

RENEWAL

PUTTING GESTALT INTO ACTION

February 2012

In this issue:

- **Examples of Gestalt informed group facilitation**
 - **Gestalt group guidelines**
 - **A beginner's guide to Gestalt groups**
-

Examples of Gestalt informed group facilitation

Paul Barber

CASE STUDY 1

Levels of learning – a two hour Gestalt group in action

Introduction:

I attempt in the following case-study, drawn from a session I facilitated with 30 folk in a drop-in conference setting, to show from a facilitator's perspective what caught my attention and how I facilitated a newly formed group, similar in membership to the drop-in Saturday Gestalt Group I currently offer bi-monthly. I hope it will give you some idea of what you may meet in a Gestalt group run on personal development and/or therapeutic lines, where the agenda unfolds and participants flow in the direction of their current interests.

In the session described I was contracted to illuminate different levels of group influence, and drew from a model for this informed by 1) physical and sensory; 2) social and cultural; 3) emotional and biographical; 4) imaginative and projective; 5) intuitive and transpersonal influences.

Physical and sensory influences:

At the physical level of a group I attend to sensory data, such as the space available; the number of participants; the play of light and shadow; the temperature of the room; the ease or tensions apparent in the postures of participants; the amount of verbal exchange and silences; the dress code and colours. I also attend to how I am physically supporting myself, reflect on my own breathing and posture, note whether I am breathing the group in or 'blowing it out', where in my body I feel relaxed and where I feel tight, and will share this to encourage others to explore their own physical reactions. For example in this group I said "I'm aware of feeling alert and on the look-out, as if I'm soaking in the environment... and as I take you all in and meet your eyes I feel more connected, less flighty and more grounded in the room... is something similar happening for you?". Others then responded by sharing how they noticed their "heart beating faster", and a sense of not knowing what might come next and watching me very carefully for a clue as to what might happen.

I confessed that before the group began I had "... acclimatised myself to the room, arranged chairs in a circle and chose a comfortable position from which to view the whole, opened windows to release the heat of mid-day – such was my need to connect with the room and the physical environment beforehand". I also note that as participants gathered I became aware of what I believe was an initial resistance to meet the eyes of others – that this appeared to be a 'beginning pattern' common to many today. In relation to this insight I found myself suggesting, as an experiment, that people "Look around the room, make the effort to meet others eyes... see what happens when your eyes meet... do you smile, feel embarrassed to look at others or to be seen by them... I also wonder if your breathing changes like mine does when you begin to really see others and to connect". After a pause individuals observed how "Fleetingly, as the group formed, I thought I saw on others faces, expressions suggesting they were a little fearful of being overwhelmed by what might await them – but I realise now this was my own fear". Another noted "I felt - bodily, I was alert and over-stimulated, full of imagination about what might happen to me, but as I looked around and made eye contact I settled". I suggest possibly the size of the group has an effect on us, and wonder how we might be if we formed four smaller groups of 4 or five of us. We agree to try this experiment.

After 10 minutes in smaller groups just observing how we go about meeting and introducing ourselves to others, I ask "So what have you learnt from this experiment?" Some note how much easier it was, how much more heard and able to speak they found it in a smaller group. I note I was struck by the increased energy and speed of verbal exchange, while in the large group we seemed to slow down and to be thrown back on ourselves. Some participants noted they felt more relaxed in the smaller group, others that they enjoyed the silence and reflection stimulated by the larger group. Some also observed that they felt more in tune with themselves in the large group, and more competitive for air time in the smaller group. In summary I suggest that possibly in the larger group our task is to make peace with our fantasies, as there is too much at play to check-out. While in the smaller group the task is to make verbal contact. Certainly it seemed to appear easier to maintain the social world and conventional notions of reality in a smaller group.

By the close of the group I was aware that group communication seemed freer, attention and listening high, bodily energy and physical movement more free-flowing. Silences now seemed to naturally arise without the tension they produced earlier, and people seemed more content to 'be' rather than to 'do' things. I reasoned from this that contact with sensory reality was enhanced and people could now stay with 'how things were' rather than desperately 'structure time' or 'hide behind their more usual roles'. By staying with discomfort, paradoxically safety grew.

