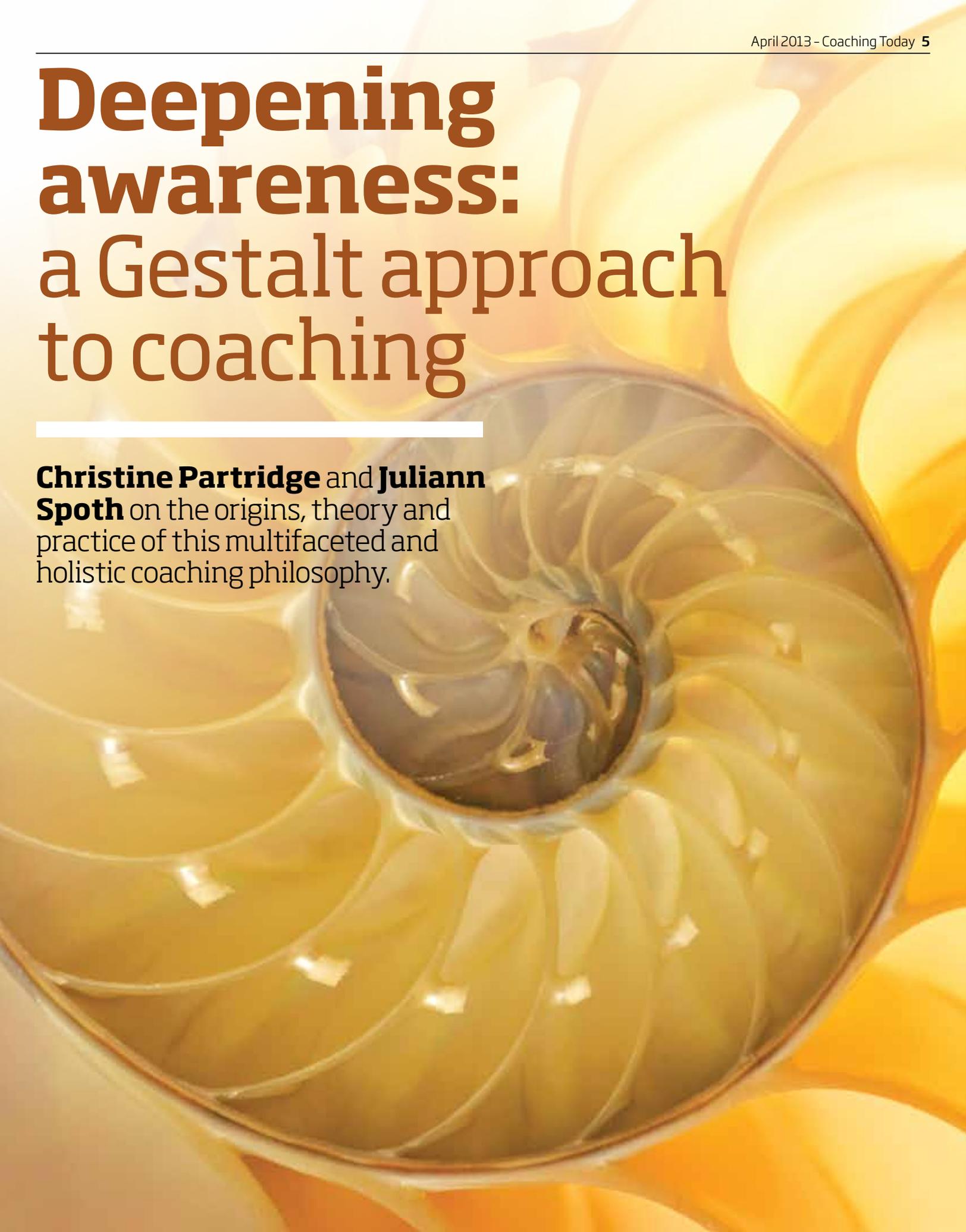


Deepening awareness: a Gestalt approach to coaching

Christine Partridge and **Juliann Spoth** on the origins, theory and practice of this multifaceted and holistic coaching philosophy.



Gestalt is a German word that variously translates as patterns, shape, configuration or meaningful organised wholes.¹ The lack of an obvious translation mirrors the rich complexity of Gestalt coaching, which is best understood as an interdependent, dynamic and evolving set of theory, concepts, methods and corresponding skills. At its core it is a way of being, rather than a set of tools and techniques.

