

Gestalt Coaching or Gestalt Therapy? Ethical and Professional Considerations on Entering the Emotional World of the Coaching Client

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Synopsis

Gestalt offers a way of being and engaging with the world which both supports and promotes self awareness on the part of the coach and coachee with a consideration of the co-created relationship – the heart of any effective and impactful coaching. Psychological competency, underpinned by Gestalt, enhances the coach’s capability to work at a deeper, more psychological level which helps bring about powerful shifts in clients’ perceptions of themselves and others. This in turn generates a number of questions for the Gestalt oriented coach regarding the boundaries of professional practice. This paper sets out the dilemmas and received wisdom of what are ‘professionally acceptable’ arenas of work for Gestalt coaches particularly when it comes to dealing with the emotional life of the coachee. We explore the following questions:

- What are the differences between Gestalt Coaching¹ and Gestalt Therapy and the resulting implications for the coaching contract?
- What does the coach need to attend to when dealing with the emotional world of their coachee?

¹ In this paper we are referring to Executive Coaching, i.e. coaching senior executives within the context of their organisations, and where the coaching is funded by the company, as opposed to, say, Life Coaching which is generally self-funded.

- Is a Gestalt oriented coach more likely to evoke emotional responses than other ‘flavours’ of coaching?

We offer both discussion and case study material which is intended to guide thinking and professional practice as each one of us attempts to make whatever decision is right in the moment for the particular context and coachee we are working with.

Background

The use of executive coaching has grown exponentially in the last ten years (Jarvis et. al. 2006, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2008, American Management Association 2008). It is arguably the most powerful method for developing managers’ capacity for leadership (Lee 2003) and for supporting existing leaders to negotiate the ambiguity and complexity of 21st century organisational life. Many coaches come with backgrounds in organisation development, learning and development, adult learning, occupational and sports psychology and increasingly through psychotherapy – including Gestalt trained therapists. This rich mix has led to a plethora of coaching styles as well as varieties of coaching. A great deal of coaching is undertaken by coaches who have little or no psychological interest or training and in the main this is appropriate for skills or performance based coaching. However key figures within coaching (Bluckert 2006; Lee 2003; Milan and West 2001) argue, as would the authors, that certain kinds of coaching² require a level of psychological competence, without necessarily requiring coaches to become psychologists or psychotherapists.

² E.g. Transformational / developmental coaching: preparing the executive for future demands of the organisation, personal growth over time, often focusing more on ‘who the person is’ rather than ‘what the person does’; Existential / transpersonal coaching: focus on self-actualisation, on the meaning of the executive’s existence, purpose in life etc.

While originally developed as a psychotherapeutic model (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951/1994) Gestalt thinking has made significant contributions to the world of organisational development (e.g. Herman & Korenich, 1977; Nevis, 1987) – as a lens through which to view individuals and the organisations in which they work. In coaching, Gestalt is not so much a model as a way of seeing and being in the world – encouraging and supporting individuals to have choice and take full responsibility for how they manage their lives. A key feature is the enhancement of client awareness, itself a powerful intervention, leading to the uncovering of redundant behavioural patterns which inhibit the client’s innate capacity to identify their needs and achieve desired goals. Gestalt coaching also offers a safe holding environment in which feelings and behaviours which might be considered as ‘unsafe’ or dangerous in other contexts can be explored and given meaning. It is in this area of vulnerability, with the potential for strong emotional reactions that growth is at its most fertile and where Gestalt coaches need to pay particular attention to the boundaries of their professional practice with full awareness of their own capabilities and intent.

The boundary between Gestalt Coaching and Gestalt Therapy

Both coaching and therapy are what Richard Kilburg calls ‘enabling relationships’ (Kilburg 2004) requiring an engagement with the personal and the practical. Both Gestalt therapy and Gestalt coaching share a common set of beliefs which support individuals through change (Bluckert 2006; Gillie 2008; Sills et al 1995). These can be translated into coaching skills and practices (Stevenson 2005; Siminovitch and Van Eron 2006) which are likely to be commonly owned by both Gestalt trained coaches and therapists. What makes something ‘therapy’, however, is an interesting grey area. As practitioners, the authors of this paper are clear about their intentions when working as Gestalt coaches. Our clients employ us as ‘business

