CHAPTER 6

The Power of Experiment(s) in Unit of Work

*Wisdom begins in wonder.*
—Socrates

Many professional programs that offer focused learning exercises aimed at horizontal development are well-planned and organized vehicles for achieving a specific and expected outcome. Such programs offer exercises which may ask the client to enact a predetermined behavioral process or to use specific language in order to improve an identified professional or personal weakness or flaw. Gestalt experiments, however, are not learning exercises—they demand much more from both the coach and the client. A Gestalt experiment invites risk-taking in learning, and the outcomes are unknown because they depend on what the client has yet to become aware of.

Nick Petrie’s work on vertical development suggests that experiment is a process to assist the client in integrating and making sense of perspectives and experiences from the different stages of awareness needed to understand new perspectives, worldviews,
or behaviors. He describes a disruption process, where the familiar approach no longer works and there is a moment of disorientation that invites the innovative power of experiment. This is the essence of the Gestalt approach.

For the Gestalt approach is experimental, experiential, and existential and has a distinctive strength in its experimental stance. More than any other approach, Gestalt coaching uses this principle of experiment to develop the vertical skills that drive our capacity to use our awareness in expanded ways. These are experiments that illuminate a potential shift in perception, worldview, or behavior in order to learn something new about oneself. Gestalt experimentation is a practice of evoking unexpected creativity and innovation that neither the coach nor the client could have predicted.

In the experiment, the coach invites the client to enter into unexplored territory, which requires a strong commitment to being curious and to keeping an open mind and heart. Whatever is discovered during the experiment, acceptance of the outcome is key, even if the outcome feels unclear or is perceived to be a failure—learning that emerges from experimentation can come equally from a sense of success or failure. Success is when a new possibility is realized, and failure is when an old pattern emerges that continues to obstruct new possibilities. Both are opportunities for learning. If the experiment provokes a sense of stickiness and old, familiar patterns, then the ensuing exploration with the client should encourage awareness of what is familiar in that stickiness and the cost of staying in that pattern.

The parameters of a Gestalt experiment are co-created by both coach and client. The client is invited to explore the dynamic between a desire for change and a resistance to that change. Gestalt experiments involve serious and difficult work that demand that clients take steps into their discomfort zones, which are associated with new perceptions and new behaviors. For this reason, Gestalt experiments are issue that is sig in thought, where the client or professional

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experiments are presented as “safe emergencies” where the identified issue that is significant to the client, requiring a significant change in thought, perception, or behavior, is done in an environment where the client knows that no damaging consequences (to career or professional position) will ensue.

Two Types of Experiments: Awareness and Thematic

When a client comes for coaching, we orient them to the experiential, experimental, and existential quality of our approach and we offer observations for their attention. When clients present their issue, the Gestalt coach may notice something figural—an expression, a gesture, or a mood—and become curious as to how that figure of behavior may be affecting the client in relation to the presenting issue. The coach offers awareness of this figure of interest to the client while also tracking what the client herself is attending to as a relevant figure. For example, a client may present an issue of a subordinate complaining about lack of supervision; as coach, however, I notice that she is smiling when she relays this issue. When I share my observation that she is smiling, the client admits that she really does not take seriously whatever this subordinate says. So the work begins with the acknowledgement by the client that she actively discounts any negative feedback received from subordinates, and that this dismissal may have contributed to the poor rating she received on her 360-degree feedback surveys.

By using our Cycle of Experience (COE), Gestalt coaches are paying attention to cues that are being played out in our field of awareness. We will notice when a figure becomes interesting to a client, and we offer the client an invitation to focus on that figure for a few seconds or a few minutes. Again, the figure of interest may be an expression, a gesture, or a mood. In whatever instance, the coach has used the COE as the vehicle of intervention for clients to experience something about themselves that may be obvious
to others but invisible to them—something that is part of their pattern, what we identify as the “what is” of their experience (like the client who discounted feedback from her subordinates because of her dismissive smile). When we invite clients to engage in awareness of what they have ignored or missed, we are offering them an opportunity to have an awareness experiment.

