

TEAM AND GROUP COACHING

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CHAPTER 9

Team and Group Coaching

Given that the concept of ‘team coaching’ is still relatively new¹, the notion of the Gestalt approach to team coaching is at the leading edge. In this chapter, we will be looking at how the core principles already covered in this book apply to working in groups and teams. In so doing, will be taking a step into new territory!

Teams and Groups

It may be stating the obvious, but as you move from coaching one-to-one to coaching a group, several important factors change:

It is much easier to raise awareness of the process of ‘contact and withdrawal’ (*Chapter 2, the Contact – Withdrawal rhythm*), and to work with it by encouraging group members to explore how they contact (or not) each other.

The larger the group, the more complex the multiple perspectives and ‘agendas’ at play become, with the implication that there will be multiple potential ‘figures of interest’ (*Chapter 2, Figure and Ground*).

Whilst in one-to-one coaching the “system” in the room is limited to a two-person dyad, when working with groups there is a fully functioning system actually in the room. This opens up possibilities of working explicitly with raising awareness of ‘systemic’ processes, ie whole group/sub-group and the interplay between.

We will explore these themes in the rest of this chapter and show how to apply the core principles of Gestalt coaching beyond the 1:1 context. Whilst the approaches I describe can be applied to work with both groups and teams, a bit more should be said about the nature of teams, the distinction between teams and groups, and what this means for the Gestalt team coach.

Difference between Teams and Groups

The distinction is primarily that teams have a common purpose with shared objectives and that achieving those shared objectives requires interdependent and collective action over a sustained period of time. In a high performing team, the joint output will be much greater than the

1. See, Hawkins, P, *Leadership Team Coaching*, (2011).

individuals could achieve separately. Needless to say, creating and maintaining this highly functioning system requires a lot of commitment.

A group, on the other hand, is a collection of independent individuals coming together to share information or address a task. However, outside that time together, there is no accountability or responsibility to the whole or for common objectives. Many organisations will talk about teams when they are, in fact, groups. For example, a loosely connected group of managers who share broad organisational strategy and objectives and report to the same leader but are not truly interdependent outside the time they meet together.

However, when together in meetings, teams and groups have the same interpersonal demands so, from a Gestalt perspective (*where the focus is on interaction in the here and now*), the theories and practices are applicable to both.

Therefore, as we go through this chapter, for simplicity I will use the term 'Team' to include 'Group'.

Contact and interruption to contact in a team context

When working with a team, it is much easier to raise awareness of, and work with, the process of 'contact and withdrawal'. The Gestalt coach pays particular attention to the patterns of interaction, and observes the quality of engagement, ie how team members contact each other and how they interrupt contact.

Exercise:

Think of the teams that you have either been a member of or have worked with as a coach or facilitator.

First, think of a time when that team really felt as though it were in 'flow', ie everyone was engaged, energy levels were high, things seemed to flow smoothly, differences were not suppressed but worked with creatively and the team coalesced around a good outcome. What was going on that enabled this to happen? What was it like? How did you feel?

Remember back in Chapter 3 when 'contact' was addressed? If I translate that concept to apply to the team, then the coach is working with them towards that point where the team engages fully with the figure of interest. If they are in effortless flow, they will make the (*right*) choice intuitively. Collective energy will be mobilised, which means that

they will take appropriate action to make good, clear, meaningful contact with each other in order to achieve a good outcome. In other words, the team will creatively adjust to its environment. In addition, given that the team is likely to have a particular purpose within the organisation, the team coach might also be paying attention to how the team is making contact (*or not*) with important stakeholders in the wider organisation.

Thus the work of the team coach is to heighten awareness, within the team, towards good contact, and the mobilisation of energy towards appropriate outcomes. As you think about the team in the exercise, it is likely that at least some of the above was happening, a healthy exchange around a common interest and energetic mobilisation towards an outcome that everyone felt certain about.

Exercise:

Now think of a time when this was definitely not the case. How would you describe what happened? What was going on that contributed to this? What was it like for you?

There were probably many contributing factors. Let's first revisit something covered in Chapter 3: the interruptions to contact. Unless the team you were thinking about was newly formed, then it will have its own unique history. It is very likely that the members will have established some habitual ways of relating, eg taken on particular roles (*some conscious, like chair or note taker; others unconscious, like the one who always challenges or placates*). When these become fixed, they block contact, block creativity and block the team from healthy adaptation to their environment.

The role of the team coach, then, is to help raise awareness of the team's patterns of interrupting contact.

Exercise:

Think again of your team. Picture them in the room with you. Tune into what you hear them saying, what you see them doing. Now see what answers you might have to some of these questions:

Introjection

What are their rigid patterns of 'shoulds', 'oughts', 'musts', ie what rules have the team introjected about eg 'how they should be' with each other or with other parts of the system in the organisation?

Projection

What does the team project on to each other or out on to other parts of the system?

- Who do they blame?
- Who do they admire?
- Who do they complain about? eg 'The problem with the Board is that they always...'

Retroflection

- What gets 'acted out' within the team when the real object of its frustration, anger etc, is another part of the system?
- What do they each blame themselves for? What responses do they hold back from making to each other? How is this enacted in relation to other parts of the system.

Confluence

- When do they engage in 'group think' and lose the richness of their individual voices?
- How do they 'go along with' other parts of the system in the wider organisation without question?
- What never gets talked about in the team, as though they have an unconscious / unspoken 'pact' to avoid 'difficult' material?

To help the team become more aware of these patterns, a coach might suggest that they engage with a range of active experiments designed to highlight these interruptions. We'll look at some of these experiments later in this chapter.

Multiple cycles of experience

Think back once again to the examples of the teams. Again, as you think of your second example, the chances are that you were experiencing a phenomenon that sits right at the heart of one of the complexities of Gestalt team coaching. When you are working one-to-one there are only two cycles of experience in the room, the coach's and the coachee's. However, when you are working with a team, there are multiple cycles of experience.

