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A Gestalt Approach to Strategic Team Change

By Bridget Farrands

Introduction and Purpose

The purpose of this article is to describe and illustrate the practice and application of some core Gestalt principles in working with a strategic team, and the OD implications of such work. Gestalt approaches in working with organizations, teams, and individuals have much to bring to the practices of OD; but the field is a relatively new one and the ideas and practices are still being developed. As an OD practitioner of some 20 years, the use of gestalt in my own consulting has been shaped by training and OD assignments in both the US and Europe which are expanded below as a frame to the case study which follows.

American and European Influences on My Practice

Gestalt philosophy was born in Germany in the late 19th century. It was an attempt to account for how human beings perceived the world. Its most significant contribution was to demonstrate the contextual nature of perception by showing that something only became figural in relation to something else which became background. The insight helped undermine the prevailing ideas about how perception occurred and eventually about the role of the brain in perception.

These ideas were translated into practice, in the US through the therapy practised by Fritz Perls. His focus was individual, present focussed, experimental, often dramatic, and transformative for many people. Key to Perls' focus was a perceptual ideal of a strong vibrant figure which symbolized confident self presence and individual peak experience. Developments in Europe were influenced by what was happening in the USA, but also by a lingering attachment to the work of the original pre-war Gestalt psychologists such as Wolfgang Kohler, Kurt Koffka (Ash, 1998).

The concept of figure and ground is a foundational one to gestaltists. It provides a central creative tension to my own organizational work, arising from the ways my practice has been shaped by influences in both the USA and Europe. Two important teachers of mine in the USA have been Edwin and Sonia Nevis, themselves both pupils of Fritz Perls and his wife Laura. Through their teaching I experienced firsthand the empowerment and potential liberation of privileging self realisation (the figure), over the hold of the historical and cultural context (ground) from which it arose. The optimism and sense of personal freedom that this orientation can create has been a powerful influence in my own practice—and especially important for me, working as a woman with often highly assertive male leaders. It is a compelling legacy of the dynamism and social upheavals of the 1960s and 70s—also personally formative years for me as a manager in manufacturing industry. But my own roots as an English woman—now European!—grow out of a different historical ground which has also significantly shaped my practice.

My experience of the development of figure and ground in Europe is different

from the pragmatic optimism I took from my experience of gestalt therapy in the US. Here, I was influenced by the way gestalt form has developed since the 1920s and '30s through the 'melting pot' of a number of existential philosophers (such as Jean Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau Ponty to mention just two) to create a stream of thought and practice that makes context inseparable from the figures which emerge from it. For them, the ground meant culture and history which had a persistent influence on any figure that arose. I work with clients in France, Spain, Sweden, Germany, and England. Without exception, although many of their commercial issues are similar, the way they are thinking about them and tackling them is noticeably different. I have to deeply appreciate their national cultures, how these impact their organization cultures and the limits and possibilities of such combinations.

Although this may seem like a statement of the obvious to anyone working internationally, it has consequences if I take seriously the deep connections between figure and ground. The ground—context and history—of an organization takes some time to really understand, if it can ever be fully understood. It asks the client for patience whilst the consultant immerses herself in their world; it asks the consultant to resist the temptation to find immediate solutions to the issue she is called in to address. And it asks for both client and consultant to work with new figures that emerge at different speeds and with different emphasis as the assignment advances. The possibilities of the present in any context cannot be grasped immediately; it takes curiosity to look and see—and maybe—uncover the organizational ground.

In my practice I regularly experience the tension between working with the figures that are obvious and which create energy for change (both for me and the client), with the need to allow the ground to reveal itself more fully—rarely a fast process. It is often the slow-to-emerge figures, which highlight the dilemmas that the client will really need to resolve if the consulting assignment is to make a sustainable change to their world. A fully developed,

tightly co-ordinated action plan is unlikely to be consistent with a gestalt approach to OD issues. Working with this tension has shaped the evolution of my practice along with the presence of two colleagues—Rob Farrands and Dominik Heil—who help enlarge the questions I and we ask our clients, so that they are addressing the ones that will really make a difference to what they do.

