

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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