Awareness experiments are the Gestalt version of “mindful practice”: attending to a microcosmic moment that carries a core truth, often concealed in a narrative. When the coach notices a habit that the client is not aware of, the client’s lack of awareness suggests an “alienated part” of him that once served some personal or professional imperative but that may no longer respond to current demands. But this alienated awareness needs to be owned so that new choices can emerge. When clients receive observations that get their attention, the coach can invite them to further experience that given observation. Clients who are not aware of how low their voice is when they talk might be invited to speak again, with a slight exaggeration of the low pitch, so that they can become more aware of their voice. Clients who use their hands when they talk might be encouraged to speak again and exaggerate their hand movements.

These invitations to become more aware of a small behavior reveal the greater power of awareness experiments, which usually take clients by surprise because they may be offered even at the beginning of new work when the coach doesn’t have a great deal of the client’s history or relationship with the client. However, the trained Gestalt coach can see already a “biography” of physical gestures and bearing, along with facial and verbal expressions, that display a living gestalt that clients may not know they are presenting to the world. When a client engages in an awareness observation offered by the coach, she will make contact with a part of herself that may be influencing the very issue she has presented. The client who came to coaching after getting negative evaluations on her 360-degree feedback smile as an evaluation; and sense of inauthenticity which she felt as pivotal awareness.

Such small experiment, according to the client, awareness until further advice guide the integration and acknowledgment by the internal but are particular habitual, and call a Unit of.

As an example, she has received difficult advice about herself, I notice it as a frown. I notice her posture and experience by presentation instead of experiment. She perhaps disavowed from recognition by Charlotte and in fact presents that she disliking awareness across issues.
360-degree feedback survey was asked to “experience” her exaggerated smile as she talked about the concern she had regarding her evaluation; and, in experiencing that smile, she acknowledged a sense of inauthenticity. This client voiced surprise that her smiling, which she felt was a good presentation, actually felt insincere. This pivotal awareness began the coaching work.

Such small awareness moments, coming out of an awareness experiment, are almost always both surprising and illuminating to the client. Often the contact with this new or recovered awareness unleashes increased energy, born both of recognition and acknowledgement of oneself and of the possibilities of further choice. Awareness experiments, which use the COE to guide the intervention, can be offered at any time in the work, but are particularly useful in beginning work to identify what is habitual, and therefore thematic, which will generate what we call a Unit of Work.

As an example: Charlotte, an executive client, tells me that she has received feedback that she is often perceived as aloof or difficult to approach. In experiencing how this client presents herself, I notice that her posture appears stiff and I see her expression as a frown. I offer her this awareness, and I ask her to exaggerate her posture and facial expression. Charlotte then has an “aha” experience by making contact with her habitual manner of self-presentation that she says she wasn’t aware of until this awareness experiment. This “aha” moment at first holds some surprise (and perhaps dismay), but it is followed by an excited energy that comes from recognizing and reclaiming one’s alienated aspect of the self. Charlotte made contact with the disowned awareness that she was in fact presenting herself with stiffness and disapproval, a manner that she disliked in others. The realization was surprising, but the awareness about what she was alienating gave her increased power over a choice for change.
This awareness experiment reveals the immense power of even small moments of awareness. The experiment asked the client to fully inhabit her habitual way of being, as the paradoxical theory of change requires. And when this client became aware of her unaware behavior, she could then choose to liberate herself from that prison of habitual behaviors and invite in new possibilities. The client had denied feedback about her abrasive interaction style; having accepted the feedback’s reality, she stated she now wished to present herself in a less arrogant manner. This awareness experiment provided a dramatic learning moment for the client: she recognized her habitual pattern, she acknowledged the cost of that pattern, and she expressed her desire for other options.

The COE is the vehicle of intervention for heightening awareness. Continuing with our case example, the coach used the COE as process tool by inviting Charlotte to pay attention, across all the points of the COE, to her posture and facial expression through exaggeration. Charlotte voiced surprise about how unaware she was of her habitual frown, and was even a bit disturbed by the unexpected recognition that she embodied a way of being that she disliked in others. She reported that while her intentions were to look stronger than she felt and to become an emotionally intelligent leader to inspire people, she recognized that she felt stiff and punishing in her interactions with others and feared intimacy in the work situation. These were several figures that came to her awareness, and she was invited to choose a figure to explore. Because she worried that she was not growing as a leader, she chose to explore how her aloofness was interfering with exploring new possibilities. This exploration revealed her introjected “should” that she needed to be strong to be an effective leader.

