

# Field-relational coaching for Gestalt beginners: the PAIR model

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**Abstract:** To date, a number of Gestalt coaching models have been developed that principally focus on activities occurring within a relatively formal coach/coachee interaction. So far, most of these tend to require the coach, and sometimes the coachee, to have extensive specialist training in Gestalt psychotherapy theory and organisational skills (see Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac, 2009, for further discussion). Our aim was to focus instead on the organisational field/culture and existent relationships per se: to develop a coaching process that would leverage the quality of *all* interactions occurring in the situation and be easy for people without specialist Gestalt training to understand and use. We thus offer the PAIR coaching model as a process that can be rapidly delivered in a wide range of organisational settings where people lack pre-existing explicit Gestalt psychotherapy or organisational Gestalt knowledge or expertise.

**Key words:** Gestalt, coaching, field, relational, process, presence.

## Introduction

Working as Gestalt-informed coaches, supervisors, and coaching trainers in a range of organisational cultures and contexts, we often experience two particular tensions. First, working in a field-relational emergent and responsive way, versus our clients' (and sometimes our own) desire for tools, techniques and models providing reassuring pre-set anchor points and sense of agency. Second, but related, giving ample time and space for 'good enough' contact to emerge, versus the pressures of operational requirements and organisational cultures leading people to 'barcode' their daily schedules. In our experience, both of these tensions point to foundational cultural differences and competing drivers between a classic 'Gestalt' orientated environment (privileging relationships), and that of corporate and organisational life (favouring products/task).

We make sense of these tensions with reference to the dialectic identified by Denham-Vaughan (2005), when discussing Gestalt psychotherapy theory, between 'will'/directed action and 'grace'/field-relational emergence. In organisational contexts, 'will' can be associated with tools, techniques, tasks, products, and time-focused action; and 'grace' with staying present and supporting co-emergence in relationship within the current situation.

We have both noticed how difficult it can sometimes be to explain and teach these complex aspects of a field-relational 'grace-biased' Gestalt approach within more

'will-orientated' organisations. As Gestalt organisational practitioners we often find ourselves within cultures that privilege the machine metaphor (Morgan, 1986), cause and effect psychology, and the individualised, Cartesian, medical model of change. Here, the very word 'Gestalt', with its alien sounding consonants and mysterious, elusive meanings, can turn some people off – since it (quite accurately in our opinion) conveys something hard to define and impossible to pin down. Indeed, we recognise that due to complexity in both theory and praxis, Gestalt takes many years to learn and finesse; years that most managers, employees, and leaders in organisations may not wish, or be resourced, to invest. Our joint aim in this project, therefore, was to spread the benefits of a Gestalt-based approach as widely as possible: to help ensure that it does not become marginalised as an elitist, 'luxury good', only available to a selected few at the top of well-resourced organisations, or reserved as a 'remedial tool' for under-performers.

Of course, in aspiring to broaden the reach of a Gestalt-based approach to work settings, we recognise the pioneering work of Burke (1980), Latner (1983), and Nevis (1987), all of whom saw linkages between a field-theoretical Gestalt approach, systems theory, and organisational behaviour. These writers pointed to the power of Gestalt interventions to affect 'total organismic functioning' (Nevis, 1987, p. 18), through awareness and phenomenological exploration of the key principle of creative adjustment within changing environments.

More recently, Gestalt-based coaching interventions have offered acceptable frames for study of these individual/team processes at work and, as identified by Magerman and Leahy (2009), have managed to avoid most of the stigma that can follow from identification of needs for personal, or team, support to mitigate toxic environments. Indeed, a special issue of the *International Gestalt Journal* (2009, 32, 1), edited by Magerman and Leahy, specifically addressed these issues of support within the Gestalt coaching arena while also noting a more general ‘explosion’ (p. 9) of the coaching industry per se since the late 1980s.

Nonetheless, despite this huge increase in coaching activity, the overarching impact of toxic field and culture are well described by Cavicchia (2009), who brilliantly articulates the ongoing costs of the increasing pressure of organisational life. In particular he draws attention to coachees’ awareness that ‘failures to examine the complex field of intersubjectivity and interactions that contribute to, and perpetuate, familiar problems and counterproductive behaviours’ (p. 53) are often responsible for individual dips in performance. In other words, and as relational Gestalt theory predicts, an individual’s work performance is inextricably linked to, and emergent from, the web of interactions and relationships that surround them. As Maurer (2005) succinctly stated when discussing organisational/large system work, ‘we are *of* the field, not just in it’ (p. 241).

