

Reflections on Coaching

The Application of Gestalt Principles and Positive Psychology to Transition Coaching

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of the coaching profession has outpaced the development of sound theory and a scientific foundation to anchor it as a psychological discipline. In this paper, which uses transition coaching as a focal point, both Gestalt theory and principles and positive psychology are examined as potential theoretical and scientific bases for the practice of coaching. The author concludes that, though Gestalt theory is an intuitive and useful framework for coaching, particularly when applied in conjunction with models of transition such as Hudson's (1999) model of adult experience of change, its evidence base is lacking. Positive psychology, with a growing body of empirical research on the nature and mechanisms of human thriving, provides a more robust scientific base from which to anchor the profession of coaching.

It is change, continuing change, inevitable change, that is the dominant factor in society today. No sensible decision can be made any longer without taking into account not only the world as it is, but the world as it will be. — Isaac Asimov

The old saw, *change is the only constant*, has never been more relevant than it is today. Gone are the days when most people lived in the same location and worked for the same organization throughout their careers. Competition and globalization require ongoing evolution of products, strategies, and business models. Advances in technology create relentless changes in the way we interact with the world. The information, entertainment, and communication options available at our fingertips are, by turns, exhilarating and anxiety provoking. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the coaching profession has grown dramatically, at the same time that the pace of change has so significantly increased. Coaches can help individuals navigate change and the related personal and professional transitions more effectively.

Coaching has been described as an emerging subdiscipline within the field of psychology (Grant and Cavanagh, 2007). These authors define emerging science, or protoscience, as differing "from established science in that it fails to [yet] meet all the criteria that delineate established science" (p. 247). The failure, as yet, to meet the rigors of established science is evident in the lack of published accounts of randomized studies. Of the 69 coaching outcome studies published between 1980 and 2007, only eight used a randomized design (Grant and Cavanagh, p. 245). Consequently, there is common agreement in the scholarly literature that evidence based theories and models of coaching are scarce at this time; and that their development is a necessity if the field is to survive as a legitimate psychological field (e.g., Feldman and Lankau, 2005; Biswas-Diener and Dean, 2007; Kilburg, 2007; Latham, 2007; Lowman, 2007; Carey, Philippon, and Cummings, 2011). Over the past decade or so, positive psychology and Gestalt theory have begun to emerge as frameworks for professional coaching. This paper will explore the application of Gestalt principles and positive psychology to coaching adults during periods of transition and examine each as a foundation for the practice.

A Brief History of Coaching

Socrates, with his use of dialogue and questions to facilitate reflection, insight, and understanding, could be viewed as the first highly prominent coach (Carey et al., 2011). Despite such early origins, the first academic paper on coaching did not appear until 1937 (Bennett and Bush, 2009). Coaching in leadership and professional development contexts started to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century (Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001; Bennett and Bush, 2009). In its early days, coaching tended to focus on remediation for leaders who were in need of performance improvement; today, coaching in organizations is viewed as a professional developmental mechanism for both emerging and experienced leaders (Bennett and Bush,

2009; Carey et al., 2011). In the 1980s and early 1990s, the first coach training programs were launched, and by the mid 1990s, professional associations (e.g., the International Coach Federation [ICF]; Professional Coaches, Mentors, and Advisors Association) began to appear (Bennett and Bush, 2009). At the turn of the current century, academic journals devoted to coaching (e.g., *Coaching Psychologist*; *International Journal of Evidence-based Coaching and Mentoring*) emerged (Bennett and Bush, 2009). ICF has introduced a code of ethics for the profession and developed standards and accreditation protocols for coach training programs. Each of these relatively recent developments marks the increasing professionalization of coaching as a discipline.

Coaching as a means of leader development has been growing rapidly in recent years. Executive Development Associates has been conducting a bi-annual survey on trends in executive development for more than 25 years. In their 2005 report, executive coaching was identified as the fifth most prevalent developmental method used in organizations (Underhill and Koriath, 2005); in the 2011 report executive coaching had moved to third, behind stretch assignments and mentoring, and respondents from the 81 organizations surveyed expected it to be in the top two within the next few years (Hagemann and Mattone, 2011). The ICF currently lists more than 20,000 members on its website. This number was 16,000 in January of 2010 (Morin, 2010), demonstrating substantive growth of coaching as a profession.

Coaching and Transitions

The Asimov quotation that opens this paper addresses the need to consider the constant nature of change in decision-making. Frederic Hudson (1999) echoes this need, dedicating a chapter to coaching through transitions. He proposes a model of adult's experience of change in which individuals continuously cycle through periods of stability and transition throughout their lives; he calls these *life chapters and life transitions*. Hudson holds that the coaching focus for individuals in a life chapter is performance and achievement oriented, while the focus for coaching individuals in a life transition is on evaluation, choice making, and developing resources to manage new ways of being (p. 107).

