

## **To Be or Not to Be**

### **A Gestalt approach to Coaching**

John Leary-Joyce

Published in Coaching at Work, Volume 2 Issue 5, 2007

If we threw a party and invited all the key influences on Gestalt we'd have interesting mixture of guests Freudian Analysis's, Zen Buddhists, Gestalt Psychologists, Existential Philosophers, Psychiatrists, Anarchists & Social Constructivists. Drawn from a period of ego centric, individualistic US in the 50's & 60's, that was anti-establishment, discovering sexual liberalism and spiritual awakening aided by mind altering substances. You have the context for an unusual party, where it would be hard to imagine guests agreeing with each other and hosted by a radical couple called Fritz & Laura Perls.

What I love about Gestalt and why I have stayed passionate and committed for 30 years is this amazing eclectic mix of ideas and methodologies that have such depth and meaning. The emphasis on individuality means that each Gestaltist is expected to find their own meaning from this wonderful mix; there are broad philosophical principles but no one Gestalt dogma. So this is the John Leary-Joyce synthesis and not the absolute one!

Gestalt is a German word for which we have no immediate English translation and means 'whole', 'complete' or 'pattern'. The early Gestalt Psychologists Wertheimer, Kholer, Lewin studied perception and concluded that we are hard-wired to see the whole pattern rather than the constituting parts. We make sense of the vast array data and stimuli by learning to clump them together and giving them meaningful labels. So we take for granted a 'face' and don't pay attention to the specific eyes, nose & mouth unless you meet Elephant Man then you re-evaluate what 'face' means.

In order to create these easily identifiable units or gestalts we have to fill in gaps so that this symbol



we would readily call a circle even though it is technically incomplete.

Laura Perls studied Gestalt Psychology in Berlin and along with her husband Fritz, a psychiatrist and Freudian Analyst, applied these principles to our emotional world. They identified that we need closure in any interaction in order for it to be satisfying and complete. So if I pose the age old joke "Why did the chicken cross the road?" you try to complete it given the versions you know. Notice your reaction when I say "The answer is at the end of this article"! An interest has been stimulated but unfinished resulting in mild frustration, the impact of an incomplete gestalt. Similarly

if you have felt aggrieved, you harbour a grudge. When you sort it out, the incident is finished and a gestalt is formed.

If we take this stance that our clients are *driven* to solve their problems, make sense of their dilemmas, form gestalts, then our focus as coaches is on facilitating that completion. This fits well with fundamental coaching practices of the client being responsible for the outcome to their relationships.

**Gestalt Principle 1 - Satisfaction in life only comes through closure of each interaction.**

A Basic Coaching Intervention would centre on what was stopping the client reaching satisfaction - *What do you have to do to feel really good about your meeting/project/appraisal?*

At this point you may be having a mini gestalt experience and say ‘A-ha now I know what Gestalt is’. You have made some meaning for yourself and may put this article down satisfied that you have enough. However, if you feel that this is a very limited explanation and feel incomplete, you will be wanting more.

**NO MAN IS AN ISLAND UNTO HIMSELF**

Needless to say, this approach is based on relationships, it has a systemic or field perspective i.e. we are inextricably linked to our environment. A more detailed look at the gestalt formation process will show three basic stages –

1. Become curious/interested in some element of your environment (Pre-Contact)
2. Engage with that element (Contact) in a way that is satisfying.
3. Withdraw from the encounter, feeling complete and ready for the next interesting engagement.

This Contact/Withdrawal rhythm is fundamental to Gestalt practice. Change is constant so a measure of health and well-being is how well you fulfil these never ending sequences. When you are feeling confident, in great company, in tune with yourself then there is an effortless grace in your encounters and you are left with a warm glow, an unspecific sense of well-being. Csíkszentmihályi(1) called this ‘Flow’ and Gallwey (2) in the Inner Game called it atunement with Self 2. It is well documented that this is the state of high performance.

