

An introduction to Gestalt consulting

The theory and practice of Gestalt therapy was first developed in the 1940s by Fritz Perls and others in an attempt to integrate the findings of Gestalt studies of perception, the related work of Kurt Lewin and work by other phenomenological and existential thinkers. Nevis' Gestalt approach to organisational consulting stems from the theory and practice of Gestalt therapy as it has developed since those early days.

Basic concepts of Gestalt psychology and therapy

Gestalt

The German word Gestalt has no direct equivalent in the English language and embraces a wide variety of concepts: "the shape, the pattern, the whole form, the configuration. It connotes the structural entity which is both different from and much more than the sum of its parts" (Clarkson, 1989). According to the Gestalt psychologists, "the true data of experience are organised wholes" (Nevis, p5). They called the perceived patterns or wholes *Gestalts* or *Gestalten*. They showed how perception of form is an inherent human quality and that people work actively to impose order on what they see. We can all identify with this quality when we find ourselves seeing shapes or faces in trees, rocks and other natural formations, or when we automatically fill in the blanks in our mind when presented with this on a page:



to form an S.

Figure and ground

One of the most basic principles to emerge out of these early studies was the figure-ground relationship, in which "each Gestalt is seen as a figure that stands out against a vaguer background. The figure is more interesting, has more meaning attributed to it, and remains in the memory better than the ground" (Nevis, p6). A figure develops through the focusing of attention, a process which is called figure formation. As we move through our daily lives, different figures emerge and recede in our awareness.

Homeostasis

"The homeostatic process is one of reaching out into the environment to satisfy a dominant need, aroused from within or by the environment... When the need is met, the gestalt is closed and the individual temporarily satisfied can now move on to forming and closing other gestalts" (Merry and Brown, 1987, p75).

Unfinished business

"Unclosed gestalts, in the form of 'unfinished business', are one of the major causes of tension in the individual and between the individual and the social environment, because homeostasis is not achieved and the process of living and satisfying emerging needs is interrupted" (Merry and Brown, 1987, p76).

The field

Perls drew upon the notion of the field, "in which the person and the social environment mutually interact. Organism and environment equals field." (Merry and Brown, 1987, p76). Gestalt is "holistic in vision" and strives towards "an appreciation of the whole energetic field of relationship" (Barber, 1999).

The primacy of awareness

"With awareness, the individual can mobilise energy so that the environment can be contacted to meet a need" (Merry and Brown, 1987, p75). "Awareness is the starting point from which all the work proceeds" (Nevis, 1987, p42).

Boundary disturbances

Much of the theoretical and practical work of Gestalt therapy is concerned with the neurotic behaviours of individuals which are described as dysfunctional boundary mechanisms or disturbances. Examples of these are: "projection, or doing to others what one imagines they are doing to oneself; introjection, or doing what we imagine others would like one to do; retroflection, or doing to oneself what one would like to do to others; and confluence, or not knowing who is doing what to whom" (Merry and Brown, 1987, p76). Clarkson (1989) defines three other boundary disturbances: desensitisation, or armouring oneself against incoming stimuli; deflection, or avoiding facing what is happening now; and egotism, or seeing only oneself. Each disturbance occurs at a different stage of the Gestalt cycle of experience.

The Gestalt Cycle of Experience

The guiding process for Gestalt-oriented organisation consulting, as developed by Nevis, is the Gestalt 'Cycle of Experience' of awareness, energy mobilisation, action, contact, resolution and withdrawal. The cycle assumes that when a disequilibrium in the state of being or functioning of a person(s) comes into awareness, "the natural human tendency is to want to do something to achieve a new state of equilibrium (Nevis, 1987, p2)". The cycle therefore describes the natural and healthy process of forming complete 'Gestalten', which can be found in all areas of human activity.

Nevis highlights two main aims as guiding the Gestalt perspective for organisational intervention; (i) "the role of the consultant is to *teach the client system* those skills necessary for understanding the 'cycle of experience' and for functioning better in carrying out the processes of awareness, contact, etc" and (ii) "in the process of helping the client system to improve its functioning, the consultant is to *provide a presence* that is otherwise lacking" (Nevis, 1987, p53).