In view of this, and with the various challenges of time-pressured culture, ongoing individualism, relational interdependence and complexity in mind, we ambitiously aimed to develop a process-based synthetic model for teaching and delivering field-relational Gestalt coaching in one day. We wanted a model that did not perpetuate the ‘Lone Ranger’ myth that Magerman and Leahy (2009) had pointed to, but that aimed instead to attend to and optimise key relational supports already existent in the working situation.

Specifically therefore, within this particular paper, we will describe our seven-hour ‘real-world coaching’ course designed for National Health Service (NHS) leaders in the UK. This is a culture where the ‘machine’ metaphor, productivity, and individual heroics are still figural, and field-relational self emergence is generally unrecognised in the dominant epistemology. As such, none of the course participants are expected to have any prior knowledge of Gestalt theory or praxis. What they do share, however, are aspirations to develop coaching style interventions that change the ethos of their working culture and that support people to flourish and work at their best.

## The coaching context

As has already been stated, coaching is an increasingly popular intervention in organisations and the NHS organisations we were working with already had a successful one-day coaching training programme in place. This training is based around the popular ‘GROW’ model, developed (by John Whitmore and colleagues (Whitmore, 2002)) from the Inner Game theory of coaching, devised by Timothy Gallway (Gallway, 1986) for use in sports coaching. ‘GROW’ stands for Goal, Reality, Options, Will. It is usually taught with reference to particular questions that a coach can use to help their client through each stage of the process, such as: What do you want to achieve? (Goal); Where are you in relation to your goal? (Reality); What could you do? (Options); and What will you do now – and when? (Will).

Some of the ideas of Inner Game theory will be familiar to Gestalt practitioners: they place an emphasis on awareness, relaxed focus of attention, and fulfilling potential. Others, however, are far more alien to contemporary field-relational Gestalt practice and perhaps closer to a more individualised approach. In particular, there is a strong emphasis on overcoming obstacles in order to reach a goal – including seeing fear, self-doubt, and lapses of focus as ‘interference’ to the coachees’ full potential.

One way we account for the success of the GROW model (in addition to its heavy reliance on the notion of a sole hero conquering adversity which fits many organisational cultures), is that the model is *very* easy to understand, learn and use. We therefore kept these latter features as figural concerns when developing our own Gestalt-based model. Specifically, we wanted to create something as *equally appealing and accessible* as GROW, yet retain our epistemological base in the complex, field-relational, process orientation of high-quality, theoretically-informed Gestalt interventions. In this, we drew inspiration from the work of Leahy and Magerman (2009), who acknowledge that ‘Gestalt therapy was never intended to be able to be captured in three bullets’ but nonetheless continue to ask ‘how we take what might be esoteric and make it more widely available’ (p. 135).

## Developing the model

As we clarified and discussed our aims, we found that we orientated ourselves to five inquiry topics and key questions. On examination, these proved to be our attempts to ‘translate’ the complex language game of field-relational Gestalt psychotherapy principles (see Yontef (1993), Hycner and Jacobs (1995, 2009),

among others), into more easily accessible frames and language.

- **Key Principle 1:** Change occurs in the present moment, not at some future point identified in a goal. *Key question:* What do we need to teach participants in order to transform all spontaneously occurring interactions within the organisation into useful 'coaching' conversations?
- **Key Principle 2:** Change occurs in the current situation. *Key question:* How do we design and deliver coaching *within* a culture rather than taking individuals 'out of' the culture to be coached?
- **Key Principle 3:** Change emerges within existing relational contexts. *Key question:* How can we improve (leverage) the quality of existing relationships and 'role-based' meetings as opposed to creating more/separate relational structures?
- **Key Principle 4:** Honour what exists not what you might wish for. *Key question:* What is realistic for participants, who are leaders in the NHS, to learn and then implement from one day of training presupposing no prior Gestalt knowledge or experience?
- **Key Principle 5:** Each person is a reservoir of strengths, abilities and talents which can be supported to create a coaching ethos and field. *Key question:* How can we help people draw on their inherent relational skills and personal strengths and bring them forward in the service of this task?

We will spare readers sharing the many hours of discussion, debate, construction, and revision that occurred as we attended to answering these questions and slowly created our model that, appropriately, we call 'PAIR'.

## The PAIR process model

As Wheeler (2006) reminds us, we are 'born to be scenario-planners, to look for a pattern fit, a solution, a prediction, as a basis for action' (p. 31).