The big implication of this is that each person's experience of the same team event will be different (*people will hear different things, make different connections etc.*). Edwin Nevis adds that "What each will be able to attend to will vary, and what each will allow to come into awareness will be different". This is because everyone is unique.

The link with Figure and Ground

We each have our own unique history, past experiences, hopes and aspirations, anxieties, assumptions etc, and we (*unconsciously*) make sense of any new event through these filters. What may be in the foreground (*figural*) for me at a team meeting may be very different from what is figural for you.

The sum of these filters can be referred to as the individual's 'total situation'. The implication of this is that, in any situation in which we find ourselves, what stands out for us (*ie what becomes 'figural' and the meaning we subsequently make from it*) derives from the total situation of this individual under this set of circumstances.

Furthermore, what traditionally might have been described as 'resistance' is seen, when viewed through a Gestalt lens, as a system made of up different but equally valid wants and needs.

Now, when working with an individual you go through the process of raising awareness, which allows the real 'figure of interest' to emerge from the 'ground', gain momentum and lead to mobilisation towards a meaningful resolution. The question is: how does this happen in a team, when there are significant differences in experience?

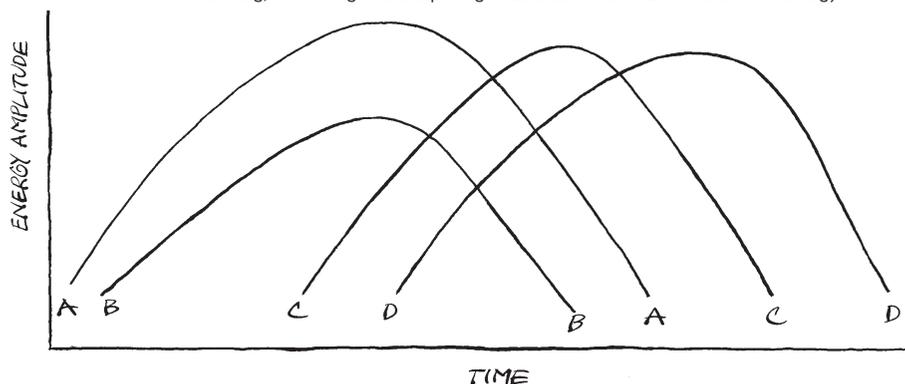
Extending the early work by the Cleveland Gestalt institute on the Gestalt Cycle of Experience (*see Chapter 3*), Joseph Zinker and Sonia March Nevis³ developed the notion of the 'Gestalt Interactive Cycle' to describe this process in small systems. The issue here is, how does the coach enable the team to arrive at a joint figure of interest, strong enough to lead to a meaningful outcome for the team?

2. Nevis, E, *Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach*, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland Press; New York: Gardner, (1987).

3. Zinker, J and Nevis, S, "*The Gestalt Theory of Couple and Family Interactions*", Working paper, Center for the Study of Intimate Systems, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, (1981). Their original work was with families, but the concept applies equally to teams.

Figure 9.1: Disjointed team⁴

Mobilising, Contacting and Completing at different times and varied levels of energy



Implications for the Coach

Perhaps the biggest implication for the Gestalt coach is to be confident to 'stay with and trust the process', particularly when there seem to be differences or even conflict between team members. Traditional team building might well have 'pushed' for agreement, which would simply have resulted in the team coalescing around a weak figure (*especially in a team prone to confluence*) and this, consequently, would have secured a low commitment to outcomes. Instead, as a Gestalt coach, you need to:

1. Work with the team in the here and now, eg: "What is going on right now between you?"
2. Continuously invite group members to disclose what they are thinking and feeling about the topic in hand;
3. Encourage genuine dialogue between members, eg: "Lesley, what happens to you, when you hear Paul say that?";
4. Articulate what you hear as the unspoken 'wants', and invite team members to articulate more directly what it is they want (*grumbles are usually disguised wants*);
5. Use your own 'presence', ie pay close attention to your own reactions to the team, what the team is evoking in you, what images come to mind etc. and disclose some of these in the service of raising their awareness of what is going on, eg: "As I listen to and observe you in this conversation, the image of the starlings on my birdfeeder fighting for seeds comes to mind. What image would you use to describe your own experience right now?"

4. Taken from *Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach*, by Edwin Nevis, page 39. Reprinted with permission of Gestalt Press.

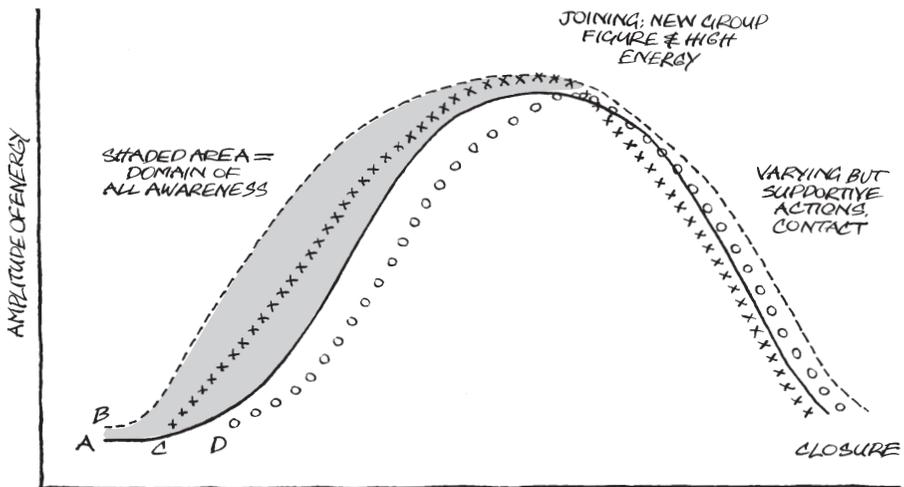
Stay with this process even when it feels very uncomfortable including, or perhaps especially, for you the coach! As Nevis says: “The aim of this phase is to achieve the fullest, widest band of awareness possible”⁵.

