

Holism, Field Theory, Systems Thinking, and Gestalt Consulting: How Each Informs the Other— Part 1, Theoretical Integration

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ABSTRACT | This article highlights core theoretical underpinnings of Gestalt consulting—phenomenology/existentialism, holism, field theory, and systems thinking—and how they overlap to create an expanded perspective for Gestalt consultants. Consistent within all these fields of thought is the aspect of emergent change and awareness. The Gestalt application of these theories has led to unique approaches on how to be a Gestalt consultant and how to intervene within organizations, such that insights on unconscious and habitualized behavioral patterns that prevent necessary shifts are able to emerge.

KEYWORDS | Gestalt consulting, phenomenology, existentialism, holism, systems thinking, field theory

Edwin C. Nevis, John Carter, Carolyn Lukenmeyer, Leonard Hirsch, Frances Baker, and Elaine Kepner founded the Organization and Systems Development (OSD) Center at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland

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(GIC) in the 1970s. From their work, the generative source of Gestalt consulting was published by Nevis ([1987] 2001) and further expanded with the establishment of the Gestalt International Study Center (GISC), which then spawned the “Competency Development Program for Coach Certification: Skills for High-Impact Coaching” (a course that the International Coaching Federation [ICF] has certified for twenty-four core competency hours and ten resource development hours). Both OSD programs provided intensive application of Gestalt concepts into the new millennium.

Oddly, the most difficult aspect of Gestalt Organizational Development (OD) theory has been how to translate the word *Gestalt*, not just from German into English but also from the various theoretical uses in Gestalt psychology, therapy, and OD. Ehrenfels, who coined the word in the 1890s, simply referred to Gestalt and form interchangeably: “He insisted that the real essence of any perception was to be found in the Gestalt . . . [in] the immediate experience” (Pillsbury 1933, 484–85). Later the Gestalt School noted that “experience [and therefore] all truly characteristic phases or processes of mind were just these Gestalten or forms” (Pillsbury 485). Though this may seem like complex and potentially circular thinking, the gist of Gestalt formation is that we make meaning when we create perceptions through our interaction with the outside world, and when we engage memories that spontaneously look inward to reason, or suggest how the experience has impacted us. Hence, how we perceive and make meaning, individually and organizationally, is endemic to who we are and what we are willing to do.

The significance of Gestalt formation is that prior knowledge greatly influences our current perception and memory. Therefore, when we remember something we are reconstructing our perceptions of the event. As Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman ([1951] 1994) state: “All experience and learning that has been fully assimilated and integrated builds up a person’s [or organization’s] background [which] gives meaning to the emerging Gestalten and thus supports a certain way of living on the boundary with excitement. Whatever is not assimilated, either gets lost or remains a block in the ongoing development [or growth]” (54). Gestalt principles of perceptual organization inform us of how we form perceptions, and therefore how we make meaning based on our existing knowledge and way connoting experience—if we can witness our own process.

Overview of Core Concepts

Gestalt theory can be construed as a method to support emergent perceptions and insights. It is best known for working with structural patterns that are both different from and more than the sum of their parts (this is in keeping with Gestalt's original roots in psychology, where it was argued that perception is best understood as an organized pattern rather than as separate parts). Thus, the aim of the Gestalt approach is to discover, explore, and experience the shape, pattern, and wholeness that can lead to meaningful integration of disparate, perceived parts (see Kohler [1947] 1992). Therein, the individual (or organization) can discover insights or create new integrative patterns and perceptions. Through such discovery, the individual is supported to fulfill "the central human activity" which, from a Gestalt perspective, is "to give meaning to . . . perceptions, experience, and one's existence" (Clarkson 2000, 1, 5). This thinking applies to teams and organizations as well.

The Gestalt approach is a theoretical and methodological adaptation of several philosophic and scientific movements that either predate or are contemporaneous with its development. These factors influenced the approach to varying degrees, but all nurtured its distinctive focus on the individual's (and the organization's) perceptions of, and responses to, the environment in the present moment. The inspiration of Gestalt work lies in its application not only to the physical situation but also to the interactions with and between people and organizations. In what follows, some fundamental aspects of phenomenology, existentialism, holism, field theory, and systems thinking are applied to form a theoretical base for Gestalt consulting (see Figure 1). When certain of these complex ideas are distilled into a Gestalt context, they can reveal dynamic tensions and strategic dilemmas common in organizations across all levels of system.

Levels of systems are examined below as locations for interventions, as well as points of tension where fractures in an organization's functions can occur. In both instances, the Gestalt lens can create awareness shift the organization toward greater effectiveness. Examples of applications will be provided throughout to highlight usefulness of an integrative approach. (The term "individual" is used henceforth in an expanded context to include applications to dyads, teams, and organizations, except where immediate clarification requires use of individual terms.)

