

The Gestalt Brand

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This article is a personal reflection on the practice, place and purpose of Gestalt in organisations from a business perspective. The first section questions the focus of Gestalt in organisations and identifies some of the particular contributions Gestalt can make to commercial enterprises. The central section describes five vignettes that animate a range of possibilities for working with Gestalt in organisations. The final section draws parallels between the organisational concept of 'brand' and the Gestalt concept of 'presence' and seeks to provoke discussion about the future influence of Gestalt in and through organisations.

Key words: organisations, brand, innovation, strategy, field, presence, future, action, systems, contact, transformation

Questioning an Orthodoxy

Some years ago a director of a major corporation asked me, over a coffee, how I had developed the insight to work with a particularly thorny business issue in the way I did. I attributed my approach to my Gestalt training. He responded with snooty surprise: 'Gestalt? But that's *old*, isn't it? Is it really still influential?' 'Not as old as Christianity,' I replied wryly, knowing something of his religious beliefs, 'and not *quite* as influential.' He got the point, laughed, and our conversation moved on.

Yet his remark left an indelible impression on me. It was freighted with the view that Gestalt has questionable relevance to business today, is not perceived to be particularly leading-edge in terms of its organisational contribution, and may even be past its sell-by date – if it ever had one. His comment made me wonder about the nature of Gestalt's contribution to organisational life. Does Gestalt have an image problem? Is it thriving in organisations and helping organisations thrive? What would it take to ensure the ascendancy of Gestalt in organisations in the twenty-first century? For those, like me, who are deeply interested in the future, and who want to take with us the best of our intellectual and cultural heritage, it seems time to ask some searching questions about the Gestalt brand.

I speculate that the view of this director, and possibly most businesspeople today, is that Gestalt practitioners provide facilitation, coaching, consultancy and training services to businesses that add value through developing so-called 'soft skills' like interpersonal communication, conflict management and team building. The clinical model has undoubtedly sharpened the competitive edge of Gestalt-oriented consultants (including myself, although I have not undergone clinical training) working with relational process in this market. Such a humanistic approach is often usefully linked to the larger framework of organisational culture, where Gestalt's perspectives on working with change and resistance (Beisser, 1970), for example, provide a unique and invaluable contribution.

At the same time, I notice with concern that there seems to be a relative dearth of Gestalt thinking in the 'hard' areas such as strategy, brand, innovation, design and leadership as well as in the more operational aspects of business management including Sales, Marketing, Finance, IT... It seems to me that the focus of much Gestalt in organisations – at the level of theory perhaps slightly more than

practice – often has more to do with *management* development than *organisational* development, and even less to do with *business* development. Perhaps this is because many consultants working in organisations seem to employ Gestalt more as a form of perceptual psychology than a holistic epistemology.

Despite its focus on Field Theory (Lewin, 1952), despite its roots in social and political activism through radicals such as Paul Goodman (Stoehr, 1993), contemporary Gestalt as it relates to business is relatively undeveloped, although corporations have exercised the most pervasive and decisive influence on lifespace globally over the last 50-odd years of any institution. Gestalt's apparent lack of voice in these more commercial areas of business is disappointing, as I believe Gestalt offers some radical concepts that can be applied quite practically and beneficially in organisations. Is it time for Gestaltists to help corporations hospice some of their old ways of doing things, and midwife the birth of a new, more creative and sustainable business paradigm – and in the process, develop a new brand of Gestalt?

This raises some fundamental questions about the place and purpose of Gestalt in organisations. Beyond the insights it offers into the human process, how exactly is Gestalt relevant to modern business? What benefits can an organisation expect from a Gestalt approach? What are its strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats? Just what does Gestalt have to contribute to discourse or direct action on the effects of globalisation, digitisation, deregulation, commoditisation, corporate power and other issues at the bedevilling contact boundary of commerce and the world? What exactly *is* Gestalt in organisations anyway?

In partial response to some of these gritty questions, I would suggest a number of things. Field theory, for instance, invites us in to a way of seeing the world that is non-linear, relational and contingent. Rather than artificially freeze-framing and deconstructing the different aspects of business activity under the prevailing positivist paradigm of 'management science,' it provides a way of considering the interactive dynamics of the various systems that co-constitute organisational life – family, political, environmental, social, technological, legal and economic. This can add real value to crafting business strategy, for example, as field theory points managers towards notions that strategy needs to be integrative as well as expansive, radical as well as practical, emergent as well as deterministic (Mintzberg, 1987).

