

# An Improviser's Journey into Gestalt Thinking and Practice

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**ABSTRACT** | The author is consistently surprised by the Gestalt community's openness to improvisation as he explores new ways to adapt classic terminology and presentation methods to his particular needs. He explores the Gestalt concepts that informed his work and follows their transition into imagery and tools that his management consulting clients grasp immediately and viscerally. He discovers that, although Gestalt teaching now includes a focus on work groups and organizations, the field still was using language best suited to individuals in therapeutic settings. The author works with individuals and groups in organizations' departments and in organizations, but thanks to the Gestalt community's encouragement and the inherent flexibility of the tools themselves, he has expanded their application, making them relevant in a corporate setting. This spirit of improvisation, he argues, is critical to the evolution of Gestalt practice.

**KEYWORDS** | improvisation, cycle of experience, resistance, cycle of action, energy bar

I was getting rusty. I had been practicing organizational development for about twelve years. Work was going well, but then two things occurred

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that pulled me off that path. I had been studying playwriting and directing, and I started getting some of my plays produced locally. During this same period, a client asked if I would write a training film script for her. Since I thought most training films were dreadful, I decided to use this as an opportunity to try and write one that was both entertaining and educational. I wrote a first draft that combined various forms of comedy. I fully expected my client to reject it, but she liked it! The director and the actors liked it as well. I was hooked. I was happy to have explored theater and educational films, but I could see that I was losing whatever edge I thought I had as a consultant.

I started to look for a place where I could practice and get feedback. I wanted to find the organizational development equivalent of baseball's spring training. Before baseball season begins each year, players meet for a month to practice. In many instances, they practice things that they have been doing since they were young children. I figured if these major league athletes could benefit from practicing the basics, so could I.

As I searched for a place to take part in spring training, a few friends mentioned the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (often referred to as GIC). I decided to attend a basic weekend called the "Gestalt Experience Workshop" to see if it might be a good fit for me. Our trainers that weekend were Les Wyman and Dorothy Siminovitch. They were thoughtful, clear, and respectful, and they seemed "magically" to know when to say something and when to keep quiet. After almost a day of silence, one participant said something deeply personal. In my experience, a statement like that could cause trainers to salivate. I have seen them pounce on their unsuspecting prey and not let go until they got a catharsis out of those poor misguided souls. After all, they were the trained professionals in the room, and who better to tell others what they should want?

But that is not how those trainers responded. Wyman looked at the participant and asked, "Is that something that you'd like to work on?" She replied, "No, thanks." I was surprised when our trainers accepted no for an answer. And then Wyman said, "Well, we've got the rest of this evening and tomorrow morning, so if you change your mind, just let us know. We'll make space for you." *Wow!* is not an official Gestalt term, but my visceral reaction to how those trainers worked with us

convinced me that Cleveland was a place where I could learn. At that time, I did not realize that an important tenet of Gestalt work was to be there *with* clients and not try to change them.

In this article, I explain the impact that Gestalt thinking has had on my life, my writing, and my consulting practice, and then I show the ways in which Gestalt theory provides a strong foundation that allows me to expand (and even deviate) from traditional Gestalt theory and practice.

## Gestalt as Foundation

After that stimulating and heartening Gestalt weekend, I enrolled in GIC's eighteen-month program focused on people who work in organizations. It was a terrific experience. I got what I wanted from spring training, and I learned a new theory and a new way of engaging with clients and colleagues. Some things from my study of a Gestalt approach have become strong foundation pieces for my thinking, writing, and practice. They are offered below.

(1) *The Cycle of Experience*. The Cycle is a simple and elegant way to observe where energy is, and where various people and groups may be on this cycle. It describes how energy builds and wanes as new figures emerge from the ground. The ground (or the phenomenological field) is a mixture of potential internal and external stimuli. From that roiling mass, ideas and thoughts rise. The Cycle helps me make sense of what happens as a figure gains energy. The classic example is hunger. We feel a twang in our stomachs. We become aware that we are hungry. We go in search of food. We find it and we eat. Our attention to that figure subsides and our attention can move onto other things.

