

# Paradox: A Gestalt Theory of Change

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## Abstract

Underlying the application of Gestalt theory to OD, consulting, and/or coaching is a lineage of paradoxical theories. In 1970, Arnold Biesser, MD named these processes implicit to gestalt theory as the paradoxical theory of change. Subsequently, the paradoxical theory of change has become the foundation of theory at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. This article provides an understanding of the theoretical concepts that underpin Gestalt OD theory. The theories that influenced Fritz Perls are elaborated and tied-back to the primary premise that all meaning manifests through the creation and dissolution of polarities.

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## CREATIVE INDIFFERENCE AND POLAR DIFFERENTIATION

Salomo Friedlaender (1918) developed the concept of creative indifference and polar differentiation. According to Friedlaender.

“In order for a phenomenon to be perceptible and appreciable, it must stand for an opposite of something else; it must be different from some other thing. This distinction or difference constitutes, in the most elementary way, the figures of the world, the forms of phenomena. The elementary principle of creation that structures this distinction of phenomena is that of polarities, the original opposite. (Frambach, 2003, 117-118).

For example, until a fish is out of water, it has no point of reference from which to define water—water simply “is”. Similarly, the advent of 360 degree feedback processes introduced many executives to the polarities implicit to their position as a field of influence. Like a fish out of water, the 360 degree feedback lifts the executive from the positional field of influence and provides many new references points from which to understand his or her effectiveness. Prior to this differentiation, the executive lives in a vacuum of imperceptibility, similar to the fish and water. Once the differentiation is established, an executive becomes consciously aware of how existing behavior serves and dis-serves him or her personally, professionally, and organizationally.

Friedlaender elaborates on polar differentiation by noting that poles are oppositively homogenous which loosely could be interpreted as symmetrically or co-defining opposites, such as plus and minus, light and dark. However, if the polar opposites are merged, the differentiation is lost; ergo, “the unity of polar differentiation is its very middle point, its indifference.” (118) Accordingly, creative indifference, therefore, is the point of indifferenciation. In this place, differences dissolve and knowing is created.

The significance of creative indifference is that it became the "fertile void" for Perls, the place where meaning making ceases and being begins. (Frambach, 2003, 114) Where Friedlaender described creative indifference as *ego-heliocenter, self, being, subject, individual, identity, person, mind, soul, absoluteness, will, freedom, etc* (119), Perls often described the fertile void in terms of the *middle point, center, zero-point, naught, pre-difference, equilibrium, balance, centering, opposites, poles and polarization* (Frambach, 2003, 121). To more clearly understand Friedlaender's creative indifference or Perls's fertile void, we need to further examine the phenomenon.

"The existential fulfillment of the philosophy of polar differences consists in the indifferentiation of one's own awareness, in a renunciation, a releasing of all differentiated contents of awareness, until an indifferent clarity of the mind can be achieved, one deemed to be the deepest source of authentic creativity. In this way, humans become centered, find their own center, capable of integrating everything, find their heart, which cannot consist if something that is differentiated, but, rather, in that rationally intangible naught on which the entire diversity of all possible phenomena is based" (Frambach, 2003, 119)

For example, as chaos defines order and vice versa, we begin to realize that the bias in most personal and organizational settings is to find order and to luxuriate in it as long as possible. More recent theory, such as chaos theory, complex adaptive system and complex adaptive, non-linear systems theory, complexity science theory, etc., acknowledge that seeking order to the exception of chaos is entropic and can lead to the destruction or mediocre functioning of the system. With the return of the original polarity of chaos and order, we find that in holding both equally without valence, creative energy emerges and create unseen possibilities that have always existed. In present day terms, the self organizing system is able to receive and contain the chaotic energies into productive, innovative, and profitable uses. (Olson & Eoyang, 2001)

As such the initial process of meaning making created through polar differentiation is reversed in a state of knowing, often referred to as being, through polar indifferentiation. In simpler terms, a person has to know who he or she is without the meaning created through polar differentiation. It is the melting of the polar opposites into polar indifferentiation and a state of being. The creative indifference, then, is "the creating self...without form" (Frambach, 2003, 119)

The paradox of creative indifference is not to simply "be", but to become it in a polarized way. "Concretely, rage and gentleness, for example should not be isolated from each other as mutually exclusive contradictions, but should be experienced as a polarly differentiated unit of opposites (mutually related) by being flexibly centered in their indifferent center. Thus, one can remain 'elastically identical' and react freely and appropriately, either angrily or with gentleness, to the demands of the situation from a 'totality of experience'." (Frambach, 2003, 120)

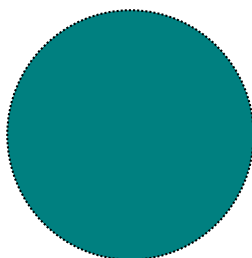
Returning to Perls, when creative indifference is applied to a consulting intervention, he suggests that "by remaining alert in the center, we can acquire a creative ability of seeing both sides of an occurrence and [of] completing an incomplete half. By avoiding a one-sided outlook, we gain a much deeper insight to the structure and function of the organism (Perls, 1969, 14-15). For example, "the present is the ever-moving zero-point of the opposites past and future" (95), where creative indifference informs and balances the polar differentiation while not becoming it.