Conversely when you are feeling insecure or awkward, there is strain, anxiety and effort in your relationships. If you recall an incident where you made a mistake. How do you feel? I bet you have gone over this incident a number of times in your head

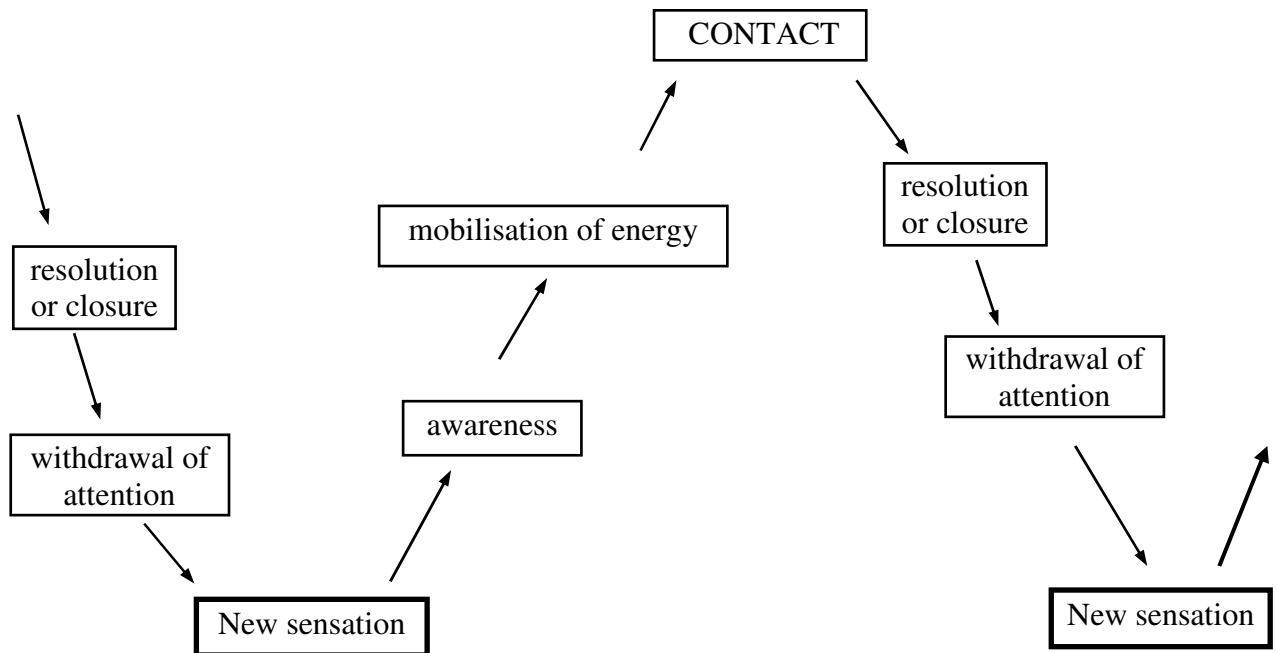
and it still nags you – an incomplete gestalt and therefore interruption to further effective performance

**Gestalt Principle 2 – High Performance comes from being in the effortless Contact/Withdrawal flow between yourself and your environment.**

Coaching Intervention *Notice how much effort you put into managing this relationship. What would happen if you didn't work so hard at it?*

## GESTALT CYCLE OF EXPERIENCE

The Cleveland Gestalt School took this principle and examined what happened in more detail. They came up with a model called the Gestalt Cycle of Experience.



When we first encounter another there is interest, energy to engage, a **New Sensation** - the first step on his cycle.

A typical Gestalt Intervention at this stage would be  
*What were your initial thoughts/feelings when you first met?*

Step two, you become more conscious or **Aware** of the motivation behind this energy, what you want or need from this interaction. This awareness encompasses

both your need and the capacity of the other to fulfil it. Systemic awareness. This is a crucial step in the cycle - it's like the scoping of a project or the initial contracting that we can so easily rush over in order to get on with *it*.

A typical Gestalt Intervention at this stage would be

*Pay attention to what motivated you to hold his meeting, what do you want out of it and what has your colleague got to offer.*

From this increased clarity comes step three, the options/choice for action and the **Mobilisation** of energy to engage.