Social and cultural influences:

At the social level of the group where we echo our culture and are stimulated by the objective 'task' or social purpose of the group, where the facilitator is approached as a leader and we attempt to enact conventional notions of social reality and 'life as taught', during the first half of the group there appeared to be a good deal of dependence on my formal leadership, as if I was expected to 'start things off' and to

'make things happen'. It was largely left to me, as 'leader', to 'form a conventional contract' and members expected that I would 'take responsibility for everything that happened or was about to happen'. They also seemed to anticipate that I would 'stay remote' and separate from them. Although the blackboard proclaimed the group aim, namely: 'To experientially inquire into the effects of groups and to open a dialogue between outer reality (sensory/intellectual constructs) and inner reality (emotional/imaginative perception)' and they had seen a briefing paper in the conference proceedings from which they selected to attend my session, people generally claimed they did not know the purpose of the session and wanted reassurance from me, as if they had regressed to a child-like position, were doubtful of their own evidence and looked to check things out directly with me.

At one stage I asked "What expectations do people have of this group?" In response some said that they "hoped for something different"; were "...irritated and hot with rushing from place to place in this conference and wanted a time to relax and reflect". Some admitted attempting to get into their more usual roles and were generally tending to ignore all else. As late members turned up there was concern about including them, especially as we were becoming short of chairs. At one point we decided to suspend the group to allow a search for chairs in nearby rooms. Inclusion and exclusion seemed to the fore at this stage, and I felt I was being checked-out as to whether I was prepared to be as collaborative as I said I would be. There also appeared to be a search for 'the rules' – to which I asked "What rules would you like to be guided by here?".

Periodically, tensions and silences would be followed by light-hearted comments. At one point a burst of what I took to be embarrassed laughter rippled around the room. One participant saw this as 'hysterical', another as a 'nervous release of energy'. As the group progressed there was more challenge and checking-out of what was really happening, as we started to enquire into 'how it felt to be confronted by a large and loosely constructed group'. It seemed to help people settle when I gave permission 'to stay with uncertainty', or shared rationale such as "...if non-structure and uncertainty are what cause us stress, maybe staying with this might be productive?".

Comfort was also afforded by my giving hand-outs which brought a recognisable 'social' structure and purpose to our inquiry. By the end of the session dependence on this level seemed much reduced, with participants taking the initiative.

Emotional and biographical influences:

At the emotional level of the group where a participant's past is re-kindled or when earlier life scripts are re-stimulated by current group events, participants seemed to approach me as an earlier authority from their past, sometimes assigning to me a parent-like role.

Where the 'group as a mirror of society' solicits role-play and task, the 'group as a mirror of the past' strikes a deeper layer more akin to psycho-drama; and the leadership style a facilitator adopts does much to influence a group's memories of

earlier emotional patterns. An empathic and nurturing facilitator is, I suggest, more likely to affect positive memories and to solicit a creative group. Conversely, a remote, critical facilitator invites negative parental transference and can reap destructive group processes. A balance of both I believe is important for an holistic learning experience.

This more emotionalised and biographical level was hard for me to verify in the short two hour time-span of the group, but one exercise where we brought back a memory of childhood, gave this memory a title and examined how this related to where we are now, brought up for myself and the person I was paired with memories of infant school. This memory, we realised, represented the first large group of our lives, plus feelings of expectancy and uncertainty which related directly to where we were, now. The title I gave to this memory was 'how to be in a community'. Material of this level also intruded when I found myself thinking of an earlier conference where I had facilitated another open undirected group. As to the acting out of past patterns by others - I can only speculate, but I was intrigued by one participant who towards the end of the workshop told me "I came to scoff, yet find myself bowing my head before the altar". I wondered about the negative experiences he had endured in earlier experiential groups and their facilitators before that day?

I received feedback, post-workshop, from a participant who had some years previous worked with a former director of the Human Potential Research Group, the post I now held, and wondered if I was being compared or inviting memories of those times for her? By the close of the workshop this level seemed to exert less active an influence, and I felt more met as a real person in my own right.

