

# The Gestalt Supervision Model

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# Chapter 6: The Gestalt Supervision Model

## Introduction

There is an increase in interest in the application of Gestalt principles to coaching, with a growing selection of articles (Siminovitch & Van Eron, 2006; Gillie, 2009; Simon, 2009), including a special edition of the International Gestalt Journal specifically on coaching (Magerman & Leahy, 2009). However, at the time of writing, there is nothing in the literature on the application of Gestalt theory to *coach* supervision, only to clinical supervision. Siminovitch and Van Eron (2006) say that Gestalt coaching “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 is particularly true of Gestalt oriented supervision, where supervisees can feel especially vulnerable as they put their practice 'on the line' in front of a fellow professional.

The exact genesis of the theory and practice of Gestalt is difficult to pinpoint accurately. Frederick 'Fritz' Perls (a psychoanalyst trained in Berlin, Frankfurt and Vienna) his wife Laura and his co-author Paul Goodman are generally recognised as the originators of Gestalt therapy as we know it, and the practice of 'Gestalt' integrates a great many influences. In this chapter I show how the core principles of Gestalt can form a coherent model for coach supervision and can compliment other supervision models. I offer examples of supervisor-supervisee dialogue, all of which have been taken from my own practice.

## Section 1: The core principles of Gestalt

Coach supervision has evolved out of the practice of clinical supervision. Resnick & Estrup (2000 p.125) believe that clinical supervision requires a theoretical frame of reference that can be articulated and which enables the supervisor to account for their practice and interventions. I believe this to be equally true of coach supervision. Such a frame needs to include the supervisor's theoretical stance on:

- the nature of human functioning;
- the process of human growth and change;
- a methodology of intervening that is consistent with these core principles.

### *i. The nature of human functioning*

The supervisor supports the coach in their personal growth and professional development so, therefore, needs an understanding of basic behaviour and functioning of the human being, i.e. what facilitates growth and what interrupts development and learning.

The Gestalt theory of human functioning grew from the work of Gestalt psychologists who studied how people organise experience to make sense of their world. Perls became interested in the research on human perception, which concluded that we seem to be 'hard wired' to see wholes, and when data is missing, we strive to make meaning by filling in the gaps (switch off a familiar piece of music before the end of the 'phrase' and who doesn't complete it silently in their head?). As you look at another person you don't see an arm, then

a leg etc., you see another human being, and this whole is the *gestalt* (the rough translation of 'gestalt' being shape, form or pattern). Perls' applied this notion to the emotional and intra-personal realms, concluding that when important needs are not met and the 'gestalt' remains incomplete, energy remains invested in the ongoing attempt to finish 'unfinished business'.

One key influence was the work of Kurt Koffka (1935) who described the process by which we organise our visual perception as that of *figure and ground*. Unless we are in thick fog, where the visual field is a blur, people focus on one thing at a time (the figure) and everything else is the ground against which that figure appears. Attention then moves on and that figure dissolves into the background as a new figure emerges. As I look around a crowded room, I don't see all of the people and all of the room at once, I differentiate (and thereby make sense of my world) by focusing on one person or thing at a time. Another example:

As I am typing my thoughts about this chapter (current figure), I begin to notice that I'm feeling chilly, but I don't want to stop writing. However the sensation of cold (new figure) becomes such that I can no longer concentrate on my writing, and need to take action and find a jacket. Now warm again (the need is met) I begin to notice that I am hungry (new figure) and so on...

Over the decades this process has been developed from the purely psycho-biological, into a theory that describes the process by which we interact with our environment (including the world of other people) to meet our emotional, psychological and social needs. Figure 1 shows my version of the Gestalt *Continuum of Experience*<sup>1</sup> (e.g. Melnick & Nevis, 2005) which emphasises the continuous flow that, if uninterrupted, happens effortlessly all of the time. It is what Perls referred to as *self-regulation*, and "a measure of psychological health and well-being is how you move (or not) with grace through this never-ending flow" (Gillie, 2009, p.34).

