

# A Gestalt perspective of coaching: a case for being more yourself

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Leaders are often anxious when engaging with coaching initiatives, uncertain of what the outcome will mean for themselves and especially their top teams. A senior executive once said to me “I don’t really want them [his senior managers] to change, just be a little better”. What he meant was that, having carefully selected his team, he was happy with their skills and general performance, and just wanted them to be “more” rather than undergo any unknown “change process”.

The coaching world is largely dominated by behavioral change which focuses primarily on what is not going well and tackling “the problem” by changing behavior. Most approaches begin with a phase of problem solving or identification and tend to be based on a fixed model or map. In most senior coaching however, there is no “problem”; and what is often needed/wanted is a developmental type coaching which focuses on personal growth. In other words, it is about helping managers make more of who they already are rather than introducing them to a largely different way of being.

Adopting a humanistic model and exploring with the coachee who he/she *is* in their work role and context leads, paradoxically, to greater awareness and a natural, organic change. The baseline for this type of change however is not set externally but emerges within the coaching context and is grounded in the current self of the coachee. This approach often referred to as the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970) is a cornerstone of Gestalt psychotherapy and assumes that change occurs when an individual becomes what he/she is rather than continually trying to be what one is not.

What does this mean for coaching in practice?

- *A focus on awareness.* At the heart of this approach to coaching is increasing the coachee’s self-awareness. Although starting with a 360 feedback is useful in kick-starting the process, it is important to hold the feedback received lightly: as perceptions rather than reality. Self-awareness builds on attempting to understand how others see or perceive the coachee in the working context, and how the coachee might be contributing to this impression. So the perception of self and feedback from others together, combine and develop through the coaching dialogue to provide a more complete and contextual awareness of what *is* the real self of the coachee. Working on accepting and exploring this real self at work will raise the individual’s awareness of their options of doing or being in a different way.
- *Trusting in the coachee’s personal ability for growth.* Unlike behavioral change, there is no map or structure for change that needs to be followed. Using a paradoxical theory of change in coaching, implies a belief in each person’s ability to find the most appropriate and supportive way of changing – given his or her context and circumstances. It would be ill-advised, for instance, to insist on total openness from a manager struggling within a deeply political environment. Similarly, the coach needs to trust that the individual’s style and way of being has supported them well so far and that the coaches role is now to encourage the coachee to trust their own emergent knowing. Grounded awareness of self provides in most people a solid basis for more creative or daring experimentation. The safety of knowing

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your real self allows you to push the boundaries and trust the emergent, intuitive type of knowing which is much needed of leaders in increasingly complex organizations.

- *The role of the coach.* The coach's role is to facilitate this exploration through an on-going dialogue and through experimentation of the various options available to the coachee. The coach is not an un-involved observer, but through dialogue engages the manager to discover his or her own style of being within the organization. This requires an attitude of creative indifference in coaching. Acknowledging that each individual is unique and needs to find their own way of being the most they can. The coach need not take on the role of the directive change agent; but support (and challenge) the manager to be what they really are, in an authentic and creative way.

### Case study

Through coaching, the director of a small and successful entrepreneurial business was looking for personal growth as well as feedback which she rarely received. She presented at first as a flamboyant, energetic and challenging personality.

Her experience of herself however, was that although she enjoyed “keeping people on their toes”, she also needed to keep up the energy and motivation levels around her and saw this (sometimes draining) way of being as necessary in order for the business to be successful. The feedback she received from her peers and direct reports was mixed with individuals feeling both energized and sometime intimidated by her style.

By exploring what it would mean to be more herself, highly energetic at times as well as acknowledging the parts of her which felt drained by the constancy of the role she played in the business, allowed for different options and more authentic ways of being to emerge.

Letting go of the need to be the “motivator” not only made space for others to take the lead but also tapped into her personal strengths and creativity, and allowed her to trust more her felt sense of when her energetic and challenging presence was needed.

The type of paradoxical coaching described here is about accessing the emergent change process of the coachee, and allowing self-expression and self-awareness to encourage the coachee to be the most that they can be. It does not impose a framework of what “good” looks like but trusts in the manager's emergent knowing and the view that exploring one's real self at work provides a steady basis for improved performance.

In a field dominated by behavioral change approaches, it is truly visionary to understand that change flows paradoxically from the acceptance of what is ... (Fairfield, n.d.).

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