In mathematics, interpolation is used to estimate some intermediate point that lies between two known numbers that is not exactly the midpoint between them. World War II radios used this process to develop radio frequencies. The actual process is like a narrowing effect by continually reducing the difference between the known and opposing numbers until the difference between the two numbers is minuscule and infinitesimally small. Moreover, during the process, the detail and complexity of the process increases while simultaneously reducing the difference between the two numbers. Applied to organizations, we tend to find comfort in exploring some known aspect of a polarity to the exception of the less known aspect. For example, for many centuries we have focused on leadership as a state of doing. In more recent literature, we are realizing that leadership is more a state of being that includes time for doing and times for not doing. Being is the creative indifference that dissolves the polarity between doing and not doing, acting and waiting. In actuality, we soon begin to realize that all polarities are multarities, multiple opposites that are interpolating into a higher, creatively indifferent meaning, such as the polarity of kind is cruel, mean, abusive. Most importantly, we cannot know kind unless we know the polarities, implicitly or explicitly.

### **GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY: Figure/Ground Formation**

Figure/ground is one of the core concepts of perception in Gestalt theory. It describes the "emergence, prioritizing and satiation of needs . . . and is the basic perceptual principle of making the wholes of human needs or experiences meaningful" (Clarkson, 2000, p. 6). *Figure* is the focus of interest—an object, a pattern, a behavior—for which *ground* is the background, setting, or context. The interplay between figure and ground is dynamic and ongoing. The same ground may, with differing interests and shifts of attention, give rise to further different figures; or a given complex figure may itself become ground in the event that some detail of its own emerges as figure (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1971, p. 25). Our attention shifts from one figure of interest to another, and when we are no longer interested in one figure, it recedes into the ground and is replaced by another (Polster & Polster, 1973, p. 31). The thoughts we experience as idle and free-flowing, for example, echoes the flow of figures moving in and out of the ground that is the conscious mind. If we wish, these figures can become more fully formed and brought completely into awareness by attending to them more vigorously.

Another important characteristic of perception is the tendency towards closure, that is, towards identifying a comprehensible figure. Provided data, we will instinctively try to make meaning of it or to create some sense of understanding or familiarity. A circle of unconnected dots, for example, will become a complete, bounded image when the perceiver mentally fills in the gaps. However, the desire for closure is often thwarted by our personal difficulties or by social constraints imposed upon us. When actions necessary for closure are not undertaken, they take root as "unfinished and uneasy" in the background, where they disturb present work needing to be done (Polster & Polster, p. 30). The result is a "fixed gestalt," which reflects unfinished and unsatisfied needs and which blocks in-the-moment contact required for meaningful work (Clarkson, 2000, p. 7). For example, the *railroad business'* failure to understand that they were in the *transportation business* was a form of fixed perception that nearly destroyed the industry. Unable to distinguish the new circumstances with the old way of perceiving, the executive leaders watched in total disbelief as they lost their grip on how America transports freight.



**Figure 1**

The ground, on the other hand, does not incite movement towards closure. The ground is generally considered unbounded and formless, but it provides the "context that affords

depth for the perception of the figure, giving it perspective but commanding little independent interest" (Polster & Polster, p. 30). Ground evolves from our past experiences, from our exposure to life-fields, such as culture, ethnicity, etc., from our unfinished business, and from the flow of the present experience. In a sense, one's entire life forms the ground for the present moment (p. 32). Applying the railroad example to ground, we realize that the industry did not have the necessary ground to break the box of perception. Polar differentiation simply was **not** a possibility because no frame of reference existed from which to consider another alternative to railroads<sup>1</sup>.

The past and the present color the variety of the individual's closed and unclosed experiences: "All experience hangs around until a person is finished with it," the Polsters insist. Although individuals can tolerate the internal existence of a number of unclosed experiences, the experiences themselves, if they become compelling enough, will generate "much self-defeating activity," and will essentially demand closure (p. 36). Once closure with an experience has been reached, either through a return to old business or by relating the experience to the present, "the preoccupation with the old incompleteness is resolved and one can move on to current possibilities" (p. 37). Change is a function of closing out one experience and moving on to "current possibilities." Gestalt has a high regard for "novelty and change, . . . a faith-filled expectation that the existence and recognition of novelty are inevitable if we stay with our own experiences as they actually form" (p. 48).

According to Frambach (2003, 122) for Perls and gestalt theory, the fertile void or place of creative indifference is "ground". As such, "polar differentiation into foreground and background has its indifference in the ground. The ground, according to Frambach, is not to be mistaken for the background. Background is diffuse and ground is indifferent. (2003, 122) Hence, "from this viewpoint, it is the goal of the gestalt [consulting] process to lead increasingly from the one-sided fixation to that which is in the foreground to the ground, from the periphery to the middle and center, by way of integrating rigid dualities into flexible polarities. As such, to enrich the client's ground, it would serve executives well to do one thing everyday that lies outside of the comfort zone. This can be doing something that is outside of the normal purview of "what is work", "what work to do" and "how to do it" or "what is vision", what is "our vision", and "how do we manifest it."

## **Contact**

From the time the umbilical cord is cut, our sense of being with others "depends paradoxically on a heightened sense of separateness and it is this paradox which we constantly seek" (Polster & Polster, pp. 98-99). The paradox between separateness and union can be temporarily bridged where and when the walls of individuality remain strong enough to hold the sense of self together, yet permeable enough to allow the sense of what is other to be experienced—at that point, contact is made. Contact is the psychological process whereby I allow myself to meet my self (as in memories and imagination); to meet a person, group, or organization; or to meet the environment: a sunset, a cat, my office, my bedroom. And I can most effectively make such contact by staying present-centered.