Additionally, in an increasingly globalised business world, a lens on the profound inter-relationship of things can be especially important in grounding commercial activity more responsibly. Shifting management focus from causality to the field helps in at least two ways. First, it could expand thinking around practices like moving manufacturing bases to third-world areas of least-cost, without considering the economic impact on local communities and the knock-on effects on consumer perception and purchasing patterns in developed economies. The current violence of anti-capitalist and anti-corporate movements (Klein, 2000) is surely a response to the shameless exploitation of developing economies by some major corporations. Second, holding a field perspective could conserve resources that might have been spent mechanistically doing *x* with a view that *y* would result – say, cutting staff recruitment and training to reduce operating costs without considering the longer-term effects on the competitiveness and sustainability of the enterprise.

In relation to business strategy, Gestalt also suggests approaches around *rightness* and *ripeness*. Engaging with the flux of ever-changing process; valuing the place of creative experimentation; and drawing on people's natural energy towards self-realisation do not suggest a forced approach. Rather, expanding awareness of present choices in relation to future needs or goals calls for supporting 'the obvious next step' as much as for mobilising prematurely. I frequently hear from managers who have pushed their teams and stretched their resources because of projected expectations of the future that do not materialise. Gestalt reminds us that if the way is not open

for the work to succeed, there is nothing to be gained by pushing – after all, implementing a strategy need not be like having your teeth done.

Additionally, while most businesses *tell* their people to innovate, they seldom *inspire* them to innovate. Gestalt reminds us that creativity and inspiration – the rocket fuel of innovation - are natural, field phenomena that are better enabled not by over-managing and engineering but by creating the space for self-organisation and flow. Removing obstacles to innate corporate creativity rather than unloading a kit-bag of creative techniques onto a business has helped a number of companies I have worked with to revitalise their products and services as well as their people.

Pinning Down Butterflies...

In my own professional practice as a brand and innovation specialist,¹ I work on business transformation projects in large, almost-entirely commercial concerns. For me, Gestalt in organisations is about something quite specific. It is about developing the presence of the organisation and supporting contact- and meaning-making through creative experimentation. Through this, I aim to generate new ideas, so that there is increased wealth, sustainable and holistic growth of people within the business, healthier relationships with communities outside as well as greater environmental sensitivity.

But what does this mean in practice? I make no explicit reference to Gestalt in my work with corporate clients. Equally, colleagues in my own company would probably not characterise me as a Gestaltist. However, field theory, the phenomenological method and the dialogic approach - all of which are key to Gestalt (Resnick, 1995) - have enriched and underpinned my work since I first encountered Gestalt about ten years ago.

While these 'pillars' of Gestalt are profound, they are also somewhat unwieldy in practice. In working with the transformation of large systems around issues of brand and innovation, I have codified my learning from Gestalt philosophy into five more portable principles. These are not intended to be a comprehensive or simplistic distillation of Gestalt wisdom. I see them more as springboards than sofas. Far from being artificially reductionist and corseting of my practice, I have found them to open up my learning and appreciation of Gestalt. It is in this spirit that I share them here, through offering some brief vignettes of a range of organisational interventions that illuminate how Gestalt informs my approach.

Principle 1: Start out from the right place – be future-facing and action-focused

The vast majority of organisations I have worked with make four fundamental errors when embarking on a major change process. Firstly, a 'problem-solving' mindset prevails instead of a 'create-the-future' mindset. Secondly, stakeholder² involvement is narrow and controlling instead of inclusive and energising. Thirdly, communication is one-way – 'tell and sell' instead of 'consult and co-create.' Lastly, planning and implementation are sequential and laborious instead of simultaneous and direct. All too often this results, at best, in incremental rather than exponential development.

Incremental development was all that was happening with a Health Authority I worked with some years ago. A multi-professional steering committee had been established to improve local HIV services. Its objectives were to develop HIV policy, bring better management to service funding and co-ordinate clinical and social care between hospital consultants, GPs, social workers, voluntary sector organisations and the complex network of other groups working to support people with HIV and AIDS. After nearly a year of service-user³ research and strategy meetings, the group had failed to deliver a plan or to significantly affect service delivery in any one specialism, let alone across the

spectrum of disciplines. Strategic, clinical and care processes were out of step with one another. Furthermore, despite honest investment of goodwill and money, worrying rifts were opening up between some specialisms. As so often happens, planning was splitting the community rather than uniting it - a realisation that seems consistent with Nevis's (1987) observation that organisations often *prevent* change from occurring by choosing means of solving problems that do not force examination of basic assumptions and values.

