

EMERGENT COACHING

– A GESTALT APPROACH TO MINDFUL LEADERSHIP

*Too many people spend money they haven't earned,
to buy things they don't want, to impress people they don't like (Will Rogers).*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores a post-modern Gestalt approach to coaching which suggests multiple levels of engagement inclusive of physical/sensory, social/cultural, emotional/biological, projective/imagined and spiritual/intuitive levels of influence. The model reviewed here focuses primarily upon the 'process' of communication rather than its content, and deals with what is emerging 'now' rather than past problems and issues.

Keywords

Gestalt; Holistic; Developmental; Leadership

ABSTRAKT

Autor podejmuje rozważania nad postmodernistycznym podejściem Gestalt do coachingu, obejmującym różne poziomy wpływu, m.in. fizyczne, sensualne, kulturowe, emocjonalne, biologiczne. Model omawiany w artykule koncentruje się na procesie komunikacji i na podejściu „tu i teraz”.

Słowa kluczowe

Gestalt, podejście holistyczne, przywództwo

ORIENTATION

Work has the potential to be a mundane pursuit for survival, a social addiction, a drama of our own making, a self-actualising or spiritually up-lifting experience. At different times it is all of these things. In this essay I will raise to awareness the various realities we flow between in the workplace, so that we might deepen our understanding and broaden the way we intervene within coaching and consultancy. I will also describe the facilitative Gestalt model of leadership my coaching style is designed to create.

Gestalt seeks to include and to interrelate rather than to reduce things down to size. A consultant or coach working in a whole field Gestalt way attends to an individual and organisation's energetic field, their whole ecology. But to work in this way without a map to guide us is a difficult task. This paper provides a map to enable you to begin to consult and coach holistically.

As a Gestalt informed coach I perform holistic inquiry within the framework of a constantly unfolding and developing relationship. I work from the premise that humankind's 'phenomenological world' is 'our reality', view knowledge as primarily defined through subjective experience and consciousness as active and meaningful in its own right. Moment to moment Zen-like awareness is my prime tool and raising awareness is my prime goal. When a person fully appreciates where they are now, and attends to what they are doing in the moment and grasps how they are structuring their life – my experience suggests they are changed and options open up before them.

The emergent model of coaching described here supports a mindful, person-centred and process-alive model of leadership which is facilitative in character. Raise a leader's awareness and relational sensitivity while educating them to how they might facilitate the same in others, and I have found a more mindful work-based culture can result (Barber 2006).

The demands upon leaders in the 21st Century and the mind-set coaches need to cultivate have been well documented.

Yesterday natural resources defined power. Today knowledge is power.

Yesterday hierarchy was the model. Today synergy is the mandate.

Yesterday leaders commanded and controlled. Today leaders empower and coach.

Yesterday leaders were warriors. Today leaders are facilitators.

Yesterday leaders demanded respect. Today leaders encourage self-respect.

Yesterday shareholders came first. Today customers come first.

Yesterday managers directed. Today managers delegate.

Yesterday supervisors flourished. Today supervisors vanish.

Yesterday employees took orders. Today teams make decisions.

Yesterday seniority signified status. Today creativity drives process.

*Yesterday production determined availability. Today quality determines demand.
 Yesterday value was extra. Today value is everything.
 Yesterday everyone was a competitor. Today everyone is a customer.
 Yesterday profits were earned through expediency. Today profits are earned with
 integrity (Waitley 1995).*

The model of coaching described here takes us some way towards achieving the above.

IDENTIFICATION

So what does emergent coaching actually do? Well, while raising our attention to what is happening now and exploring how we are relating to ourselves, each other and the world – it encourages us to constantly reappraise everything we take for granted and to expand beyond ‘the known’. Simply – it expands awareness in all directions.

To help illustrate the Gestalt inspired ‘whole-field vision’ and awareness expansion I am describing, along with the mind-set awareness emergent coaching seeks to foster in leaders; I have found it useful to focus upon how we collect information from the world via our senses, culture, emotions, imagination and intuition. These orientations are presented below alongside the questions I use to expand awareness in each domain.