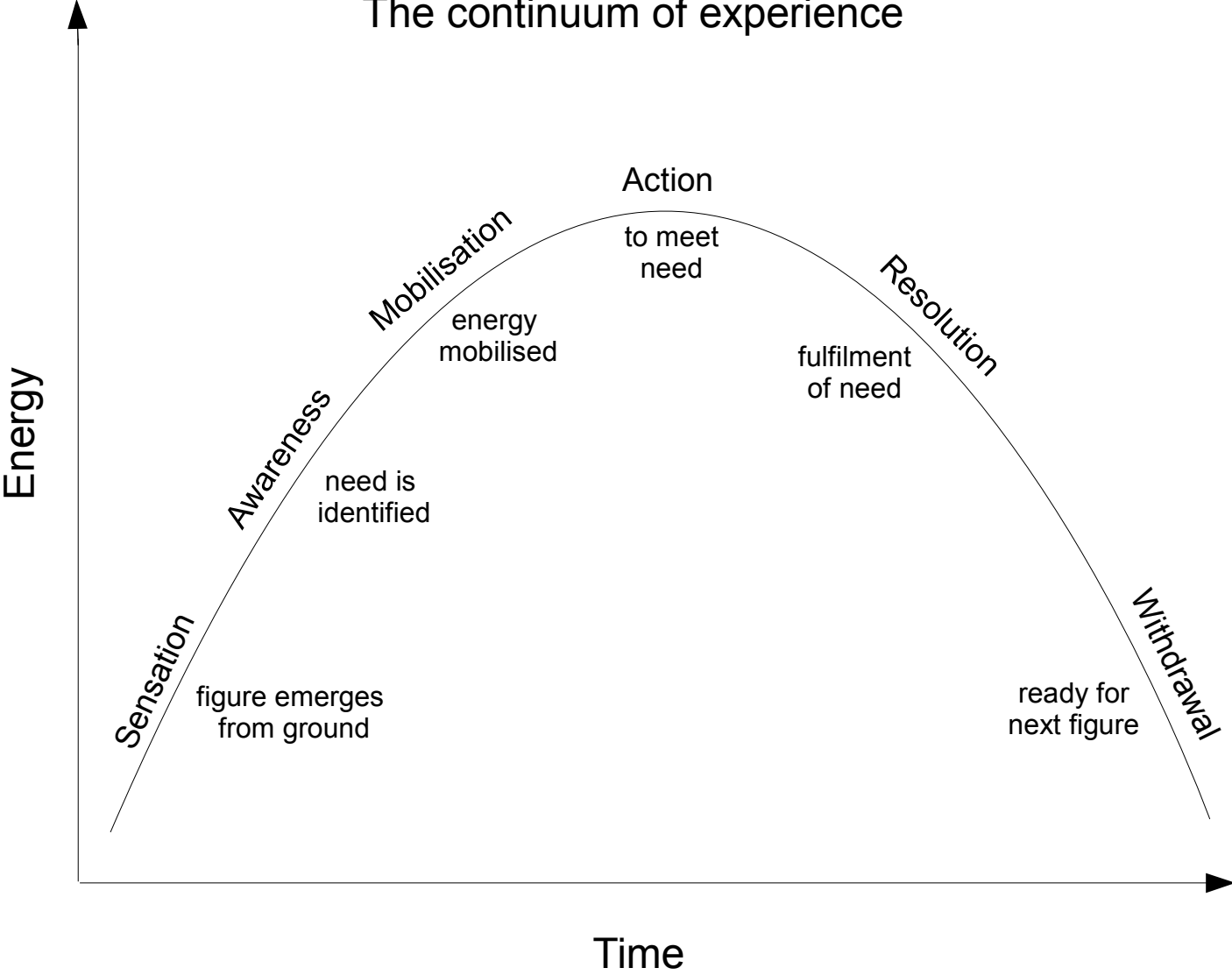
### [Figure 1]

Of course it's not that simple. Healthy self-regulation requires the person to a) notice the sensations as they arise that indicate a need is forming, b) accurately identify that need, c) know what action will satisfy that need and d) have the capability and resourcefulness to take the appropriate action. Anyone who has ever eaten a bar of chocolate to cheer themselves up, or had too many alcoholic drinks to 'drown their sorrows' will know that this process can become all messed up. Thus a critical aspect of the Gestalt supervisor's role is to help the supervisee identify their *real* need (we call this "the *figure of interest*"), explore what action would be appropriate, and find out what they need to do to mobilise to act.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally named the Gestalt Cycle of Experience by the faculty of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, it was developed into the Gestalt Continuum of Experience by the Gestalt International Study Centre, Cape Cod. This representation shows the relationship between the stage in the continuum and the level of energy exhibited by the individual (or system). Both the Cleveland and the GISC models use the term 'contact' where I use 'resolution'. Both refer to the point at which the need is met to whatever extent it can be. This could be a real 'ah ha' moment of new insight, or it could be the point at which one is able to move on from whatever is holding one's interest, in either case it represents the moment at which the gestalt is completed.

