

# The What, How, and Why of Gestalt Coaching

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I am frequently asked to explain “the what, how, and why” of Gestalt coaching (GC), as the Director of Training for the first ICF-approved Gestalt coach training program, and others that have followed. I wrote [\*A Gestalt Primer: The Path Toward Awareness Intelligence\*](#) to demonstrate how the particular strengths and values of Gestalt principles, conceptual models, and strategies apply to the world of coaching with remarkable results. GC is vibrantly relevant, because it is an effective, sustainable set of competencies, and is a rewarding coaching method—for both client and coach—for our volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous times.

## Coaching Principles

Adaptability, creativity, and resilience. These qualities have long been understood to be central to an individual’s ability to successfully navigate tumultuous life events. More recently, these same qualities have become the core leadership qualities necessary to manage organizations through volatile and disruptive systemic events.

Gestalt focuses on holistic perceptions, organic processes, and the individual’s unique sense of integrity in the present. A Gestalt approach, in other words, fosters adaptability, creativity, and resilience by paying special attention to the client’s

awareness of and experience of their wants and needs in the moment.

One defining characteristic of a Gestalt approach is the capacity to see a coherent whole—the “big picture”—and to make meaning of it, even if all we have are fragments. (We know that humans can imagine a “face” out of two dots and a line) “What do you see or perceive, and how do you read it—what do you make of it?” is the question. Meaning making is an essential aspect of being aware of and paying attention to what emerges in the moment. Seeing the big picture, and reading it correctly, is a vital attribute of a leader. Whatever interferes with or distorts that picture, and thus the ability to make proper meaning of it, could lead to unwanted consequences. Therefore, when a client creates a big picture, or a narrative, about a significant event from the fragments he *does* understand, the Gestalt coach is curious about what’s missing: what he *does not*, or will not, or cannot see—the other potential fragments that could provide a more nuanced or more accurate vision.

The Gestalt approach centers on heightening what the client is immediately aware of right now, whether in terms of sensations, thoughts, or emotions. This “right now” invitation frequently leads to a discovery of the embedded “what was”: the ignored or forgotten habits of thinking and behavior that continue to impact the client’s present (and future). These embedded habits tend to be deeply ingrained, and they tend to “resist” being surfaced. Of course, not all unmindful habits are dysfunctional. Many habitual patterns provide a valuable service. Enacting social rituals of politeness with others conveys basic relational sensitivity, for example. The Gestalt coach, however, supports the client to *choose with awareness* which habits to preserve and which to let go of.

Viktor Frankl, Holocaust survivor and luminary of positive psychology, wrote, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” GC takes the opportunity to explore that space with the client. When reactivity appears triggered by an unaware resistance, the Gestalt coach invites the client to stop, focus, and reflect, a process that grounds sustained learning and transformative change. How

is the exploration of this space conducted? The methodology involves a practice that is *experiential*, *experimental*, and *existential*.

## Experiential Learning

GC's concept of working with a client to reveal blind spots or unintentional resistances in order to increase client choice is informed by a conceptual model called the Cycle of Experience (COE). The COE primarily serves to reveal what you're aware of about yourself and your environment, and how you act on that awareness in relation to satisfying needs or wants. It can also help assess how your needs or wants are being thwarted because of habitual, unaware patterns of response. The key to working with the COE is *awareness in the moment*, involving skills of observation, identification, emotional and somatic tracking, determining desired change, and assessing what just happened.



The Gestalt coach supports clients to ideally move all the way through the COE regarding a specific issue or experience brought to the coaching session, teaching them to attend to: their sensations [SCANNING]; what claims their attention—their “figure of interest” [AWARENESS]; their emotional or somatic energy around that figure [ENERGY]; what movement they want to take towards that figure [ACTION]; a resolution concerning the importance of that figure [CONTACT]; and an appreciative withdrawal from or release of that figure [CLOSURE].

Moving through the COE is a meaning-making process. When steps in the process are skipped over or become “stuck,” this commonly indicates unaware or habitual patterns of resistance. Becoming more aware of what interferes with completion of the COE is the beginning of learning and choice, and yields significant outcomes. GC clients often report experiencing a compelling sense of liberation when they discern for themselves these unmindful patterns, and realize they can now reinvest their attention and energy differently.

These patterns of resistance frequently fall into one of the following six categories, with brief examples as definitions. (Keep in mind that each resistance has its more positive counterpart.)

1. **Desensitization** When you do not, or cannot, “feel” anything (emotionally or physically) about a particular experience or issue, positive or negative.
2. **Introjection** When “must, should, ought” are such strong influences in your life that they interfere with your ability to get satisfaction.
3. **Projection** When you’re in an emotionally uncomfortable situation, but call out another person as the one who feels the same as you do without naming yourself.
4. **Retroreflection** When you hold back from doing or saying things that could bring you satisfaction, perhaps because of an introject (“must, should, ought”), and the tension you are holding by not acting or speaking likely manifests as a somatic symptom (e.g., backache, headache).
5. **Deflection** When you distract others by commenting irrelevantly or cracking jokes during speeches or activities that make you uncomfortable.
6. **Confluence** When, rather than raise any tension or conflict, you agree to agree with those in charge, and quietly feel a small embarrassment that you could not or would not speak for yourself.

