

PART 1

THE GESTALT APPROACH TO COACHING

Chapter 1 - Overview of Gestalt Coaching

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OVERVIEW OF GESTALT COACHING

CHAPTER 1

Overview of Gestalt Coaching

Introduction

Writing about Gestalt is itself a contradiction in that experience in the moment is fundamental to the approach. Interpreting, structuring, organising information and reflecting are what you do when you write. So, in attempting to distil the approach and make it easily understandable, we run the risk of sabotaging the very spirit of Gestalt. The medium cannot be the message as it can in a workshop where you plunge in and experience it for yourself – cognitively, behaviourally and emotionally – in real time. The printed word can only outline, indicate and suggest. Of course, your experience as you read the book will be both cognitive (*your thinking*) and emotional (*how you feel about what you read*) but it's what you then do with it that matters – and that bit is up to you.

Openness, curiosity and experiment, in 'pure' form, means that every moment is experienced for the first time. People exist only in the present and make new choices each moment. My experience as I sit at my computer and write this sentence is a different experience from your experience as you read the words. As I start to write this line, a new experience begins for me. As you read it, or suddenly understand something new, a new experience begins for you. Rigid rules are counterproductive because every writer and every reader is an individual with his or her own experience within a unique frame of reference, as is every coachee and coach.

This book is itself a gestalt. As you work through it, you will come across the components and principles expressed in different ways, which will help you to fill the gaps in your understanding of the whole picture. If you don't see the picture clearly to begin with, keep reading – the ideas and principles will make sense, take shape and emerge as you find out more.

I hope that there will be times as you read when you will have a mini gestalt experience and say 'A-ha, now I know what Gestalt is!' You have made some meaning for yourself and, at that point, you may put the book down satisfied that you have enough. However, if you feel that the A-ha! moment has merely sparked your curiosity and interest, the gestalt is incomplete. You will be driven to find out more.

The Gestalt approach – a brief history

Fritz and Laura Perls are the founders of Gestalt Therapy. Fritz was a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, extrovert and aspiring actor. His wife, on the other hand, was much more down-to-earth; a thoughtful intellectual who was a PhD in Gestalt Psychology and studied with Martin Buber. A marriage of opposites that brought great richness to Gestalt theory and practice.

They fled the anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime in 1933 for South Africa and Fritz established the Psychoanalytic Training Institute. However, Freud's rebuffing of Fritz pushed him to develop his own style, theories and practices.

They left for New York and in 1950 collaborated with Paul Goodman, a radical socialist, poet, author and intellectual, to publish the 'bible' – *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*. So an anarchistic, creative, socialist element entered Gestalt.

Fritz and Laura integrated many other approaches into Gestalt – from Moreno's psychodrama to Kurt Lewin's group dynamics and Wilhelm Reich's body therapy. They separated and Laura stayed with the New York Gestalt Institute to embed the theoretical principles of Gestalt. Fritz moved to the Esalen Growth Centre, California in 1960 offering highly innovative and experimental workshops incorporating aspects of Zen.

Gestalt practice continues to evolve, with each Gestaltist establishing their own signature style as enshrined in the philosophy. This application to coaching is yet another addition.

What is a gestalt?

The German word 'gestalt' has no exact English translation, but means something like 'whole', 'complete' or 'pattern'.

In this handbook, Gestalt, with a capital G, is used as a title for the approach or method of coaching.

When used with a lower-case g, it is a descriptive noun – 'a gestalt' meaning whole or complete.

The early Gestalt psychologists, Wertheimer, Kohler and Koffka, were concerned with perception. They concluded that we are hard-wired to recognise a whole meaningful pattern (*gestalt*) rather than see individual constituent parts from the vast array of data and stimuli available.

So we see a picture rather than a group of separate objects on a canvas. We hear a tune rather than the individual notes. We recognise a face and

don't pay attention to the detail. We don't first see the eyes, nose and mouth individually, then put them together and deduce that it is a face. In fact, it is hard to identify a familiar face if you can only see the eyes, a nose or a mouth on its own, unless you know each detail intimately. The face, tune or picture is the gestalt – the complete, identifiable whole.