consultants', not as practising psychologists, counsellors or therapists, and as long as we continuously hold in mind that the coaching context is the client's current effectiveness at work, their identity as leaders or their career aspirations for themselves in the future, then we are likely to be on safe ground. However, a client of one of the authors jokingly refers to her to his colleagues as 'my shrink', which prompts the question: if the client experiences the work as therapeutic, is it therapy? We can attend to our intentionality and ensure that our behaviour (as we experience it) is consistent with our intentions and values, but clearly we have no control over the felt experience of the client. We might say that if they find our coaching valuable then it doesn't really matter how they frame it, as long as we know that we are clear about our practice and boundaries. It is still disconcerting, however, to know that our practice is occasionally being misrepresented (albeit jokingly) by clients in our client organisations, despite our best efforts to differentiate coaching from therapy during the contracting session.

Aside from the felt experience of the client, important distinctions do exist between Gestalt coaching and Gestalt therapy. In general, coaching clients tend to be defined from the outset as whole, healthy, well-functioning individuals who are 'resource-rich' having the capability to identify and meet their needs and therefore achieve their goals. Therapy traditionally views the client as having less well-developed self-regulation capability, and the aim of Gestalt therapy is the restoration of a sense of wholeness and well-being. Clients normally seek help when triggered by emotional distress or by increasing dissatisfaction with their current lives. Although therapy is often a journey into the unknown, the therapeutic contract tends to be an agreement as to the general direction of therapy – a 'soft' understanding about intention or process. Confidentiality is clear and is restricted to therapist and client

only, and contracting is likely to be an ongoing process as the direction and purpose of the work changes when new material emerges.

One important difference between Gestalt coaching and Gestalt therapy, therefore, is that someone entering Gestalt therapy would generally be expecting their personal and emotional world to be the subject of the work. This is not necessarily the case for coaching clients, where their professional working life (at least at the start) is figural. So whilst both Gestalt coaches and therapists share common areas of practice and skill sets, the authors believe that one ethical consideration for Gestalt coaches at the contracting phase is to be meticulously clear about the nature of their coaching practice and personal style, and explicit about both their purpose and intent in working in particular ways during the coaching programme.

Another critical difference is that executive coaching is always conducted within a work context, in the service of enhanced performance at work, with the client's personal goals generally seen as ultimately in the service of the wider organisational agenda. The inclusion of others in the organisation is a distinguishing factor which can create complexity, i.e. with various stakeholder interests, desire for different degrees of confidentiality, and the practice of holding three-way contracting meetings with the sponsor, line manager *and* the individual coachee. This meeting provides a critical opportunity to clarify expectations of all parties, agree how progress will be tracked, and agree what does and does not fall within the scope of coaching. As executive coaches, we are accountable for the needs of our coachee as well as the various stakeholders, and so a critical question to ask when differentiating coaching from therapy is: 'Who is the work in service of?' The therapist's position is clear – they are accountable only to their client, with their duty of care firmly resting with that individual. By virtue of the coach working within the organisational setting

then the duty of care is to the individual, to their organisation and to the relationship between the two – in effect there are three ‘clients’ (Hawkins and Smith 2006). The contracted work with the coachee is also in the service of the wider organisational objectives and is paid for by the organisation. Thus, where the Gestalt coach knows that his or her practice is a holistic one, i.e. where the emotional and personal world of the client is likely to emerge as an important aspect of the work, the authors believe that good professional and ethical practice requires the Gestalt coach to have conversations about this possibility with sponsors as well as with the coachees themselves. Occasionally some sponsors are sceptical or suspicious of this orientation, but we generally find that with probing, their concerns are often about ensuring that the more personal work is relevant to the coachee’s developmental goals and that insights and emotional shifts are translated into positive behavioural change at work. Certainly in the United Kingdom the authors have found that having the capability to work with personal material which impacts performance at work is often seen as a unique selling point of Gestalt coaches. As Gestalt coaches, both authors disclose their personal backgrounds and talk about the potential capability to work, if appropriate, at a deeper, more psychological level in the service of bringing about powerful shifts in their clients’ perceptions of themselves and perceptions of others. We hold that central to the code of ethics held by the Gestalt coach should be a clearly articulated definition (to give clarity to the coach and to articulate to the client and sponsors) of how they personally view the boundary between coaching and therapy when working with the emotional terrain of their clients, and how they ensure that they work within the boundaries of their own capabilities. For example, one of the authors openly states that “if it becomes appropriate, we could move into personal areas or past influences in the course of our work, but the focus would be on how

