

Thinking holistically

Sue Lieberman presents Gestalt and other ways of working with organisations

Counselling in the workplace has grown enormously in recent years, and is big business. Few large organisations in the UK would now not consider themselves to have some responsibility for the emotional wellbeing of their employees, and sign up to some form of counselling provision: either through in-house counselling, or (more often) via an Employee Assistance Programme. Mostly, such provision is (necessarily) in the form of short-term counselling, usually between six and 10 sessions, and geared towards helping clients in need achieve a shift in perspective on their present circumstances within a short space of time. Such provision can be very effective in helping individuals work through a short-term crisis, or pointing them in the direction of longer-term support when the personal difficulties they are facing have deeper roots.

Although not explicitly a part of most counselling training, counselling concepts, values and approaches have, however, a much wider relevance to the workplace than simply the provision of short-term one-to-one support. For the evidence of this, we need look no further than the proliferation of writings and teachings on leadership, which borrow heavily from the personal development field. In particular, managers are taught the importance of listening and interpersonal skills; and leaders are encouraged to become emotionally self-aware and to think systemically. This represents quite a cultural shift, reflecting the fact that counselling and therapeutic values are recognised to have an important bearing on how a modern organisation functions.

Developing managers' and leaders' skills in this way is enormously beneficial, especially given that for most people a major determinant of their feeling of wellbeing at work is the relationship they have with their manager. A manager who listens responsively and who discusses issues honestly is more likely to get committed and intelligent performance than one who persistently ignores or overrides how staff feel. At another level, however, the way counselling ideas can apply within an organisation concerns the highly complex nature of any modern organisation: how it relates externally to client, customer and stakeholder needs and expectations; and internally to itself and its own system of structures, roles, professions, range of

knowledge etc. Being trained in two different schools of therapy that have developed distinctive ways of applying psychotherapeutic insights to the world of organisations, I turn to both of them in order to discuss this: Gestalt; and a particular psychodynamic systems approach developed by group analysis.

Gestalt: being aware of the whole here-and-now

The word 'Gestalt' means 'whole' or 'wholeness'. In the organisational setting, using a Gestalt approach means having a stance that is whole-oriented. This extends from the wholeness of each individual to the organisational system-as-a-whole. Gestalt is particularly effective in developing the skills of individuals in an organisation: it can help them to be more aware of their own whole-self experience in relation to any organisational 'event', to become more aware of patterns of discourse and dynamic exchange across the organisation, and to become more discriminating in how to act as a result of what they have recognised.

The process that Gestalt uses involves paying detailed attention to two related phenomena. The first of these is the concept of 'awareness': a concept ostensibly simple but highly complex in application. Being 'aware' means noticing and giving value to the totality of my experience: not just my thoughts but what I see and hear; my emotions, sensations and spontaneous images. As an example, I recently saw a manager who has for a long time led an organisation that is run largely by volunteers, has very limited financial resources and many clients in emotional need. The organisation recently moved premises, and this has brought out some underlying dynamics. During my session with the manager, I became aware of a curiously empty feeling and fed this back, using the word 'vacuum'. My client connected with this as a significant description of gaps in the ways different groups were relating in the new building, and she was then able to use this to identify a key aspect of the new administrator's job. Simple awareness of the phenomena that 'I' feel potentially opens up a complexity of experience lying at different levels in the organisation, and provides a means to explore situations that may otherwise become paralysed by unarticulated feeling,

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‘A group is not simply a collection of individuals-in-need but an entity in its own right. The ‘wholeness’ of the group is viewed not by adding up the number of individuals, but by being open to the constant play of interactions between group members, the posing and counter-posing of themes, and by the way the group as a whole seems to incline first one way, then another’



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or inconclusively expressed through repeatedly going over the same ground.

People in organisations to whom I teach this practice invariably express surprise and excitement at the rich possibilities that open up once the fullness of their experience is encouraged and actively utilised. An example of this comes from an Action Learning Set that I facilitated for some months. In one session, a member presented a difficult issue revolving around inter-agency relationships in a facility she managed. I had given one ‘observer’ in this Set the task of paying attention to her own inner images while listening to the presentation. As a result, during feedback the observer offered the presenter her spontaneous image of a baby in a cot. The presenter related to this as an accurate reflection of how she felt, and this opened up a valuable exploration concerning powerlessness, abandonment and isolation, which were all dimensions of the objective situation she had to deal with. Once this was clear, she could use the resources of the group to work out her approach from a more empowered position.