Typical Gestalt Interventions at this stage would be

*What options do you have, what do you think are the consequences?*

*Where is your energy?*

*What are you going to do?*

If we are in effortless flow then these questions will be answered intuitively and the mobilised energy will bring you into clear **Contact** with the other. This fourth step is the *raison d'être* for the initial interest. You will have taken account of both your own and the others needs. In other words you are adjusting your needs to that of the other to achieve an outcome where you will be complete. In essence Gestalt is about creative adaptation. The quality with which the previous three steps are executed will determine how profound/trivial the connection will be.

Typical Gestalt Interventions at the Contact stage would be

*Pay attention to the way you are communicating the vision, how connected are you with them as you're speaking?*

*How whole hearted do you feel with them?*

*Are you presenting it in a way that they can accept what you are saying?*

Having fully engaged you will feel a sense of resolution, the fifth stage **Satisfaction**. This Satisfaction stage refers to a sense of achievement 'I've done it'. It could be a happy or sad emotion depending on the nature of the parting.

Typical Gestalt Interventions at this stage would be

*How do you feel now that you have finished the presentation?*

*Is there anything left to say in order to complete the message?*

*How do you think they understood what you had to say.*

That leads to the sixth stage - **Completion** and **Withdrawal**, where you are letting go of the interaction and preparing to move on.

Typical Gestalt Interventions at the Contact stage would be

*What have you learned from this presentation that could be useful the next time?*

*How are you going to let go of this project?*

*Are you ready to let them take up responsibility now?*

There is a wealth more theory and practice linked to this cycle. For example, there are a number of habitual ways of resisting the next step on the cycle, which we call

‘interruptions to contact’. Further reading or attending a course will go into more depth on how these processes work and the interventions required to overcome them.

## NATURE OF CHANGE – TO BE OR NOT TO BE YOURSELF

Fact 1 – Change is constant – if you stop changing you’re dead!

Fact 2 – Change can only happen in the present – we can only change our thoughts/feelings *about* yesterday or tomorrow in the present!

Life is about adapting to this ever changing world from moment to moment. Gestalt is the focus on how we do this to get the most juice out of life.

We have the option to be aware and make choices to influence our life or we abdicate responsibility and trust Fate/God. I believe that the primary role of a coach is to help our clients take responsibility for their role/life.

If we take on this responsibility for learning and growing there are two further choices of action.

1. Try to be different from who you are
2. Be more yourself

Our educational system and training methodologies favour the former. We put a lot of effort in teaching ourselves to be different. Traditional coaching, whether it’s based on NLP, Solution Focused, Cognitive Behavioural, GROW model, focuses on creating specific goal, a desired future or ideal model that you can change yourself to fit into.

Gestalt espouses the latter, more in line with the Inner Game approach, MBTI and Zen/Taoist philosophies. The emphasis is on accepting who you are and growing your capability from that position.

### **Gestalt Principle 3 - Paradox of Change**

*Change happens when you become more of who you are  
Rather than when you try to be what you are not.*

Of course there are huge implications embedded in this definition but it principally guides you in a very specific direction.

Gestalt Interventions focus on:-

Where are you now? (rather than - What do you want)

Who are you now? (rather than - Who do you want to become)

With these interventions comes a challenge to be aware of all of you – senses, physical feelings, emotions, thoughts and resultant behaviour. The bulk of Gestalt

interventions are there to simply fulfil this function. The coach is encouraged to be as creative as possible in setting up experiments where the client experiences themselves more fully.

A typical Gestalt Intervention would be:-

*Be aware of what you are doing/feeling now and exaggerate it!*

So if your client is feeling frustrated ask them to show you how they can be more frustrated!! This works really well if your client is stuck because instead of trying to get them moving you simply inquire into how they are sticking themselves and if they were to do it more what would happen. Invariably by being aware of the process of sticking oneself – change happens – and you discover ways to un-stick yourself. Kurt Lewin formerly part of the Gestalt Psychology network in Germany, was aware of this when talking about his Force Field Analysis – Every pro-action produces an equal and opposite reaction. Take away the demand to be different and you remove the need to resist.

#### THE GESTALT COACHING RELATIONSHIP

*What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander*

We know from exhaustive research in the psychotherapy field that the quality of the relationship is far more important in effecting change than the methodology. This makes sense because change can only happen in the present and if you maximise the potential for change within the relationship it will be more profound and complete.

