

Gestalt coaches as awareness agents

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A review of **A Gestalt Coaching Primer – the Path Toward Awareness IQ** by Dorothy E Siminovitch. Published by Gestalt Coaching Works, www.gestaltcoachingworks.com, 2017, 339 pages. Price: \$25.00.

Almost a decade ago now, I undertook coach training with the Academy of Executive Coaching (AoEC). My trainers were Marion Gillie and John Leary Joyce, both Gestalt psychotherapists, and executive coaches. John was the founding trainer at the Gestalt Centre in London; and later, founded the AoEC. The training was not specifically Gestalt, but Marion lived and breathed Gestalt as a way of life and she ignited my deep interest in this modality, which I have furthered through subsequent trainings.

In setting the context for her book, *A Gestalt Coaching Primer – the Path Toward Awareness IQ*, Dorothy Siminovitch describes her aim as ‘to make accessible and available what is often obscured by academic language’ (p. 2). It is an ambition that is close to my heart; and one I feel she achieves, in the main. Siminovitch argues that what is missing from the literature is ‘a trusted guide, a primer that demystifies the Gestalt principles, concepts, and applications that provide meaningful and compelling resources for coaching practice’ (p. 2). I do think she delivers that goal; however, as I look on my coaching bookshelf, there are a few other trusted guides too, including: *The Fertile Void* by John Leary Joyce (2014) and *Gestalt Coaching* by Peter Bluckert (2015). Still, there is much to admire in Siminovitch’s contribution.

Siminovitch describes Gestalt as “the pragmatics of magic” – this magical feeling has a great deal to do with the sense of energy, renewal, and self-liberation released by action with informed awareness in the moment that holds the greatest possibility for choice and change’ (p. 3). This captures beautifully my lived experience of Gestalt practice. In my leadership coaching work, I

have always had a deep interest in the concept of multiple intelligence, including Danah Zohar’s research around spiritual quotient (SQ) in her and Ian Marshall’s book *Spiritual Intelligence* (2001); and more recently, Malcolm Parlett’s exploration of ‘whole intelligence’ in *Future Sense* (2015). So I found myself deeply curious to pick up Siminovitch’s book, and discover that the core purpose of this book is to support coaching clients to deepen their awareness, to support choice and change, to evoke a sense of awakening and develop a new ‘integrative awareness competency – Awareness IQ’ (p. 4).

The first chapter builds an accessible and compelling case for developing Gestalt coaching practice. I found the articulation of the models helpful, in particular, her introductions to figure/ground, the cycle of experience, the unit(ing) of work. As Siminovitch recognises, and I do too, these are central to Gestalt practice, but not easy concepts to fully master. I particularly valued her articulation of how coach presence (‘a being intervention’, p. 33) supports ‘use of self as instrument’ (‘which facets of our presence we act from in service of the client’, p. 33). I also appreciated how she brought in the connections between Gestalt and both mindfulness and Otto Scharmer’s leadership model, ‘Theory U’.

In the first chapter, the only part that does not resonate for me, and leaves me a little confused, is Siminovitch’s assertion that ‘the coach-client collaboration is one key differentiation from therapy and consulting’. I would say the coach-client collaboration is central, whether I am practising as a Gestalt coach, or as a Gestalt therapist.

At the end of chapter one, Siminovitch usefully highlights the connection between central Gestalt principles – ‘collaboration, co-creation, awareness intelligence, experimentation, deep listening, with the core competencies of the International Coach Federation (ICF)’ (p. 38). I now realise why I was drawn to the ICF competencies in the very early stages of my AoEC coach training: there was a Gestaltist within me, waiting to emerge. I have since chosen the ICF as my accrediting body and so Siminovitch’s focus on the ICF resonates deeply for me. However, I do find myself wondering how coaches with an interest in developing their Gestalt coaching practice, and who have chosen professional accreditation through other coaching bodies, e.g. EMCC, AC, APECS, might feel about the strong focus on ICF, and ICF competencies, that runs throughout the book.

In the chapter ‘Awareness and Change’, Siminovitch clearly and simply outlines the

Gestalt coach's role, using the paradoxical theory of change, as 'awareness agents' (p. 40), to support more client choice, and as the first step towards learning and change. It is a beautifully articulated chapter. In particular, I think she focuses well on the challenges Gestalt coaches face and how new awareness can be unsettling, threatening and potentially shaming for coaching clients. She talks about how to use awareness in ways that best serve the client, and this being both a 'skill and an art' (p. 44). Indeed. She outlines clearly how to develop a safe, effective and ethical practice, arguing that skilful and artful practice in this area 'supports the client to see and to experience the liberating power of self-determined change – we see this as a contemporary version of genuine magic' (p. 54).

There is a detailed chapter on the Cycle of Experience (CoE), which is extremely accessible. As Siminovitch says, 'self-mastery of one's own COE is an identifying marker of the masterful Gestalt coach' (p. 77). I notice since reading this chapter my understanding has deepened, and my interest in my own CoE is more figural. She goes on to quote from the late Ed Nevis, who described 'the skilled Gestalt practitioner' as:

[one] who has internalised the Cycle of Experience as an orientating principle through experiencing it as both a client and a consultant. One must not only believe intellectually that this theory of awareness is a powerful perspective, one must have assimilated the value of the awareness process in his or her visceral and skeletal being as a fundamental biological orientation. (p. 80)

Throughout this chapter, Siminovitch takes a strong stand on the inherent risks involved in inquiring into the client's experiential data. I find her position, words, and tone on these risks particularly helpful, resonant and ethical.

