

"The Gestalt coach works to establish and nurture a coach-client relationship that engenders the trust necessary for raising awareness and initiating substantial change."

Gestalt Coaching

By Herb Stevenson

OVER THE LAST 40 years, the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland has refined Gestalt theory for use in coaching as well as OD consulting. In 1960, Edwin Nevis and Richard Wallen began to apply Gestalt concepts to organization development. Around 1974, Nevis, John Carter, Carolyn Lukensmeyer, Leonard Hirsch and Elaine Kepner founded the Organization and Systems Development Center at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (GIC). During the late 1990s, Carter and Dorothy Siminovitch developed the Gestalt Coaching concepts that led to GIC's International Coaching Program, that was launched in 2002.

Most readers of this journal have been exposed to Gestalt theory and the structure of its "unit of work" as applied to OD consulting (*OD Practitioner*, volume 36, number 4). The Gestalt approach is applied in coaching with some similarities but also with some unique features, as this article will discuss.

The Gestalt approach begins with a set of core assumptions that place high value on present-centered awareness, client-coach interaction and experimentation, as outlined in *Table 1*.

GESTALT COACHING STANCE

The development of a Gestalt coaching stance distinguishes Gestalt from other forms of coaching. The Gestalt coach is trained to a) use self as instrument; b) provide a presence that is otherwise lacking in the system and c) help the client to complete units of work that result in new insights, behavior or action. *Table 2* on the next page profiles each of the aspects of the Gestalt coaching stance.

USE OF SELF

Awareness

The Gestalt coach is trained to become an awareness expert by remaining focused on the present. The goal is to be as fully present with oneself and with the client as possible, thereby enabling new awareness or heightening existing awareness in the client system.

Maintaining present-centeredness enhances the Gestalt

Table 1
CORE ASSUMPTIONS IN THE GESTALT APPROACH

(Modified from Nevis, 1997, p. 112)

Learning occurs through examination of here-and-now experience.

Awareness is the precursor to effective action; awareness leads to choice.

People have an inherent drive to behave as effectively as possible. The coach's task is to help them learn this.

Growth is facilitated by the interaction of client and coach. The presence of the coach is a critical element.

Growth occurs at the contact boundary between that which is known and that which is unknown or rejected.

Experimentation is a critical source of learning.

Change is the responsibility of the client, not the coach.

Individual autonomy is crucial to healthy adjustment.

**Table 2
GESTALT COACHING STANCE**

(Adapted from Gestalt Consulting Stance, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, Organization and Systems Development Center)

A. Use yourself as an instrument

1. You must become an awareness expert.
2. There should be congruence between your behavior and what you want to teach others.

B. Provide a presence which is otherwise lacking in the system

1. Stand for certain values and skills.
2. Model a way of solving problems and of dealing with life in general.
3. Help to focus the client's energy on the problems, not the solutions you prefer.
4. Teach basic behavioral skills.
5. Evoke experimentation.

C. Employ Gestalt-based techniques:

1. Observe and selectively share what you see, hear and feel.
2. Attend to your own experience (feelings, sensations, thoughts) and selectively share it, thereby establishing your presence.
3. Focus on energy in the client system and the emergence or lack of themes or issues for which there is energy. This supports mobilization of energy so that something happens.
4. Facilitate clear, meaningful, heightened contacts between members of the client system (and with you).
5. Help the client system to complete units of work and to achieve closure around unfinished business.

coach's ability to collect important data in order to understand client dynamics. Although data could be collected solely from organizational reports and telephone or meeting interviews, the most valuable source is direct observation (Alevras & Wepman, 1980, p. 234). Immersion in the client system brings observations, experiences and insights that would otherwise be diminished or unrealized.

Awareness-building itself is a powerful intervention. The Gestalt coach gathers information through direct observation of the client system, and then descriptively reports findings. In this way, she acts as a mirror and adds value by sharpening the clarity of a client's reflection. One's awareness of the current situation establishes the information base from which decisions are made. A coach can help identify conflicting behaviors, for example, and support the client's determination of "how to proceed in the face of such knowledge" (p. 234).