those influences impact you now, in your work and career. It would not be appropriate in a coaching context to spend time exploring in depth those past relationships”. In addition, we are also clear that there may be occasions when the coachee’s energy and focus is with material best explored within a therapeutic rather than a coaching context. There are, of course, different ways of contracting for this. One option for the Gestalt coach is to agree to have a ‘one-off’ session with the coachee where the focus deliberately and explicitly shifts to work on, for example, family of origin issues or the client’s emotional reaction to a family crisis. Both authors believe that if this is within their field of expertise and is well contracted for, *a single session only* of this kind can greatly enhance the work. A second option would be to offer the client a referral to a counsellor or therapist thus keeping the focus of the coaching and the deeper, more personal work of therapy separate. This is, of course, not always an easy judgement call. Sometimes it is obvious that the influence of the family of origin material is so significant that it could not be ‘worked with’ in any significant way in a one-off coaching session. Other times the judgement needs to be made on the basis of how robust and ‘grounded’ the client generally is in terms of sense of self. Interestingly, having looked at the codes of ethics from a number of professional coaching bodies (notably the International Coach Federation and the European Mentoring & Coaching Council) whilst they cite the requirement to operate within the limits of competence and to the process of referral if appropriate, none make any clear or useful reference to the boundary between coaching and therapy.

Gestalt Coaching and the emotional world of the client

We have established that the key differentiating factors between Gestalt coaching and Gestalt therapy lie in purpose, context and intent. Given that coaching clients exist within multiple levels of system – intrapersonal, interpersonal, team and

organisational, coaches need to be skilled at working with the client to decide where and how to make interventions for maximum effect (Siminovich & Van Eron, 2006). In the remainder of this article we confine ourselves to looking at work which emerges at the level of intrapersonal or self, and of an emotional nature. So what does this mean in practise?

As Gestalt-oriented coaches, our work is underpinned by the belief that resistances in the form of locked emotional energy can block growth and learning, and our work frequently includes how our clients block and limit themselves from fully achieving what they otherwise might. We all (hopefully) start from the position of holding our client's best interests at heart. However, we can all cite times where the impact of an intervention has not matched our intent or when we have suddenly found ourselves in unfamiliar territory. Most of us are clear when we don't have the expertise at a content level e.g. when the client needs help developing a new business model and our field is predominantly the world of relationships. We then coach the client in clarifying what they need to learn and in finding out how they can get this need met. The critical issue being examined here, however, is the emotional depth to which we may operate as coaches (as opposed to therapists), this is far less clear.

Enquiring into how a client is feeling about their situation is the bread and butter of the work of all but the most outcome, goal focused of coaches. What we are really talking about here is working at 'emotional depth', so we need to be clear about what we mean by this. Generally speaking we usually mean one of the following when we used this term:

- Uncovering developmental (i.e. childhood) influences;
- Dealing with regressive material – childhood 'stuff';

- Staying with and working through whatever emotional reaction is evoked in the coaching session.

Uncovering developmental influences refers to any work that explores the possible origins of the client's current issues back in childhood, childhood history, relationship with parents, significant events etc. Some coaches as a matter of course take a personal history or invite the coachee to draw their 'life-line' (mapping the emotional ups and downs through the passage of life to date) as a way of better understanding what influences have shaped the person they are working with. Dealing with regressive material refers to any emotional reaction the client has that is likely to be linked to childhood material. Transferential material would be one example, when the client seems to be transferring his/her fear of father onto the boss, or when the client seems to be manipulating the coach to get approval in the same way that they did from mother. Given as Yontef says: 'Gestalt therapy is an art based on clear, phenomenologically based awareness and dialogic contact and any suggestions based on group data, such as diagnosis, are only suggestive and helpful for the therapist's growth in perspective' (Yontef, 1993, p. 454), it is a moot point as to whether Gestalt has a developmental perspective (see Gillie, 1999). Gestalt therapy certainly does not have a clearly defined theory of development that is widely accepted and understood as a 'theory' in the same way that, for example, the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970) is understood. This makes it less likely that the Gestalt coach would actively seek out childhood influences, but would certainly be mindful of possible connections that become evident in the emergent work as it unfolds. Take the client whose emotional reaction to their current boss seems disproportionately strong for the events they describe. In inviting the client to, say, speak directly to their boss on the empty chair, the Gestalt coach might gently ask: "Who else does this person remind