All these resistance patterns can have a positive function, *if* used with awareness. But because, over time and practice, they become embedded without full awareness in the individual’s sense of who they are, identifying and confronting them requires courage and commitment, from both coach and client. One way to address this challenge is to conduct experimental work, which is contracted between the coach and the client.

## Experimental Work

Experimental work is collaborative, and designed to support the client's exploration of alternative cognitive and behavioral choices in a safe place. Clients might be invited to re-enact events or evoke imaginary scenes from their past, present or future; or to have a conversation between their perceived and ideal selves; or to inhabit fantasy scenarios of peak experiences that have happened or that they hope will happen. Experiments that are collaboratively and imaginatively designed strengthen clients' awareness of themselves and facilitate use of their own resources. Coach and client then debrief the experiment to recognize new learnings. Such an "intervention" is deliberate. It taps the coach's awareness skills and creativity to support the client to attend to a past or future event that needs further understanding or new learning to manage. Creating safe learning environments for leaders, executives, and professionals to explore their options, and to get pertinent, in-the-moment observational feedback, is one of GC's invaluable practice resources. This is the space of GC's "safe emergency," or "psychological safety." We borrow [wisdom from Ron Heifitz](#), a Harvard Kennedy School colleague, who says, "Our job is to disturb the client at a level they can tolerate." In accompanying a client's exploration of new possibilities, coaches are there to offer the support that encourages examination and acceptance of what was, and examination of and energetic excitement for what can be.

## Existential Work

Existential has to do with being alive, *existing*: being in your body, being in your head, being in the world at this moment, right now. The aim of GC is to partner with clients to investigate and discover what has relevance for them, how they experience or think about the issue they've brought to the table, what influences their decisions, and how they might otherwise choose to respond. The Gestalt coach encourages clients to focus on and explore whatever strongly emerges for them in the process of the session, as this may provide the observational "data of the moment" that connects both short- and long-term professional and personal challenges and goals. As a deeply humanist model and practice, GC is willing to step a little outside the bounds of organizational consulting. That "bigger picture" puts the Gestalt coach at the center of the focus, emphasizing both her awareness skills and her ability to use those skills to catalyze more profound awareness within the client.

## Coaching Presence

What we have learned from years of research is that simply showing up is already an “intervention”: who we are, our being, impacts others. How we look, stand, speak, occupy our space—these all affect how others think of, respond to, and make meaning of us. For the client, the coach has to be a trustworthy and relatable resource.

Gestalt coaches are tasked with using their awareness and feedback skills to establish that sense of psychological safety and relational resonance. So they need to do the [developmental self-work to effectively support the client](#). They need to understand themselves well, including personal biases and triggers. Coaches bring their mindset, their values, their perceptual processes, their intuition, and their experience to the coaching encounter. This is intentional “use of self,” and it entails being fully present for and transparent with the client.

The coach’s presence as use of self is perhaps the single most important factor in the client’s experience of the coaching session. It isn’t so much a matter of charisma or learned procedure, but rather one of skill, what I have called *awareness intelligence*. First is [the question of “authenticity” of being](#), which grounds mutual trust. Who you are and how you interact with the client has impact: how “real” do you feel to that client? Again, self-work is important to help coaches share their articulated values and definitional intention. [As my colleague Marcia Reynolds says, “clients don’t want us to be perfect, they want us to be present.”](#) And present in a way that makes that client feel seen, appropriately challenged, safe, and supported.

The coach is always gathering observational data in the moment, and deciding what to bring to the client’s attention, as well as when and how. What would be useful for the client to be aware of regarding their desired outcome? Apart from stated needs or wants, what is the client missing that leads to a sense of frustration or regret? One role of the Gestalt coach, for example, is to name the unacknowledged but observationally obvious (a client’s physical or mental fatigue) and to share the question wanting to be asked (“Does fatigue sit with you?”). Skillfully using the awareness data of the moment to identify and, in partnership with the client, to experimentally explore the dynamics of the client’s experiential and existential pathways is the foundation of GC.

Effectively using the data of the moment is what defines awareness intelligence. Missing an opportunity to act on meaningful, in-the-moment observational data may lead to regret, on the part of both the coach and the client. Only after-the-fact, and with reflection, can this regret lead to learning.