To understand contact, we need to look at how we relate to the world. Gestalt theory presupposes that each person, group, or organization is not an independent entity, "but together...constitute a functioning, mutually influencing total system":

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1. See: *Leadership and Self Deception: Getting out of the Box* by the Arbing Institute, 2000 for an interesting description of this phenomena.

Without your environment you—your feelings, thoughts, tendencies to action—would not organize, concentrate, and have direction; on the other hand, without you as a living, differentiated organization of awareness, your environment would be, for you, nonexistent. Your sense of the unitary interfunctioning of you and your environment is contact." (Perls Hefferline, & Goodman, p. 73)

Contact, then, is not togetherness or joining, but actually a heightened awareness of the distinction between you and what is "outside" of you; contact occurs at a porous boundary, one that simultaneously holds the two concepts of self and other apart, but permits interaction and exchange: "The contact boundary is the point at which one experiences the 'me' in relation to that which is 'not me' and through this contact, both are more clearly experienced" (Polster & Polster, pp. 102-103).

Our self-concept is constructed from our experiences, which are in part determined by the range of our "capacities for assimilating new or intensified experience" (p. 108). The individual maintains a sense of self through "I-boundaries," that is, through establishing "bounded limits" that determine how he or she "either blocks out or permits awareness and action at the contact-boundary" with what is *not me*, and that thereby "govern the style of life, including choice of friends, work, geography, fantasy, lovemaking, and all the other experiences which are psychologically relevant to his [or her] existence" (p. 109). Stated differently, "standard social and business practices are built on certain assumptions—shared understandings that have evolved from older beliefs and conditions. And while circumstances may have changed since the start of these practices, their continued use tends to reconfirm the old beliefs. For this reason, our daily practices feel right and true to us, regardless of whether they have evolved to keep up with the pace of change. In just such a way, a business culture arises and perpetuates itself, perhaps after its usefulness has passed." (Zander & Zander, 2000, 4)

We often find that "within the same individual there will be both the mobilization to grow in some areas and the resistances to growth in others," so that the I-boundary is inconsistent in blocking out or opening up to the other (p. 110). Conscious and unconscious emotions, symbols, and thoughts that are typically split off from the self and/or projected onto others can emerge from within the client. Frequently, these emotions, symbols, and thoughts serve the function of not only establishing meaning, but also of containing (framing and holding in place) anxieties. To help the client meet with or extend appropriate contact boundaries, the Gestaltist makes that contact tolerable for the client by first containing (framing and holding) and then gradually re-presenting to the client the emotions, symbols, and thoughts in the form of words or silence and, when necessary, boundary-maintaining action (Billow, p. 247). For example, by containing the present situation of the client, the gestaltist is able to support something new to emerge either through supporting new possibilities becoming known or existing frames of reference to unfold into more clarity. Hence, the function of *containing* is primarily transformative.

Gestalt experiment is frequently associated with expanding the individual's, group's, or organization's contact-boundary while still maintaining contact with self and others. The Gestalt experiment seeks to draw out and stretch the habitual sense of boundary. In the experiment, the Gestaltist encourages the client to "try-on" behaviors that feel alien, frightening, or unacceptable within the secure container of the intervention. "A safe emergency is created, one which fosters the development of self-support for new experiences" (Polster & Polster, p. 112).

## Resistances

During the early years of theoretical development in Gestalt psychology, Perls, Hefferline and Goodman conceived of resistance in terms similar to those of the psychoanalytic theorists, that is, as the opposition to change. Resistance was perceived as the avoidance of contact and as a problem to be worked through, indicating an unhealthy blockage to or refusal of contact. An important aspect of resistance is the realization that "all resistances have an intrapersonal and interpersonal aspect. . . . It reflects an internal conflict or difficulty that comes into play with a given [individual]" (Milman & Goldman, 1987, p. 4). This conflict or difficulty generally arises to avoid some form of pain, real or imagined. Conceptually, the internal mechanisms of resistance identified in Gestalt are Introjection, Projection, Retroflection, Deflection, Confluence, and Desensitization. Figure 2 below describes how these mechanisms function for the individual.

<b>Figure 2 Resistances</b>	
Introjection	Taking in or swallowing an experience "whole." Not filtering experiences for what resonates with personal truth. Being naïve or gullible; e.g. parental guidance of how to safely walk across the street is a positive introjection.
Projection	Attributing one's own feelings or actions to another. Blaming. For example, unable to acknowledge that white is a form of race and looking to define race via people of color, instead of indepthly looking to understand what it means to be white by looking at the larger population as well as one's life.
Retroflection	Doing to yourself what you want to do to others, or what you want others to do to you. For example, swallowing anger to avoid conflict or physically or verbally stroking oneself when feeling threatened by a parent or supervisor.
Deflection	Avoiding direct contact with another person. For example, using jokes to block the seriousness of a situation or to ignore a compliment.
Confluence	The inability to differentiate oneself. For example, merging with others' opinions to avoid having to take a position, often perceived as a "yes" person with no personal opinion.
Desensitization	Numbing sensations. For example, avoiding awareness physically, emotionally or mentally. Dissociating.

In 1991, however, Wheeler expanded the concept from "resistance to contact" to "the dimensions or functions of the contact process" (p. 119), which effectually shifted the perception of resistance from negative to positive, even to the position where these internal defenses illustrated a range of creative and adaptive contact styles for the individual, group, or organization (p. 126).