In this case, progress was being impeded by the steering group's wish to sort out the present problems of the healthcare system as it related to HIV services in the area. Staying with the present problems led to analysis paralysis. By focusing attention instead on the future, we created alignment and transformed the nature of the energy available for the system to mobilise to action and move forward in the right spirit. In practice, we organised a 3-day event involving around 80 people from across the networked services (including people with HIV and their carers) to participate 'in the moment' in the creation of a workable gameplan for service innovation. Strategy, as well as the necessary relationships, commitment and action-focus, emerged out of real dialogue.

This large group intervention achieved in three days what had eluded the steering committee for around twelve months. It also energised people to come together in multiple stakeholder groups over the course of the ensuing year to re-examine continually the phenomenology of what was unfolding. Developing more visionary possibilities for the future through wider and more direct participation supported the steering group *to act strategically* rather than *to develop a strategic plan to act*.

Such an approach – on mobilisation by transforming awareness through active dialogue - seems quite in line with Gestalt philosophy. The work with this Health Authority highlighted the power of supporting different forms of contact between people while dealing more directly with entrenched and emergent issues within the nested context of local, national and global HIV healthcare systems. Shifting the debate from the *content* of the strategy to a wider consideration of strategic *context* and *conduct* is certainly a more field-theoretical perspective. Indeed, Bunker and Alban (1997) make the case that these sorts of participative planning methodologies (including Search Conferencing, Future Search and Real Time Strategic Change, have their roots in Lewin's (1951) experimental social psychology. Nevis (1996) also underlines the role of participative decision-making in creating shared futures from multiple realities.

In this instance, the work demonstrated two other elements of a Gestalt approach. First was the importance of moving away from deficit models of client need and pathology and to focus instead on the strength of creative potential. Second, it showed that it is better to draw strategy from action rather than extrapolate it from the drift of trends: we learn more by doing than planning, and we get further faster. As Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) say of self-discovery, which they assert is the essence of Gestalt (more accurately, of Gestalt *therapy*), 'To observe your self in action - ultimately, to observe your self as action - calls for techniques strikingly different from those you may have tried already and found wanting; in particular, introspection (p252).'

Organisations frequently bring in consultants after failed attempts have been made to achieve something of strategic importance. This may be attributed to reasons within or outside the organisation, from a missing knowledge base or necessary skillsets, to team relationship issues, or increased competitor activity, the rate of industry/ market change as well as a number of other factors. However, I do not believe that the Gestalt practitioner is there to solve interpersonal or business problems but rather to enable the organisation to realise and release itself through creative endeavour.

Principle 2: Recognise that you are in service to the system

My company had been retained by a DIY chain to work on a corporate communications project. During the course of the contract, two incidents arose which helped us clarify a key issue about clientship.

In the first instance, a senior manager began to disclose information to me in a private meeting that I learned she was withholding from her boss for both personal and political reasons. Although the information would have helped clarify some business-critical issues the company faced at the time, and would have informed corporate decision-making, she asked me to respect her decision to keep quiet.

This dilemma poses a key question which I believe is particularly relevant to any executive coaching context, and points to a fundamental difference between a therapeutic and organisational contract. The question is, who is the client - the individual or the system? I do not believe the Gestalt practitioner in an organisational setting can promise confidentiality when coaching someone in the service of another purpose. You might have to say, as I did in this situation, 'Don't tell me anything you wouldn't want me to use in my work with the board of directors.' In organisational work, the system is the client.

In a second instance, a colleague and I were invited to do some team-building. During a preliminary stage of the project, the director in charge of the team was puzzled and concerned that we were spending more time examining the history of the department, general market factors and exploring the macro issues of relationships between the team and other groups in the organisation, rather than the micro issues of relationships within his team.

Our reasons shifted the entire trajectory of work for this Director. We explained that it is often futile to work on internal team issues because of the tendency for errors to occur when the baton gets passed between different teams that are distributed around the organisation. No team exists in a vacuum, so attention needs to be paid to 'the space between' if more dramatic and sustainable improvements in performance are to be assured.