The Gestalt approach to *resistance* offers a refreshing antidote to the typical way that resistance is addressed (or ignored) in organizations. Prior to the prominence of a Gestalt perspective, resistance was often thought of as a bad thing. It was resistance to analysis, and so the clinician's task was to help the client *overcome* his or her block. A Gestalt mindset suggests that, as we attempt to make meaning of our experiences, we may resist for good reasons. For example, when the

clinician asks about our relationship with our parents, we might resist because it feels unsafe—even dangerous—to talk about such things. Rather than thinking that reluctance is a bad thing, we are taught to help our clients embrace their resistance. In terms set forth by Laura Perls (1992), we create “support for contact.” We try to provide support so that clients can experience this so-called resistance without judgment.

(2) The *Paradoxical Theory of Change* gives me a way to calibrate my own energy and keep me attuned to where my client is; and to develop ways for clients to try to stay in sync with each other. I think that Arnold Beisser’s (1970) four-page article is brilliant: he captures the fundamental heartbeat of Gestalt practice. He explains why change is a paradox. It gives us a way to look at resistance with gentler eyes. Beisser writes:

The Gestalt therapist rejects the role of “changer,” for his strategy is to encourage, even insist, that the patient *be* where and what he *is*. He believes change does not take place by “trying,” coercion, or persuasion, or by insight, interpretation, or any other such means. Rather, change can occur when the patient abandons, at least for the moment, what he would like to become and attempts to be what he is. The premise is that one must stand in one place in order to have firm footing to move and that it is difficult or impossible to move without that footing. (77)

Ah, but then the paradox enters the picture. Beisser continues:

The patient comes to the therapist because he wishes to be changed. Many therapies accept this as a legitimate objective and set out through various means to try to change him, establishing what Perls calls the “top-dog/under-dog” dichotomy. A therapist who seeks to help a patient has left the egalitarian position and become the knowing expert, with the patient playing the helpless person, yet his goal is that he and the patient should become equals. The Gestalt therapist believes that the top-dog/under-dog dichotomy

already exists within the patient, with one part trying to change the other, and that the therapist must avoid becoming locked into one of these roles. He tries to avoid this trap by encouraging the patient to accept both of them, one at a time, as his own. (78)

(3) *Field Theory*. Kurt Lewin's simple equation  $B = f(PE)$ —Behavior is a Function of the Person and his or her Environment—has helped me begin to look at my behavior and the behavior of my clients within the field (or environment) we are in (see Sansone, Morf, and Panter 2004). Field theory is way too complex to try to explain in the equivalent of a bullet point. If you are interested in field theory as it relates to work in organizations, I encourage you to read Malcolm Parlett's (1991, 1997, 2005) fundamental papers.

(4) *Relational Gestalt Therapy*. Shortly after I started teaching in Cleveland, I learned about the work of Lynne Jacobs, Rich Hycner, and Gary Yontef. Although I am not a therapist nor plan to move in that direction, this return to Buber and some of the fundamental principles of how therapists can relate to clients gave me a clearer way of relating to my clients. Yontef (2005), for example, writes: "In Gestalt therapy theory, change happens through the contact between therapist and patient. The emphasis is on 'meeting' the patient, on contact without aiming. The quality of the contact and the quality of the ongoing contact or relationship largely determine the effectiveness of the therapy" (98). Watching Jacobs, Yontef, and their colleagues work with clients in training sessions brought Buber's I/Thou philosophy to life.

(5) *Generosity of Spirit*. Here are some examples of how the intellectual generosity of Gestalt practitioners continues to support my desire to learn more about Gestalt theory and practice; I continue to find ways to apply its lessons.

- During the final week of that big organizational training program at GIC, all participants were asked to give a presentation about some aspect of what we learned. I chose resistance. I loved the model I was learning, but I knew that many of

my clients (primarily engineers, information technology [IT] professionals, and financial folks) would be put off with words like *retroreflection* and *introjection*. I wondered if there was a way that I could explain the Gestalt approach to resistance in ways that my own clients could understand and apply it in the workplace.