Accordingly, in any context, we are always and already making meaning of both what exists and what to do about it. We are forming gestalts that inform our action practices. Classically, within Gestalt psychotherapy theory, this phenomenological process was referred to as the 'Cycle (or wave) of Experience' (see, for example, Clarkson, 1989, for further discussion). Indeed, this aspect of theory has been used extensively by Gestalt coaches with individuals, teams, and whole organisations, with reported excellent outcomes (e.g. Bluckert, p. 2006; Allan and Whybrow, 2007; Rousseau, 2009).

Recently however, Denham-Vaughan (2010) revisited this particular theoretical map to emphasise that this ongoing process of figure formation and action imperative always emerges from a context; a field that is

both comprised of and activated by the relational constituents of a situation. As such, any Gestalt-based coaching model lends itself to being both field-relational and process-orientated, always embedded in the situation and employing awareness of that total situation to plan action. It is these theoretical premises, comprising responses to some of our key questions outlined earlier, that we used to develop our four-phase PAIR process model.

## Four phases forming a whole: Gestalt as narrative in action

The four phases of the PAIR model are:

P = Presence

A = Agreement

I = Intervention

R = Review

As we have said earlier, the PAIR model aims to be a field-relational Gestalt model of coaching that is suitable for beginners to Gestalt and for use in a wide variety of organisational contexts. In particular, we aspire to use *all* existing relationships and situations within the organisation, wherever and whenever they arise, as opportunities for coaching interventions to occur. We believe that by this process we can transform an organisational ethos and culture, without specifically targeting interventions at the team or group level.

To this end, we define coaching within our approach as 'a collaborative process of enabling others to experience their situation from a fresh perspective'. We believe this emphasis on collaboration (similar to 'relational', but a more commonly used and valued organisational term) both reflects and confirms the relational nature of our Gestalt approach. Similarly, the emphasis on 'fresh perspective' reflects our emergent field-theoretical orientation, wherein we do not plan in advance what the precise goal or outcome of any coaching session/meeting will be.

In practice, we envisage the model as an iterative loop that can have a fractal or recursive quality. In other words, it can be used in a step-by-step order (P, A, I then R) but also, within any one stage of the process, a coach may follow a mini-PAIR process, paying attention to any one of the stages, or all of the stages, simultaneously. In this way, we believe the model reflects the hermeneutic process that we believe is necessary for all genuinely emergent process of dialogue, where both equality and active reciprocity are essential (see Orange, 2011, for full explication).

In order to simplify the description of the model, and reflect our teaching and delivery, we will now explain each individual element separately. We will then emphasise how this linear presentation works together

as a whole gestalt in practice to form an emergent, field-relational, process-based Gestalt coaching model.

#### Element One: Presence

One of the first things that aspiring Gestalt practitioners are taught is how to become 'present' in the here and now: to 'bring all of herself to the meeting' (Joyce and Sills, 2010, p. 45). Indeed, this quality was emphasised by Nevis (1987), in his seminal work *Organisational Consulting*, as being a cornerstone of the Gestalt approach, crucial to successful practice and the means by which omissions in the current situation are 'manifest, symbolised or implied' (p. 69). Nevis thus emphasised from the outset that presence has two specific qualities: turning up, and then, what you do when you have arrived. The first is a necessary precondition for anything that follows.

In practice, a number of 'action practices' can help in becoming present: sitting with one's feet firmly on the ground, paying attention to the other (including the conversation at hand), focussing on different elements in the environment and scanning inner, middle, and outer zones of awareness. (See Joyce and Sills, 2010, p. 46, for further details.)

In so much of organisational life, however, people find themselves flitting from meeting to meeting often finding themselves juggling multiple tasks and agendas. The result is frequently people are distracted and pulled in multiple directions (a kind of half/distracted presence) which, we believe, does not make for a productive coaching conversation.

The basic skills of turning up/becoming present are, therefore, very relevant and essential to good quality field-relational coaching conversations in organisations: not much of value for the field can emerge if you are not present within the field.

To help teach these skills we draw on Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan's (2007) definition of presence as 'energetic availability and fluid responsiveness'. We explain this as 'bringing all of yourself and your potential to this moment' and emphasise the three strands of 'paying attention to self, other, and the situation'.

