

Commentary: Applying Gestalt Theory to Coaching¹

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Abstract

In his paper, Stuart Simon describes the evolution of the 'profession' of coaching over the last decade or so, and the relatively recent interest in the application of Gestalt theory to coaching. In this commentary I want first to support Stuart's assertion that "Gestalt theory easily lends itself to offering a significant contribution to the field of professional coaching" by drawing links with research and writing of other coaches who do not have a Gestalt background. Second, I want to explore a question raised by Stuart Simon but not answered: "what is the difference between coaching and therapy", particularly in the context of executive coaching where the work takes place within the organizational context.

Current writing on professional coaching

In a recent book, Erik de Haan (2008) pulls together the conclusions from a large number of studies into what ingredients contribute to effectiveness in one-to-one coaching, or 'helping conversations', as he defines coaching. He concludes that "the most important effective ingredients are the capacity for learning of the persons conducting the conversation and the quality of the relationship between the interlocutors" (p. viii). This is totally consistent with the Gestalt belief that growth is a result of an individual's contact and interactions with the environment, and with Stuart Simon's conclusion about how critical the relationship is to the effectiveness of coaching. When he says "It requires genuine interest in the client and availability by the coach to be 'contacted'", Stuart is referring to the requirement of the coach (as well as the coachee) to be open to learning.

In addition, Graham Lee (2003, p.10) says of leadership coaching: "The challenge of authentic leadership is that it demands awareness – self-awareness, awareness of others and organizational awareness. Such awareness provides the basis for conscious leadership, by which managers are able to examine their motives and make conscious judgements. Furthermore, they are able to identify unhelpful defences or reactions in themselves - perhaps a tendency to control or dominate based on a fear of failure, perhaps a fear of conflict and a desire to appease...". He puts the case that all coaches (of whatever orientation) working with leaders need to develop their competence in supporting their coachees in this journey of self exploration. Stuart Simon focuses on two aspects of Gestalt theory, contact and awareness. Contact surely lies at the heart of what de Haan says is a requirement of effective coaching, and increasing awareness is the essence of Lee's conclusion about what is needed for good leadership coaching. Furthermore, Lee adds that a bias towards performance/skills coaching, i.e. actively setting out to change behaviour, *discourages* effective leadership (p.16). Again this is consistent with Gestalt theory, in the shape of Arnold Beisser's Paradoxical Theory of Change (1970) which states that change occurs (paradoxically) when I fully become what I am, rather than trying to be what I am not, and that lasting change cannot be attained through coercion or persuasion. It is Lee's belief (after many years working with leaders) that whilst there is a need for the leader to become 'organizationally attuned', effective and lasting change will only occur when the coaching supports him or her to become more self-aware and to evolve a style of leadership that is 'personally distinctive' (i.e. becoming more of what one already is). Given the link between core Gestalt theory and what is becoming known about the efficacy of coaching, I am not surprised that, certainly in the UK, there is a significant and growing interest in the application of Gestalt principles to coaching.

Just as de Haan refers to coaching as a 'helping conversation', Richard Kilburg (2004) describes both coaching *and* therapy as 'enabling relationships', and says that both require an engagement with the personal and the practical. This leads onto the second aspect of this commentary, an exploration of the question Stuart Simon raises in his paper: "what is the difference between coaching and

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therapy?”, which enables me to develop some of the themes a colleague and I identified in a recently published article (Gillie & Shackleton, 2009).

Coaching and therapy

In his paper, Stuart Simon refers to teaching and learning as core components of the coaching relationship, which immediately brought to my mind Siminovich and Van Eron (2006, p. 50): “The Gestalt coaching encounter offers a safe arena where vulnerability, strong emotions, and failure can play themselves out in the service of learning and growth”. I agree with this description and I believe it would apply equally to Gestalt therapy. So what (if anything) is the difference? Both can be short or long-term, both can focus on the present, past and future, both can engage with emotions, thinking and body processes. So the answer is far from straightforward, and some of the often stated differences tend to blur when looked at more closely. For example, I have heard colleagues argue that the people who enter therapy are less resourceful and in need of some kind of restoration of sense of self and/or healthy self-regulation, whilst coaching clients are ‘typically’ resource rich. However, in recent years, people are increasingly entering therapy purely for increased self-awareness and personal development, and certainly, many coaching assignments are triggered by some form of emotional distress or sense of dissatisfaction with their lives (see for example Ket de Vries, 2004).

There are some clear differences between therapy and *executive coaching*, however. Executive and leadership coaching take place within the organizational context. This generally brings with it an ‘organizational agenda’ and multiple stakeholders (i.e. the requirements that the boss/bosses have of the coaching) and, crucially, it is the organization that funds the work. The coaching ‘agenda’, therefore, is typically a blend of personal (to the individual) and public (negotiated with their organization). Not all coaching is executive coaching, however, and life coaching, which tends to be self-funded, can sometimes be indistinguishable from therapy (depending of course on the orientation of the coach).

Perhaps another difference between coaching and therapy lies in the expectations of the client at the outset. Someone entering therapy would (at least to some degree) be expecting the focus of the work to be their personal/emotional world. This would not necessarily be the case for the executive client, who would typically be expecting the focus of the coaching to be their world of work. Whilst the work context is absolutely the starting point and where the work needs to be anchored, executive coaching can cover many things: the person’s transition into a role, their current performance, their aspirations, how they engage with those around them, to name a few. In my experience, when working with leaders, whatever the starting point the work frequently moves to exploring issues of identity, i.e. *who the person is*, what matters to them and how they are (or want to be) in their world. Given that this is essentially about self-awareness and sense of self, the existential nature of this enquiry invariably has a strong emotional component with strong links with the leader’s personal history.