WAYS OF PERCEIVING & MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD

– RELATED COACHING QUESTIONS:

- **“Life as Sensed & Physically Experienced”** (*our physical and sensory reality*):
 - What physiological needs remain unmet at this time in this place?
 - What is to the fore of attention and in the back-ground of your awareness now?
 - How well do people draw support from each other and their physical surroundings here?
 - Where in our bodies are we most alive and where do we seem de-energised and dead?

- **“Life as Socially Scripted & Intellectually Taught”** (*our social and cultural reality*):
 - What rules and roles are well established here? (power/politics/”isms”/norms rules)
 - Who are the power holders and how are people and events dynamically organised?
 - What role do people seemingly expect or hoist upon others? (role play)
 - How do we relate to others & the wider community? (our cultural location)

- **“Life as Felt & Emotionally Scripted”** (*our emotional and biographical reality*):
 What emotional dramas and politics (rescuer-persecutor-victim-rebel) proliferate here?
 If this team/organisation were a family what sorts of children would it rear?
 How are earlier family and parent-child dynamics enacted here? (historical dramas)
 What sort of relational dance am I being invited to join? (counter-transference)

- **“Life as Imagined & Desired to be”** (*our projective and imagined reality*)
 What fantasies do we enact and which projections does this situation mirror back to us?
 What do we blind ourselves to or hold in check here? (the shadow relationship)
 Which angels guide or demons drive us here? (idealisations and ego defence mechanisms)
 Which symbols and metaphors haunt or exert influence? (the organisational dream)

- **“Life as a Mysterious & Intuitive journey”** (*our spiritual and intuitive reality*):
 What higher lessons and illuminations are available from this experience?
 What might be our higher and greater purpose? (an individual or groups spiritual destiny)
 Which ethical values and/or spiritual beliefs shape people and events here?
 How might this individual/group contribute to the community and humankind?

Drawing into awareness how the above influences impact upon us helps us appreciate how we construct our own individual and corporate realities.

As coaches we might invite leaders at the *physical-sensory level* to attend to physical evidence and to develop sensitivity to their physiological needs and supports. At the *social-cultural level* they may be invited to reflect upon how their traditions and thinking inform the roles they enact. At the *emotional-biographical level* they are encouraged to examine their emotional patterns and family scripts, and to recognise how past emotional patterns are using them! At the *creative-projective level* they may be encouraged to identify their sub-personalities and to unpack the imaginative constructs they project out upon the world. At the *spiritual-intuitive level* they may be invited to value themselves and the human condition, and through reflection upon *what their soul has come to learn*, to draw nearer to their authentic core and their life’s true purpose.

Running alongside the above exploration are dynamics of the evolving coach-client relationship. I recognise six phases as attending my coaching relationship:

Pre-Contact prior to our actually meeting; *Orientation* when we first meet, gain knowledge and hopefully build trust; *Identification* when we define a tentative agenda; *Exploration* when the work properly begins and we co-operative explore together; *Resolution* where as we end our time together and reflect on what has been learnt; *Post-Contact* when we reflect on long term effects after coaching has finished. Illuminating these phases I find raises my client's appreciation of 'moment to moment' relating; in this way the process of coaching itself transmits a model of mindful relating.

THE EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP – AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESSES INVOLVED:

Pre-Contact: (Projecting) An imaginative impression forms as individuals speculate upon a future meeting (*Here the idealised (transferential and projective level of a hoped for relationship is imaginatively en-fired as we consider – “So what might happen?”*)

Orientation: (Acclimatising) A potential relationship and partnership are explored as client and facilitator actually meet, compare the imagined relationship to the one unfolding, orientate to the world view of each other and assess the potential for empathy and trust (*Here the authentic (transpersonal) & contractual (sensory & social) level of relationship is explored as individuals inquire – “So can we work together?”*)

Identification: (Envisioning) Responsibilities are defined, experiments and hypotheses for testing speculated upon and a speculative contract is created, strategies are mutually considered, rules of engagement negotiated and responsibilities agreed upon. (*Here the contractual level (sensory & social) of relationship is engaged as individuals refine – “How might we work together?”*)

