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The Gestalt Approach to Resistance in Coaching

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The Gestalt Approach to Resistance in Coaching

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Coaching invites resistance – and that’s a good thing. But, it’s only a good thing if the coach understands why resistance occurs and how to work effectively with it. Otherwise, the coach’s own discomfort with resistance or lack of skill in working with it will get in the way of the client’s work. It’s not resistance that creates a problem; it’s our reaction to it that can get in the way.

Too often resistance is thought of as something to be overcome. (I conducted a literature search and found that the word “overcome” is the most common verb associated with resistance.) If we believe, as Freud did, that resistance is something to be overcome, then we limit our responses to interventions that try to force the client to “get over it.” However, if we believe that resistance is something to be embraced and celebrated, then we open up a different (and potentially richer) palette of interventions. That’s what this article is about.

WHY RESISTANCE OCCURS IN COACHING

People want something from coaching. They come to us for a reason. For example, Mary comes to an executive coaching session because she wonders if she should accept the promotion offered to her. She wants to know what to do.

Gestalt theory suggests that every want (need, aspiration, etc.) is coupled with resistance. Mary comes to the session excited about the possibility of this promotion and fearful as well. She can see that this new job would be a chance to apply her knowledge and skills, as well as an opportunity to play on a bigger stage. This could be a significant stepping stone on her career path. On the other hand, she thinks, “What if I fail? What if I get there and I don’t like it? My kids will hate this move.”

In Gestalt theory, both the want and the resistance are equally legitimate and valuable. Both the want and resistance give us an insight into how Mary constructs reality. Her version of reality is what guides her decision making.

Our job is not to give her the answer but to help heighten her awareness of how she is looking at, and experiencing, this situation. If we were to try to help her overcome her fear (resistance) of the new job we would be placing value on the outcome we think she should choose. That’s not our job.

It's hard to imagine someone wanting something strongly and not having a resistance paired to it. For instance, two people decide to get married or make a commitment to each other. As the big day approaches they both are excited; they know this is the right decision; they're thrilled about it; and when they look at each other, their hearts race. What could be better?

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Yet, at the same time, they both may be feeling a great deal of fear, even dread, and a great sense of loss: "What am I giving up? What am I getting into? How much do I know about this person? Am I still going to be able to do X, Y, and Z?" That tension between the want and the resistance goes with the territory.

Appreciating who the client is, and helping that person see how he or she makes meaning, is core to the work of those who work from a Gestalt orientation.

A FOUNDATION FOR GESTALT COACHING

The paradoxical theory of change

Arnold Beisser wrote an extremely important article titled "The Paradoxical Theory of Change." He said that it's not our job to try to make things happen, because change occurs when people are fully in touch with the current situation facing them. And that's the paradox.

Beisser (2006) said it best:

. . . change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not. Change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what he is—to be fully invested in his current position. By rejecting the role of change agent, we make meaningful and orderly change possible.

The work for the coach is twofold. One, it is to help keep the focus on the work so that neither you nor the client gets distracted. The second thing is to heighten awareness of the current situation as it relates to the client's want or resistance.

Beisser (*ibid.*) writes,

The Gestalt therapist rejects the role of "changer," for his strategy is to encourage, even insist, that the patient *be* where and what he *is*. He believes 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 patient abandons, at least for the moment, what he would like to become and attempts to be what he is. The premise is that one must stand in one place in order to have firm footing to move and that it is difficult or impossible to move without that footing.

We're putting a frame around the work. It's as if we were saying, "Here's where we're going to focus our work. And we are going to work on the issue in a very specific way. We are going to heighten awareness so that you and I get a better appreciation and understanding of the forces that are at work with regard to this challenge you are facing." We heighten awareness of things, feelings, thoughts, or bodily sensations that have some relevance to the current situation. As we heighten awareness, we both learn more about the power of the want or goal and about resistance to that want.

We can heighten awareness by either exploring the want or by exploring the resistance. Either side of the polarity will work. Think of the ancient Chinese symbol of yin and yang. When one side fills completely, energy moves to the opposite side. As we fully explore the client's want, invariably he or she says something like, "Yeah, but on the other hand..." And with that energy moves to the opposite pole. Of course, the same phenomenon occurs if we start by exploring the resistance first. Once that side seems full, energy just naturally shifts to its opposite. We're there to help the client grasp the situation so that they can say, "Oh, that's what this is. That's where I am."

The work is relational

We are in relationship with our clients and the work occurs within those relationships. We are not sitting outside like a traditional psychoanalyst – client lying on a couch facing away from us. We're meeting face-to-face, or some virtual equivalent of that. As a result, we have an opportunity to influence each other. We are not doing unto our clients; we are exploring with them.

Consequently, because we're engaging each other, it allows for our own excitement, fear, apprehension, confusion, indifference, and so forth to come to the surface. We're putting ourselves into the mix, becoming part of this dance.