Imaginative and projective influences:

The group at an imaginative level where people project out meaning upon others was less amenable to intellectual rationalisation. A facilitator cannot hurry along insight here, but must wait for a group's readiness. At this level a consultant or facilitator functions as a screen upon which clients project imagined and fantasised meaning. In this way, a group leader may come to incarnate 'projective meanings' for the group, become a fantasy archetypal symbolic figure; a creature formed from imagination. I believe there were several incidents where participants projected qualities of their own, onto and into me. This was noticeable in language, especially where statements started with "You want us to..."; "One always does..."; "You are saying that because..."; "People tend to...", when and where they spoke from a rich vein of assumption. Some astute members challenged others to check-out their beliefs rather than thrust these out upon them and the group. For example, after a participant described another as uncomfortable, yet seemed to more readily display this quality herself, she was challenged to own her own discomfort.

For example, at the beginning of the group when there appeared to be a good deal of emotional discomfort, the group seemed to project out upon the physical environment; the lack of air in the room; the sun's heat etc. In terms of acting out projected energies, the drive at various times to open windows, to do something

active and to make late comers comfortable, all seemed to emanate from a store of internal and personalised dis-at-ease. It was also noted, by one participant, that the reticence of himself and others was understandable, for in this peer group of fellow professionals the sense of vulnerability was acute. I guessed from this that competence was being projected onto others, with the consequence that a residual trace of inadequacy remained within the self. By the end of the workshop imaginative projections appeared to have been checked-out to the degree that factual and/or sensory data now balanced out projective reality.

Intuitive and transpersonal influences:

At the transpersonal or more intuitive cum spiritual level of the group, which relates to what is largely beyond our awareness and held within the 'collective unconscious' of the group, we glimpse more subtle and tacit level this in spontaneous and instinctive insights. When working at this level I have found intuitive, subtle, non-directed interventions most fitting. The use of metaphor here reaches where cold reason and logic fail. When memories of the past and concerns of the ego begin to fade, a peaceful stillness can come upon us, wherein we meet with a deeper level of being where the unspoken is better perceived.

While at the ego generated imagined-projective level the individual asks 'What's in it for me?', at the transpersonal level an individual asks 'How can I add value and give best of myself here?' Or look to their life's purpose and what is guiding them. This level was lightly addressed when we shared intuitions relating to the symbolic animal the group brought to mind, where symbols arose of "... a large slow lumbering animal like an elephant"; "... a large woolly fluffy sheep"; "... a turtle in a round hard shell" all percolated to mind in various periods of the group's life-line. A participant who drew attention to an imagined 'large hole' in the centre of the group drew from me the image of water, which was in turn seen by some as "... still and clear", and others as "choppy", but noticeably without sharks or other dangerous creatures in its depths. But it was during silences and quiet restful moments when a meditative state descended upon the group when things spiritual and over and above us seemed to flower that this level felt most present.

Reflections upon the experience of being in a group illuminated insights for some participants of what might be their life's purpose. There were also two periods of silence when participants seemed particularly attentive and self-absorbed in a meditative fashion upon the quality of our being together. By the close of the workshop participants appeared more open to the unknown and unknowable and more able to work in peaceful silence and at the level of communal togetherness.

Epilogue:

In reviewing the above group, I feel that evidence generated from the transpersonal level of the group was heavily contaminated by imagination, and was the least attended or pursued. The social and professional level appeared to be heavily invested in by participants, though some headway was made in awaking people to physical and imaginative aspects of reality. Then again, this was an academic setting in a university setting at a professional conference with psychologists and academic

researchers in attendance - so what more could we really expect? Yet, I believe much had been achieved in the time frame of 2 hours.

References:

Barber, P. (2012) A Reflective Guide to Facilitating Change in Groups and Organisations – A Gestalt Approach to Mindfulness. Libri Press, Oxford (to be published in Autumn 2012).

CASE STUDY 2

Travelling through chaos and confusion on a two day workshop

Orientation and identification (setting the scene, building trust and identifying the agenda):

People often ask me how I employ my particular counter-cultural Gestalt facilitation in commercial settings. This case study describes how I applied myself and my Gestalt in a 2 day workshop in a large multi-national company which wished to enhance its staff's facilitative skills. The participants, 13 in number, were drawn from an international background and all except two had been in the company many years. Though the group considered themselves to be advanced facilitators, the impression I rapidly formed was that all but a few were more comfortable in the task domain with a high degree of structure, than the cut and thrust of a more facilitative style. They appeared to my mind competent trainers rather than facilitators.

In this group the agenda had been contractually set-up with senior managers prior to my meeting with the group.