Exploration: (Acting & Observing) Experience is engaged, experiments are performed, boundaries are tested, awareness is raised towards a developing theme and practical experiments are undertaken, support is mobilised, fantasies checked out and awareness of the moment heightened with a view to illuminating the life-space and pattern of a client's current situation (*Here the idealised (transferential & projective) level is tested, the contractual level (sensory & social) engaged & the authentic (transpersonal) level is further illuminated as individuals decide – “What needs to happen now?”*)

Resolution: (Debriefing & Evaluating) After several cycles of exploration findings and results are appraised, learning is debriefed and future avenues of development considered (*Here the authentic (transpersonal) level of the relationship is appraised & the contractual (sensory & social) level of relationship is evaluated as individuals evaluate – “What have been the gains & costs of this relationship?”*)

Post-Contact: (Reflecting & Remembering) Out of contact again the imagination continues to shape the relationship (*Here within the idealised [transferential & projective] level we reflect further upon memories of the relationship as we seek to answer the question - “So what did this experience really mean to me?”*)

As the relationship develops so coaching develops and the client develops.

EXPLORATION

Every act, of whatever duration, needs to attend to the above relational life-cycle if it is to be mindful and have impact. In many business climates I find it common to rush to *Identification* prior to *Orientation* – so that trust remains shaky. Likewise evaluation via the *Resolution* phase is often missed and individuals and teams continue to perpetuate mistakes of the past.

Taken as a whole this two-dimensional model – with movement through time and multiple levels of influence, illuminates how we perceive and generate meaning. It also suggests how our ‘stream of consciousness’ can be harnessed to generate excellence of coaching inquiry and preparation to mindful leadership.

Over the past year I researched my practice as a coach and therapist (Barber 2011) using the above relational model as a reference point. As the study progressed I gradually realised, as a Gestalt practitioner I tended to illuminate what was out of awareness in both coaching and therapy alike, which caused me to speculate upon the ‘therapeutic blind-spots’ of coaching and the ‘coaching blind-spots’ of therapy! This was a revelation for me. A cross-over point, suggesting that therapy might move tacitly towards coaching and coaching towards therapy – a sort of integration of the shadow inherent in each!

In order to integrate my findings I performed a ‘comparative analysis’ of my coaching and therapeutic relationships using the aforementioned relational phases as a structure to illuminate what was emerging in my coaching and therapy practice.

A COMPARISON OF COACHING AND THERAPY

In the **pre-contract phase** in coaching and therapy alike word of mouth referral from current or past clients is the usual point of entry; coaching clients appear especially drawn by my association with management training and business associations, and trappings of success.

In the **orientation phase** of the coaching relationship a pressure of talk prevails; clients seem to trust my CV and supposed expertise and are eager to impress me; while in therapy emotional silences figure large and trust is built gradually rather than taken for granted, the client seems more attuned to my empathetic response. Silences are better tolerated in therapy.

During the **identification phase** coaching clients ask many questions and are keen to devise a plan and to be understood; they are attuned to *socio-conventional* notions of reality and the world of facts, trusting of the status quo and clear as to 'how they will use me'. Therapy clients, conversely, seem more prepared to feel their way – don't know how I can help but appear relieved to be talking about their issues. They are heavily influenced by their emotional world and may be trapped in powerful *imaginative projections*; they are unsure of themselves, unclear to what they need and in the grip of forces unknown.

In the **exploration phase** coaching clients continue to demonstrate a need to over-inform me and focus on specific events – they strive to be intellectually understand and *emotional* and *projective* material is secondary, though this can emerge in time. Self-esteem remains high and they look to increase skills and insight with a view to developing 'increased expertise'. I feel myself objectified and serving an educative purpose, like a consultant being consulted. The individual's sense of competence remains intact. As a practitioner I often feel peer-like, instructive and collegiate. My intellect and sense-making are readily involved and social reality clearly in view. Clients are outwardly directed and we often co-create strategic ways forward for application in the workplace. Movement is rapid, action comes first and integration much later. Intellectually I feel intellectually informed by the client, emotionally less so. In terms of the interventions these are primarily clarifying and challenging in the beginning with supportive interventions coming somewhat later – I sometimes feel as if I'm attempting to wake them up! Function and performance inform the culture we co-create. Therapy clients speak reluctantly as if haunted by intangibles and strive to emotionally accept their experiences; they are often heavily influenced by *transferential/projective* levels of experience – simply they are in crisis. They are often dysfunctional before re-gaining self-support, as the full impact of what was previous beyond awareness arises, impacts and demands emotional release. As a practitioner I feel protective of the vulnerable individual before me. I am intimately connected to my client and feel deeply respectful of their process. My emotions and intuition are to the fore as I struggle to hear the unsaid and meet with the tacit influences we address. We experiment with crafting support beyond the therapeutic hour. Movement is often slow. Understanding comes second to emotional integration and I feel emotionally met. My interventions are mainly clarifying and supportive at the beginning with challenging ones coming later. Respect and sensitivity to the human condition inform the prevailing culture.