While she was determined to be a more emotionally sensitive leader, Charlotte’s old introjections revealed deep-seated connections to authority figures. A series of awareness experiments followed that allowed her only 15 to 20 with coaching experiences of how she experienced them, terrified of no As a result, she in business lesson she had n her. This awareness an energetic sl her and not an awareness of thwarted or coaching aim selves, outside achieving their curious about collaboratively patterns that n thematic experience guide and is outdated path that will serve typically built uppermost fig the client to see that chronological
The Power of Experiment(s) in Unit of Work

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ionally sensitive rated connections iments followed that allowed her to explore these behavioral patterns. We took only 15 to 20 minutes exaggerating her habitual postures; then, with coaching intervention, I asked her to speak to her aware- ness of how she experienced this behavior. She reported that she experienced this behavior as being arrogant and irritating, but that she had never had good models that she could trust and was terrified of not being able to manage people if she was too kind. As a result, she had emulated an arrogant style that she had seen in business leaders who had succeeded. She became aware now that she had never felt comfortable with this style or felt self-trust. This awareness provided a major moment of contact, signaled by an energetic shift when she realized that this style was foreign to her and not as effective as she had hoped. Her closure from this awareness experiment was to contract to start the next session by exploring more emotionally responsive options that would allow her to be the leader she desired to become.

Thematic experiments are created around a chronic pattern of thwarted or frustrated goals. As in awareness experiments, the coaching aim is to help clients recognize some aspect of themselves, outside their awareness, that persistently stops them from achieving their goals. A thematic experiment invites clients to be curious about their familiar patterns of behavior, and then offers a collaboratively designed experience to provide learning about those patterns that may impact the achievement of their stated goals. The thematic experiment requires that the coach act as a collaborative guide and invited intervener to support client understanding of outdated patterns and/or possibly to experiment with other choices that will serve the client's current interests. A thematic experiment typically builds from an awareness experiment by defining the uppermost figure in the client's awareness, and then working with the client to support an articulation of a discerned need or desire that chronically has been frustrated or unsatisfied.
In a thematic experiment, the coach works with the client to identify a pattern of what the client may be needing or is resisting—or the polarity between the two—as a basis from which to begin the experiment. There is often an intimate quality to this moment, as the client is invited to get interested in a core pattern so deeply embedded that the coach can offer support that ensures a safe exploration of this chronic issue.

In the awareness experiment, the coach uses the COE as the vehicle of description and analysis, what gets referred to, in simple terms, as the “what is.” The COE is the phenomenological description of what is occurring, as well as where there may be interruptions to awareness and the action across the different parts of the COE. In the thematic experiment, the Gestalt coach first uses the COE to assess clients’ processes of identifying what is wanting and where they may have a pattern of being stuck. The Unit of Work (UOW) is the next integrated action: the energetic, defined structure that intentionally orchestrates client learning and change. A UOW is shaped in the following way (Figure 6.1).

**Figure 6.1 Unit(ing) of Work**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessing what is</td>
<td>Choosing what to attend to</td>
<td>Acting on the choice</td>
<td>Closing out the activity</td>
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- **Concepts**
- **Theories**
- **Methods**
- **Tools**
- **Perspectives**

- **Concepts**
- **Theories**
- **Methods**
- **Tools**
- **Perspectives**

- **Polities:** Desire for change + resistance to change
- **Getting a collaborative agreement**
- **Innovation driven by imagination**
- **Coach-facilitated experiment or exercise in relation to goals**

- **EVALUATE**
  - What is different?
  - What is changed?
  - Learnings
  - Resolved vs. ongoing issues
  - Experience of doing the task

- **Communicate a new “what is”**
- **Appreciate and integrate change**
- **More on**

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**THE DRIVER OF CHANGE** is The Paradoxical Theory of Change
In working collaboratively with the client to create the UOW, there are four distinct steps:

**UOW Step One: The “what is” process analysis.** This is where the figure of interest for the client is recognized as a phenomenon that is either observed by the coach or identified by the client. The coach offers attentive scanning and supports the client’s awareness, using the COE to bring to light a figure that is interesting to the client and is named the “what is.” For example, in our first meeting with Harry, an executive client, he presents himself as wanting to implement a succession plan for the company that has been under his leadership for the past ten years. As coach, you notice that he talks quickly and appears to be breathing rapidly. You offer this awareness to the client. He laughs and affirms that he is familiar with his fast pace.