- At the end of my presentation, faculty members Elaine Kepner and Ernesto Poza asked if I was going to publish what I had just presented. I had not thought of that before. They encouraged me to write about what I was beginning to explore. Kepner said, “I’d like you to consider publishing with the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland Press.” I was deeply touched by their words and their encouragement to explore a different way to express this one aspect of Gestalt theory. I did take their advice about writing a book, but I decided to go with a publisher of business books. I started a three-year writing process. *Beyond the Wall of Resistance* (Maurer [1996] 2010) was the result of that exploration.
- In 1998, I was invited to join the GIC faculty and teach in the organizational programs. And in 2001, Edwin Nevis invited me to be an associate editor for *Gestalt Review*. I spent fifteen years encouraging, critiquing, angering, and editing the work of fellow writers. Nevis ([1987] 2001) literally wrote the book (or at least a chapter in *Organizational Consulting from a Gestalt Perspective*) on presence. Whenever it came time to teach that topic, it seemed only fitting that he would take on that task during our training program. But one year, he was not able to be with us for the session that introduced presence. My colleague Harold Hill and I were asked to teach it. We called Nevis for advice. He was gracious and described what he would say, and the reasons why he put the design together in the way he did. Unfortunately, Hill could not attend, either, so then it was up to me to try and fill Nevis’s shoes by myself! A few months later, I ran into him and said that the session had gone very well. I told him that I had covered the points he had suggested and followed the design just as he had advised. He looked at me and said,

“That’s great, Rick. I’m glad to hear it. But, next time make the presentation your own. That’s the only way our theory will continue to grow.” Once again, *Wow!*

## Resistance: Individual and Organizational

As I started thinking how I might turn that presentation on presence into an article or a book, I realized that, although I agreed with Gestalt’s underlying thinking and practice when working with resistance, there were certain aspects that did not fit with what I was observing in organizations. The teaching was fine. The organizational programs at GIC focused on how we could work effectively with work groups, full organizations, and individuals within the context of organizations. But as helpful as that was, there seemed to be something missing. For instance, the language of resistance that works so well with individuals does not quite fit when we talk about work groups or organizations.

Take *retroreflection*, for example. Retroreflection suggests that people keep silent about things that are too difficult to say out loud: they resist giving voice to a thought or feeling because the risk seems too high. Organizations do not retroreflect, people retroreflect. Some might say that, when an entire team is silent in a meeting, that silence could represent retroreflection. That knowledge may help the Gestalt-trained consultant or manager interpret the silence, but telling a group that they are retroreflecting just invites problems. It smacks of arrogance and, at the very least, would require a lot of explanation. I wanted something that people could experience without having to use psychological terms better suited to therapy sessions. Retroreflection is just one of a number of types of resistance that stem from Freud and other analysts and psychologists who worked with individuals.

At first, I thought it was merely a translation issue: finding a word to replace the psychological terms for types of resistance, such as *retroreflection*, *projection*, or *introjection*. In fact, my presentation during the program I had attended at GIC was focused largely on trying to translate Gestalt terms and ideas into a language that my clients might use. I created an outline and started writing chapters for what became *Beyond the Wall of Resistance* (Maurer [1996] 2010). Everything was

going fine except for chapter 8, which is where I wanted to describe my thinking on resistance. Every day I turned on my computer and looked at a blank screen. Of course, this was writer's block, but thanks to my Gestalt training, I welcomed this block, just assuming that something was stirring inside. (Others might fret over writer's block; I wallowed in it with great enthusiasm.)

One evening, as I stared at that blank screen, I decided that a change of scenery might help. I drove to a local bookstore/bar that sold micro-brews. (I limited myself to two beers, by the way.) As I sat there, I started drawing circles in my notebook. Some random ideas started to coalesce into three categories. I realized those three categories were connected, each influencing the other two circles. I wrote the chapter. Even though my thinking on the third of the three categories or "levels" has changed some over the years, they became the way that I looked at resistance in organizations. Whether the relationship is one-to-one, a small group, or an entire organization, Levels 1, 2, and 3 described below tend to provide valuable information to my clients and me.

*Level 1: "I don't get it."* This level is marked by lack of knowledge or confusion. This cognitive "resistance" is not part of the Gestalt taxonomy, but it does represent a significant reason why people might not support a change at work. I noticed something interesting. Often when people in organizations try to influence others, and they get resistance, they assume that it must be Level 1. Consequently, they keep talking about their idea: they give longer presentations and show even more densely packed slides to no avail. When people do understand what someone is telling them, providing more explanation invites deeper resistance.

*Level 2: "I don't like it."* This level is often based on fear. Something about this new idea scares people. They might lose their jobs, face, control, power, status, respect, and so forth. When Level 2 is present, people cannot take in more information—they are otherwise engaged with personal concerns. Daniel Goleman (1999) refers to this as an "amygdala hijack" (87). I think that much of Gestalt thinking on resistance is captured in Levels 2 and 3.