Related to the practice of ‘awareness’ is the actuality of the here-and-now. Organisations operate in a peculiar time warp. They are constantly planning for the future and/or looking back at the past; but often fail to take a sufficient look at what is actually happening in the present, especially if it is difficult or

painful. Gestalt operates on the somewhat obvious premise that everything only actually happens in the present; neither past nor future exist except in imagination, or in the way past experience has shaped patterns of behaviour in the present. In reality, all that we have available to us is in the present. This concept is understood in therapy, but organisations, while they have to undertake forward planning, frequently split off from the present and escape into a future that is either idealised or dreaded, but which is seldom actively connected to the real present. An example of this is an organisation that suffers enormously high levels of staff stress, reflected in sickness and absence. All this organisation seems able to do is to repeatedly carry out staff stress surveys (three times in as many years). In between surveys, nothing happens to tackle the sources of stress (a pattern that inevitably leads to a drop in response rates to each subsequent survey). It is as though management cannot actually look at the painful reality of what is happening to staff without becoming paralysed themselves, and have got stuck in a vague future hope that something will be better next time without actually doing anything in the present.

Beyond the individual: the organisation as system

In developing a way of working therapeutically

with groups, SH Foulkes, the founder of group analysis, applied the concept of Gestalt to groups. In this, he saw a group not simply as a collection of individuals-in-need but as an entity in its own right. The 'wholeness' of the group is viewed not by adding up the number of individuals, but by being open to the constant play of interactions between group members, the posing and counter-posing of themes, and by the way the group as a whole seems to incline first one way, then another.

Virtually all organisations comprise numbers – sometimes large numbers – of groups, and these are groups that operate with complex sets of relationships: internally within their own ranks; externally to other groups and other parts of the organisation, to the customer/client/public world and expectations, and, not least, to the task the organisation has to fulfil. At this level, we are talking about a highly complex system, and some branches of therapy have correspondingly developed ways of working systemically.

Key to a systemic view is seeing an organisation dynamically. That is, the organisation is a living entity with a constant dynamic interplay between people, events and practices. As a parallel, an experienced therapist sees what an individual client says or does in the context of what s/he, the therapist, knows of the client as a whole person: what is the pattern, what might be the meaning to the client, of what s/he is saying? How can I observe and offer to this client in a way which is useful to her? Similarly, albeit on a much larger scale, a systemically-oriented organisational intervener has to be able to observe the actual phenomena of the organisation, to think about the potential significance of these phenomena at a deeper level, and to find a way of reflecting these observations and thoughts back usefully.

The Gestalt capacity for phenomenological awareness, both of myself, my own experience, and what I can objectively see or hear, applies as much, if not more, in this setting. At the same time, any individual's capacity for awareness can be quickly swamped by too much data; so psychodynamic concepts assist as a way of conceptualising theoretically what might be happening in the organisation, and can focus interventions. One such concept is that of projective identification, a key idea in psychodynamic practice. In this dynamic, the feelings one person has are communicated invisibly to another person, and depending on the second person's unconscious 'availability', those feelings will lodge in the second person and have a strong, and sometimes confusing, impact. Organisationally, this can be seen when an entire system becomes bogged down in dysfunctional

ways of working which everyone seems helpless to change.

An example of this comes from the Women's Aid movement. Women's Aid was founded on such a strict notion of egalitarianism that for many years virtually every branch was run as a collective. Everybody, irrespective of their job, was paid the same amount, and no one had any positional authority over anyone else. As all decisions had to have consensus, meetings were long and frequently inconclusive. In these circumstances, effective forward planning and speed of reaction were virtually impossible, and ultimately, in order to keep up with the changing environment, key parts of the movement ditched collectivity in favour of more traditional hierarchy.

On one level, a collective structure sounds like one of those politically naïve relics of the 1960s. Thinking psychodynamically and systemically, however, there is a more complex picture. Women's Aid works to counter domestic violence against women. A high proportion of women who work in Women's Aid have experienced domestic violence themselves, and as a consequence have a deeply ambivalent relationship with power (because of its potential abuse). A collective structure ostensibly flattens out the power hierarchy and protects 'everyone' against abuse by a powerful boss or board of management. In reality, it protects no one. Without the boundaries and containment of a more structured system, powerful and oppressive dynamics are enacted all the time between individuals within the collectivity, sometimes characterised by 'who speaks loudest or longest wins'. This is an example of how unarticulated feelings (terror, fury, powerlessness) became projected into the very structure of the organisation, then creating systems that disallowed exploration of the confusion and could only project the unprocessed feelings back outwards onto the world at large. Moving to a more conventional system was not only necessary for practical reasons; it was also important as a way of potentially providing containment for the emotional experience at the heart of the organisation's existence.

Conclusion

In this article, I have offered two approaches to seeing how therapy in its widest sense can be applied within the workplace. Gestalt offers a rich way of developing awareness; a systems approach is essentially fluid and dynamic in the way of seeing, interpreting and responding to organisational experience. Organisations themselves are rich and complex worlds; they can benefit from many different ways of intervening so as to become optimal places for the health and wellbeing of individuals. ■