

Gestalt in Coaching & Consulting: A Dialogue with Holism & the Soul (Paul Barber 2002)

Abstract

This paper examines the need for an holistic approach to coaching and consultancy, and suggests that a Gestalt-informed vision is essential if organisations are to prosper and to become fit environs for the human spirit. The model described here has already been practically applied to group facilitation, research, organisational consultancy and coaching (Barber 1996; 1999; 2001) within masters and doctorate programmes within the University of Surrey. The model presented is not meant to replace Gestalt approaches to consultancy (Nevis 1987) nor to compete with concepts of the learning company (Pedler et al 1991), but is designed to build upon and to complement these influences.

Holism - The Many Faces of Work and Reality

"Often a person's identity, that wild inner complexity of soul and colour of spirit, becomes shrunken into their work identity. They become prisoners of their role. They limit and reduce their lives. They become seduced by the practice of self-absence. They move further and further away from their own lives. They are forced backwards into hidden areas on the ledges of their hearts. When you encounter them you meet only the role. You look for the person, but you never meet him" (O'Donoghue 1997 p187-188).

Work has the potential to be a mundane pursuit for survival, a social addiction (Harrison 1995), 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 you might deepen your understanding and broaden the way you intervene within coaching and consultancy.

Holism, akin to the Gestalt notion of field theory (Lewin 1952; Parlett 1993), seeks to include and to interrelate rather than to reduce things down to size. A consultant or coach working holistically attends to an individual and organisation's energetic field, their whole ecology. But to work in this way without a map to guide you is a difficult task. This paper sets out to provide a map plus a few strategies to enable you to begin to consult and coach holistically.

Critical reflection upon my own experience as a coach and consultant (Barber 1996; 1999) has illuminated the following five main levels of influence:

- The physical-sensory level - everything we physically sense, see, hear, taste and touch;
- The social-cultural level - our beliefs and social norms, values and traditions, all we have been culturally taught to believe;
- The emotional-transferential level - memories and prior learning, transference, familial patterns and personal dramas - (victim, rescuer, persecutor, rebel);
- The projective-imaginal level - our projections and fantasies, archetypes and inner dreams, the angels that guide us and demons that drive us;
- The transpersonal-spiritual level - intuitions of things over, above and beyond the self, notions of divine guidance and inspiration.

These levels are not mutually exclusive, but seen as inter-dependent. Being fluid and constantly in flow, they emerge and dissolve as our external and internal environment changes. From this perspective, reality is a river with ever-changing currents.

Though every level of is valuable and serves a unique function, each contains negative and positive features. For example, "work" within the aforementioned levels can take on many forms:

- When we anchor ourselves in physical-sensory reality work may be seen as a skilfully co-ordinated activity, an exercise for the body and mind where physiological energies are generated and exchanged where we may negatively lose ourselves in our instincts and habits, or positively heighten our awareness and contact through sensory engagement with the moment.
- When we attune to social-cultural reality we relate via rules and intellectual maps to engage with work through conventional roles and rituals, here we may negatively become like ghosts trapped in a machine, or through heightened communication develop a positive sense of community and enrich our ourselves through relationships with others.
- When we encounter emotional-transferential reality work re-stimulates bits of our emotional history which are as yet unresolved, to the degree we negatively enact family roles or blindly act-out earlier conflicts, or positively raise to awareness the patterns that drive us and rise above the same.
- When we engage projective-imaginal reality our professional work can become a mirror of ourselves, where we negatively become lost in a self-generated ego-trip as we act out our own movie, or positively through mindful observation transcend our desires to meet with a more authentic sense of being.

- When we open up to transpersonal-spiritual reality our work can become a quest where we negatively become submerged or overwhelmed by the universal energies that surround us, or may positively embark upon a spiritual journey which shapes our true destiny.

As our natures are complex and multi-faceted, so are the organisations we co-create. A coach and consultant's job is to draw attention to negative patterns while fostering the positive adaptations cited above.