**UOW Step Two: Engaging in the choice.** This is the place for the coach to support clients in their choice of what they wish to attend to, and to identify a pattern that thwarts the want or desired goal as expressed in Step One. The work in this second part of the UOW is to decide what to pay attention to and then to explore by means of a learning experiment. The coach works as a guide to assist the client in choosing what to pay attention to, whether this be the uppermost figure (the desired goal), the obstruction or resistance to the goal, or the interplay between them. If the client wishes to pay attention to the goal which seems to be the uppermost figure of interest, the coach will recognize this by the client’s verbal expressions of “I want” or “I need.” If there seems to be obstruction to a desired want or need, and the obstruction manifests as a behavior that frustrates (resists fulfilling) the goal, then the pattern of resistance may be more figural for the client than the want or need itself—it is familiar and therefore thematic. Thus, one direction for the work may
be to explore the chronic resistance pattern. Another option for client exploration may be the relationship between the desired goal and the pattern of resistance.

The client has an active role in choosing what to work on. The coach is there to support the client’s choice by engaging, clarifying, and asking powerful questions that assist the client in choosing what to attend to. Our questions for Harry, our client example from Step One, could be: “So, what is most interesting to you to explore? Your succession plan itself? How your fast pace affects your succession plan? Or the relationship between your fast pace and its effect on your succession plan?” Harry could explore any one of these three options. Harry asked to look at how the pace of his work affected the succession planning and his helpfulness about the future.

**UOW Step Three: Acting on the choice.** The third stage of the UOW, called “acting on the choice,” is where the thematic experiment is implemented. Here, the coach offers an experiment to work the issue chosen by the client in Step Two. The experiment is collaboratively designed between the coach and client, with the coach inviting the client’s curiosity to determine how to explore the issue and shape the experiment.

Proceeding confidently into unknown areas of the self—the essential learning of a Gestalt experiment—requires both a sense of safety and a sense of risk. A core belief regarding learning is that emotion is a signal of learning. So if we see too much calmness, it suggests no emotional risk and, therefore, no learning. If we see too much emotion for the client to manage, this suggests that fear has supplanted curiosity about the unknown. As coaches, our responsibility is to support the client and to bolster client learning by using ourselves as a kind of barometer to discern our client’s tolerance for vulnerability and for risk. As coaches, we keep inviting clients to explore learning connected to their areas of discomfort and vulnerability or derailment.

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**UOW Step F.** where the end learning. On name results and new part of the I feels like an of new choice both a more and then a thing for bre were drama seduction succession then spoke
and vulnerability while also keeping clients from falling into fear or derailment.

Our executive client Harry suggested that he wished to look at how the pace of his work interfered with the implementation of the plan for succession, which in turn affected his hopefulness about the future. The experiment he co-designed with Harry was for him to engage in a brainstorming activity regarding the succession plan: One version required him to name all the critical activities that needed to be addressed, one-by-one and quickly; a second version asked him to list the conditions of the succession plan one-by-one, but in detail. Harry agreed to the experiment. He engaged quickly in articulating the activities that needed to be addressed and started laughing at how easily a manic quality of energy got evoked. When he was invited to switch to speaking slowly about the activities involved in the succession plan, however, he was surprised at the emotion that got provoked and the issues connected to the phenomenon of his legacy.

**UOW Step Four: New gestalt—New “what is.”** This is the step where the energy is focused on supporting clients to integrate new learning. One way of closing the experiment is to ask the client to name resultant learnings and to invite reflection on new insights and new possibilities in relation to his goals. This is the closure part of the UOW, the culmination of experiential learning that feels like an energetic “shift” or an “aha” moment in awareness of new choices. For Harry, our executive client—who engaged in both a more common, frenetic rendition of his succession plan and then a more unusual, deliberate presentation of it, one allowing for breath and physical expansion—the learning outcomes were dramatic. Harry reported a painful unfamiliarity with the seduction of speed, and how moving too quickly through the succession plan was already meeting with familiar failure. He then spoke to the emotional vulnerability he was aware of when,
in going slower, he experienced a sense of his own vulnerability that was attached to issues of legacy. In his new “what is,” Harry reported wishing to take more deliberate meetings with his executive team to review the succession plan itself and to provide a way to interview invited candidates in order to address ongoing important initiatives. He was more hopeful as he elaborated on his new “what is,” which held more emotional and imaginative possibilities than the original.

