

# Bringing Gestalt to cyber security: a case study

Maggie Marriott

Received 9 April 2016

2015 Student Essay Prize winner

**Abstract:** Cyber security is a term that encompasses the protection of information systems from theft or damage and is a major focus of investment by the UK government. This case study describes how Gestalt concepts of dialogue, field theory and phenomenology were used to help the board of a government department identify how they needed to transform to respond to the growing threats to the cyber security of the UK.

*Key words:* cyber security, phenomenology, dialogue, field theory, experiment.

The world of cyber security is still a new field, and probably not the first place you would think of applying Gestalt theory to, and yet I suggest it is as vital here as anywhere else. I would like to share with you a case study of work I undertook within a government department that plays a significant role in protecting the information of UK citizens.

I often read about the 21st century being described as the ‘Information Age’ and certainly the UK government is encouraging all of its departments to share information and make as many services as possible available to the public online. This has transformed how, in the UK, we tax our cars or submit our tax returns and as a consequence it has also put more of our personal information at risk of cyber theft. Protecting this information is key to the stability of the UK economy and is a mammoth task.

## Case study

The organisation that asked me to work with them was a large and mature government department that historically had a very low public profile. The people in the organisation were leaders in their field and the culture of the organisation was very reminiscent of academia – constant questioning, research, reflection and the right for everyone to have an opinion. The system had worked very effectively for most of the hundred years of its existence but the pace and nature of the outside world had changed considerably leading to a risk that their work was not keeping pace with the cyber security needs of the government. There had already been five failed transformation attempts and I was asked to work with the board on the sixth.

I began by reflecting back to the Director that a

lot of time and money had been spent and minimal change had happened, so maybe it was time to take a fresh approach. I recommended that we needed to meet people where they were because ‘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’ (Beisser, 1972). Malcolm Parlett encourages us to take a unified field approach which involves finding out how the current field is organised, including ‘what the “currently active gestalts” and projects are; the divisions and styles of boundary making; the figural concerns of individual, group, or community, as well as the stable (or continuously regenerated) features that endure’ (Parlett, 1997, p. 23). And in his most recent book (2015), Malcolm Parlett explains ‘that people are basically different all the time, and vary according to the total situation which they are currently experiencing – as well as, in part, constructing’ (pp. 66–7), so it is wise to take account of the whole situation. I explained this would enable us to understand and then effectively tackle the root cause of the issues rather than the symptoms. I was also clear that it would take time to understand the field through sensing and raising awareness before mobilising to action.

When I first entered the organisation my phenomenological sense was of people in immense pain who did not dare to look at the source of that pain, as if they were all shielding their eyes from the truth and keeping themselves as busy as possible. I was noticing people talking only about the immediate issues, listening without hearing and holding a lot of tension in their bodies. It was this pain that led me to book a two-day residential offsite away from the normal working environment to create a safe and supportive environment where the board members could begin to

acknowledge and accept the true reality of the situation and of each other's feelings.

I did not yet know how I was going to use the event but I knew it was desperately needed. In preparation for the offsite residential, I talked formally and informally face-to-face to as many people as I could about their work and how they felt, how the organisation was run, who did what, why and when, to help me identify which patterns became figural, because '[L]ives and collective systems intertwine and need to be considered together as a *unified field*' (Parlett, 1997, p. 1, original italics). The figures I noticed are explained in the table below.

Whilst I was identifying potential figures for attention there was a major change in the field with the arrival of a new senior leader.

## A new leader

The new leader was curious about my work and why it was necessary. I knew that at our first meeting I needed to be fully present and to have 'energetic availability and fluid responsiveness' (Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan, 2007). The conversation was initially stilted; there was little eye contact and a lot of leg twitching by the leader. I began by explaining my research and

thoughts for the offsite event, making sure I pitched at the same level of energetic intensity I was sensing from him. I then sat back and asked him how well this resonated with his own perspectives since joining and what his needs were. Slowly the eye contact increased and his body relaxed as he too sat back in his chair and the depth of the conversation grew.

By the end of the conversation he declared he would be my new sponsor and we discussed other ways I could support him to build relationships in the organisation. After the meeting, in my imagination, I saw him as a being like a new child arriving at school as the head boy; he doesn't know either the written or unwritten rules and has no friends, or anyone to go to lunch with who could teach him. The other pupils all know each other well and know how to work the system; they don't need this new boy, are suspicious of him and close him out. A challenging position to be in as a leader.