We help participants to experience the impact *not* doing this can have by asking them to coach another person while planning, in detail, their dinner menu for that evening! This generates a thoroughly unpleasant experience that rapidly leads to the coachee becoming speechless when faced with the coach's poor quality and distracted presence. We follow this with the same exercise but replace the dinner distraction with our 'SOS' protocol for becoming present; where 'SOS' stands for:

1. S = Stick your feet on the ground;
2. O = Observe their eyes;
3. S = Slowly breathe out.

By doing this, the coach actively pays attention to the situation (noticing feet on the ground), the other (by looking at the coachee's eyes), and to self (by becoming aware of breathing). We lightly describe this as 'listening to me as if I am someone you love' and find the 'SOS' mnemonic, with its association of 'a cry for help', to be both easily remembered and associated with being of service.

This simply-taught action practice leads, in our experience so far, to delegates registering and reporting a transformational difference in experience. In addition, and consistent with the field-relational and emergent model of self arising in each moment in our relational field (see e.g. Philippson, 2009), people being coached also report a radical change. Participants report that they are more able to talk, feel more supported and behaviourally enabled because of the change in the quality of the coaches' listening as they attempt to be present.

We in no way want to suggest that the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of presence, as developed from Martin Buber's philosophy (1958/1984), can be mastered in one day (or even in a lifetime). However, we do believe the simple teaching and practice of 'SOS' conveys some of the essence of field-relational Gestalt theory: we emerge *together* as a function of the current field, so my talking depends on the quality of your listening. In true hermeneutic spirit, we also acknowledge the converse to be true and refer to this as creating the core ingredients to have a 'good quality coaching conversation or dialogue'.

#### Element Two: Agreement

We begin this teaching element with the simple question: 'Have you ever been offered advice that you didn't really want? Or felt that someone who is trying to help you has missed what is really important about the issue for you?' Unsurprisingly, most course participants are easily able to offer examples!

We formulate these common experiences as 'Relational Ruptures' (Tobin, 1982), or 'Encountering the other as a subject' (with their own needs/agendas: see Jacobs 2009 for full discussion of advantages as well as disadvantages). We believe these moments are inevitable consequences of differing perspectives that have a high impact on ongoing relatedness. It is one thing to be misunderstood; it is quite another to have no opportunity for dialogue about the misunderstanding. As such, while our course does not attempt to teach dialogue/psychotherapy skills (indeed, it may be risky and/or counter-productive to attempt this), we nonetheless believe we need to attend to these moments due to their impact on the relational field.

We therefore frame ruptures as being most frequently a consequence of poor quality of contact and/or lack of a working alliance/agreement. We suggest that the most

common reason for this can be lack of presence (turning up and attending) on the coach's part, but that another common problem is failure to agree on the aim, task or style of the coaching conversation. There is thus no mutual or shared understanding of the process and, accordingly, there can be no surrendering to, or running with, the process. Interestingly, this was the experience of other coaching approaches that some participants reported to us; leading to us coining the phrase 'Coaching by Stealth'. This referred to a practice of leaders/managers approaching their staff and starting to coach them without ever agreeing the process. We concluded that in some cases, enthusiasm to coach had clearly outflanked the need for coaching!

While we see the potential dangers of this lack of agreement, we nonetheless teach that, subject to certain core conditions being in place, the agreement between the coach and coachee does not necessarily need to be stated explicitly by the coach. Our experience is that, with sufficient presence and contact in relationship, agreement regarding what happens and what is helpful in relationship is apparent and can be phenomenologically observed in the coachee's responses, both verbal and embodied.

The key question we ask people to consider, therefore, is not whether they have explicitly agreed a goal or aim with the coachee. Rather, we ask coaches explicitly to ask themselves how confident they are that they are being helpful to the coachee. Paradoxically of course, positioning this question as a figural concern for the coach leads to greater verbal exploration of the agreements that are being made and more frequent exploration of this with coachees. In our training we support this frequent 'temperature testing' of the agreement process and further support this by our use of reviews (see element 4).

Furthermore, we explicitly discuss with coaches the various down-to-earth ways of checking agreement that do not jar the conversation (and therefore the relationship). Our personal experience of the GROW model is that the questions suggested are designed to be used in quite formal contexts and, therefore, can sound strange when used day-to-day. They may evoke a response of 'what was that question about?', or worse, 'what is this person trying to *do to* me with that question?' The latter response can create a strong sense of objectification that potentially ruptures the relationship and risks extreme shame for both parties. (See Carlson and Kolodny, 2009, for a full exploration of shame in the coaching context.)

