

# Gestalt practice and arts-based training for leadership, innovation and change management skills

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**Abstract:** *Gestalt practice and arts-based training has been examined and evaluated using evidence from the literature and personal experience. Gestalt practice allows the training and learning process to take into account the intrapersonal as well as the interpersonal aspects of the group and the individuals involved: the resulting knowledge and understanding can be used to the benefit of learners. Gestalt practice is in essence a highly experiential approach and, as such, provides space for active experimentation in a training or coaching session. By combining Gestalt concepts with experimentation from the arts, a significant methodology for teaching soft skills and helping learners to acquire leadership, innovation and change management skills can be developed. Insights are provided into how a combination of Gestalt practice and arts-based training can benefit organizations and individuals. Arts-based training is evaluated by using Kirkpatrick's four levels of rigour framework (reaction, learning, behaviour and results). It was observed that a paradigm shift in training and education is in progress, from what has been referred to in the literature as the 'logico-rational Anglo-Saxon' model to a more flexible and holistic model that encompasses emotions, feelings and the human body.*

**Keywords:** *Gestalt; arts education; leadership, innovation; change management; soft skills*

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In order for organizations to achieve their strategic goals, their employees are expected to have not only the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities but also the correct and appropriate behaviours and attitudes. Training can be used to improving directly the requisite knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, behaviours and motivation of employees (Thang *et al*, 2010); equally significant are the behaviours, attitudes (and even

emotions) of senior executives because these attributes can influence the operation of the entire organization. For example, as Fineman (1993) explains, paranoid executives can generate a suspicious and defensive organization, while depressive executives can foster pessimism and indecision.

Training and professional or executive development almost by definition implies change – in skills,

knowledge, attitudes or social behaviour (Cascio, 1998). Anecdotally, most people perceive change as unpleasant, disruptive and something to be avoided. The paradox that comes from Gestalt philosophy, which the present paper examines, is that the only constant is that change will occur (Karp, 1996).

In the present paper, we view leaders and leadership much as Scharmer (2009) does in his work. He suggests that:

‘... Leaders [are] the individuals or groups who initiate innovation or change – the “artists”. All leaders and innovators, whether in business, communities, government, or non-profit organisations, do what artists do: they create something new and bring it into the world.’

Using the analogy of leaders or managers as artists enables a clearer understanding of the importance of creativity and inspiration – both essential in today’s business world. According to Hatch *et al* (2005), in order to succeed managers need the creativity of an artist. Only when technical prowess, creativity and inspiration co-exist can the highest levels of business performance be achieved. Adler (2006) agrees that, ‘it is imperative in the 21st century to be able to design options worthy of implementation, which calls for levels of inspiration and passionate creativity that have been more the domain of artists and artistic processes than of most managers’.

## **Gestalt practice and arts-based training**

### *Gestalt practice*

Determining an exact date or period when modern Gestalt theory emerged and became formally recognized is problematic, but publication of the seminal work by Perls *et al* (1951) is regarded as a defining event (Perls *et al*, 1951; Mackewn, 1997). According to Joyce and Sills (2010), good Gestalt practice can be described by five characteristics:

- A focus on here and now emerging experiences;
- A commitment to a co-created and relational perspective;
- The practitioner’s offer for a dialogical perspective (refusing the role of the expert);
- A perspective of field theory and holism; and
- A creative, experimental attitude to the emerging process.

Gestalt practice (much like its psychotherapeutic counterpart) requires a shift of perception on the part of both practitioners and clients. The focus of the

experience is noticing the present moment and what is happening in the ‘now’ – something our educational systems do not generally provide. In the present moment, we focus on perceiving the world as a whole – thus not primarily mind or soul or body or relationship or history or expectation, but all of these. A gestalt is a ‘whole’, an organized field of perception that relates to the past, the future, the environment and both the internal world of the organization and the external world of clients (Houston, 2003).

The promotion and encouragement of full and free-flowing awareness is the cornerstone of Gestalt practice (Houston, 2003); and the term ‘awareness’ does not refer here to thinking, over-analysing, reflecting or self-monitoring. Awareness can be loosely defined as being in touch with one’s own existence and ‘what is’. This means that a person who is aware knows what they do, how they do it and that they have alternatives – which mean that they choose to be as they are (Yontef, 1993).

According to Gestalt theory, there is always a whole, in the sense of co-operation or some other interaction between the sensory, motor and cognitive aspects of a person, so there is no need to separate concepts such as mind, body and spirit. In support of this holistic view, Gestalt methods similarly address many aspects of living besides the verbal (Houston, 2003; Zinker, 1977).

