

INSIGHT GUIDE #10

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

How can I use gestalt to help my coaching clients?

The gestalt approach to coaching is about enabling coachees to get in touch with their 'whole selves' and to develop deeper awareness and insight, not only of their cognitions, but also of their physiological reactions to the issues they are working on. The approach helps coachees to

identify how their perceptions, and the meaning they make, take shape in their whole being. Gestalt coaching enables coachees to identify and reflect on the patterns of their behaviour, and through this to make changes to their behaviour.



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The relationship between gestalt and coaching

The word *gestalt* is a German word, and while it is difficult to translate directly, it is closest to 'form' or 'pattern'. In terms of coaching, its origins are in psychology, where gestalt aims to explore how meaning takes shape in human perception. A gestalt framework offers a way of being, of developing presence so that the coach acts as a powerful role model in their work. It focuses on how beliefs, values and attitudes affect people's relationships, how they respond to change and therefore impact on business targets. It promotes clarity and discovery where more rational approaches no longer offer a solution.

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Gestalt can really support the coachee in moving away from rational over-thinking and gain an appreciation of other physiological reactions to an in issue.

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Frequently, when coaches talk about gestalt coaching, they immediately think of the empty chair exercise, but there is much more to the gestalt approach.

Taking a gestalt approach involves talking about the 'figure of interest' – this means the 'particular thing' that a person is focussed on and interested in at that moment in time. Where someone has an incomplete picture, they will seek to complete it with their own perceptions. Overall, gestalt is 'founded on the notion that human nature is organised into patterns and wholes, and that the whole is more than the sum of its parts' (Gillie, 2008). 'Figure' and 'ground' are key terms in gestalt coaching. As highlighted above, the figure is the focus of the coachee at that moment in time; coaches are likely to see different 'figures' emerging during the coaching session, therefore it is the role of the coach to explore the figure, but also the 'ground', or the context from which the figure emerges. The work of the coach is to help the coachee develop full awareness of the figure and the ground.

The aim of the Gestalt approach is for the person to discover, explore and experience his or her own shape, pattern and wholeness. Analysis may be a part of the process but the aim of gestalt is the integration of all disparate parts. In this way people can let themselves become totally what they already are, and what they potentially can become. This fullness of experience can then be available to them in the course of their life and in the experience of a single moment.

(Clarkson,1989: 1)



Gestalt-based coaching is underpinned by a number of interconnected concepts:

- **Present-centred awareness:** Awareness is seen as curative and growth producing. The coaching process follows the coachee's experience, staying with what is present and aware. It is essential that the coach is fully aware moment by moment, and this is aligned to mindfulness. Practising mindfulness is one way this level of present-centred awareness can be developed.
- **Emphasis on the unique experience of the individual:** Individual experience comprises emotions, perceptions, behaviour and body sensations, as well as memories and ideas, and is honoured and respected as being true for each individual.
- **Creative experimentation:** The collaborative efforts of the coachee and coach promote growth and discovery through experimental methodology in which the coach 'tests' out hunches against the coachee's experience and modifies accordingly.
- **Relationship:** Relationality is central to the change process. Presence, dialogue and the visibility of the coach characterise the co-created relationship of coachee and coach.

(Toman et al, 2013)

How to use gestalt coaching with coachees

There are a number of ways in which to use gestalt coaching:

Awareness: This can be used in terms of identifying what is going on 'in the moment' as data for the coaching conversation. This can be in a couple of forms, for example: after noticing something about the coachee, the coach may say 'when you were talking about your line manager you were frowning; what were you thinking? What were you feeling?' This can help bring to the coachee's attention something they hadn't thought about – a thought or a feeling. The coach can then use their own awareness to challenge, support or as a line of enquiry to help deepen the coachee's awareness.

Alternatively, the coach may reflect back something they notice about a feeling they have – 'I am feeling anxious at the moment, and I wonder what that might mean.' Or, if the coachee says they are feeling a certain way e.g. anxiety in a certain situation – the coach may then encourage them to explore this by asking 'where in your body does the anxiety sit? What physical sensations do you have?' Asking coachees to explore body sensations brings a much deeper awareness; many coaches focus on the cognitive and rational thoughts and a greater awareness of bodily sensations can bring new data, and insight, thereby opening the door to change.

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The empty chair: This is an approach that can be used with coachees who are experiencing conflict in the workplace. Begin by placing an empty chair near to the coachee, and then inviting them to imagine the person they are in conflict with is sitting in this chair. Ask the coachee to describe what they would be seeing, what they would be hearing, how they would be feeling and what else they notice as they imagine the other person sitting in the chair. The next stage is to invite the coachee to speak to the other person – to say whatever they want and need to say, however they want to say it – reminding them they can say whatever they want with no consequences. This stage is dependent on the prior stage and the coachee really associating with the other person in the chair. The coach can follow this up with 'is there anything else you wish to say?' and 'what more do you want to say?' The coach can repeat this until it is clear that the coachee has finished. This can be a very cathartic experience for the coachee. The coach can then pause at this stage and invite the coachee to reflect on how they now feel about the other person.

The next step is to invite the coachee to sit in the other person's chair and ask them to reflect: What do they see? How do they feel? What do they hear? What might they say in response to what they have just heard?

The final step is to ask the coachee to return to their original chair and ask them to reflect on both perspectives, and then ask them how they might move forwards. On occasions, the coachee may want to say something else to the empty chair.

This approach works particularly well in a workplace conflict situation; it is also useful when coachees have other relationship challenges. It can work because the coachee has had an 'experience' (talking to the empty chair) that changes the nature of their own subjective experience and perceptions about the other person.



Summary

Gestalt can be a very experiential approach and can help the coachee gain new insights and perspectives through the empty chair exercise. It has been invaluable in working with interpersonal conflict and in supporting the enhancement of workplace relationships.

In terms of the coach's own levels of awareness to use gestalt, practising mindfulness can be very useful.

Overall, it can really support the coachee in moving away from rational over-thinking and gain an appreciation of other reactions to an issue in terms of their physiological reactions.

Henley Centre for Coaching

The Henley Centre for Coaching is a global leader in coaching research and coach training. We are the only triple-accredited coaching provider in the world offering both postgraduate university qualifications in coaching and accreditation from the Association for Coaching (AC), the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC).

The Centre provides formal accredited coach training through our *Professional Certificate in Coaching* and *MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change*, and accredited supervision training through our *Professional Certificate in Supervision*. These programmes are delivered in the UK at our Greenlands campus, and at venues across the world.

The Centre provides continuous professional development for coaching professionals through masterclasses, webinars, conferences, and via online access to journals, ebooks and coaching research. These are all delivered through our online learning platform, meaning coaches can connect from anywhere in the world to engage in professional development.

The Henley coaching team consists of leading practitioners and academics who have shaped the coaching profession since the late 1990s. They have written many of the most popular coaching books and they continue to publish in leading management journals and to contribute at conferences worldwide. Their writing, thinking and research informs our teaching and ensures our programmes are at the cutting edge of coaching practice.

The Centre offers annual membership to all professional coaches, providing a virtual-learning environment where the members shape research and practice in coaching. Check out our website for details on how we can help you and your business come to life.



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References

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