*Level 3: "I don't like you."* (This may be an overstatement, but it helps people remember the three levels. And I am grateful to Leslie Stephen, editor of my two books on resistance, for those three memorable



sentences describing the levels.) When Level 3 occurs, resistance may have nothing to do with the idea itself. They may understand what is being talked about (Level 1). They may actually like the idea and believe it is important (Level 2). They are resisting because of their relationship with the person or group advocating this new idea. Level 3 is often eye-opening for my clients. Some had never thought about resistance as something that could occur simply due to their relationship to others.

### ***How “The List” Became My Resistance Tool of Choice***

A large consulting company invited me to teach the three levels and my version of the Cycle of Experience to a large corporation’s planning team. The team was charged with coming up with a way to plan and implement Business Process Engineering (BPE). In the late 1990s, this was a popular approach to organizational change—and a controversial one. The mere mention of BPE could send people into the depths of Level 2 fear.

A member of the team stopped me during my presentation, and said, “Rick, next week the bomb is going to drop. What should we do?” People nodded and leaned forward, waiting for my brilliant answer to this ticking-bomb dilemma. I had no idea what to do, but (thanks to Gestalt training) I did know the power of metaphors. And “the bomb is going to drop” seemed to be quite a powerful one. So I asked about it. They told me that they were going to hold a meeting with the key stakeholders. It was going to be an all-day meeting, and they were certain that people were going to hate what they had come up with so far.

I still had no idea what to tell them. I needed more information before I could say something (thank you to Beisser’s “Paradoxical Theory of Change,” for that advice). Desperate for more information, I said, “I want each of you imagine you are one of those people coming to the meeting. What would be on your minds as you walked into that room?” People started talking quickly, and I wrote as fast as I could on the flip chart. As I wrote, I realized what I could do with that information.

I quickly taught them the three levels of resistance. Then I asked, “Which of these items seem to be Level 1?” I used a blue marker to indicate Level 1 issues. “Which are Level 2 issues?” I used a red marker.

“What about Level 3?” And I used a green marker. Now the list was color coded. Someone said, “Oh, that’s why the bomb is going to drop!” Others looked at him, a bit confused. He went on to say, “We designed that entire meeting to deal with Level 1 issues like budgets, timeline, deliverables, and so forth. But only about 10 percent of the things on that list correspond to Level 1. Everything else is Level 2, fear; or Level 3, lack of trust in us.” His words had an immediate impact on the planning group.

They were energized. They asked if they could take the next hour to redesign that upcoming meeting. Of course, my colleague and I said, “Yes.” They found ways to cover critical informational issues and do it in a way that allowed time for conversations about personal reactions. And they tried to design the meeting in a way that might actually build the stakeholders’ trust and confidence in them. I was told that the meeting with the stakeholders the following week went very well.

Since then the notion of “The Magic List” is the starting point for all my consulting on change (see Maurer 2012). It is important that both my client and I know what is on that list. What are the Levels 1, 2, and 3 issues working for or against this change? Without that knowledge, we would be flying without radar. If the weather is good and the terrain is flat, we may have a smooth flight, but without that critical information, we could be creating serious problems.

### **Resistance and Support**

I always thought of resistance on a continuum with support, but the first edition of *Beyond the Wall of Resistance* (Maurer 1996 [2010]) does not emphasize that idea. This oversight was reinforced as I learned more about how my colleagues viewed resistance. In short, resistance is not special and separate from *who* we are. Our abilities to resist and support are all part of how we are able to make choices.

Barry Johnson, an early student in the GIC organizational program, got attracted to the importance of polarities in Gestalt. That curiosity led him to write *Polarity Management* (Johnson 2014). I believe that Johnson has done more than anyone to expand our knowledge of polarities and how to work with them, especially in organizational settings. His work

helped me see the importance of keeping that powerful polarity of support and resistance always in mind. In my interview with him for *Gestalt Review* (Maurer 2002a), I stated, “You begin your book, *Polarity Management*, by saying you’ve got some bad news and some good news” (209). Johnson responded:

The bad side of the news is that there are a whole host of issues we face in our organizational lives that are completely unavoidable and unsolvable. The good news is that we can identify these particular issues that I have called polarities. They also have been called paradoxes or dilemmas. By addressing these sets of interdependent opposites, we can manage them and actually create a synergy for the benefit of the individual parts of the system as a whole. (210)

Since my first days as a student in Cleveland, I could feel Gordon Wheeler’s influence on my thinking. Wheeler (1991) wrote the landmark book, *Gestalt Reconsidered*, in which he suggests that we think of resistances as contact styles rather than as behaviors that get in the way of contact. He speaks about the importance of the client’s or patient’s ground when looking at his or her behavior: “[W]hat we are saying here is that there is no such thing as ‘contact’ in some ideal, platonic form, pure and theoretical, which then in the ‘real’ case becomes unfortunately sullied with ‘resistances.’ . . . Rather, the exercise of all these modes, all these variables at the boundary, which we will call ‘contact functions,’ is the contact” (133).

