Sales and Gestalt: Our Alienated Fragment

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ABSTRACT
Alienated fragments interfere with healthy function by limiting choices or driving habitually unsatisfying behavior. We may see this phenomenon occur in our clinical or organizational practices or within ourselves on various issues. However, when it comes to the business side of Gestalt, we may fail to notice the alienated fragments that influence our behavior with respect to marketing and selling. This article suggests that this prevents us from supporting our own efforts to market and sell our own clinical or organizational practices. The author proposes some reasons that these alienated fragments may exist and, using Gestalt theory as a guide, suggests some ways to come to terms with them.

“If there are two capable and competent consultants, and one is Gestalt trained, and the other is not,” I asked Edwin Nevis, “what do you get if you hire the Gestalt-trained consultant that you don’t get with the other?”

Nevis, whom I revere, blinked several times and looked at me, bemused. He thought for a moment, and said “A lot of obnoxious questions like that!”

My fifteen Gestalt Institute of Cleveland Organizational Systems Development colleagues roared with laughter, as did I. When I reflected on Nevis’s answer, I realized that it was perfect, yet his response gnawed at something in me.

To even the most casual observer, it is obvious that many Gestalt teaching and study organizations, as well Gestalt-oriented organizational development (OD) practitioners,

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struggle to survive profitably. The corporate world is not, to put it mildly, beating a path to our doors, seeking to engage our individual practices or organizations. The same might be said of OD practice in general.

In my experience over many years in the organizational development business and within the Gestalt community, I notice what I might describe as a prejudice against sales and selling. How could a group of individuals—the Gestalt and OD consulting community—so concerned with presence, so finely attuned to the need for and impact of interventions, so routinely express a dislike for or indifference to the work of selling the principles, practices, and theories of Gestalt in particular and OD in general?

My perception is that the Gestalt community and the larger OD community have within them an alienated fragment that, by and large, they are unwilling to integrate.

That fragment is a clear distaste, dislike, and disregard for the work of selling the principles, theories, and practices of Gestalt-based organizational development consulting in the corporate world. How is it that when we interact within a client organization, our use of self includes intentional acts of persuasion and influence, but outside the organization we de-skill ourselves? We resist marketing and selling. Why?

The purpose of this article is to describe that fragment as I have experienced it, to describe the consequences of our resistance to this alienated fragment, and to speculate on reasons for its existence. Finally, I wish to suggest a model, and the benefits to us as individuals and as a community if we were to bring it more into our awareness. There is a way to be true to Gestalt theory and practice and advance our businesses. That which we prescribe for clients—the viscous, smelly cod liver oil of self-awareness—may be more difficult to swallow self-administered, but all the more reason to drink deep.

Most of the world’s resistance to our principles, practices, and very existence is a myth we have created for ourselves. The world is not resisting us; it is mostly unaware of us. Except for fleeting familiarity with Fritz Perls as an idiosyncratic and unconventional psychotherapist, and the word Gestalt itself simultaneously resisting clear definition and alerting the listener to its very foreignness, we are below the radar.

What we perceive as the corporate world’s resistance to our offerings is, I believe, a projection that results from our unwillingness to do the work of selling.

A Visit to the Alienated Fragment

Given my hunches, observations, and experiences over many years, I decided intentionally to visit this fragment to dig deeper. I conducted twelve formal telephone interviews for this article and countless informal conversations with organizational development colleagues. My observations and conclusions are not based on these twelve interviews alone, but on years of experience in organizational development and sales as an employee and independent consultant.

Telephone interviewees at first were simply asked to speak spontaneously about what came to mind for them when they heard the words “sales,” “sales processes,” and “sales people.” The interview then focused on perceptions of their behavior with respect to sales processes in their practices or in the companies for whom they worked. Distinctions among internal and external consultants in nonprofits, public sector, and for-profit corporations seemed to make little or no difference.

The alienated fragment has several prominent, jagged edges. In sum, they speak to our discomfort with and resistance to asking for money for our services. What is the introject here? Can right, honorable work coexist with commerce? Can we?
Several themes stood out, almost unanimously:

1. I am a victim of sales people, so I forego selling: Sales people almost never consider what might be best for me; they want to make a sale regardless of my needs or wants.

2. The mountain comes to Mohammad: I resist making sales calls (in my company or on behalf of my OD practice) because I hate doing it. Most of my work comes through referrals anyway. If I do good work, work will come to me; I don’t need to ask for it.