Wheeler offered a continuum of contact styles, as portrayed in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3  
Contact Styles**

<b>Confluence</b>	vs.	<b>Differentiation</b>
<b>Projection</b>	vs.	<b>Retention, literalness</b>
<b>Introjection</b>	vs.	<b>Chewing, destructuring</b>
<b>Retroflection</b>	vs.	<b>Exchange, encounter</b>
<b>Desensitization (or Egoism)</b>	vs.	<b>Merging, yielding</b>
<b>Deflection</b>	vs.	<b>Focusing, concentration</b>

When the contact style moves to either extreme of this continuum, it becomes dysfunctional to varying degrees. But this shift in the view of resistance from a defense mechanism to a style of contact enriched our ability to understand and work with resistance in the change process. Resistance to contact, under Wheeler's taxonomy, is now defined as resistance to awareness or to other ways of being in the world, and therefore to growth (pp. 127, 129). Once adequate support is developed within the individual and/or from the environment, greater awareness and new ways of being in the world are possible.<sup>2</sup>

Nevis (1987) adapted Friedlaender's concept of "creative indifference" in his work with contact styles in organizations, expanding on Perls's understanding of creative indifference as an effective strategy for untangling and recontextualizing differentiated poles (or polarity):

[E]very event is related to a zero point from which a differentiation into opposites takes place. These opposites show in their specific context a great affinity to each other. By remaining alert in the center, we can acquire a creative ability of seeing both sides of an occurrence and completing an incomplete half. By avoiding a one-sided outlook we gain a much deeper insight into the structure and function of the [individual, group, or organization]. (Perls, 1969, p. 15)

The Gestaltist strives to occupy the neutral territory between the poles, the "center" of the polarity, where both poles can be perceived and both can be understood without regard to either pole being preferred over the other, that is, with creative indifference.

Applied to the organizational context, Nevis saw resistance to change as an expression of the differentiation of opposites (polar differentiation). His observation is that "any instance where one or more persons do not seem to be 'joining' is a manifestation of multi-directed energy. This term conveys the notion of multiple forces or desires, not all of which support each other, and many of which pull in different directions" (Nevis, p. 147). Over the years, the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland has augmented Nevis's concept of multi-directed energy in

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<sup>2</sup> Under Wheeler's explication, resistances are useful and in service to the individual. For example, a child is helped by swallowing whole (to introject) the well-known warning, "Look both ways before crossing the street, even if the signal light says walk." Similarly, one would generally find it to one's benefit to accept all policies of a new job at face value until able to determine the "real" rules of the organization. Thinking before acting is a form of retroflection. There are appropriate moments to swallow one's anger, such as in order to complete a project. At issue is when the resistance becomes dysfunctional by giving rise to conflict or by blocking awareness. What is good for the individual is not always perceived (consciously or unconsciously) to be what is good for the group or the organization, and *vice versa*.

the system by arguing that all change is rooted in opposing forces: a force for change, and a force for sameness. Change viewed as a polarity allows for the effective application of creative indifference, offering a more complex understanding and use of the tension between the two poles. More importantly, Gestalt theory recognizes that a system is acting in a healthy manner when these two forces appear. Unlike past conceptions of change that demanded pushing through or leaping over or banishing the forces for sameness, Gestalt focuses on unfolding differing kinds of awareness within the system.

Recent theoretic developments have further shaped our understanding of the forces for sameness and for change as a form of competing commitments. Kegan and Lahey (2001) find that while individuals may overtly accept and embrace a change agenda, they often unconsciously exert equal but underground energy to not changing. This resistance is not a factor of opposition, nor is it a matter of apathy or "inertia." Rather, the "resulting dynamic equilibrium [between the forces for change and for sameness] stalls the effort in what looks like resistance but is in fact a kind of personal immunity to change" (p. 85). Within this framework, the individual's resistance is founded on what Kegan and Lahey call "a big assumption": "Because big assumptions are held as fact, they actually inform what people see, leading them to systematically (but unconsciously) attend to certain data and avoid or ignore other data" (p. 90). Consistent with Wheeler's focus on raising awareness about personal contact styles, they affirm that bringing the big assumption into awareness is transforming, and provide a humorous example of the consequences of not becoming aware of the assumption.

A woman we met from Australia told us about her experience living in the United States for a year. "Not only do you drive on the wrong side of the street over here," she said, "your steering wheels are on the wrong side, too. I would routinely pile into the right side of the car to drive off, only to discover I needed to get out and walk over to the other side." "One day," she continued, "I was thinking about six different things, and I got into the right side of the car, took out my keys, and was prepared to drive off. I looked up and thought to myself, 'My God, here in the violent and lawless United States, they are even stealing steering wheels!' Of course the countervailing evidence was just an arm's length to her left, but—and this is the main point—"Why should she look?" Our big assumption creates a disarming and deluding sense of certainty. If we know where a steering wheel belongs, we are unlikely to look for it some place else. If we know what our company, department, boss, or subordinate can and can't do, why look for countervailing data—even if it is just an arm's length away? (p. 91)

Whether the term is resistances, competing commitments, big assumption, or something else, the process underlying contact styles is a function of deeply ingrained and hidden thinking patterns. Although individuals are capable of holding in mind two different or opposing patterns, one or the other will dominate depending on the environment or context (Brytting & Trollestad, 2000, p. 70). Moreover, these deep-seated thinking patterns "tend to be self-sealing . . . precisely because they lack self-critical elements" (Weick & Bougon, 1986, p. ). One common organizational example is captured in the gradual popularity of the metaphor *thinking outside the box*. Organizations and industries have a tendency to develop and institutionalize their own particular pattern of thinking regarding business strategies and ways to approach problems. When the pattern of thinking no longer effectively served the organization, by becoming repetitive and "self-sealed," new approaches and conceptions were needed—that is, it became necessary to think other than or "outside" the established internal organizational pattern. Once this awareness became explicit, the cliché of *thinking outside the*

box was born and rapidly adopted throughout a range of contexts and settings. From a Gestalt perspective, creating an awareness of the customary thinking pattern frees the individual(s) from their "self-sealed" perceptual and cognitive worlds.