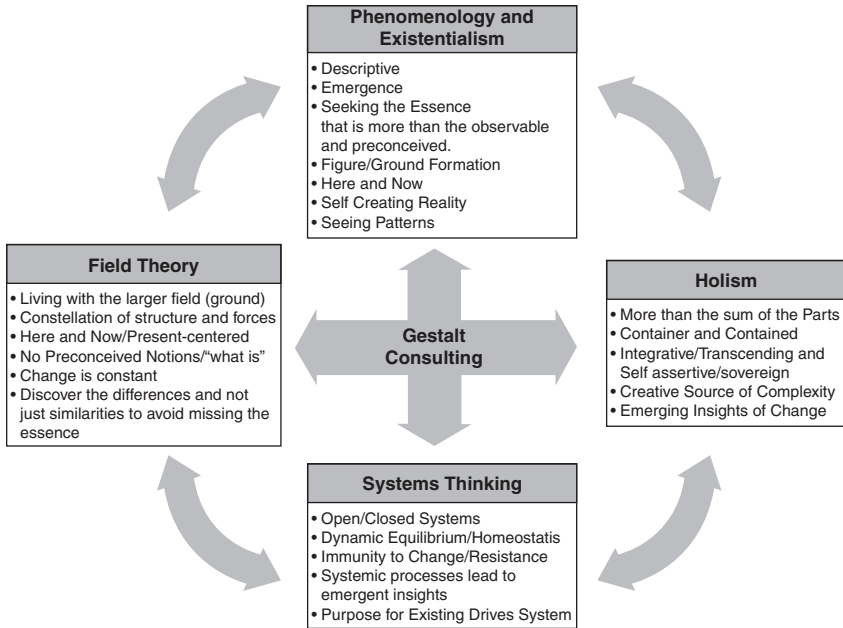


FIGURE 1 | Theoretical Underpinnings of Gestalt Consulting (and Coaching).

Basic Gestalt (Consulting) Principles

Phenomenology

Husserl (1999) believed in the need for a “descriptive psychology,”¹ which incorporated a “science of experience.” Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman ([1951] 1994), agreeing with Husserl, founded and developed Gestalt therapy, where description is considered more important than prescription or interpretation. “Clients are [supported] to find their own meaning through this process” (Clarkson 2000, 15). For example, the validation of another’s experience without judgment enables that

1. Husserl (1999, 318–19) distinguished between explanatory phenomenology (seen as a phenomenology of regulated genesis, where the focus was to explain the origination of the phenomenon) and descriptive phenomenology (seen as a “phenomenology of possible, essential shapes [no matter how they come to pass] in pure consciousness” at a point in time).

person to take ownership of the experience, to become curious and, possibly, to develop new awareness by paying attention to one's self. Generally, while focusing on the descriptive experience of being, "the longer [the client] can stay with [his] ongoing awareness, the greater the possibility of heightening, expanding, deepening [his] awareness" (Zinker 1978, 85).

Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman ([1951] 1994) also explain that finding meaning through the Gestalt approach embraces explicit, unique relational connections: "Awareness of and responsibility for the total field, for the self as well as the other, gives meaning and patterns to the individual's life" (49). The notion of field (discussed in greater depth below) emerged out of the phenomenological approach and, simply put, is linked to awareness and meaning-making through the close relationship that exists between phenomenology and existentialism.

Existentialism (and Basic Paradoxes)

Existentialism "is a philosophical theory or approach that emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining [her] own development through acts of the will" (Oxford Online Dictionary 2018). In basic terms, existentialism brings each person into direct contact with an awareness that is stark, like a naked truth that reveals the paradoxes permeating day-to-day life. In organizations, these paradoxes are revealed in the web of cultural norms that seek to guide (and constrict) acceptable behavior and ways of making meaning.

At some point, each person confronts the paradoxical tension between awareness of the inevitability of death and the innate desire to continue to be; that is, for individuals and organizations to continue to exist. In basic terms, this existential crisis is often experienced as an identity crisis, in which freedom does not denote simply choice but rather the definition of who one is, whether an individual or an organization. It is the awareness that one is "the author of his or her own world, life design, choices, and actions" (Yalom 1980, 9), and therefore nothing exists except that which we have constructed from our experiences. This leads to the paradoxical tension between the desire for meaningful clarity and the absolute chaos of life. Within organizations, the culture—the successful ways of doing business—tend to define and provide the

structure for making meaning within the ground of the industry or of societal norms. When, however, the structure no longer supports one's identity, the individual or organization is required either to expand that definition in order to create congruent meaning, or to revise that culture. In today's environment, organizational cultures and individual identities are being strained to their limits.

The existential paradox is the stark awareness of our absolute isolation when our identity is threatened by an ever-changing organizational culture colliding with an inborn wish for contact with the world, for protection, and for being part of a larger whole; that is, of something more than oneself. Typically, the organizational culture has filled this need by providing generally accepted meaning-making processes. At this point, the paradoxical tensions reveal that each of us seeks meaning in a world that, at the most core level of existence, has no meaning. It simply "is," and it is our responsibility to create meaning in our lives.

Gestalt Application

Perls drew heavily on the notion of existential freedom and its precepts of responsibility and choice. Phenomenology, as the basic tenet of the existential philosopher, was used to ask the client to "take ownership" in the here-and-now of Gestalt therapy: "The experiential here and now . . . does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it is owned, by a self, a person, a me" (Zinker 1978, 85).

Nevis ([1987] 2001), a pioneering organizational consultant, applied many of the basic Gestalt principles cited above to the emerging field of OD, creating its corpus of core assumptions. In particular, tenets of phenomenological and existential thinking, foundational to the Gestalt approach, are captured in support of organizational consulting (Table 1).

