

Use of self and self disclosure in coaching

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This use of self cannot be taught in a prescriptive or normative manner, since each coach will draw on unique personal experiences and knowledge, and each coaching encounter will present unique constellations of opportunity for the coach's use of self.¹

Change through relationship

Gestalt holds that change happens through *relationship*. The importance of the quality of the relationship between coach/client is not exclusive to Gestalt of course (e.g. De Haan, 2008), but Gestalt does bring a perspective, which is quite different from conventional wisdom. To Perls, the 'self' is not a semi-fixed entity that endures over time. Instead 'self' is a process, always in flux and totally contextual, it is a function of what gets evoked in the interaction between individuals under the unique set of circumstances of that particular interaction (Perls, 1978). Simply put, the 'me' that I experience when I am with my boss is likely to be different in some respect from the 'me' that I experience when I am with my best friend etc. The implication of this for coaching is that you, as coach, are a critical aspect of the client's experience and how you 'show up' will inform (not necessarily consciously) what the client chooses to reveal. Two aspects of the way you work as a Gestalt coach are critical: your *presence/use of self* and your ability to engage in *dialogue*.

Presence is much more than how 'professional' you are as a coach. It includes how 'grounded' you are in yourself and your work, how able you are to 'contact' the client, even when they are difficult to reach. It is the ability to *be in the here and now*, i.e. to tune into what is going on within yourself (your reactions to your client, what they evoke in you, what images come to mind, what sensations are stimulated) as you are impacted by them, and to disclose some of this in order to 'make contact'.

I am listening to Jane who has returned to work after a miscarriage and is struggling as a new partner in a professional services firm. She talks in a jolly, light, cheerful manner and I notice that I am struggling to stay present. Suddenly the image of a bird comes to mind. I see it skimming along the top of the hedgerow, never really coming to land anywhere. I share this image with Jane, owning that it is my image, and ask if it has any meaning for her in her world.

I trust that because this vivid image has arisen within the interaction between me and my client it is reasonable to assume that it has some relevance to the client's situation and is worth checking out. You do this of course in the service of *their* awareness and part of the process is to find out what impact your disclosure has had on them. This opened the door to a fruitful exploration of how she has been trying to 'make light' of her situation with her colleagues and how in our session we both have been staying in a 'light, frothy' place (the parallel process). My disclosure enabled Jane and I to *make contact*, i.e. relate in a different way, to move from 'skimming the surface' to something more helpful to her and to us.

This is the Gestalt notion of 'dialogue', which has its roots in Buber's (e.g. 1970) existential philosophy that differentiates between 'I-thou' interaction (two people engaging in an open, mutually respectful way without attempting to impose their will on the other) and 'I-it' interactions in which one or both attempt to shape the other towards some desired outcome. Genuine, moving contact cannot be made to happen. It flows from the coach's willingness to be him or herself without any attachment to what might happen in the encounter. This means that as a Gestalt coach, I am particularly attentive to the quality of the relationship between myself and my client.

¹ Siminovitch, D., and Van Eron, A. (2006)

Practical Implications for the Coach

1. What to disclose

- The coach's internal reactions offer valuable data. These reactions are data that is readily available, present in the room, and which have arisen in the context of the coaching encounter. They have a relevance and the coach needs to trust his/her internal world – the thoughts, reflections, observations, sensations, the visualisations, metaphors and images that come to mind, along with what the client evokes for the coach etc. In order to do this coaches may need to 'unlearn' some previously held notions of coach self disclosure, notably that a) it isn't relevant, and b) any attempt by the coach to share their experience takes the focus away from the coaching client.
- Through use of self, as a coach you become an expert in awareness, not only awareness of yourself and awareness of your client, but also awareness of the unfolding relationship between the two of you. Useful questions to reflect on are: what is the tone/colour/music which best captures your coach/client relationship? What do you observe about the client, e.g. energy levels, flow and tone of speech, body movements, eye contact, congruence between behaviour, thinking and feelings etc. How does all of this impact on you as coach? In a Gestalt way of working, the human body is a gateway to the inner world, and so through sharing the impact the client has on you, you bring the client's awareness to 'how' they are being in relationship with you (and potentially wider world) which in turn heightens their own self-awareness.
- What we can never know is how the client will respond to the information you offer. It is not for the coach to volunteer an interpretation, but to help the client do the meaning making. In selecting the most pertinent observations the Gestalt coach invites the client to first 'stay with' (i.e. attend to) and then explore their experience in the moment. The key emphasis is on the client's enhanced awareness rather than on finding the 'right' answer. Siminovitch and Van Eron also make the point that by self disclosing the coach models personal risk taking for clients who may view such behaviour as too personally threatening.