# The continuum of experience



Jane comes to a supervision session saying that she has good news; against all odds, her coaching contract with a local authority has been extended for another year. She has worked hard to negotiate this. Her tone is flat, her shoulders are slumped, and she looks glum. When I ask her how she feels about this, she tells me that it is great, because it will be an enormous help financially when she is making other changes in her life. She looks down at her feet as she says this and sounds far from great. I invite her to exaggerate her posture and tone, and to say the words again ("It's great..."). She tries this for a moment, then stamps her foot on the floor, raises her head and shouts "It's not bloody great at all..."

We discover that she really doesn't enjoy the work there any more, but she feels trapped and believes that she "should stay there for the sake of the money". In this illustration, the 'presented issue' (her good news) is clearly *not* the real figure of interest. The Gestalt Continuum of Experience tells me that the supervisee's level of energy (as manifest in body, tone etc.) is a big clue as to how genuinely 'interested' the person is, because when the real figure of interest (need) is identified, energy *always* swells, and then you know that you are working on something that matters. In this example, the supervisor is helping the supervisee become clearer about their own needs, and on another level, is developing the supervisee's capability to do this with their own clients.

### *Meaning-making*

Perls was deeply interested in how people create meaning and 'make-sense' of their world. He studied Zen Buddhism, Existential philosophy, and the 'phenomenological method' all of which contributed to Gestalt's focus on understanding the person's immediate lived experience, from moment to moment in the 'here and now'. He became fascinated by the fact that every individual exists within a highly complex context that is totally unique to them, and which shapes their view of the world. Further, he recognised that it is impossible to make any sense of a person's lived experience without some understanding of this context. He drew on Kurt Lewin's Field Theory (Lewin, 1951) which calls the totality of a person's context their 'phenomenological field', and includes their immediate situation, personal history, thoughts, feelings, conscious and unconscious beliefs, anxieties and fears, memories of past experiences, hopes and aspirations. In any situation what stands out for us, what we notice, what we hear, what we assume (i.e. what becomes '*figural*') is a function of many things that are unique to us.

In the above example, as Jane tells me her 'good news', it would have been very easy for me to move quickly into congratulating her, to hear the words, remember previous conversations about this contract and, as a result, impose my meaning on her situation. My context and Jane's are different. I am aware of the tough year Jane has had and of my desire for her to find success. However, even though this is my fifth session with the same supervisee, the here and now context is new each time. Whilst Jane would have been thrilled about this contract four months ago, her context has changed and I need to set aside my preconceived ideas of what it is like in her shoes. I need to help her find *her* meaning, which I do by helping the real figure of interest to emerge.

### *The wider field*

Whilst the individual brings to supervision their unique phenomenological field, everything is part of a wider field, which includes ethnicity (supervisor, supervisee, end client) culture

(organisational, country), society (historical and current prevailing perspectives on gender, sexual orientation and class), the economic and political climate, to name a few. Whilst nobody could be expected to be consciously aware of all aspects of this wider field, Gestalt nevertheless holds that all parts are interrelated and to be understood, a person must be seen within their wider context.

Peter is coaching a young Asian woman who has just been promoted to a senior role in an Investment Bank. Peter talks of his frustration with his client's reluctance to assert her own needs. We explore their relationship (what she evokes in him, what parallel might there be with this and her impact on her colleagues). We explore his 'process' i.e. the '*shoulds*' that he holds about the behaviour of senior leaders ("she's a senior manager now, she ought to be able to speak her mind..."). It suddenly occurs to me that the wider cultural issues are simply not in my supervisee's awareness... what are the acceptable ways of being in her culture of origin? What are the rules she may hold about how assertive a women from her culture can be?