This approach is consistent with both Parlett's (2000) assertion that 'developments in the global field need to be recognised for their effects on people's ability to interrelate' (p21) as well as Wheeler's (2000) view that the Gestalt practitioner's topography of attention needs to extend 'beyond individualism.' It is located within a paradigm that shifts focus from the self and from interpersonal relating to the wider field. From this paradigm, designing the team intervention is not the critical issue so much as creating the context and conditions for the work to take place⁴.

Principle 3: Discriminate between strategic and intimate relating

I believe the two examples already given illustrate another principle of Gestalt in organisations that seems counterposed to Gestalt work in its therapeutic modality. Interventions that are helpful in a therapy room are sometimes quite disabling in a business context, where the starting point is the task to be completed, rather than concentrating on relationship issues. Ultimately, people in organisations are in service to a business imperative. They need to be supported only to get close enough to do the work – they don't need to love each other, just to get sufficiently into relationship to achieve excellence in terms of the task.

At one level, this means supporting healthier contact by developing tasks that require cross-functional processes to be activated or designed, rather than on creating cross-functional working parties. For instance, I have experienced the fruitlessness of working with groups from different

departments, who have been thrust together by well-meaning managers to look at inter-disciplinary performance improvements or to work on generic concerns such as customer care. Important though these processes are, when the starting point is on perceived team issues rather than on actual business needs, the results are invariably disappointing.

This contrasts sharply to the focus and energy multidisciplinary teams have when addressing business-critical issues that impact more directly on their different domains of expertise. Examples might include introducing a new sales order processing systems or improving information flow between telephone call centres, warehouses and other parts of the customer supply chain. When the *work* is figural, the *relationships* follow. In addition, trying to resolve interpersonal conflict between executives or to engage in teambuilding are often 'easy options' - deflections from addressing the underlying business issues and processes. The people might well be relating as they need to or are compelled to by the commercial infrastructure. Supporting greater contact between team members is no guarantee of better business results.

Focusing more particularly on task is certainly not to argue against the importance of human intimacy in organisations, and the profound role real contact plays in personal as well as task transformation. Melnick and Backman (2000) make the point that intimacy enables people to feel present and connected, while strategy is action-orientated and pragmatic - what is required is a balance appropriate to circumstances. My point is merely that it is vital to discriminate between when the personal experience needs to be attended to in organisational settings and when it does not.

Discriminating personal from organisational is particularly important in working with large and distributed systems, where communicating and acting with authenticity so often has to happen through non-human media - including email technology, webcasts and video conferencing, advertising, brochures and even brands. Lukensmeyer (1997) notes that, 'Increasingly the majority of our experience is of a system that is second-hand... So the "present moment" is not often a face-to-face moment. The challenge of what it takes to be authentic in the connection between leader and people changes in those two different contexts' (p6).

Working as I do with businesses on corporate branding assignments regularly foregrounds these related issues: of the need to balance strategic and intimate relating, and of the dilemma of mediating authenticity. While my Gestalt training has enriched and sensitised my awareness of the vitality of embodied contact, at the same time it reminds me of the importance of working with *what is* and starting from where people find themselves. In today's technologised and branded world, this means engaging with these realities creatively.

A client in the chemicals industry invited me to do some crisis communications work to restore the company's brand image after some unfair and adverse publicity surrounding its operations. Press articles and a hostile national TV report had damaged the stock value of the business and polarised the local community in which the business was the major employer. Feelings were running so high that local people - company staff and others - were fighting in pubs. Livelihoods of decent people were at stake.

I know from my marketing background that the traditional approach to managing perceptions in these circumstances is to focus on damage limitation, message control and cosmetic image manipulation. In the process, corporate relating becomes depersonalised and hyper-strategic. Emotional authenticity is reduced or removed from images and verbal communications. There are multiple, continuous and sustained interruptions to contact. After the non-sequiturs and disclaimers come the candy-coated 'win'em back' PR campaigns. Hardly a healing approach. Circumstances such as these certainly call for considerable discrimination around supporting intimate and strategic

relating, as well as a more sophisticated view of the potential of brands and branding⁵. Gestalt has hugely influenced my thinking and practice in this area.