In order to create these identifiable units or gestalts, we have to fill in gaps. So we would describe the image below as a circle even though it is technically incomplete.

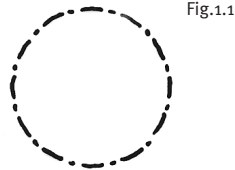


Fig.1.1

The image is experienced as integrated, whole or closed. We compensate for the gaps to make sense of a picture, whenever and wherever possible and to make the picture regular and simple. This concept also applies to cognitive and emotional experiences. We are compelled to 'complete the picture' of an experience, and to complete it in as regular, balanced and simple a way as possible. We need closure in any interaction in order for it to be satisfying and complete.

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 book'. An interest has been stimulated but is 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 the gestalt is complete.

The Gestalt approach is concerned with the whole person, encouraging a balance between body, feeling, intellect and imagination. It also embodies the idea that we are inextricably linked with our 'whole' environments, both affecting and being affected by the context in which we live.

If we take the stance that our coachees are *driven* to solve their problems, to make sense of their dilemmas and form complete, regular and simple gestalts, then our focus as coaches is on facilitating that completion. This fits well with the fundamental coaching principle, that it is the coachee who is responsible for the outcome – not the coach.

In this book, we aim to help you understand Gestalt philosophy as it applies to coaching and to inspire you to experiment with the ideas.

It's not a manual of 'Gestalt style' tools with clearly defined action steps from 1 to 12 that you must learn by rote, practise and apply. We want to help you tap into your creativity intuition and experience, based on an understanding of the philosophy and theory. Each intervention you make as a coach can then be fresh and alive. Each session is an experiment.

Tools and techniques

Tools and techniques have a place in coaching, but for a Gestalt coach, the most important tool is you. The quality of your coaching lies in *being* rather than *doing*. It relies on your awareness of what is going on here, now, between you and your coachee. It requires you to be *fully present* in the moment, fully experiencing what is happening, rather than *thinking about* what you should have done or could be doing next time.

The focus in many coaching approaches is trying to change behaviour with an emphasis on putting effort into doing something differently. With Gestalt, the focus is on becoming more of who you are – exploring, uncovering and understanding what is really going on, from the inside out. By directing our energy into fully experiencing and accepting what is going on in the present, change happens without trying and our behaviour adjusts naturally, without effort.

If you are new to Gestalt, this perspective takes some getting used to. It runs counter to standard training, education and behavioural coaching approaches, which depend on putting effort into learning, so it takes a leap of faith and then concrete experience to see how it works.

What I can offer here is my explanations, experiences, examples and suggestions as an introduction to a Gestalt way of thinking. Then the experiments in each of the chapters will help you to experience it for yourself and with your coachees. However, this book alone cannot turn you into a Gestalt coach. Real understanding and integration can only be gained through experience and practice. So, in true Gestalt manner, it's up to you to adapt and experiment with the suggestions for yourself and your coachees in your own way.

Five guiding principles of a Gestalt approach to coaching

Gestalt is more an attitude, a perspective or a sensibility, with a strong theoretical underpinning. It is complex, paradoxical and sometimes ambiguous. The following is an outline of five basic principles. You will discover more about these principles as you read through the book and mini 'gestalts' will happen as you gradually make sense of different aspects of the approach.

1. It is about awareness
2. It is concerned with the way in which we do, say, approach, experience and think about things
3. It is concerned with what is, in the here and now – not what may be, should be, might be or has been
4. It is relationship-centred, contextual and inclusive
5. It is based on the principle that change is constant and only happens in the present

1. It is about awareness

Awareness is central to the Gestalt coaching approach. By which I mean awareness of what is going on, both cognitively and emotionally, for everyone concerned (*including you as coach*) in any situation or interaction.

Implications for the coach

First, you need to be aware of you, physically, emotionally and cognitively. Then you need to be aware of the environment you are in and of your coachee.

