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Gestalt Therapy and Organizational Change Three Recent Contributions

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This article reviews three contributions from Gestalt therapy to the fields of management and organizational change. The three works examined are

- *The Change Leader: Using a Gestalt Approach with Work Groups*. H. B. Karp. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer, 1996
- *Beyond the Wall of Resistance*. R. Maurer. Austin, Texas: Bard Books, 1996
- *Change in Organizations*. P. Clarkson. London: Whurt Publishers, 1995

Psychology and psychotherapy provide an important foundation for understanding management and organization change. Most systems of organizational change are built upon explicit or implied psychological assumptions about the individuals who make up organizations. Key questions answered by these assumptions include what motivates these individuals, how do they interact with one another, and what motivates them to change.

As useful as the insights imbedded in these assumptions are, there are intrinsic differences between the world of psychotherapy and the world of business and organizational change, and these differences themselves lead to two questions: First, what is the appropriate level of analysis: individual, group or total organization?

Do we change organizations by focusing on individual members, the groups to which these individuals belong, or the overall structure and process of the organization? Most systems of psychotherapy focus on either the intrapsychic and interpersonal levels. One of Gestalt therapy's distinctions is that its framework allows us to shift between levels. Originally, Gestalt therapy provided a unique view of the individual and that person's changing environment (Latner, 1992). More recently,

however, the work of some Gestalt therapists has applied Gestalt principles at the level of the total organizational system (Critchley and Casey, 1989). The Cleveland Gestalt Institute has taken the lead in this new approach. It is this ability to shift between the individual, group and organizational levels that makes the Gestalt framework particularly helpful for the organizational consultant and manager.

The second question is: what is the relevance of human emotion in a business context? Since the historic Hawthorne experiments, managers and consultants have systematically extended the standard view of relevant organizational behavior to include more and more of the individual's affective system. In the late 1950s, organization development extended the trend toward bringing the "whole individual" into the workplace. Currently this is an old issue, but hardly a settled one. Today, some take for granted the relevance of personal feelings in the workplace, while others still question the relevance of affect to business and management.

Gestalt therapy makes a contribution here from both theoretical and applied bases. Gestalt theory views emotion in terms of a cycle of experience that allows the individual to link emotion to specific responses to the environment. Gestalt methodology offers a wide variety of techniques by which individuals and groups can increase awareness of their perceptions and emotions.

In what follows, we have examined the three works under review in terms of how they continue the trend toward making emotion relevant to business behavior.

Each of these books is based on a different view of change and consulting in the same way that each organizational consultant takes a different view of consulting and change. To some, they are nuts and bolts, and to others, therapy. Some use only Gestalt and others are eclectic. These books highlight these differences.

Change in Organizations is by Petruska Clarkson, who has published two other books on Gestalt Therapy, *Gestalt Counseling in Action* (London: Sage, 1989) and *Key Figures in Counseling and Psychotherapy: Fritz Perls* (London: Sage, 1993). But Gestalt therapy is not a major focus of Clarkson's book. Instead, she draws on a number of theories to describe the framework of relationships within organizations. She views organizations as a complex web of human relationships with different aspects, such as:

- The working alliance
- The unfinished or projected relationships
- The developing relationship
- The personal relationship
- The transpersonal relationship

The essays in *Change in Organizations* range from topics such as redundancy (British for layoffs) to the pseudocompetency of executives. Two essays draw specifically upon Gestalt: the essays on redundancy, which she structures around the Gestalt Cycle of Experience, and a theoretical essay on organizational change which draws on these three Gestalt principles:

- Everything is a whole.
- Everything changes.
- Everything is related to everything else.

In terms of their level of analysis, the essays describe organizational phenomena from the individual's point of view. They do not illustrate how the Gestalt framework can be used to move back and forth between the individual and collective view. For instance, the chapter on organization change describes changes in terms of the individual and his psychology, using terms such as enhanced functioning, disillusionment, and growth. And the essay on intervention focuses only on the client's subjective experience of danger, conflict, confusion, or deficit. The chapter on groups draws on Eric Berne's theory of group development, which is based on the individual perception of each group member. Clarkson presents these various frameworks which using checklists for the reader, consultant, or manager to draw on to understand individual behavior in an organizational context.