3. My virginity is intact: Sales is bad, marketing is good, and the reason is that sales efforts are intrusive and, likely, abusive, whereas marketing simply positions me to receive the mountain (see number 2, above.)

4. Love at first sight only, please: If, by happenstance, serendipity, or accident, another individual and I find ourselves to have exchanged purely objective data about one another’s business needs and capabilities, with no intent on either part, then it is acceptable to contract for business; that is, to sell.

Let’s take a closer look at each:

1. I am a victim of sales people, so I forego selling: That all of us have suffered the aggression of unwelcome sales calls or sales persons is a simple and depressing fact of life. Many of these efforts to sell us something are by their nature blind to our needs and wants, partly because they attempt to create needs and wants to move products and services that have little or no real value. Our refusal to listen to or entertain these messages results in our unwillingness to send our own under almost any circumstances except inside a client organization during an engagement. That is self-defeating.

Purposeful attempts to influence or persuade are not, by themselves, inherently good or bad. As Gestalt OD consultants, we engage in intentional acts, evocative or provocative, all the time. Most of us think deeply about our interventions and our intent precisely because they are overt attempts to influence and persuade. Much of the training that goes on in the Gestalt community is designed to sharpen interventions and maximize their impact. And it is a virtual cliché among Gestalt practitioners that one influences a system merely by showing up. So, by definition, we are in the influence business. Why not get good at it?

But we resist committing overt acts of persuasion that might advance our businesses and, at the same time, spread Gestalt theory. This is because we fail to distinguish between acts of persuasion and influence that we find repellent, and our own acts of persuasion and influence that might well be righteous as well as in our economic self interest.

2. The mountain comes to Mohammad: Most OD consultants interviewed here perceive that sales departments in their client organizations are separate from the rest of the organization. Implicit in this separation is the belief that sales organizations receive special treatment, live by special rules (or perhaps no rules at all) and, because they generate revenue, are the “favored children” of management—unlike OD or human resources employees and consultants.

Included in this perception are no small amounts of fear and envy, as well as a sense of superiority. If the activities of these inferior people—making unwelcome phone calls
or visits, “closing” business, contacting prospects—are bad, then I shall not engage in them. I shall sit like a Buddha and work will come to me because of my goodness.

We have unwittingly created the same separation in ourselves that we see in client organizations.

3. My virginity is intact: Interestingly, almost all interviewees identified marketing activities as infinitely preferable to sales activities, despite the fact that when asked what the difference was (and there is one), they could not describe it. What they did describe was their acceptance of what in business school would be termed “branding” activity. It is okay, in their view, to write a paper or give a speech or workshop that has some kind of legitimate content and includes no overt attempt to solicit business. Of course, the sum and substance of this type of activity is to get business in such a way that the client will approach the supplier, a power play that any good brand-conscious company makes, any time it can.

Most companies—most consultants—cannot execute such power plays often and need to ask for an order instead. But most of us resist asking for an order—selling—and in the process lose business entirely, or leave substantial dollars on the table. Why? Because we have confused all selling with immoral, improper, or unwelcome selling. If our awareness were greater, we would have more choices, more business, and more growth for Gestalt.

4. Love at first sight only, please: Most interviewees described a fantasy (my term) as a situation in which they felt completely comfortable to sell. In this fantasy, the seller has no intent to sell, and the buyer has no intent to buy. Each is interacting improvisationally and in the moment, when suddenly both notice that the seller’s capabilities (quite miraculously) meet the buyer’s needs. No one has attempted to influence or persuade the other and, therefore, creating a business relationship out of the accidental collision of capability and need is acceptable.

How could such a thing happen if there were not, in fact, great and intentional contact between seller and buyer? It simply could not.

This type of fantasy may be a comfort, but it is a hopelessly weak business strategy. These fantasies serve us in that they keep our alienated sales fragment fixed. Again, we may wish to develop more choices about how we decide to overtly influence another in order to sell our consulting services.

Speculating on introjects at work here may be rich ground for gaining awareness of this alienated fragment of ours. How and where did we learn that proactively assigning economic value to our work was wrong? To many of us, the commercialization of everyday life and the nature of our economic system inspire a certain amount of dread. Can we find a way to sell our services that maximizes our impact and keeps us ethically and spiritually whole?

Of course we can, and we must if we believe, as I do, that our theory, principles, and practices represent a positive good in the world. The Cycle of Experience (as well as many other Gestalt concepts) provides useful frameworks in which to do this.