### **Polarity Management**

As noted in prior pages, "many phenomena could not exist if their opposites did not also exist" (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, p. 43). We glean both the manifest and the nuanced meaning of one from the other: day helps to define night and *vice versa*; hot helps to define cold and *vice versa*; old helps to define young and *vice versa*. The individual is himself or herself "a never-ending sequence of polarities. Whenever an individual recognizes one aspect of him [or her] self, the presence of the antithesis, or polar quality, is implicit" (Polster & Polster, p. 61). People bear within themselves the latent and potential opposite of their external character, for example. The person who demonstrates kindness to others does so with the sense or knowledge of its obvious polarity, cruelty, or even of many possible related polarities, e.g., "insensitivity or callousness toward another person's feelings." Erving Polster has named these several related polarities "multilarities" (Zinker, 1978, pp. 196-197).

To more fully appreciate the tension built into a polarity, Rittel (1972) noted that there are tame problems, which are solvable, and there are wicked problems, which are unsolvable. Wicked problems are not evil, even though they might seem so. In this context wicked problems are ones that become more complex and possibly more unsolvable with each attempt toward resolution—paradoxical. The wickedness of the situation is the developing awareness of the complexity of the web that the organization has spun in creating itself. In many ways, it has created a catch-22 wherein no matter which way it turns to find a solution, the organization runs into itself.

Rittel (1972) developed a list of traits that correspond between tame (solvable) problems and wicked (unsolvable) problems. See Figure 4 below.

"Opposites come into existence by differentiation of 'something not differentiated'... [T]he two (or more) branches of a differentiation develops simultaneously, and..., generally, the extension is equal on [all] sides. (Perls, 1969, 19) Preferring one pole of a polarity over another, either on an individual or organizational level, can make the polarity itself a bone of contention. In attempting to

**Figure 4  
Wicked Problems**

<b>Situation</b>	<b>Tame Problem</b>	<b>Wicked Problem</b>
Problem Formation	can be exhaustively planned and written down on paper	has no definitive conceptualization
Relationship between problem and solution	can be forged separately from any notion of the solution	cannot be articulated separately from the solution. Understanding the problem is synonymous with solving it
Testability	the solution can be tested and mistakes can be pinpointed and corrected.	there is no single correct answer. There is only the degree of good or bad of each solution in comparison to one another.
Finality	Have a clear solution; an endpoint, closure	with no clear solution, it is an endless loop of trying to improve upon what cannot be solved

Tractability	Known steps can be used to solve the problem	exploring the known in attempts to define let alone solve the problem
Explanatory characteristics	"what is" versus "what ought to be" is clear and correctable	multiple perspectives leading to multiple explanations leading to multiple solutions
Level of analysis	the root cause is clear and where to address the problem is clear.	The root cause is unknown and therefore where to attack the problem is unknown; e.g. individual, group, etc.
Reproducibility	the problem can be isolated and attempted to be solved until final solution is found	no trial and error. Each solution is live, cannot be undone, and impacts the entire organization
Replicability	the problem may occur over and over.	basically a unique situation
Responsibility	blame is not burnished onto someone for not solving a problem, but acclaim is given to those that do.	responsibility is clearly borne and blame is burnished onto someone for failing and praise is never granted as it is not clear the problem was ever solved.

Rittel, H. (1972) *On the Planning Crisis: Systems Analysis of the 'First and Second Generations'*. In *Bedriftsokonomien*. No. 8. pp. 390-396.

define and assess the poles, one might discover that "competing commitments" based on "big assumptions" underlie the conflict. However, moving beyond the presumption of Gestalt resistance theory and of Kegan and Lahey—"awareness creates resolution"—one might also discover that the competing commitments are actually sufficiently based in organizational reality to be something other than merely "big assumptions." In this case, we have competing realities whose resolution cannot be reached through the "either/or" format of problem solving, but rather demands the "both/and" format of managing a significant polarity (Johnson, 1992).

The significance of the polarity to be managed can be gauged by the degree or extent that the warring parties tend to disown, or at a minimum to discredit the validity of, the opposing reality. Since both poles of the polarity are founded in organizational reality, to reject or close off one pole inevitably means that the organization is diminished. The ability of the organization (or the individual, or the group) to realize its greater or full potential is seriously crippled. "The organization does not see how it creates its own difficulties by blocking expression of parts of itself. It is unaware of how it 'interrupts' itself" (Merry & Brown, 1987, p. 154).

Since both poles have their own particular values and strengths, re-establishing contact between them is the crucial first step in being able to use all their values and strengths in the best interest of the individual, group, or organization. Creating an awareness that "a polarity to manage" exists instead of "a problem to be solved" helps to open the doors to a "both/and" solution. As Polster and Polster point out, this awareness allows the warring parties to "become allies in the common search for a good life, rather than uneasy opponents maintaining the split" (p. 248). Once the situation is clearly established, the focus turns towards unfolding how the opposing forces of the polarity depend upon each other.