This approach draws on several of the key Gestalt principles that are already familiar to you from earlier chapters. Chapter 2 described the process of being ‘present’ and working in the ‘here and now’ as the process of achieving high-level awareness and in Chapter 8 we talked about dialogue and disclosure as important processes in making good contact with your client. In the process above, the team coach is attending to these processes within him or herself and at the same time both role modelling these skills for the team and encouraging them to try them out in the here and now.

This means that as the team interacts, the individual cycles meet, and if team members engage in the process described above, then the energy arising from the new awareness leads to a new figure of interest, which is newly co-created by the group.

The team coach is essentially helping the team to arrive at a new meaning, over and above the meaning that individuals were placing on the team event, and meaning making is core to Gestalt philosophy.

Figure 9.2: Integrated team⁶
Individuals contacting at the same point with reasonable consistency of energy



5. Nevis, E, *Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach*, Gestalt Press, (1981), p 31.

6. Taken from *Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach*, by Edwin Nevis, page 32. Reprinted with permission of Gestalt Press.

Meaning making happens in the here and now

There is another nuance to meaning-making which is relevant to the team coach. As we said earlier, each person's experience of the same team event will be different and what becomes 'figural' (*ie the meaning we make*) derives from each person's unique set of influences. However, despite what the individual team members bring with them into the room from their unique circumstances, the team coach always has to hold in mind that meaning is being made now by this group, under these circumstances in the here and now.

The past is remembered now and the future is fantasised about now. Both of these are part of the current situation in the present moment. It is the present circumstances, which are affecting, for example, how the past is evoked. The team coach needs to help the team become interested in how the past is being remembered (*reconstructed*) now.

Implications for the team coach

This means that the team coach needs to be listening for the team's war stories, fantasies, and hopes for the future and then help them make meaning of them in the present, ie what do the war stories mean to the team here and now? The coach would then explore those stories, fantasies and hopes through active experimentation, with a view to raising the team's awareness of what the real issues are.

EXAMPLE

Coach: I have heard many of you talk a number of times about 'how things were' before the merger. I am thinking it might be of use to you to explore this further and invite you to try something... How about you all stand up, and move around the room in relation to one another, until you find a physical representation of how it was for you before the merger. There are no rights or wrongs, it is an opportunity to discover...

(team members tentatively move, pause, move again, until they find a good enough representation).

Coach: OK, let's hear from each of you. As you stand there and look around at your colleagues, what do you experience?

Paul: I notice how far away Brian and Lesley are from me here.

Coach: And as you say that, what do you experience?

Paul: I feel a bit annoyed.

At this point the coach could do a number of things:

- On an intrapersonal level – she could ask Paul to ‘hold onto that’ whilst they hear from the rest of the team
- On an interpersonal level – she might ask Paul to say that directly to Brian and Lesley and find out what impact it has on them;
- On a group level – she might ask how this exchange is a reflection of the dynamics of the group;
- On a systemic level – she might speculate on the parallel processes between what’s happening in the group with the organisational dynamics.

The whole purpose would be to heighten awareness of the ‘unfinished business’ left over from the merger that is still impacting in the present.

The ‘team figure’ can also be the team’s blind spot

In the previous section we have been talking about the implications for the team and team coach for having multiple individual cycles of experience in the room and how the coach can work with the team to co-create a new and jointly owned figure.

However, most teams have some form of history within the context of their overall organisation. They will hold some view of themselves in relation to other sub-systems (*teams, functions*) in the organisation (“*We are the ones who...*”, “*They are the ones who...*”). Whilst this was probably based on experience at some point, it invariably morphs into assumption and projection, which might now be getting in the way with good quality communications with others beyond the team.

Implications for the team coach

The role of the team coach is to attend to the functioning of the team at a number of levels, including what is happening within the team (*our focus so far*) and what is happening in the space between the team and important aspects of their environment.

Periodically the team coach needs to shift their attention from micro level interactions to consider the macro level environment and ask what might be the ‘team figure’ at play at any particular point in time? Is there a fixed gestalt that is preventing good contact between the team and their wider world?

Again, think of a team that you are familiar with:

- How do they describe themselves in relation to other teams/sub groups?
- What metaphors, images do they use when talking about people beyond the team?
- In order to deliver what they need to deliver, what is the breadth and level of the people outside the team that they're communicating with?
- Importantly, who do they never or rarely speak of or to?
- What are the relationships that could be more connected for the team to be more effective?

If you were working with this team right now, what experiment could you invite them to try that would raise their awareness of these questions?

Coach presence

Returning to the notion that meaning-making happens in the here and now, there is another vitally important aspect to consider. A significant feature of the current circumstance, the 'here and now' experience of the team, is the very presence of the team coach.

In working with the team in the ways described above, the coach is helping to create and shape the current reality of everyone in that room. This includes the coach herself. The very way the coach behaves influences the situation and will have consequences for the team (*just as everything the team does has consequences for the coach*). What the individuals in the team chose to reveal (*consciously and unconsciously, spoken and non-verbal*) will be informed by how the coach 'shows up', ie our notion of Signature Presence (*see Chapter 10*).