For example, in sales training, “closing” means gaining the explicit commitment of a buyer to buy. One particularly odious sales tactic is ABC—Always Be Closing. In other words, continually ask (that is, badger) the buyer to buy, in the hope that you will sell by repetition and attrition. Most of what irritates us about sales people is inappropriate closing behavior. Sales per-
sons interrupt themselves—and us—by moving without warning to a different part of the experience. No ground gets built, no figure can be agreed on.

If we use the Cycle of Experience—the belief that individuals and groups experience the world in progression from sensation to awareness to excitement to action and then resolution—we can easily see value in interacting with another at a contact boundary. If the buyer is in sensation, we may want to meet him or her there by sharing our scanning. If the potential client is in awareness, we may want to conceptualize with them.

Those are simply good ways to make rich contact, to build ground, and to agree on a figure. If the figure is: “I want to purchase your consulting capabilities because they fit with me and my organization’s needs,” then we have influenced, persuaded, and manipulated the buyer—exactly according to Gestalt principles. How—and why—do we refuse to change our experience of ourselves to reflect this business reality? What judgment do we carry about ourselves or our environment that causes us to use fewer parts of ourselves?

Let’s take a look at a fictional sales scene, in which a Gestalt-oriented consultant uses the Cycle of Experience to intentionally persuade a prospect to purchase consulting services. The dialogue is interspersed with commentary to show how the various stages of the Cycle come into play.

**Seller:** Good morning, Frederick.

**Buyer:** Good morning, Laura.

**Seller:** Do you have a few minutes? There’s something I’d like to talk with you about.

**Buyer:** I have some time. What’s on your mind?

The Seller begins to build ground, the Buyer asks for clarification.

**Seller:** Something you said on the phone the other day made me wonder. We were talking about my consulting company. You said something like, “People here are so overloaded with change initiatives that I can’t imagine doing anything new with your company.”

**Buyer:** Yeah, I guess I said something like that.

The Seller has built more ground and the Buyer has gingerly stepped onto it. His short response alerts the Seller that she may be encountering resistance.

**Seller:** It made me nervous to hear that you couldn’t imagine doing anything with my company, but I think you might have hit on something pretty meaningful there.

The Seller continues to build ground by sharing something that changed in her interior.

**Buyer:** I just was stating the obvious.

The Seller realizes that in terms of contact, she and the Buyer just missed each other, and that the Buyer’s resistance is stronger now.
Seller: I agree it's obvious that folks here are on some kind of overload, but I don’t notice anybody but you mentioning it.

The Seller has attempted to make contact by bringing new awareness to the Buyer.

Buyer: Really? I thought everyone felt that way.

The Buyer just confirmed his new awareness and is in contact with the Seller. They are further fattening and clarifying the figure.

Seller: They may well all feel that way. That's something you could take advantage of as department head.

The Seller has just made an overt attempt to influence the Buyer by inviting him to mobilize energy.

Buyer: How can I take advantage of it when it's what's getting in the way? That doesn’t make any sense to me, but if it did I would be pretty excited about it.

The Buyer is saying that he doesn't know how to mobilize energy around that figure, and the Seller is aware that she has raised the excitement (in this case discomfort) level of the Buyer.

This is a crucial point, a moment of truth, if you will, between Seller and Buyer, and precisely where I suggest we de-skill ourselves. We have many intervention choices here: We can try to raise the discomfort level, lower it, explore it further, ignore it, and so on.

Seller: Can you tell me more about why it doesn’t make sense to you?

The Seller chooses to try to explore the resistance.

Buyer: If everyone is pretty maxed out on change, how can I use that to promote change?

Seller: Let me explain what I mean, OK?

The Seller is asking permission to attempt to be persuasive. They have good contact at the boundary of the Buyer’s discomfort. The Seller wants to present a specific figure based on the Paradoxical Theory of Change.

Buyer: OK

The Buyer gives permission.

Seller: It could be that all of the different change initiatives around here share a common quality that keeps them from “sticking.”
The Seller offers to describe a new idea and reduce the Buyer’s discomfort.  
**Buyer:** Well, to me they are all over the place, but what do you mean?  
The Buyer has mobilized some energy.  

**Seller:** What I mean is that despite the multiplicity of the change initiatives, they seem to all center around your department changing into something that it is not, at least not now, anyway.  