In organizations, more often than not, polarities are viewed as problems to be solved, whereby the polarity seems to demand choosing either one pole or the other as the "best" or

the "right" way to go. But true polarities are never solved — they can only be managed. "It is a 'both/and' difficulty. Both one pole and its apparent opposite depend on each other. The pairs are involved in an ongoing, balancing process over an extended period of time. They are interdependent. They need each other" (Johnson, p. 82)<sup>3</sup>. For example, a recent organizational focus is on team-directed *versus* individual-directed project management. Generally, a decision is made to use one or the other, and the organization moves quickly to institute that decision company-wide. However, polarity management would not conclude that an organization must use one or the other format. In fact, both types of project management are useful and are dependent upon each other. The orientation towards polarity management creates an awareness whereby the organization can move to a "both/and" approach to project management: where individual initiative is needed for a specialized project, it might be assigned to a project manager; where a cohesive unit reflecting the larger organization is needed, a project team might be established (Johnson, p. 11).

Bob de Wit and Ron Meyer (1999) continue the application to policy planning and strategy problems, albeit by replacing polarity with paradox. In their analysis, paradoxical problems, Rittel’s wicked problems, reflects that organized complexity inherently becomes more complex with each attempt toward resolution. As such, they exhibit the following paradoxical characteristics. See Figure 5.

**Figure 5**  
Paradoxical Characteristics

Trait	Description
<i>Interconnectedness</i>	Strong connections link each problem to other problems. As a result, these connections sometimes circle back to form feedback loops. 'Solutions' aimed at the problem seem inevitably to have important opportunity costs and side effects. How they work out depends on events beyond the scope of any one problem.
<i>Complicatedness</i>	Wicked problems have numerous important elements with relationships among them, including important 'feedback loops' through which a change tends to multiply itself or perhaps even cancel itself out. Generally, there are various leverage points where analysis and ideas for intervention might focus, as well as many possible approaches and plausible programs of action. There is also a likelihood that different programs should be combined with a given problem.
<i>Uncertainty</i>	Wicked problems exist in a dynamic and largely uncertain environment, which creates a need to accept risk, perhaps incalculable risk. Contingency planning and also the flexibility to respond to unimagined and perhaps unimaginable contingencies are both necessary.

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**3.** Similar developments have surfaced under paradox management. Specifically, Bob de Wit and Ron Meyer (1999) note that "a paradox is a situation in which two seeming contradictory, or even mutually exclusive, factors appear to be true at the same time. A problem that is a paradox has *no definitive solution*, as there is no way to logically integrate the two opposites into an internally consistent understanding of the problem. As opposed to the either/or nature of the dilemma, the paradox can be characterized as a *both-and* problem—one factor is true and a contradictory factor is simultaneously true. Hence, the problem-owner must resolve a paradox by trying to find a way to reconcile the opposites in the most productive manner." (p. 18)

<i>Ambiguity</i>	The problem can be seen in quite different ways, depending on the viewer's personal characteristics, loyalties, past experiences, and even on accidental circumstances of involvement. There is no single 'correct view' of the problem.
<i>Conflict</i>	Because of competing claims, there is often a need to trade off 'goods' against 'bads' within the same value system. Conflicts of interest among persons or organizations with different or even antagonistic value systems are to be expected. How things will work out may depend on the interaction among powerful interests that are unlikely to enter into fully cooperative arrangements.
<i>Societal Constraints</i>	Social, organizational, and political constraints and capabilities, as well as technological ones, are central both to the feasibility and the desirability of solutions.

(de Wit & Meyer, 1999, p. 33)

## **Dialogue**

Gestalt theory presupposes that the consultant-client interaction will be a dialogue, not a discussion. Discussion and dialogue operate by opposing processes: "dialogue is about gathering or unfolding meaning that comes from many parts, while discussion is about breaking the whole down into many parts" (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 20). Discussion denotes "break[ing] things up. It emphasizes the idea of analysis, where there may be many points of view, where everybody is presenting a different one" (Bohm, 1996, pp. 6-7). Discussion focuses on persuading others, as in a debate; therefore, the discussion easily becomes a war of wills. Conversely, genuine dialogue suspends judgment in the pursuit of creating shared awareness, meaning, and understanding; the dialogue becomes a container of curiosity where the conversation becomes more than the sum of its participants. More importantly, dialogue engenders both "inquiry within and between people" and the novelty of uncovering through conversation ideas or responses that "neither party could have imagined before starting" (Isaacs, 1999, p. 9). Figure 6, below, contrasts the two conversational modes.

<b>Figure 6</b> <b>TWO CONVERSATIONAL MODES</b>	
<b>DISCUSSION</b>	<b>DIALOGUE</b>
Breaking the issue/problem into <i>parts</i>	Seeing the <i>whole</i> among the parts
Seeing <i>distinctions</i> between the parts	Seeing the <i>connections</i> between the parts
<i>Justifying/defending</i> assumptions	<i>Inquiring</i> into assumptions
<i>Persuading</i> [through declaration and assertion]	<i>Learning</i> through inquiry and disclosure
Gaining agreement on <i>one meaning</i>	Creating <i>shared meaning</i> among many

(Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 21)

## **Themes**

In Gestalt theory, the belief is deeply held that "we are wired to think and perceive in temporally linked sequences of meaning—'first this, then that,' or 'that means (or leads to) this.' . . . The idea of temporally linked sequences of meaning, raised to complex interactive

levels, is a close working definition of *story*." In terms of self-identity, the story precedes the self (*cf.* the existentialist credo, "existence precedes essence"): "We do not first exist as individuals, then know ourselves, then form a self story and finally tell it to another. Rather, we find and create our story in the telling of it to another person and that act is the same as the creative construction of the self" (Wheeler, 1998, p. 123).

