

A Gestalt Approach to Facilitation

by Warren Scott - Oakwood Learning Ltd

Organizational facilitation usually is described in terms of three primary models: purchase, doctor-patient, and process consultation (Schein, 1988). **Purchase models** refer to the purchase of expert information and advice; **doctor-patient models** refer to the purchase of diagnostic and prescriptive services; and **process consultation models** refer to collaborative client-consultant relationships in which consultants function as facilitators and help clients learn to improve their internal problem-solving processes. Nevis (1987) suggests that Gestalt models of consultation essentially are extensions of process consultation, with the addition of a theoretical foundation built on the principles of Gestalt therapy.

Basics of Gestalt Theory

Gestalt psychology began as the study of human perception and learning during the early and mid-Twentieth Century (Koffka, 1922; Kohler, 1929; Wertheimer, 1945). Gestalt principles subsequently were applied in the therapeutic setting (Perls, 1951) and were focused specifically on the processes by which people develop an awareness and perception of their environments at any given moment in time. When Gestalt principles are applied within an organizational-consulting situation, perception and awareness become focal points-so much so that Nevis (1987) argues that the basic premise of Gestalt Facilitation & consulting is that **effective awareness processes are fundamental to any successful intervention**.

Figure/Ground

Gestalt pertains to the manner in which parts of environments or situations are perceived and experienced as meaningful wholes. **Figure** is anything within the environment or situation that is the focus of attention, and **ground** is the environment or background surrounding the figure. Ground includes all that is within one's field of perception (physical and emotional) but that is not the focus of attention. Figures exist within **boundaries** that define and separate them from the environment

The Gestalt Cycle of Awareness

Nevis contends that effective Gestalt facilitation requires an understanding of the Gestalt cycle of awareness. Its acceptance as a basic orienting principle is an integral part of understanding Gestalt processes. The cycle of awareness addresses the following elements of human experience:

- The processes by which people become aware of what is going on in the environment (the environment meaning the processes going on within the individuals, group and/organisations)
- The methods by which energy is readied for action.

The cycle assumes that all people have an intrinsic desire to be effective and to be satisfied with what they do. Gestalt-oriented consultants believe that movement through the cycle is necessary for healthy functioning, human effectiveness, satisfaction, and learning. The figure that follows illustrates the seven stages of the Gestalt cycle of experience: sensation, awareness, energy mobilization, action, contact, resolution, and withdrawal of attention.

Sensation - Human experience begins with sensory arousal that is brought about by one or more of the five senses (touch, smell, sight, hearing, and taste). This arousal stems from elements in the environment and leads to an awareness of figures.

Awareness - Awareness occurs when figures emerge from sensations. Awareness focuses attention on important elements (figures) within the environment (ground) so that important elements emerge as clearly differentiated figures. Awareness is continuous and ongoing.

Energy Mobilization - Energy is the potential or capability to do work. Awareness brings about an awakening of internal energy, which produces the additional strength necessary to bring important background elements into focus (make figural). In the Gestalt sense, energy mobilization refers to the work that takes place in order to produce a clearly differentiated figure and ground.

Action - Action adds a behavioral component to the awareness of an emerged figure. The first three stages of the Gestalt cycle of experience refer to increased sensory awareness of self and/or environment. Thus, action is the joining of awareness, energy, and overt motor behavior in a manner that produces some appropriate action.

Contact - Contact is the synthesis of sensory awareness and overt behavior, and pertains to what Nevis (1987) concludes is an “aggressive response to a figure of interest.” Contact is active participation with the figure in order to learn about and to unite the desired goal with what is possible. The meaning derived from our experiences is generated through contact.

Resolution - Resolution is the acknowledgment of completeness. Through resolution, the meaning of contact is assimilated, and learning occurs. Gestalt uses the term closure to signify this completion.

Withdrawal of Attention - As closure takes place, attention to the figure declines, and the figure recedes into the background. Work is completed; what has been learned remains available in the background for later use; and sensory processes once again bring new awarenesses into consciousness.

Gestalt Interventions

Gestalt-oriented facilitators advocate high-visibility interventions and the use of “self” in **high-contact, client-consultant interaction**. For Nevis, the mere presence of a facilitator within a client system affects change within the system. Thus, although the consultant’s activity and behaviour may be termed contracting, data collection, diagnosis, social interaction, and so on, **any activity or behaviour by a facilitator/ consultant is an intervention into the client system**. A Gestalt model of intervention contends that facilitators enter a client system with two primary goals in mind:

- To help the client function more effectively
- To maintain a presence within the client system

All facilitator/consultants, regardless of theoretical orientation, work with organisations to help them to become more effective. However, Gestalt-oriented facilitator/ consultants are set apart by their use of the Gestalt cycle of experience. Gestalt facilitator/ consultants typically direct clients’ attention in a manner that creates strong awareness of what is happening internally in terms of current functioning and problem-solving capabilities-in particular, the manner in which awareness activates energy and action in specific directions.