The Seller has made a brief summary statement about the Paradoxical Theory of Change. She may use it to differentiate herself from other competitive internal or external consultants.  

**Buyer:** Well, we are trying very hard to improve; but we do seem so stuck... I never thought about being stuck in quite that way.  

The Buyer is a bit defensive but in contact because the figure is powerful and, in effect, invites the Seller to go on. This edge—where contact is good and resistance is in bloom—is fertile ground for both people.  

This is another moment of truth in which we tend to be passive. The Seller can point out that the Buyer’s resistance—she may use another word for it by referencing the Buyer’s earlier “confusion”—is a reflection of resistance in the organization. She has an opportunity to build support for more contact by stating that she and the Buyer are experiencing the same quality of the organization.  

**Seller:** I am saying you can only get un-stuck if you stop, in effect, trying to impose change and look at change as an inside-out process... the opposite of what your organization is doing now. I’d really like the opportunity to go into detail with you about this.  

The Seller has given more detail about her view of change, and has executed that which in traditional sales training jargon is a “trial close”—asking for the opportunity to continue, since she senses that a unit of work is near completion. It might be that the continuation of the interaction will happen now or later.  

**Buyer:** You know, maybe we’re so stuck because we’re going about this backwards.  

The Buyer has revealed something of his interior sensation, and is starting to share a figure regarding “backwards” change.  

**Seller:** Yes, maybe we see some of the same things....  

Buyer and Seller have traveled around the Cycle of Experience together—orbiting, hopscotching, and leapfrogging to be sure, but they stayed in contact at the direction of the Seller and with the consent of the Buyer.  

The Seller influenced, persuaded, sold the buyer—whatever term you prefer—by raising awareness, increasing excitement, exploring resistance, uncovering a need, staying in contact, and suggesting that there was a way to meet that need. There was
By any reasonable measure of Gestalt theory and practice, the Seller has employed
the stance of an effective intervener:

- Played a marginal role;
- Demonstrated the importance of awareness;
- Managed and modulated energy, in this case resistance;
- Selectively made meaning;
- Intentionally disturbed boundaries; and
- Heightened “reality.”

Our ability to scan our environment and ourselves gives us a powerful tool to use
in selling our organizations and ourselves as Gestalt-oriented consultants and prac-
titioners. Many of us view our profession, clinical or organizational, as a helping
profession, and come to it with altruistic ideals. Does exchanging our services for
money taint us, corrupt us, make us somehow immoral? I think not. But many of us
behave as if it does.

Scanning our interior as individuals, or scanning organizations with whom we have
an employment or consulting relationship, in search of the alienated fragment may be
supported by asking the following of ourselves: What introjects are silently at work in
me?

- “Money is not the most important thing.”
- “There’s more to life than the almighty dollar.”
- “He sounds like a used car salesman.”
- “You should make a real difference for social good.”
- “The system is corrupt and working in it is corrupting.”
- “You are so fortunate to have what you have.... Others are much less fortunate
  than you.”

There may be truth in these introjects, but if ingested whole and stored unexamined,
y they may guide counterproductive behavior in ways we are unaware of.

Consider “Money is not the most important thing,” and “There’s more to life than
the almighty dollar.” Do these introjects cause us to value money insufficiently in the
sales process, and thereby create confusion in our own minds and those of clients or
prospects about what and how much we are really asking for?

Or look at, “He sounds like a used car salesman.” Does our dislike of clumsy, leaden
sales pitches cause us to make no pitch at all?

Could our altruism— “You should make a real difference for social good”— create a
sense of shame in us about exchanging our work for money and, therefore, a reluctance
to engage openly in selling our services?

“The system is corrupt and working in it is corrupting” is a political statement that,
as an introject, may cause us to refrain from selling in an attempt to maintain our
purity. This isolates us from the business playing field, and makes selling all the more
difficult.

“You are so fortunate to have what you have.... Others are much less fortunate than
you.” In a world in which many of us are aware of inequity with respect to race, gender,
ethnicity, and sexual orientation, do we unintentionally fall short in our selling efforts
to right social wrongs?

A successful selling process requires skills that competent OD consultants and therapists already possess: the ability to conduct an honest, thoughtful, crisp, and interesting interview. As with any interaction in which we engage, we are first and foremost limited by those alienated fragments within us, whether they be about sales or anything else. We can examine and integrate the alienated fragment within that we allow to defeat ourselves.

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