Not surprisingly, Harry was surprised by the power of his Gestalt experiment, which explored his chronic pattern of speediness and how that was an old pattern of resistance against emotional sensitivity that actually weakened his leadership power. Such is the invisible and powerful magic of the UOW—moving through seemingly “simple” steps holds transformative possibilities of learning and change.

Let’s look at one more example involving an awareness experiment leading to a thematic experiment using the UOW. This example involves Maria, a highly successful general manager. Maria sought leadership development coaching because she had received feedback that her direct reports found her highly reactive and difficult to work with. The coach’s awareness was caught by the upward tilt of Maria’s chin and by the appearance of her lips, which were tightly compressed in a thin line. The coach shared this observation, and Maria responded that she was often not aware of how her expression appeared to others and that she had already received feedback about how stern she could appear. She reported being interested in learning about what made her react sharply to stressful news and about ways that she could be better grounded and more resourceful in her interactions. Maria expressed interest in learning how to attain greater calmness, but she also stated she didn’t think she could do that. The coach asked her to alternate between being reactive (to thrust her chin up and press her lips tightly)

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tightly together) and then being in her imagined state of calm
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As she alternated between the somatic experiences of reactivity
and groundedness, however, she expressed her inner doubt that
she could be trusting of, and therefore calm with, subordinates
or business associates when there was any perceived threat from
them. What then emerged was her secret trauma about how her
entrepreneurial father had been bankrupted by colleagues he had
trusted. She expressed both deep sadness and a feeling of shame
about this that she always tried to conceal. The shame stemmed
from what she had lived through with her father, but she also
feared she would be as guileless and vulnerable as her father if she
allowed herself to be trusting and open. This awareness-thematic
experiment revealed to the client that her reactivity served as a
preemptive strategy to forestall any kind of threat. The new “what
is” revealed in working through a UOW was her awareness that
she really wished that her leadership development would provide
better tactics for managing a workforce that wanted to be respected
and involved in meaningful work.

What evolved from the thematic experiment with Maria was
far more powerful and unexpected than could be achieved through
any pre-scripted learning exercise. Thematic experiments are like
an anthropological dig, where what gets unearthed and discovered
may not be exactly what is being sought but has deep value and
relevance to the individual client. The surprises that are revealed
to the client from thematic experiments confirm that a process of
growth and development is the work of reclaiming what has been
alienated and outside of awareness. This is why the coach must
have a stance of “creative indifference,” having no vested interest
in any particular outcome in the client’s experiment. This stance
supports the client’s ability to face the existential uncertainty of the
experiment, while the attitude of creative indifference allows the
coach to “embrace the practice of genuine interest combined with an equally genuine lack of investment in any particular result. The [coach] is willing to accept whatever ‘is and becomes.’”

As can be seen, the UOW is a powerful structure that invites the client into a learning sequence first brought into awareness through skillful use of the COE. The COE supports client awareness of any figure of interest, in the here-and-now, that emerges from the ground of all that is possible for the client. The UOW is the energetic structure whereby the client is collaboratively invited into deeper work on a chosen issue. Because with the UOW there is a process that needs orchestration through four distinct steps, the coach must have clear intentionality around supporting the client’s work. While we describe the coach’s stance as being embedded in creative indifference, paradoxically there is also a quality of “playing God with a small g,” since the coach also acts deliberatively to invite the client across distinct and distinctly risk-taking steps (in particular, a learning experience in Step Three that is intended to assist the client to move into a discomfort zone in order to deal with what has been alienated and needs new consideration).

The coach has a vital role in being a supportive guide and encouraging the client to the edge of tolerable discomfort in order to generate the heat of new learning. A client may become more aware of her disapproving expressions through an awareness experiment, but offering a UOW created out of her interests and challenges and envisioning a doable experiment is what will engage that client to successfully explore her issues. However, the coach must also be prepared for rejections to those invitations to move through the sequence of the UOW yet still remain committed to offering a more tolerable, doable UOW to the client—this is what it means to “play God with a small g.”
This is the challenge for the coach, to dynamically use all the concepts that are involved in coaching. The coach has to recognize when there has been enough issue identification to shape a doable piece of work. Then the coach is required to be competent in using her COE to skillfully track the processes of the client, in the here-and-now, while being dialogically collaborative and engaging the client interactively. There is an artful quality to being able to use the COE and UOW. When the COE and UOW are synchronized, multiple interactions occur across the UOW steps. The coach uses the COE to discern when to move through the steps of the UOW, as indicated in Figure 6.2.