The notion of gestalt as a figure/ground form is a consistent idea that guides my practice and enables me to make sense of the complexities of working with different organizations in different countries. My understanding of gestalt in the context of OD is still developing and will continue to do so. Just as there is no such thing as a unified or singular US or European gestalt approach, so it is with my own practice; it is a dynamic and evolving process. But perhaps the best way to bring gestalt practice to life is to describe what Gestalt can bring when applied to a very common situation for OD consultants, that of consulting to a senior team facing a new and demanding future.

Applying a Gestalt-based Approach to a Strategic Team: The Client and the Consulting Needs

How does a leadership team, responsible for 60,000 people in a national retail chain, change its way of working and leading so that those directly and indirectly affected by the team's leadership would also be enabled to change the ways they then work?

This is the question that was posed 18 months ago by the National Stores Director

(NSD). His question was prompted by a need for him to personally change how he led his team, mainly so that he could free up time to step into a COO role. The NSD had built a very loyal, dedicated, and stores-centred team—one that often felt closed and fortress-like to those outside it. This had an impact on their interactions with marketing, product development, and logistics, especially in how these teams collaborated with such a crucial group.

The whole question of team leadership was itself positioned in a wider context of the organization's desire to develop a

> Leadership was expected to move from a uniquely singular practice to one that was collective, distributed, and shared, in support of the strategic business goals. In the highly competitive retail sector, and with uncompromising internal financial goals, the pressure on the team was acute (and visible to thousands) to learn fast, change their ways of working, and begin to lead differently.

culture which demanded greater customer-centricity, innovation and accountability from all its people. To lead such a change, senior leaders were being asked to balance their operational focus with increased time on coaching and developing their people. Leadership was expected to move from a uniquely singular practice to one that was collective, distributed, and shared, in support of the strategic business goals. In the highly competitive retail sector, and with uncompromising internal financial goals, the pressure on the team was acute (and visible to thousands) to learn fast, change their ways of working, and begin to lead differently.

Over a period of 14 months I joined the Stores leadership team for 6 intensive meetings of an evening and the following day. Each of these meetings centred on the current business agenda of the team. My role was to support their learning, as they did their work, a process we came to call "learn-as-you-work-as-you-learn," which described the cyclical nature of doing something, stepping back to see what happened, and then deciding what and how

to change for the next round of work in the meeting. In many respects this was an on-going cycle of figure/ground formation. The face-to-face work with the team was accompanied by a background of personal connections as I met members on other assignments, including one to one coaching, agenda planning meetings, and follow up sense-making calls. I also sent short YouTube videos, a range of articles and occasional book chapters to the team in between meetings that related to the most recent work we had done.

The team prided themselves on being practical, get-things-done kind of people; each person brought deep retail experience and within the industry they were seen as a formidable group. However, implementation of some decisions was often frustratingly difficult or inadequately achieved and there were concerns that they were being insufficiently strategic.

My challenge in working with the team was twofold:

1. To enable the team to do the demanding work of leading the national stores with less reliance on the NSD and increasing inter-dependence within the team. This would involve different forms of collaboration and creating together new models of peer leadership.
2. To broaden their conversational capability so that they might add more reflection, relational awareness and creativity to the time they spent together once a month.

The hope was that both of these would be more likely to enable the team to shift their existing reputation (see above), work at a more strategic level of issue, and improve the quality of their cross-business collaboration.

Getting Started

Gestalt puts emphasis on contact with people, context, history, and need. It accepts that how each person and each part of a system perceives its world will determine in large part how it takes action. What we are energised by and take action around (the figure) emerges from a complex context (the ground). Beginning with some appreciation of the world of this team—its ground—and the types of issues/problems—the figures—it created seemed a first step to really contacting the world of the team. I decided too that this would provide a basis for working in the team itself, so I used my own process of figure/ground formation to inform my work with them.

I began my work with lengthy 1:1 discussions with each member of the team before meeting them as a group. This shaped my own views on where to begin. At that point we had no end point—only agreement that there was a journey to go on and (mostly) everyone was willing to get started.