After a round of check-ins where we each in turn shared who we were and what we wanted from the workshop, we sketched a brief agenda for the days ahead. In an effort to prepare the group to a more emergent style of facilitation, one that could build communities rather than 'manage events', periodically throughout the first day I drew attention to the necessity for us to be 'led by the wisdom of our insecurity' and to 'welcome confusion', as these were akin to facilitative 'growing pains' and symptomatic of us moving into territory where new learning awaits. After all, I was contracted to run an 'advanced facilitator training' workshop where they may need to move beyond their comfort zone, where 'inquiry' and illumination were the order of the day rather than 'training to skills'.

To my mind this was a superficially safe and over-polite group who wished to stay with 'the known' rather than conquest new territory.

Again, we return to the truism that in order for groups and teams to move out from a 'false sense of community' – towards a more 'authentic' one, individuals must first travel through very necessary transitory phases of chaos and emptiness, where the "old" is released in favour of a still to be realised "new" (Peck 1993). Indeed, I used the work of Scott Peck to help convey the need for facilitators to support others

moving beyond their safety zones and into the less structured climate of meeting needs in the here and now.

In the first hour and a half I let things run as they were, watched the usual culture form and allowed the group to inform me. On this first day, before coffee, I believe we were primarily in what Scott Peck (ibid) terms 'Pseudo-community', a position characterised by low energy where people maintain a pretence that differences don't exist, are intent on 'getting on with the task in a polite and amicable way' and were 'avoiding the underlying issues'.

Exploration (meeting the agenda, experimenting and engaging with learning activities):

Having watched this unfold for most of the morning – and believing that we would not travel very far as a group if we let it continue, following coffee I voiced observations as to how I was experiencing the group and challenged the role that laughter and the various in-jokes were serving for the group. Some felt shocked and others excited by my challenge to leave politeness behind in favour of a more robust and challenging style. At this point sides were taken, some agreed with me and others distanced themselves and formed antagonistic cliques.

As we left our more 'conventional social world' behind I believe we began to experience what Peck terms 'Chaos', a position where frustrations are released, energy grows, people try to obliterate differences by persuading others to their point of view and an awareness of group process is lost in the competitive struggle to come out on top. At this time I strove to acknowledge difference, negotiated a more experiential and experimental structure by way of experiment, and helped to contain the group through the introduction of new gestalt-informed ground-rules which encouraged inquiry.

By the close of the first day I believe we were struggling within a phase of 'Emptiness', where to escape chaos we would have to revert back to a stage of pseudo-community or by emptying and giving up the belief that we know best release control and walk towards our fears!

I think my non-defensive manner and invitation for people to face their fears helped move us towards a more authentic stance. After all, as I reminded them, they were now being expected by their company to facilitate team-building and to act as internal consultants, and if they wanted to be more process-centred and effective they would need to develop personally – and here was a chance. There were therefore sound reasons behind endeavouring to work in this 'new way'.

Having slept on the experience, when we returned on the second day, miraculously, the group appeared to have integrated a great deal. For example, during check-in people not only said 'for real' how they felt but shared their feelings openly in the group. They were also able to fluently define complex principles relating to a Gestalt informed facilitation style! They had done their homework overnight, and what they were rejecting yesterday they demonstrated competency in today! This was a group

of bright people well able to adapt who had re-read the hand-outs of the day before and had spent time overnight integrating the idea – but I didn't buy my own bullshit and realised they had acquiesced to my demands; that they had merely swapped an absent parent for the one present now, me!

But this said, before coffee on the second day we were well into Scott Peck's notion of 'Community', a position characterised by a high degree of authenticity, an ability to engage in conflict resolution where task and processes are managed simultaneously – but it didn't quite ring true. Though a little later during a facilitative exercise where individuals received and answered spontaneous questions while seated in the centre of the group, I saw the group functioning very effectively as a 'real self-facilitating community and my role evolved into one of a process consultant, something was missing.

We spent most of the afternoon sharing our learning and forming and contracting peer supervision to help us continue our Gestalt development post workshop. In plenary the group celebrated the gains it had made and individuals voiced a commitment to continue this more 'process-centred' way of working as a compliment to their existent skill-base – but I believed it not.