However this can be quite scary for coaches who are more familiar with being objective, client-focused and directive non-directive! Because, this means that you are going to have to be aware of yourself as a coach and how you engage with your client. As my Gestalt trainer used to say, “Unless you are changing in the relationship you are not doing Gestalt” So as a Gestalt coach I am continually required to check with myself

*What am I thinking/feeling now and what of this do I need to share with my client in order to enhance the relationship.*

In Cognitive Behavioural Coaching the expectation is to be an ‘Authentic Chameleon’ – but this is skin deep and Gestalt requires you to be willing to change your inner being.

Remember the goal in Gestalt is to make the best contact you can with this other person so that we complete our interaction as fully as possible.

The challenging and differentiating aspect of Gestalt is that it is ‘Relationship-Centred’ rather than client-centred. It calls on coach to be highly self-aware and able to use that awareness in service of the client. Because of the emphasis on effortlessness, when you are in the flow the coaching interaction becomes such a delight, so profound and personally meaningful. This is why I continue to practice Gestalt in my life and work after 30 years!

## CASE STUDIES

### Case Study 1 – Managing a strong Sensation

A rapidly promoted young board director came to me having had an acute anxiety attack when giving a board presentation. In our first session when I asked him to tell me about it, he gave a report that didn't touch me at all. I was surprised by my response given that this was a critical incident. When I gently commented on my reaction he was taken aback.

I first of all asked him to notice how he was telling me the story, the way he was sitting, his tone of voice, how he perceived me. He commented that he was giving me a report, feeling numb in his body, flat tone of voice and distant from me. This made sense why I didn't feel touched initially. However, with this disclosure I could feel a connection forming.

I asked him to stay with this feeling of distance and flatness and exaggerate it a little. He pushed back his chair from me and slumped in it. After a moment of paying attention to this state of being he said quietly and directly to me "I'm afraid to let you know how I really feel in case that awful anxiety attack comes back" Immediately we took a huge leap forward and I felt enormously tender towards that fearful side of him - which I shared with him.

I then asked him to tell *me* his story again, building on the quality of relationship we had now established. I also reassured him that if this anxiety feeling came back that he should tell me and then stop. He did this and, as I expected, he had no real problem – it was the fear of the fear that was getting in the way. We chatted further and concluded the first session.

On coming back he recounted how much lighter he felt after the session and more confident back at work. However he still wanted to get to the bottom of why this anxiety had happened and what to do about it.

Feeling a good rapport and confident that I could track his experience I asked him to imagine being back in that board meeting and slowly recount what was happened in the here and now with me. Many coaches back off this type of engagement for fear of triggering some catastrophic emotional reaction. However, if you are sensitive, responsive, in-tune with your client and they are mature capable people and you take your time checking all the time if this is OK with them then they will self regulate and take responsibility for themselves.

We slowly examined what he was thinking & feeling prior to the presentation, the relationships with his board colleagues and how he assessed his competence to fulfil this new role. This uncovered a whole raft of negative self-beliefs, unrealistic expectations of his capability that were totally unconnected to those of his colleagues. The subsequent sessions were an exploration of these self-beliefs and what he needed to do about changing them. The methodology for doing this followed the same pattern.

### **Case Study 2 – Mobilising Energy in an exciting but safe way.**

As a highly successful trader Jo had taken risks and was known as a maverick. She had been promoted to a responsible leadership position and was concerned that her usual impulsive style would be a high risk.

We focused on how she felt when taking risks, the thrill she got with the adrenalin rush. By sticking with the Sensations and Awareness phases, she also identified a rebellious streak towards authority reminiscent of her teenage years. This awareness led to a number of actions

1. Getting back into ‘black run’ skiing to satisfy that thirst for living on the edge.
2. Seeing herself now as the ‘Authority’ in her new leadership role – there was no one to rebel against.
3. Finding excitement in mobilising her team to be more adventurous in risk management.

### **Case Study 3 – Making contact with force and authority.**

A COO of large business came for coaching to improve his performance. He was very efficient and clear in setting objectives but ‘soft hearted’ in implementation. He could see what needed to happen but rather than biting the bullet and making redundancies, he tried to work with the existing teams resulting in poor business results and a negative personal appraisal.

