose in life and his vision, and we considered any gaps that existed between what he could do and what he wanted to do.

Together, we discussed a plan that would allow him the opportunity to move forward: to use his skills in decorating and his knowledge of fine arts to work with realtors and architects and do staging of property that

was being rebuilt and sold. This had been a life dream for Bill. He built a plan, and now he is working the plan; he realized that the loss of his job had opened a new and exciting possibility. With his new awareness he was able to celebrate his good luck in losing his former position.

The Gestalt Cycle of Experience parallels the coaching cycle. The cycle, as we recall, includes sensation, awareness, mobilization, action, integration, and closure (E. Nevis, 1987, 2009), with energy increasing and decreasing relative to each point on the continuum. Each point on the cycle not only requires contact but also produces some form of resistance (Mauer, 1996) from the client's point of view, which must be dealt with before she can move successfully through the cycle. This corresponds to what coaching looks like in its most simple form.

How Does Coaching Support the Client?

It takes a great deal of energy for a person to hold an idea of change in their consciousness before they are ready to begin gaining awareness. If a client loses energy, contact, or awareness both the cycle of experience and the cycle of coaching are broken. The attention and energy of the client are then moved to another topic or issue. Many of our beliefs and actions have become buried in the subconscious. Hargrove (1995) refers to this state as our automatic way of being. Coaching helps bring the client's awareness of buried beliefs and behaviors to the surface; this is useful in considering possibilities for change or in reinforcing good beliefs and actions.

Several years ago, I heard Sonia M. Nevis make the following statement: "With awareness, we can celebrate good luck and bear disappointments" (S. Nevis, 2007). I have thought about this statement in the context of life in general as changes occur, and now I think of it in the context of Simon's article on applying Gestalt theory to coaching. Nevis suggested that the "awareness" is about the consequences of understanding and the mobilization of change. Understanding lets us be more comfortable with ourselves, with others, and with the things around us. It enables us to *understand* why change occurs, or why some things must stay the same. It allows for new meaning to emerge through new figure formation. Awareness permits us to make meaning of actions, feelings, or objects that may not seem familiar; it turns them into something acceptable. From a Gestalt perspective, coaching is contact that supports people in gaining awareness and in making meaning of things important to them. Without awareness we answer the loudest voice in our head; coaching raises a client's awareness so that they can hear different voices that may be buried in their subconscious. I refer to these different

voices as possibilities.

People also use coaches as thought partners. A key attribute a coach brings to the engagement is the ability to listen; not necessarily to drive an outcome, but to hold a safe place to support the client in making choices (O'Neill, 2000). All of this involves contact and awareness. A coach supports a client in making choices in order to achieve something special; something they previously thought might not be possible. Coaching helps the client identify possibilities, which at times can be a dilemma, and subsequently to narrow them in order to move into action (Carse, 1991). These possibilities can be referred to as the energy between what is and what could be. As awareness grows through contact, the client can then move into mobilization and action. This awareness can be about oneself or about an issue a client wants to shift.

How Do People Get into Coaching?

There are several ways a person becomes connected to coaching. It all begins at the first point of the Cycle of Experience – Sensation. One can have several sensations at the same time and move through the Cycle working on multiple issues in a day. However, I want to isolate the energy that connects an individual in working with a coach. Here are a few examples of the *sensation point*.

- 1) An individual realizes something is not working as they would like.
- 2) An individual realizes that things in the world have changed around them, and they have not changed.
- 3) An individual wants to have a different outcome from what they have previously experienced.
- 4) An individual has a boss who says they need to change because of some non-compliant behavior.
- 5) An individual needs to prepare for a different leadership position.
- 6) An individual has become a new leader in an organization, and the boss wants the individual to be properly integrated into the new culture.

We have invested great effort in becoming what we are today, and in doing the things that have made us safe and successful and, frankly, sane. To realize that we need to change our way of being, or to have someone else *tell us* that we need to change our way of being, takes a great deal of energy and courage. Maybe an issue is too difficult to confront, or it is just easier to stay the same.

How Does the Coaching Relationship Impact the Engagement?

Regardless of how a person gets into coaching, the outcome is what is important to the client. The client is more open and accessible to the coach and to the experience if they have chosen to be coached, or have been offered the opportunity to be coached. The client is less open and more resistant to the experience if they are required to be coached in order to stay within a system. Simon's observation that trust is of paramount importance is true; trust is the basic building block of action. One cannot hear another if trust is not present. True support can begin only after the coach is trusted; only then are the skill and engagement of the coach relevant. This process requires self-awareness on the part of the coach, and increasing awareness on the part of the client.