2. It is concerned with the way in which we do, say, approach, experience and think about things

Content is what the person is saying about his situation. A Gestalt approach is interested in how he or she is saying it. It's about what is really going on alongside the words or actions: physically, cognitively and emotionally. The focus is the whole person, not just the presenting issue.

Implications for the coach

The key for the coach is to not only understand the content (*ie you have to get the facts right*) but more importantly to notice how your coachee presents the issue, and to describe what you notice. While the words the coachee uses to present the facts are important, the thinking and feeling behind the words, which can be manifested in how they are said, is often more significant.

3. It is concerned with what is, in the here and now – not what may be, should be, might be or has been

Gestalt uses a phenomenological¹ approach – what can be experienced through the five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell – to engage with what is happening. All the information you need is available to you in the present. It's about noticing what is happening here and now and responding to what you see, hear, sense and feel – the phenomena. It's not about interpreting or evaluating these phenomena, although you may discuss meaning and significance with your coachee.

Implications for the coach

Everything you notice and feel about the coachee needs to be acknowledged without judgement, then highlighted and explored. This approach – where you assume that everything about the coachee is there to be seen and experienced, and everything has rightful importance – contrasts strongly with an interpretive approach which tends to begin with a narrative or a theory, then fits the observations to it. An interpretive approach may also tempt a coach to nudge the coachee's thinking to where the coach thinks it ought to be. Describing what you notice about the coachee without ascribing particular significance to any one phenomenon can help them uncover surprising and significant areas of new experience.

4. It is relationship-centred, contextual and inclusive

Individuals exist through their relationship with others and with their environment. Everything affects, and is affected by, everything else in the coachee's world. Body, mind, emotions and the environment – all have an impact on the individual.

1. Phenomenology. A scientific and philosophical discipline originated by Edmund Husserl. *The Annual for Philosophical and Phenomenological Research (1913-30)*, edited by Husserl, made an international movement of his personal philosophy.

Implications for the coach

As a coach, the implications of this are firstly that your experience of your coachee includes and takes into account of:

- the context and environment within which they exist, which may be their co-workers, the organisation or the family
- what is going on around them in the moment.

The second implication is that your relationship with the coachee, and what happens between you, is central to your work. In your sessions you are an important part of the environment. It's not just about what you say or do, but about making authentic, creative contact with your coachee. You are important as an active participant in the dialogue, not just as a blank page or a sounding board for your coachee. Meaning emerges from the dynamics of the joint situation.

5. It is based on the principle that change is constant and only happens in the present

The paradoxical nature of change is central to Gestalt thinking. The basic premise is that change happens, all the time. If you stop changing you cease to exist! Change can only happen in the present: we can only change our thoughts and feelings about yesterday or tomorrow in the present. The paradox is that by focusing on the present – who or what you are now – and staying with your experience rather than trying to be someone or something else, change will flow.

Implications for the coach

Many coaching approaches are future-focused, which is effective when specific outcomes are required. However, this is often about forcing change to happen, driving goal setting and directing action toward achieving targets. The Gestalt view is about working with an emergent process of change and how your coachee blocks this flow by rushing to objective-based outcomes. Outcomes and goals are useful, so long as you hold them lightly.

What is different about Gestalt coaching?

Life is about adapting to a constantly changing world from moment to moment. Gestalt focuses on how we do this to get the most out of life.

We have two choices. We can either.

A. Abdicate responsibility then trust or blame Fate, the Universe, Government or anyone else, for what happens to us

B. Take responsibility, make aware choices and decisions then accept the consequences

The primary role of the Gestalt coach is to create awareness of the possible choices and help the coachee take responsibility and ownership for the decisions they then make. In this way find authorship in their role, relationships, tasks, activities, in fact of their whole life.

*May I have the serenity to accept what I cannot change,
Courage to change what I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.²*

Becoming different vs. Being who you are

If we do take responsibility for our own learning and development, then there are two choices:

- Try to be different
- Be more yourself

This is the key differentiator. Behaviourally-based coaching focuses on action: trying to behave and think differently and assume that the inside/attitude catches up. A simple example in everyday life would be to smile so you will become more positive. The NLP (*neuro-linguistic programming*) ‘modelling’ technique is similar – the coachee models their behaviour on someone whom they aspire to be like. As a result they actively become different to who they are.