Throughout the work with the team I used a mixture of framing, showing, and telling each of which is described below as a way of bringing to life the gestalt orientation I use. As their world became more visible to them and their ground enlarged, what emerged were alternative practices, based on different and more negotiated assumptions, which had the power to reshape some parts of their world, and so of their leadership.

Framing involved managing expectations and intentions largely through pre-meeting contact with different team members, supporting the agenda preparation, and labelling the kinds of conversation the agenda would ask for. Framing was a different way of describing the ground of team meetings; it helped to establish the topics (figures) team members could expect to cover. Part of framing meetings deliberately asked team members to come with curiosity. They were invited to suspend the personal value each placed on knowing the answer. The team—and the organization—were heading into a future they had never met before. For leaders, it asked for such meta-skills as fast cycle learning, adaptability, self observation, and reflection. Competence in the team was more frequently demonstrated around providing solutions to issues, where activity was tactical and, for such a senior group, often over-detailed. The ability to lead for an unknown future meant to become more competent in knowing at what level an issue needed framing, listening to a wide range of experiences and views (multiple figures), inviting challenge and learning a new kind of questioning (moving from "what shall we do" to "what don't we know" and "how can we find out"). It involved working with a less structured agenda and having more open time where what needed to emerge could emerge; asking questions that exploited the potential of the present (Why is nobody saying anything when I ask this question? How come we are trying to make this decision again?) and using continuous re-framing as the issue evolved. Fundamentally, it asked the team to be open to expanding their understanding of the ground of the team, well before jumping in to solution finding, the minute a new figure emerged.

Showing was a way of working that involved bringing to attention often elusive human processes, and working with them—not allowing them to pass by. I worked openly with "moments." These refer to the micro, hardly seen but always felt, pauses in groups: silent but loaded glances between two people, no response after a heartfelt comment, moving from one topic to another with a gulf of unspoken commentary hanging in the air. We all know them when they happen: working in the now involves highlighting them and finding out more about their significance. Such moments are often fleeting and, if not named and lightly held, easily take flight and so are lost as a source of learning. Specifically, this meant

» Growing the *awareness* of how the team operates in the present as it does its work by using real work as a basis for observing and understanding how the team actually works. Awareness is one of the gestalt concepts held within the larger container of the figure/ground form. It is the process of making figural what is already in the ground. Awareness can refer to feelings, ideas, behaviour, and what is said; essentially what is already present in some way.

» Changing the basis of contact, conversation, and disclosure so that the climate of openness and trust in the team was enlarged. Gestalt places a high value on *honest contact and awareness of other* as a basis for relationship, which

itself builds new ground from which new relational figures can emerge. "Honest" refers to authenticity: an approach that is a way of avoiding the deflections and social injunctions (only say nice things to people...don't upset people etc) that can stultify relationships and make change difficult.

Showing also involved the design of experiments that allowed the team to try out new ways of being together with no obligation to make these permanent work structures. Gestalt is a present-centred

Telling involved the careful introduction of concepts and ideas to support the team's conversations. Without referring directly to Gestalt (it is a hotly disputed question within the Gestalt OD field as to whether it is necessary to label what we do as Gestalt, or whether what is more important is to live and use the practices), ideas here were useful if offered visually as models or frameworks. An example of such a concept was that of multiple realities. The team carried an implicit assumption—at least they acted as though they did—that everyone saw the world in a similar way. Because

Explicit feeling responses: In the beginning, I heightened my contact with some team members by describing how moved I felt as they spoke about experiences which were affecting their work: of parenting a very sick child, of moving to a new part of the country, and struggles with a partner. Whilst some team members had close relationships, the climate when they met as a whole was often loud, jokey, and fast paced. Enlarging the range of responses they had with each other by including such emotionally vulnerable disclosures, seemed to legitimise this kind of talking and slowed down exchanges between people. In the slower pace there was time for speaking and listening differently, and so a different experience of contact with each other.