As the coach moves into an assignment the following points should be considered:

- 1) Are data needed for diagnostic or problem-identification purposes?
- 2) Do I have sufficient awareness of what is going on within the client, the client system, and within myself?
- 3) What is the readiness for an intervention on my part?
- 4) If growth is to occur, is there sufficient energy and willingness in the client system to do the work required?
- 5) What is the nature of my relationship with the client? Is it conducive to positive movement on the part of the client?
- 6) What is the best thing for me to do at this moment in order to be helpful?

The coach may see the client and the system demonstrate the ability to change. If, however, the boss or others in the system cannot see or make room for the possibility of change, then the accepted change will not occur. Therefore, it is important for the client to keep the boss and the system informed about what they are accomplishing in the coaching engagement. This is where contact continues to be important. It increases the boss's and the system's awareness of what change is possible and what change is taking place. This is the paradoxical theory of change. There must be room for the change to happen. The issue of awareness-building supports developing possibilities for change. Here is an example:

I had an extraordinary coaching client in California: young, bright, upwardly mobile – a star. She had just been promoted to a strategic position in the executive suite. She was thoughtful and creative. However, each time one of her peers asked her a question she wanted to think about

it before she responded. There was absolutely nothing wrong with that. The problem was that as she stopped to reflect on the issue, she contorted her face as she thought. Her peers interpreted the behavior to mean she that was making fun of their question. She did not realize that she was contorting her face. Finally, her boss brought it to her attention, and she brought the issue to a coaching session. Since she had engaged in this behavior her entire life, we discussed possibilities of how she could change: 1) simply stop doing it; 2) announce each time that she needed to think about the comment, and to think about it, she would be contorting her face. The second possibility was for her disruptive, but because this behavior was something she had done her entire life, she decided to try it. Each time someone asked her a question she announced that she needed to think about it, and to think about it she would be contorting her face – “Please think nothing of it.” Interestingly, after she experimented in this way for approximately two weeks, she stopped contorting her face when she thought about questions. She actually became more aware and then truly changed by training herself to use a less disruptive style.

In this case there was energy spent in building contact, sensation, and awareness. There was room for change, and change was more important to the client than staying the same.

Conclusion

I can understand why Simon chose to focus on awareness and contact as key concepts of the Cycle of Experience as it relates to coaching. The Cycle of Experience, however, is *not* the totality of Coaching. In the Cycle of Experience, each area takes on some form of awareness and contact in order to move into and through it. In the absence of effective contact and awareness, the other coaching methodologies and tools are less effective. If one should lose energy around awareness and contact, the continuum will be broken. Coaching is successful only when a client believes that the output is worth the energy expended to get through the resistance in order to change. Contact and awareness support the client’s ability to move into action and integration, and to reach closure regarding the matter at hand and the coaching engagement.

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Commentary III: Applying Gestalt Theory to Coaching

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A B S T R A C T

In his paper, Stuart N. Simon describes the evolution of the “profession” of coaching over the last decade or so, and the relatively recent interest in the application of Gestalt theory to coaching. In this Commentary, I want first to support Simon’s assertion that “Gestalt theory easily lends itself to offering a significant contribution to the field of professional coaching” by drawing links with research and writing of other coaches who do not have a Gestalt background. Second, I want to explore a question raised by Simon but not answered: “What is the difference between coaching and therapy?” particularly in the context of executive coaching where the work takes place within the organisational context.

Current Writing on Professional Coaching

In a recent book, Erik de Haan (2008) pulls together the conclusions from a large number of studies into what ingredients contribute to effectiveness in one-to-one coaching, or “helping conversations,” as he defines coaching. He



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concludes that “the most important effective ingredients are the capacity for learning of the persons conducting the conversation and the quality of the relationship between the interlocutors” (p. viii). This assertion is totally consistent with the Gestalt belief that growth is a result of an individual’s contact and interactions with the environment, and with Stuart Simon’s conclusion about how critical the relationship is to the effectiveness of coaching. When he says, “It requires genuine interest in the client and availability by the coach to be ‘contacted,’” Simon is referring to the requirement of the coach (as well as the coachee) to be open to learning.