The thinking behind Gestalt involves field and systems theory. Field theory was developed by Kurt Lewin (Lewin, 1939), influenced by 20th century physics and progress in electromagnetism. Smuts (1995) further proposed that all things, ideas, animals, plants and people, like physical forces, have their fields and have to be examined and observed taking into account these fields.

Other important theoretical concepts of Gestalt theory include the natural urge to complete and the fact that people take action to make full contact with their current need or interest. If they manage to do that they will withdraw satisfied; otherwise, if they are unable to complete contact with whatever is attracting them, the ‘gestalt’ will remain unfinished and thus they will interpret the world based on this incomplete ‘gestalt’ (Mackewn, 1997).

Another principle that it is important to mention here is that people tend to focus on specific perceptions and make meaning based on these ‘figural’ perceptions which are understood against a dim background. This is better explained with the image of the well-known vase and faces picture, the Rubin Goblet (Figure 1). We cannot see the two (the faces and the vase) at the same time; we have to make a selection (Mackewn, 1997). Psychologically this is important because it provides information about how people make meaning, always



Figure 1. The Rubin Goblet.

based on something they perceive and something that they are not aware of (the concept of figure and ground).

#### *Arts-based training*

The discussion about how the arts can contribute to the development of organizations is of particular importance in the complex business landscape of today. As organizations search for new solutions to engage and improve the working lives of their people, face difficult management challenges, generate experience-based market value and spur resilience and innovativeness, the arts can help them find new solutions to emerging business problems (Schiuma, 2011). Arts-based training helps to maintain a balance between conventional practices of management education, with their focus on doing, and the unconventional artistic practices with their focus on the development of the self and reflective practice (Congram, 2008).

According to Taylor and Ladkin (2009), it is currently an intricate task to talk about ‘arts-based methods’ in a coherent manner due to the wide range of approaches – which can result in a variety of different goals and outcomes. This flexibility is, of course, also indicative of the significant personal potential that the trainer must be able to realize. Taylor and Ladkin (2009) argue that arts-based methods can range from the ‘flavour of the month’, adding something new and engaging to managerial development activities, all the way up to the implementation of arts-based training by skilled practitioners in order to help a group and an organization achieve well-defined objectives.

In a leadership programme reported by Congram (2008), arts-based learning facilitated a wide variety of learning outcomes which would not have been possible through conventional methods (and was actually outside the scope of traditional methods). These outcomes included educating the imagination, development of the self, self-reflection, raising the unspoken and the unknown into consciousness, widening perceptions and linking being and doing together (Congram, 2008).

Most art-based training methods (for example, drawing, poetry, storytelling, theatrical games or improvisations, etc) have the potential to use the bodies of the trainees and involve them holistically in the training session. This is essential for cultivating ‘presence’ – used here to mean being present in the moment, while also including elements such as being authentic, maintaining ‘creative indifference’ and practising inclusion (Denham, 2006). The concept of presence, also of significant importance in Gestalt practice, is defined by Nevis (1987) as ‘. . . the ability of the trainer, consultant or coach to be aware of what he or she evokes in other people as a consequence of being in the same space with trainees’.

Other benefits of working with arts-based training include working with roles (for example, a future role a manager is expected to perform) or ‘stepping into someone else’s shoes’. In this way, trust in our own abilities can be developed and how to improve abilities and interactions can be learned. At the same time, improvement of diligence in self-observation and capacity for self-reflection can also be observed (Nicolaidis and Liotas, 2006).

#### **Leadership, innovation and change management skills**

The principal subject of interest of this paper is the skills training group, which, according to Wheelan (1990), is ‘. . . a group established to teach human relations skills such as assertion, communication, management or leadership in order to enhance personal and professional effectiveness’. In skills training groups, people may contract to learn to develop skills relevant to their job, or their role, or general interactional skills such as communication, assertion and negotiation.

It is generally accepted that increasing member awareness can be accomplished better through experiential learning rather than by lectures (Wheelan, 1990). Arts-based training can provide a stimulus for development that supports change; in the corporate context this typically includes areas such as communication skills, team building and equal opportunity policy implementation, amongst others. Techniques from the arts can be used to engage people

in ways that other methods cannot (Gibb, 2004). Conducting a skills training workshop for an adult population requires more knowledge as well as a set of skills that includes attention to group processes and timeliness in making appropriate interventions. If the trainer models effectively and handles group issues well, members will be more likely to learn and practise the skills advocated by the trainer (Wheelan, 1990).