Gestalt has its roots in a range of creative theoretical and philosophical bodies of knowledge and disciplines, including existential philosophy, phenomenology, humanism, Gestalt psychology, bio-energetics, psychoanalysis, and eastern philosophies.² The more recent application of Gestalt in organisational development legitimised using Gestalt concepts and methods for healthy individuals in social settings³ and was a critical factor in the emergence of Gestalt coaching.

Gestalt is a process approach to coaching, with process taking precedence over tools and techniques.³ Thus describing Gestalt coaching is a challenge as it is not a linear, sequential approach but a complex, interactive, and recursive process. As Mackewn points out:⁴ 'On one hand it is simple and elegant; on the other it embraces complexity and resists reductionism.' Gestalt embraces holism, which recognises that the whole is not only more than the sum of its parts; it is different from the sum of its parts. Consistent with this notion, the synergistic nature of Gestalt's concepts and methods when used together create the power and efficacy of Gestalt coaching that cannot be explained by any one concept or method.

In this article we describe some of the core concepts and methods that guide Gestalt coaching. These are embodied presence, figure and ground, cycle of experience, paradoxical theory of change, resistance, experiment and the unit of work (UOW). Regardless of the concept or method being used, the coach's underlying intention is to raise the client's awareness in the present moment as 'the Gestalt coach understands there is a direct relationship between the degree of awareness and the potential for new choices of behaviour'.⁵ In essence, the coach is an awareness agent rather than a change agent.⁶

Embodied presence

Gestalt coaching embraces the notion of self as an instrument. Using self as a highly tuned instrument requires the coach to be present to himself (body, thoughts, emotions and spirit), the client and the wider environment. Gestalt coaching requires the coach to be intuitive, self-aware and in touch with his/her bodily and emotional selves.⁴ The Gestalt coach seeks to be fully present in his body and aware of his thoughts, emotions, physicality and spirit/energy. At the same time the coach is also attuned to the client's physicality (ie breathing, body posture, facial expressions, voice quality and tone, gestures), energetic presence and what is being expressed through the thought and emotions and what is missing. The coach judiciously shares these internal and external observations with an attitude of curiosity, inquiry and a suspension of judgment, to heighten what is present and being evoked.

Figure and ground

A figure refers to the issue, thought, feeling or goal on which the client is focused. An uppermost figure is the figure that, among all those expressed, captures the most interest and energy. The Gestalt coach expects different figures to emerge in the course of a session and constantly tracks the person's level of interest and energy as an indicator of which figure is most likely to provide a potent opportunity for exploration. The exploration of an uppermost figure always includes some exploration of the ground or context from which it emerges, as a figure cannot be fully understood without reference to its context,² 'which also contains its own dynamic'.¹ The work of the coach is to help the client clarify and 'fatten' the uppermost figure and the ground from which it emerges. The more the coach increases the awareness of the figure in relationship to the ground, the more likely the client is able to find alternative options.

The paradoxical theory of change

Arnold Beisser states that 'change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not. Change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and

effort to be what he is, to be fully invested in his current position'.⁷ The paradoxical theory of change underscores the polarities that exist in any change effort: the desire to be different and the inertia of remaining the same or framed another way; the tension between the want and the current habit (eg 'I want to be more focused' (ie the want) versus trying to do everything (ie the habit)).

The cycle of experience

The cycle of experience (CoE) describes the normal change process a person goes through as he or she attempts to fulfil a need. The cycle is illustrated in figure 1.