Methods of awareness

Gestalt identifies two different but complementary forms of awareness in the coaching process: "[Active, directed awareness [emphasizes] structured, guided questioning of members of the client system. [Open, undirected awareness... attempts to hold hypothesis formation in abeyance for a longer period of time...]" (Nevis, 1987, pp. 110-111).

When gathering data, the Gestalt coach is trained to move back and forth between both modes of awareness without preference (p. 116). *Table 3* illustrates the distinctive features of both methods.

Congruence

The use of self as a coaching instrument differentiates the Gestalt approach from other intervention orientations. The relationship between the Gestalt coach and the client is an essential factor in the change process. The Gestalt coach works to establish and nurture a coach-client relationship that engenders

**Table 3
GESTALT AWARENESS**

(adapted from Nevis, 1987, p. 111)

| Active, Directed Awareness | Open, Undirected Awareness |
|---|---|
| Goes to the world | Lets the world come to you |
| Forces something to emerge | Waits for something to emerge |
| Uses Structures/framework to guide what you wish to see, hear, etc. | Investigates without being organized or "prejudiced" in any way as to what you wish to see hear, etc. |
| Focuses questioning; strives for a narrow, sharp field of vision | Maintains widest peripheral vision; little foreground and everything of equal importance |
| Attends to things in terms of knowledge of how they work, what is present and missing in a normative sense. | Is naive about how things work; hopes to find something new about how things work |
| Values content and concepts | Values process |
| Searching of sensory modalities | Receptive use of sensory modalities |

the trust necessary for raising awareness and initiating substantial change.

By reporting internal experiences to the client, the Gestalt coach raises awareness of the mutual impact that coach and client have on each other. Since dysfunctional systems often lack constructive feedback (Satir, 2000), this intervention, alone, can contribute health to the system. If the coach does not allow herself to be present, she operates under the same system as the client. However, when a coach uses his own reactions as an awareness building intervention—by sharing how he is effected by what is happening, and asking how his actions are impacting the client—he models “a new way of operating which can effectively change the system” (Satir, cited in Baldwin, 2000, p. xxii).

In this case, constructive feedback can become part of the system itself. The Gestalt coach’s feedback triggers the client to sharpen up unformed or indistinct figure–ground formations (what is in the forefront or background of awareness) by articulating what the client is thinking but is unable to bring out into the open.

In the state of congruence, the Gestalt coach seeks to be present-centered without judgment or blame, and to exercise his or her full humanity in the coaching context and the coaching-client relationship. Congruence demonstrates that the Gestalt coach is using the self in responsive service to the client rather than imposing a catch-all, external methodology. One caveat: The use of self engages the Gestalt coach in a “potentially painful and highly anxiety-provoking process” (Pieterman, 1999, p. 1), because she may introject (swallow whole) the client’s projections in an attempt to understand what the client is thinking (Sher). In psychoanalytic terms, this projection-introjection process would be called counter-transference.

The Gestalt coach is then charged with the often complex and unsettling responsibility of making sense of the introjected data and feeding it back in a constructive way.

Given these challenges, establishing and maintaining trust in the coach-client relationship is an ongoing and primary focus of the work and requires, among other skills, that the Gestalt coach exhibit congruence in all dealings with the client. When one is congruent, “one looks like one feels, says what one feels and means, and acts in accordance with what one says” (Satir, 2000, pp. 21-22).

Walking the talk

Walking the talk is typically associated with being congruent in the sense of being *consistent* in thought and action. However, the concepts of congruence and consistency are somewhat different seen through the lens of Gestalt theory.

In any organization, there are as many “realities” as there are individuals within the organization. This often means “that the way a manager walks the talk in the eyes of... [one person]... is seen as insincere by someone else” (Weick, 1995, p. 182).

Organizations that insist that managers or coaches “walk

the talk” actually have it backwards: They are setting their managers and coaches up for failure, because “the talk makes sense of walking” (pp. 182-183). In other words, people discover what they feel and think by examining what they say and do.