This session illustrates how a Gestalt perspective can compliment the Seven Eyed Model (Hawkins, 2006) indeed our supervision focus moves from the coaching relationship (Mode 3) to Peter's own process (Mode 4) onto the wider context (Mode 7). It enabled Peter to acknowledge his blind spot about this 'lens', stretch his thinking and enhance his practice as a coach.

## *ii. The process of human growth and change*

### *The paradoxical theory of change*

Every model of coach supervision needs a coherent theory of how change takes place and how supervision supports this process. Gestalt's approach to change grew out of Perls' fundamental conflict with the psychiatric and psychological establishments of his day, whose methods were rooted in a model that, to put it crudely, aimed to change people judged to be in need of 'fixing'.

Perls observed that trying to force change, even when the change is desired, simply sets up (not necessarily consciously) resistance to that change. Arnold Beisser first documented his understanding of Perls' stance when he described the Paradoxical Theory of Change: "change occurs when one becomes what one is, not when he tries to become what he is not" (Beisser, 1970, p. 77). Perls' experience showed him that change does occur, however, in an emergent, organic way, when his clients engaged in a process of exploring and *staying with what is*, which in turn enabled them to discover their real needs, which in turn facilitated the process of healthy self-regulation (as outlined above). People who are trying to 'push change', particularly those trying to meet some externally imposed standard (real or imagined) are inevitably caught between two positions *how it should be* and *how it really is*, without fully identifying with either. Anyone who has tried to lose weight/give up smoking/start exercise because someone else applies pressure (parent, partner, doctor, society) will be familiar with the rebellion-remorse cycle ("To hell with it, I'll just have one more" followed by "I've blown it again"). This is the pattern that Perls named the top-dog / under-dog dichotomy (Perls, 1969). Beisser's premise is that "one must stand in one place in

order to have firm footing to move, and that it is difficult or impossible to move without that footing" (p. 77). Without that firm footing the swing between "I should... I won't" is inevitable and, paradoxically, once a person can stand *fully* in the place that is reality, then the energy that gets diverted into rebellion is released and mobilised towards something which is a *genuine choice*. Remember Jane in the case above:

Jane tells me that she is happy yet her whole body is telling me something different. I work with her to really stay with, in fact to exaggerate, her body's message (which I imagine is her real position). As she does this, her skin tone reddens, she stamps her foot and shouts (indeed there is a tremendous release of energy). I invite her to shout once again "It's not bloody great at all...", and then she says "yes this is absolutely right, I really *don't* want to work there any more", she looks very grounded as she says this, and it is clear to me that she is fully acknowledging her truth. As her burst of energy subsides, we are able to engage in a conversation about what her options are, what feels possible and how to handle the pressure on her from her partner.

### *Change through relationship*

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

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

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

I trust that because this vivid image has arisen within the interaction between me and my supervisee it is reasonable to assume that it has some relevance to the supervisee's

situation and is worth checking out. You do this of course in the service of *their* awareness and part of the process is to find out what impact your disclosure has had on them.

Peter is thoughtful for a while, then looks at me and says that he feels a bit embarrassed about an image that he himself has had a couple of times when working with this client, of a pint of thick stout, black beneath the surface but frothy and white on top. He looks at me intently, and I notice how much more engaged I feel.

This opened the door to a fruitful exploration covering a number of the Seven Eyed Modes: how he is working at a surface level for fear of opening up something too emotional (his process, Mode 4), how his client is pretending that 'everything is OK' (client situation, Mode 1), how he could have shared his image with her (his interventions, Mode 2) and how he and I have been staying in a 'light, frothy' place (the parallel process, Mode 5).

My disclosure enabled Peter and I to *make contact*, i.e. relate in a different way, to move from 'skimming the surface' to something more helpful to him and to us. This is the Gestalt notion of 'dialogue', which has its roots in Buber's (e.g. 1970) existential philosophy that differentiates between 'I-thou' interaction (two people engaging in an open, mutually respectful way without attempting to impose their will on the other) and 'I-it' interactions in which one or both attempt to shape the other towards some desired outcome. Genuine, moving contact cannot be made to happen. It flows from the supervisor's willingness to be him or herself without any attachment to what might happen in the encounter. This means that as a Gestalt supervisor, I am particularly attentive to the quality of the relationship between the two of us. Even when I step into the role of educator or challenger of ethical practice, the overarching spirit in which I work is one of dialogue, with mutuality of respect and directness of contact at its heart. I never lose sight of the fact that I may have greater 'expertise' in psychological theory and more years' experience than my supervisees, but they are the experts on their own experience.