In this case, the consultancy intervention around brand was to work in a number of different ways with longer-term issues of organisational and community *identity* that emerged from the crisis rather than focus on glossing the corporate *image* in the short-term. This involved supporting company/community contact in relatively simple ways. Possibilities for more strategic relating were provided through establishing a liaison panel of local and company leaders who thrashed out issues face-to-face, through developing mechanisms for reporting back to the larger community, such as using local press and a quarterly company/community magazine. Possibilities for more intimacy were centred around bringing people together in less formal circumstances where communications could not be so easily controlled. The company held site 'open days,' launched summer fetes and supported a number of joint community projects with local people. Paradoxically, by first acknowledging and openly exploring the *strategic* inter-dependence of the company and community, as well as honestly considering issues of mutual concern and advantage, space was created for people to come together with a different spirit and engage at more *intimate* contact in informal settings.

Such approaches to the brand development needs of this particular client are consistent with Nevis's (1987) assertion that contact involves confronting boundaries between self and other. One of the boundaries being confronted by groups in this example was around the company/community polarity. The work involved supporting a recognition that at some levels there was an artificial distinction being made by some vested interests that the company was not part of the community. The brand work in this instance did not draw on the 'cosmetic surgery' approaches of conventional marketing but on working on brand as the contact boundary of company-in-community.

Principle 4: Don't try to change anything – revitalise rather than re-engineer

I was once a member of a team invited by the human resources director of a retailing operation to undertake what he described as a 'culture change programme.' While this starting point is common, it disturbs me. My experience has been that it is more effective to begin by changing core business practices than by working on culture.

Harrison (1995) is dismissive of organisations embarking on culture-change programmes: 'Calling a change effort a culture change programme invites people to spend a lot of time sitting around talking about how they are going to change the culture when they could be figuring out how to work better or smarter. It plays into the hands of those people who want to believe they are changing without really doing anything... then, when people begin to identify the things the organisation will have to do to improve its performance, culture appears as a barrier to doing them' (p234).

In my own organisation, we believe that inspiring innovation is at the heart of business transformation and organisational change. My colleagues and I attempt to move the client system's attention firmly back to the business issues by developing awareness of the company's capacity to innovate. In overly rational systems (that is, most organisations!) people assume awareness is enhanced through using 'scientifically-generated,' usually external data in the form of hard 'market research' facts. Our approach is to develop skills in the *art* of inspiring-innovation⁶. A common starting-point for us is to liberate an organisation's sense of identity by articulating a business purpose *beyond profit* that is replete with possibility and portent. For instance, this might begin by asking searching questions of boards of directors about corporate, team and personal uniqueness, as it is from our uniqueness that our creative capacity stems.

Shifting awareness to the creative possibilities of *business purpose* in this way seems to generate more powerful transformational energy than staying with culture-change as a starting point. One possible explanation for this is that because needs energise gestalts and innovation is a more potent commercial need than culture change, business purpose generates correspondingly more vitality.

Another possibility is that the focus on relational conversational practices rather than on applying a toolkit of methods (implicit in crafting an art rather than prosecuting a science) produces a more subtle and sustainable result and generates far less resistance. On an innovation assignment, the underlying emphasis is on co-creation – on building something different together, rather than on change - altering enshrined ways of doing things.

Additionally, by restricting our focus of attention to the board of directors and a couple of key forums for some considerable time, the work is also apparently less invasive than what often occurs with a culture-change agenda. It is therefore in accord with the Gestalt principle of minimal intervention. Again, Harrison (1995) observes, 'the more you ask [an organisation] to change, the less energy will be available for daily work. It behoves us to intervene no more than is necessary to obtain the desired competencies. By the same token when we intervene strongly in an organisation, the organisation members not only have to deal with their work problems, they also have to deal with the intervention' (p235).

However, it is also vital to work beyond the organisational power-nexus of the Board if a company is to be able to develop its innovation capability and experience organismic change. One way we work on priming the organisational field for innovation is by introducing new voices that spark new conversations in businesses. These voices are often from non-commercial spheres – for example, musicians, writers, sports men and women. They speak directly to mixed groups of people from stores, head office and ancillary parts of a business about life beyond the company. In doing so, they provide powerful *human* (rather than strictly *commercial*) insights about aspects of entrepreneurship such as venturing into the unknown, learning from failure and other experiences. This seems vital in re-animating corporate effort and 're-minding' the organisation that business is a part of life rather than apart from life.