But as the connection between talking about a topic and how it felt to be having that conversation became tightly linked, so too did a greater appreciation that listening in a particular way supported disclosure of different kinds of information, which itself led to different kinds of discussion. We became equally interested in what was troublesome or difficult as we did in what was going fine. We avoided the tyranny of the positive, preferring to simply recognise what was happening without needing to ascribe a positive or negative value to it.

approach which values experimentation as a basis for experiencing change. Talking about change, in practice changes little. Experiments encourage trial and error, risk taking and shifting habitual patterns; the use of deliberately designed experiments can give new awareness and choice about how an individual or the team could be different. About half way through the assignment, the team created a number of experiments designed to disturb familiar meeting patterns and encourage feedback about the team's own process of working and to give opportunities for feedback on each other's contribution. The goal of an experiment is to creatively reveal more of the world that is within the client's grasp, and to give some lived moments of what this could be like. My training with Joseph Zinker (Zinker, 1977) taught me to design experiments which were graded and grounded within the client's experience, typically by involving the client in their creation.

they worked at such pace on a complex agenda, they believed they could not spare the time to understand the variety of views (both figures and ground) in a discussion. But because every person's personal ground is different and influenced by the wider context they share, taking the time to appreciate such differences was central to how decisions could be sustainable over time.

Over the months, the team came to see how its working pattern was an inter-connected series of assumptions which made a kind of world. Each team meeting was like a visit to this world with some assumed inevitability about how each person would need to act once there. These assumptions were creating fixed forms (gestalts) and it is these that the team worked on to change.

Listening for possibility: I probed members' experience with questions which took seriously the difficulties of leading and working together. I was interested in how *they* accounted for what went on, and especially in how they experienced *themselves* as they spoke with me and each other. This was often a strange and hard question to answer: what did this have to do with anything? But as the connection between talking about a topic and how it felt to be having that conversation became tightly linked, so too did a greater appreciation that listening in a particular way supported disclosure of different kinds of information, which itself led to different kinds of discussion. We became equally interested in what was troublesome or difficult as we did in what was going fine. We avoided the tyranny of the positive, preferring to simply recognise what was happening without needing to ascribe a positive or negative value to it.

Opening to assumptions: As part of the work on multiple realities, I asked pairs to enquire into each other's assumptions about certain key issues in the team (why are we a hard team for others to join? Why do we go round in circles when we make decisions?), aiming to avoid interpretations or judgements but following their

curiosity and trusting that the resulting enquiry would be enlightening for both. In the process each discovered differences, similarities, and the values that drove their partner. The change that took place in working with the business agenda that followed, was to enable discussions to be grounded in both the personal and the commercial, and to heighten the way in which unspoken assumptions could be a basis for de-railing decisions.

When team members were listening for the plan or the action it was hard for them to slow down into the more reflective space within which conversations concerning relationship or strategic possibility might occur; and such conversations tended to require more sensitivity to taken-for-granted assumptions. Team members tended to speak into the way they were being listened to.

Creating peer leadership: the NSD wanted the team to develop greater inter-dependence so that he could take on wider responsibilities. But how to enable the team to operate effectively without him being present? In effect, how could someone be "in charge" of the team on a temporary basis without setting any single individual up as the deputy, but giving them the authority to finalise decisions and act as though they were the leader? Gestalt has an inherent dislike of hierarchy; its ideas of top dog/underdog chime directly with the legacy of Fritz Perls and his radical take on structures of power and culture which he believed constrained self realisation.

» The answer we came up with was to invent a rotating role which we called "the person-in-charge"!
» Embedded in the person-in-charge role were many challenges for those individuals who took it on:
» How to exercise appropriate authority over their peers
» How to do real work whilst simultaneously experimenting with their leadership in a very visible setting of a peer group

» How to replicate the quality of decision making that the NSD was known for
» How to do all this *and* keep focused on the topic in hand

My role was to create enough support for the person-in-charge so that s/he could experiment and learn about him/herself through the experience of being the person-in-charge. This was one of the most sensitive areas for the team to change. It was hard for these managers, with many years of learning how to make a hierarchy work, to find that the established order was suddenly so mobile. Although they understood the rationale behind doing it, the practice of making the person-in-charge role work well was uncomfortable and awkward.