This is the opposite to the Gestalt approach which works cognitively, behaviourally and emotionally on becoming more aware and accepting of who you are as a person, so the outcome is to be more yourself.³

2. Serenity Prayer by American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr adapted for use in Alcoholics Anonymous 12 Step Programme.

3. This technique and all approaches in the book are only suitable for coachees who are self-supporting and do not have a psychological dysfunction. If you believe your coachee is mentally disturbed in some way then you should refer them to a psychotherapist.

Implications for the coach

If your coachee is confused about their next action, as a Gestalt coach your response would not be to help the coachee to create a vision and goal to work towards. Instead, the work involves staying with her in the confusion and helping her be aware of what is happening now in the session with you. Your exploration would include the coachee's experience of herself in the work situation – what she is thinking and feeling (*physically and emotionally*) including the environment around her as she talks to you in the present.

This isn't a comfortable option, as quite often all the coachee wants to do is to get out of the situation. The cognitive/behavioural solution would be to help her focus on a potential future resolution (*goal*) and to create a behavioural action plan. This will work, but you risk getting a quick-fix solution that may hide other more profound insights.

The Gestalt view would be that the block to the coachee's progress needs to be experienced fully and resolved. If it isn't, it will interrupt her flow of experience and she will get stuck again when confronted with a similar but different confusion. When she is aware of what is creating the confusion, her response will change appropriately and a solution will appear naturally.

EXAMPLE

Sandra gave up her freelance consultancy work to be CEO of a £multi-million family business and help the Chairman/Founder get it ready for sale. She has a great salary and the promise of a substantial pay-out when it is sold. Her Chairman is likeable, but patriarchal, self-centred, and mercurial. Although he pays lip service to Sandra's ideas in meetings, he doesn't really take them on board, leaving Sandra frustrated and demotivated. Her presenting issue was: 'How do I hang on till the business is sold and I get the pay-out?' In our sessions, we keep our focus on what's going on now in her frustration and make incremental discoveries about how she needs to be and what she needs to do to improve her working situation. However, more importantly she begins to become aware of who she is and what she wants in her career and life. Gradually the issue changes, from 'How do I hang on...?' to 'What do I want from my career?'.

Sandra recognised that she wasn't going to see much change in her boss and hanging on wasn't worth it so she extricated herself smoothly, having negotiated a good financial package – with goodwill on both sides. Now our sessions turn on keeping her nerve, taking stock of the situation logically and emotionally as each new work opportunity arises and not rushing into the next job out of anxiety for the future.

Implications for the coach

Two further implications arise:

1. Progress in the session may seem unstructured and unfocused. There is no busy-work activity to burrow into, no clear behavioural objective other than awareness, nor an action plan to ease the potential uncertainty. If not managed skilfully the coachee may feel impatience with the seeming lack of structure. As a Gestalt coach you will need to ensure there is a clear link between staying with the frustration and the presenting issue.
2. As a beginner with this method, you may feel frustrated that you aren't delivering tangible results. However, as Myles Downey advises – 'don't get stuck, get interested'⁴. Stay with the awareness of your frustration and explore how it connects with your client's.

Awareness vs. making something happen

Awareness is the quality you need most as a Gestalt coach, directed towards promoting awareness in your coachees. This links in with the paradox of change principle (*Chapter 5*). If a coachee becomes more aware of who they are and of what is actually going on, then something will shift and change as a result – neither you nor your coachee need do anything else. It sounds like magic, but it works.

Implications for the coach

Trust your responses and aim to be effortless. You'll feel the coachee's shift of mood when 'something happens' as he explores an event or an interaction. By helping him in this way, he can bring his own awareness to the surface and unlock the puzzle.

4. Downey, Myles, *Effective Coaching*, Texere Publishing Limited, (1999).

EXAMPLE

Coach: What's been happening with you?

Coachee: Well, in our last session we worked on how confused and incompetent I felt working with Ben and realised that maybe he didn't know what he was doing, either.