Hudson's (1999) change model includes four phases: two in the stability arc, "go for it" and "the doldrums"; and two in the transition arc, "cocooning" and "getting ready" (pp. 105-115). The "go for it" phase is described as a period of success, satisfaction, and stability, while "the doldrums" are characterized by boredom and restlessness. "Cocooning" is a period of introspection, a time when old role identities and ways of being are evaluated. In the fourth phase, "getting ready," people begin to focus on developing new resources

to support the pending change and the process of transformation ensues. The model offers insights into feelings that clients may be experiencing in each phase. It also provides suggestions for results a coach may want clients to attain and activities that may help them in each phase. It makes a distinction between major transitions and minor ones, which are called “minitransitions.” Minitransitions serve to restructure a life chapter, building upon what is working and evolving what is not, whereas life transitions are more transformational in nature. Hudson advises that, by careful questioning and attentive listening, coaches can determine whether a client is in a stable life chapter, in a minitransition, or in a life transition. The coach’s overarching goal is to help clients build skills in recognizing and successfully navigating the phases of the change model.

Gestalt and Coaching

The Gestalt school of psychology has its origins in Berlin and can be viewed as a response to behaviorism (Murray, 2012, p. 475). Gestalt psychology has been characterized as primarily concerned with defining and describing qualities of wholeness, especially in stimulus processing (Marr as cited in Kubovy and van den Berg, 2008, p. 131). One of the early theorists, Max Wertheimer (1880-1943), who has been called the father of Gestalt Psychology, investigated the organizational processes associated with perception. His research led him to argue that the function of stimulus-response, the core of behaviorist thought, was too simplistic a construct to account for the “ah-ha” moments and intuitive leaps that occur in problem solving (Murray, 2012, p. 478).

Gestalt therapy, founded by Fritz Perls (1893-1970) and colleagues, has been described as having little to do with the concepts forwarded by the Berlin contingent mentioned above (Murray, 2012). It is, however, clearer upon closer examination that this is not the case. The humanistic, holistic, and experiential nature of the practice of Gestalt therapy (Zahm and Gold, 2004), along with core Gestalt concepts like figure and ground, cycles of experience, level of system, and multiple realities, can all be traced to the early Gestalt movement. The focus of Gestalt therapy is on increasing awareness in the client. It is through the facilitation of increased awareness of sensations, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors—rather than an active transformation effort—that change in the client or system may spontaneously occur (Zahm and Gold, 2004).

The theories and principles of Gestalt therapy have more recently been applied to the practice of coaching, with Gestalt training institutes worldwide offering professional coaching programs (Simon, 2009). Some of these Gestalt based programs, such as the coaching program offered by the Gestalt

International Study Center, are accredited by the ICF, indicating some degree of alignment with the ICF goal of maintaining the integrity of coaching as a profession with training standards and professional ethics.

The ICF provides the following definition for coaching:

Coaching [is] partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential, which is particularly important in today's uncertain and complex environment. Coaches honor the client as the expert in his or her life and work and believe every client is creative, resourceful and whole. Standing on this foundation, the coach's responsibility is to:

- Discover, clarify, and align with what the client wants to achieve
- Encourage client self-discovery
- Elicit client-generated solutions and strategies
- Hold the client responsible and accountable

This process helps clients dramatically improve their outlook on work and life, while improving their leadership skills and unlocking their potential.

Teasing apart this definition we can see a number of points of confluence with Gestalt principles. Gestalt practitioners take an optimistic stance, meaning that they work with the strengths and potential within the client and/or system. ICF says that the client is creative, resourceful, and whole, and the expert in his or her own experience. Both of these orientations see the client as whole and capable of learning and growth. The Gestalt principle of self-responsibility is clearly present in ICF's definition. Goals and solutions are client driven. ICF adds that coaches are responsible for encouraging self-discovery. This aligns with the core Gestalt principle of awareness. Gestalt practitioners work to increase client awareness, so that they can explore options for behavioral range expansion and change.

In the opening sentence of the ICF definition of coaching, there is a reference to the dynamically changing world that serves as the backdrop for all coaching engagements. Hudson's (1999) model of adult change can provide a framework for locating a client within the change cycle. Is he or she in a life chapter or life transition? Understanding where he or she is within a cycle allows the coach to focus awareness-building activities more effectively. For example, clients in phase two—the doldrums—may be experiencing a sense of decline, or of being stuck; they may be feeling sad or trapped. Clients in phase four—getting ready—may be experiencing heightened creativity or feeling a sense of positive anticipation. By sharing resources about the

different phases within the change cycle, and by helping clients increase their awareness of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in a particular stage, coaches can then begin moving interactions toward desired goals.

While Gestalt theory provides an intuitive and useful framework for coaching, particularly when coupled with adult development models such as Hudson's (1999), empirical support for its effectiveness, either as a therapeutic approach or a coaching model, is lacking (Zahm and Gold, 2004). In a global coaching study commissioned by ICF and conducted by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, coaching clients reported experiencing high levels of satisfaction with the coaching process and benefits in a number of areas including: increased confidence, improved communication abilities, better work performance, and increased career opportunities (ICF, 2009). Most clients reported that, at the very least, they had recouped their investment in coaching, and nearly all said that would participate in coaching again (the sample included more than 2,100 clients from 64 countries). Based on these data, coaching clients experience a variety of benefits from coaching regardless of the underlying theoretical orientation or coaching methodology applied in the engagement. So why does coaching work? The field of positive psychology, which is focused on understanding and increasing well-being and human flourishing—goals that are well aligned with the ICF definition of coaching—is beginning to amass evidence that provides some insight into this question.