2. If and when to disclose

- The key question that guides your decision is always 'how will your disclosure serve the client?' If the response is a potential heightening of the client's awareness, thus 'adding to' what the client already knows, then you may decide to go ahead. For example, at the end of a challenging piece of work in which the client had worked through a particularly difficult scenario about which he had felt very stressed, he reported that he felt calmer and more at peace which was visible in his body demeanour, rate and flow of speech etc. A response of "Yes I feel calmer also" is superfluous and adds nothing for the client. Whereas a response of "Yes, I can see that and I'm also aware of my own feeling of satisfaction, of a job well done. I'm wondering how you reflect on and celebrate your achievements?" affirms the client and helps him to acknowledge what he has achieved.
- If you are unsure then wait, and by delaying you may get further clarity about your internal data which might well be of use to the client at a later point in the session. You might also give some thought to the consequences of *not* disclosing. For example, a persistent image or hunch that keeps running through your thoughts, if left undisclosed, might lead you to feel distracted and so less present with the client.
- If a feeling, image etc. *has* persisted with this client during the session or over the time you have known him or her, it is important you chose to disclose when it emerges once more in the current session, because there will be reason that it has come back to you 'right now' and this is the context that can help you and the client make sense of the data. Sharing an image

that occurred to you last session at the beginning of this session will be out of context and the client is unlikely to be able to relate to it.

- One of the many reasons that coaches refrain from self disclosure is anxiety about it being ‘my stuff’ and, therefore, not relevant to the client. So how do you know if your emotional reaction is a genuine response to a client or ‘your own stuff’ (technically known as counter-transference²)? Sometimes it is obvious, as when a client reminds you of someone else, or brings material which evokes a strong reaction that reactivates a past event or relationship of your own, or touches on a strong value that you hold. Here it is probably more appropriate to refrain from disclosing, reflect further and take your reaction to supervision. One question to ask yourself is how frequently something happens. For example, are you working on the same issue with every coaching client that you have? If you are, then it is highly possible that you are (unconsciously) shaping the agenda because it’s your interest (or your expertise). This is why supervision is so essential.

3. How to disclose

- When noticing your internal world, make sure you articulate it first to yourself and then to the client using language which is both non-judgemental and non-interpretive, and which is phrased in the present ‘here and now’, e.g. “that’s interesting, I notice that my attention is drifting” as opposed to “this is (she is) really boring!”.
- Then, when you articulate your awareness, own what you say using ‘I’ rather than ‘you’ language (“I notice that my energy level dropped in the last few minutes. What’s happening for you as you talk about this?”). Notice how important it is to make the link back to the client’s experience... simply saying “I notice that my energy level dropped in the last few minutes” without checking what is going on for the the client is likely to be received as a criticism, when in fact you are trying to see if you are picking up some of the client’s own boredom with his situation.
- Having made your intervention be attentive to the client’s reaction by noticing the impact on the client, and be ready to help the client express a reaction to what you said. There is no right or wrong in this. You are not making an interpretation or casting a judgement, but offering your self-reflections lightly, with curiosity and wonderment. Track your client’s energy and interest. If your disclosure does not ‘land’ fully with the client, he/she will let you know and something will happen. Your intervention may help the client to get clear about something else, or you may opt to ‘let it go’. It will come around again if it is significant, it might simply be that the client isn’t quite ready to explore this area yet.
- We talk a lot about the use of intuition in coaching, i.e. the hunches we have. In a Gestalt way of working, our hunches are backed up with observational data in the room. For example, in a coaching demonstration as part of a Gestalt workshop I shared a hunch which had materialised for me from data offered by the client, in her use of language, changes in her energy levels when she referred to a particular relationship, as well as my own feelings of increasing sadness as she talked. I shared my hunch (owning it as mine, and not an interpretation) and this struck a chord for her. In the debrief following there was comment from an observer about ‘how I had instilled’ my thoughts into the client. Drawing on my own ‘internal supervisor’ there were two ways I could double check the ‘integrity’ of my intervention. First, I referred back to the client’s experience and her response to what I’d said, which had been very positive. Second, I had supported my intervention with the data I had observed (e.g. the client’s energy level shift).

² From the psychodynamic movement.

4. How much to disclose

- As a general rule, less is always better than more. In the event that you have a number of responses that you could make, it pays to keep paying attention to your own evolving reactions for a while, and eventually something will begin to stand out (e.g. a particularly strong image or sensation), or what started as multiple reactions will suddenly synthesise into a single and, therefore, potentially potent response.

Guidelines for Practice: a summary

1. Tune into yourself: what impact does the client have on you?
2. Selectively disclose in service of the client;
3. Trust the validity of your self disclosure;
4. Check the impact this has on the client, what meaning it holds for them;
5. Don't be too attached to your reaction. Be prepared to let it go if it has little/no resonance for the client;
6. Use supervision as a place to talk through strong reactions you have to your clients and the issues they bring.

References

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