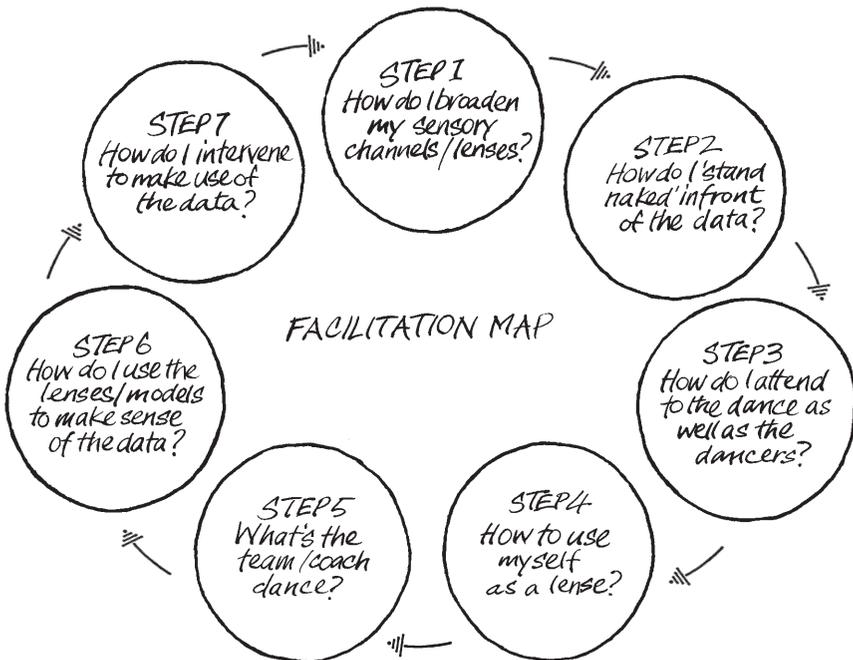
Implications for the team coach

Presence is much more than how 'professional' you are as a team coach. It includes how 'grounded' you are in yourself and your work. It is also the ability to be aware of what is going on within yourself and between yourself and the team in the here and now, and to be prepared to articulate some of this to the team as one way of 'making contact'. You do this of course in the service of their awareness. Once developed, this becomes a 'way of life' for the Gestalt coach, but developing this capacity requires a complex set of capabilities. We have developed a process that helps the team coach become as 'present' as it is possible to be with a group or team, the steps below make up the Seven-Step facilitation map:

Developing Coach Presence

We have developed a process that helps the team coach become as 'present' as it is possible to be with a group or team. The steps are illustrated in figure 9.3 below and we will now work through this Seven-Step Facilitation Map, step by step.

Figure 9.3
Seven-Step Facilitation map



Step 1: How do I broaden my sensory channels/lenses?

From the minute we engage with the team we are already seeing them through our established lenses – our assumptions/models about what 'healthy team functioning' is, our frameworks that describe group processes, etc. Step 1 invites us to:

- Know what our lenses, assumptions and biases are
- Put them to one side, so that we might be able to stay with the 'raw data' before moving too early into interpretation
- Learn how to broaden our sensory channels, eg: looking out at the team and turning inward to experience our own reactions by fully using our different senses; visual (*seeing their non-verbal patterns*), auditory (*hearing their images/metaphors*), sensory (*your internal reactions, experiences of the energy patterns*)

Step 2: How do I stand naked in front of the data?

Standing naked in front of the data means adding nothing of one's own 'stuff', ie no interpretations, evaluations, hypotheses, no self-talk. This is about learning to distinguish between 'data' and inference/interpretation/intuition. It is the difference between saying "Members of the team often speak at the same time" (*a description of the phenomenology*) and saying "Team members interrupt each other" (*an evaluation*) or "They are so keen to get their view across they don't listen to each other" (*an interpretation*).

Step 3: Attending to the dance, as well as the dancers

This requires you to 'see' as opposed to 'look'. 'Looking' implies that you are looking out for something, which is inevitably done through some model (*eg looking to see what roles the team members adopt*). Here you need 'soft eyes' – to wait for the pattern to emerge as figure from the ground. Useful metaphors that help this include, 'If this were a dance, what kind of dance would it be?'; 'If it were a type of music, what would it be?' etc.

Step 4: Self as lens

This is the ability to be in the here and now ie to tune into what is going on within yourself (*your reactions to the team, what is getting evoked in you, what images or metaphors come to mind, what sensations are stimulated*) as you are impacted by them, and to disclose some of this in the service of their learning. Philosophically/theoretically it is based on the notion that these reactions have arisen within the interaction of the current system (*of which you are a part*) and, therefore it is reasonable to

assume that has some relevance to them as a system. An important feature of this step is to explore what impact your disclosure has had on them, whether it makes any sense to them.

Step 5: What's the team/coach dance?

Step 5 requires you to hold in mind that, as coach in the room with this team, you are also a part of their current system. This can give you another rich source of data if you are able to (*for a moment*) mentally stand back and consider what kind of pattern/dance is unfolding between you and the team? Do they tend to wait for your guidance/interventions? Do they push back on everything you say? Do some push you whilst others try to rescue you? Do they sometimes act as though you don't exist?

In reality there tends to be an oscillation between steps 4 and 5, ie you notice your own reaction evoked by the team dynamics (*Step 4*) this prompts you to get curious about the team/coach dance (*Step 5*), then back to Step 4 as you check out your part in the dance. This enables you to speculate on the 'parallel process': is what's happening in the room mirroring what happens 'out there' between the team and other subsystems in their organisation? As in Step 4, the art then lies in deciding which of these observations to disclose to the team, in the service of their learning.

EXAMPLE

Team Coach: “As I have been watching and listening to you in the last ten minutes, I have become aware of a strong image as I hear you talk about your current project... I pictured you all engaged in a kind of jive dance, except there were moments of fluidity when you all seemed to know the movements without effort, and then a long period where you were bumping into each other, or missing the hand clasps...”
(*pause for reaction... then if no or little reaction...*)
“Does that image have any meaning for you in relation to the project?”

Step 6: How do I use the lenses to help me and them make sense of the data?

Step 6 refers to your sense making through the lenses of those theoretical models and experiences that you bring to your work, the very ones that you were required to put to one side in Steps 1 and 2. By this stage you can use the models more 'cleanly' – your choice of lens is now informed by the data that you have gathered (*and can guide your sense*

making). Had you used them earlier they would certainly have narrowed the focus of your data gathering.