Contrast, for example, the following two types of questions:

GROW goal-checking examples:

'What do you want?'

'What are you hoping to achieve?'

PAIR model agreement-checking examples:

'How about I . . .?'

'Is there anything you would you like from me?'

'Would it be useful if I . . .?'

'I get a sense that it would be good if we . . .'

Our intention is that the latter generate an altogether lighter, looser, and more collaborative and relational form of being together than the rather individualised and potentially objectifying language of the former. Indeed, some participants in the GROW training running in the NHS sometimes reported that not being able to state clearly at the start of the coaching process what they wanted or hoped to achieve had led to the process stalling and/or an intense sense of failure. Many participants stated that they wanted coaching in order to become clearer *about* their goals, as opposed to getting clearer about ways to action and achieve them.

### Element Three: Intervention

A novice coach on a course is usually presented with a bewildering choice of potential interventions to use at different, often prescribed, points in the process. However, when uncertainty and anxiety levels increase in a conversation, people's access to creative choices tends to reduce dramatically. At worse, there is a kind of tunnel vision where people see limited or no options and the coaching process runs out of steam.

Our experience is that the tonic for this is *not* in presenting people with lots more options: in many conversations less is more. Instead, at least in the context of a one-day course, we believe that a coach increasing their awareness of their habitual/figural style of intervention and recognising that they have at least one other option is hugely and pragmatically helpful. Furthermore, when an individual's awareness of their habitual style of intervention is framed as them playing to their strengths in a conversation, they are more likely to feel the kind of relaxed, fluid responsiveness that we know opens up new possibilities in relationship.

In this spirit, we determined to utilise a four-part minimal structure model devised by Denham-Vaughan to support 'helpful' conversations. This model is called the 4As and refers to four forms of commonly occurring, easily recognisable and rapidly accessible intervention styles: Ask, Advise, re-Assure and Action. We will now briefly describe our presentation of these styles:

#### 1. Ask

'Ask' involves a process of inquiry aimed at deepening both parties' understanding of the issue and people involved. This is similar to the reality and options part of the GROW model and is generally supported by

using open questions such as ‘what’ and ‘how’ that lead to descriptive, as opposed to yes/no, answers.

We know from our experience as Gestalt psychotherapists employing phenomenological inquiry and from our experience with inquiry-based organisational change approaches (e.g. Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperider and Srivastva, 1987)), that asking good questions stimulates a deepening of awareness and spontaneously evokes change. Indeed, leadership writer Keith Grint (2005) says that what he defines as ‘wicked problems’ (problems that are messy, complex, and uncertain) are best approached using a collaborative and inquiring stance. In simply taught and easily learnt terms, we define this as ‘Asking’.

## 2. Advise

Although acknowledging more and more ‘wicked problems’ in organisations, Grint also says that one person’s wicked problem is another’s tame problem. A tame problem is one where the causes are known and where a known solution is likely to work. We often learn how to deal with these kinds of problems through experience and thus may well have useful advice about ways forward.

In terms of the coaching dyad, it is sometimes the case that experienced leaders are coaching less experienced colleagues or that someone with specialist experience is coaching someone without that experience. In our experience, one of the big disadvantages of traditional coaching approaches is that they are often accompanied by a strong message that coaches ‘never give advice’. This is, no doubt, in reaction to the tendency of some coaches to jump in with advice before they have become present, reached an agreement or listened to what the coachee is actually saying. However, the ‘no advice’ should-ism has been so strongly introjected by people on coaching training courses that, when we began to wonder out loud in the training whether advice could occasionally be useful, we had many incredulous responses!

In fact, our advice to coaches in these situations is *not* to hold back their experience; to do so is often to retroflect that element of self that could be most helpful to the coachee and to deny the very real field-relational supports available. For example, if I fall out of a boat into a fast flowing river (a not uncommon sensation in organisational life), I’d prefer to be rescued before being instructed to swim. The former recognises the collaborative team spirit often present and available in the ground of corporate life, despite rugged individual heroics being promoted as figural. Accordingly, we suggest to coaches that if they are starting to feel that advice might be useful and they have checked out (internally and through agreement) that it could be well placed, they are best advised to offer it. Indeed, it

might be exactly what the coachee wants and needs – and holding back can sometimes be experienced at the implicit level by the coachee as inauthentic, disingenuous, or downright annoying.