Coach: Yes, so what impact has that had on your relationship?

Coachee: ...things are much better. I had a meeting with him and asked if we could review progress to date because I was getting lost. Then I waited for him to start...and it all kicked off!

Coach: What happened?

Coachee: He scrabbled about with his papers, then slammed his hand on the table and went into a rant about what a waste of time the whole project was and he couldn't see the point. Quite a shock.

Coach: Wow, quite a strong reaction from him. How did you feel about that?

Coachee: Actually it was a relief – I knew then it wasn't just me that was feeling incompetent. He apologised for the outburst and we talked it through. We're both going to meet the guy who's masterminded the project. I feel much better about it. I thought I was alone with my confusion, and it was affecting the rest of my work.

How a Gestalt approach can add value to your coaching practice

You probably use a mix of different coaching and psychological models with your coachees, depending on their individual needs. With a clear emphasis on outcomes and results, traditional approaches such as NLP or CBC (*cognitive behavioural coaching*), GROW and solution-focused coaching, focus on creating specific goals, a desired future or ideal model that you can change yourself to fit into.

Our educational system and training methods favour this perspective. From the schoolroom through to vocational training, we are encouraged to put a lot of effort into drilling ourselves to be different. These approaches also make coachees feel safe and comfortable in the knowledge that they are doing something to help themselves. Gestalt, on the other hand, offers an alternative route, more in line with Timothy Gallwey's Inner Game⁵ approach as well as Myers Briggs personality profiling⁶ and Carl Rogers 'Unconditional Regard'⁷.

5. Gallwey, Timothy, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, Jonathan Cape, (1975).

6. MBTI personality profiling emphasises that individuals have a natural preference in how they engage with the world and this needs to be recognised and honoured.

7. Carl Rogers developed Person Centred Counselling approach outlined in his book *On Becoming a Person*. This is the basis of the Active Listening approaches used in coaching.

The emphasis is on accepting who you are and growing your capability from that position.

Gestalt not only encourages coachees to be more themselves to build capability, it also helps them to deal with complexity and ambiguity and to accept what can't be changed. It will add a deeper, broader and more sustainable dimension to your coaching. It's not a panacea for all ills: it isn't the approach for all coaching situations, and it may not suit everyone, but it is exciting, creative and powerful.

When can Gestalt coaching be most effective?

It's very effective if you and your coachee are dealing with:

- Relationships and identity
- Ambiguity, confusion, uncertainty about direction
- Dilemmas
- Visioning and strategy
- Creativity and innovation

Relationships and Identity

Gestalt comes into its own in this context, where you can help your coachees to explore what is actually going on in their interactions with other people, and uncover parts of themselves, beliefs and values that may be out of their awareness.

Ambiguity

Gestalt lends itself to issues that are open-ended, ambiguous and undefined. The belief that change is constant and can happen effortlessly means that the coachee is relieved of the need to try to do something to make change happen. Not having specific objectives means that your work is not forced in any one direction nor is it hampered by a narrow focus on the horizon. Exploring what's going on in the present and letting outcomes emerge naturally and incrementally from that work means that the solutions can be more creative and sometimes surprising.

Because the Gestalt approach provides a compass rather than a road map, it lends itself to creative solutions and finding direction based on who the coachee is (*rather than who he would rather be*) and exploration of what is happening now.

Solutions and direction will emerge in this process, which remains open and fluid, so it is also valuable for creativity, abstract situations and ideas.

Dilemmas

In situations where it is unclear which option would be the best to pursue because the pro's and con's appear equally balanced, Gestalt allows for an emergent solution rather than rational problem solving. What is extraordinary is that by sticking with the principle of awareness and experience and not trying to solve the problem, a new and unimagined 'third' way emerges.

Visioning & Strategy

Because of the constantly changing commercial environment, rigid, by-the-book strategy is less workable than it was when the economic and organisational environment was more stable. Organisations are increasingly turning to more emergent and flexible strategy development. Combining the background knowledge of what has happened as well as working with the awareness of experience in the present, you can help your coachee create a vision and strategy that is pragmatic and flexible.