The second facilitator/ consulting goal, **maintaining a presence within the client system**, deals with the visible use of "self." **facilitator/ Consultant presence** refers to the consultant’s making known his or her personal values, beliefs, attitudes, and skills, and using them to boost client awareness, energy, and action. Presence is **who** the facilitator/ consultant is. Gestalt-oriented facilitator/ consultants rely on their interactions with clients to bring about awareness and to affect positive change. Therefore, Gestalt facilitator/ consultants are not passive participants within the client system and are receptive to the open expression of personal emotions and perceptions.

According to Nevis, the basic intervention behaviors of Gestalt-oriented facilitator/ consultants are based on the above goals and the Gestalt cycle of experience and include the following:

1. **Paying attention to, observing, and selectively offering feedback about what has been observed, heard, and perceived within the client system.**
Doing so helps establish the facilitator/consultant’s presence within the client organization.
2. **Paying attention to one’s emotions, thoughts, and sensations, and selectively feeding back that information to the client system.**
Doing so also helps to establish the facilitator/ consultant’s presence within the client organization.
3. **Paying attention to the energy level in the client system and to the development or lack of common focus (figures) for which there is energy.**

- 4. Supporting the development and mobilization of client energy so that action takes place.**
- 5. Facilitating honest, straightforward, and meaningful communication and contact between members of the client system.**
- 6. Helping the client system to achieve an increased awareness of the processes involved in completing organizational tasks so that tasks can be completed in ways that achieve closure around figural issues.**

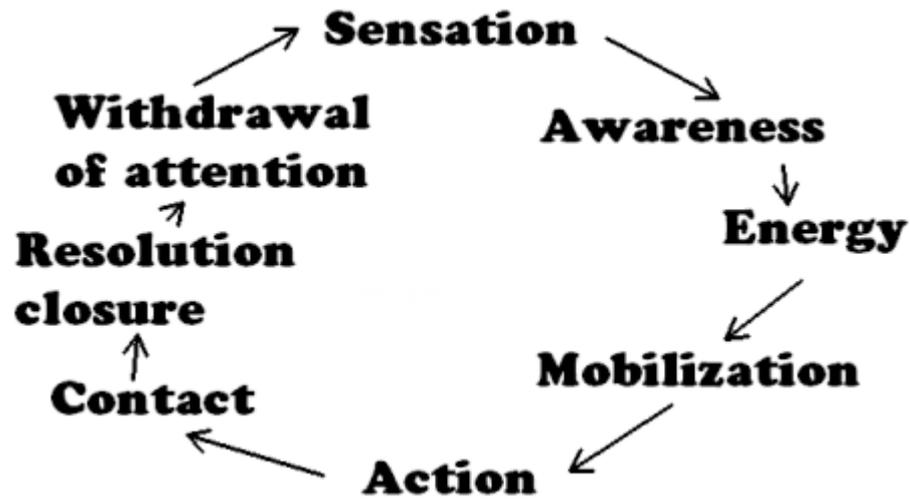
Behaviours one and two form the essence of Gestalt facilitator/ consulting. The facilitator/ consultant becomes a mirror, giving the client organization an opportunity to view itself from an outsider's perspective. The skilled Gestalt facilitator/ consultant has an array of carefully developed observation and feedback skills that signal the presence of a highly developed self; this is the single most important aspect of Gestalt facilitator/ consulting. These consulting behaviours are the exact behaviours that the facilitator/ consultant is teaching the client system to perform on its own.

Implications

The Gestalt model of facilitator/ consultation is, for the most part, an extension of traditional process consultation. However, there are major differences, primarily in the use of the Gestalt cycle of experience and in the consultants' reactions and senses of self as issues for consideration.

Two important implications are derived from the integration of Gestalt ideologies into the facilitator/consulting process. The first concerns facilitator/consultants as part of the client process and suggests that facilitator/consultants are more than passive participants within client systems. Facilitator/consultants are, in fact, hypersensitive to client-awareness processes and actively direct clients toward energy mobilization and action. The second implication concerns the facilitator/consultant's internal processes while working within the client system. Their job is to help the client system to become more effective, which suggests that their services are client driven (as opposed to product driven) and that successful facilitation/consulting is predicated on adapting the facilitation/ consulting to fit the client.

Finally, in addition to facilitation/consulting, Gestalt principles have been advocated for use in other organisational aspects such as general managerial behavior (Herman & Korenich 1977), team building (Karp, 1980), and organization development (Herman, 1974).



Gestalt Cycle of Experience

From E.G. Nevis, *Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach*.
New York: Gardner Press, 1987.