Resolution (debriefing and evaluating the outcomes):

In plenary at the end of the two day workshop one third seemed heavily committed to the new way of working they had experienced. One third seemed compliant but not committed, and one third was clear it wasn't for them and a training environment where roles were clear was where they felt best able to function. Still, even those less enthusiastic about becoming facilitators were pleased at being exposed to this way of working and said they had acquired much fresh learning and a little more skill.

Scott Peck says it takes months or years to move a community through the above phases – yet we did it to some degree in two days! Granted, it was a small group of thirteen, but it says much about what is potentially possible in an intensive facilitated climate where authenticity has flowered and the purpose is understood. Yet will it last? Alas no, for transitions such as this are merely adaptive rather than owned.

When we are prepared to make 'emptiness' and 'chaos' close friends and accept Gestalt's invitation to stay in contact with what is happening, to authentically speak our truth and to inquire into the emerging need of a group – much is possible; but dependent groups will give you what you want time after time! Consequently, the learning stays within the workshop rather than percolates to the workplace or into people's hearts.

A few months after my session, I spoke to one of the more senior workshop participants. A third of the group had really grown since the workshop, but the organisation had decided it didn't want advanced facilitators so much as advanced trainers, so the best of the bunch moved on.

References:

Peck, M.S. (1993) *A World Waiting to be Born - the Search for Civility*. Rider, London.
Quoted in Barber, P. (2012) *A Reflective Guide to Facilitating Change in Groups and Organisations – A Gestalt Approach to Mindfulness*. Libri Press, Oxford (to be published in Autumn 2012).

CASE STUDY 3**An inquiry into Dharma – awakening a team to the transpersonal****Entering and observing the field:**

Some years ago I was invited to consult a top management team within a multinational company facing re-organisation. In due course I met with key players, observed the team in action and arranged a day to commence team-building proper.

Although the management team seemed to get on well enough and to gentle themselves along generally in the right direction, energetically there appeared to be a general lack of vitality, focus and authentic feedback. For instance, prior to the performance of team-building proper when I joined the team for an evening meal and casual chatter, one snippet of information especially impacted me. It emerged that the Managing Director (MD) often dined rather too well at lunch and consequently all too often fell asleep during afternoon meetings. This it seemed had become something of an in-joke in the team, with other managers hinting that it was best to get the important work over with in the morning, or yet to wait until late afternoon for more pressing business. I later found out that some used this to their advantage, getting issues nodded through after lunch which at other times might have been challenged!

Treating the MD in this manner, although fuelling of humour, seemed to have acquired informally over time, legitimate status as a way of ridiculing him and 'hitting back' in retaliation for his nit-picking and detail-chasing management style. Indeed his accountancy background and fastidious manner was widely resented by those who had been 'trained to management'. This resentment was never openly broached, individually nor collectively, and so remained a covert point of contention within the team. Having gleaned this information from three team members on separate occasions in the staff club – note a consultant is never off-duty – at the first opportunity I fed it back to the team in the presence of the MD, without identifying my sources. I recollect saying something along the lines of "I believe this team sets people up; for example, I've heard that many here find a certain individual's detail-chasing style frustrating, but in contrast to challenging or helping him to appreciate the bigger picture they choose to let him continue unencumbered by their counsel or feedback. It is also a standing joke that the person concerned falls asleep in meetings following lunch – but no one challenges them. If this is so, what might be the team's motives?" No names were mentioned but all knew who we were talking about – the MD included. Over the next few weeks the MD took lighter lunches!

Raising the team shadow to awareness:

Throughout this consultancy I found myself doing a good deal of challenge, regularly holding up for examination what was seemingly being denied and increasingly speaking the unspoken. In short, I caught myself playing out the challenging energy associated with the Warrior archetype. Recognising this in myself I began to consider the archetype I was possibly engaging in the client system; which on reflection seemed to be one of Scholar, as knowledge was venerated, systematically collected and had to be exhaustively considered before any managerial decision could be taken. Indeed, the MD appeared to be the principle culture carrier of an over-fastidious scholarly approach, which led to speculative ideas being shunned and to a cumbersome decision making process where no one could proceed without full information. Consequentially, decisions tended to be excessively slow and arrive far too late – for envisioning the future and experimentation were not an option and no one moved until the plan was watertight, but of course no plan is ever watertight within ever changing circumstances – and re-organisation was imminent.