In this section, I have outlined the core theoretical principles of the Gestalt approach. The next section offers a clear methodology for intervening which flows from those principles.

## **Working with Gestalt in Supervision**

Whether inviting the supervisee to stay with 'what is' (paradoxical theory of change) or disclosing your own feelings, observations, images etc. (presence and dialogue) the overarching rationale is to support the process of self-regulation, the healthy flow through the Continuum of Experience. In his original writing, Perls maintained that the route to healthy self-regulation is self-awareness and believed that awareness *per se* – by and of itself can bring growth, because when we know and understand how we limit ourselves, we open up choice (Perls, 1969). He later acknowledged that awareness alone could be a slow method of achieving change, and developed the idea of active experimentation as a creative way of accelerating growth (Perls, 1973). By experimentation he meant encouraging clients to try something out in the session to see what new awareness or new learning it might elicit.

This section explores the many ways that the Gestalt Supervisor might work to raise the awareness of the supervisee and mobilise them towards appropriate action, using the complimentary methodologies of:

i. *phenomenological exploration*

ii. *active experimentation*<sup>2</sup>.

i. Phenomenological exploration

This wonderful term simply means working with the *'in the moment'* data that the supervisee brings into the room, without any interpretation, comment or judgement from the supervisor. Typically, the supervisor pays close attention to the supervisee's movements, breathing pattern, changes in skin tone (red patches, going pale etc.) and tracks patterns that emerge over time. The supervisor would then share these observations and invite the supervisee to note their own 'here and now' reactions, which might be sensations, feelings, images or thoughts, e.g.

Supervisor: "I notice that every time you talk about coaching in that organisation, you look down and shake your head (*the supervisor would then mirror the movement as a way of focusing on the phenomenon rather than offering a verbal interpretation*). As you think of the organisation again, and maybe try that movement again, what do you become aware of...?"

With every move closer to the supervisee's actual experience, they become increasingly aware of the intensity of the feeling, which will lead to greater clarity about the real needs in the situation. Furthermore, if the supervisee can *stay* with their stuckness and experience it fully, often by exaggerating it, it will usually either dissolve or transform, freeing the supervisee up to move forward. By working with the phenomenological data you support a journey of discovery:

Ralph is new to running his own coaching business, having been an internal coach for many years. He has just started coaching a very senior woman in a pharmaceuticals firm. He is giving me a detailed description of their second session, in which he felt stuck. He keeps shuffling his feet and rubbing his hand up and down his arm as he speaks.

Nothing stands out in his lengthy account, which is bland with no clear figure of interest, but his body appears to have information of which he seems unaware. I invite him to move away from 'talking about' into 're-experiencing', as a way of moving closer to his actual experience:

Supervisor: "Imagine that you are back there, in that session with her in front of you... take a long look at her, what do you notice? How does she look... her tone of voice... what do you notice about your own reactions, feelings, sensations, thoughts...?"

Ralph: "I feel tense. I can feel my stomach muscles tighten..."

Supervisor: "As you speak I am aware that I am holding my breath, and I see you wrap your arms across your body, what happens if you exaggerate that movement?"

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<sup>2</sup> I like the term 'experiment' and use it with my supervisees. It conveys the spirit of 'trying something on for size', with no attachment to any particular outcome.

Ralph: (lets out a long breath) "Yeah, I was holding my breath too... (tightens his arms)... I think I'm trying to hold myself together... (stays with the movement). Yes, definitely, I realise that I am trying to protect myself."

The supervisee was stuck in an early phase of the cycle of experience, he was not aware enough of his needs in the situation. My first supervision task was to help him to clarify the *real* figure of interest. By re-creating the 'in the moment' experience with his client and then staying with (and even exaggerating) the sensations evoked, Ralph could access a greater awareness of what this client elicits and a very clear figure emerges (his need to protect himself) which opens the door to the next step, which is what this means for him in terms of his work with this client.