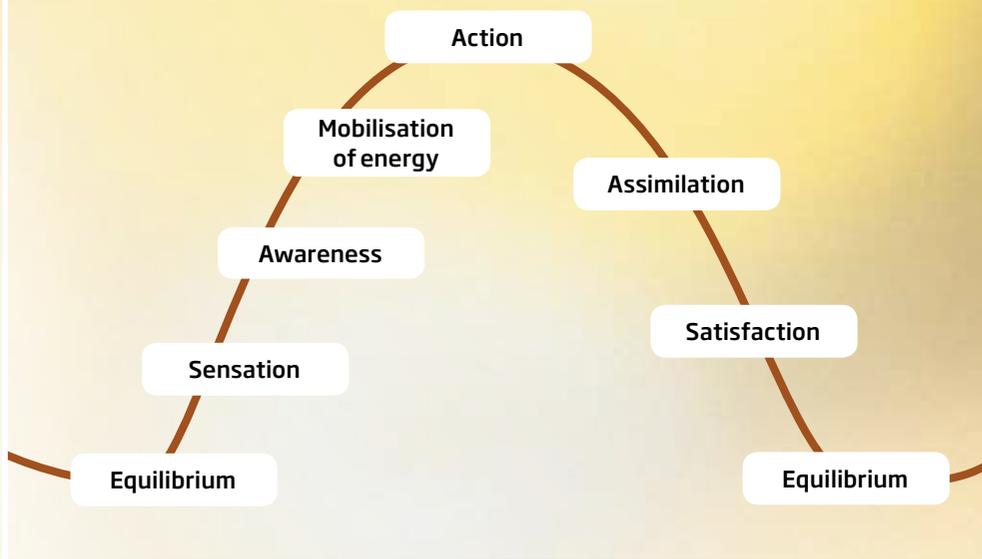
The CoE begins with the person in equilibrium: that is, the person's needs are being met. When this state of equilibrium is disturbed, the first indications are changes in physical sensations. Using the example of hunger, we start to notice a certain sensation in our stomachs or feel lightheaded. These sensations lead to an awareness of hunger, which then becomes the figure and mobilises us to act and, in this case, find something to eat. Once we assimilate the food and feel a sense of satisfaction, equilibrium returns.

The CoE enables the coach to understand where the client is in the change process and his preferences, strengths and limitations in moving through this process, which can be used to guide interventions. For example, the coach may notice the client jumps to action and does not take time to tune into their sensations and develop an awareness of what the real need/issue is. In this case it is likely that the action taken will not lead to satisfaction. Equally, the coach might notice that the person goes from one thing to another without reflecting on her experience (assimilation) or celebrating (satisfaction) her achievement. In both cases the coach raises the person's awareness of his process and helps the person slow down as he moves through the cycle. A slower pace enables the individual to gain a deeper awareness of 'what is'. This can be challenging for action-orientated clients.

Resistance

The tension between forces for change (the 'want') and the forces for sameness (the 'habit')

Figure 1: the cycle of experience



can disrupt movement through the cycle. These interruptions take the form of different types of resistances. Gestalt coaches view resistance as a creative adjustment for dealing with these opposing forces⁹ and an integral part of any change. While resistance interrupts the CoE, it also empowers and in some way serves the client. Helping the client explore these opposing forces and how they are or are not serving him opens up the possibility for different choices, especially if the resistance is experienced as dysfunctional.

Experiments

Experiments are used to raise awareness, gain insight and try out new ways of being. Experiments are carefully crafted experiences that contain an appropriate level of challenge and are enacted in the moment. They can be potent learning experiences, offering the client a chance to take a graded risk in a safe space. 'Experiments encourage trial and error, risk taking and shifting habitual patterns; the use of deliberately designed experiments can give new awareness and choice about how an individual or the team could be different.'⁹

Experiments can be brief and simple – for example, 'Continue talking about your boss and

notice if you become more or less irritated,' or 'Continue to point and shake your finger and notice what you are saying to yourself'.

Alternatively, they may be more complex – for example, inviting the client to speak about a conflict situation as if she were the other person. Experiments are live, organic experiences that emerge in the present and are related to the client's exploration. The following extract from a coaching session illustrates the use of an awareness experiment. The client is a new manager in a small organisation that is struggling financially.

Client: 'I am going round in circles here.'

Coach: 'What is the circle you are doing? What image or metaphor describes or speaks to this going round in circles?'

Client: 'Like fighting fire or keeping your head above water, treading water, being on a treadmill going nowhere.'

Coach: 'So if you stop treading water, stop being on the treadmill, what gets evoked in you when I say this? In your gut, in your thoughts?'

Client: 'A kind of calmness – oh alright, OK, let's stop.'

Coach: 'You just sat back in the chair. Sit right back in the chair if you are willing to do this...'

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Breathe into the space and notice what comes up, what you become aware of.’

Silence

Client: ‘I suppose there is still a lot going on, a lot happening but, standing back and watching it, the activity is still going on but I am trying to see the bigger picture. When you are in among it you are part of it and become part of the chaos ... and you get pulled in so many directions but when I stand back and I look at what’s going on, you can see it.’

Coach: ‘As you sit back looking at all this activity going on for you, is there a new perspective you are seeing, the bigger picture?’

Client: ‘What I do see is that I know there is a lot going on that is really good actually and it will still be going on when I am not there.’