The table of core assumptions, common to both individual and OD, reveals how Nevis's work began the process of "translating" certain tenets of Gestalt therapy theory into a consulting framework. If, on the one hand, Nevis's work translates individual therapeutic development into a precursor to what would evolve into the practice of "coaching" (which often struggles to differentiate itself theoretically and practically from therapy [see Siminovitch 2017, Figure 8.1, 211–12;

TABLE 1 | Gestalt Core Assumptions

<i>Individual Development</i>	<i>Organization Development</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning occurs through examination of here-and-now experience. • Awareness is the precursor to effective action; awareness leads to choice. • There is an inherent drive for people to behave as effectively as possible. The task is to help them learn this. • Growth is facilitated by the interaction of client and consultant. The presence of the consultant is a critical element. • Growth occurs at the contact boundary, between what is known and what is unknown, or rejected. • Experimentation with new forms of experience and perception is a critical source for learning. • Change is the responsibility of the client, not the consultant. • Individual autonomy is crucial to healthy adjustment. • Change comes from within and spreads throughout the system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning occurs best through focusing on the process of interaction rather than on the content. • Change in systems occurs only if members of the system are involved in the change process. • People in organizations have the potential for solving their problems. The task of OD is to facilitate the understanding and utilization of this potential. • A climate of openness and trust is essential for a healthy work environment. • The feedback/action research model is the path to organizational learning and change. • Pilot studies and experimentation are a critical source of learning. • Change is the responsibility of the client, not the consultant. • The small group is a highly effective unit through which to bring about change. • Change at one level of the system permeates all other levels of the system.

Note: Adapted from E. Nevis ([1987], 2001), and from the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, Organization and Systems Development Program manual, with permission.

Simon 2012, 299]), on the other, it integrates tenets of Gestalt therapy theory into a system's level of thinking that would function in organizations. In addition to phenomenological and existential approaches,

holism has also served as a critical foundation to what is now Gestalt consulting.

Holism: Conceptualizing Field

Jan Christian Smuts (1926) was one of the first to use the term “holism” to reflect the idea that the whole is more than the sum of its parts: “A whole . . . has something internal, some inwardness of structure and function, some specific inner relations, some internality of character or nature, which constitutes the more” (103). He believed that this “more” consisted of a field that synthesized the parts into the whole. Often missed in discussions of holism is that Smuts thought that it is not only creative but self-creative, and that its final structures are far more holistic than its initial structures. He called this “a process of creative synthesis,” whereby “the resulting wholes are not static but dynamic, evolutionary, creative” (87). As such, a whole, whether it be an organism or the personality of a person, “is really a ‘synthesized’ event in the system of relativity” and therefore “really a unified, synthesized section of history, which includes not only its present, but much of its past and even its future” (87). Hence, the whole, Smuts prophesied, “can only be explained by reference to its past and its future as well as its present; the conception of the field therefore becomes necessary and will be found fruitful in biology and psychology no less than physics” (87); moreover, “this is a universe of whole-making” (87).

Perls (1969) applied holism to psychological processes, whereby the individual is perceived to be more than simply the sum of his or her experiences, just as an organization is perceived to be more than the sum of the individuals within it. However, the structure that identifies an entity (e.g., individual, organization) determines which parts are or can be included in that entity. Hence, there is at once a reciprocal and deterministic relationship between the whole and the parts, and one cannot be fully understood without the other. Perls focused heavily on Smuts’s concept that the past and future are fully present in the moment, which contributed to the present-centered focus of Gestalt therapy and organizational consulting. In organizational consulting, this here-and-now conceptualization is discussed in Gestalt terms as the field and

commonly referred to in OD parlance as the “organization’s culture.” The past successes and failures as well as the original and present dreams of the future are imprinted in the organization’s stories, artifacts, and taboos that exist in every present moment. Culture, in this sense, is the unwritten and time-tested norms of how to make meaning in order to succeed within the organization and for the organization to succeed as a whole.

Arthur Koestler ([1967] 1990) expanded the discussion of holism with his development of the concept of “holon.”² In simple terms, a holon is “any entity that is itself a whole and simultaneously a part of some other whole” (Wilber 1996, 20). For example, when we look at an individual, a group, or an organization, we can perceive a holon: entities that are whole in themselves (an individual) yet also a part in relationship with other wholes (a group or organization). Koestler (1978) further distinguishes this relationship by indicating that holons are Janus-faced: “The face turned upward, toward the higher levels, is that of a dependent part: the face turned downward, toward its own constituents, is that of a whole of remarkable self-sufficiency” (27). As such, every holon has two opposing “tendencies or potentials: an *integrative or self-transcending tendency* to function as part of the larger whole, and a *self-assertive tendency* to preserve its individual autonomy” (56). The tension between these opposing tendencies or potentials suggests a third aspect of complexity—the whole, the part, and the tension between the two. An organizational example of this two-sided tension is the individual constantly seeking a level of self-identity, while simultaneously seeking to be part of the organization. Individuals unified within a function create something beyond their individual capabilities, yet the organization cannot exist without the contribution of the many individuals.

The holistic approach used in Gestalt interventions is rooted in the idea that an individual’s search for meaning cannot be reduced to the sum of her or his experiences; the individual must be considered within the larger reality in a role that is only that of a “part.” “By keeping an eye on the context or field or whole in which a phenomenon is embedded,” Perls (1969) argues, “we avoid many misunderstandings” (29).

2. Koestler (1978) notes that the term “*holon*, from the Greek *holos* = whole, with the suffix *on*, which, as in proton or neutron, suggests a particle or part” (33).

The importance of this concept deepens when we understand that in an intervention, the Gestaltist is a holon joining with the client, another holon, to create a third holon: a dyad that is more than—and different from—the sum of its parts, that is, the Gestaltist and the client. Furthermore, the structure created—a dyad—determines the nature of the relationships of the two individuals included in it. The Gestalt intervener therefore needs to sustain an awareness of the wholeness of each holon as well as the dynamic relationships between self and client in the dyad they form. Furthermore, the intervener needs to be mindful that each holon has the capacity to self-transcend and self-assert like Koestler's (1978) "Janus face." Each part, client and Gestaltist, is maintaining identity as an act of self-assertion, an act that can at the same time be self-transcending, in that awareness is expanded into something larger than oneself.