## 3. Re-Assure

Many people in organisations and organisational cultures per se, are afraid of and guard against emotions, particularly anger and sadness. Some people are also afraid of coaching slipping into becoming ‘therapy’. In the Gestalt world this issue is starting to be more widely explored. Some senior coaching trainers thus warn of the dangers of coaches working with or evoking emotion without very clear contracts and good-enough training in dealing with them. (See Gillie and Shackleton, 2009, for full discussion.)

We agree, of course, that there can be very real dangers of coaches deliberately evoking emotions or of coaches not being able to deal with sudden emotional reactions from coachees. However, our experience in organisations is also that huge support, soothing and re-assurance can be provided by simply ‘being’ in relationship: listening and acknowledging what is going on for the other person. Indeed, we observe that this is often one of the most powerful things a coach can do and, sometimes just out of awareness, is what coachees would most value.

Sadly, however, more instrumental, task and goal-focused coaching approaches seem to deny, mask, and actively discourage this via an emphasis on independence, agency, and individual goal focused achievement. In our training therefore, we aim to help coaches become more aware of their own attitudes to emotion being displayed (by self and others) and gently to challenge and change those patterns when helpful. Provision of simple information regarding the roles of emotion in formulating and asking good questions, energising action and releasing unhelpful patterns supports this element as participants gain a sense that emotions are functional, as well as distressing.

We revisit the ‘Presence’ (element 1) aspect of the course to emphasise that either too much or too little emotion can radically detract from people’s ability to be fully present, focused and concentrated in the moment. We therefore emphasise a mutually shared ‘corporate responsibility’ to manage our own and support others’ emotions within a helpful range. Obviously, we do not attempt to describe or prescribe what this range should be for the organisation. Participants do, however, report finding it very helpful to have a facilitated discussion about the positive role of emotions and that this mitigates against the pervasive ‘all or nothing’ attitude whereby staff feel they must suppress all emotion until they ‘explode’ into tears or temper. Our hope is that these rudimentary discussions provide a sup-

portive platform for enhancing relationships and changing the work ethos to one that is generally more supportive.

It is also worth noting that, with the groups we have worked with to date, there appeared to be very little danger that people would attempt potentially unhelpful therapy-type interventions beyond their capability levels. Indeed, the danger of avoiding and or shutting down any emotional expression seemed far greater. We were, however, always vigilant in demonstrating strategies appropriate for our brief introductory level training and of also raising the need to seek supervision, support and guidance as required.

#### 4. Action

Action involves encouraging agency towards a task or future orientation in the coachee. This may happen near the end of a session with a view to suggesting an experiment at work and it is therefore a vital element of moving the conversation into the wider context and achieving the cultural change to which we aspire. We also found ourselves suggesting ‘action’ as a specific task when faced with the ‘real world’ situation of limited time (e.g. a coach being approached at the drinks machine while on the way to another meeting) and finding it difficult to be fully present. At this point, an action intervention can be used to suggest postponing to another time or moving to a more suitable location.

In the NHS context, we developed this specific task for ‘real world’ use as some leaders found postponing or refusing a request to provide coaching very challenging. Many NHS leaders have the expectation that they should be almost constantly available to others, especially members of their team. However, we point out that forcing themselves to provide coaching when there are other priorities competing that cannot be deflected from, rarely enables good presence or conversation. This is thus another example of how attending to one’s own ability to be present provides a way of regulating and managing unrealistic expectations and demands on time.

#### Guidelines for intervening

The key with all four of the 4As, in the context of a short course, is not that participants become masters of every type of intervention. Rather, we hope that they will build confidence and ability in becoming more aware of their predominant and automatic choice or choices of existing relational style and experiment with both the familiar and the novel.

We focus, therefore, on different ways of helping people become aware of their patterns – and then to experience and experiment with catching themselves in the moment, become present, and possibly explore a different route. Here we use the concepts of habit and

stretch. Habit, we explain, is an individual’s dominant pattern of intervention. Stretch is taking a different option. Experience shows that individuals with no prior experience can quickly learn to spot their own preferred intervention style as well as that of others.

At this stage in the training we ask participants to work a lot in groups of three, with one coach, one coachee and one observer, to discuss and experience the pros and cons of each intervention option. In this way, we believe we are aligning ourselves with Hawkins and Smith’s (2006, p. 130) guidelines for coach development which focus on building on and extending existing abilities within facilitated peer groups. Certainly, our experience of using this format, wherein coachees present real-life, pre-prepared scenarios on which they want coaching, and novice coaches practise with support/supervision from trainers and feedback from all, is that both confidence and skills in application are rapidly increased.