In the **resolution** phase as we debrief, in coaching our journey of discovery is readily discernible and easily described. After 6 months to 2 years when the client has explored what they originally came for or need, they tend to move on – or more rarely

if they have surfaced an additional or emotional menu they might re-negotiate a new contract. Clients often rate the success of our work through newly won promotions or contracts or improvements in team relationships. The journey through therapy is less tangible and more resistive to verbalisation. After 3–5 years when they feel sufficiently self-supporting clients leave or join a group to further integrate their identity and self-support. Clients often rate the success of therapy in terms of becoming better able to withstand emotional pressures and climates that previously over-awed them.

As for **post-contact**, coaching clients regularly return as new challenges arise in their work life. Many gain confidence and leave their original place of work within 18 months of completing coaching. Then again, Gestalt – in keeping with much humanistic therapy I believe frees-up options and builds energy for ‘potential’ to be fulfilled – and thus promotes individual change. Therapeutic clients return less frequently if at all.

In relation to the leadership model my coaching supported, this was found to be one valuing of personal development, empowerment, mindfulness and self-supervision, which strove to educate to authentic relationships and work with the good of the community at heart. A model of leadership such as this is not a dream – but a must. The challenge of the 21st Century is for business to make ‘change’ its friend – not its ruler; to learn from its mistakes without fossilising around its successes; to gain expertise without falling into the trap of thinking or acting like an expert; to honour its values but be prepared to surrender its assumptions (Waitley 1995; RSA 1996). In order to do this, a company needs to identify and understand the physical energies that cause it stress and stimulus over-load; to recognise the social pressures that alienate employers from employees and undermine community; to highlight the emotional habits and power-plays that keep it stuck in the past; to identify the projections it mirrors and group-defences it stimulates; to actualise the visions that can guide it towards the realisation of its potential and destiny. All this must be appreciated if a leader is to develop a holistic all inclusive view of organisational life.

Conventional management training that builds sensory and social intelligence is inadequate, for an appreciation and development of emotional, self and intuitive intelligence must also take place. So how would a holistic and Gestalt inspired management development curriculum geared to developing sensory, social, emotional, imaginative and transpersonal intelligence appear? Below is one suggestion.

AN HOLISTIC CURRICULUM FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Developing Sensory Intelligence – (fostering observation & listening skills):

- developing sensitivity to the physical environment, client and employee needs;
- focusing upon the organisational field, employee and client behaviours;

- contacting, attending to and ordering sensory and physiological feedback;
- learning about human and systemic needs and how best to satisfy these.

Developing Social Intelligence – (fostering facilitative inquiry & communication skills):

- forming and developing appropriate client-consultant relationships;
- diagnosing and appreciating organisational culture, role and team/group dynamics;
- contracting, negotiating, facilitating and implementing suitable strategies;
- raising awareness to managing professional, ethical and social boundaries and rules.

Developing Emotional Intelligence – (fostering coaching & counselling skills):

- illuminating historical patterns and emotional dramas that shape organisational life;
- developing insight into the emotional needs of oneself, others, teams and organisations;
- working with and resolving conflict within oneself, others, the team and organisation;
- releasing emotional blockages, illuminating and resolving dramas.

Developing Self-Intelligence – (fostering mindfulness & self-awareness skills):

- raising awareness to the effects of personal bias, fantasy and beliefs;
- surfacing and working with the individual, team, group and organisational shadow;
- illuminating deeper motivations and meanings, developing skills in shadow consultancy;
- identifying, challenging and working with hidden agendas.