Silence

‘I suppose it is trying to see the priorities for going on. I think one of the difficulties is that when I am in among it I also get caught up in personalities and when I stand back it’s more seeing what action needs to happen.’

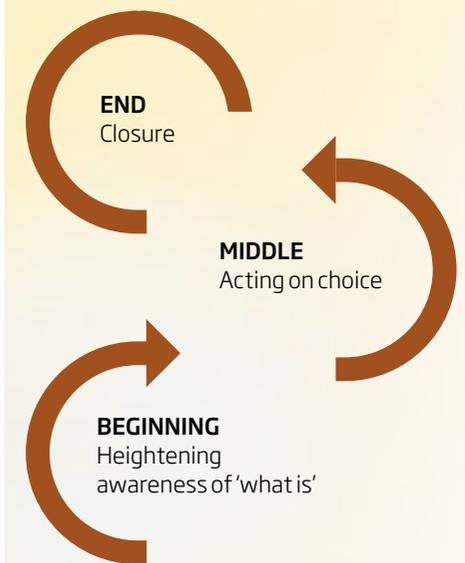
A unit of work

The unit of work (UOW) provides the architecture of Gestalt coaching; it is an orienting frame that the coach can use to understand where s/he is in the coaching process. Developed at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (GIC), it gives a frame within which the Gestalt coach can use a dynamic and creative mix of Gestalt approaches and concepts. It allows coaches to be spontaneous and imaginative as well as systematic in their approach.

The UOW consists of several phases, each having a different purpose:

- **beginning** – assessing and heightening awareness of the current ‘what is’ and identifying and exploring figures of interest or goals
- **transition (beginning to middle)** – choosing what to attend to (ie the uppermost figure)
- **middle** – acting on the choice by deepening awareness of the patterns and resistances and co-creating experiments that increase awareness and test alternative ways of doing things
- **transition (middle to end)** – acknowledging the new ‘what is’ and linking it to original goal or interest and exploring application of new learning

Figure 2: the flow of the unit of work



- **ending** – closing the coaching session/coaching engagement; co-creating actions for further exploration or application and appreciating the work done and the new ‘what is’.

Figure 2 illustrates the flow of the UOW. The UOW can be used to structure the entire coaching engagement or a single session or part of a session. It serves as an orienting frame that the coach can use to understand where she is in the coaching conversation.

Beginning

Although contracting, agreeing the confidentiality guidelines and articulating the overall coaching goal are typically covered in the beginning phase of the overall coaching engagement, they may also be revisited in any beginning session within the engagement. This phase is focused on expanding the client’s understanding of the initial dilemma/issue and its context: the current ‘what is’. This is in service of the paradoxical theory of change, which encourages knowing and accepting more fully what one is. As other figures emerge they are also clarified and the energy associated with them tracked. The emergence of an energised

uppermost figure signals the transition to the middle phase. Regardless of the topic, as the conversation unfolds the coach seeks to co-create a working partnership based on mutual trust and respect.

Middle

The theme of the middle phase is deepening the awareness of the uppermost figure and any emerging themes. Potential ways of doing this are explored but each ultimately includes naming the resistance and exploring the forces for change and sameness. Experiments are co-created to explore these forces and further deepen awareness.

Ending

The ending phase is focused on closure – the assimilation and satisfaction phases of the cycle of experience. Closing includes reflecting on what is new and applying what has been learned to the wider work and life context and celebrating what was accomplished. To further increase awareness or integrate the learning, there may be an agreement on doing an experiment or activity before the next session. Consciously attending to the task of ending provides a more satisfactory closure for the session and reduces the danger of starting another UOW at the last moment.

Summary

'The uncommon practice of attending so closely to process and experience makes Gestalt coaching a robust and life giving practice in today's organisational environments'.¹⁰

Gestalt coaching can be and often is transformational. The synergistic interaction of the concepts and methods allows the coach to go deeper more quickly without crossing the boundary between coaching and therapy. Its process orientation and emphasis on experimentation encourage a creative and individualised approach for each client. It is an appreciative approach in that it regards the client as whole, healthy and in possession of the resources and skills to meet his or her needs.⁵

Describing Gestalt coaching is a challenge because it is at its core holistic, creative and experiential. This article only touches the surface of the key concepts and methods used in

Gestalt coaching. While it does not describe Gestalt coaching in depth, we hope it has given the reader a taste and a desire to learn more. ■

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