In my initial contact with the team I had observed their emerging style and endeavoured to act in a cultural friendly way, building trust through evidencing my approach and sharing my reasons, thus meeting the client's Scholarly culture and going along at their pace. But now, a little later having walked in their shoes sufficiently to embody and appreciate the prevailing field conditions at a deeper experiential level, somewhat like a cuckoo in an alien cosy nest I begun to push out eggs rather than to walk on softly upon the ever-present egg-shells.

Becoming concentrated and focussed energetically in the manner of a Warrior, one who was persistent in the pursuit of 'truth', was not without its dangers. How long would it be, I reasoned, in this mantle of Warrior before I alienated myself from the larger proportion of the team; yet Warrior energy and an appreciation of the 'creative power of action' seemed the very thing the team lacked. With this caution in mind I experimented with shifting my facilitative stance between Scholar and Warrior, the former to retain trust, the latter to role-model and introduce 'challenge' into the team.

I had initially been called to this consultation by the MD who felt – rightly in context of my earlier observations – that there was insufficient openness and honesty in the team. He reasoned that with re-organisation upon the horizon that large black-holes of missing information would result unless the team bonded in a more real and authentic way. To reaffirm this initial contract, to inform more widely, to help generate commitment and especially to provide a safe container in which to frame my Warrior-inspired challenges, I suggested to the team that we might work together towards an illumination of what the team does well and not so well, with a view to crafting together the form future team-building might take. I also shared my suspicion that the team was wrestling with the 'acquisition and ownership of knowledge' (Scholarly energy) but may possibly need to move towards an 'acknowledgement of the creative power of action' (Warrior energy). I also acknowledged how I was feeling more and more inspired to challenge their way of working, and asked them to monitor this tendency and to tell me should this feel too

much at any time.

Deciding to run with the above Scholar and Warrior metaphors, we eventually settled upon collaborative inquiry based on an Appreciative Inquiry format as a way forward. This we reasoned would go some way to illuminating the current situation, the conditions that support people giving of their best in the workplace, while injecting more honesty and Warrior energy into team culture.

In my introduction and review of Appreciative Inquiry (Bushe 1998) I outlined its progression through the following stages:

- First, participants are asked to give a general impression of what it feels like to work in their current workplace;
- Second, they are each in turn asked to describe a personal 'best experience' of working together when they felt at their most effective and efficient;
- Third, they each share their own 'best experiences' while those who are listening are encouraged to remain curious and ask questions of the person sharing;
- Fourth, they are encouraged to get in touch with their own memories of similar experiences to the one being shared and to consider what it was that made this time a peak experience for them;
- Fifth, individuals pool together the information they have surfaced to develop a consensus of the core qualities they associate with best working experiences with a view to identifying what they need to learn and build upon to integrate this experience further in the workplace;
- Sixth, members are invited to acknowledge anything they have observed in the discussion group that has specifically helped them to become more aware of their own practice, the team, and how they might improve their work performance.

In the weeks following the above exercise I noticed a subtle change in the team's function, for instance, dialogue was now more inviting and accepting of difference and the communal belief system appeared to have placed 'challenge' on the agenda. Indeed, challenge was now invited. Although our Appreciative Inquiry had lasted no more than four hours in total, the potential for an attitudinal shift had seemingly been sown.

In the following meetings we evaluated gains from the above exercise. Several observations came to light:

- Individuals felt more aware of how they were working and clear as to the conditions they needed to enhance their productivity and enjoyment;
- Dialogue and communication between individuals who were previously distant in their day-to-day dealings were reported to be more intimate and frequent;
- The challenge I had provided – possibly in the manner of a Blitz mentality – seemed to have fuelled a common 'we are all in it together' synergy;
- Team ethos was believed to have improved through an injection of communal understanding.

Over the next few weeks we went the whole hog and considered Dharma, which is to say each person's special purpose in life, how they could express their own unique talents and how they might actualise themselves in the workplace! Underpinning the concept of Dharma is the notion that we are in the world to discover our higher and spiritual self, for only through communion with our higher self are we suggested to be able to express our divinity – our true purpose, a purpose designed to make best use of our unique gifts and talents which shows us how best to serve humanity and the working community.

In terms of putting Dharma into action, I suggested we entertain the notion we have all been given physical form in order to express our true potentiality and to discover our unique purpose, and if we were to run with this idea as a creative way forward we might observe ourselves and each other at work so as to discover what exactly this might be? Simply, we would pursue the nature of our own excellence, and keep an eye open for the unique contributions we each made within the team.