Creativity & Innovation

We are most creative when we are free to explore ideas and allow them to emerge spontaneously. Gestalt has at its core the notion of Creative Adaption explored in full in Chapter 4. We are also dedicated to the practice of experimentation, constantly encouraging risk taking with new ways of doing and being so that solutions and innovative approaches emerge.

When is it not so effective?

A Gestalt approach may not be so effective if you and your coachee are concerned with issues where specific outcomes are required, such as:

- Targets and results, as in performance coaching towards a specific goal
- Working on tactical objectives
- Concrete, step-by-step action planning
- Logical conceptualising
- Learning a new skill or acquiring new knowledge

This is where other, more future focused coaching methodologies such as GROW and NLP can be more useful. In this book, we're not advocating that Gestalt is the only effective route to change and growth. By understanding what Gestalt has to offer you can then integrate it with other methods.

The Spectrum of Coaching Practice – identifying the types of coaching most appropriate for Gestalt

Mike Milan and Lucy West⁸ identified a continuum of coaching practice between "Performance Coaching" and "Development Coaching".

Performance Coaching is focused on improving task functioning. It has a strong results, goal and solution orientation and addresses what the coachee is doing and how to do it better.

Development Coaching is much more focused on the person, who the coachee is, the beliefs and attitudes that support or hinder their progress.

Robert Witherspoon and Randall White⁹, working on the same lines, added two further types at either end: Skills Coaching and Executive's Agenda.

Skills Coaching addresses a specific skill requirement, like sales or time management. It is similar to sports coaching, instruction or training.

Executive's Agenda took a wider perspective to address the issues of leadership and the identity of the executive in their role.

In my experience I could see that there was a level of coaching beyond Developmental that was much wider and deeper than Witherspoon's Executive's Agenda, addressing issues of personal identity and purpose. In my Masters research thesis I initially called this level Transformational coaching. Later I replaced the title with Existential coaching because it more accurately reflected the focus on the fundamental nature of the individual's existence, their core beliefs and in some cases, their spiritual aspirations.

So the Spectrum of Coaching Practice flows through the four coaching levels of Skills, Performance, Developmental and Existential.

8. Milan, M and West, L (2001) *The Reflecting Glass: Professional Coaching for Leadership Development*, Palgrave Macmillan.

9. Robert Witherspoon, Randall P White (1997) *Four Essential Ways That Coaching Can Help Executives*, Center For Creative Leadership.

Where a coaching intervention sits in that spectrum will determine the nature and character of that encounter. Let's examine the spectrum and look at the:

- Origins of each level of coaching
- Orientation and focus of activity
- Learning processes
- Output, measurement, motivation and goals
- Coaching Practice

The origins of each type of coaching

Skills and Performance coaching draw on the tradition of adult education, sports coaching and competency-based assessment centres, building on the experiences of instruction, training and assessment to achieve behavioural targets. As coaching became more established, Cognitive Behavioural coaching, Solution Focused approaches, NLP, Hypnotherapy and Inner Game methods were incorporated.

Developmental and Existential coaching draw much more on the Humanistic Psychology tradition of personal growth. The psychological influences were Person Centred Counselling, Gestalt, Transactional Analysis, and Psychosynthesis as well as Psychodynamic, Jungian, Existential and Ontological approaches. It can be seen as a regeneration of the values and practices of the 1980's Human Potential Movement pioneered by figures like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, promoting personal and spiritual growth and the idea of self-actualisation.

Orientation and focus of activity of the types of coaching

In Skills and Performance coaching the thrust for change is to 'be different'. There are clear identifiable future-focused goals to be attained and the exploration is first a gap analysis and then activities to bridge that gap. Through effort, determination and repetition, cognitive and behavioural change is embedded and functional skills are maximised.

Developmental and Existential coaching, on the other hand, are concerned with changing values, attitudes and core beliefs by working primarily at the emotional, somatic (*body*) and spiritual level, as well as a more profound cognitive level. There is a greater emphasis on 'becoming aware and accepting who you are' and allowing change to happen without effort – very much the domain of Gestalt.