Even though I was being taught the “classic” resistances (which are worth knowing), I kept feeling the pull toward Wheeler’s and Johnson’s thinking.

## Adapting the Cycle of Experience

The Cycle has been a foundation piece at the GIC for a long time. A detailed version of it appears in *Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy* by Joseph Zinker (1978, 112). Nevis ([1987] 1991) sees it as a wave. Many other versions of the cycle have appeared in handouts at GIC and at the Gestalt International Study Center (GISC), as well as in articles

published in *Gestalt Review* (e.g., Simon 2012). There does not appear to be a definitive version of the cycle. Emboldened by that rich tradition of adapting the cycle, I created my own version. I wanted something that would focus on organizations and not just on individual phenomena. Through discussions with colleagues, I came up with terms that I believed better reflected what people in organizations might experience. Those terms appeared in the original 1996 edition of *Beyond the Wall of Resistance*.

For example, sensation precedes awareness on many versions of the cycle, even those that focus on groups and organizations. I do not believe that the entities of groups and organizations have sensory capacities; therefore, I wanted to find terms that better reflected what went on at the group and organizational levels. I replaced the term *sensation* (which refers to individuals) with random incidents that I thought better described phenomena that might go on in an organization. This new list of terms to replace the original language on the cycle of experience was all right, but it still required more explanation on my part. I still needed something that people in organizations could grasp immediately. I needed to get further away from professional jargon. A few years later, I changed the terminology on my version of the cycle to what you see in Figures 1 and 2. I made one more change to the cycle: I placed resistance in the center. That allowed me to show how movement can shift off our intended track and into resistance. The graphic artist who drew the cycle for the original version of the book added the image of a hurricane swirling in the center. I loved that image.

I often draw the cycle while I describe it to someone. Something about the informality of drawing it on a napkin as we both lean over an image taking shape brings it to life. Sometimes, I do not even get all the way around the cycle before people start to see connections to their pet projects. If that does not happen, I might ask people, “Where are you on the cycle? And, where are others on the cycle?” If they say that they are at “Getting Started” and think that a key stakeholder is “In the Dark,” I explain that getting out ahead of others on the cycle is a big reason why we get resistance. I say, “When you try to push or pull them around, their arrow usually doesn’t race up to where you are, but it turns into the center of the cycle, and that’s where resistance resides.” Actually seeing

## CYCLE OF CHANGE



FIGURE 1 | © 1996 Rick Maurer. Used with permission.

how we can get out ahead of others on the cycle often opens the door for more in-depth conversations and work on the potential support or resistance they might experience.

I realize that if I were being true to the concept of support and resistance being part of the contacting process, I could have found a way to express that in my version of the cycle. I decided not to do that. (I can feel the “gods of Gestalt” descending on me as I write this.) I wanted people’s first exposure to the cycle to grab their attention, both intellectually and viscerally. I believed that, as soon as I started adding more

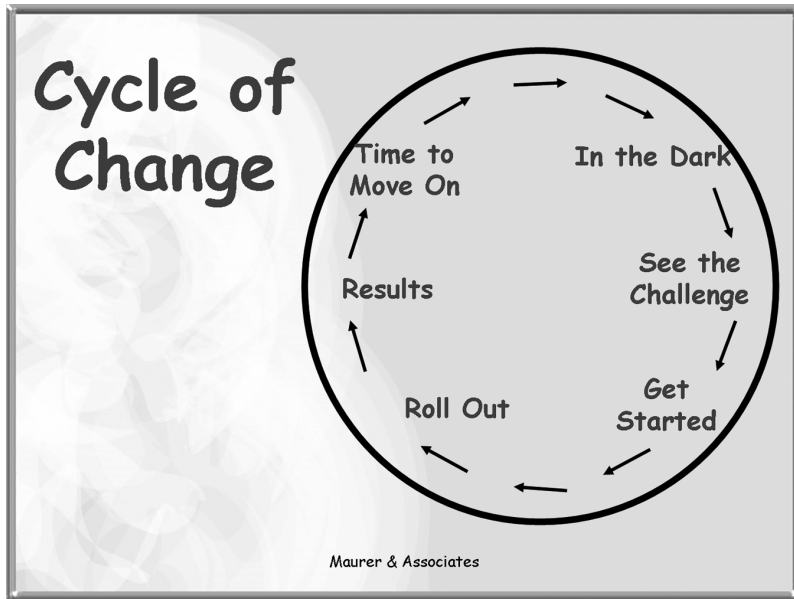


FIGURE 2 | © 1996 Rick Maurer. Used with permission.