For example, a manager of a NHS IT department discovered, through feedback in the course, that he almost always jumped into either advising actions or inquiring about actions and next steps. Using this insight in the context of recognising it as a strength that may, nonetheless, be over-used in some circumstances, he was able to practise staying with and providing a re-assuring presence to others – *before* moving into action. This very simple and easily effected change made a radical shift in his presence and the feedback he gained from coachees.

Furthermore, we invite participants to think of all their interventions in an experimental and iterative way – as part of an ongoing process of checking agreement, suggesting an intervention and then reviewing impact. We ask that they ‘hold lightly’ to their interventions, in order to stay present to the co-emerging process and not get locked into a fixed objective, outcome or way of doing things. In this way, we aim to introduce the ethos of Creative Indifference to the developing coaching culture and begin to unlock the idea that there is only one right way to do business. We instead assert a very pragmatic approach of ‘going with what works’, defined as what energises the coachee, maintains the dialogue and holds your own interest. Participants report finding this a very useful concept theoretically and are surprised to see that, by using skills learnt in the review phase, they can easily identify more ‘successful’ coaching conversations, sessions and interventions.

#### Element Four: Review

The final stage of the PAIR process is ‘R’ for review. We believe that dialogic coaching conversations should be reviewed continuously throughout, as well as towards the end of the conversation. We emphasise that by ‘review’ we mean checking how the conversation has impacted on the coachee and the meaning they have

made of it. It is similar to the work of assimilation and integration in Gestalt psychotherapy, utilises the hermeneutical model of dialogue previously referred to above and is modelled by us throughout the coaching delivery training day.

We state from the outset that the time for course participants to ask for something, or to give us feedback, is now; not on the feedback sheets at the end of the day. By doing this, we believe we are demonstrating and 'going live' with our five key principles that underpin the PAIR course design (present moment, current situation, relational context, existential 'reality', and motivating to fulfil potential). We therefore believe that through this simple practice we are, in an additional way, also modelling the process of present-centred, field-relational, organisational Gestalt practice.

In a similar way to that already described when discussing element 2, 'agreement', we propose that 'reviews' can occur at both an explicit or implicit level. We therefore teach and demonstrate both processes on the course, sometimes asking explicit review questions such as:

'How do you feel about what we've discussed?'

'What's your thinking now?'

'How are you about all this?'

'On a scale of 1–10, how confident are you about this?'

Alternatively, we point out to coaches the various implicit ways we might deduce how people are responding from their embodiment; for instance, breathing faster, flushing, looking away, fidgeting, moving back, etc. We find that, generally, most leaders have few difficulties in agreeing whether embodied signals indicate either 'this is going well' or 'I don't like this'. We emphasise that we are hard-wired to make these sorts of judgements and interpretations and, in fact, use them all the time as leaders. We also emphasise that staying present makes it much more likely that we can accurately pick up signals from the other; but also that all interpretations should be 'held lightly' and explicitly checked out on a regular basis. Again, we model this during the course and give specific examples of instances when we are 'reading embodied signals' both accurately and inaccurately.

Our experience is that it is especially important to signal the *high* chances of such interpretations being wrong; but that nonetheless, utilising embodied information to support explicit reviews is vital to improving the quality of coaching conversations. We emphasise that being present both to register and respond to such signals at the very least improves the quality of overall listening to the other.

We thereby teach coaches that paying attention to their own felt body sense, or shifts in the coachees' or the coaches' sense of the relationship during a conver-

sation, may be enough to highlight that a coaching session has achieved its aim. Indeed, we use Gendlin's (1981) concept of 'felt shifts' to help explain to delegates that sometimes, although change is unspoken and implicit, it can be experienced in an immediately obvious way by attending to their own and the coachee's embodied process. Certainly, practice in groups of three supports this statement with coachees reporting a dramatic improvement in their sense of being listened to and responded to when the coach factors in attention to body process. Of course, for Gestalt psychotherapists and organisational practitioners this will come as no surprise.

## Summary

In developing and teaching the PAIR process model we ambitiously aimed to develop a process-based, synthetic model for teaching and delivering field-relational Gestalt coaching in one day.

We also hoped to help participants in the course leverage the quality of *all* interactions occurring in their situations – not just those occurring within the context of relatively formal coach/coachee interactions.