The learning processes

Learning through Skills coaching is heavily subject-oriented, developing a skill through theoretical understanding, practice and feedback. Gestalt has little to offer here, unless the skill to be developed is awareness and the ability to have a constructive conversation with yourself.

Performance coaching is about learning how to do something better to get results. It is about understanding the self in relation to the tasks to be accomplished and how to access support from others as you perform those tasks. The emphasis is on resilience and determination in overcoming obstacles to new ways of thinking and behaving. The bulk of the learning takes place outside the coaching session, back in the work context. The Gestalt approach can make a contribution to developing the coachee's awareness of how they are performing the tasks and rehearsing new behaviours in the coaching session, but it will have less impact than other methods.

Learning through Developmental coaching focuses on who the coachee is in their experience of life and understanding the psychological drivers and blocks to sustained fulfilment. There is a greater emphasis on improving the quality of connection, so the relationship with the coach is a key area of interest. It is much more about experiential learning and change within the coaching session. Understanding the nature of acceptance and learning to be who you are, become the hallmarks of this methodology. Performance objectives are viewed as the context in which the development occurs rather than the focus of it. As you will see as you read this handbook, Gestalt has a great deal to offer here.

In Existential coaching the learning shifts to a more profound level, exploring questions like 'why am I here?' and 'what's the purpose?'. It is about learning to let go, to stop striving and to develop the capability of non-attachment through reflection, contemplation and mindfulness practice. By becoming a more rounded and integrated person, the tasks and objectives of work or life are handled effectively and unconsciously. Many aspects of the Gestalt approach are appropriate here, such as learning to be present, to let go and to be aware without effort.

Output, measurement, motivation and goals

Because Skills and Performance coaching address cognitive and behavioural change it is possible and even desirable to have measures against targets – often referred to as 'Evidence Based Practice'. You can verify the change by looking at the evidence. The goal is clarity and certainty in thought and action – an afterthought in the Gestalt approach.

Developmental coaching on the other hand does not easily lend itself to measurement. The change is in attitude and values, which are much more subjective, intangible and not easily observable. A coachee may not work harder or faster but will feel happier, create a better working environment and be likely to be more effective. The motivation is personal growth, resulting in the ability to be assertive and confident or manage anxiety, ambiguity and uncertainty. Gestalt sits clearly in this camp as its purpose is personal growth.

Measurement is seen as inconsequential and outcomes are expected to be intrinsic in Existential coaching. Zen principles like ‘action through inaction’ or ‘trust the process’ predominate. Complexity and uncertainty are a given, so outputs are indefinable. Being calm, focused and inspirational with the capability for immediacy, adaptability, fluidity and flexibility are the resulting outcomes. Gestalt has a lot to contribute here, with the emphasis on being in the present and creative adaptation.

Coaching Practice

Skills and Performance coaching, because of the attention to goals and action planning, is more applicable for management and operational issues. The GROW model and its variants are ideal in these situations. The coach needs to be efficient and well structured, holding the coachee to the identified tasks and ensuring there is an effective Wrap Up and actions going forward. It can be helpful if the coach is an expert in the subject area so as to be able to draw on their experience to ask pertinent questions. The use of competency frameworks, psychometrics or 360 feedback are useful frames for the coaching.

Developmental and Existential coaching requires greater capability on the part of the coach to handle an emergent process based on a guiding purpose rather than on clear objectives. This level is more suited to senior leadership issues, where intangible objectives such as values, vision, and inspiration are required. With an emphasis on emotional, somatic and spiritual development, the coach needs to have more psychological expertise, and Gestalt is one of the prime approaches.