content to the cycle, I might increase its accuracy—but miss the opportunity to connect with what it represented for them (e.g., “Oh, I see why we’re in trouble”).

### *Misusing the Cycle*

It is easy for clients (and Gestalt practitioners like me) to misinterpret what the cycle shows us. For those of us who work in organizations, there are so many project and change management planning tools that imply that if we complete Step 1, we will automatically move to Step 2, and so on until the project is complete. Here is where Beisser’s (1970) “Paradoxical Theory of Change” can help. Being present to wherever the energy is right now is the best way to allow movement forward. This flies in the face of many corporate change models that attempt to “enlist support,” “overcome resistance,” and so on.

To use my language to describe this phenomenon, work must be completed when people are “In the Dark” so that they are able to “See the Challenge.” The fallacy that simply explaining the reasons why people should recognize the importance of this new project causes lots of problems. It may appear that people are onboard, but they may just be going through the motions that they support this change. That feigned enthusiasm usually dissipates quickly. A feedback loop is essential. Those who want the support of others need to know if their interventions actually moved the energy, and moved the energy in the intended direction. I recall an executive team that was so excited about the presentation they had just made to the organization regarding a major change. What they did not know was that their presentation was greeted with cynicism. If they had known that, they could have made a course correction.

## The Cycle in Action: It Is All Energy

A scientific research organization created a cadre from across the organization to serve as key resources on applying my approach in the work place. I was invited to attend a meeting of this cadre. Someone drew the cycle on a flip chart and started to describe a project. Soon everyone was standing around this chart talking. They got stuck on how various members were using various terms. I interrupted and said, “Folks, it’s just energy. Either it’s going this way (support) or that way (resistance).” My primary client, a nuclear physicist, said, “That’s good” (physicists love it when you talk about energy). Almost instantly, the conversation got clearer. The team started talking in ways that helped them make progress on what they needed to do next.

The following week, I was working with a change management team in another large organization. Someone expressed concern about one key stakeholder and asked what I thought they should do. Since I did not have much information at that point, I drew a horizontal line on the whiteboard. I told them that the far-right end indicated strong support, and the far-left end indicated no support. I said, “Think of this as a bar of energy.” I asked what energy they needed from this stakeholder, and

then what energy they were likely to get. It was easy for them to identify the energy they needed and the energy they were likely to get. Once they saw the gap between those two points, they were able to focus with a lot of excitement on what it would take to bridge that gap.

Later, a few more members of the planning team came in. One of those who had taken part in that whiteboard activity turned to me and said, “Do you mind if I teach them the energy bar?” Up to this point, I had not thought about giving it a name (I have since trademarked “The Energy Bar™”; see Maurer 2014.) I was amazed at how a simple tool—it was only a horizontal line—gave people a way to engage with the polarity of support and resistance and almost immediately teach it to others. Over the coming weeks, I added terms to describe points along that bar of energy. And then I began developing activities and tools to help bring it to life (see Figure 3).

Today, I often use The Energy Bar™ to get people engaged in talking about support and resistance. And then I ask, “So why do you think the stakeholders’ energy is so far away from where you want it to be?” If they don’t seem to know, then I teach them the “three levels,” and we create “the list.” Alert readers will note that this gap on The Energy Bar can represent getting out ahead of others on the Cycle. I found that The Energy Bar was often a quicker way to get people interested in the gap in energy, and why it existed. When people got interested in why there was a gap in energy, it allowed me to teach the levels of support and resistance. And, if they were working on a major project, I might teach the Cycle in order to give them a framework to see places where energy might have been aligned or where it might have been blocked. Most important, people would often begin to consider ways in which they might be able to bridge that gap in energy.