Much of the verbal exchange between the client and the Gestaltist during intervention is the telling of stories. These stories report the critical events of the client's life as seen, ordered, and interpreted by the client, and as such they "reveal personal qualities, replicate previous experience, accentuate conflict, communicate a connectedness among people, and evoke the drama of the experiences from which the self is formed" (Polster, 1995, p. 108). Clients' troubles or problems—their sense of being "stuck"—often arise from an experiential storyline that has over time been pruned and rehearsed, until the self constructed from this abbreviated story is severely constricted. The Gestaltist seeks to expand the client's storyline by providing descriptive data of what has been heard, enabling the client to hear her or his story in a different voice and in a different vocal register. Through listening closely, asking for clarification, and offering descriptive feedback, the Gestaltist brings to the client's attention the contradictions and lapses in his or her story, and helps the client construct a storyline with greater breadth and depth. "By adding new events to the . . . [client's] repertoire, the [Gestaltist] reintroduces struggle between conflicting events and conflicting selves, replacing the one-sidedness that has gotten the person stuck" (Polster, p. 112). The awareness that results can redirect the perceptions of the client and increase the client's contact with the self, others, and the environment, leading to significant change.

The client's story unfolds "by fits and starts, often fragmented and unskillfully presented. [Yet the events] nevertheless . . . represent extraordinary experiences and characters" (Polster, p. 117). Experiences and thoughts and responses that recur throughout the story, either verbatim or in slightly altered contexts or scenarios, "provid[e] implication and mobilization for the [client's] continuity and orientation" (p. 123). Recurring fragments are in relation with one another in the matrix of the client's storytelling as *theme*, which is defined and functions much like *motif* in a musical composition. Polster and Polster state that "[w]hile some themes will reappear again and again during the entire lifetime of a single individual, others may be played out during a specific period, never to repeat themselves. . . . [Regardless,] the recurrence of themes represents the piecemeal exploration of psychologically unclaimed territory" (pp. 193-194).

Through the interactive dynamics of intervention, Gestaltists become the client's "coauthor or editor, not only of the storyline itself but also of [the client's] developing sense of self" (Polster, p. 123). Once a theme has been identified, work can begin in assisting the client to become "unstuck" in the story of her or his life, and to change in sometimes surprising ways. A "unifying storyline is a vehicle for connection. Stories are the gathering of experiences; through their thematic development, they transform otherwise unconnected events into a meaningful unity." Furthermore, new thematic connections encourage new perceptions of self, other, and environment, that is, new perceptions of "reality."

In the older view, . . . meaning and reality were sharply separated. Reality was not supposed to be changed directly by perception of a new meaning. Rather it was thought that to do this was merely to obtain a better "view" of reality that was independent of what it meant to us, and then to do something about it. But once you actually see the new meaning and take hold of your intention, reality has changed. No further act is needed. (Bohm, 1998, p. 94)

### **Example:** Gestalt Applied to Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry explores changing the organization through social construction of a new reality, and thereby creating a new way of making meaning. David Cooperrider realized that most organizations are predisposed to focusing on "what is wrong" within the organization. He attributed this predisposition to the inculcated problem-solving mentality of the scientific method, which tends to ignore the "what is working," "what has gone well," and the "what does not need to be fixed" components of the organization. In other words, the organization needs to be refocused from an analytic critique of organizational failures to a more supportive, more optimistic understanding of behaviors within the organization at large. Cooperrider seeks to harness untapped creative energies by redirecting attention away from object-relations and problem-solving towards an *Appreciative Inquiry* into organizational stories of success. A sense of community is created through such an inquiry, as common themes and imaginative outlooks are discovered and put to positive use. The end result is a new, positive perspective on the organization and of what is possible (Cooperrider & Dutton, 1999; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Cooperrider, et al., 2000) and a new story is created.

Applied to Gestalt, assessing the "what is" of an organization would reveal any predisposition to focusing on "what is wrong" within the organization. Rather than direct the focus of the organization toward a positive psychology, only, as created in appreciative inquiries, Gestalt would create a container for the situation until the fullness of the theme is revealed including polar differentiations. For example, assuming that a predisposition toward "what is wrong" can be corrected or reversed by focusing on "what is right" ignores the base assumption or belief that initiated the original predisposition toward "what is wrong." Gestalt explores how focusing on "what is wrong" has served and dis-served the organization, then focuses on how "what is right" has served and dis-served the organization, suggesting a "both/and" approach to creating awareness and understanding of the internal dynamics of the organization. Once this awareness of the polar differentiation is developed, the organization can choose to move toward its creative indifference through positive psychology as indicated by appreciative inquiry or toward a new or different psychology that incorporates the serving aspects of the primary belief system while adapting to the changing needs and environment of the organization. See Figure 7 for an example of an exercise that expands Appreciative Inquiry into a broader and deeper inquiry in search of the zero point for a CEO during a coaching session.<sup>4</sup>

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4. The concept of polar differentiation is implicit to Weisbord and Janoff's *Future Search* "Focus of the Present" process, (2000, 220) where they have the client list "prouds" and "sorrys" related to the future search topic. Creative indifference, it can be said, relates to their search for common ground through an interpolation of the polarities that are separating instead of integrating the energies and focus of the organization.

## Figure 7

### Zero Point Process CEO

We all live somewhere between two opposing perceptions. The point in the middle which creates a sense of balance, groundedness, and centeredness is our zero point. The following questions enable us to explore the opposing perceptions so as to rediscover our zero point.