Random feedback: in my pre-work it became clear that feedback was something we needed to make livelier, spontaneous, and a routine part of the team's working. It had become ritualized and boring: people typically heard little of value so its power as a basis for learning and change was starved of energy and immediacy. We used a number of feedback mechanisms, typically where people were given very little time to prepare and encouraged to speak simply from their direct experience of the person in the last 10 minutes or last hour. The emphasis was on describing felt experience and making short, phenomenological observations, avoiding the lengthy sanitizing that went on in so much of their feedback.

Signs of Change

There have been several changes in the team. They describe:

» The climate and the breadth of conversations the team can have together have significantly increased. Outright disagreements are still rare, but there is a willingness to stick with a discussion until the issue has been resolved and no longer suggestions to "discuss this off line."
» Members continue to invest in knowing each other better in and out of their roles. They aim to spend time with each other in different parts of the country so that they understand better how their colleague leads in his/her own region, and to build the personal relationship.
» They continue to have meetings dedicated to themselves as a team and how they work. Discussions about relationships in and out of the team are a legitimate part of the work they do.
» They have learnt how to work together without the NSD being present—as is often the case. The rotating person-in-charge role has become a consistent part of the way they operate, as has feedback on how an individual undertakes that role.
» They are active and willing partners in a number of cross-business forums/teams and have made deliberate efforts to build relationships and draw closer to them key individuals with whom historically there had been animosity.

Reflections on Practice

As I reflected on this work with the NSD's team, I take from it the following issues which have more general application in OD work.

» *Context, context, context:* the ground shapes everything and it takes deep immersion over time to appreciate its shaping influence on a system. Taken-for-granted assumptions about how things are, need challenging to find out if they are still relevant or whether they are part of the problem. The consultant's role here is to help the client to disclose the ground, to question the

figures that emerge and enquire into their relevance, so that it becomes a resource for development. As new figures emerge, the ones that are significant for the system attract energy and interest; so contact and action grow from within the team rather than being the responsibility of the consultant.

» *Listen, listen, listen:* listening comes before speaking. But it is hard to be listening-neutral because too often we like to have confirmed what we are listening for. It is a change in listening that is likely to bring forth new speaking, and so the likelihood of a new future. When team members were listening for the plan or the action it was hard for them to slow down into the more reflective space within which conversations concerning relationship or strategic possibility might occur; and such conversations tended to require more sensitivity to taken-for-granted assumptions. Team members tended to speak into the way they were being listened to. If OD work supports system change, then changes to how we listen may be more significant than changing how we speak and what we talk about.

» *Which agenda when?* Many organizations are built around planning and budgeting cycles that take for granted that the future will happen as planned. They know it is unlikely, but they proceed as though it is true anyway. Working in a way which favours the present over the past and the future may make long term detailed organization change plans harder to support. Many OD projects, by their nature, need such plans. A Gestalt orientation asks the consultant to be both responsive to what is happening in the moment, coupled with the ability to retain a perspective on the longer term. And to know that as the present changes, it changes the future. The principle of holism tells us that as one part changes so the whole changes, which, in turn, changes the parts. The difficulty for many leaders of large systems is that this asks for them to live within more disorder than most are comfortable with. And it asks the consultant to do so too.

» *Go slower to go faster:* most leaders and many leadership teams want change to happen fast. Action is usually preferred over reflection. Within a Gestalt frame of reference on OD, the idea that these are separate is challenged. Action takes a number of forms of which reflection is just one; others include experiments and new methods of contact. In the early meetings of the team this slowing down to make sense as a group was a struggle. The urge to move to something else, to come up with one quick answer involved patience and trust. What helped was a client who was himself open to new practices, to learning about himself and who put his leadership behind the discovery of new approaches to the team's working. As a result he modelled and valued appropriate slowing down as a way to move ahead with more pace.

In Conclusion

For OD practitioners, it is hard to draw a direct cause-effect line between ideas, actions, and outcomes. The results above came about because of many, many influences and supports on the team—including a powerful business imperative to change, which a group of intelligent people could clearly understand, and where the results of not doing so would be personally unthinkable. As the consultant, having a client dedicated to sustaining this work over an intensely busy time with an unmoving insistence that it was business critical, was rare and invaluable.

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