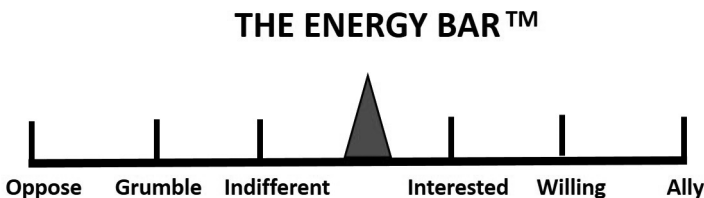


FIGURE 3 | © 2014 Rick Maurer.



## Engagement: Support with Resistance

As I worked with the three levels of support and resistance in various ways, my clients invariably shifted their focus from organizational to group to interpersonal. I realized that I needed to develop more tools to help individuals see themselves in these dances of support and resistance. I was intrigued by the work of James Kepner (1993) and Ruella Frank (2001) on using the physical body as a way to heighten clients' contact with themselves. I began to wonder if this somatic approach might be helpful in the workplace. I knew that (at least here in the USA) physical touching would not be an option.

In 1998, my wife Kathy and I moved to Seattle for a few months so that she could work as a summer associate for a law firm. Shortly after arriving, I noticed that Seattle was hosting a film festival. One event stood out. James L. Brooks was going to hold an afternoon workshop. I had admired his work as a creator of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and as director of movies like *Terms of Endearment*. I thought I could afford to take the afternoon off to attend that event. Brooks worked with four professional actors. He told us that they were going to work on scenes from films that none of them had been a part of. They began with a scene from the movie *Shampoo*. Warren Beatty's character was a womanizer whose girlfriend, played by Goldie Hawn, confronted him after finding an earring in their bed.

The scene was so boring. I thought, "These are really bad actors. I feel sorry for James Brooks." I was so wrong. Thirty minutes later, I was leaning forward and thoroughly engaged as I watched a woman finally muster the courage to confront her unfaithful partner. It was a powerful performance. What did Brooks do? At no point did he say, "You two are really bad actors." He saw something in them that I could not see. He turned the scene around simply by suggesting ways they could focus their attention differently. For instance, the girlfriend had been acting as if she were holding the earring that she found in their bed. Brooks asked if he could borrow a real earring from an audience member. He told the actress that this earring symbolized everything that was wrong in the relationship, and that when she handed it to her partner, the relationship would be over.

That one intervention was like electricity added to the scene. For the next half hour, Brooks pointed out little places where they might shift their attention. For instance, when the man began pleading for her to give him one more chance, Brooks wondered aloud if the girlfriend would really maintain eye contact as this guy gave his insincere spiel for the umpteenth time. The actress began to look away. The actor moved so that she would have to look at him. But she turned away again and again. His manipulative actions were not working. You could see his desperation as he tried to find the right words to get her to believe one more time. Many of Brooks's tips involved paying closer attention to their bodies, especially in relation to each other. Later, I picked up Kathy from work, and I could not shut up about this experience. She said that it sounded like I had experienced something that combined my love of Gestalt, theater, and improvisation. That turned out to be a massively important thing for her to say.

A couple of weeks later, a friend from Portland, Oregon asked if I would come down and give a one-day workshop on the ideas I had covered in *Beyond the Wall of Resistance*. I suggested an alternative. How about giving her two days for the price of one? On the second day, I would lead them in theater improvisation scenes related to the ideas in my book. I told her that this was an experiment. I wanted to see if physically embodying actions might support their learning. I did not know if it would work very well; that was why I wanted to offer it for free. She liked that idea. I did the workshop. The first day went fine, but the second day—all theater improvisation with a focus on the three levels of support and resistance—had a vibrancy that the first day lacked. When we were debriefing the entire experience, someone said, “You should do more of the second-day stuff on the first day.” That experience was the springboard for my workshop titled “Theater of Resistance.” I have offered versions of it at Gestalt institutes as well as in corporations.

In addition to experimenting with improvisation, I wanted to deepen my understanding of how therapists worked with clients. As mentioned earlier, I was drawn to the work going on in Relational Gestalt Therapy. I started studying Relational Gestalt Therapy at the Pacific Gestalt Institute in 2000. My interest in working with people one-on-one was deepened by my work with Jacobs, Yontef, and their colleagues.

## Relational Gestalt = Engagement

This rich gumbo of influences resulted in my book, *Why Don't You Want What I Want?* (Maurer 2002b). It is based on the three levels of support and resistance, and I created six principles to guide people when they wanted to influence others. (The primary difference between this book and *Beyond the Wall of Resistance* [Maurer (1996) 2010] is the focus. *Wall* focuses on group and organizational change, and it asks the reader to step back and see the big picture: look at my suggestions through an organization-level lens. In *Why?* I ask readers to focus on themselves as they try to influence other individuals, groups, and organizations.)