Holism as Structure and Function

Two explanations can aid in understanding the complexity inherent in holism. As a structural phenomenon, holism is a type of hierarchical growth from simpler to more complex. Wilber (1996), like Smuts (1926), states that "virtually all growth processes, from matter to life to mind, occur via natural holarchies, or orders of increasing holism and wholeness—wholes that becomes parts of new wholes—and that's natural hierarchy or holarchy" (28).³ As a functional phenomenon, holism is the dynamic interplay between container and contained. Describing group psychological processes, Billow (2000) refers to this underlying dynamic as multilevel nestings, where each level simultaneously functions as container and contained:

The container at one level of symbolic formation serves as the contained at another. On one level the structure of the thought, the symbol itself, serves as the object or container; the individual's unformulated ideas and emotions are the contained. On the level

3. "Holarchy" refers to the innate hierarchy implicit in all life. Hierarchy has more of a reductionist focus, whereas holarchy includes holons and applies to the tension of whole/parts implicit in all life.

of the self, the individual serves as the container of the symbols, which become the contained. On the interpersonal level, the pair and group serve as container, while public expressions of the individual—symbols, emotions, thoughts, self-presentation, and action—are the contained. The nesting process is a developmental achievement. Until the nesting process is intact, the process of meaning-making remains incomplete. (246)

Connecting holism to Gestalt consulting, we can say that there is a constant focus on what is here and now (e.g., recognizing the dynamic interplay between individuals, teams, and the organization), each being a container of meaning, actions, knowledge, and structure. Moreover, the culture of the organization acts as a unifying container for the team and the individuals. Understanding this interplay of meaning-making between being container and being contained can lead to emergent insights for the consultant that can be shared with the client.

An example of this interplay in a consulting setting may help elucidate the way in which a holistic awareness informs this dynamic. While working with an African American social service agency, it was noticed that the building outside and all printed public materials suggested that it was just “another” social services agency; if pushed to an extreme, it could be considered just another “white” organization. However, the interior space was filled with African art, clearly indicating that it was an African American social service agency, exuding ethnic heritage and pride. In reporting the common findings to a group of more than hundred members of the board, staff, and local community, I ended with a question concerning the public appearance versus the rich private heritage within. There was dead silence for what felt like five minutes. A person in the back vocalized that, if the ethnic heritage was publicized, the agency would lose funding. All heads nodded their agreement. I asked if that notion had been tested, adding that their declining use of services might be related to this split perception. In the months that followed, funding became easier as foundations and government were clearer about how the organization served the community. The same thing evolved over time for the use of its services. In unraveling the unspoken assumptions and perceptions, a new perceptual container was

created, which led to an expanded perception of what was possible and who could be served. The self-imposed veil of protection from the past had been lifted to reveal a new way to be and be seen, individually and collectively.

Field Theory

Gestalt consulting was heavily influenced by the work of Kurt Lewin (1951), who developed the concept of field theory from Gestalt psychology, wherein “all behavior (including action, thinking, wishing, striving, valuing, achieving, etc.) is conceived of as a change of some state of field” (xi). The psychological field is defined as the “life space” of the individual, group, or organization; that is, the psychological environment as it exists for individuals, groups, and organizations. If the theory had gone no further, it would still have been a major contribution to Gestalt theory in the development of a holistic orientation. However, Lewin noted too that field theory was a methodology for analyzing “causal relations [that] can be expressed in the form of certain general statements about the ‘nature’ of the conditions of change” (45). These conditions of change became the more consequential contribution to Gestalt organization development and consulting.⁴

Five Principles of Field Theory

Significantly, Lewin’s field theory put into language the dynamics of holism as a Gestalt concept. As he observed organizational dynamics, he noticed that specific conditions of change existed. From these observations, Lewin developed five principles of field theory which, when overlain with Smuts’s holism, reveal the tenets of Gestalt OD.

4. “Given that Lewin and Perls focused on different aspects of the total person-environment configuration, it is no wonder that the followers of each have tended to ignore or neglect the work of the other. . . . Perls acknowledged the contributions of Lewin in *Gestalt Psychology*, but remained an individualist and an individual therapist throughout his career” (Kepner 1980, 8).

(1) *Principle of Organization.* Lewin (1951) explains that the manifestation of a particular behavior is not dependent upon a single fact or set of facts, but upon “the constellation (structure and forces) of the specific field as a whole” (149). Any single fact or set of facts is given meaning by an awareness of its position in the field (e.g., cultural influences impact how events are translated into descriptive facts). Furthermore, the different parts of a field are mutually interdependent; therefore, meaning is derived from surveying the environment and considering the interdependent and/or coexisting perceptions. For example, the railroad industry did not recognize that it was in the transportation business, and that the trucking industry would lead to its near demise. Had railroad executives perceived the evolving constellation (structure and forces) of the transportation industry where customers would have desired door-to-door service, they could have owned the trucking industry as a complement to the railroads. When the evolving constellations of an organization and its industry are applied to the Gestalt predisposition to allow “what is” to emerge within the meaning-making “life-space,” we can begin to reveal the reciprocate influencing roles of container and contained.