In Gestalt theory, *talking the walk* helps managers and coaches discover a competent organizational language through the opportunity to “uncover something for which the current words... are inadequate and for which new words are needed” (p. 183).

Talking before walking is contrary to Euro-centric social norms, which value action before speaking. Nonetheless, the Gestalt coach is not burdened with norms, interpretations, hidden beliefs about “the way we do things around here,” or projections of how it should or must be in the future. Instead, the Gestalt coach focuses on “what is” in the present moment: What is being said or not said, done or not done, questioned or not questioned. Thus, the Gestalt coach can initiate diagnostic and intervention tools while modeling present-centeredness.

This way of talking the walk can have a profound effect on the organization. At a minimum, it reminds us of the value of listening and of the power of words to shape our perceptions and realities.

Table 4
GESTALT COACHING SKILLS

(adapted from Nevis, 1987, pp. 92-101)

- Ability to stay present and to focus on the ongoing process, with faith in natural developmental sequences
- Considerable sensitivity to the sensory, physical functioning of self and others
- Frequent “tuning in” to your own emotional reactions and to those of others
- Ability to separate data from interpretation, and to emphasize nonjudgmental observations
- Ability to put things succinctly, clearly and directly
- Awareness of intentions, of what you want to do or say, together with the ability to be clear in letting others know what’s wanted from them
- Ability to see where the client is at any time, and to show respect in working with the system
- Ability to face and accept emotional situations with a minimum of personal defensiveness
- Ability to make good contact with others
- Appreciation of significant contextual issues involved in system interventions
- Awareness of the aesthetic, transcendent and creative aspects of working as a Gestalt coach (pp. 92-101)

PRESENCE

The most common form of establishing presence is for the Gestalt coach to embody the theories and practices that are essential to bring about changes in people (Nevis, 1987, p. 69).

Standing for something

Presence is “the living out of values in such a way that in ‘taking a stance,’ the intervener teaches these important concepts” (p. 70). Generally, a Gestalt coach will develop and employ the skills listed in *Table 4*.

As the Gestalt coach masters these skills, they become natural characteristics of how he or she interacts with clients. Hence, “presence denotes a good integration of knowledge and behavior... The more compelling... the knowledge and its enactment, the richer is the presence” (p. 70).

Modeling behavior

What are specific behaviors that will support effective interaction between coach and client (p. 90)? First, listening without judgment to all aspects of the client’s experience models the notion of listening impartially to oneself. Second, withholding judgment about a client’s feelings models how a client may become more self-accepting. Third, genuineness and congruence model authentic behavior for the client (Baldwin, 2000, p. 31).

The Gestalt coach models being present-centered, for example, by staying most aware of how the client describes the situation, rather than by becoming overly engrossed with content. Though awkward in casual verbal exchanges, naming how the client is communicating creates a “here and now” awareness. This may result in self-consciousness or a sense of discomfort for the client, but nevertheless it helps to reinforce the value of staying present-centered.

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Focusing on the client’s problem

The Gestalt approach to coaching downplays problem-solving in favor of helping the client to see the problem in new ways. Information and expertise are not withheld, of course, but the Gestalt coach tirelessly focuses on what is—here and now—while descriptively assessing the problem and its context.

The descriptive assessment offers breadth and depth to a problem definition, with the anticipation that sheer awareness of this expanded definition may lead to a solution that was not available until that moment of awareness. The goal is to foster an “emergent reality” that unfolds from a conversation structured by... curiosity about the client’s ideas, attitudes, and speculations about change” (Duncan & Miller, 2000, p. 182). As the Gestalt coach describes the situation, and an awareness of “what is” emerges, the individual is changed.

Such a transformational experience need not be rooted in some traumatic revelation; in Gestalt coaching, transformation can just as easily arise—and often does arise—from helping the client to see the obvious.