you of?” Immediately the boundary between coaching and therapy becomes figural. The case study that follows picks up this very issue. We hold that in coaching, ethically we need to be really clear *why* we are initiating this enquiry. We see that the intention has to be that of the raising of the client’s awareness of the influences at play with a view to loosening the grip the past has on the present, and helping the client become more effective in their *current working relationships*. Whether or not you invite the client to put the parent in question in an empty chair is a matter of debate (see the discussion following the case study below). Both authors would view this as crossing the boundary between Gestalt coaching and Gestalt therapy. However, as already stated, as a one-off well-bounded piece of work that is contracted as a therapeutic intervention, it may be appropriate.

In Gestalt terms if we clearly define ‘the ground’ as the wider organisational context, and the therapeutic process as the ‘the immediate figure of interest’, then the meaning-making created in the session can add significant value to both the individual *and* the work context. Where the duty of care lies solely with the individual, then the work might be thought of as ‘counselling at work’. However, this too can be a tough judgement call, as it could clearly be argued that anything that supports the individual’s enhanced well-being will bring organisational benefits. We, of course, agree with this, but would argue that this is *not the role of the coach* within a three-way organisational contract. What is crystal clear, however, is that the work would certainly move into the realm of therapy if the coach embarked on some kind of ‘healing process’ with the parent in question. Both authors would see this as transgressing an ethical boundary if the contracted work is coaching not therapy.

Even in the writing of this example, however, another interesting contextual point is raised. Many Gestalt-oriented coaches have developed their practice through

the Organisational Development route (e.g. via The Gestalt Institute of Cleveland in the US, or the various centres that offer Gestalt in organisations in the UK and Europe), whilst others come to coaching from a Gestalt psychotherapeutic base. In discussing the case study below, the authors discovered that despite both being Gestalt coaches, differences in their approach were rooted in differences in career path.

So how specifically does the Gestalt coach engage with the emotional world of the client? At the heart of the Gestalt approach lies working with the client's immediate phenomenology and the notion of staying with whatever emotion is evoked during a session. Both are based on the principle that the key to raising awareness means working with 'what is' rather than why it is or what it should be. Arnold Beisser's Paradoxical Theory of Change (1970), a big influence on Gestalt thinking, holds that change occurs (paradoxically) when I fully become what I am, rather than trying to be what I am not, and that lasting change cannot be attained through coercion or persuasion. The process of healthy self-regulation is the ability to be fully what one is and to meet one's genuine needs, as distinguished from external regulation (trying to be what I think I should be to meet some external demand, real or imagined). The route to healthy self-regulation is self-awareness and Perls maintained that awareness – by and of itself – can be curative. Take the following example: your client arrives at a coaching session agitated and confused about a recent interaction with a colleague. This brings us to another professional/ethical issue. In Gestalt therapy, the therapist will generally be tracking and working with what is immediately figural for the client. Here in coaching, what is immediately figural (his agitation with his colleague) may be outside the scope of the work you have contracted for. As Gestalt coaches, to manage this boundary, we need to ensure that the client takes full

responsibility for where the work goes, which requires a bit of ‘mini’ contracting in the moment: “we had said that at this session we would explore how you lead your team, yet this is what you have arrived with, which is fine. Which of these would you like to focus on right now?” Assuming your client confirms that he wants to go ahead with the work on his emotional reaction to his colleague, your coaching goal becomes helping him become more fully aware of his needs and/or to mobilise his energy towards appropriate action. Taking a Gestalt approach, you might arrive at this awareness through interventions that bring your client as close as possible to his experience in the here and now. You do this by paying attention to what you see and hear your client saying and doing, and, in turn, asking your client to pay attention to what is going on for him in the here and now – his thoughts, behaviours, and emotions. In our example, one starting point could be to invite him to re-evoked the memory of the interaction with his colleague, encouraging him to attend to his experience in the immediate moment as he does so. After further ‘mini’ contracting to do this (see below) you might say something like:

Coach: “Ok, what I’d like you to do is to imagine that you are back there, in that meeting with your colleague in front of you... *(you could, if appropriate, even ask your client to close his eyes, we normally find that even the most senior executive is prepared to try this)*... take a long look at your colleague, what do you notice? Her tone of voice... what do you notice about your own reactions, feelings, sensations, thoughts...”

A similar starting point could be:

Coach: “As you are talking about your colleague right now, what do you become aware of? *(you could add the following prompts... in your body, what images come to mind, what thoughts, sounds, emotions)*.”

Yet another way in might be to use your own observations:

Coach: “As you are talking about your colleague, I notice you clench your fist and you look as though you are tensing your arms *(at this point, the coach would be very likely to mirror the movement as a way of focusing on the phenomenon rather than drawing too much attention to the verbal interpretation)*. How about you try staying

with that movement and exaggerate it (again mirroring the movement). What comes up for you as you do that... (*as before, image, thoughts, sound, emotion*).

The underlying principle of the phenomenological method is to heighten awareness by staying with actual experience without interference or interpretation on the part of the coach. To ensure that the work stays on the appropriate side of the coaching/therapy boundary, we hold that it is essential to contract in the moment for the work. This would require the coach to be explicit about the experiment that is being suggested and the intention behind the invitation, leaving it totally up to the client to accept or decline the option of working in this way. This might sound something like: “As you move closer to your actual experience at the time, and the range of feelings evoked, it is possible that you will become clearer about your own needs in the situation, which might help you identify how you would like to move forward from this confusing place you are currently in.” As the work unfolds, it is very possible that the client may experience a heightened emotional reaction (anger, shame, tears). This raises two more important ethical considerations related to the degree of choice a client needs to have to feel safe. First, we believe that an important aspect of the contracting for such experimentation is to be open about the possibility that the work could move into emotional territory and check if the client is prepared for this to happen. Second, at the point that the client is expressing their emotion, it is crucial to check if they are OK with continuing to explore this material. Bear in mind, however, that it is incredibly difficult for a client to say ‘no’ at this juncture. You need to phrase your question with care. Simply asking “Are you alright to continue with this?” is likely to elicit an automatic ‘yes’. Asking “Think carefully about what you want to do right now, stay with it or move on?” will get a more considered reply.

We believe that this way of working distinguishes the Gestalt coach from coaches from other backgrounds, e.g. Cognitive Behavioural coaching which

would invite the client to explore their thinking patterns and assumptions triggered by the encounter; or Outcome Focused coaching which might ask the client how he would like things to be different with this colleague and explore what would need happen to bring about the change. Given that the human body is such a gateway to the client's affect, we hold the hypothesis that a Gestalt oriented coach is more likely to evoke emotional responses in their clients than many other 'flavours' of coaching. The benefits of this are substantial. For example, when the client is stuck somewhere in the cycle of experience (e.g. because they are not aware enough of the need or they are aware but unable to act) your task is to help the client explore how they are creating this blockage. This involves surfacing, listening to and experiencing being stuck. Paradoxically, if you and the client can stay with the block / stuckness / resistance and fully experience it (often by exaggerating it) we generally find that it will either dissolve or transform, thus freeing the client up to move forward. Clearly, this work is often transformational. It brings with it, however, responsibilities. As mentioned before, the work needs to be clearly explained and contracted for in the moment. The Gestalt coach needs to ensure that the context, including the physical space in which the work takes place, is supportive of the client. What might be appropriate in a private consulting room may be wholly inappropriate in a meeting room in the client's organisation. The coach needs to know how to 're-ground' the client if a strong emotional reaction is evoked, e.g. encouraging the client to attend to their breathing if it has become shallow, inviting them to become fully-present in the room by feeling their feet on the floor and taking in their present surroundings, etc. Furthermore, within the context of the overall direction of the coaching work, the Gestalt coach needs to know how to 'anchor' the outcomes of these experiments within the client's organisational situation, by inviting him or her to reflect on what

new awareness the experiment brings and what meaning it has in the context of the agreed coaching contract. Finally above all, the coach needs to be clear about their own purpose and intentions in working in this particular way.