(2) *Principle of Contemporaneity.* According to Lewin (1951), and consistent with Smuts (1926), the present moment determines “any behavior or any other change in a psychological field” (45), which includes past, present, and future in any given time. The character of the situation may include the past as remembered in this present moment or the future as anticipated in this present moment, which will form part of the person’s in-the-moment experience of the field. This is consistent with Perls’s concept of constant focus, wherein nothing exists beyond the here and now: “To me, nothing exists except the now. Now = experience = awareness = reality. The past is no more and the future not yet. Only the now exists” (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman [1951] 1994).

The power of present-centeredness can be clarified by relating it to emergent perceptions created if the consultant is the container and the client (dynamics) the contained. In Buddhist traditions, which influenced Perls, this present-centeredness was known as “bare attention”: by living with full awareness in the “here and now,” we are able to be the quiet witness of our experience of our self and of our client

(Thera 1962). If we move out of the here and now, we tend to project our past or anticipate some future. Since it is not present-centered, it is an “illusion [that] ensnares us in its recurrence” (Naranjo 1993, 22–23). This illusion is generated by the nanosecond response that short-circuits a present-centered experience and replaces it with preconceived perceptions from the past or about the future, thereby overlaying a self-created perception of reality with the larger perceptions of “what is” actually happening. The railroad/trucking example cited above illustrates this principle further.

(3) *The Principle of Singularity*. Lewin (1951) believed that to generalize is to risk not seeing “what is” in the moment. Each moment is unique. Each construction of meaning is unique, even when it contains influences from past, present, and future. Each person and his or her situation are unique. Moreover, “generalizations can lead to finding exactly what one is looking for” (Parlett 1991, 72; see also 1997, 2005). Hence, the rote, the habitual, and the unconscious return to our awareness to be experienced and/or examined when we remain focused on the uniqueness of each moment, each situation, and each person.

(4) *The Principle of Changing Process*. Lewin (1951) recognized that theories support understanding but cannot replicate reality perfectly. He cautioned not to proceed beyond the mere collection and description of facts without the determination of overt behavior and the present situation, including the idea that change is constant. In other words, past perceptions can inform the present; yet, they must be freed of preconceived notions that the present client need is exactly like that of prior clients.

(5) *The Principle of Possible Relevance*. Everything in the field is part of the total organization and potentially meaningful. This requires paying attention to what is momentarily or persistently relevant or interesting, so that we recognize how the “field is organized at the moment” (Parlett 1991, 72). If, for example, in working with an executive team, I notice a change in tone or see eyes rolling, I ask if either is a common reaction. I focus on the reaction as an undersupported, and therefore

deflected, pattern in the field. A common response is for those in the room to go unilaterally quiet. At that moment, I ask what about the topic or statement has created the reaction of a change in vocal tone, in the team's mood, in the eyes. After some coaxing, the hidden Gestalt surfaces and energy returns to the conversation, often leading to insights into team dynamics. Paradoxically, we change (complete unfinished business) when we fully reveal who we are as a team or an organization.

The application of these Lewinian principles to Gestalt consulting causes significant perceptions to emerge. For example, if the field is more than the sum of the situation, and it includes the meaning-making functions of the individual and the organization, then we are conceivably experiencing the dynamics of holism while participating in the creation of the field. One way of looking at this cocreation phenomenon is to say that we engage in a form of "participating consciousness," wherein a unified field exists between observer and observed. If we apply this concept to two individuals in a conversation, it could be construed that "we help to create others' realities through the creation of a mutual field" (Parlett 1991, 77). This mutual field is often called the organizational culture, wherein all meaning-making is filtered through the history and dreams of the organization (Schein 1990). A difficult aspect of culture is that it encompasses the unwritten rules of survival concerning not only how to behave but also what must remain unspoken.

In the same way that the individual consultant can choose to disclose her internal process to the client, the consulting team can opt to disclose its internal process to the client team (Krantz and Gilmore 1991). For Gestalt teams, one effective method of disclosure is to discuss the process unfolding amongst members of the consulting team in the presence of the client team, which does not participate but simply observes. If a parallel process does exist, the client team should become aware that the consulting team is in fact mirroring the client's own process. This observation usually results in the client team refocusing its internal process, as a means of resolving whatever issue had brought them together initially.

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking extends the concept of holism and field theory (see Bailey 1990; Berrien 1968; Laszlo 1972; Phillips 1976; Von Bertalanffy 1967, 1968). It is used in the social sciences to explain the arrangement or working of a unified whole. The overall objective, reason for existence, or purpose determines what is included and excluded from the system. Hence, the defining objective, reason, or purpose for existing determines and establishes the boundaries of the system. If holons describe the natural complexity between the coming together of whole/parts, systems theory suggests a means to understand that complexity by examining what brought the whole/parts or parts of the system together.

Open versus Closed Systems

The degree to which a system is open or closed depends on the extent to which it is permeable at its boundaries. In social systems, this would mean the extent to which information, influence, people, and action move back and forth across the system's boundaries. No system is totally open or closed. If a system were totally open, there would be no selective process, and there would be no difference between system and environment. If a system were totally closed, it would not be permeable and therefore have no contact with the environment. Hence, the defining purpose creates the boundary that filters what is inside the system and what is in the background, outside the system.

Mergers and acquisitions provide opportunities to examine closed versus open systems. For example, after Quaker Oats experienced success with the purchase of Gatorade, it extended that logic to purchase Snapple. Snapple unlike Gatorade (or Quaker Oats) had a loosely formed organization that supported maximum autonomy. As Quaker Oats attempted to integrate Snapple, massive breakdowns in the operations occurred, leading to massive losses. Realizing that the two cultures would never fit together, Quaker sold Snapple for a \$1.1 billion loss (Winer 1996). Quaker was closed in its systems thinking, assuming that since it had been successful before with Gatorade it would be so with Snapple. It failed to recognize that Snapple, culturally, was not and could not be Gatorade (Table 2).