The aftermath:

I worked with this team for some eighteen months, meeting up to review the fruits of the above inquiry every six weeks or so. Quite quickly the group divided into 'controllers' and 'experimenters'. One female member was especially vulnerable and her reticence to move or do things differently stimulated a great deal of rescuing, where seniors tried to appease her in efforts to quieten their own inner emotional stresses and to rescue themselves from their own emotional danger zone. Emotions were always the enemy in this team, things to be hidden at all costs. The more transpersonal approach I adopted helped reflection, individual and group envisioning of possible futures, but whenever things emotional were faced, tentatively, the team closed down. So I played to their strengths rather than opened an emotional trap-door for them to fall through. It was not my job to do therapy, but to team-build, to support their everyday functioning and to improve on this as best I could!

This consultancy more than any other reaffirmed for me that if we don't like what's happening to us in the world, all we have to do is change our consciousness and re-frame our vision – and 'the world out there' will change for us.

References:

Bushe, G.R. (1998) Five Theories of Change Embedded in Appreciative Inquiry. Presented at the 18th Annual World Congress of Organisational Development, Dublin, July 14-18 1998. Quoted in: Barber, P. (2012) A Reflective Guide to Facilitating Change in Groups and Organisations – A Gestalt Approach to Mindfulness. Libri Press, Oxford (to be published in Autumn 2012).

Contact Paul Barber by e-mail: gestaltinaction@msn.com

Gestalt group guidelines

Paul Barber

- **Be authentic:** implied in every Gestalt group is the assumption that you will endeavour to be authentic, open and honest, and work for the good of yourself and others.
- **Stay curious:** check things out rather than project your interpretations and meanings upon others; engage in exploration of what arises and how this affects you and others; say “*I guess that ...*” or “*I imagine that ...*” rather than label via “*you feel ...*” or “*you are ...*”
- **Share your reality and practice becoming open and transparent:** speak from the authority of your own experience, i.e. “*I think...*”, “*I feel...*”, “*I observe ...*”, “*I imagine ...*” rather than “*one thinks ...*”, “*people tend to ...*” etc.
- **Experiment and play with being different:** risk opening yourself to others and reducing your guard; experiment with being non-judgemental; give yourself permission to play with new ways of being you.
- **Respect your own and others’ privacy:** don’t leak material beyond the group, nor share information about others in the group without their consent; take responsibility for sharing or holding onto your secrets.
- **Act on your beliefs:** choose for yourself when to opt out of activities that appear wrong for you at the time; do not collude in situations that you feel are personally unhealthy for you.
- **Clarify your intention:** when you speak be clear if you are *supporting, challenging, or seeking clarification.*
- **Be here – now:** endeavour to engage with what is happening in the moment, share how you are currently feeling and what you are thinking – right now!
- **Make direct statements:** simplify rather than construct elaborate statements that distort with explanation or avoid the immediacy of experience; specify rather than generalise.
- **Ask ‘how’ rather than ‘why’ questions:** invite others to share their observations and responses rather than to explain their reasons.
- **Keep confidence:** do not report beyond the group what others have said or done nor identify them to others; by all means share with friends and family what *you* did but keep others confidential.
- **Engage in dialogue:** speak directly to others; avoid speeches, monologues and pronouncements.

A beginner's guide to Gestalt groups

Paul Barber

What sort of people attend Gestalt groups?

Anyone wishing to explore how they relate, how others see them, and who may want to change any aspect of their life that troubles them, in the company of interested others who have come to learn and not to judge. Housewives and students, counsellors and managers, all come to receive quality feedback from sympathetic others, or to be challenged and given the strength to change.

What type of issues do they work on?

Family and workplace relationships, a feeling of low self-worth or inability to identify what they need or the best next step they might take in life. Some are coming to terms with divorce or bereavement, job-loss or retirement. Many just come to be with others in a supportive environment where they can share things they feel unable to do with their family and friends.

What happens during a group session?

