



## The Gestalt-Informed Workplace

A conversation with Tracy Saunders (Consultant), Michael Walsh (Consultant), and John Wipfler (CEO) - faculty in our Skills for Influential Leadership program - about how the skillful use of Gestalt leadership concepts can improve the workplace and bottom-line results. By Laurie Fitzpatrick

### What are some elements of a Gestalt-informed workplace and how do you implement them?

**Michael:** Intentionality around the impact one has. Awareness - what do people pay attention to, about themselves, about other people? In a workplace informed by Gestalt principles, there is a checking in that happens. There is also the recognition that all people can get what they need. Perhaps not always what they want, but what they need.

**John:** Some of the qualities I believe one finds in a Gestalt-informed workplace are increased awareness of self and others, a positive outlook, general sense of optimism, appreciation for different perspectives, and a better understanding of conflict and resistance and how to engage them. I believe that these sorts of elements are implemented through modeling and teaching by leadership. As a leader, I try to live from these perspectives and try to model the skills and behaviors I would like the organization and its members to embody. I also actively coach management and staff in ways that incorporate Gestalt principles.

### Can you give me some examples?

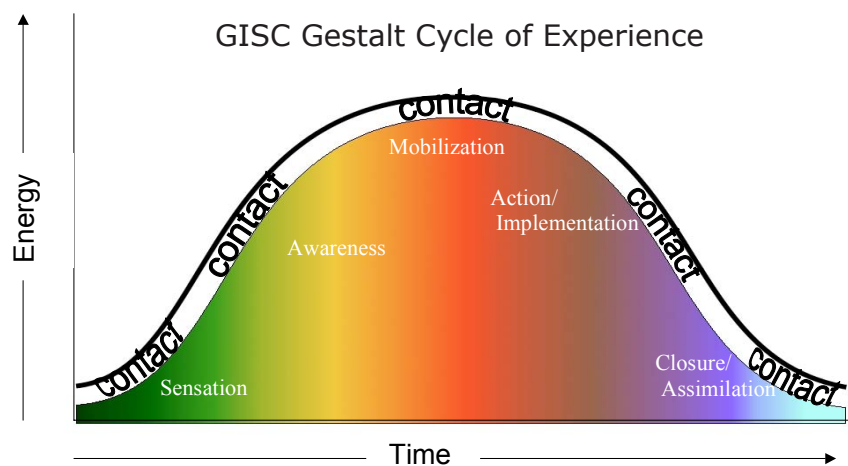
**John:** As projects or issues evolve, I spend a good deal of time with those involved making sure folks "are on the same page." That is, I assume

that there are multiple realities (or perspectives, interests, understandings) about any particular issue at any given time among those involved. I find that it is useful to get those perspectives to the surface as much as possible to avoid the conflicts and resistance that are sure to surface if we aren't all trying to actively account for and understand the differences. An understanding of the reasons for conflict and resistance in a system can have you work differently in order to avoid some of it.

**Michael:** Resistance is a natural expression of energy and often exists when a person is trying to protect something. In a Gestalt-informed workplace, curiosity becomes an effective means of working with resistance. If we can engage that person to understand their resistance, and bring it into the conversation, we can often move forward more effectively. I should also say that it's important for leaders to watch their own resistance, to use their awareness in that way.

**John:** When conflict and resistance do arise, then a leader needs to be aware of the dynamic, get curious, and "lean into" that resistance. The impulse is often to oppose or defend against resistance. If one takes a stance of curiosity - "what is this about" - it can go a long way toward resolution. This can be so difficult as a leader because more often than not it is the leader against whom the resistance is targeted. It is easy to take this personally if you don't understand the dynamic - a place leaders often get into trouble.

**Tracy:** The Cycle of Experience [a model which describes the phases of individual or group change] is one Gestalt concept that dramatically shifted my consultancy. I discovered that clients (and I) often jumped too quickly and often hadn't truly understood a problem. They, with me leading the way, would grasp at solutions looking for a quick fix. The Cycle of Experience gives me a framework to slow myself and



the client down. I spend a lot more time building ground and exploring a range of possibilities (or “figures”) to discover symptoms and causes, to truly discern the “problem.” This also enables the exploration of multiple perspectives and allows us to expand the “solution space” when we take a broader, more holistic view of what’s happening.

I use the cycle to help “teach” people like myself who want to move quickly to a solution, about the importance of creating a solution that is grounded in organizational context and attends to specific individual and collective capabilities, needs and concerns. In other words, I’m trying to surface and attend to resistance and natural capability throughout the process—not just in implementation. Understanding the Cycle of Experience has enabled not only better solutions, but a much more civilized and relational process to discovering those solutions; and that, in turn, builds stronger personal, interpersonal and organizational relationships along with much more sustainable solutions.

### **Do Gestalt principles create a different working environment?**

**Michael:** I believe that Gestalt-informed environments tolerate differences. There is more curiosity and less need for conformance. If one looks at Gestalt communities, one often finds wide perspectives, greater gender balance and minorities. Widening that spectrum gives an organization access to people it wouldn’t otherwise have access to. The organization is enhanced

when it includes and values people who might otherwise find themselves marginalized. Marginalized people don’t feel excited and engaged.

**Tracy:** If a “safe container” can be offered to allow for vulnerability, discussions beyond KPIs are possible. We can discuss what matters most and people’s personal feelings about the issues or challenges and how to move forward. Through this process, the leaders themselves are changed. Unless there is sensitivity to the vulnerability of running an organization and the pressure to deliver results, organizational environments won’t foster creativity. Without creativity, we can be stuck in mechanistic processes. When leaders are dynamic and connected personally, people know that they matter. When homage is paid to “what” needs to get done and the “how” things are done, balancing the needs of all stakeholders, much more sustainable results are possible.

### **Does that affect the organization’s bottom line?**

**Tracy:** Yes absolutely. I don’t have the “formula” to calculate the ROI but certainly organizations can be more effective. We are talking about how to measure missed opportunity – the missed conversations, the ideas. These can come when a balance of both strategic and intimate conversations take place. By nature, organizations are designed to be strategic, but at the end of the day, organizations are about people. In our short-term, results-oriented, too-many-tasks-not-enough-time organizational

cultures, it’s easy to forget this.

**Michael:** I believe that if there is intentionality around awareness, people are more efficient. With awareness and intent, more attention is paid to people than to things. My personal experience and that of my clients is that when people feel more connected, they find their work more satisfying.

**John:** My experience is that it works. We have a very low turnover rate, people want to come to work, they trust leadership and the process, they take risks and are willing to be actively engaged, and they are happy to be part of the organization. It has a direct impact on creating a healthier organizational culture, resulting in higher productivity and happy staff. Gestalt leadership skills are a very solid return on investment.

**Tracy Saunders, MA** is a management consultant in private practice (Intruequest), specializing in how organizations function. She’s involved in strategic organizational change, team development, executive coaching and leadership development.

**Michael Walsh, MBA**, is a partner in a ten-person international consulting firm based in Ottawa, Canada. He has studied with GISC for more than ten years.

**John Wipfler, JD, MBA**, is a healthcare CEO with twenty years of healthcare management, legal and regulatory experience. He has held leadership positions in both work and civic activities.