What does this look like? Lynne Jacobs, a noted Gestalt therapist and author, talks about the importance of truly attempting to see the world through the client's eyes. I've heard her use a wonderful image to capture this. She asks us to imagine the client was sitting in a chair across from us. Our job is to *figuratively* move our own chair over beside the client so that we are looking in the same direction. Our intent is to see what the client sees and try to experience what the client experiences. Our curiosity, questions, and inquiry are all focused on helping us meet that goal.

We will never completely see the world through the eyes of our clients, but the mere act of trying can have a profound impact on the quality of the relationship, and consequently, on the quality of the work.

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Martin Buber's work provides a very strong theoretical and philosophical foundation for this relational approach. His I/Thou philosophy suggests that as humans there are two ways we can be in relationship with another person. In I/Thou, we meet as two people capable of meeting, seeing, mutually influencing, and perhaps enjoying each other. It is an intimate and non-strategic way of coming together. In I/It, the other person is an object to help us meet our own goals. It is a world of artifice, game-playing, or contriving just to get someone to do what you want them to do.

Buber believed that we couldn't make I/Thou moments occur. However, he did believe that we could create the conditions that support I/Thou. We need to surrender to grace and be willing to be vulnerable and believe in the possibility that deeper human contact with another person is possible. He invites us to engage in a process where we cannot predict the outcome. As he writes, "It is a form of grace for which one must always be prepared but on which one can never count" (Buber, 1970). Working from an I/Thou stance demands our constant attention since our experience and the organizational structures often support—and even encourage—I/It relationships.

The field matters

Kurt Lewin said that behavior is a function of the person and the environment (Lewin, 1997). This was a fundamental shift away from traditional Western psychology. He was saying that a person and his environment are connected in a life-space relationship. He writes, ". . . to understand or predict behavior, the person and his environment have to be considered as *one* constellation of interdependent factors" (Lewin, 1997, p. 338). This life space "includes both the person and his psychological environment."

Ted Conover was interested in what life was like inside maximum security prisons, so he went undercover and got a job as a prison guard at Sing Sing, a very dangerous place. When he started on the job, people gave him advice on how to survive. Unfortunately, the advice that served him so well during the year that he was a prison guard started to infect the rest of his life. His relationship with his spouse and his child started to deteriorate as a result of working in the prison (Conover, 2001).

If you were coaching a prison guard, it would be important to know that he or she worked as a guard at a maximum security facility. And more importantly, it would help to know what that particular "psychological climate" was like for our client. For behavior to make sense, it must be seen within the context of the environment.

It can be dangerous to coach without looking at the client's field or psychological context. Imagine that a young boy named Romeo came to you for life coaching. He just met this girl, he's head over heels in love, and wants to get married right away. You might ask him to step back and look at some important things

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like his age, where they might live, what they plan to live on, and so forth. Maybe even do a visioning exercise with him. There's a lot a coach could do. But, if you failed to realize that Romeo is a Montague, and that Juliet is a Capulet, you would miss a critically important element of what shapes Romeo and the implications these differences could have for the couple.

The psychological field even gets more complex. When a client comes into the room she is a bundle of all the things that are of interest to her: her history, beliefs, experiences, fears, and so on. As coaches we enter that same room as a bundle of what interests us, our history, beliefs, experiences, fears, and so on.

The field for the work now includes all of that rich data being generated between the client and the coach. We each contribute to shaping the environment in small and sometimes profound ways. This field is amorphous and it changes with each interaction. We aren't just in the field; we are *of the field* as well.

Relative levels of comfort, trust, candor, and capacity to do the work at hand can shift moment-to-moment as a result of the unfolding of our relationship.

THE WORK

Options for how to work with a client

Here are a few things to consider when working with a client, especially in situations where resistance is strong.

1. We can choose to work with the want *or* the resistance. Usually, it's better to fully explore one pole rather than flitting back and forth between the want and the resistance. When we shift back and forth too quickly, it can lead to a give and take conversation and lack the kind of depth that it takes for a person to really get in touch with, "Oh, that's what's bothering me," or, "Oh, that's what excites me." It takes the patience and the commitment to insist that you focus on one side or the other.
2. Use the *Paradoxical Theory of Change* as the fundamental framework. In other words, we are not there to change the client or push him or her to make a decision. We are not there to aid and abet the client. We are there to heighten awareness so our clients can make better choices.
3. Paying attention to I/Thou goes hand-in-hand with the Paradoxical Theory of Change. When we embody the values of I/Thou, we almost can't help but embrace the Paradoxical Theory of Change. We aren't pushing the client to go somewhere, because we are exploring the current state with interest and caring with no outcome in mind.

Choosing a lens doesn't mean that you're not seeing the full picture. You're just making a choice where to focus right now.