The emotional world of the client: a case study

We can never predict when a client is going to have a strong emotional response to the work we do with them as coaches. Indeed to work through certain issues it may well be necessary for the client to stay with and experience as fully as they can their emotionality. For example to help a client work through their transition following major change including redundancies, the client may cry and/or need to vent their rage before they are fully able to move on.

Gestalt coaches who have therapy/counselling/clinical training (should) know, via their training when it is appropriate (for the client) to encourage the client to focus on rather than move away from their emotions and should be able to facilitate the client's process through to completion. Gestalt coaches without such clinical training (e.g. those who have come via the Gestalt OD route) may acquire this understanding through experience. However, this is often experience that is difficult to acquire, firstly, because such reactions are encountered relatively infrequently in a coaching setting, and second, because when it does occur, unless the coach has established a sound basis for coach supervision, then he or she is likely to be working alone without the support of experienced colleagues to learn from. It is in this learning phase that the coach is most vulnerable, e.g. to working clumsily with a client's emotions at one level and to being manipulated or seduced into a collusive relationship with a client at another. For this reason, we believe it is the ethical responsibility of all coaches, especially those who practise a Gestalt (or other potentially therapeutic) orientation,

or who are early on in the learning curve, to ensure that they receive regular professional supervision by a clinically trained coach or a very experienced Gestalt coach. As both authors are strong advocates of coach supervision, they now offer the following case that was brought by a colleague into the supervision group that both authors belong to. Following the session description, you will see an example of the kind of supervisory conversation that can really help to support a coach in their work and which serves to illustrate some of the points already raised in this paper.

The case

The coach described work with a senior financial executive (LW) for whom the coaching was in support of a major change he was leading in his organisation and which was emotionally challenging for him. Relevant to this was the recent birth of his second child, his working long hours and not getting much sleep, with life being generally stressful. Earlier coaching sessions had explored his relationship with a female boss whom he felt had an unhealthy dependence on him, and who he overly protected. In the session in question, the coach experienced LW being extremely self-critical, which she reflected back to him. At this point, the coach asked him whose voice he was hearing, to which he replied “My mother’s”, and the coach offered an intervention in support of developing a more compassionate voice, followed by more exploration around his strategies for self-management. LW then brought his attention back to his mother and proceeded to tell his story about an over-critical mother who was largely absent with depression during his childhood, which he felt was due to his own inadequacies, and shared his perpetual fear that he might do something which would cause her to disappear again. It was clear to the coach and to LW that these ‘introjected’ messages from mother were having a substantial impact on him at work, especially in his relationship with his boss. The coach invited LW to think about where he wanted to go with the session, giving one option of working on these maternal messages. What ensued was an experiment, offered by the coach, where the client put his mother on the empty chair, to have a dialogue with her. Tracking the energy of the work, the coach noticed LW drumming his fingers on the table which the coach suggested he exaggerate, which eventually led to LW ripping sheets of paper into small pieces as he accessed his hurt, anger and frustration. The work ended by the coach inviting LW to see what he might want to say to his mother now, which enabled him to be clear about his feelings and to be really honest for the first time with himself. The coach was careful then to bring LW back to his work situation and to help him make sense of his discovery in his current context. Of most importance in his meaning making was that his needs really did matter.

Supervision conversation

- MS: What was your thinking in facilitating the work to move into this territory?
- Coach: The ground was prepared. We had been ‘matched’ by a mutual

colleague who knew that LW wanted a coach with psychological capability, and emotional issues had been flagged up in the request for coaching. During our initial session we had discussed the possibility of personal issues coming into the work, and so I was clear that LW was interested in working in this way. I remember him saying that he knew the work may take him into uncomfortable territory.

MS: What about the wider organisational context?

Coach: I had already worked with a number of executives in the organisation and knew it well, knew the challenges. LW's boss was supportive of his goals and understood that the challenges he faced included how he was coping with the emotional pressure of home and work.