The table overleaf provides a snapshot of several types of coaching and a summary of these aspects.¹⁰

10. With reference to West, L and Milan, M (2001) *The Reflecting Glass*, Palgrave MacMillan.

The Spectrum of Coaching Practice

	SKILLS	PERFORMANCE	DEVELOPMENTAL	EXISTENTIAL
Origin	Sports	Competency based Assessment Sports Psychology	Counselling Psychotherapy	Religious/Spiritual Personal Growth
Psychological Approaches	Sports Psychology NLP Inner Game	Cognitive behavioural NLP Hypnotherapy	Gestalt Psychoanalysis Rogerian person- centered	Gestalt Jungian analysis Existentialism Psychosynthesis
PROCESS				
Timeframe	Depends on the skill and the standard	Short term and specific	Medium term and broad	Life time and unknown
Orientation	Present - Future	Present - Future	Past - present	Present
Focus of activity	Acquisition of specific skills	Goal orientated Solution focused Business objectives Corporate priority	Person centered Personality focused Personal objectives	Reason for existing/ living/ being Nature of existence Spiritual/Transpersonal
Change	Behaviour	Behaviour	Values and attitudes	Core beliefs
Mode	Behavioural Practical Functional	Rational/Cognitive/ Behavioural	Emotional/Physical	Spiritual Religious
Coaching Session practice	Focus on the specific component that is to be practised	Focus on what the goals and outcomes for the session are	Focus on how the coachee is doing, feeling in the relationship	Totally emergent - whatever is figural at the moment
PEOPLE				
Learning	From others Practicing How can I do it better Single loop	Doing What am I doing How can I do it better	Doing and Reflecting Who am I doing it How can I be a better person Double loop	Being Why am I doing it - what's the point How can I live better Triple loop
Self	Self in relation to skill acquisition	Self in relation to task	Self in relation to others	Self in relation to 'god'
Work focus	Coachee - specific skill	Coachee task	Coach - Coachee relationship	Coachee - 'god' relationship
OUTPUT				
Motivation	To be the best at the skill	Doing better next time Ambition Competence	Managing psychological blocks and drivers	Letting go Free of achieving and striving
Goal	Action	Knowledge	Experience	Wisdom
Driven by	Mastery of a skill	Achievement - Targets	Personal growth	Nothing - Non-action
Aiming for	Ability to master as specific activity	Clarity focus and certainty	Clarity out of ambiguity Direction from uncertainty	Accepting ambiguity/ complexity Uncertainty as given
Measurement of success	Standard of achievement	Behavioural - task completion	Job satisfaction and self worth	Sense of well being

Summary

Gestalt Therapy originated from the Gestalt Psychology movement of the 1920's. The founders of the Gestalt Therapy approach were Fritz and Laura Perls in USA during the 1950's and 60's and its development was strongly influenced by many radical humanistic psychologists of the time.

Gestalt is a German word meaning 'whole', 'complete' or 'pattern'. When we see a picture, rather than a group of separate objects on a canvas, we do this by compensating for the ambiguous spaces or gaps to make sense of it. We have a innate desire to complete and finish every interaction.

Tools and techniques have a place, but for a Gestalt coach, the most important tool is the coach themselves.

Gestalt is more an attitude – a perspective – but with a strong theoretical underpinning. It is complex, paradoxical and sometimes ambiguous. The five basic principles focus on:

1. Awareness
2. How we do things rather than why
3. Being present in the here and now
4. The quality of the relationship
5. Paradoxical nature of change

Gestalt coaching can be most effective in working with:

- Relationships and identity
- Ambiguity, confusion, uncertainty about direction
- Dilemmas
- Visioning and strategy
- Creativity and innovation

It is not so effective when the work is about:

- Targets and results
- Tactical objectives
- Concrete, step-by-step action planning
- Logical conceptualising
- Learning a new skill or acquiring new knowledge

The Spectrum of Coaching Practice flows through the four coaching levels:

- 1. Skills:** addresses a specific skill requirement
- 2. Performance:** is focused on improving task functioning with a strong results and solution orientation
- 3. Developmental:** focused on the person, their emotional experience, beliefs and attitudes
- 4. Existential:** addressing the fundamental nature of the individual's identity and existence, their core beliefs and values

A Gestalt approach works more at the Developmental and Existential levels.

In order to intervene at a particular level of the spectrum the coach needs to understand:

- Theoretical roots to each level of coaching
- Orientation and focus of activity
- Learning processes expected of the coachee
- Output, measurement, motivation and goals required
- Capability of the coach and context they are working in