### *The Principles of Engagement*

(1) *The Right Intention.* I believe that our intentions (whether we are aware of them or not) are the foundation on which all our skills, tricks, tactics, and tools for influencing others are built. If my sole aim is to get you to buy something, then my actions will be in service of making that sale. However, if my intention is to find a way that we both can succeed on some project, then my behavior is likely to be considerably different.

(2) *Consider the Context.* This is the field. I limit the discussion to issues like culture, history, timing, and power differentials. But, even that rather superficial dive into the field often helps clients see their aims more clearly in context.

(3) *Pay Attention.* I suggest that we need to listen with a willingness to be changed by the other person. I heard Alan Alda tell an interviewer that “actors need to listen with a willingness to being changed.” His statement elegantly described what I meant by paying attention. I asked him how he did that. Alda replied, “Before a performance I talk with the other actors for a long time, I get used to hearing them, seeing them, making them laugh, and letting them make me laugh. I can’t act with a total stranger” (Maurer 2002b, 120).

(4) *Avoid Knee-Jerk Reactions.* When Level 2 or Level 3 gets activated, it is common for us to react in ways that may not serve us well. I was

heavily influenced by Joseph LeDoux's (1998) book, *The Emotional Brain*. His research provided a foundation for my thinking on Level 2 emotional reactions.

(5) *Explore Deeply*. This principle suggests that there are many times when people's thinking or feelings are beneath the surface. Listening with a willingness to be influenced by the other person is often a gateway into what people may be thinking or feeling.

(6) *Find Ways to Join Them*. Here is where all the principles come together as we seek a win-win solution. It was only after I wrote a draft of *Why Don't You Want What I Want?* that I realized how closely connected the six principles were. For example, "Principle 1: Know Your Intention" (or The Right Intention as I describe it in the book), is essential if you truly want to find ways to Join Them (Principle 6.) Of course, the curiosity about the other person captured in "Principle 3: Pay Attention" is the essential lubricant that allows us to be influenced or "changed" by what we hear.

### ***Principles of Engagement in Action***

I use these principles as the framework for improvisation activities during "Theater of Resistance." Except for warm-up activities, all scenes are situations that participants tell me they want to work on. We exaggerate those scenes (it is theater, after all), but everything relates to their work.

Two people were engaged in a scene where a consultant was trying to convince his client to go along with some intervention. It was so tedious! Their improvisation was everything I hate about role-playing, where people try to show they know how to do things correctly. (My "use-of-self" interventions often spring from boredom, as it did in this case.) I said, "Hey, Bill, why don't you try to make things worse? Instead of getting him to go along, see how far you can push him away." That paradoxical suggestion—push the other guy away—brought the scene to life. And, to my surprise, the actors and the audience learned a lot about influence from watching this highly exaggerated version of someone doing things wrong.

## My Journey Continues

I like that I am part of a discipline that continues evolving and growing in scope. I was told that, when folks at the GIC began to experiment with applying Gestalt to work groups and organizations, they were met with resistance. Apparently, this shift was seen as apostasy by some who believed that a Gestalt approach was intended for individuals and couples in therapy—and, therefore, that our work should be limited to the wisdom of the founders. (I love the irony that Paul Goodman, one of the authors of *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman [(1951) 1994], a foundational text for the Gestalt revolution, considered himself an anarchist.)

I was greatly encouraged by Elaine Kepner and Ernesto Posa when they urged me to explore a new way of talking about resistance in organizations. And Nevis's words to me, "Make the presentation your own, that's how our theory develops," continue to inspire me. (Nevis even supported the publication of my article, "Connection Versus Survival at Work [or Buber Meets Machiavelli]," in *Gestalt Review* [Maurer 2008], even though he and I disagreed on how I was treating theory that he and Sonia M. Nevis had developed.)

I have mentioned many who have influenced my own thinking. In recent years, Herb Stevenson's thinking on applying Gestalt principles in organizational settings continues to enlighten and provoke me. And those are good things. I would like pass that spirit along to you. I hope you will consider expanding or deepening our theory and practice. It is how we all can learn, and how our love of the Gestalt perspective can thrive in organizations. I wish you well.

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