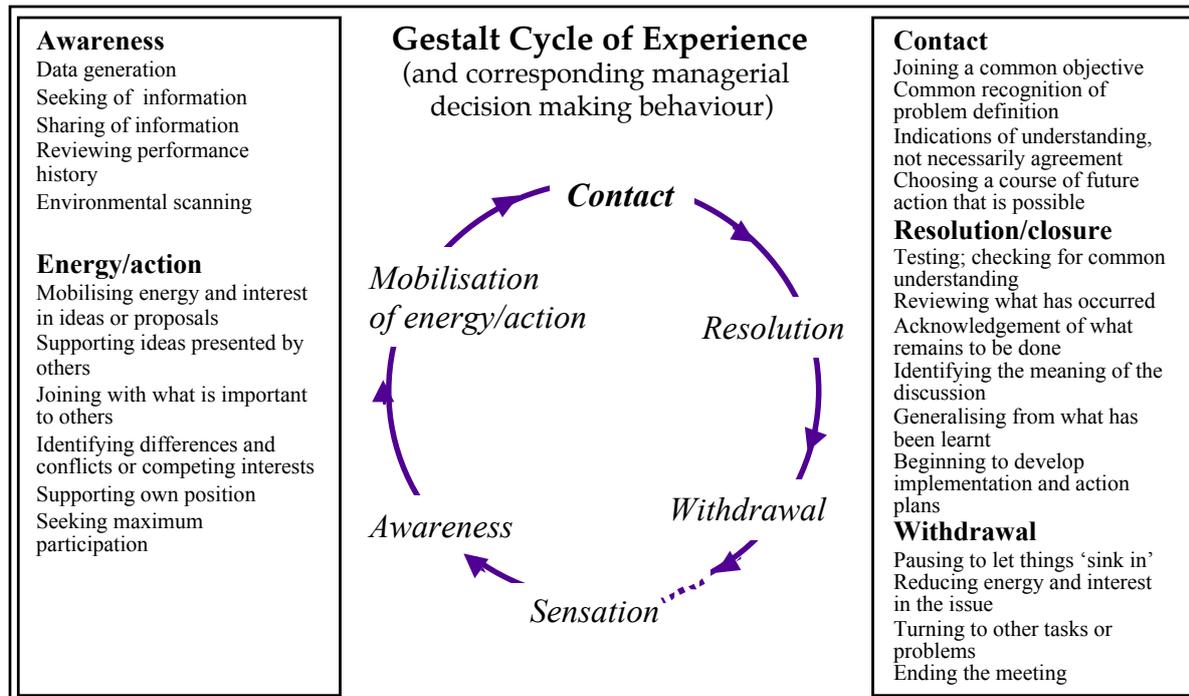
Nevis elaborates on what he means by presence; "the consultant models a way of approaching problems and, through interest in the attractiveness of this way of being, hopes to mobilise the energy of the client system" (Nevis, 1987, p54). This Gestalt methodology can be seen as a development of process consultation, however it goes "beyond a classical process consultation model in that the use of the full self and active presence of the consultant is a key component (Nevis, 1987, p66)".

He goes on to suggest how the cycle might be used in relation to the consulting process: "at first look the phases of the cycle may appear to correspond roughly to stages of organisational consulting. Certainly the entry and assessment stages of consultation place a heavy emphasis on awareness development. ...however it would be a mistake to see the Cycle in such a limited or fragmented relationship to the consulting process. The Cycle of Experience defines a basic process of awareness that the consultant deals with in self and others while carrying out the work at each stage of the consulting process" (Nevis, 1987, p42).

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From my own experience the Gestalt cycle can be used as a micro process that is repeated many times within a consulting assignment. Each meeting a consultant has with a client is guided by a process of sorts, even if not explicitly recognised. It is this phenomenon that I wanted to explore in my research.

I have summarised the Gestalt cycle of experience and how it relates to behaviour and activity within management consultancy situations in the following diagram:



Adapted from Nevis, Organisational Consulting (1995)

Complete units of experience

A consultant should orientate themselves to view each interaction with the client system in terms of beginnings and endings. Each and every sessions with a client requires a completed unit of work or useful experience.

Whether engaged in individual counselling, two-person planning or a group meeting, the objective is to see that each phase of the cycle is carried out well and that there is an appreciation of an entire cycle. The consultant bases interventions on what is missing in the system and what is needed to improve the process.

At the end of a cycle, there should be a clear idea of what has been done, of what has not been done or what the system is not ready to deal with at this time. The client should be able to make some statements at the end of a session (a one hour meeting or a three day workshop) that summarises the meaning that has been gained from the experience.

Intervention behaviours drawing upon a Gestalt perspective

Nevis lists five major activities that relate to the phases of the cycle of experience:

- 1 To attend, observe, and selectively share observations of what you see, hear, feel, etc, and thus establish your presence in doing so.
- 2 To attend to one's own experience (feelings, sensations, thoughts) and to selectively share these, thus establishing your presence in doing so.
- 3 To focus on energy in the client system and the emergence or lack of themes or issues (common figures) for which there is energy; to act to support mobilisation of client energy (joining) so that something happens.
- 4 To facilitate clear, meaningful, heightened contacts between members of the client system (including their contact with you).
- 5 To help the group achieve heightened awareness of its overall process in completing units of work, and to learn to complete units of work so as to achieve closure around problem areas of unfinished business.

Gestalt psychotherapy (notes from Metanoia introductory weekend)

The main features of a gestalt approach to psychotherapy:

- Experimentation
- Awareness, working in the present
- Field theory?

Other key features of a gestalt approach:

- 1 Figure and ground
- 2 The cycle of experience
- 3 Interruptions to the cycle of experience
- 4 Unfinished business
- 5 Full use of self (the therapist)
- 6 Psychodrama
- 7 Dream analysis

Gestalt coaching – fundamental propositions

- ❖ That awareness leads to change
- ❖ That the aim of the coach is to help clients to become more aware of their own process
- ❖ That this heightened awareness will produce a greater understanding of what is needed, what choices are open, and will ultimately produce more effective decision making and action
- ❖ That the awareness raising process produces greater personal ownership and responsibility
- ❖ That our emerging dominant needs organise our field of perception
- ❖ That we perceive in whole and seek to gain closure around issues
- ❖ That we need to give meaning to our perceptions and experiences
- ❖ That learning occurs through the examination of here and now experiences

Peter Bluckert – Psychological Dimensions of Executive Coaching