So, are we animals in a concrete jungle fighting for survival? Human cogs in a great social machine endeavouring to run smoothly? Do we enact an emotional drama which chains us to the past? Are we driven by inner desires to succeed? Do we search for a higher sense of meaning and purpose? Such influences as these - and the realities they emanate from - constantly shape behaviour. Better to raise these influences to awareness than to blindly act them out. But then again, the world remains a far simpler place when you stick yourself at the social level - stay well within the expectations of our parent culture - and turn a blind-eye to all else! But doesn't this represent surrender - not growth! For "growth" entails discomfort, moving beyond your comfort zone and, meeting with your vulnerability all over again.

Whatever you concentrate upon grows stronger, and what you withdraw energy from grows weaker and dies.

Gestalt - Staying in Meaningful Dialogue with the Whole

"Myths shape our attitudes and aspirations in ways we scarcely recognize, grabbing hold of your imagination and channelling out energies into prescribed patterns of behaviour. Today our dominant myth about work is the myth of 'a world of little kings'. This myth produces a social ideal, a measure of judging the relative worth of various activities and members of society. It is a view of life which many today are finding to be personally empty and socially ruinous" (Boldt 1993).

Although the scientific task-orientated vision of Western business tends to emphasise a "physical-sensory" and "social-cultural" world view, when I enter business communities to probe a little deeper, I find that although they rationalise what they do at these levels, their motivation is usually fuelled by emotion and imagination. What people say they do is often different to what they actually do. Behaviour is the show, emotions are the fuel, and intellectual rationalisation provides the cover story. In this light, any amount of cause-and-effect thinking and logical planning will do little to transform an organisation or person if the deeper energetic drivers are missed.

So how might Gestalt help to address the above? Simply, it provides a method. Gestalt encourages us to suspend judgements and through ever deepening description to describe what we see, hear, touch, feel, imagine and intuitively sense within the client system - now. In this way organisations and individuals are approached experientially and holistically, rather than

interpreted theoretically. A consultant or coach working in the Gestalt mode thus builds "a picture of awareness" refined from out of "immediate experience" through a "felt sense" of the client embedded in his or her current environment (Yontif 1996). Raising awareness is therefore both a prime intention and the desired outcome, and because every moment is seen as unique and interrelating to everything else, we are cautioned that there are no easy answers or simple solutions to human problems.

The more cynical reader at this stage might ask: "Why bother with holism and Gestalt, what have these got to do with earning a crust of bread and life in the real world?" In reply, I would draw attention to how different levels of reality inform the "contractual", "idealised" and "authentic" dimensions of our consulting and coaching relationships (Greenson 1967), and point out that if we blind ourselves to these dimensions, we limit our own and our clients potential. Awareness precedes both learning and the development of responsibility.

Pause for a while to examine the dimensions of relationship cited below, and consider which of these you primarily concentrate upon and live within?

For instance the ***contractual dimension of relationship*** is constructed from *physical-sensory* and *social-cultural* information, and houses the stated purpose for the enactment of a relationship, its task and the working alliance you negotiate. Here are located strategic intent, practical knowledge and skill and professional criteria for relational success, as well as the social and intellectual agreement that underpins our client-consultant relationship. Most consultants and coaches are excellent at communicating this dimension.

The ***idealised dimension of relationship*** is constructed from *emotional-transferential* and *imaginal-projective* material, and houses emotional, historical and fantasised material, and in so doing enshrines the shadow of the contractual relationship. In this dimension a relationship may echo child-parent or subordinate-boss communications, sexual game-play and power-politics. This, the shadow-side of the client-consultant relationship, though felt and acted upon, often functions out of a coach or consultant's general awareness.

The ***authentic dimension of relationship*** is constructed from a *transpersonal-spiritual* sense of experiential values, and says more about who you are at core, the real you from the drivers seat stripped of all social denial, defence and artifice. Though it may be inappropriate to burden your clients with your self-doubt and personal problems, it is crucial for you to recognise how these influence you. Indeed, the sense of a real relationship is based on accurate perceptions and a willingness to be open, honest and authentic. Consultants and coaches of excellence are richly endowed in this area. Transformation also needs to occur at this, the authentic "soul" level, if there are to be lasting effects.

