

Gestalt Core Concepts and Behaviors

Gestalt theory has inspired the development of practices that enable people to become more intentional in their choices and more effective in the world. When applied, these learned behaviors offer one an effective mix of interpersonal, strategic, and tactical experiences. To support the teachings of the Gestalt International Study Center, the following concepts and behaviors have been identified and embedded in our training, coaching, consulting and clinical work and are what differentiate us as well as those we train.

Awareness

Gestalt believes that an individual or system is performing at its optimum based on its current awareness. At the center of the Gestalt perspective is the concept of awareness. If we believe in the potential of an individual and their self-responsibility, then the core concept to effecting change in the individual is through the expansion of their awareness. By raising awareness, we enable the individual or the organization to maintain responsibility and make the changes that are most appropriate and in their interests.

Boundary

The point (contact) at which the “me” and the “not me” is made or broken. It is also the point of intention.

Contact

Contact is the term used to define the nature and qualities of human interaction. Individuals are always in contact with their environment and often with other people. The extent to which the individual is aware, present and engaged reflects their level of contact. We often experience a “connection” with another person or have “good conversations” where people feel that the communication is honest and real. People who are able to make connections, communicate effectively and relate well to others, or have high “emotional intelligence,” are people who are able to make contact with others. In Gestalt, we help people to improve their ability to make contact with others and to have a greater impact on their lives. We do this by developing the skills for connecting as well as learning to identify and remove the barriers to good contact.

Cycle of Experience

Gestalt is focused on building skill in the process of perceiving, deciding, acting, and learning and improving. This process is called the Cycle of Experience. The Cycle of Experience describes an interactive cycle that moves from awareness through contact, action, integration, and closure, providing both a framework and a template to observe for competence and areas that need further development.

Experiments

Gestalt practice is distinct because it moves toward action, away from “talking about,” and for this reason is considered an applied approach. Through trying new ways of doing things, we support the

individual’s direct experience of something new, instead of merely talking about the possibility of something new.

Figure/Ground

Some things are more important than others, and what we choose to arrest our gaze upon shapes the experience of our life. How we perceive the information that is available to us, and how we choose what action we will take, depends on the full amount of information that is available (ground). This includes situation data as well as data about our physical and emotional reaction and experience. From that we make choices about what we will focus on (figure) above anything else. The greater the ground work, the better the figure. Raising awareness is often about adding information to the ground before a person, group, or organization chooses to focus on a figure.

Gestalt Phenomenology

Stay with what is – now. Staying with the process.

Intention

When an individual or organization operates without awareness, they operate without intention. Unexpected and disappointing consequences often emerge when decisions and actions are taken without intention. As an individual or organization becomes more aware, they are better able to make decisions and take actions from a point of clear intention. This often results in an individual’s or organization’s needs being met more fully. An important corollary to raising awareness is helping individuals and organizations develop clarity around their intentions.

Level of System

Things are happening everywhere, all the time. An individual experiences anxiety, two people have an argument, a group decides to take action, an organization experiences a trauma. When working with a system, we need to increase our awareness of what is happening and at what level and determine how we want to impact the system and at what level. Do we help by talking to a senior executive in a key function or with a group of field people? Do we need to have broad communication across a group or will a personal discussion with someone make a difference? Understanding how people and organizations work allows us to see how best to influence and impact their success.

Multiple Realities

We emphasize the concept of multiple realities and acknowledge that we each bring our unique experience and perception to a situation, and that there are always multiple ways of making meaning out of a given moment – all of which are real to the individual. We place great emphasis on teaching people how to manage differences.

Optimistic Stance

Gestalt takes a realistic view of the present and an optimistic view of the possible, preferring to work in the development of the potential within an individual or system rather than correcting them.

Polarities

Polarities are the natural process of opposites.

Sad / Happy Hot / Cold Generous / Stingy

There is a tendency to move to one side and call it a good thing and to call the other side bad. Our stance is that both ends of every polarity are important, depending on the circumstance. Growth and development is the stretching to incorporate the whole spectrum.

Presence

Who we are as individuals and how we present ourselves when with others is at the core of our presence. In Gestalt, we believe that an individual's presence has the ability to impact another person, group or organization. Becoming increasingly aware of our presence and acting with intention on how we use our presence is a discipline of Gestalt. Whether we are modeling a behavior, bringing a missing presence or joining an existing energy, we are always having an impact.

Resistance

It is a force that slows or stops movement. It is a natural and expected part of change. Understanding the resistance and leaning into it releases energy to move forward. It is a paradox.

Self-Responsibility

Gestalt firmly believes in the responsibility and dominion of the individual or system for itself. It is only by taking responsibility for our decisions and actions that we are able to change and improve our experience and interaction in the world. It is up to the individual or the system to change itself.

Shadow Self

The shadow is a psychological term introduced by the late Dr. Carl Jung. It is everything in us that is unconscious, repressed, undeveloped and denied. There are rejected aspects of our being, so there is positive undeveloped potential in the shadow because

anything that is unconscious is not in our awareness. Healing comes from the shadow. When we integrate our shadow side we become aware of our inferiority, our vulnerability, weakness, and greed. Gestalt has adopted Jung's theory because it is central to self-awareness and the integration of whole being.

Strategic and Intimate Systems[©]

Behaviors that create trust and safety and balancing interactions to produce a seamless braid results in the best possible outcome.

Theory of Change

Only an individual, group or organization can change itself. The challenge of the Gestalt practitioner (coach/consultant/clinician) is to raise the awareness of the individual, group or organization so that it decides to change itself. The paradox is that the more a system attempts to be who it is not, the more it remains the same. Conversely, when people identify with their current experience, the conditions of wholeness and growth support change.

Unit of Work

Each person, group or organization has any number of obligations, responsibilities, expectations, activities, tasks and other "to-dos." Each of these is at various stages of starting and completion. In Gestalt, the process of getting work done requires clarity around what it is that is being done and the stage of the cycle of experience in which we are working. Being explicit about the boundary and stage of work that is to be completed is referred to as a "unit of work." Being clear on a unit of work and completing the unit with effective closure is an important aspect of the Gestalt approach.

Well Developed/Less Developed[©]

GISC teaches "well developed" and "less developed" to describe how people tend to lean to one end of the polarity and call it good and call the other end of the polarity bad. At times one may use the well-developed because it is an automatic way of being. Overuse of any behavior narrows one's choices. Understanding Well Developed/Less Developed[©] theory allows for the opening of more possibilities.