TABLE 2 | Implications for Understanding Systems Behavior

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Open System</i>	<i>Closed System</i>
A point of reference for understanding system behavior	Attention is focused on system-environment interdependence. To understand the system, it is necessary to understand the environmental forces.	The behavior of the system is explained in terms of internal structures; the environment is relatively unimportant.
Approaches to variance or irregularity in the system	Will view variance as essential to the self-regulating properties of the system, i.e., the system must vary behavior to respond and adjust to environmental changes. Growth toward greater complexity and heterogeneity is a natural development.	Will view variance with the system as a disruptive force to be controlled and minimized to maintain stability.
Amount of uncertainty experienced by the system	Is always subject to environmental influences and is consequently always facing some degree of uncertainty as to appropriate behavior. The goal is to do the best it can in the face of continuing uncertainty. The open system emphasizes gaining information from the environment. A correlated and major strategy, then, is for the system to influence the environment to increase certainty.	Focuses on the certainty already present within the system, and is relatively unaffected by the environment. The closed system pays attention to information existing within the system, and assumes a high degree of rationality in system behavior.
Structures of the system	Assumes there is no one best way to structure the system to reach its objectives. The effectiveness of a structure depends on the environmental circumstances at that time. The system feels free to modify the structure to reach its objectives.	Focuses on the single best way to structure the system to reach its objectives. The closed system seeks a maximally structured system to produce specified outcomes, and uses structure itself to create and maintain stability.

Note: Adapted from the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, Organization and Systems Development Program Manual, 2000–2002, OSD 14: 40–41.

Systems theory is fundamentally concerned with patterns and problems of relationship, structure, and interdependence in ways similar to holism and field theory. The general principle that characterizes all open systems is that there is no determined need for a single method to achieve any given objective. Consequently, we cannot understand any system without studying the internal and external forces that impinge upon it.

In applying systems thinking to holism and field theory, dynamic equilibrium is the driving force, often seen as the organization's culture; that force holds the unifying focus of how the organization defines its purpose (why it exists), which in turn drives its structure as an organization. Furthermore, if the field is more than the sum of the situation, and includes the meaning-making functions of the individuals within the organization, it is conceivable that we are participating in the creation of the field. One way of looking at this phenomenon is to consider that we engage in a form of "participating consciousness" (Parlett 1991, 74), wherein it could be construed that we construct each other's reality. This occurs through the creation of a mutual field, often referred to as the unwritten rules learned over time that become the invisible culture of an organization (Schein 2010).

Gestalt Theory and Change

A central tenet of the Gestalt approach is that change cannot occur without interrupting existing perceptions and ways of being. Systems theory permeates Gestalt consulting. Each of the core concepts of systems theory is a dynamic gateway to understanding the client system. Homeostasis and dynamic equilibrium, however, are the foremost concepts used in understanding change. Homeostasis is the predisposition of the individual, group, or organization to maintain some semblance of stability or predetermined sense of well-being. It is the source of what Gestalt practitioners often refer to as "resistance to change" and, more recently, are labeling different types of "contact styles."

A Gestalt approach seeks to understand the "what is" of a dynamic equilibrium. By ingesting disruptions and threats, the equilibrium

is actually a self-correcting system of countervailing motions that continuously adjust to create a form of self-protection to ensure self-preservation. As such, the equilibrium functions like an “an immunity to change” (Kegan and Lahey 2001, 6). When applied to the internal functioning of an organization, we begin to realize that the implosion of differentiation consistent with the holistic tendency toward complexity inherent in almost all organizations creates a dynamic equilibrium immune to change. Hence, when a change initiative is introduced, this immune system is part and parcel of the organization and therefore pre-programmed to acquire, neutralize, or destroy any attempt to destabilize the system and change the organization. We cannot see and often are not aware of these immunities to change because the clients “live inside them” (Kegan and Lahey 6). By examining the culture and dynamics of the organization, the Gestaltist seeks make these immunities surface and thereby help the client.

Levels of the Organization (“System”)

From a Gestalt perspective, the dynamics of holism have been incorporated into levels of the organizational system and interplay within it in various ways, as evidenced in programs offered, for example, at the GIC and at the GISC. Since these levels are based on the field and on the dynamics of holism, any intervention will impact all the other levels of the organization or system. The four levels are described below, wherein each acts as a possible point of intervention (see Hopper-Carter 2004).

(1) *Intrapersonal (Individual)*: The intrapersonal level of system is focused on the self, the individual; it is often said that “the boundary is the self-system.” The focus of the Gestaltist is to assist the client to be in better contact with the parts of the self or external environment. As a way of orientation, the individual client could learn to examine the assumptions underlying major decisions. In exploring the internal dynamics of these assumptions, the individual could be encouraged to look at individual yearnings, perceptions, internal dialogues, and processes for personal development. Generally, this is the work of coaching.

(2) *Interpersonal*: The interpersonal level of system is defined as “self and other,” where other could be an individual, a group, or a subgroup. Because the boundary defines the interaction, the focus of interventions would be to clarify the boundary between an individual and others, as well as exchanges that moves back and forth across that boundary. This level of system serves to differentiate, and to discover similarities, between the individual and others. For example, in an executive coaching situation, it could involve creating awareness of what the CEO and the COO respond to and/or how they respond or react to one another. Work at this level of system could be expanded and adapted to an exchange between CEO and senior leadership teams in formal meetings.