The term "soul" in the above context, relates to our "essence", the non-driven part of us that witnesses rather than judges, and stands apart from everyday experience while experiencing its lessons. Some authorities (Chopra 1996)

see the soul as housing the sum of our acquired intuitive knowledge and experiential wisdom - all our unconscious competencies. As the cosmos is to the macrocosm, so the soul is to the human microcosm. It is the soul or essence of a person we must communicate with if we are to foster change, and it is the collective soul of the organisation a consultant must influence if they are to reap transformation. Coaches and consultants are reminded here that they must cultivate their *being* if they are to enrich their contact with and communication of the authentic dimension.

So what kind of consultant or coach are you? Are you primarily logical and professionally hard edged, self-centred and emotionally expressive, or do you share of your real self? Note, at the contractual level the relationship is primarily an "I-It" one - centred on rules and tasks; at the idealised level the relationship is an "I-I" one preoccupied with the self; at the authentic level the relationship is "I-Thou" and respectful of the human condition.

If you cannot distinguish between the "*contractual*" dimension and its *sensory* and *social influences*, the "*idealised*" dimension and its *emotional* and *imaginal* influence, and the "*authentic*" dimension and its *transpersonal* influences, what value your professional advice? Let alone your coaching or consultation?

Though there are good professional reasons for acquiring holistic vision, there are also issues of modernity pressing for Gestalt informed change; these will now be reviewed.

An Holistic & Gestalt informed Approach to Organisational Healing

"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).

We are at the end of one era and about to embark upon another, and need only to look to current trends for a glimpse of the future. A new business paradigm is demanded for the 21st Century and companies need to adapt accordingly. An "I-It" relationship to the workplace and management can no longer prosper, for an "I-Thou" relationship attentive to human needs and ecologically sound practice is beginning to be demanded by consumers and workers alike. Consider just how different business demands of today are to those of the recent past:

- "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 business community needs an holistic approach to move it forward to this next level, but most business education has not kept abreast of the times. Companies that resist or are unprepared for this change will fossilise and die. Historically, the drive for maximum short-term return on investment for shareholders has bequeathed much waste and pollution, and consumers are now demanding an ecologically friendly perspective that adds value to the wider community (RSA 1996). An holistic appreciation is necessary for this.

As environmental and ecological issues come to the fore, along with a growing concern for animal welfare, the need to shift power away from capital to human resources, from shareholders to customers, and from expediency to ethical business increases day by day (RSA 1996). The market has already rebelled against battery farming, is hostile to genetically altered food-stuffs, alerted to the felling of the rain-forests and still reels from the spectre of mad-cow and foot-and-mouth disease. And what the consumer wants one day, the government courts in return for votes the next. Values of the transpersonal level have therefore already entered the political arena, and will need to be balanced with the demands of shareholders for a maximum return upon long-term investments. The need for holistic vision has therefore never been greater.

If employees are to become aware, empowered and self-supervising, if work is to be truly educative and if organisations are to maximise human potential and to work with the good of the community at heart, a new approach to business education is necessary. This is not a dream - it is 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; the social pressures that alienate employers from employees and undermine community; the emotional habits and power-plays that keep it stuck in the past; the projections it mirrors and group-defences it stimulates; the visions that can guide it towards the realisation of its potential and destiny.

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 what would an holistic and Gestalt informed management development curriculum geared to developing sensory, social, emotional, imaginal and transpersonal intelligence look like? Below is one suggestion:

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 conducting inquiry into organisational culture, role and team/group dynamics;
- contracting, negotiating, facilitating and implementing suitable strategies;
- raising awareness to managing professional, ethical and socio-cultural boundaries and rules.

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

- illuminating historical patterns and emotional dramas that shape organisational behaviours;
- developing insight into the emotional needs of oneself, others, teams and organisations;

- working with and resolving conflict within oneself, others, groups, teams and organisations;
- 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, if this is a fitting curriculum for consultants and coaches to work towards, how might its product, the holistic Gestalt inspired 21st Century organisation appear?

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 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 to happen managers would 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). 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.

"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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