Once this level of awareness has been reached, many supervisees will naturally clarify what they intend to do next. In Ralph's case, he decided to disclose his insight to his client, given that she may evoke similar reactions in others in her organisation and it would give her useful data.

## ii. Active experimentation

There are occasions, however, when despite their level of awareness, the supervisee is stuck because they feel unable to act ("Yes, I could do that, but..."). Here the supervisee is blocked at the mobilisation phase of the continuum of experience and active experimentation can help the supervisee mobilise energy into appropriate action. Had Ralph been stuck at this point, I might have invited him to 'try out' what he'd like to say to her, or suggested he put himself in her shoes (more on this methodology later). There are always many options, and the Gestalt supervisor is guided by their knowledge of the supervisee, 'grades' the suggestion according to how much challenge is appropriate, and always seeks genuine consent to try the experiment.

### a) Active experimentation through metaphor

Ideas for experiments will flow naturally from the material presented by the supervisee, if you allow yourself to relax and 'be present'. However, for supervisors who are new to Gestalt (or believe they lack creativity in crafting experiments) a fruitful route to identifying possible experiments is through metaphor. As a Gestalt supervisor I pay close attention to the metaphors and images used by the supervisee, and allow possibilities to float through my mind, e.g. when Ralph first used the word 'stuck' I pictured him physically 'stuck' e.g. in the chair, or standing unable to move. Recently another supervisee described her contract with one organisation as being in a 'straight-jacket' from which she wanted to 'break free' but didn't know how. I happened to have a very thick scarf with me, and after contracting to do so, I wrapped the scarf around her, trapping her arms by her side, and invited her to "break free". She started with little energy, but as my grip tightened, she began to mobilise. As she wrestled and struggled I asked her to articulate what was happening. Eventually she leapt out of my grasp shouting "I won't put up with this any more!". We were then able to explore how she might mobilise her energy towards re-contracting with this organisation.

People use metaphor much more frequently than is often noticed. Sometimes the metaphor is simply a well-established colloquial phrase (e.g. 'I was on thin ice', 'he's out of his depth'),

and sometimes it can be the doorway to completely new awareness. However, all too often we hear a metaphor and assume that it means the same to the supervisee as it does to us.

June is coaching Mark, an intelligent, creative director from a media company. She feels slightly stuck about how best to work with him. She tells me that working with him "is a bit like struggling up hill, where you can't get a grip because of the small stones". In a misplaced attempt at empathy I tell her that this sounds tough (my interpretation). "Oh no! it's really exhilarating... like climbing a challenging, steep hillside!" I acknowledge my assumption (I'd forgotten that she is a hiker) and ask if she is willing to explore the metaphor. I invite her to imagine the hill track and where she is on it:

June: "...about half way up. Mark is near the top".

Supervisor: "What happens if you stand and look around, what do you see, experience? Try it out if you'd like to."

June: "I look up and see Mark, and can feel my feet slide a bit on the loose stones... it's scary (she stands up and imitates the movement), hard to get my balance."

Supervisor: "OK, so If you stay where you are, what happens?"

June: "Hmmm, I can stand still for a moment and get my balance back. It feels good, I feel much stronger".

Supervisor: "So what happens if you look back to the top?"

June: "I am picturing myself walking up a mountain track, it is getting steeper."

Supervisor: "Do want to try it out?"

June: (takes a couple of steps) "Yes, I *know* that it's what I want to do, I can do it. I can imagine the view from the top, it's really rewarding!".

Supervisor: "What's the 'it' you know you want, can do and will be rewarding?"

June: "I can get to the top".

Supervisor: "And Mark?"

June: (long pause) "It fits. He certainly challenges me, and I do feel on a slippery slope sometimes. But I can see that I haven't been challenging *him* as much as I need to. If I pause, slow myself down, I can stay grounded, and then we can both get to the top".

By working with her metaphor as she develops the theme, she arrives at a new awareness of what she needs to do in her work with him. Of course Gestalt is not the only approach to use metaphor, but it does have a particular way of engaging the supervisee with the metaphor, bringing them as close as possible to their experience in the here and now, which evokes a level of awareness that goes beyond the cognitive.