Change in Organizations demonstrates how emotions are relevant to business life but avoids the extreme position that emotions are the root of all business problems. Her focus, instead, is on how emotion can block the learning necessary to adjust to layoffs, and to balance task and process. Clarkson also shows how executives can suffer from believing that they are not as competent as others believe they are or they appear to be: pseudo-competence. Her book thus adds to the long-term trend in management writing, which integrates the affective life of individuals into the realm of work-related behavior.

Change in Organizations is a useful book for consultants and managers who already have a basic background in Gestalt theory and its application. With such a background the frameworks and models in this book can help a manager or consultant to be aware of the assumptions guiding their work and can serve as a guide to future work. Managers and consultants must always be prepared to explain what they are doing to their clients, and Clarkson's simple, easy-to-understand diagrams and tables are especially useful in educating the client, a part of any organizational intervention.

The Change Leader: Using a Gestalt Approach with Work Groups is a guide for leading individuals and groups through change. Karp covers so

much ground so quickly that his book is a powerful primer for new managers and a refresher for the more experienced managers and practitioners. It is refreshingly different from most other books on change, which can be traced back to the early (and by now familiar) seminal works in the field of organization development. But *The Change Leader* is based on Gestalt theory. Each chapter deals with a specific aspect of the change process, starting with power and self-interest and ending with implementing change. It is truly a step-by-step, "how to" book.

Since Gestalt theory relies heavily on the use of paradoxes, the book also uses them. Karp relies especially on these three:

1. You change by not changing.
2. Slower is faster.
3. The more complex the change, the simpler it is to implement.

Since the Gestalt approach originated in a clinical rather than an organizational setting, the author makes liberal use of group activity and "change-leader outlines" to provide practical organizational applications. These provide a useful guide to managers and practitioners as they work with groups to experience the Gestalt concepts in action. Questionnaires are provided throughout the book (with answers in the back) as a guide to learning.

Karp supports the idea that the most useful focus for organization change is the individual, in contrast to most current change strategies, which are geared to creating change in the group setting. His book focuses on how to work with individual concerns, *within* a group setting. Karp, (1996, p. 6) quoting Perls (1973), emphasizes a basic value that he sees driving the change process, that "no human being has the right to make a unilateral decision that affects the lives of other individuals without offering them a voice in that decision." The author points out that, by becoming more comfortable with and confident in your own personal use of power, you increase your own effectiveness, and facilitate the empowerment of those with whom you live and work. Karp's focus on the individual and his impact on others is consistent throughout the book.

The Change Leader takes a micro-approach to change, concentrating on the importance of emotion in business organizations. The author suggests that before anyone delves into the strategies of change, he needs to ask himself this question: "How are you stopping yourself from getting what you want?" This legitimization of personal needs is a very powerful tool for a manager attempting to produce change in an organization.

More radical views of organizational change such as *Mean Business* by Albert J. Dunlap (1996), have tended to emphasize the demands of

the environment rather than the human capacity for change. *The Change Leader* does the opposite, emphasizing, clarifying, and discussing individual values as an early step to group effectiveness. In doing so, it places itself within the “whole individual” classic OD approach to the work place, rather than newer trends.

OD, like Gestalt, is currently in a state of change. Its present focus has shifted from what some called “a missionary approach” in the 1970s—spreading the good word for humanistic and democratic values in organizations—to practitioners adapting themselves to traditional business concerns. While fostering humanistic concerns remains an important agenda, their focus is now on business effectiveness, quality, and productivity (Church, Burke, and Van Eynde, 1994).

The Change Leader, in summary, is a basic book on Gestalt in organizational settings, with a bigger emphasis on application than theory.