(3) *Small Group (Teams)*: The small group is a subgroup (two or more individuals) united as a different entity amongst the larger group. For example, in an organization cliques form around shared opinions, which leads to clashes with others in the larger team. An intervention could focus on heightening awareness of the existence of a subgroup, and on exploring how that awareness impacts the functioning of both the larger group and the subgroup. Typically, subgroup and team focus, not so much on aspects of self-definition as a group that make it separate from the larger team, as on differences of opinion. Furthermore, the separating self-definition prevents examining the dynamic exchange between them, which leads to poor exchanges and frustration.

For example, three members of a team of consultants from the same organization had a particular approach they wanted to use for a given project. As experts, their subgroup took control of the project without teaching the approach or involving others in it. While the project progressed, questions and concerns from other consultants were not addressed by the subgroup. As the project came toward an end, it became apparent that many of the project deliverables were missed. In processing the team dynamics, the impact of the subgroup had suboptimized the larger team and, more importantly, reduced the team’s effectiveness. Upon hearing the perceptions of the entire team, the subgroup acknowledged that their actions had impacted its productiveness and the success of the project.

(4) *Organization*: The organization or group or total system level is the largest system present. The boundary is around the entire organization brought together for a specific purpose. The goal is to create an awareness of group consciousness and its characteristics, as the group exists separately from each individual or subgroup. Typically, this is done by clearly defining and aligning around the purpose of the organization (why it exists). A Gestaltist's intervention could involve paying attention to the behavior, tone, and characteristics of the group or organization as a whole to determine whether it functions as an aligned organization or as a collection of individuals collecting paychecks.

For example, the current separation of political parties in the United States reveals two emotionally conflictive groups that have many factions. Neither Republican nor Democratic parties are able to subordinate their passionate beliefs to find a unifying theme in terms of the entire country. Both sides are focused on blaming and shaming instead of determining what is best, not just for some individuals or groups, but for the country at large.

Interrelatedness of Levels

Given that an organization or team may have subgroup as well as interpersonal dynamics and individual experiences, there is constant interplay across and within the different levels of system. Nonetheless, each level of system contains the conflict or problem or situation in its entirety and can influence all other levels of system; therefore, from the perspective of Gestalt consulting, all levels of system must explicitly address the issue at hand. For example, with respect to a leadership team struggling with issues of individual leadership and team dynamics, the intervention was to combine individual and team coaching. Each leader was provided a coaching experience to understand the impact of her or his leadership style. As this process evolved, the team was also coached in its dynamics. At first, massive conflict ensued, but over time individual coaching created awareness that led to an understanding of team dynamics. The combination of individual and team interventions began to impact the entire organization; a new level

of awareness among leaders changed how leadership was practiced within the overall system.

Noteworthy is the Gestalt tenet that there are no hard and fast rules to determine the most effective level of system within which to work. The choice will often depend, as much on the consultant's personal preferences and skills, as on any "objective" determination of the most effective point of intervention. Other factors contributing to the choice are the stage of a team's development, the existence (or lack) of a shared sense of purpose, the degree of trust and familiarity between the consultant and the system, and the extent to which one level of system has been developed at the expense of another.

Engage or Integrate

Over the years, John Carter, Veronica Hopper-Carter, Claire Stratford, and Frances Baker at the GIC determined that organizations can embrace two activities so that change can occur: it can either *engage* with aspects of itself or with the environment; or it can *integrate*, take in and assimilate what has been accessed or acquired from the internal or external environment (Hopper-Carter 2004).

As noted above (see "Levels of System"), engagement involves setting up an exchange between differing aspects of the system or between one system and another. This process is one of revealing the possibilities for intervention. The purpose of exchange is largely differentiation: exploring what distinguishes one aspect of the organization from another. Similarities are often revealed; common figures and shared ground often emerge. In this way, exchange creates common understanding/knowledge between individuals and different functions, as well as within the organization. Exchange at the boundary between individuals, functions, or teams often results in a new definition of the system itself. In other words, the exchange enables understanding between individuals (teams, functions) to occur, and their interdependence to be successful, thereby increasing the success of the organization.

Thus intervening at the "boundary between" to create an exchange produces a new awareness of the holistic qualities of the organization

(which is more than the sum of the parts). An understanding of how the pieces fit together generates a sense of integration that allows the system to experience itself as a unified whole. For example, when a team identity is revealed through an exchange intervention, the team can experience the organization as a whole and will experience a momentary *definition* of itself (e.g., “we are a consulting team for the organization”). The system is more capable of entering into the next instance of exchange, now with common aspects of itself, or with other levels of system, that is, an understanding of team or organizational experience as part of the team and separate from it.

Where to Intervene

The decision of where to intervene is critical; Figure 2 shows how a decision can be supported. As the Gestaltist examines the options, it helps to look for the energy (or perceptions) that can be redirected to more effective use, and then to determine where and how to intervene. Figure 2 indicates that, if there are structural conflicts between individual teams, the intervention might be around how individuals or teams engaged (or not) with each other. For instance, if the individuals, groups, or functions do not engage at all, silos are formed; then highlighting this lack of engagement and developing experiments as to how to do so effectively might be useful. If, however, there is a lot of creative tension in the system, it might be that the forces of dynamic equilibrium, the immunity to change, are in play in different parts of the organization; it would therefore benefit from a unit on clarity of definition and purpose. Often, the inability to see clearly is created by prior successes, and the intervention would be to create awareness of that factor.