Developing Intuitive Intelligence – (fostering reflective & envisioning skills):

- illuminating and actualising your own potential and fostering the potential of others;
- becoming authentic, self-witnessing and open to the unknown and unknowable;
- valuing the self, humankind as my kind, and working for the common good;
- illuminating the higher spiritual purpose of individuals, groups, teams and organisations.

So this is the higher goal my coaching seeks to cultivate. Do you think this is a fitting curriculum for consultants and coaches to work towards?

RESOLUTION

Coming to the end of this paper I invite you to consider how the product of the coaching approach described here, namely a holistic 21st Century Organisation might appear? I have some ideas myself, plus a little practical evidence of what might be achieved from a consultancy experience informed by the model described here (Barber 2006).

TOWARDS AN ENLIGHTENED ORGANISATION

At the sensory level such an organisation would pay attention to its present position and developing needs. To enable this, its managers would employ sound observational, action research and data processing skills, and be able to interpret physical phenomena. *Remember knowledge is power and synergy is the mandate.*

At the social level the organisation would have boundaries akin to a skin, which are semi-permeable and grow to accommodate change. To enable this managers would need to be expert at building and maintaining relationships and will be skilled facilitators. *Remember, in the 21st Century leaders empower and coach, and teams make decisions.*

At the emotional level the organisation would encourage expression and raise awareness to the emotional field. For this managers would work with and direct emotional energy, and be able to identify the historical patterns that hinder and/or enhance the organisational climate, while fostering a climate of self-empowerment. *Remember, supervisors vanish and managers need to delegate.*

At the projective level the organisation would raise and work with its shadow, the collisions and everything else that interferes with its creativity and adaptation. For this managers would need to employ skills of shadow consultancy. *Remember, creativity drives process, quality determines demand, and value is everything.*

At the transpersonal level the organisation would consider its higher purposes, how it can continue to add value to its employees and the community it serves. Its managers would be authentic and visionary. *Remember, profits must be earned with integrity, everyone is a customer, and managers will need to value others and to encourage self-respect.*

The 'therapeutic community' idea that it is 'the system' rather than the individual that needs healing (Jensen 1980) is already influential within organisational development (Harrison 1995; Barber 1999). This paper has built on this notion and dared to suggest how coaches and organisational consultants might begin to educate the workplace to holistic awareness and Gestalt methods of inquiry through coaching.

Many enlightened models of leadership I believe have not gained ground because the higher level individual skills necessary for their success have remained

undeveloped, for instance Servant-Leadership's (Hall 2007) core skill-base of *listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight and stewardship*, and Alpha Leadership (Deering et al 2002) emphasis upon mindful *anticipating, aligning* and *acting*. This paper has suggested a way this may be rectified.

In Gestalt, as within other modes of phenomenological inquiry there are no answers, no certainties – only uncertainty, and as in life there is only an as yet 'unformed fertile void' to guide us, yet by staying with this potential chaos we end up with expanded awareness and a far better 'sense' of what we are doing now and what we might experiment with further. Managing chaos and tolerating the 'unknown' are higher level leadership skills which mitigate against impulsiveness and defensiveness.

Gestalt is an experiential method of inquiry which appreciates 'the whole field'; its tools are dialogue inquiry in service of current awareness and its products are raised awareness and the illumination of tacit embodied knowledge. It is also a powerful change agent and promoter of respect for the human condition – and the humanistic values it enacts of deep respect for the human condition, empowerment, democratic decision-making and experiential learning enshrine its ethical base. Indeed, Gestalt in service of leadership, organisational renewal and culture change I have experienced as generative of making organisations a fit home for the human condition (Barber 2006).

At the last, for all our clever sciences, intellectual theories and cultural constructions, I believe coaching boils down to a 'felt-sense' of whether something feels true for us or not. An experience is worth a thousand pictures or theories and we end up with 'wisdom' sweated out of our lived experience. Gestalt facilitates this process.

*Knowledge has three degrees – opinion, science, illumination.
The means or instrument of the first is sense, of the second,
dialectic; of the third, intuition (Plotinus).*

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