Siminovitch devotes an entire chapter (22 pages) to the theme of resistance and the challenge of development and change. In doing so I feel she differentiates from other Gestalt coaching books, in a way that is both wholly accessible and deeply valuable. I find the depth of her capacity to attend to the inherent sensitivities in awareness-focused coaching work refreshing, and resonant. She states:

[T]he coach is required to be impeccably trustworthy, both in presence and methodology, so that clients are both challenged and supported to enter a zone of safe emergency. (p. 102)

Siminovitch weaves leadership concepts into each chapter, and this chapter is no exception. I particularly appreciated the links

she makes in supporting clients to become aware of their unaware resistance patterns, their 'swamp work' (p. 101), referencing both Johari's Window, and Heifetz's concept of adaptive leadership. I also valued how she linked resistance patterns (modifications to contact) with the Cycle of Experience, and the CoE skill required by the Gestalt coach, as resistance is brought into awareness.

Presence has become a hot topic in the fields of leadership and organisational development and Siminovitch's extensive chapter on presence does well to explore this issue in a detailed and sophisticated way. There is much to admire. Firstly, she differentiates between coaching presence and use of self, and outlines presence as a way of 'being'; and use of self involves informed action and 'doing'. Secondly, the chapter builds through exploring aspects of presence; qualities of presence; presence and the use of self in the coaching relationship; and then use of self, skills and competencies. Also, like other chapters, Siminovitch continues to focus on the inherent risks in deepening client awareness, and the depth of skill required of Gestalt coaches, in particular when:

... what's evoked is not accurate, we need to know how to meet the consequential projections purposefully and non-defensively. These challenges, whilst subtle, can have a dramatic effect. (p. 131)

Siminovitch makes useful references to Nick Petrie's concept of the distinction between horizontal and vertical leadership development models (2013). She asserts that whilst both models are useful and productive, the emphasis on horizontal development (leadership skills, tools, techniques, information), at the expense of vertical development, 'has proven problematic' (p. 134). And in a VUCA-driven world (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous), 'presence is knowledge that lies along the vertical pathway of leadership development...and vertical development is about transformation of the leader' (pp. 133-134). Indeed.

Strangely, though I am deeply interested in creative experimentation (developed through both psychodrama training and Gestalt therapy training), I found myself much less engaged in the chapter on 'The Power of Experiment(s) in Unit of Work'. I initially found myself working hard trying to make sense of the two types of experiments – 'awareness and thematic' (p. 145); and I wonder about the intended value in this. I found it complex trying to link the two types of experiments with the Cycle of Experience and the Unit of Work. The types of experiments (categorised by Erving and

Polster) were helpful, yet limited; though the examples given were valuable.

Similarly, the exploration of 'Group and Team Coaching' left me feeling rather confused. In particular, as it begins with systems theory. I found myself wondering about Siminovitch's intent? Is the focus on group development and systems; or Gestalt team coaching and field orientation? I appreciated her bringing in Mary Ann Huckabay's concept of working with small groups, of how the three main theoretical frameworks (systems, field and Gestalt theory) 'provide the why, the what, and the how of effective work with small groups' (p. 173). Siminovitch has highlighted that few Gestalt practitioners writing on group work draw any clear distinctions between systems theory and field theory. I feel she has differentiated through drawing out these distinctions; which I feel interested in, and yet not entirely engaged in. I noticed myself re-engaging, as I read the 'CoE and Interruptions to Contact at the Group Level' and the 'Six Classic Gestalt Resistances at the Group Level'. Overall though, I found this chapter much less accessible than others.

It is clear to understand why the Gestalt Centre for Coaching has aligned itself with the ICF. And that the main purpose of writing this book emerged from a goal to provide students in the Gestalt Centre for Coaching with an accessible and trusted guide, to support the development of technical competencies, and the more adaptive vertical development competencies, around presence and use of self. As Siminovitch says:

What the Gestalt-based approach adds to the ICF core competencies is a strategic dimension of the implementation of presence, which is identified as 'use of self'... use of self is when the coach acts skillfully to apply intentional interventions designed to support clients' learning and change. We see use of self, the active side of coaching presence, as a central integrating competency that effectively guides the masterful art and practice of coaching. Use of self has a key position in activating all other competencies. (p. 218)

In exchange, 'the ICF competencies are strengthened and enhanced when the existential, experiential, and experimental variables of Gestalt coaching are introduced' (p. 240). Siminovitch is proud of the integration of these two forces in the service of professional coaching, and rightly so. It is an ethical partnership that works well. This book achieves its aim to be a trusted guide, a book that (in the main) demystifies Gestalt, and provides a meaningful and compelling resource for Gestalt informed

coaching practice, that is aligned with the ICF competencies.

References

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