MG: That overall contractual context sounds very clear. Can I take you back to the point where you asked whose voice he heard, can you remember what was going on for you at that moment?

Coach: I was feeling a huge empathy, and a great desire to be enabling... based on my own experience, I made a light remark that he might find it helpful to turn the volume down.

MS: Is that something you'd found helpful in your own work on yourself?

Coach: Yes... and as I say that, I am wondering if I became confluent with him in that moment. I wasn't aware of it at the time, but I can see that my comment was based on what had worked for me. I am suddenly remembering a coach supervisor once asking me "What do you do when your 'personal process' is the same as the client's", and now I realise that this is a fine question if you are aware of it in the moment, but at that moment I wasn't aware.

MG: So, what you know now is that when you aren't aware that your process mirrors that of the client, one thing you do (as you did here) is to be 'helpful', which might be fine if it is your conscious choice. When it is in awareness it gives the option of labelling what the client evokes in you, thus using your presence as a coach.

Coach: Well, after this I will certainly be more mindful about all of this, which will help me make a more informed decision. Even if the decision is the same, it will be made consciously.

MG: Sounds like a good insight. Can I ask you to say some more about your thinking in suggesting the experiment about bringing his mother into the room?

Coach: When his mother as 'figure' first arose, I made a suggestion about how he might manage the critical voice and then proceeded to support his under-developed compassionate voice. It was only when *he* brought his focus back to his mother that I realised how much energy he had for that figure, especially given the increased communication he was having with his parents in the wake of his new baby. Mother was definitely in the room. In that moment it was clear to me that the link he'd made between his critical voice and his mother was so figural for him that other options would be unlikely to hold much energy. I tried as much as possible to lay out all possible options and

give him the choice.

MS: What other options did you layout for him?

Coach: Work more with his resistances – for example exploring the nature of his relationships with his boss and different conversations he might have with her; undoing his retroreflections and becoming more expressive; how he is coping (or not) with the pressure, and his self-limiting beliefs – that under-dog voice...

MS: I imagine that we'd all agree that this work is definitely at the boundary between coaching and therapy. How do you define that boundary for yourself?

Coach: I have clinical as well as therapeutic and coaching skills so I know I often operate in that grey area. I am clear that my duty of care as a coach is to both the client and the organisation and how I can facilitate their relationship. My belief was that enabling closure on this very figural relationship would greatly impact his effectiveness in key relationships at work and would then lead to significant movement towards what he wanted to achieve with coaching. My judgement was that this would be the most effective way for him to, for example, differentiate his boss from his mother. I saw this as a limited piece of work. If family of origin had been figural in later sessions I would have suggested a therapy referral. Also I knew that the physical setting was supportive of the work. Actually, through my own supervision, my boundaries have shifted somewhat. Once I would have defined this specific work with LW as 'coaching'. I now reframe this now as 'therapeutic work in service of the wider organisational goals' which I feel is a legitimate area of coaching for someone with my level of skill and supervision support. Otherwise it becomes 'counselling at work' which is definitely not coaching.

MG: This gets me thinking about my own practice... I realise that it would be rare for me to bring a parent into the room in a coaching session and I am wondering about that boundary for me, because your definition is clear and makes sense. For one thing, I am usually working on the client's own premises rather than in my own 'consulting room' and need to take account of the client's capacity to emerge from such a session into his world of work and of how thin the walls can be. Perhaps one difference between us is where we draw the boundary. I know that both of you would contract for a one-off session like this, but I would more than likely go down the referral route. I can never be certain what might be evoked by moving into parental territory and how it could be contained within a three-way coaching contract.

Coach: So what would you have done instead in the session?

MG: I'd certainly use some of the Gestalt methods you use, but the content might differ. It is very likely that the work I would do would involve some empty chair work with boss (e.g. "you are not my mother" – helping him to see the ways in which they are different). I would also work on helping him find his self-compassion, his under-developed

polarity, possibly by having him exaggerate his critical self, then move to a second chair to observe what he is doing to himself. I might invite the 'nurturing self' to talk to the 'critical self', whilst helping the 'critical self' find a way of hearing what is being said. Thus in terms of boundaries, I would focus on his here and now relationship with himself and how this interferes with his current working relationships.