Step 6 will include sharing those lenses/models (*eg the Gestalt Cycle of Experience or other models of team effectiveness*) with the team, getting their buy-in to those lenses, and working with them in collaborative inquiry and sense-making. It will also include broadening my own range of ways in which I engage the team members in this process of sense-making, which brings us to Step 7.

Step 7: How do I intervene to make use of the data?

Up until now I have been exploring different ways of engaging with the data (*gathering it and making sense of it*). Step 7 is concerned with the many ways in which you can intervene with a team to take their awareness raising and meaning making forward. From a Gestalt perspective this might include:

- **Sharing the phenomenological data:** “A pattern that I have been seeing that you may not be aware of is...(describe the data)”
- **Coach Presence and use of self:** disclosing your own reactions and responses as a way of sharing information and raising their awareness
- **Active experimentation:** offering a process of exploration, via an experiment to try out (*Chapter 6*), that enables their patterns of interaction and team dynamics to become highlighted, such as Constellations (*taken from Bert Hellinger’s work – see Chapter 7*), Sculpting (*taken from the world psychodrama?*), or methods from Transactional Analysis (*eg working with the drama triangle⁸ etc*). As well as these existing methods there are also those that you create in the moment with the team, and in these you are limited only by your own imagination and bravery! Such experiments would typically arise from picking up the language and metaphors used by the team and exploring whether they are interested in ‘playing’ with the metaphor (*eg ‘it feels like we are wading through treacle...’ or ‘we are forever going around in circles...’ might lead to some interesting work with them actually trying this out in the room!*)

7. Karp, M, Holmes, P, and Bradshaw-Tauvon, K (Eds.), *The Handbook of Psychodrama, (1998)*, Routledge.

8. James, M and Jongeward, D, *Born to Win: Transactional Analysis with Gestalt Experiments*, Da Capo Press, 4th Edition, (1996).

Raising Awareness vs. Making Something Happen

In Chapter One and Chapter Six we drew the distinction between the Gestalt Coach's role in attending to raising awareness versus making something happen, and we linked this to the paradoxical theory of change principle. If we apply this same thinking to Gestalt team coaching, then, if a team, via the collective experiences of the members of a team, become more aware of who they are and of what is actually going on, then something will shift and change as a result.

This can be particularly challenging for team coaches who have come from an organisation development/consulting background where they would typically be brought into the organisation by a sponsor (*eg senior manager, who might also be the team leader*) who has identified that the team could be functioning more effectively in some way or another (*the desired outcome*). In team facilitation the facilitator would typically agree the terms of reference (*contract, outcomes, methods etc.*) with this senior sponsor. This means it is the sponsor who sets the agenda to which the facilitator then designs the intervention and then works towards delivering what has been agreed.

However, as you have seen, trying to make something happen by concentrating on what you want to happen, rather than examining what is actually happening, often results in short term compliance rather than long lasting and sustainable change.

Implications for the Coach

This has a particular meaning for the Gestalt team coach. The ability to work with what is rather than trying to engage the team in what is not (*ie the paradoxical theory of change*) is paramount to our approach, but equally, the ability to use a firm, often directive style to support their enquiry will help the team feel safe enough to experiment. The last thing a team needs is a tentative coach.

EXAMPLE **Coach 1:** I have heard a number of you use some metaphors to describe your meetings with the Phoenix team, and I, ummm, wondered if you might like to try a little experiment, ummm, try something out...

Versus:

Coach 2: I have heard a number of you use some colourful metaphors to describe your meetings with the Phoenix team. I have heard that you 'wade through treacle', you 'lose yourselves in the forest', that you 'can't find a way out of the maze'... In the spirit of exploring this further, I have an experiment you might be interested in trying. I have no idea where it will lead, but if you are up for finding out, here is my thinking...

Here the coach picks up on the language of the team, uses this to craft an experiment, and then puts this forward in a robust fashion. Furthermore, the coach indicates that she has no attachment to any outcome, and that the only goal is exploration. Her tone is firm enough to create a safety net, yet she would be willing to drop the idea at any time she sees that it is not useful to the team.

Coach: I picture you standing up, and imagining that maze is in this room. How about walking around the maze, and if you want to, you can also wade through treacle as you do so... and see what you become aware of. How does that sound?

She looks for genuine consent from members then helps them make the space. Should there be some that want to try it and others that don't, she can use their input to further craft the experiment:

Coach: Ok, that's fine, how about the two of you sit here, where you can simply observe the maze, as the others are in the maze, and you can also see what you become aware of whilst you observe.

There is no requirement that it should be done in any particular way and it is important that the team members experience being a part of co-creating their own experiments. When the experiment has run for a while (*the coach is listening and watching for a shift in energy that suggests a readiness to move on*)...

Coach: So... if you pause there, and let's hear from people... What are you aware of, thoughts, images, words, sensations, anything?

Lesley: I was wondering if they (*ie the Phoenix team*) also feel the same way as we do.

Paul: Yes, I felt the urge to shout "Come on everyone, let's just speak our minds!"

Carrie: I felt so tired, I found myself getting slower and slower.

Jonathan: You know, I wanted to go around and kick a couple of you up the rear and get you to get on with it, we must look pretty dull to them.

At this stage the team coach needs to remember Edwin Nevis: “What each will be able to attend to will vary, and what each will allow to come into awareness will be different”. So hearing from everyone without being tempted to follow the first ‘lead’ (*or the ‘lead’ that is most interesting to the coach*) is critical. Then, just like in one-to-one coaching when the coach hears a number of potential themes, the team coach gives the team the choice:

Coach: I have heard a number of themes any or all of which might be a fruitful avenue to explore further. We could explore whether the Phoenix team feel the same as you do and/or see you as dull; we could see what happened if everyone ‘spoke heir minds’; we could find out what happens if you get slower and slower, or even what it would be like to kick each other in the rear! As you hear those options, which are you drawn to? Or maybe it has triggered something different...