This raises the question of whether the direction the work takes (e.g. towards or away from the affect of the executive) is a function of who is doing the coaching? Certainly my Gestalt orientation will predispose me to work in certain ways, ways that are different from a more outcome orientated business coach. Gestalt is essentially a ‘relational’ framework and coaching, like therapy is highly relational, a co-creation between the coach and coachee. Particular coachees choose me because of their experience of the quality of my presence at the initial ‘chemistry meeting’, and as Stuart Simon says, “the ‘how’ of ...the contact with the coaching client can be...a subtle and nuanced process”. I am clear in the contracting process about how I work and the background that I bring, and clients who want a more outcome driven, goal focused coaching experience would be less likely to choose to work with me, although I can work in that way if required. However, there is no doubt about it, that as a Gestalt oriented coach I do work with the emotional world of my executive clients and I know that my interventions can be experienced as ‘therapeutic’, if not in intent, then in impact.

Is there a place for therapy within coaching?

Perhaps, then, a more contentious debate is to what extent do (should) coaches work with the emotional world of their clients and with family of origin issues? As Lee, a psychodynamically oriented coach, says “Human beings are in many ways a product of their experiences... we are powerfully shaped by our upbringing and other experiences” (p. 19) and he concludes that “if coaching is to release the vitality of authenticity, it must engage with personal history”. Gestalt theory holds “that ‘meaning’ derives from the *total situation* of *this* individual under *this* set of circumstances, which includes past experiences, hopes, aspirations, anxieties, assumptions” (Gillie, 2009, p. 35) and what becomes figural for the coachee, does so in the *here and now* in the presence of the coach. Thus, whilst it is unlikely that the Gestalt coach would actively seek out childhood influences, they would certainly be sensitive to possible connections that become evident in the work as it unfolds (e.g. authority figure transference resulting in projections being made onto the boss). It is often the client who brings a parent into to the room, as they suddenly make the connection. Alternatively, I might gently enquire about whom the boss reminds him or her. If I do this as a coach, it is crucial from an ethical standpoint that I am totally clear about *why* I am initiating this enquiry and it needs to be clear to the coachee that they have absolute choice in whether or not to follow that line of thought. I believe that this can be a legitimate route for the coaching to take when it is in service of the client’s *current working relationships* (i.e. raising the client’s awareness of the influences at play with a view to loosening the grip the past is having on current effectiveness). By whatever means the link between the past and the present is made, however, the next question that arises is: to what extent (if at all) is it appropriate for a coach to work with the historical material? I have had many debates with fellow Gestalt coaches about, for example, whether we would ever put the parent in the ‘empty chair’. Views do vary, although there is considerable agreement that this would certainly cross the boundary between Gestalt coaching and Gestalt therapy. The conclusion my colleague and I reached (Gillie & Shackleton, 2009) is that as a one-off well-bounded piece of work that is clearly contracted for as a therapeutic intervention, this can be appropriate within the coaching context.

Working with the client’s immediate phenomenology and the notion of staying with whatever is evoked during a session lies at the heart of the Gestalt approach, with the Cycle of Experience providing a powerful lens through which we track the flow of energy and where it may be blocked. As a Gestalt oriented coach I hope to engage my clients’ interest in how they can become more fully aware of their needs and how they mobilise energy towards appropriate action. A Gestalt approach would be to arrive at this awareness through interventions that bring a client as close as possible to his or her experience in the here and now, and “Given that the human body is such a gateway to the client’s affect, we hold the hypothesis that a Gestalt oriented coach is more likely to evoke emotional responses in their clients than many other ‘flavours’ of coaching” (Gillie & Shackleton, 2009). In this paper we conclude that this way of working as a coach can be hugely transformational. However, it is essential that the coach takes responsibility for ensuring that it is fully contracted for (both up front at the start of the coaching contract and again in the moment that a session seems to be moving into emotional territory), that the work is supported by the environment (what might be appropriate in a private consulting room may be wholly inappropriate in a meeting room in the client’s organization) and above all, the coach is clear about his or her own purpose and intentions in working in this particular way.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I absolutely agree with Stuart Simon that “professional coaching has certainly entered the Gestalt world”. Or perhaps one might equally say that Gestalt has now entered the coaching world, as Gestalt theory can and does offer a significant contribution to the field of professional coaching. I also conclude that a Gestalt orientated coach is likely to work in a way which is more likely to get closer to the client’s affect than some other coaching methodologies, but as long as this is well contracted for and well bounded, then the benefits in coaching can be transformational. I do wonder if one of the reasons that coaching has become so prevalent in recent years is because it is a

'legitimate' excuse for therapy within the organisational setting. I think the answer to this is probably 'yes,' at least for some people some of the time. A colleague of mine refers to his coaching as 'a way of dealing with my everyday neuroses', and as Ket de Vries (2004) points out: "many top executives, being middle-aged, suffer from depression. Midlife prompts a reappraisal of career identity, and by the time a leader is a CEO, an existential crisis is often imminent". I am sure that is why I work with some of the clients that I do.

Finally, at the end of his paper, Stuart Simon says that "...there has not been a significant contribution to the coaching literature that draws upon Gestalt principles for its theory base". Certainly Stuart's paper addresses this and I would point interested readers to Gillie (2009, pp 29 - 48) which was still in press when he was writing his paper. This 'coincidence', plus the forthcoming special edition of the International Gestalt Journal on coaching, suggests to me that the interest in the application of Gestalt theory to coaching is accelerating.

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