In *Beyond the Wall of Resistance*, Robert Maurer uses Gestalt theory and methodology, not as a Gestalt practitioner does, but as management or an OD consultant would. With his numerous examples and interviews, he demonstrates how, by harnessing, working with and overcoming resistance, one can induce change in an organization. To illustrate how it is done, Maurer gives us a viable change model centering on resistance, adapting the Gestalt Cycle of Experience in a form called a Cycle of Change. His six-step model has these specific aims:

- To help us appreciate that change is a cycle, and that nothing lasts for ever
- To explain why resistance is occurring
- To help us predict the consequences of continuing to use the same strategies
- To point to alternatives to the current course of action

Maurer aims to educate the reader on the nature and significance of resistance. For instance, he points out the signs of resistance in the workplace:

- Confusion
- Immediate criticism
- Denial
- Malicious compliance
- Sabotage
- Easy agreement
- Deflection
- Silence
- In-your-face criticism

Maurer teaches, and the approach of the book models, a good way for managers to make change. For example, he starts his readers off by offering a basic Gestalt tenet, that they be skeptical of his guidance—don't introject—and then leads them cautiously into the implementation phase. In contrast, Karp, in *The Change Leader*, quickly leads his readers to work with groups on organization problems with problem-solving techniques and action plans.

Maurer cleverly focuses on an area, resistance, that is most frustrating to managers and, therefore, immediately has the reader's attention. He shows us how we typically approach resistance and the probable disastrous results. Since most of us accept that our approaches to resistance are less than perfect, we are fair game for the next step: he gives us five touchstones to work with. He shows us how to use them, illustrating his method by providing examples, stories, scenarios, and interviews with leaders in the field. Thus Maurer gives us an education in one of the strongest areas in the Gestalt approach an area where it is radically different from other approaches, because it honors resistance. Maurer's five touchstones are:

- Maintain clear focus
- Embrace resistance
- Respect those who resist
- Relax
- Join with the resistance

At this level Maurer offers a simple survey so stake holders can begin safely, with dialog on the collected data and what it means. Like *The Change Leader*, Maurer's book is a primer—but in a different way. It gives the reader more time to "chew" and digest Gestalt thinking before attempting to try to transfer that understanding.

Beyond the Wall of Resistance does a fine job of balancing the needs of the individual and the organization, but Maurer emphasizes managing groups to produce change. He believes our failures to induce change in today's business environment are caused less by resistance than by our failure to manage it. He urges the reader to get in touch with "where they are coming from" to deal with group change. This focus on how management can deal with its own resistance, along with his mainstream approach, will neutralize any manager's preconceived notions about using Gestalt. (Yes, there are preconceived notions about Gestalt [Church, Waclawski, and Burke, 1996] and there are similar notions about OD.)

If the cost of failed attempts at change is high for the organization, think about the cost to employees. As Maurer points out, there are people behind the Wall of Resistance, and when we try to destroy that wall,

people will fight back. Often, we will fail, and our efforts as a result will only succeed in making the wall stronger.

Maurer approaches individual feelings and sentiments through the eyes of a seasoned business manager. He asks, how do we effectively deal with them, and he shows us why the conventional ways of dealing with resistance to change actually increase opposition to it. Maurer's approach also allows for fast change. While OD traditionally emphasizes incremental change, newer business problems require more radical, immediate change. OD has been forced to come to grips with this threat to its slower paced, humanistic agenda. The need for radical change increases the pressure in the workplace to use management styles that are more directive and even coercive (Dunphy and Stace, 1993), creating a need for OD and Gestalt practitioners to mediate between the concerns for the needs of the "whole individual" and the needs of the "whole organization."

Maurer's approach to this problem is more palatable than the others reviewed here. His examples imply support of both incremental and radical change. Though his touchstones do not support coercive styles of managing, they do support more directive styles. One of his examples, from Chapter 15, is of a famous orchestra leader forcing his orchestra to play music they didn't want to. They finally played it and played it well; they even learned to like it. However, as the author points out, for this kind of situation to work out well, certain conditions have to be present. Here, the necessary condition was the conductor: the orchestra members respected his abilities and so were willing to follow where he led.

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