#### b) Active experimentation with the classic two chairs / empty chair approach

When many people think of 'Gestalt' it is this way of working that often comes to mind. The two-chair/empty chair approach is particularly useful when you hear 'duality' of some kind in the supervisee's story. This might take the form of the supervisee facing a dilemma ("On the

one hand I could..., but on the other hand ..."). Or you might hear your supervisee engaging in an internal battle with different aspects of themselves. This often takes the form of a critical 'Top-dog' that tells the supervisee how they *should* be and how inadequate they are, and a hopeless, stuck side that passively resists, which Perls called the 'Under-dog' (Perls, 1969).

In both cases, neither side of the duality is fully owned, and the supervisee remains stuck as they oscillate between the two horns of the dilemma or the two inner voices, and energy is trapped in the constant movement between the two positions. Mobilisation comes when each side is brought fully into awareness (separation) then brought into contact with each other (integration):

Alan is debating whether to leave a well paid, secure role as internal consultant to set up his own business. I hear him going around in circles. This is a classic dilemma where there is no easy or obvious answer. I offer Alan two chairs, one for each option, and suggest he sits in each in turn and speak out the benefits. This physical separation supports the untangling of the thoughts and emotions that accompany a genuine dilemma. I watch carefully for what happens to Alan's energy as he speaks. As he talks of his current role, his tone is fairly flat, except when he talks about his wonderful colleagues. As he switches seats, he becomes much more animated.

In my experience, supervisees usually have more energy for one option over the other, which is outside their awareness, but which shows through in their body language. My task is to help Alan become aware consciously of what he 'unconsciously' knows. I share my observation and invite Alan to revisit the two chairs and try exaggerating his energy as he does so, flatter for one option and animated for the other. Alan realises that he has already made his decision. We are then able to move into a discussion about next steps, in particular about how he can support his need for social contact.

This way of working is also very useful when the supervisee is experiencing some difficulty in their relationship with another person. There are many variations depending on the situation:

- The supervisee places the other person (e.g. their client) on the 'empty chair' and experiments with what they would really like to say (you could go further, ask the supervisee to exaggerate, be outrageous, be 'super coach' etc.)
- The supervisee swaps chairs and speaks as the client, e.g. how does the client respond to the supervisee's statement? The supervisee could speak as the client, what do they want from the coach?
- Invite the supervisee to stand away from the two chairs and to imagine watching the coach-client exchange, what do they see? If they were to give the coach (themselves) advice, what would it be?

This can be quite a challenging experiment for supervisees who are new to this way of working, so it is important that you clarify your suggestion beforehand so that they can give genuine consent or can genuinely decline. However, it is extraordinary the insight someone can get by stepping into the other's shoes. Finally, whatever experiments you work with it is important that you have plenty of time in the session to help them make sense of their

experience and help them clarify what choices they want to make about their situation going forward.

### c) Active experimenting working with the whole system

Supervision is a valuable place for coaches to explore the complex systemic and boundary issues that arise when working within an organisation (Mode 7 of the Seven Eyed Model). Coaches have many relationships to juggle, e.g. with their coachee, the coachee's boss, other senior sponsors, with H.R., possibly with other coachees in the same sub-system etc. By inviting your supervisee to bring the system into the room, you can use active experimentation to support exploration of these complexities.

There are many ways of doing this. If I am working in an environment that is 'artefact rich' I ask my supervisee to select a range of objects to represent, e.g. themselves, the client, the boss, other relevant individuals or sub-systems etc. However, if such interesting material isn't available, I might invite my supervisee to represent each person/sub-group with a picture or image. This opens up a range of possible experiments depending on the issue at hand.

You could explore what each person in the system evokes in your supervisee. In my office I have a bowl of stones collected from all over the world. One supervisee selected a stone to represent each person in his system:

Supervisor: "Take each stone and describe the person it represents in terms of that stone".

Supervisee: "Yes, this is definitely Nigel, very sharp edges and a dark side!"

It is amazing what someone can project onto a piece of granite. You have many options now, one would be to ask the supervisee to speak as each person, using the words elicited by the object, e.g. the supervisee above might speak as 'Nigel', "I have a sharp edge, I have a dark side", which could lead to an interesting conversation about a) how Nigel might feel in the system, b) what of himself the supervisee sees in Nigel.