For example, I often ask questions to try and understand the invisible assumptions supporting the organization on one level and undermining it on another. One method I use is to ask what drives the organization. It is an open question that tends to provide a lot of information. I follow with what inhibits the organization. To dig deeper, I ask how what drives the organization has served the organization and “dis-served” it. Often, the “dis-served” aspect takes a while to articulate but

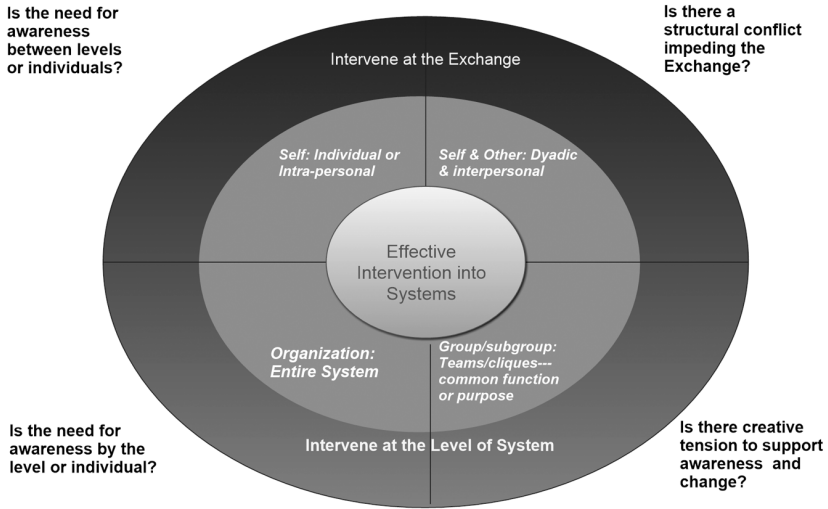


FIGURE 2 | Levels of System: Interrupting to Create Awareness and Potential for Change

eventually reveals insights into choice points that have impacted the organization. Next, I go one step further and ask how what has inhibited the organization has served and “dis-served” it. Silence can fill the room until the first voice starts the process rolling. Then the shared perception (container) that supports the generally accepted behavior in the organization reveals itself. I begin to explore to see if what needs to be revealed is an individual or group function, or an organizational perception. When I understand that it is a “contained” perception, the process of selecting the level of system at which to intervene most effectively is narrowed. It might be that an individual or team definition needs to be expanded, as in the case of a senior executive or a leadership team. If there is misperception or friction between individuals, teams or functions, I look to intervening at the exchange to eliminate misunderstanding or preconceived notions about themselves and about the opposing individual, team, or function. I am always looking for what is *not seen or included* within the story being told by the client, as indicated in the earlier instance of an African-American social services agency.

Here is a global example, in which cross-cultural dynamics were embedded in the client system. When asked to create cohesion amongst a team of fifteen leaders of multiple national origins, I became intrigued. The organization was born and bred as an Irish multinational organization. Consistent with that national origin, many leaders were from the United Kingdom. In the last decade, growth had led the organization into the Middle East and South Africa. Suddenly, the leadership had become diversified. At the most basic level, the team seemed stuck in a cycle of conflict. After observing the team and completing some assessments, it became clear that the top leader of the team, to whom the other fourteen reported, held the Irish cultural belief that a tough stance and argumentative approach was the one and only correct way to deal with disagreement, and to increase and enhance performance. So long as the team was comprised only of Irishmen, Scotsmen, and the like, the top leader's approach worked relatively well. But when other national cultures were added, the cited Irish cultural belief became a systemic inhibitor.

The intervention in this case was to highlight the cultural beliefs that separated the leadership between UK conflict styles and all the others. It became apparent that the South African team member refused to be disrespectful by screaming at other team members, even though the normative style was one of loud voices and "in-your-face" heated conversations that were competitive if not combative. The perceptual reframe eliminated the presiding beliefs (container) that supported the present behavior. There was a shift from heated debates toward collaboration: individual success became team success, and vice versa. By making invisible cultural dynamics visible, the capacity for success increased.

Closing

It is imperative for the Gestaltist to support the client system to move beyond blame, and to learn how to reframe situations to achieve clarity and resolution. Repetitive problems and mistakes, for example, are often systemic and not solvable at least in the clients' present mindset. The client must be supported to look at the system, identify underlying causes of problems, and avoid a rush to provide symptomatic solutions

or blame specific people. Since any intervention generally impacts the entire system it is best to determine small, well-focused actions that can produce significant, enduring improvements.⁵

If Gestalt consulting involves a dynamic approach stemming from core theories in existentialism, phenomenology, holism, and system dynamics, its evolution as derived from Lewin and Perls was no less dynamic. Schematically put, Perls created Gestalt therapy and Lewin created field theory. Subsequently, Gestalt practitioners integrated systems thinking with holism and field theory as further refinements to the task of organizational consulting. These dynamics merge to enable the Gestalt coach and consultant to see more deeply into the culture(s) of organizations and to support their exploration of ways to become healthier, more successful systems.

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5. Here is a set of consulting principles to remember in any organizational intervention: Less is More, Small is Big, Slow is Fast. Due to the holistic processes of the field, the system will adjust and potentially lead to unintended consequences. This applies to executive coaching, team coaching, or organizational consulting. For example, I use the metaphor of the CEO rolling a snowball down the side of a mountain: as the ball rolls down, it gathers size and speed, and anything at the bottom risks being destroyed. In other words, pilot programs and behavioral experiments can be used to test interventions and begin the process of creating a shift in the organization's behavior.

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