This takes a special type of listening not born of technique, but of intention. For my money, the actor/director Alan Alda said it best. “Actors must listen with a willingness to be changed.” I believe the same goes for us as OD and coaching practitioners. Alda said,

I look at the person who is actually in front of me. I don’t answer what I think they ought to be saying, but what they actually are saying and how they say it. I don’t ignore obvious clues in their tone of voice and body language. I let every shift in the way they talk to me alter the way I respond. (Maurer, 2002)

4. Shifting the level of system can be very helpful. There are at least three levels that are always alive when we are coaching:
 - Focus on the client.
 - Focus on our relationship between coach and client.
 - Focus on the client in the context of his environment.

Choosing a lens doesn’t mean that you’re not seeing the full picture. You’re just making a choice where to focus right now. The picture itself doesn’t change if you’re using a close-up versus a wide-angle lens, but how you view the scene does change. You can ask yourself, “Which lens makes the most sense right now?”

The individual lens. Choosing the individual lens can be especially important if what’s being talked about seems thematic. That is, it’s bigger than this one instance. What they’re talking about is a pattern that seems to transcend the current work environment and relationships they are in.

The danger of this lens is that it can be too comfortable. Much of psychology focuses on the individual to the exclusion of his or her field. For instance, many of the popular personality assessments provide categories for pigeonholing people without regard to the context. You work at Nordstrom and then move to Sing Sing—no problem. Your personality category goes with you. Lewin’s notion that behavior is a function of the person and the environment suggests otherwise.

The client and coach lens. What is alive in your relationship that could have an impact on the situation the client is addressing? For example, a client comes in with his 360° feedback evaluation. As he talks about it, you notice that he is dismissing the feedback he received on communication skills. When you ask about it, he says, “People say I don’t really pay attention. They’re a bunch

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of idiots.” You say, “Hmm, I think I know what they mean,” and then you stop to see if they are interested in exploring your rather provocative intervention. You might even say, “I think it has relevance. I’d be interested in exploring it. Are you?”

If the answer is “no,” then the answer is “no.” This is one thing that sets Gestalt apart from some other forms of coaching, therapy, and counseling (at least the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland’s approach). If a person says, “No, I don’t want to work,” our job is to say, “Okay, I’m here. I’m available. What shall we do now?” If we do anything else, we are working counter to the Paradoxical Theory. We are attempting to push the client into looking at something that interests us.

It can be quite liberating for a client to know that he or she can actually say “no” and put up boundaries around what’s acceptable to talk about. It provides safety and an assurance that you see this person as capable of making decisions for himself or herself.

Another aspect of focusing on our relationship is the notion of parallel processes. Herb Stevenson (1992) wrote, referring to William Swann’s work:

He notes that during interpersonal encounters we negotiate our identity. This identity negotiation is the process that occurs between individuals as each seeks to affirm the identity of self, while discovering the identity of the other. These negotiations develop through interactions that involve perceptions of others while at the same time influencing the perceptions of others. . . . As a Gestaltist, we will be impacted by these conscious and unconscious negotiations.

The parallel processes that are created in the client-coach field are rich fodder for work. Not work for its own sake, but to support the client’s work on issues that are of interest to him or her.

The client and the larger environment. This is a wide-angle lens that looks deep within the picture as well. It allows us to see the person in relation to his or her environment. I discussed this at length in the previous section of this article.

5. Create support for the work. Laura Perls, a founder of Gestalt therapy, wrote that contact was only possible “to the extent that support is available.” So rather than focusing on making something happen by the end of the hour, we can join with our client to create an environment where there is sufficient support to work. That does not mean that we remove or gloss over tough issues; simply that we try to create an environment where there is sufficient comfort for the work to get done. Perls (1992, p. 132) wrote, “Support

There is something satisfying about taking an approach and turning it into a formula. It gives us a false assurance that we are in charge.

is everything that facilitates the ongoing assimilation and integration of experience for the person, a relationship, or society.”

THE GREAT TEMPTATION

There’s a great temptation for people in our field to turn things into a set of steps with a scoring system akin to a five-point Likert scale. There is something satisfying about taking an approach and turning it into a formula. It gives us a false assurance that we are in charge. That we need to come up with an orderly process often stems from our own need to be in control. And the problem with that approach is that it can easily put I/It values over I/Thou.

Personally, I do much better when I don’t work so hard at helping other people get somewhere. It allows me to be more present. And as soon as I start to say to myself, “We’ve only got a half hour left and we haven’t made nearly enough progress” I abandon the Paradoxical Theory and I/Thou as I try to push the client somewhere. To the extent that I can stay in the moment and support the work around whatever the topic is, it allows me to enter the dance with my partner. And this can be an extremely powerful way of supporting the client.

CLOSING

When we apply the principles addressed in this article to our work, we see something amazing occur. Resistance takes on a different sheen. It no longer has the power to subvert because we are treating it—and the client and ourselves—with great respect. Resistance is merely data that we both can get interested in. That is liberating for both client and coach.

At the core of the Gestalt approach is a respect for the human being as he or she is right now—with no need to change to something different. There is a kind of perfection in that. When we work with clients using these principles, people often feel seen and appreciated. And the wonderful paradox is that in that perfection of the moment, they are now free to let down their guards and see other possibilities.

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