Figure 6.2 COE and UOW Synchronized
The coach uses the tracking data of the COE to identify and invite the client into the next steps of the UOW. Too much focusing on Step One can become distracting and too divergent to proceed into Step Two, which can deter from the client’s choosing what to really attend to as the focal issue. In Step Two, too much careful preciseness about asking the client to confirm the focal issue of choice can create fragmented energy and prevent progressing into Step Three, where the work is to actively move into an experiment. Too much staying in the experiment can drain the energy the client needs to step into the last and assimilative stage of the UOW, Step Four, where the client is invited to focus on his new learning—this step being the desired outcome of the UOW. This is the art of managing the UOW, and the challenge for the coach is to practice being supportive around the next learning possibilities without taking over the work for the client.

Time management is important in guiding the UOW, and it is imperative for the coach to assist the client in choosing an issue that can be scaled to the time available for the work. As an example, the client desiring a career shift could be encouraged to explore smaller issues embedded in career shifts, whether it is what is possible or what has been considered. There can be multiple UOWs in a coaching session, or a UOW can start at the beginning of a session and take the entire session to complete. It is useful to gauge the time available and to scale the work so that the steps of the UOW can be completed, allowing for closure and learning integration to take place. If a UOW does not get completed in the session because the client could not or would not move forward to completion, it is important to name what is unfinished and invite the client’s interest in what she feels needs to be finished. This allows the client to continue to reflect on an issue with an appreciation that something is still waiting to be understood and/or learned.
to identify and much focusing not to proceed into choosing what to do much careful e focus of progressing into an experi- the energy stage of the cosa on his new the UOW. This ge for the coach finding possibilities ; the UOW, and ; in choosing an the work. As and be encouraged hi buffs, whether it ed. There can be V can start at the n to complete. It the work so that wing for closure DW does not get uld not or would t to name what is at she feels needs se to reflect on an still waiting to be

**Gestalt Experiments**

Albert Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution.” And Joseph Zinker, in his seminal *Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy*, identified the core of his work as focused on experiment, which he defined in part as “a move or series of moves with an unknown outcome.” Zinker highlighted that Gestalt practice was particularly strong in being able to bring the creative process of experiment as a power that could invite new possibilities. This is seen in the capacity of the Gestalt approach to offer experiments with the client.

Gestalt coaches, in learning their craft, must manage the dance between horizontal and vertical development. The horizontal skill is to learn the structure of experiments and the vertical skill is to discern what design is best for the client. Horizontal learning in Gestalt practice involves knowing the types of experiments categorized by Erving and Miriam Polster: 1) Enactment, 2) Directed behavior, 3) Fantasy, 4) Dreams/Dreamwork, and 5) Homework.

**Enactment Experiment.** This involves dramatization of some event from the client’s experience, which: 1) May be unfinished and hold a great deal of energy for the client; 2) May be a current issue where the client feels stuck; or 3) Is an enactment of a desired or undesired characteristic.

In enactment experiments, the coach is paying attention to the client’s figure, which is encouraged to be “fattened” through awareness experiments by first inviting the client to try on the noticed behavior. It can begin with a gesture or expression from the client that is relevant to the presenting issues. As an example, one client who voiced alarm over the poor feedback report she received on her performance review revealed a gesture of turning her eyes
away and holding her jaw. When she was invited to experience this, she responded that she had learned to never ask about “bad feedback” but to keep moving forward no matter how it felt, and that this was how she felt about this bad feedback. Now she wished she could understand what was going on, since the feedback was so important to success. The coach asked her whether she was more interested in how she stops herself from asking or how she could experiment with asking. She chose to get interested in how she stops herself from asking.

The enactment experiment that she was offered was to “be” all the aspects of how she held herself back. She was invited to exaggerate holding her jaw and looking away and to exaggerate other ways that she held herself back. She was also asked to speak to what was familiar about this pattern. She identified her introject of “I should not ask” and the price that she paid for such a restricting resistance. Having confronted the shoulders of her introjects, she voiced self-compassion in that she had subjected herself to relentless ambition, no matter the impact of her actions, and that moving on, despite all the feedback, had often left her feeling alone rather than supported by others. She then began to voice different choices, and another UOW emerged for further work.

There is an open-ended quality to enactment, where through engagement with specific behaviors the client discovers or “uncovers aspects of himself which in turn generate further discoveries.”