#### Part I: Positive Pole Questions

- (1) Describe a time when you most felt like a CEO? What were the circumstances during that time?
- (2) Describe a time when you were proud to be a CEO? Why were you proud?
- (3) What do you value most about being a CEO? Why?

#### Part II: Negative Pole Questions

- (1) Describe a time when you least felt like a CEO? What were the circumstances during that time?
- (2) Describe a time when you were embarrassed to be a CEO? Why were you embarrassed?
- (3) What do you value least about being a CEO? Why?

#### Part III: Zero Point Questions

- (1) Imagine you had a magic wand that granted three wishes for you to more fully become the CEO that you are. What would those wishes be?
- (2) What are you willing to do to make the three wishes come true?
- (3) What has been the most important thing you've learned or perhaps relearned—about being CEO?

A problem that can arise by focusing only on the only one pole of the differentiation is that it swings the pendulum to the other side and makes what is not working implicit to what is working. For example, a client organization was failing. Costs and growth were excessive with little or no chance of stemming either because the Chairman, a 50 year veteran of the organization, held to a belief that employees were family and to be protected regardless of competency. The CEO, trying to counter the stake in the sand concerning reducing employees, held to a belief that the only solution was to grow out of the situation which increased costs. When discussing stemming growth and reducing costs including personnel reductions during a board meeting, tempers rose to the point that a powerful director screamed "we can't squeeze blood from a turnip". Recognizing that we had a polar differentiation around the perceived situation, I responded, "then, we need to drill for oil". The shift in metaphor enabled the entire board to recognize that the old way of framing the situation was incapable of creating a solution. Swinging back and forth between the closed perceptions of the CEO and Chair would not save the institution. Instead, with a new willingness to frame the issue around saving the institution, and not around personal preferences about how to do it, the institution was able to make the shift needed to return to solvency.

### Gestalt Theory and Change

Systems theory permeates gestalt theory. Each of the core concepts of systems theory are dynamic gateways to understanding the client system. However, homeostasis and

dynamic equilibrium are the foremost concepts used toward understanding change. Homeostasis is the predisposition of the individual, group, or organization to maintain some semblance of stability or pre-determined sense of well-being; e.g., the body seeks to maintain a normal temperature. Equilibrium, as noted in the Oxford University Press Electronic Dictionary, is a state in which opposing forces or influences are balanced, such as the state of being physically balanced or in a calm state of mind, or as in chemistry, a state in which a process and its reverse are occurring at equal rates so that no overall change is taking place, or as in economics, a situation in which supply and demand are matched and prices are stable.

Gestalt seeks to understand the "what is" of dynamic equilibrium. As such, it is able to see that by ingesting disruptions and threats, it is actually a self correcting system of countervailing motions that continuously adjust to create a form of self protection to ensure self preservation. As such it is like an "an immunity to change." (Kegan & Lahey, 2001, 6) When applied to the internal functioning of an organization, we begin to realize that the implosion of differentiation consistent with the tendency towards complexity inherent in almost all organizations creates a dynamic equilibrium that is immune to change. Hence, when a change initiative is introduced, this immune system is part and parcel of the organization and therefore preprogrammed to acquire, neutralize and/or destroy the attempt to destabilize the system. We cannot see and often are not aware of these immunities to change because "we live inside them. We do not 'have them', they 'have us'. We cannot see them because we too are caught up in them." (Kegan & Lahey, 2001, 6) The gestaltist seeks to help the client to surface these immunities and to expand their capacities for difference.

### **Paradoxical Theory of Change**

At the center of Gestalt theory is the paradoxical theory of change, which is the touchstone for most Gestalt interventions. However, to fully appreciate the paradoxical theory of change, we need to acknowledge as suggested by Duncan and Miller, that "within the client is a uniquely personal theory of change waiting for discovery, a framework for interventions to be unfolded and utilized for a successful outcome" (2000, p. 180). This *uniquely personal* theory of change in fact supports the paradoxical theory of change—where it is assumed that change occurs when an individual, group, or organization becomes what he, she, or it *is* rather than continually trying to be what one is not. Hence, "change does not take place by trying coercion, or persuasion, or by insight, interpretation, or any other such means. Rather, change can occur when the [client] abandons, at least for the moment, what he [or she] would like to become and attempts to be what he [or she] is" (Beisser, 1970, p. 77). It is in the fullness of this state of being that fixed gestalts dissolve and greater complexity can be seen and utilized as part of the "what is".

According to Gestalt theory, the person, group, or organization seeking change is in conflict with at least two, internal or external, warring factions. Constantly moving between what "should be" and what "is," and never fully identifying with either, the client becomes caught or locked between two or more competing commitments. (Beisser, 1970, 77)

Duncan and Miller suggest that the "exploration for and discovery of the client's theory [of change] is a co-evolutionary process, [an interpolation of sorts, which occurs through] a crisscrossing of ideas that generates a seamless connection of socially constructed meanings" (p. 182). As such, the Gestaltist asks the client to invest fully in the opposing roles or factions, one at a time. Examining or being one role or faction is explored, then the client shifts to another. The Gestaltist asks that the client be what "is" at the moment.

Consistent with Friedlaender's creative indifference and polar differentiation, Gestalt theory rejects any directive role for the change agent, and instead encourages the client to *be* where and what he or she *is*, to take the time and make the sincere effort to be fully invested in his or her situation. The implications of this theory are that the individual, group, or organization needs to risk identifying and being itself instead of accepting other- or socially-constructed expectations, roles, or practices. In so doing fixed gestalts such as polar differentiations melt into creative indifference and an entirely new "what is" for the individual, group, and/or organization emerges.

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