Teaching behavioral skills

Presence is not manufactured; it is something everyone displays at all times, whether one is aware of it or not. However, presence is most powerful when it embodies a compelling model or theory of learning. While some learning models are more useful than others in influencing adult behavior change, the important point is that the Gestalt coach has internalized one that has proven useful over time. (Nevis, 1987, p. 75)

A primary tenet of Gestalt theory is to state the “what is” and then to teach the client to see it and say it as well. The focus rests on the descriptive versus the evaluative. In teaching how to use descriptive feedback, the Gestalt coach enables the client to distinguish between past interpretations or future fantasies and what is real in the present moment.

As this skill evolves, clients are able to see their own process and to determine for themselves how this process either is or is not serving the tasks at hand.

Evoking experimentation

The Gestalt coach’s presence aims to evoke some form of change in the system through creating awareness. Such awareness is gained not only through the use of descriptive language, but can also “evolve out of... experimentation” (Goodman, 1999, p. 63), or in the more commonly used organizational terms, through creating a *pilot*.

In organization development, the Gestalt experiment shows the client how to identify “habitualized behavioral patterns,” how to safely experiment with other ways of behaving and how to modify habitual behavior for greater effectiveness (Polster & Polster, 1973). The presumption is that experience can initiate learning, and the focus of experimentation is to create opportunities for insight into how the client experiences himself and his environment. The client actually becomes the teacher, because these insights are self-generated through the

awareness aroused by the experiment. Experiment is preferable to advice or theory because it involves direct experience rather than contrived experience (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984):

Arbitrary exercises thrust on the person (or group), devoid of experiential roots, are not within the realm of phenomenology and of Gestalt theory... because they do not carry... a living context for the client. It is within this living context that most lasting learnings take place. (Zinker, 1977, p. 88)

Holding space

Although rarely conscious, another powerful way the Gestalt coach creates presence is by holding space for the client through bare attention. Holding space is similar to Winnicott's created environment in which it is safe to be nobody and thus to begin to find the self; called a process of "unintegration," this psychologically safe environment ultimately promotes an individual's ability to **be** instead of always having to **do**. At this point, deep awareness surfaces as the client develops a sense of feeling "real" (Winnicott, 1965, pp. 31, 59-61, 185-86; Epstein, 1999, pp. 36-38).

Another aspect of *holding space* is being able to witness oneself and to know, for example, when interaction with the client is arousing anxiety within oneself. The Gestalt coach's ability to hold that anxiety, patiently allowing the source of it to surface into awareness, and to report this internal experience directly helps the client to articulate the subconscious, unspoken (perhaps unspeakable) sources of her own anxiety.

Sheer presence can have as great an impact as any problem-solving skills. A powerful presence depends on the Gestalt

coach's ability to "fill" each moment with positive silence and relaxed attentiveness. The silence of relaxed attentiveness permits clients to apprehend gaps in their internal and external points of contact, and to surface awareness that otherwise is drowned out in superficial speech.

Holding space, then, contributes to an environment appropriate for the client's "safe" experimentation with other conceptions and behaviors. When awareness of gaps or inconsistencies occur, then real, unscripted communication is made possible (Epstein, 1995, pp. 186-189). Within the held space of relaxed attention, the client can use the Gestalt coach's presence like a "ground, asking to be written on" (Parlett, 1991, p. 80; Zinker, 1987).

Experiment

Gestalt experiments are often referred to as "safe emergencies." In the safety of the experiment, the client is able to try out a new behavior or a different way of conceptualizing a situation without risking personal or organizational resources. This leads to an awareness of "what might be," or how things could be better in the future.

The benefit of an experimental approach is that *all* outcomes are valuable. Experiments reveal new ways of thinking and behaving that could provide significant insights into possible courses of action. For example, an experiment might result in insights that support the CEO's strategies to stop unconscious and undermining behaviors, help a team redirect energies, or guide the organization in deciding whether to move forward with broad changes.

For the experiment to be a valuable learning experience, the client must pass through the five steps of the *experiential cycle of learning* (see Figure 1).

This cycle creates an orienting lens with which to frame the client's learning experience. In this way, the Gestalt coach compares the client's "what is" before and after the experiment, thereby helping the client identify not only what is new, but what is possible and desirable.

