

Journal

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## Paradox and Presence The Magic of Gestalt Coaching from Jen Todd

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# Paradox and Presence: The Magic of Gestalt Coaching

Jen Todd



Yesterday my client, Martha, was drowning in a sea of emotions due to an out of control impending divorce, demanding work responsibilities as a Director at a large consulting firm and concerns about what the future holds for her. When I asked what she wants from our coaching session she said, "I want to know how to move forward with all this emotional stuff going on." Instead of working on moving forward or reviewing the goals she created to define her future, I asked her to describe these emotions and her experience when they are present. What we uncovered is our coaching work was not about "moving forward," rather, it was about how to stay grounded amidst her emotions without suppressing, avoiding or trying to control them.

This coaching approach leverages the training and fundamentals of Gestalt, and what I consider to be the magical ingredients in my blend of leadership coaching and organizational change consulting. This article describes a few critical foundational principles of Gestalt applied to coaching: the change and resistance paradoxes and bringing our presence.

## The Paradox of Change

The Gestalt approach founded by Fredrick Perls is based on the fundamental principles of the paradoxical theory of change originated in 1970 by Arnold Beisser. The paradox assumes that "one must stand in one place in order to have firm footing to move and that it is difficult or impossible to move without that footing"(Beisser, 1970, pg77). This means there must be an awareness

of status quo before our clients can change, move or act in a way that supports their desired future.

Now, here's the real absurdity of this paradox. Coaches using the Gestalt approach are committed to NOT change their clients. The key to tapping into the power of the paradox is to support the client in noticing where they are right now, who they really are and in doing so they may realize or chose to explore different realities or futures. This coaching stance is different than pushing, persuading, leading or advising them to change.

We need to really BE with the client and witness them as they are. This can be daunting to hold the paradox when we are typically hired to make some desired change happen with our clients.



## The Paradox of Resistance

Embracing the paradox means a shift in the traditional view of "resistance to change." When I say the word resistance, what feelings and thoughts get conjured up in you? If coach's have a negative filter on resistance they can get sucked into the co-dependent game of trying to rid the client of their habits versus supporting the results they want. Ed Nevis, the pioneer of Gestalt in orga-

nizations, describes this definition of resistance "as the existence of multiple realities sees all sides as directing energy in different directions and not as judgmental valuation of "good" or "bad" (Nevis, 1997, pg 129).

Gestalt coaches invite resistance viewing it as healthy, expected and holding valuable information about the client's internal process and the focus of the coaching work. When I sense resistance, I get curious, interested and support the client to follow the trail of bread crumbs that usually leads us right to the heart of the matter.

Martha, my client mentioned earlier, had resistance to her own emotions because her father told her as a child that she was too emotional and that "people can't handle her emotions." This belief that she internalized drove her behavior and was what Martha needed awareness of (the firm footing of status quo that Beisser described) to realize what she wanted to change. She got clear she wanted to

break her pattern, her fear of being swallowed by her emotions subsided, and she even acknowledged her emotions were a gift that made her more effective as a leader and a mother.

## Our Presence as Instrument of Change

Our goal as Gestalt coaches is to support the client and "heighten awareness." This requires coaches to show up with their full and present selves in mind, emotions, body and spirit when



we meet the client and enter the systems they work and live in.

We come with all of our training, tools, expertise and processes, as well as our baggage, triggers, in tolerations, limiting beliefs and filters. Being conscious and aware of what we bring into the client's space is how make the most impact with our clients. Celia Young, faculty at The Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, highlights the importance of this consciousness when she states, "instead of using our presence, we can become way too clever by using our pre-designed coaching tools. When we show up as expert of these tools, we risk losing the opportunity to co-create with our client on an equal level" (personal conversation, April 15, 2012). Meeting client's where they are at, embracing our humanity and leading with presence supports the client's choices, rather than our prefer-

red agendas.

The role of the Gestalt coach is to provide a presence that is lacking in them or the system they operate in. As Martha shared her situation, I described the sensations and emotions I experienced in my own body. When I played them back, she was able to "make contact with herself," as we say in Gestalt terms, and she was able to name and find her own feelings.

Corporate leaders I coach often lack of awareness about the conflicts inside of them that contribute to their undesirable results. They get mired in one success formula or strategy, or get stuck hearing only loud limiting voice in their head or repeating a self sabotaging pattern. Essentially they can't see the impact of these different parts in themselves and operate with a disconnection rather than an understand-

ing of their whole self.

It is no surprise that the word "Gestalt" actually means whole.

When we let go of agendas, bring our whole present selves and support the client in doing the same, we tap into the power of the paradox and the person and we are able to be true instrument of change. That's when the magic of the Gestalt happens.

#### References

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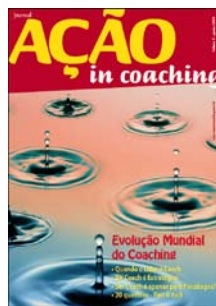
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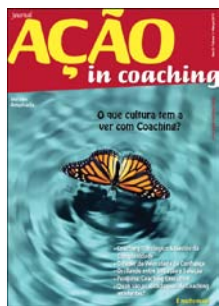
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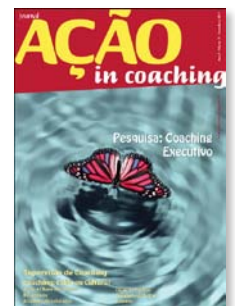
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