## The two-day offsite

Prior to the offsite I captured the huge number of meetings the board attended, what news stories they shared on the intranet and people's perceptions of how the organisation was being run. Based on the

**Table 1: A description of the organisation through a Gestalt lens**

<b>The organisation was a closed system</b>	A closed organisation 'places great value on its organization charts, division of labor, superior-subordinate relations, policies, processes, controls, and stability, rather than customers, suppliers, markets, technologies, or community' (NTL Institute, 2014, pp. 285–6).
<b>And stagnant in complexity theory terms</b>	The axes in complex systems (Waldrop, 1992) range from rigid stability to chaotic turbulence; this organisation was closer to the rigid stability end of the spectrum making the system resistant to change.
<b>People knew the reality of the situation but nobody was voicing it, the corporate script did not match reality</b>	The organisation's view of itself was of being highly valued and highly functioning but all knew this to be untrue. Beisser's paradoxical theory of change suggests the organisation was trying to be what it was not which was inhibiting their desire for change and 'that change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not' (Beisser, 1972). I have found the model of 'Immunity to Change' (Kegan and Lahey, 2009) a helpful approach to understanding resistance and the 'multiple forces ... many of which pull in different directions' (Nevis, 2001, p. 147).
<b>Each person had a slightly different perspective of the problem</b>	The nature of the work and that each person was an 'expert' led to fragmentation 'in which the people involved see themselves as more separate than united, and in which information and knowledge are chaotic and scattered' (Conklin, 2006, p. 3).
<b>And related to each other as I-It</b>	Most relationships were I-It rather than I-Thou (Buber, 1957) as when 'we approach the people and things as if they were objects or functions whose existence is for us to affect, control or manipulate' (Sills, 2012, p. 23).
<b>The problem space was a 'wicked problem'</b>	The environment the organisation was working within was one of severe economic constraint and increasing technical and political complexity. It could be described as 'wicked' where problems 'are never solved. At best they are only re-solved – over and over again' (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 160).

quantitative and qualitative data I had gathered about the organisation and board members, I decided the outcome for the offsite event should be to bring into their awareness how they ran the organisation and provide the environment for good quality dialogue and contact. I believed they were exhibiting perfectly natural resistance to change, including the moderation to contact of desensitising by 'numbing and blocking communication of emotional, mental, and physical sensation, information and energy to and from the organization's external environment' (NTL Institute, 2014, p. 263). The board members had a predisposition to begin at the action stage of the Gestalt cycle of experience so I couched the outcome as a question, giving them the sense of an action focused event that could only be answered through contact and dialogue. What follows is a brief summary of my approach to the offsite process.

I developed a question-based agenda that enabled me to meet the needs of the attendees for structure whilst allowing me total flexibility to seek answers to the questions in the moment. I used the Disney creativity strategy technique developed by Robert Dilts (Dilts, 1994) because of its simplicity to use and its natural fit for the four corners of the room. I set up three corners of the room as 'dreamer', 'realist' and 'critic' along with quantitative information to befit each. In the fourth corner I built a 'campfire' encircled by chairs and named it the 'neutral corner'. Knowing that sitting around a campfire tends to have a comforting and soothing impact on people I felt this would promote a relaxed atmosphere for interaction and dialogue and this is where I asked them to begin.

The attendees had little or no opportunity to hear directly from the public about the value of their work. In fact, it is likely most UK citizens are totally unaware of the difference their work makes every day. I found myself wanting to reconnect their work with the emotional impact it has. From my Gestalt training, I knew that I was part of the field and so I began by telling them how important it was to my family and me that the organisation was as good as it could be. I was relying on them to do their best work to help keep my daughters safe. I then explained that my co-facilitators and I would reflect and bring to their awareness what was happening, as well as our phenomenological response, when we thought it would be useful, something which caused a few raised eyebrows at first.

I asked them to leave their roles out of the circle and to tell each other stories about experiences from their working life with the aim of providing opportunities for I-Thou (Buber, 1957) moments of relating. After what felt like an initially uncomfortable way of being for the group, I took them back into their comfort zone of analysing the data around the room, encouraging

them to discuss whatever became figural. On return to the campfire there was muttering between people, many crossed arms and furrowed brows which led me to think people were 'holding back' rather than openly discussing their concerns. At this point, I brought out a blow-up elephant and asked if there was an 'elephant in the room', with the hope of giving the group the opportunity to make issues figural. It brought great laughter and did lead to a discussion of key issues such as the unrealistic quantity and diversity of the demands made of them; the lack of coherence of their work; and the unsupportive behaviour of some key stakeholders. As the two days progressed the discussions grew in depth and quality and the group started to put the elephant in the middle of the circle themselves suggesting their growing awareness and acceptance of what had previously been unspoken. By the end of day two, my role as facilitator was minimal and the power of the group was strong. They spent the majority of the time in the awareness phase, sometimes moving to mobilising and then back to awareness. It was only in the last hour of the two days that they spoke unanimously of their commitment to a new a direction and their full support for the new leader.

## The results

As a result of the offsite work a paper outlining the need for major transformational change was quickly put to the full board and accepted. A summary of the transformation agenda with a Gestalt lens is below.