According to Taylor and Ladkin (2009), arts-based methods have the following impacts:

- They are able to transfer skills effectively. A great variety of skills such as communication, listening, improvisational skills as well as empathy can be directly impacted by such methods.
- They are able to help on the expressiveness of inner states (use of projective technique). As Taylor and Ladkin state, ‘In particular, the output of artistic endeavours allows participants to reveal inner thoughts, feelings and even a potential that may not be accessible through more conventional modes’.
- They can illustrate the essence of a concept, situation revealing depth that was not possible before. This is also the way to approach tacit knowledge, the part of us that we don’t know we know.
- Finally, they can help us in learning by doing and making. The very making of art can foster a deeper experience of personal presence and connection, which can serve as a healing process for managers and leaders who may so often experience their lives as fragmented and disconnected.

All these factors are important in the current business environment, with its propensity for rapid change and its complex and diverse challenges that require flexible and innovative approaches. Businesses are pushed to innovate before their competitors – according to VanGundy (2005) a lack of creative responses is likely to lead ultimately to reduced profit. Rigid operating systems are ineffective in business environments: flexible systems in contrast can generate possible solutions. Creative solutions add to flexibility by increasing the range of options and helping individuals to cope and adapt: the more ideas they have, the more potential solutions will be at their disposal. Thus creativity can help us to reinvent ourselves and our organizations (VanGundy, 2005).

Creative ability and innovation skills can be developed in trainees by allowing space during the training for right-brain activities. According to Zinker (1977), certain functions are associated with the left cerebral hemisphere, including analysing, problem-solving, doing maths, being in control and being serious, while another set of functions, including creativity, seeing the process, allowing oneself to experience confusion, playing, working with the arts and intuition, are associated with the right hemisphere. The creative person seems to have a special talent for dipping into their intuitive, image-filled right hemisphere while harnessing and illuminating experience with the left brain.

**Table 1: The four levels of rigour for training programmes utilizing Gestalt practice and arts-based training**

Level	Outcomes
Reaction	Trainee satisfaction through interactions with each other and games. Possible minor negative reactions due to the elicitation of emotions, getting in touch with one’s emotional being, resistance and/or bringing to awareness patterns of behaviour (in personal development workshops).
Learning	Acquisition of knowledge relevant to the topic of the training. Acquisition of leadership, artistic, creative, innovation, improvisational and change management skills. Utilizing all different ways of learning (connecting, deciding, action and reflection). Learning on current issues of the organization and the training group (not predefined by the trainer but emergent from the training group).
Behaviour	Improvement of behaviour on the job in: cooperation and teamwork skills; providing services to clients in better ways; dealing with poor communication issues; and matching verbal and non-verbal communication. Acting from a position of greater ‘personal power’ and self-confidence – taking responsibility. Possible ‘unlearning’ of past behaviours and allowing new behaviours to emerge.
Results	Organization becoming ‘healthier’ by understanding its ‘what is’ picture. Stronger cohesion of teams. Balancing intimate and strategic interactions within the organization. Cultivation of ‘presence’ in trainees – understanding personal influence. Opening up to new perceptions and new possibilities. Increased efficiency of managers by seeing what was previously ‘invisible’ or ‘out of awareness’. Problems addressed and solved creatively in ways not previously available.

Source: Based on Kirkpatrick (1977; 1983).

## Evaluating Gestalt practice and arts-based training

Kirkpatrick (1977; 1983) identified four main levels for evaluating training and development programmes. These 'levels of rigour' are: reaction, learning, behaviour and results (see Table 1). Reaction criteria are the lowest level of rigor and represent the trainee's impression or feelings about the programme. Trainees' reactions do not provide a safe evaluation of the training programme. The best results are achieved by motivating trainees to perform tasks well and to react positively to a training programme (Cascio, 1998).

## Epilogue

As discussed above, Gestalt practice respects the present moment and looks at individuals and organizations as they are in the present moment, taking into account the fact that a system is more than the sum of its parts. The arts have a variety of tools to offer to the business sector and management training and can be used to enhance creativity, leadership and change management skills.

According to Ivan G. Siedenbergh, Chairman and CEO of Verizon (quoted by Adler, 2006), 'creativity is the one irreplaceable human skill in an increasingly automated world ... the only sustainable source of competitive advantage'. Because creativity is so highly valued in today's organizations, the importance of 'managers as artists' and arts-based training becomes increasingly apparent.

The paradigm shift that is currently taking place follows the experience of a century of efficiencies gained through mechanistic and reductionist techniques. In this new era, business leaders need to develop their creative capacity and to deepen their knowledge and understanding of themselves and others.

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