Shaping and supervising successful experiments requires specific knowledge and skills; the nature of the experiment depends on the client's specific needs, situation and environment. Fashioning an appropriate experiment, then, is a highly creative process. According to Zinker (1978), this process is designed to reach certain goals, as outlined in Table 5.

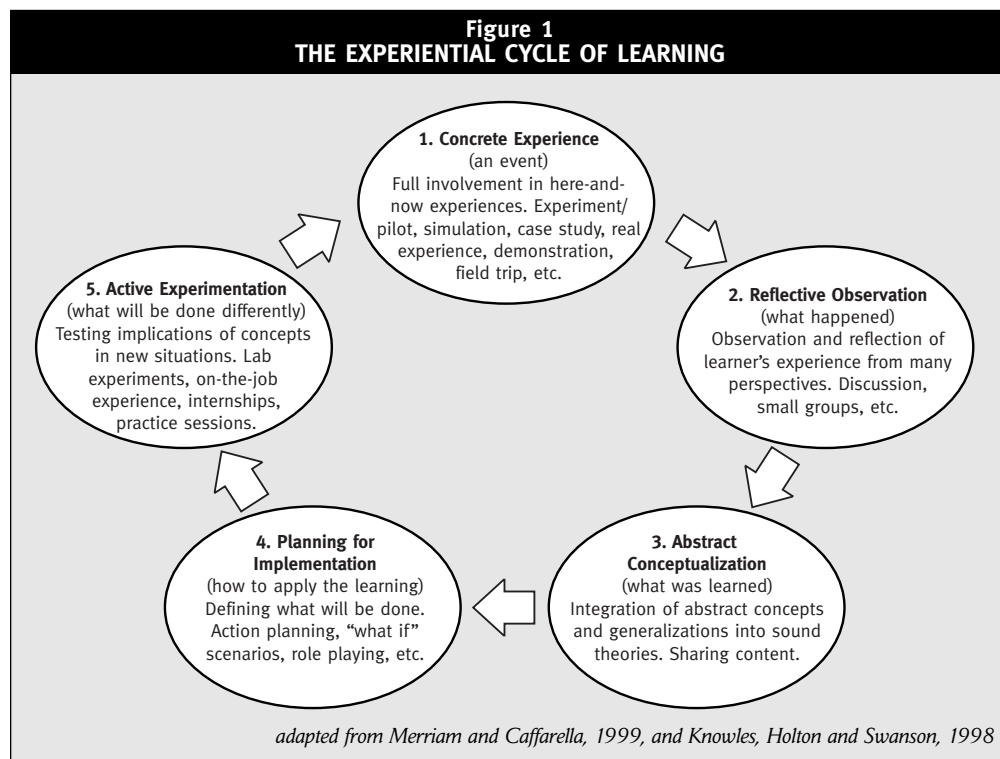


Table 5
GOALS OF CREATIVE EXPERIMENTATION

adapted from Zinker, 1978, p. 126

- To expand the range of behavior of the individual, group or organization
- To create conditions under which the individual, group, or organization can claim ownership for a specific behavior
- To stimulate experiential learning from which new self concepts can evolve
- To reveal creative adjustments that have resulted in unfinished situations
- To integrate understanding with expression
- To discover polarizations that are outside of awareness
- To stimulate awareness and integration of conflicting forces
- To reveal competing commitments and to integrate big assumptions*
- To stimulate circumstances under which the individual, group or organization can feel and act stronger, more competent, more self-supported, more explorative and actively responsible to self and others

*Note: "Competing commitments" and "big assumptions" are concepts developed at Harvard University by Robert Kegan, Ph.D. and Lisa Laskow Lahey

The Gestalt coaching stance requires self-discipline and self-awareness. Self-discipline is revealed in constant vigilance in tracking "what is" within the self and with the client. Self awareness means being able to state "what is" in descriptive terms. Combined, the Gestalt coaching stance is a powerful, present-centered, awareness-building platform. ■

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