The board now meet and regularly have healthy dialogue and the transformation was announced across Whitehall. The organisation's engagement model is now focused on customer needs and ongoing communication, both face-to-face and online with the creation of blogs and a Twitter feed that would have been unthinkable just six months earlier.

## Conclusion

I hope this case study has shown how taking a Gestalt approach of meeting people where they are and encouraging others to do the same can be deeply effective. The powerful combination of dialogue, field theory and phenomenology played a large part in my client's decision to transform their way of leading and working and ensuring the vitality of their department and the protection of UK citizens' information for years to come.

In the Western world, where collaboration, knowledge and information-sharing across organisational boundaries are key to the health and vitality of all organisations and the people within them, I believe the theories and application of Organisational Gestalt have

**Table 2: A description of the future state organisation through a Gestalt lens**

<b>The organisation needed to become an open system</b>	An organisation where '[E]mphasis is given to external stakeholders' and where change becomes easier because 'the organisation has a comprehensive picture of its dynamic environment and its internal structures are limber' (NTL Institute, 2014, p. 286).
<b>And move towards the 'edge of chaos' (Waldrop, 1992)</b>	A number of agile and disruptive projects were proposed that would begin to shift the balance towards the edge of chaos and acceptance that a 'rhythm of awareness-energy-action-closure built around smaller units or incremental changes is much more manageable' (Nevis, 2001, p. 204).
<b>Where everyone knew the reality of the organisation's situation</b>	The board accepted the reality of where they were and were willing to admit and build from it; they had accepted Beisser's paradoxical theory of change.
<b>And needed to relate to each other as I-Thou</b>	They wanted to build healthy relationships with employees, customers and suppliers, an I-Thou relationship with a 'genuine meeting of person to person' (Sills, 2012, p. 23).
<b>And that the problem space was 'wicked'</b>	It was accepted they were working in a world of 'wicked problems' where 'diverse values are held by different groups of individuals – that what satisfies one may be abhorrent to another, that what comprises problem-solution for one is problem-generation for another' (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 169), and they could only succeed through collaboration.

much to offer. I hope that OG becomes more widely understood and applied by many other organisational transformation consultants and leaders. There is also potential to bring a Gestalt approach to social science research being led by the UK Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST), for example, a national hub for understanding, countering and mitigating security threats. CREST has funding for programmes from the Economic and Social Research Council to conduct interdisciplinary, multi-method, knowledge synthesis and original social science research into security threats. I believe Gestalt approaches and this way of working have much to offer these programmes.

## Acknowledgement

Thanks to Ms Gerrie Hughes and Dr Marie-Anne Chidiac for their support and encouragement in the production of this piece.

## References

Beisser, A. (1972). The Paradoxical Theory of Change. In J. Fagan and I.L. Shepherd (eds.), *Gestalt Therapy Now: Theory, Techniques, Applications*. Science and Behavior Books, Palo Alto, CA.

- Buber, M. (1957). *I and Thou*. Translated by R.G. Smith. Kindle edition, see: <[https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0051I50EM/ref=cm\\_sw\\_r\\_cp\\_api\\_ygRSxbY5F01WP](https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0051I50EM/ref=cm_sw_r_cp_api_ygRSxbY5F01WP)>
- Chidiac, M.A. and Denham-Vaughan, S. (2007). The Process of Presence: Energetic Availability and Fluid Responsiveness. *British Gestalt Journal*, 16, 1, pp. 9–19.
- Conklin, J. (2006). *Dialogue Mapping: Building Shared Understanding of Wicked Problems*. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.
- Kegan, R. and Lahey, L. (2009). *Immunity to Change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.
- Parlett, M. (1997). The Unified Field in Practice. *Gestalt Review*, 1, 1, pp. 16–33.
- Parlett, M. (2015). *Future Sense: Five Explorations of Whole Intelligence for a World That's Waking Up*. Leicester: Troubador/Matador.
- Dilts, R. (1994). *Strategies of Genius: Volume 1*. Capitola, CA: Meta Publications.
- Nevis, E.C. (2001). *Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach* (3rd ed.). Cambridge, Mass: Gestalt Press.
- Rittel, H. and Webber, M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4, pp. 155–169.
- NTL Institute (2014). *The NTL Handbook of organization development and change* (2nd ed.). California: Wiley.
- Sills, C.L. (2012). *An Introduction to Gestalt*. London: Sage.
- Waldrop, M.M. (1992). *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

**Maggie Marriott** is an organisation consultant and leadership coach who brings over twenty-five years of experience working in both the private and public sector. Her career included teaching, software engineering and technical architecture before specialising in organisational change. She now works as an independent consultant specialising in helping leadership teams prepare their businesses for the cyber age. She was awarded a Postgraduate Diploma in Relational Change from the Relational Change Organisation in July 2015.

*Address for correspondence:* [maggie@enkiconsultants.co.uk](mailto:maggie@enkiconsultants.co.uk)