In addition, Graham Lee (2003) says the following of leadership coaching:

The challenge of authentic leadership is that it demands awareness – self-awareness, awareness of others and organisational awareness. Such awareness provides the basis for conscious leadership, by which managers are able to examine their motives and make conscious judgements. Furthermore, they are able to identify unhelpful defences or reactions in themselves – perhaps a tendency to control or dominate based on a fear of failure, perhaps a fear of conflict and a desire to appease. (p. 10)

Lee puts forth the case that all coaches (of whatever orientation) working with leaders need to develop their competence in supporting their coachees in this journey of self exploration. Simon focuses on two aspects of Gestalt theory, contact and awareness. Contact surely lies at the heart of what de Haan (2008) says is a requirement of effective coaching; and increasing awareness is the essence of Lee’s conclusion about what is needed for good leadership coaching. Furthermore, Lee (2003) adds that a bias towards performance/skills coaching, i.e., actively setting out to change behaviour, *discourages* effective leadership (p.16). Again this is consistent with Gestalt theory, in the shape of Arnold Beisser’s (1970) “paradoxical theory of change,” which states that change occurs (paradoxically) when I fully become what I am, rather than trying to be what I am not, and that lasting change cannot be attained through coercion or persuasion. It is Lee’s belief (after many years of working with leaders) that whilst there is a need for the leader to become “organisationally attuned,” effective and lasting change will only occur when the coaching supports him or her to become more self-aware and to evolve a style of leadership that is “personally distinctive” (i.e., becoming more of what one already is). Given the link between core Gestalt theory, and what is becoming known about the efficacy of coaching, I am not surprised that, certainly in the UK, there is a significant and growing interest in the application of Gestalt principles to coaching.

Just as de Haan (2008) refers to coaching as a “helping conversation,”

Richard Kilburg (2004) describes both coaching *and* therapy as “enabling relationships,” saying that both require an engagement with the personal and the practical. This leads onto the second aspect of this Commentary, an exploration of the question Simon raises in his paper: “What is the difference between coaching and therapy?” This question enables me to develop some of the themes a colleague and I identified in a recently published article (Gillie & Shackleton, 2009).

Coaching and Therapy

In his paper, Simon refers to teaching and learning as core components of the coaching relationship, which immediately brings to mind Siminovich & Van Eron (2006): “The Gestalt coaching encounter offers a safe arena where vulnerability, strong emotions, and failure can play themselves out in the service of learning and growth” (p. 50). I agree with this description, and I believe it would apply equally to Gestalt therapy. So what (if anything) is the difference? Both can be short or long-term, both can focus on the present, past and future, both can engage with emotions, thinking and body processes. So the answer is far from straightforward, and some of the often stated differences tend to blur when looked at more closely. For example, I have heard colleagues argue that the people who enter therapy are less resourceful and in need of some kind of restoration of sense of self and/or healthy self-regulation, whilst coaching clients are “typically” resource rich. In recent years, however, people are increasingly entering therapy purely for increased self-awareness and personal development, and certainly, many coaching assignments are triggered by some form of emotional distress or sense of dissatisfaction with their lives (see, for example, Ket de Vries, 2004).

Nevertheless, there are some clear differences between therapy and *executive coaching*. Executive and leadership coaching take place within the organisational context. This framework generally brings with it an “organisational agenda” and multiple stakeholders (i.e., the requirements that the boss/bosses have of the coaching) and, crucially, it is the organisation that funds the work. The coaching “agenda,” therefore, is typically a blend of personal (to the individual) and public (negotiated with their organisation). Not all coaching is executive coaching, however, and life coaching, which tends to be self-funded, can sometimes be indistinguishable from therapy (depending, of course, on the orientation of the coach).

Perhaps another difference between coaching and therapy lies in the expectations of the client at the outset. Someone entering therapy would (at least to some degree) be expecting the focus of the work to be their personal/emotional world. This would not necessarily be the case for the executive

client, who would typically be expecting the focus of the coaching to be their world of work. Whilst the work context is absolutely the starting point and where the work needs to be anchored, executive coaching can cover many things: the person's transition into a role, their current performance, their aspirations, how they engage with those around them, to name a few. In my experience, when working with leaders, whatever the starting point the work frequently moves to exploring issues of identity, i.e., *who the person is*, what matters to them and how they are (or want to be) in their world. Given that this exploration is essentially about self-awareness and sense of self, the existential nature of this enquiry invariably has a strong emotional component with strong links with the leader's personal history.

This raises the question of whether the direction the work takes (e.g., towards or away from the affect of the executive) is a function of "Who is doing the coaching?" Certainly my Gestalt orientation will predispose me to work in certain ways, ways that are different from a more outcome orientated business coach. Gestalt is essentially a "relational" framework and coaching, like therapy is highly relational, a co-creation between the coach and coachee. Particular coachees choose me because of their experience of the quality of my presence at the initial "chemistry meeting," and as Simon says, "the 'how' of . . . the contact with the coaching client can be . . . a subtle and nuanced process." I am clear in the contracting process about how I work and the background that I bring, and clients who want a more outcome driven, goal focused coaching experience would be less likely to choose to work with me, although I can work in that way if required. However, there is no doubt about it, that as a Gestalt oriented coach I do work with the emotional world of my executive clients, and I know that my interventions can be experienced as "therapeutic," if not in intent, then in impact.