## **The Bigger Systems at Work**

Individual clients do not, of course, exist in a bubble. Whether professionally or personally, they are interconnected with other individuals, other groups, other communities, other institutions. GC is sensitive to the complexities of where a client's necessary work is most accurately situated within "levels of system." Gestalt coaches look to discern whether the presenting issue is primarily at the individual, interpersonal, group/team, or organizational level. Each system level is connected to, but different from, all other levels, but change at any one level of the system will to some degree impact all the other levels. For example: If something changes for the client individually, people at other levels of the system that this client deals with will also experience a difference in their interactions with the client. The Gestalt coach asks: "At what level of system is it most productive to intervene for the greatest learning and development?"

Making a system level error has consequences. Working what is an individual-level issue at the group level, for instance, risks low energy and disengagement, as the group is being asked to do the work of the one who holds the issue most closely. Conversely, working a group issue at the individual level can limit full understanding of what work is really needed. When a person speaks for a group without involving the group, the group level is misrepresented by that person speaking "for" the group. Although such errors can be corrected, the error means that time has been misspent, energy has been diminished or misdirected, and trust may have eroded if no learning has occurred.

But because GC works adaptively and effectively at every level of system, it offers the potential for deeper, sustainable learning and change. Consider the complex decision making that occurs when the client is a senior executive who is presented with a job

promotion that involves a change of city, or state, or even country. Many obvious and not so obvious issues need attention, involving multiple levels of system. For example, apart from the executive's internal ambitions, needs, and wants regarding a career with this particular organization, questions at home may involve who the crucial "breadwinner" is or whether uprooting young children is a worthwhile option. The various dimensions of the client's decision can range from the cognitive to the emotional to the somatic, as well mediating the values and norms held by those affected. The strength of a Gestalt approach is in visualizing and addressing a coherent whole from its particular parts. Through awareness intelligence and skilled use of self, the Gestalt coach will intentionally focus on chosen aspects of the client's narrative, discovering what else needs to be explored while allowing that narrative to be woven into the work. Engaging different levels of system is a GC technique to enhance the richness of the "big picture" by adding more information and building from diverse resources to support the coaching work. Having done such work, this executive will be better positioned to move forward on the choice with confidence.


### **Make a Difference: Become a Gestalt Coach**

The Gestalt coach assists clients to be aware of what has been ignored but is relevant, what has become outdated and can be retired, what has been missing and needs to be invited. The coaching encounter is conducted from a stance of appreciative curiosity and compassion. Experimental work is co-created with clients and enacted in a safe environment, where clients are free to rehearse different behavioral choices without fear of repercussions, personally or professionally. Experiential, experimental, and existential work allow clients to become more skilled in meeting their own challenges, but also encourages them to be more thoughtfully responsive to others, which enables greater empathy and relationship.

A Gestalt approach teaches a person how to learn from their experience. When clients describe their GC sessions as "magical," they are speaking to a transformative experience that they carry with them and enact with others in their lives, expanding the reach of their awareness intelligence and thereby influencing others.



I've given you a brief overview of the foundational practices of GC and potential outcomes. Extended definitions, explanations, and examples can be found in my book, [A Gestalt Primer: The Path Toward Awareness Intelligence](#). The book will give you a cognitive understanding of the rich theoretical grounding, principles, models, and tools of GC. *But frankly, to fully understand its power, you have to experience it...*



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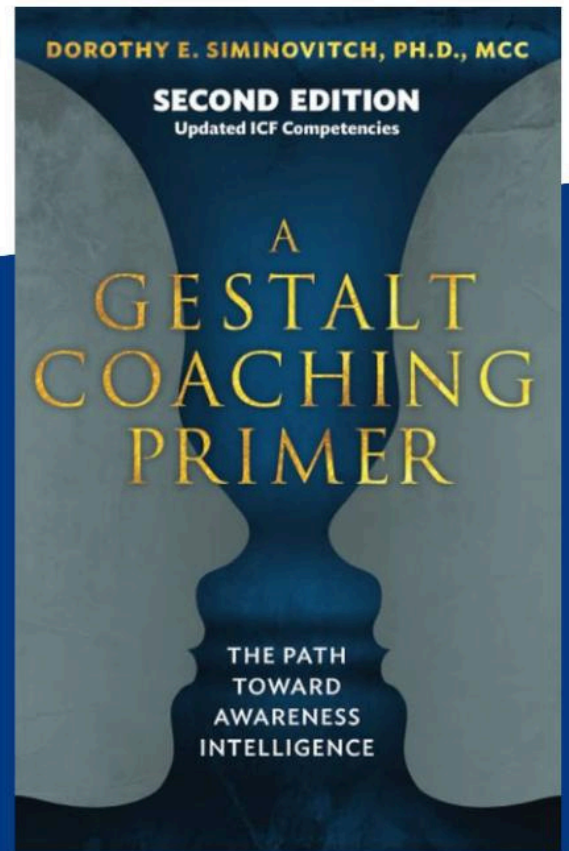
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