Such a way of working draws on open systems approaches (Emery, 1981), which I believe are complementary to Gestalt. These approaches locate and relate organisations within a wider and mutually self-modifying field, treat organisations as organic rather than mechanistic, hold a holistic perspective and achieve results because they re-energise, rather than re-engineer things. Significantly, open systems approaches also treat change as an innate property or characteristic of the field rather than something that has to be artificially introduced – a perspective that seems to me to be 'pure' Gestalt.

Rather than seeing organisations as closed and monolithic, this more 'natural' open systems approach imports playful energy and introduces greater diversity – two essential ingredients for the creativity needed to fuel corporate innovation. It also draws directly on the complex web of relationships that exist between the people inside the organisation, on the different communities of interest outside - suppliers, strategic partners, shareholders, customers, competitors, as well as on organisations in other sectors and groups in the world at large. The result is a more inspiring, radical, flexible innovation curve, where organisational change happens with less effort and is mutually self-modified by personal and social change. In the longer term, people are more aligned and the development of products and services flows more naturally.

Fresh conversations also generate fresh ideas and raise awareness of another sine qua non of lasting systemic change – that links need crafting between 'inside' groups at different levels of the organisation and groups 'outside.' Again, I agree with Lukensmeyer's (1997) observation that 'the

vision and policies being formed at the centre have to become connected to some aware location in the populace, if there is to be significant change' (p5). This is as true for a board wanting to implement a new initiative as it is for a company wanting to launch a new product or a government wanting to introduce a new policy. If any sort of innovation is not to succumb to the forces of resistance, then practitioners must work to resolve the dilemmas that underlie human ambivalence. My experience has been that innovation will not take root and systemic change will only be episodic and transitory if diverse networks of people inside and outside the organisation cannot establish common ground, develop a shared vision and nurture both strategic and intimate dimensions of relationships.

Principle 5: Working on yourself is also the client work

'Self as instrument' is, for me, one of the enshrined principles of a Gestalt approach. Being present, using your presence, experimenting with the creative possibilities of the moment (Zinker, 1997), holding the space (taking responsibility for creating the field conditions) for transformation are all aspects of this principle. Paradoxically, I have found that it is important to look beyond what we typically understand by 'the self' to be more instrumental in service to the client need. This often means enlarging the frame of reference around the use of self as instrument in the client/consultant relationship.

By way of example, in his essay on the unified field, Parlett (1997) draws attention to the nature of dependent co-arising between 'individuals' and the systems we are part of: 'we create our systems, our systems create us' (p16). For me, working with Gestalt approaches to corporate transformation involves acknowledging and engaging with this apparently magical and numinous quality of the field. For instance, I have noticed how frequently a new client arrives with corporate issues surprisingly similar to personal issues I am working on in my own life – for example, around my own visibility, leadership, relating and so on.

Davies (1997) writes about the incidence of parallel processes in organisational consulting. Although I disagree with her attribution of the phenomenon solely to projective identification (along with Krantz and Gilmore, 1991), I can recount numerous examples of coincident breakthrough in my life and in the client work I undertake. This seems to me to offer exciting possibilities for further research.

While I work hard to distinguish between and maintain appropriate boundaries around my own development needs and those of my clients, the patterns and themes that co-arise provide invaluable insights and material for mutual benefit. In this sense, issues of my own identity, creativity and development are activated by and recursively activate the client issues of brand, innovation and change with which I work.

At a practical level, this means that as I work with systemic issues of brand, innovation and business development in client organisations, I continually and reflexively focus on my own ways of being, around the parallel processes of embodying, bringing forth and growing in my own life. I do not see self-process and field-process as polarities, but rather as co-existing in a more intricate and subtle figure/ground relationship. Working with the notion of 'self as instrument' for me involves developing acuity around the Chinese puzzle of when to attend more mindfully to intrapsychic, interpersonal or systemic issues.

This field perspective on the use of self as instrument implies for me that a key stance of the Gestalt practitioner in organisations is to work, not just with witness consciousness, but intimate witness consciousness. That is, to acknowledge the subtle and often unknowable ways in which client and practitioner may be co-implicated in working together. Although this verges on a

metaphysical stance, I believe in being pragmatic about its applications in businesses. In determining which of the multitude of complex issues to focus on in my daily organisational work, I accord with Nevis's (1987) view that it is often a useful rule of thumb to find those issues that both pique consultant interest and energy, and which simultaneously mobilise the interest and energy of the client system. He goes further in stating unequivocally, 'the development of the self is the single most useful means of becoming an effective consultant' (p58).