**Directed Behavior Experiment.** This experiment invites the client to practice behaviors he may be avoiding or be unaware of. Directed behavior experiments are not intended to make a person do what he is not interested in doing or learning about. They are intended to offer clients the opportunity to practice specific behaviors, with support from the coach. The coach supports the client in engaging in specific behaviors as opposed to the open-ended quality of enactment experiments.
One example of directed behavior involved a client who had been promoted to a leadership position but who felt inadequate in the role since she was uncomfortable delegating tasks to her subordinates, who were older than she was. She asked for help in learning how to speak with older subordinates and was invited to speak to the coach (who was herself older) as if the coach were her direct report. The client, Abby, was asked to speak with a stronger tone and to make requests with clarity about what was being asked. When she spoke, she was also invited to make eye contact, to breathe more deeply, and to thank the subordinate for following through on the requests. After several minutes of engaging in this directive experiment, Abby was asked to pay attention to how it felt. She reported that it was not as weird as she had imagined, maybe “even helpful,” as she had previously avoided the kind of clarity that she herself would have found useful. What was easily witnessed was that Abby developed an understanding for the wisdom of talking more directly and with clarity. A directive experiment can be a safe space to try on important and new behaviors.

Fantasy Experiment. “Fantasy is an expansive force in a person’s life—it reaches and stretches beyond the immediate people, environment or event which may otherwise contain him . . . . [S]ometimes these extensions can gather such great force and poignancy that they achieve a presence which is more compelling than some real life situations.” Much has been written on the power of imagery and imagination to ignite creative, unimagined possibilities, and fantasy work can offer space for them. Experiments that invite the client to engage in fantasy are actually inviting the client’s power of creativity and innovation.

Polster and Polster suggest that we can invite clients into fantasy work by having them make contact with what is desired or with what may be resisted or never attempted. Fantasy work may feel like enactment, but the major difference is that whereas enactment
takes its form from some past event, the work that gets created
from fantasy comes out of a client’s imagined possibility. Fantasy
work has great power as the fiction a person creates for himself,
either as a nightmare or as desired reality, which when processed
as experiment can help the person discover new possibilities in the
non-fiction of his lived experience.

**Dreams/Dreamwork Experiment.** Dreamwork offers the client
the opportunity to have a dream form the basis of the experi-
ment where the aim is to bring the message of the dream to full
awareness. The Jungian writer Marion Woodman described
dreamwork as the picture of one’s life taken from the perspec-
tive of one’s unconscious. The Gestalt method of working with
dreams is to have the client tell the dream in the present tense
to bring immediacy and power to the dream. The dream ele-
ments are projections of the dreamer’s alienated aspects of self.
In working a dream, clients are invited to become an aspect of
the dream and, by doing so, to make contact with and reclaim
their alienated part(s).

For example, a person tells a dream about a fast-looking new
model car, driving to a new city. In establishing the dream ex-
periment, he is invited to play the part of the new car and to speak
as if he is the car. He speaks of himself as young and vibrant and
admired by everyone. He voices pride over his innovative features,
which allow him great speed. He is invited to speak about the new
city. In speaking as the new city, he reveals that he has stopped
asking for directions. He was invited to consider what he learned
from being the car, and he spoke to the strengths available to him
in the new job offer he was considering. When invited to speak
to how he also was the new place he was traveling to, he spoke of
his desire to create a new brand in his company that would yield
great benefit if successful but that carried risk in implementation.
When asked how he felt as he talked about these possibilities, he
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The Power of Experiment(s) in Unit of Work

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noted the feeling of more energy, more excitement in himself, and
less of the fear that typically restricted his consideration of these
options. As coach, I remember giving him feedback about how he
looked different, with more color in his face and a different tone
to his voice. Polster and Polster describe the ownership qualities
available to the dreamer:

[In acknowledging kinship with many aspects of the
dream, [the client] is extending his sense of diversity,
broadening his experience of self and centering himself
in his world, instead of arbitrarily fractioning it into the
world-out-there and me-out-there. This new extended
sense of self generates the energy for a dynamic align-
ment of a whole range of fresh intrapersonal material.
Instead of [a] stagnant self-image, where contradictory
characteristics seemed to require denial, he becomes free
to seek integrations of his own multiplexity.]