- MS: All useful options. What I am hearing here though is that the clearest figure of interest for the client was his mother's critical voice. This raises another issue for me, there is clearly a limit to how much 'out there' or 'back there' material is appropriate in a three-way coaching contract, can I ask how you are managing this with LW?
- Coach: I was clear that we would limit this work to this session. If 'mother' comes up in subsequent sessions, I will definitely suggest that he takes the work to a different professional and offer a referral.
- MG: I am interested in exploring with both of you what you *wouldn't* work with in a coaching session, i.e. what for you would be a clear breach of the ethical boundary?
- Coach: Good question. Well in this case, I made sure that he was dealing with his mother from his current, adult self. I would definitely not have invited him to engage with her from a regressive, child place. I wouldn't have moved into attempting to mend anything with his mother, either by inviting him to speak as her, or to tryout what he might have said to her for real.
- MG: Nothing else occurs to me right now. What this conversation has done for me is to get me to look again at how I define the boundary between coaching and therapy and to re-evaluate my rationale.

Some conclusions

To sum up, in terms of the ethical and professional considerations on entering the emotional world of the client, we believe that the Gestalt coach needs to: first, be really clear and well-grounded in their own practice and to have the ability to 'account' for their work in the way the authors have done here. We all know that the internalised messages from childhood, when they become unhelpful (fixed gestalts / unfinished business) can really get in the way of productive, healthy working relationships. As coaches we can never predict when a client will raise such issues in a coaching session, and helping them to make links e.g. between having a critical

father and the propensity to perfectionism may be very helpful. Gestalt coaches who have a contract with the client to work with the ‘whole’ person often use methodologies that focus on the affective world (“what are you aware of right now in your body?” / “Stay with that movement for a moment, what happens...?” etc.). As long as the purpose is clear, which is to gain insights into the client’s current functioning and the main focus is on what this means in the current context, then the Gestalt coach is likely to be on safe ground. Safe, that is, as long as he or she knows how to ‘re-ground’ the client in the here and now if the exploration triggers an emotional response. The Gestalt coach who doesn’t have clinical training has to be crystal clear *why* they are encouraging a cathartic reaction, and *how* such an outcome might be of benefit to the client. Catharsis for the sake of it is invariably driven by some need or belief of the coach, rather than the client.

Second, the coach needs to ensure that they have access to their own professional support (and challenge) in the shape of coach supervision. Those without any formally recognised clinical training need to be particularly self-aware in terms of their own intent in working with the client’s emotional affect, and professional supervision is essential in ensuring that the work is relevant to the current presented coaching issue. Supervision can be used to develop an understanding of how to work ethically with emotional material and how to re-ground an emotionally ‘wobbly’ client.

Third, they need to attend to what has and has not been explicitly contracted for. As mentioned, when someone comes to therapy, exploration of affect is (usually) expected as part of the territory, which is not necessarily the case for coaching and therefore, it absolutely must be explicitly contracted for. This needs to happen at two junctures. First at the beginning of the coaching contract when it is important to say

that the work could potentially touch on emotional territory and check if the client is prepared for this to happen; and second, at the point that the client is expressing their emotion, it is crucial to check if they are OK with continuing to explore this material.

Fourth, the Gestalt coach needs to ensure that their work remains within their level of competence when it comes to the emotional world of the client. When a client makes an important connection between something from the past, as happened in this case study, the ‘safest’ and sometimes most appropriate response for a Gestalt coach who isn’t clinically trained may be to acknowledge the importance of the insight and move the exploration on to the meaning of the insight in the client’s current working life. The ‘safest’ option of all for someone who is unsure is to deal with the client’s emotional reactions first by careful listening then working sensitively to move the client away from their emotions towards a cognitive / thinking processing of what has happened. New Gestalt oriented coaches need to be careful not to be drawn into a client’s emotional material until they have explored how to do so with their supervisor and/or have been through an advanced coaching programme.

If the Gestalt coach attends to the ethical and professional considerations discussed in this paper, we are in full agreement with Siminovich and Van Eron (2006, p50): “The Gestalt coaching encounter offers a safe arena where vulnerability, strong emotions, and failure can play themselves out in the service of learning and growth”.

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