We explored how he always tried to be fair, disliked conflict and over compensated for others deficiencies. I encouraged him to exaggerate how hard he had to work to be fair and avoid conflict. This surfaced a latent anger about others who took advantage of his gentleness and didn’t reciprocate in kind. I helped him mobilised this angry energy, become familiar with standing up for himself, and convert this into being a strong authority. This then became the force and backbone he needed to implement tough and unpopular decisions.

### **DO’S & DON’TS IN GESTALT COACHING**

1. Focus more on *how* the client telling you the story rather than what is being said.
2. Ensure the client is talking *to you*, so you feel connected, rather than into space.
3. Pay close attention to your own thoughts and feelings and communicate them in a way that enriches the relationship. Don’t try to be ‘objective’ – it’s not possible.
4. Emphasise the here and now experience – physical feelings, emotional reactions, fantasies and opinions, make them as vivid and alive as possible. Don’t rationalise until you’ve extracted as much juice as possible from the experience.
5. Don’t dwell on family history/past experience, this is only of value in understanding patterns in the present.
6. The goal is awareness and mobilisation into contact – the solution will take care of itself. Do not aim for specific objectives, ‘desired future’ or modelling another’s behaviour.

7. Do not 'work hard' with your client, stay tuned to yourself and your client and take the risk to speak your mind. High performance requires high-energy not high-effort.
8. When possible, bring past experiences into the present by re-enacting them rather than talking about them as history.

## FOR AND AGAINST GESTALT

### For Gestalt

1. Relationships, complex people issues
2. Dilemmas, confusion, uncertainty about direction
3. Creativity, abstract situations/ideas
4. Undefined outcomes. Solutions are emergent
5. Personal identity, beliefs, values

### Against Gestalt

1. Working on strategic objectives
2. Rational problem solving
3. Concrete action planning
4. Where specific outcomes are required
5. Logical conceptualising

1. Flow - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mihaly\\_Csikszentmihalyi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mihaly_Csikszentmihalyi)
2. W.Timothy Gallwey – Inner Game of Tennis

### Further Reading

**Gestalt Therapy** *Perls, Hefferline & Goodman* – The definitive bible on Gestalt based on Fritz Perls' ideas. Book 1 by Hefferline is experiential exercises Book 2 by Goodman is a profound but dense, philosophical treatise.

**Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy** – *Joseph Zinker*. A long standing favourite, very accessible, one of the early and most enduring texts. Good explanation of Gestalt and its creative application in practice.

**Organisational Consulting, A Gestalt Approach** *Edwin Nevis* The only book that links coaching directly to consulting very useful reframing of Gestalt principles for an organisational context.

**Gestalt Counselling** *Jennifer Mackewn* A very thorough explanation of Gestalt by a very experienced UK Gestalt Psychotherapist.

**Skills in Gestalt Counselling** *Joyce & Sills* – most students find this very accessible and practical as it's focused on developing your skill and building a practice.

**Gestalt Coaching Study Manual** *John Leary-Joyce* – Available in electronic format from the AEC. This is the workbook I wrote for my Gestalt courses to support the experiential learning. Designed with lots of exercises you can do on your own or with a group to back up the theory.

### **Further Training in Gestalt**

The Academy of Executive Coaching runs a eight-day course on the Psychology of Coaching and one of the two-day modules is on Gestalt. There is an additional four-day follow up with supervision for those who want use Gestalt in their coaching. See [www.academyofexecutivecoaching.com](http://www.academyofexecutivecoaching.com) tel. 01727 864806 for details

The Gestalt Centre London runs short personal development workshops and training courses from one year introduction to fully accredited Counselling and Psychotherapy programmes. See [www.gestaltcentre.co.uk](http://www.gestaltcentre.co.uk) tel. 020 7613 4480

**John Leary-Joyce** started his Gestalt training when he was 22. He became a practitioner and then joined the faculty of the Gestalt Centre 5 years later. Later he took over as Managing Director and ran the business for 12 years before moving into coaching and launching the Academy of Executive Coaching in 2000.