

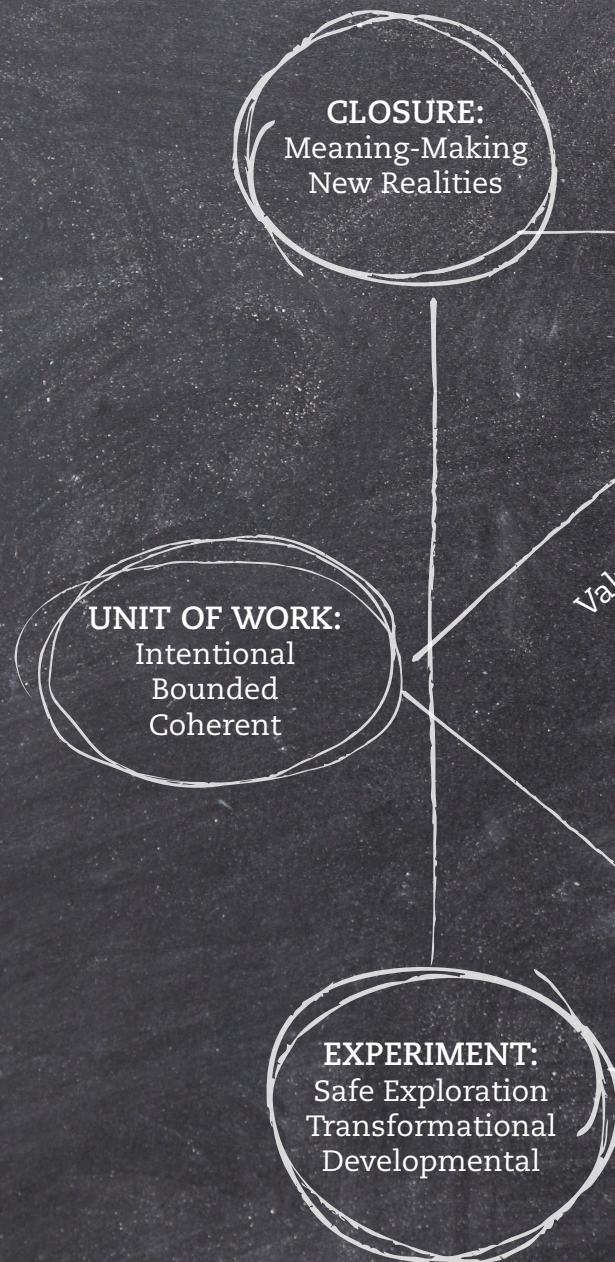
Practicing *Gestalt*

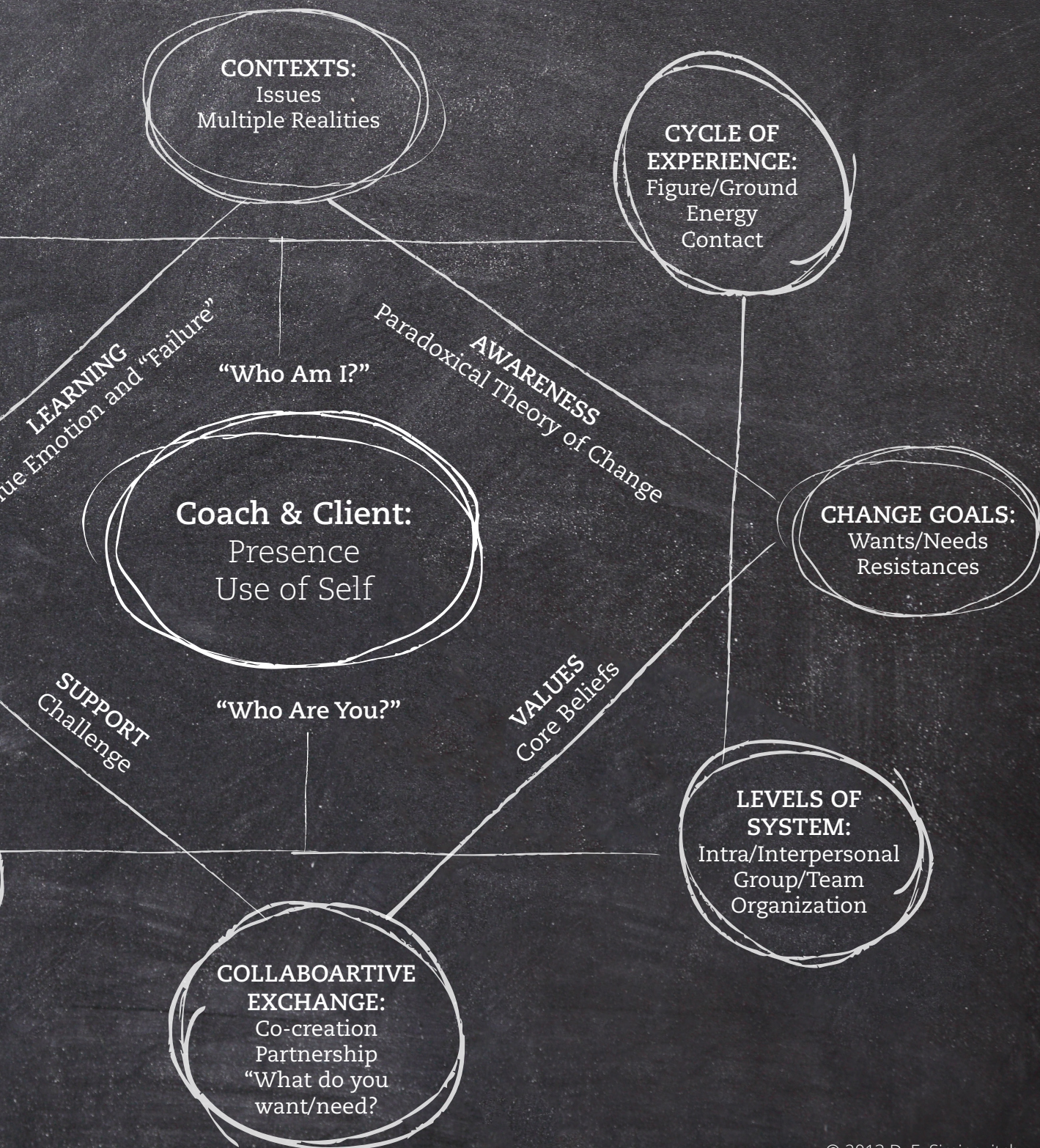
BY DR. DOROTHY E. SIMINOVITCH, MCC

We live in a challenging world of exponential change that's aptly described by a U.S. military acronym, VUCA: volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. Adaptive responses to these challenges occur when vision offsets volatility, understanding tempers the negativity of uncertainty, conscious strategies help manage complexity, and "centering" provides a way to be grounded amidst ambiguity. Coaching clients repeatedly come up against challenges under the VUCA umbrella, and Gestalt coaching provides the dynamic theory, tools and techniques to meet them. In partnership with an experienced Gestalt coach, clients' situational awareness and intervention skills are strengthened, their vision of possibility and opportunity is sharpened, and they are empowered by practices of ongoing self-support and sustained learning.

Gestalt coaching offers what I call a pragmatic magic: The conceptual models and applications have well-defined learning steps, yet the results unleashed are magical. Gestalt coaching is rooted in core principles, concepts and methodologies developed in Gestalt psychotherapy and Gestalt organizational consulting. Inherent to Gestalt theory is the tenet that clients are innately capable and competent; the coach's primary responsibility is to assist clients in identifying their available resources and working through resistances so that they can intentionally use those resources to an advantage. Gestalt thinking holds that learning and change occur through experience and experimentation, both of which adaptively use "failure" to spark new insights and new perspectives. Rather than dwell on deficiencies and flaws, the Gestalt coach works co-creatively with clients to help them identify needs, wants and resistances, and to focus them on potentials and possibilities. This coaching work is done in an aware, co-created environment of trust, where clients can safely explore alternative ways of behaving with no risk to their professional well-being.

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Gestalt coaches serve as “awareness agents,” a role that calls for them to use their own awareness to catalyze clients’ self-awareness as the key asset for current and future goal attainment. To successfully use the self in coaching engagements, Gestalt coaches work in three ways:

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Experientially, by inviting clients to become aware of their immediate contextual responses (e.g., physical, psychological, emotional, cognitive)	Experimentally, by collaboratively and creatively supporting clients’ safe exploration of alternative perceptual and behavioral choices	Existentially, by encouraging clients’ awareness of self and others, which yields “data” that informs actions to achieve desired outcomes
<p>The heart of a Gestalt approach lies in internalizing and applying the power of awareness. The skills needed to track and heighten awareness are taught through the Cycle of Experience (COE), a conceptual model that illustrates how needs and desires are sensed, articulated, engaged with, acted upon and assimilated through meaning-making processes. The Gestalt coach works with the COE to facilitate clients’ self-identification of habitual, unaware patterns of response, particularly those that interfere with their ability to gauge and appropriately act in changing situations. Gestalt coaching clients experience an energetic sense of “liberation” when they discern these patterns and understand how the patterns impact their decisions and behaviors. Gestalt coaches learn and practice embodied presence; i.e., one’s way of being and presenting oneself to the world. In turn, coaches help clients develop strategies for being centered in their own presence. Presence is uniquely manifested by each coach, but being in the relational field of a Gestalt coach’s authentic presence evokes clients’ trust and their hope for successful work.</p>	<p>Gestalt coaches offer collaboratively and creatively structured experiments to strengthen clients’ awareness of themselves and to facilitate an aware use of their available resources. Experiments interrupt habitual perceptual or behavioral patterns and invite opportunity. Clients might be invited to act out real or imagined scenes from the past, present or future; to have a conversation between their perceived and ideal selves; or to describe and “inhabit” fantasy scenarios of peak experiences that have happened or that they hope will happen. Coach and client then debrief the experiment to see what new learning and alternative choices for action have emerged.</p>	<p>The Gestalt coach keeps clients focused on whatever emerges in the moment, as this constitutes data that invariably connects to both short- and long-term professional and personal challenges and goals. A Gestalt approach uses whatever occurs in the moment as the experiential and existential ground for coach and client to explore and experiment with. If a client experiences discomfort with a powerful question, the existential imperative is to support the client to investigate that discomfort to see how it might relate to his or her ability to reach desired goals. Conditions and factors that make career derailment possible or imminent, for example, are often obscured by clients’ habituated or resistant ways of perceiving or behaving. These can only be changed by fully understanding what they are and what role they play for the client. For example, the client might state a goal of making her team more openly expressive and inclusive while she simultaneously engages in an unaware behavioral pattern of controlling and shutting down team members’ input. Once information about such behaviors surfaces, the question for the client becomes, “Do I still want or need to choose this response? What are my other options?” The Gestalt coach encourages clients to explore, to experiment and to choose with awareness.</p>

Even when working with individual clients, Gestalt coaches are mindful of interconnections. Principles of systems theory are a major theoretical and conceptual influence on the Gestalt approach. Gestalt coaches ask, “At what level of system is it most productive to intervene for the greatest learning and development?” Level of system refers to individual, interpersonal, group or team, organizational, and larger levels of human systems. Each system level is connected to, but different from, all other levels, so being adept at identifying and managing system-

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level boundaries is critical. For example: Working individual-level issues at the group level risks a significant boundary error, because individual issues need maximum confidentiality and thus cannot be successfully worked at the group level; organizational executives are always interactive with and responsible for multiple levels of system, so a multi-level awareness must inform any executive coaching intervention. The Gestalt coach supports clients’ experiential and experimental practice in recognizing levels of system. Understanding the central system theory principle of coexistent “multiple realities and contexts” heightens Gestalt coaching clients’ emotional and social intelligence, and tutors them in the art of identifying the system boundaries that “hold” the energy for any given change effort.

The Gestalt coach provides clients with theory, tools and techniques that allow them to adaptively respond to volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The Gestalt coach teaches clients how to best coach themselves: to identify perceptual and behavioral patterns that are no longer useful to experiment safely with alternative perceptual and behavioral patterns to make meaning of and situate themselves within their multiple contexts and realities and to determine their best choices for success.

When the coach skillfully and creatively uses core Gestalt principles, concepts and methodologies to teach clients the means to achieve on their own what they have been imagining, hoping for, dreaming about—that is, indeed, a powerful, pragmatic kind of magic.



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facilitator. She is founder and co-owner of and faculty member and director of training for the Eurasian Gestalt Coaching Program (EGCP) in Istanbul, an ICF Accredited Coach Training Program. She is also co-founder of the Eurasian Gestalt Center, which delivers ICF-accredited trainings. Dorothy is a graduate of Case Western Reserve University's prestigious department of organizational behavior. She envisioned the application of Gestalt theory in the service of coaching in 1995, and has been delivering Gestalt coach training since 1996. EGCP in Istanbul is her second Gestalt-based coach training program to garner ICF accreditation. Dorothy honed her rich teaching, coaching and consulting skills while serving in leadership and teaching roles at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland and through her affiliation with other Gestalt centers. She provides world-class training in and transformative human development through Gestalt-based coaching and holistic approaches, leading to outstanding results for individuals, groups, and organizations. Her particular specialties are coaching for signature presence, leadership presence and peak performance; overcoming derailment; and working with high-performance groups and teams. She presents additional training and development opportunities at ICF conferences, Organization Development Network conferences and by invitation. Dorothy can be reached via email at awareworks@aol.com.