You might ask the supervisee to give each object/picture a voice, what would it be saying if it could speak? This can reveal insights about how the supervisee sees others in the system and how others might see each other.

When the issue seems to be tricky relationships you might ask the supervisee to place each object, image or picture in relationship one with another, where the distance between them could be strength of relationship, degree of trust, who is closest to whom, etc. From there, you could invite your supervisee to stand in each location, and to speak from that place in terms of what it feels like to be there, how they perceive the rest of the system as they look around, what needs they have etc. Whilst it is important to hold in mind that you are not working with the real system but with the projections of the supervisee onto the system, I have found it a creative way of exploring the wider systemic issues.

Gestalt supervision vs. Gestalt therapy

Supervision clearly plays a key role in the *professional* development of the coach, and in my experience this cannot be separated from their *personal* journey. High quality coaching requires a high level of self-awareness, the ability to reflect on their 'process' (both when they are effective and when they are less so, i.e. their biases, how they 'get stuck', how they get 'hooked' by the client or client's material etc.). In turn this requires the supervisor to work in ways that facilitates this level of exploration. Gestalt supervision is particularly well placed to do this. However, given that that Gestalt approaches originate in Gestalt therapy and the human body is such a gateway to the supervisee's emotions, the Gestalt oriented supervisor needs to pay particular attention to the boundary between supervision and therapy. I am aware that my Gestalt orientation predisposes me to work in certain ways, it biases me towards Hawkin's Modes 4, 5 and 6 (the supervisee's process, the supervisor-supervisee relationship and the supervisor's process respectively). Experienced coaches will frequently seek out a psychotherapeutically trained supervisor for this very reason. I am clear in the contracting process about how I work, the background that I bring and that we will use the 'here and now' information about our co-created relationship to explore how the supervisee 'shapes' (albeit out of conscious awareness) their relationships with their coaching clients. Like other clinically trained supervisors, I am able to educate my supervisees about psychological dynamics of the coach-coachee relationship. However, as Gestalt frames 'healthy functioning' as the natural flow of energy from need identification to need satisfaction, Gestalt supervisor's don't engage in 'pathologising' the end client (e.g. "he sounds somewhat narcissistic / borderline / paranoid etc."). Instead they encourage their supervisees to take an optimistic stance and view their clients as 'doing the best they can under the circumstances' (the field conditions). Supervisors also help their supervisees explore how they, in turn, can support their own clients in investigating how they limit themselves through their fixed gestalts.

There is no doubt that as a Gestalt oriented supervisor I do work with the emotional world of my supervisees and I know that my interventions can be experienced as 'therapeutic', if not in intent, then in impact. As I have said elsewhere about Gestalt coaching (Gillie & Shackleton, 2009) it is vital that the Gestalt supervisor needs to know how to 'anchor' the outcomes of the work within the supervisee's developmental journey by inviting them to reflect on what new awareness the experiment brings and what meaning it has in the context of the work with their end client. Finally, the Gestalt supervisor, especially if clinically trained, needs to pay attention to when the work is beginning to focus on the personality structure of the supervisee and would be more helpfully taken into the supervisee's personal therapy.

## **Conclusions**

Gestalt provides a rich and coherent model for coach supervision. It offers a clear theoretical stance on:

- a) the nature of human functioning: the *Continuum of Experience* offers an excellent compass for orientation through a supervision session, where the supervisee's energy is, what's in/not in awareness, how energy is/isn't being mobilised towards action etc.
- b) the process of human growth and change: *The Paradoxical Theory of Change* that encourages the supervisee to fully embrace who they *are* and not try to be something they are not; and change through relationship, bringing the supervisor's own process through

*Presence* into the relationship and engaging in *Dialogue*, where the supervisor and supervisee are fully present and meet in the spirit of genuine enquiry with no attachment to a particular outcome.

c) the methodology of intervening: *Phenomenological exploration*, working with the 'in the moment' data as a way of raising awareness; and *Active experimentation*, encouraging supervisees to try something out in the session as a creative way of bringing new awareness and mobilising energy for action.

Finally, a Gestalt orientation is very much 'a way of being' rather than a set of techniques. In practice, it is an endless process of awareness, choice and action as you continuously move your attention between your supervisee (their story, tone and movement) and your own internal response to what you see and hear. It becomes a way of life.

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