Positive Psychology and Coaching

Positive psychology has been described as "the study of positive emotion, of engagement, and of meaning, the three aspects that make sense out of the scientifically unwieldy notion of 'happiness'" (Seligman, 2007, p. 266). It has developed as a response to what some psychologists (e.g., Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) saw as an overemphasis on diagnosing what is wrong with people rather than building on what is right. Positive psychology incorporates a wide range of inquiry including giftedness, creativity, wisdom, optimism, self-determination, and happiness; it considers state-like and trait-like topics as well as individual, organizational, and cultural contributors towards a positive orientation (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, p. 8).

Positive psychology is, at its essence, the study of subjective well-being. The concept of well-being can be broken down into three pathways to happiness: "(a) positive emotion and pleasure (the pleasant life); (b) engagement (the engaged life); (c) meaning (the meaningful life)" (Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson, 2005, p. 413). Pioneers in the field of positive psychology describe its emergence as deriving from the goal to have a "more complete and balanced

scientific understanding of the human experience—the peaks, the valleys, and everything in between" (p. 410).

The empirical evidence being amassed in the field of positive psychology is compelling and advancing quickly. Consequently, it is beginning to be touted as a theoretical and empirical basis for the practice of coaching (Biswas-Diener and Dean, 2007; Kauffman and Scoular, 2004; Kauffman, 2006; Seligman, 2007). A brief review of the positive psychology literature, which is provided below, supports this contention.

Fredrickson's (2001) "broaden and build" theory is cited as an important foundation for positive psychology (Kauffman, 2006). "Broaden and build" is the emotional flip side to "fight or flight." Each response is adaptive—fight or flight is a reaction to immediate personal risk and is necessary for personal survival, while broaden and build facilitates connections to others, curiosity, play, and exploration—in that each is necessary for the species to survive and thrive. The broaden and build theory contends that positive emotions like joy, contentment, and pride broaden people's thought-action response options and build their long-term individual assets in a wide range of areas including cognitive ability, and physical health (p. 220). Fredrickson supports this contention through her own research as well as that of others in the areas of attachment style, cognition, and intrinsic motivation. The objective and function of coaching might be described in similar terms to those used to describe Fredrickson's theory.

Seligman et al. (2005) identify six overarching virtues and twenty-four related character strengths that appear to have transcultural validity and can be used to classify and analyze factors that contribute to individual well-being. These virtues are wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. In a randomized controlled trial involving more than 400 subjects, Seligman and team found evidence that interventions built upon these virtues and strengths could generate lasting improvements to measures of happiness and depression for as long as six months. Two interventions generated the longest lasting increases. One involved *using signature strengths in a new way*: participants completed an inventory of character strengths to identify their top five strengths and then were asked, for the period of one week, to use one of their top five in a different way each day. The other was the *three good things in life* intervention, which entailed recording, at the end of every day for a week, three things that went well and the reason(s) that they did. It is easy to envision using these two interventions in Gestalt-based coaching experiments to help clients practice broadening their personal and professional range of options.

Fredrickson and Losada (2005), in an interesting study that measured the relationship between daily emotional experience and flourishing mental

health, found a nonlinear relationship between the two constructs. In fact, there appears to be an ideal range of positivity to negativity of between 2.9:1 and 11.6:1 (p. 684). In other words, being too negative hampers well-being and performance, as does being too positive. This finding has an intuitive appeal that will resonate with positive psychology skeptics. One can readily imagine an organizational coach adapting the findings from this study in working with teams to assess the average range of positive to negative interactions within the group, and then facilitating activities that would help the team manage themselves to stay more consistently within the ideal range.

The work of each of these researchers provides a convincing evidence base that links positive emotion to improved physical and mental functioning across a variety of domains, including individual and team performance. Coaching, with its emphasis on goal setting, awareness, and personal and professional effectiveness, seeks to improve functioning across a variety of domains. The theories and evidence underpinning positive psychology are well aligned with the profession of coaching.

Conclusions and Areas for Future Research

Gestalt principles and approaches provide a strong framework and orientation for professional coaches. Positive psychology research offers insight into the somewhat illusive question of why coaching works, as well as into specific interventions that can be utilized in coaching engagements. The dramatic pace of change that is the ubiquitous experience of each of us in modern society requires that coaches have tools for assessing and supporting clients within that context. Hudson's (1999) model of the adult change experience serves as a useful construct for locating clients within a change cycle, and helping them develop awareness and increase personal resources for the continuous cycles of transition and stability. The literature review conducted for this paper did not unearth any articles on applying Gestalt practices and positive psychology approaches to coaching through transitions. This paper begins to make an argument for the integration of the three concepts, but additional analysis and research are required.

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