People explore how they relate to groups, look at ways of building trust and share what they would like to learn from the group. As different individual's menus unfold we address these as appropriate. Some may want to role-play a job interview or to explore how they might improve a particular relationship; some want feedback as to how others have fared in similar circumstances; some may explore ways of challenging others and asserting their needs; some might seek reassurance that what they feel is normal in the circumstances and invite feedback from the group. Simply, each person gives and takes and receives as they desire. There is no coercion and individuals only share as much as they wish - indeed some feel they can gain more by watching and hearing from others - and all is permitted, as each person is invited to go as fast or slow as they like. You need not bring a problem, for just experiencing an open and honest supportive group gives benefits of itself.

How does talking about problems with a group of strangers help?

Implied in every Gestalt group is the assumption that you will endeavour to be authentic, open and honest, and work for the good of yourself and others. Though we begin as strangers, very quickly a close bond develops as honesty and openness draws us together. Within two hours a culture of caring usually evolves to the degree people feel able to take risks they have rarely done in groups before. To be seen and witnessed by others seems to give something of itself, as if we need an audience to energise and help us meet our learning challenges.

What are these 'experiments' people talk of?

Gestalt encourages you to explore and to experiment with new behaviour, to extend your range and to become the whole of yourself. For instance, someone might say they could never raise their voice. They might then be invited to speak a little louder, and if this felt okay to see how loud they might allow themselves to be, and to check out how others experienced them when they were raising their voice. You might also be invited to return to a relationship beyond the group, one you have worked on within the group, with a view to exploring how it might be improved by applying the fresh insights and learning you have acquired. Treating yourself and your relationships experimentally helps to embed the principle of 'life as learning'; it keeps you fresh and interested with yourself!

What is this emphasis on the 'here and now' all about?

Simply, we have no power to change the past nor power to make a difference by living in the future. It is only here and now we can act and make a difference. And the choices and actions we take now build our future!

What is special about Gestalt groups?

Gestalt groups emphasise an authentic real meeting between client and facilitator. What is usually kept hidden in most other therapies is verbalised and discussed in Gestalt. And a therapist doesn't keep his insights to himself, he invites you to work with him in your own interests. You are a person in your own right and given respect for the way you have adapted to life right up to the present. You are not required to change, but encouraged to expand your awareness so that you might change if this is right for you. Raising awareness is both the main intervention and the desired outcome, for awareness allows you to see further and to consider choices that were beyond your appreciation earlier. Also, it is not until you become aware of something that you can take responsibility for it!

How long have you been running Gestalt groups?

I've been running them over 35 years, first in mental health, then in education, and for the past 25 years in therapeutic settings.

How has your style evolved over the years?

When I first began I was very active in my facilitation and possibly at times over-stimulated and over-managed the group. These days I am more group-centred and led by what is in emergence, rather than feel it is up to me to make things happen. I think I listen more and attend to people and the group process more sensitively than in my earlier days. I'm also less in the professional therapist role and more alongside the individual in their struggle.

What does facilitation actually mean?

To enable and support the growth of individuals, groups and communities. It combines both therapeutic (healing) and coaching (learning) interventions, and works in the interests of health and personal growth in a person-centred and democratic way.

What do you enjoy most about facilitating groups?

Seeing how people grow and develop when provided with a non-judgemental climate where they are challenged to explore how they might become everything they are; the quality of presence and mindfulness that comes from living in the moment and being fully heard and valued; the relaxed awareness that flows from people in touch with their body and feelings and authentic selves.

What aspects do you find most taxing?

The games that flower in commercial environments where people adopt a role and become more 'human doings' than 'human beings'; the inhumanity that flourishes and is encouraged in competitive survival-ridden climates devoid of authenticity and insensitive to the human condition; the common ignorance that too many managers and business cultures subscribe to when they speak of the 'real world', which is a world view all too often full of intellectual notions and half-baked imaginary fears, rather than a sensitive and mindful appreciation of the relational human environment.

How does your style of Gestalt differ from that of others?

I think I'm a little more radical than most, as I see the social and cultural influences of the conventional 'world as taught' as inducing a state akin to sleep-walking if we follow it too closely. I also see some aspects of 'professionalism' as setting therapists up as experts, which depowers clients, and as seducing therapists into enacting the same social conditions that bring clients into therapy in the first place. I am therefore saying that to be truly healthy, therapy and therapists must be counter-cultural and support the human condition in a better way than our society does at present.

Contact Paul Barber by e-mail: gestaltinaction@msn.com