A Brand of Gestalt?

The five principles I have outlined in this article – be future-facing and action-focused; recognise that you are in service to the system; discriminate between intimate and strategic relating; revitalise rather than re-engineer; and recognise the dependent co-arising between self and system – have arisen as a result of an ongoing dialectic between my practical experience in commercial organisations and my immersion in Gestalt ideas and ways of thinking. Taken together, they provide a glimpse of my own particular brand of Gestalt.

The vignettes I have painted also lead me to wonder how other Gestaltists would work with similar situations. I realise that I do not know definitively what it is to work with Gestalt in organisations. I see a wide range of practices in other Gestalt-trained colleagues, and am reminded of the three blind men who were introduced for the first time to an elephant. The first stood at its ear and thought it was a great fan. The second stood at its tail and thought it was a rope. The third stood at its feet and thought it was a great tree-trunk. Elephant-ness eluded them all. Diversity seems to me to be a particular hallmark (itself a specific kind of brand) of Gestalt. Yet despite the value of variety it also raises difficulties that frustrate me. Do we stand for anything together as Gestalt practitioners in organisations? How would we recognise one another? What could bind us into a coherent and potent community of practice? How could we be more effective in the world?

These important questions perhaps suggest possibilities for the future training and development of Gestalt consultants, or for therapists wanting to bridge into large systems work. In organisational parlance, these are also important questions about brand, which I now offer as a metaphor for *presence*. Developing a clearer and more consistent brand is ultimately to work on the very presence of Gestalt in the world. Like presence, a brand (beyond the crassness of a mere logo) is the immanent aspect of our contact-boundary with the world. It is highly field-sensitive, and can be central to how we come to know ourselves as well as how we come to be known. Branding can help an organisation and community create and articulate purpose and values, shape and value uniqueness, energise around needs, mediate experience and make continuous creative adjustments in relationship to the environment. As the vital spark of a business or community, brand, like presence, can ignite leadership, strategy, team performance, communications, change, innovation and other critical areas.

I wonder whether it is time for Gestaltists to question more deeply and collectively our presence in the world, and the place and purpose of our practice as we face the future. The anecdote I began this article with is still ringing in my ears. Is it time to refocus and redirect the Gestalt brand?

Notes

Brand and innovation are intimately inter-related areas of commercial concern. A brand exists to put an organisation into relationship with its market. As such, a brand is a complex bundle of elements including the projected image of a business (logo, motto, typeface, colour, store design, product design etc) and its recognisable cultural characteristics (the lived behaviours of people in the company, especially those who come into direct contact with customers, as well as specific practices

and processes the organisation is famous for). Innovation describes a spectrum of activities around bringing new things into being, from the development of new products and services to the generation of new strategies and working cultures, to the rare but ground-breaking and industry-changing new business concepts. My work as a brand and innovation specialist takes me into each of these distinct domains working on issues including strategy, leadership, communications and others. Importantly, I also work across the two domains on issues of business growth. As such I am concerned with the health and wealth of a business.

An organisation's stakeholders include its staff, suppliers, strategic partners, shareholders, customers and others.

'Service-user' is a term employed in the NHS to acknowledge that a wider group than patients avail themselves of healthcare and related welfare services such as sickness benefits, attendance allowances and so on. A service-user could be a patient, partner, family member, carer or significant other.

Hellinger's (1998) work on Orders of Love reminds us that dysfunctionality can sometimes be caused not because of interpersonal issues between team members but because of the systemic inter-relationships of roles and positions across of the organisation over time.

By 'brands' I mean established and invariably global companies such as Disney or HSBC, but also established institutions, movements, even approaches such as Gestalt. By 'branding' I refer to specialist practices that help encourage belonging and trust, and that establish perception and reputation. These practices include reifying figureheads (to the average person, Gestalt is still inextricably linked with Fritz Perls), distilling and strategically applying values, regularly promoting particular viewpoints through sloganising or conferencing, advertising or events management, as well as a host of other actions.

Looking at inspiration as a property of the field, my own company is pioneering 'the art of inspiring-innovationTM' – a specialist practice we draw attention to with the use of the hyphen, and which is a term we have legally trade-marked.

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