Again, the coach hears from each person, with the aim of arriving at a strong enough joint figure of interest, one that has enough traction to lead towards a meaningful outcome for the team.

Active Experimentation

As you can see, active experimentation (*see Chapter 6*) plays just as an important a role in Gestalt team coaching as it does in one-to-one coaching. The key difference is the continuous attention that the coach pays to co-creating a joint figure of interest when there are multiple perspectives. Just as with one-to-one coaching, if the coach is fully present and attending to their own imagery and the imagery used by the team, then the experiment flows from the work in hand. Coaches who are busy trying to work out the ‘killer experiment’ (*like the ‘killer question’*) are not fully present and are working too hard!

In the opening paragraphs of this chapter we said that one of the factors that changes between coaching one-to-one and coaching a team is that in working with a small system which is itself a part of a wider system opens up the possibilities of working explicitly with raising awareness of ‘systemic’ processes, ie whole group/sub-group and the interplay between them. Active experimentation provides a rich way of doing this and at many levels.

Subsystems within the whole system

First, within the team that you are working with, it is likely that you will have a number of sub-systems present. Some of these will be obvious (*different roles, possibly different grades*), but some will be less obvious and only become so when you start hearing and sensing potential ‘blockages’, eg “Well, you old timers are bound to see it differently”; “Well if you’d been here before the merger...” etc.

The methodology of Sculpting mentioned earlier gives a rich seam of possibilities.

To raise awareness of the role ‘history’ plays in the team’s identity, you might invite the team to enact a ‘time line’, to stand in a line starting with the longest serving member of the team and ending with the most recent person to join. Invite each one to say what it was like in the organisation when they joined, what mattered, what they miss, what they are glad to have moved on from (*you select your questions to chime with the issues that you think are in the system*). Variations might be age lines, experience lines etc.

To raise awareness of the sub-systems that might be at play within the wider system you could invite them to choose objects (*or drawings*) to represent the various sub-systems, and ask them to do a communal sculpt, ie to work together in placing the objects in relation to each other. This is less risky than asking them to stand as a sub-system in relation to one another, but if trust is high enough, doing it physically is very potent.

Bringing the wider system into the room

As we said earlier in this chapter, both executive coaching and team coaching occur within the organisational context but one critical difference lies in the sheer complexity of the systemic context and in the multiplicity of potential ‘agendas’ in team coaching. Bringing other systems into the room is a particularly valuable experiment that the Gestalt team coach can draw on. In itself this approach isn’t unique to Gestalt, but what makes it unique is how you then work with the data, by staying with the here and now, working for awareness rather than driving for action, exploring the experience team members have when they, for example, speak to or speak as the sub-system. There are many ways of doing this, here are some of our favourites:

- Using the space
- Using objects/pictures
- Exploring interruptions to contact

Using the space

Ask the team to map out all their stakeholders and critical sub-systems in the organisation. Invite them to place chairs (*or areas on the floor marked with flipchart paper*) in the room to represent each of these, which might include a blank space for the ‘forgotten/missing’ piece. After this, there are many options. For example, invite them to sit in each chair/stand in each of the places and speak as that stakeholder (*eg what it feels like to be there, how they perceive the rest of the system as they look around, how they see the team, what needs they have etc.*). You could have one team member per stakeholder, or each person takes a turn with each stakeholder (*we tend to set out the options and see what they are interested in*). Once all positions have been explored, you might ask the team to stand back and look at the system and ask what strikes them most strongly about what’s happening in the system.

Another approach would be a systemic version of the two-chairs/empty chair exercise, ie invite the team (*again all of them or some of them*) to say what they would really like to say to each stakeholder, then explore what it was like to do this. You might then follow with inviting them to sit as the stakeholder and offer a response.

Using objects / Pictures

If you have an artefact rich environment or have brought some resources with you, ask the team to select a range of objects to represent each key stakeholder, key sub-systems and the team itself. Invite them to arrange the objects in relation to one another, where ‘relation’ might mean emotional closeness/distance of the relationships, level of trust etc.

One option would be to have team members arrive at the relational ‘sculpt’ together; another would be to have different team members do it sequentially, ie to explore different people’s perspectives. Following that, you could invite them to use the objects chosen as a metaphor for the person/sub-system the object was selected to represent, eg:

Lesley: (*holding a china mug selected to represent the Phoenix team*)
“The Phoenix team is smooth, a bit slippery, you can’t easily see into it, but you know it can be useful”

Another option might be to ask the team (*again this could be collectively or individually*) to draw a picture/image that represents each stakeholder/sub-system, and then you can play around with metaphor, space, indeed all of the above!

Clearly you are not working with the real sub-systems, but these experiments can reveal new insights about how the team sees other sub-systems and how those systems might see the team, which leads us to looking more closely at contact and interruption to contact.

Exploring interruptions to contact – Projection

It is easy to see how any of the experiments above could be used to explore what the team is projecting onto other subsystems/individuals in the organisation. The further step would be to help the team re-own their projection!

For example, if you have established that the team see the Phoenix Project team members as ‘stubborn, difficult and evasive’, you could:

- have each team member say aloud, “We are stubborn, difficult and evasive” in turn, and see what they experience as they say it and hear each other say it
- have them imagine themselves as the Phoenix team and get them to ‘talk to’ your team, saying “you are stubborn, difficult and evasive”... and ask the team to locate the grain of truth!

Exploring interruptions to contact – Introjection

This is about exploring what ‘rules’ the team are introjecting from elsewhere in the system. You could:

- invite the team to elicit the ‘shoulds’ and ‘oughts’ you could do a collective version of the exercise on page 106:

‘We have to...’

‘We must...’

‘We should...’

Then invite them to agree a different set:

‘We choose to...’

‘We want to...’

‘We’d like to...’

- do a variation on the projection exercise, and have the team stand in for various other sub-systems talking to your team...

‘You have to...’

‘You must...’

‘You should...’