Dreamwork can be worked effectively in a coaching group by
having the dream holder describe her dream and then asking her
to assign dream components to group members. The important
meaning-making of the dream rests with the dream holder. The
coach tracks the engagement the dream holder is making with
each role, and the coach supports the dream holder in paying
attention to what she is becoming aware of and reclaiming from
previous alienation.

Homework Experiment. This is a recommended form of experiment
for real life application of new behavior that requires accountability
and ongoing support. While there is support when in the coaching
environment, self-responsibility and accountability outside of this
environment measure the real success for the client. The Polsters
suggest that homework must be “[customized] to the particular
conflict of the [client].” Homework must be collaboratively created for the client to try, and the range of possibilities is only limited by the imagination of the coach and client. When the client has completed a UOW in the coaching session that yields new understanding about a goal, the coach can then follow up with, “So what would be a practice that allows you to continue working on this after this session?” One executive client who had a demanding presentation to give to her executive board was invited to practice her speech every morning in front of a mirror. At the end of each rehearsal, she was invited to identify what she said well. She was also invited to give herself a grade that ranged from good to excellent. What became clear when she returned for more coaching was that the practice had provided her with the needed self-support for her presentation.

To recapitulate, the sequence of experiments has been described as:

1. Identifying the figure
2. Suggesting an experiment
3. Grading the experiment for risk and challenge
4. Developing the experiment
5. Completing the work
6. Assimilating and integrating the learning (Figure 6.3)

The Unit of Work in relation to experiment is summarized as follows:

**Step One** is where the figure of interest for the client emerges.

**Step Two** is the place for the coach to support the client in choosing which figure of interest he wishes to attend to, the resistance pattern that holds him back from his goals, or the interplay between his resistance and a desired new possibility. The coach offers an experiment for the client to explore.
**Figure 6.3 Gestalt Experiment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>An intentional, organized behavioral event intended to explore, define, clarify, and illuminate an issue important to the client</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PURPOSE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* See the price of old perceptions and behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Explore new possibilities in a safe setting with graded and acceptable risk</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Experiment with new goals or habits of resistance, or the interplay between them</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Experience and accept support from the environment for new possibilities</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PRINCIPLES</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Stress doing over talking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Create &quot;safe emergencies&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Focus on the present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Aim for closure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GRADING</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* GRADE UP = RAISE THE RISK or LOWER THE SUPPORT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* GRADE DOWN = LOWER THE RISK or RAISE THE SUPPORT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STEPS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Secure agreement—establish grounding and contact</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Achieve clarity of intention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Grade the intervention to a degree you and the client can handle</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Adjust the experiment to the client—creativity serves learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Support the client’s experience and learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Provide closure—be unattached to the outcome</td>
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**Step Three** involves the client acting on what has been chosen. The coach acts to support the client in choosing and engaging in an experiment.

**Step Four** is the energetic space to support the client in integrating her new learning by revisiting what she chose to attend to and assimilating her learning from her original “what is” picture into a newly defined “what is” that incorporates the learning derived from the experiment. This is the experiential learning culmination, the shift of awareness into new possibilities.

The use of experiment and the management of Unit of Work speak to the power of the Gestalt process and the intervention
skills of the coach. The coach is required to assist clients in a collaborative manner by maintaining her creative indifference, which is based on not being attached to any specific outcome while still being available to offer observation and inquiry that can serve the client. This is the marriage of the learned horizontal skills of the experiment with the vertical development that ensures that the coach knows the appropriate application and timing of her place in the encounter. “It is trust in the healthiness of [client] self-regulation and in the deeper wisdom that lies within us. Most of all, it is trust that if we as [coaches] provide the proper conditions in the process of [coaching] the client will choose his own right direction.”

We provide that the Unit of Work is the organizing structure that holds the experiment and provides an organized way of orchestrating the process for a coherent learning experience. The UOW asks the coach to work with intent on behalf of the client, using thematic issues as pathways into an invitation to experiment and unleash new possibilities. Being able to co-design, support, and guide a client through UOWs is a powerful aspect of Gestalt coaching that also benefits from both horizontal and vertical development. The more a coach can support clients to engage in their UOW, the more the coach learns how to invoke and harness her own wisdom and how to shape creative experiments inside the UOW. The power in the UOW is that it provides a safe place to confront habitual patterns with new experimental possibilities that can generate new outcomes—a process and result that often gets experienced as the magic of Gestalt.