Is There a Place for Therapy within Coaching?

Perhaps, then, a more contentious debate is to what extent do (should) coaches work with the emotional world of their clients and with family of origin issues? As Lee, a psychodynamically oriented coach, says, "Human beings are in many ways a product of their experiences . . . we are powerfully shaped by our upbringing and other experiences" (Lee, 2003, p. 19); and he concludes that "if coaching is to release the vitality of authenticity, it must engage with personal history" (p. 44). Gestalt theory holds that "'meaning' derives from the *total situation* of *this* individual under *this* set of circumstances, which includes past experiences, hopes, aspirations, anxieties, assumptions" (Gillie, 2009, p. 35); what becomes figural for the coachee does so in the *here and now* in the presence of the coach. Thus, whilst it is unlikely that the Gestalt

coach would actively seek out childhood influences, they would certainly be sensitive to possible connections that become evident in the work as it unfolds (e.g., authority figure transference resulting in projections being made onto the boss). It is often the client who brings a parent into to the room, as they suddenly make the connection. Alternatively, I might gently enquire about whom the boss reminds him or her. If I do this as a coach, it is crucial from an ethical standpoint that I am totally clear about *why* I am initiating this enquiry, and it needs to be clear to the coachee that they have absolute choice in whether or not to follow that line of thought. I believe that this can be a legitimate route for the coaching to take when it is in service of the client's *current working relationships* (i.e., raising the client's awareness of the influences at play with a view to loosening the grip the past is having on current effectiveness). By whatever means the link between the past and the present is made, the next question that arises is: to what extent (if at all) is it appropriate for a coach to work with the historical material? I have had many debates with fellow Gestalt coaches about, for example, whether we would ever put the parent in the "empty chair." Views do vary, although there is considerable agreement that this would certainly cross the boundary between Gestalt coaching and Gestalt therapy. The conclusion my colleague and I reached (Gillie & Shackleton, 2009) is that as a one-off well-bounded piece of work that is clearly contracted for as a therapeutic intervention, this strategy can be appropriate within the coaching context.

Working with the client's immediate phenomenology and the notion of staying with whatever is evoked during a session lies at the heart of the Gestalt approach, with the Cycle of Experience providing a powerful lens through which we track the flow of energy and where it may be blocked. As a Gestalt oriented coach I hope to engage my clients' interest in how they can become more fully aware of their needs, and how they mobilise energy towards appropriate action. A Gestalt approach would be to arrive at this awareness through interventions that bring a client as close as possible to his or her experience in the here and now; "[g]iven that the human body is such a gateway to the client's affect, we hold the hypothesis that a Gestalt oriented coach is more likely to evoke emotional responses in their clients than many other 'flavours' of coaching" (Gillie & Shackleton, 2009, N. pag.). In this paper we conclude that this way of working as a coach can be hugely transformational. It is essential, however, that the coach take responsibility for ensuring that it is fully contracted for (both up front at the start of the coaching contract, and again in the moment that a session seems to be moving into emotional territory), that the work is supported by the environment (what might be appropriate in a private consulting room may be wholly inappropriate in a meeting room in the client's organisation), and that, above all,

the coach is clear about his or her own purpose and intentions in working in this particular way.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I absolutely agree with Simon that “professional coaching has certainly entered the Gestalt world.” Or perhaps one might equally say that Gestalt has now entered the coaching world, as Gestalt theory can and does offer a significant contribution to the field of professional coaching. I also conclude that a Gestalt orientated coach is prone to work in a way which is more likely to get closer to the client’s affect than some other coaching methodologies, but as long as this is well contracted for and well bounded, then the benefits in coaching can be transformational. I do wonder if one of the reasons that coaching has become so prevalent in recent years is because it is a “legitimate” excuse for therapy within the organisational setting. I think the answer to this question is probably “yes,” at least for some people some of the time. A colleague of mine refers to his coaching as “a way of dealing with my everyday neuroses,” and as Ket de Vries (2004) points out: “Many top executives, being middle-aged, suffer from depression. Midlife prompts a reappraisal of career identity, and by the time a leader is a CEO, an existential crisis is often imminent.” I am sure that is why I work with some of the clients that I do.

Finally, at the end of his paper, Simon says that “there has not been a significant contribution to the coaching literature that draws upon Gestalt principles for its theory base.” Certainly his paper addresses this issue, and I would point interested readers to Gillie (2009, pp. 29-48), which was still in press when he was writing his paper. This “coincidence,” plus the forthcoming special edition of the *International Gestalt Journal* on coaching, suggests to me that the interest in the application of Gestalt theory to coaching is accelerating.

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