You might invite the team to see how much of this is their own assumption, and how they might need to reframe their thinking in order to make the requirements on them feel less burdensome.

Exploring interruptions to contact – Confluence

If you notice that the team may have fallen into the trap of ‘group think’ and have lost the richness of their individual voices or you find yourself asking “what isn’t being voiced in the team?”:

- You might invite each member to experiment with voicing a totally different perspective to the one being voiced by the team, exaggerate it, play around with it, then ask them to share their experience of doing this.
- If the team is being confluent about themselves and how they want to be as a team, eg “We respect each other’s views” and you notice that this stifles any disagreement, you might try a ‘both/and’ experiment by inviting them to experiment with saying to one another variations on: “We can respect each other and express difference”. Again, you would ask them to share their experience of doing this.
- You then might ‘upgrade’ the challenge of the experiment, by inviting them to say directly to one another “I can respect you and I can disagree with you”.

Finally, as we have said before, the relevant experiment is likely to flow from what you are hearing, seeing and experiencing in the here and now as you work with the team, and it is also likely to depend on what the current figure of interest is within the team. The experiments might focus any of the following:

- Bringing the stakeholders into the room
- Exploring the team members’ relationship with their core purpose
- Engaging the team to develop more effective contact with one another
- Helping to unblock fixed gestalts, integrate different aspects of the team
- Exploring how the team view their wider world
- Helping the team explore their learning journey together

Using the Cape Cod Model with teams

The Origins of the Cape Cod Model lie in the work of Sonia March Nevis during the 1960s and 1970s as she worked as a therapist with couples and families. Later, she and her colleague Joe Melnick at the Gestalt International Study Centre in Cape Cod developed it into a powerful methodology for working with teams and small systems within organisations. It provides a methodology for team and group coaches to observe a team in action, share key observations with them and engage the team in conversations that lead to greater effectiveness through an increased behavioural repertoire.

Typically it is a process facilitated by two team coaches; a lead coach who has conversations with the team directly, and a shadow coach, whose role is to support the lead coach.

The underlying philosophy

Like the positive psychology movement, the initial focus is on what is 'well developed' in the system, what they are already doing well and/or a lot of. This could be thought of as a strength, although the language of the model tends to steer away from evaluative phrases like 'strength' which implies some external standard of good or acceptable behaviour. Instead the model encourages the use of more descriptive phrases like 'One of the things this team is already able to do is...'; 'This team is highly capable of...' followed by a description of what is positive for the team about this: '...and when they do this, I can see their passion and energy...'

Knowing what sustains the system and recognising the positive helps individuals hear about and deal with the flipside. Any behaviour can tip into something less helpful, 'a strength on overdrive' reveals the developmental 'edge' of the system ie what is missing in the system that would create a more healthy balance. When the team begins to feel more optimistic about their process it infuses energy into the system and supports new learning (*new awareness*).

It is not about reframing what the individuals in the system do (*ie it does not strive to place a positive spin on their behaviour*), in Gestalt terms, it aims to facilitate the emergence of a joint figure, which when happens, infuses the system with energy.

The process

The process is a four stage one:

1. Initial phase (*observing the system interacting*)
2. Phase two (*intervening on what is 'well developed'*)
3. Phase three (*intervening on 'what is less developed'*)
4. Phase four (*the experiment*)

Initial phase (*observing the system interacting*)

The lead coach begins by clearly contracting with the team that one of their roles is to observe the system in action and feedback observations to them 'real time'. He or she then invites the team to talk with one another, keeping the 'brief' deliberately vague, eg "talk about something that is important to you", eg:

What we are going to do is ask you to turn to each other and talk about something that's important to you.

We will sit back, and we will say something if we see anything that might be of interest to you.

If any of you are stuck at any time, please turn to us, we are still very much with you.

The coaches then pull their chairs away, to create a clear boundary between themselves and the team. So what are the coaches attending to?

- They are watching for the 'melody' of the team's process. As we have discussed already, the art is learning to see the phenomenological data and describe it in a way that energises the team. This takes the form of positively framed comments about what is observed of the relationship between the individuals. Note that the coaches will also see what isn't very effective in the team's process, but at this stage, the focus is on what is 'strong' about their process ie what they do a lot, even if it doesn't appear to be very effective. For example, in a team that is doing a lot of fighting, one optimistic comment might be that "*They certainly have a lot of energy for engaging with one another*" or for teams that transmit but don't listen: "*They really are committed to having their views heard by the others*"
- They pay little attention to the 'content' focusing more on the energy and quality of contact in their relationships

To do this, the coaches need the patience to observe with ‘soft eyes’ (*ie they are not searching for something, but waiting to see what emerges*). They sit back, relaxed, taking it all in, having the courage to sit with ‘not knowing’ where things are going, and trusting that a clear figure will emerge.

Phase two (*intervening on what is ‘well developed’*)

At a point when the coaches (*communicating non-verbally between each other*) believe that they have seen something that might be of interest to the team, the lead facilitator interrupts the team’s conversation and calls an explicit ‘time-out’. He or she invites the team to listen to the coaches’ conversation, with no requirement to respond. The coaches then turn to one another and talk between themselves about the positive things they see happening in the system in the room.

- Their discussion focuses on one positive aspect at a time, what strikes each coach most noticeably, keeping descriptions clear and simple
- They describe the team’s positive intentions and don’t reinforce negative behaviour. Based on the paradoxical theory of change, the better the coaches describe what is, the more capable the system becomes of exploring what it is not
- They use metaphor for descriptions of their own experience: *I get a picture of the orchestra warming up...*

When finished the lead coach explicitly invites the team to say if the intervention has ‘landed’ eg:

Does that make sense to you?

The coach doesn’t move away until they have said a clear yes or no, and if they say no, the coach lets it drop. He or she then invites the team to continue their conversation. There is no requirement for the team to discuss what they have heard, although most do. There might be two rounds of this, just talking about what is well developed in the system.