In attempting to achieve both of these aims, we took a different tack to many existing Gestalt coaching approaches. Classically, these have focused on developing ways of working that call for more 'advanced' training and skills than was realistic in the context of a one-day course in the NHS. They have also tended to focus on more formally 'recognised as coaching' conversations and frames. For example, more advanced ways of working as a Gestalt coach include 'use of self' (see Stevenson (2005), Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac (2009), Chidiac (2008), Siminovitch and Van Eron (2006)), and 'working with the paradoxical theory of change' (Chidiac (2008) and Simon (2009)). (For a review of these Gestalt coaching approaches, see Simon, 2009, p. 230.)

Although these same concepts also underpinned our approach, we focused on making them widely accessible in one day and on the possibility for *both* formal coaching *and* other types of conversation to change the culture and ethos of an organisation. In this, we drew on writers who see the linkages between field theoretical Gestalt and organisational behaviour (including Burke (1980), Latner (1983), Nevis (1987), Magerman and Leahy (2009), Barber (2002), and Critchley (2007)).

We believe therefore that we have succeeded in designing a Gestalt-immersed approach that achieves the principles of being time focused, culturally responsive and field-relational, while working with the strengths and talents that people already possess. We have now run a number of courses and found it to be



possible to train Gestalt beginners to work as individual coaches and deliver Gestalt-based coaching interventions. Follow-up action learning sets and supervision clinics have shown that individuals are keen to continue to use skills, find the frame easy to use and appreciate the relative informality of the format. Costs are kept low through being able to use internal, pre-existing relationships and coach *in situ* rather than at a distance. There has also been feedback and comment that coaches find local knowledge and intelligence (for example, knowledge of policies, procedures, compliance arrangements, etc.), very useful in both supporting action and avoiding time-wasting suggestions of field-inappropriate actions/experiments. In this way, we would suggest that PAIR utilises existing technical competencies and local knowledge to 'bridge the gap between individual and community' (Spagnuolo Lobb, Salonia and Sichea, 1996). Via the frame of the PAIR process the individual coachee is supported in their relational web at work.

With reference to this latter point, we are also satisfied that the PAIR model offers a beginning frame as a field-based intervention that supports a whole organisation to generate more positive and helpful interactions as it goes about its daily business. In this way, PAIR is situationally focused and offers up real possibilities for changing organisational ethos.

Anecdotal evidence gained from feedback at senior meetings does indicate that the PAIR process has been particularly supportive during current times of high organisational uncertainty and change. Colleagues would seem to have coached each other, frequently and quite informally, with a focus on providing relational support and encouragement for actions. In view of Leahy and Magerman's (2009) summary statement that 'A trusted, intimate other is essential for deconstructing, reconstructing and making a choice' (p. 140), this is perhaps unsurprising. Indeed, we have been moved and humbled by the depth of relationship that colleagues working together in difficult and challenging circumstances reported experiencing. Consolidating, supporting and enhancing this 'supportive net' would seem to be a high priority, and an alternative to constructing individual heroes who can single-handedly save the day. We would formulate this as leaning into and developing the 'grace-biased', feminine, polarity of organisational life and see development of this specific area of work as a priority for Gestalt-based coaches and organisational practitioners.

We are, however, keen not to polarise, and wish therefore to recognise the strengths of PAIR that are more 'will-biased' and masculine: the productivity gains accruing from the brevity of training, the acknowledgement of pre-existing strengths, the recognition of

daily organisational realities/constraints and the reliance on field-relational principles. We believe these factors mean that the PAIR model of Gestalt field-relational coaching is thus highly accessible for all organisations; not just highly-paid executives or well-resourced corporations able to invest in lengthy development programmes and/or highly priced external coaches.

As such, we propose that PAIR offers a bridge across the 'will and grace'-based cultural tension that can preclude Gestalt-based coaching from many less-advantaged settings. It is a way of bringing the esoteric and feminine field-relational style successfully into pressurised organisational life. In this, we see PAIR supporting the application of a genuinely phenomenological attitude to work based situations. As Wollants states,

The focus is on the concrete situation, the totality of relations of the person and his world, his bodily being in the world, his being with others and his experience of the givens of the present situation. (2007, p. 158)

We believe that to have addressed this wide range of key field-relational Gestalt principles and have incorporated them in a one-day coach training event that has been so well received, is a step forward for Gestalt coaching. Our early feedback leaves us delighted to have achieved our aim of offering Gestalt-based coaching to a very wide, Gestalt-naïve audience. We also look forward to further, longer-term research in a wider range of organisations in order to explore fully the impact of PAIR on the ethos of a variety of cultures.

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