Phase three (*intervening on ‘what is less developed’*)

The coaches pay close attention to the energy flow within the system, using the Cycle of Experience as their compass, making a judgement about when the team is ready to hear about, and what might be blocking their effectiveness. In fact, in our experience, having heard about their strengths a few times, many teams move to this naturally (*which we might expect given the paradoxical nature of change*). So now the coaches are

observing and commenting on how ‘the well-developed’ behaviour can tip into something less useful, ie naming what might be the developmental edge of the system. Again there may be two rounds of team conversation/coach observation/coach intervention. How do the coaches do this?

- In conversation together, both coaches speculate on what might be missing
- When the lead coach returns to the team, he or she always makes awareness statements and avoids making suggestions, eg: *Have you noticed that you...? Are you aware that you don't...?*
- What you might need to develop is your capacity to...? (*listen as well as talk to one another*)
- Or if the team has already starting to speculate, the coach might ask them for their thoughts eg:
What is your guess about what you don't do well? What is not well-developed?

Phase four (*the experiment*)

The final phase is to offer the system an experiment to try out, which focuses on their actual behaviour. From experience, setting out the experiment is likely to begin with a description of what constitutes good 'dialogue' ie how to have direct, contactful, problem-solving conversations, which is followed by inviting the team to try it out. The key here is to let go of the content, it is not about solving a problem, but about learning how to solve a problem. So in true Gestalt fashion, the coach invites them to try out something different from their typical behavioural pattern, then asks about their experience of having done it:

- The coach explains clearly what the experiment is and the rationale:
What I have in mind for you to try...
I'm curious about what it would be like to...
How would it be if you were to...
- He or she then explicitly asks:
Does that interest you?
- As always it is important to work with ‘what is’, for example, if the team ‘resist’ the experiment, the coach integrates working with this resistance into the experiment. There is no change without resistance, if they act on it immediately, then it's not under-developed:

Ok, how about starting there, and test out saying to one another 'I am reluctant to try listening to you...' just to see what happens?

- After the experiment the coach invites the team to share experiences:

What was that like? /Tell me what you experienced as you did this?

Finally, the whole session is closed by inviting the team to articulate what they have learnt in the session and what they might want to try out for themselves between coaching sessions. If the coaches have been working with the here and now and tracking the energy of the team, it is usual for the team to leave a session feeling energised and motivated to carry on with the experiment in their subsequent team conversations.

Summary

Contact and Interruption to contact

Working with groups and teams provides an increased ability to raise awareness of and work with the process of ‘contact and withdrawal’ by encouraging group members to explore how they contact (*or not*) each other.

The coach pays attention to the patterns of interaction and quality of engagement and offers the team experiments to try that raise awareness of:

Introjection: What are the ‘rules’ the team have ‘swallowed whole’ and introjected from elsewhere in the system?

Projection: What does the team project out onto other sub-systems, who do they blame, who do they admire?

Retrofection: What gets ‘acted out’ within the team when the real object of frustration, anger etc. is another sub-system?

Confluence: When do they engage in ‘group think’ and lose the richness of their individual voices?

Multiple cycles of experience

The larger the team the higher the complexity, and there will be multiple potential ‘figures of interest’.

The coach works with the ‘here and now’ interactions of the team members and inviting them to explore ‘what is going on between them right now’.

Through engaging in this way, the individual cycles of experience meet and the energy arising from the new awareness leads to a new figure of interest, which is newly co-created by the group.

The ‘team figure’ can also be a blind spot

Whilst the co-created team figure provides energy for action, a well-established figure, especially when it has become a part of how the team identify themselves, can also be a ‘fixed gestalt’ which stifles creativity.

Coach Presence

What the individuals in the team chose to reveal will be informed by how the coach ‘shows up’, their presence.

The team coach learns to be aware of what is going on within himself, his co-coach and the team in the here and now, and be prepared to articulate some of this to the team as one way of ‘making contact’, in the service of

the team's awareness. The Seven-Step Facilitation Map offers a framework for developing these capabilities.

Step 1: How do I broaden my sensory channels/lenses?

Step 2: How do I stand naked in front of the data?

Step 3: Attending to the dance, as well as the dancers

Step 4: Self as lens

Step 5: What's the team/coach dance?

Step 6: How do I use the lenses to help me and them make sense of the data?

Step 7: How do I intervene to make use of the data?

Working with 'what is', not forcing change

The ability to work with what is rather than trying to engage the team in what is not (*paradoxical theory of change*) and drive towards change is a particular challenge for team coaches who have come from an organisation development/consulting background where a sponsor has identified a desired outcome.

The coach needs to develop a capacity for sitting with 'not knowing' and to trust that through active experimentation the team's level of awareness will rise, and change will occur.

Active Experimentation

The team coach pays attention to co-creating a joint figure of interest when there are multiple perspectives.

The team is part of a wider system, so the team coach works explicitly with raising awareness of 'systemic' processes. Active experimentation provides a rich way of doing this and at many levels.

Using the Cape Cod Model

This is a powerful methodology in which the coach shares his or her observations of the team and helps them recognise and appreciate what is already 'well developed', what is 'less developed' and potentially limiting, and offering experiments to help them develop their creative capability. Typically there are two coaches: a lead coach and a shadow coach in support.

The method offers four phases:

- 1.** Observing the system interacting
- 2.** Intervening on what is 'well developed'

3. Intervening on what is 'less developed'

4. Offering the experiment

Conclusion

Gestalt provides a rich source of support to the group and team coach. The cycle of experience offers an excellent compass for orientation through a coaching session. Where is the team's energy? What's in/not in awareness? How is/isn't energy being mobilised towards action? How is closure being/not being managed? How does the team move onto the next action without savouring the satisfaction of success etc? The practice of active experimentation brings creativity to the team coaching work, and the notion of bringing the coach's own presence into the relationship means that the work is both challenging and deeply rewarding.