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Chapter 33: Define Your Unique Identity

By Dorothy E. Siminovitch, PhD, MCC

Dorothy E. Siminovitch, PhD, MCC is principal of [Gestalt Coaching Works, LLC](#), a Master Certified Coach, and an international coach, consultant, and group facilitator. She is founder, co-owner, faculty, and Director of Training for the Eurasian Gestalt Coaching Program (EGCP) in Istanbul, an ICF-ACTP 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, a certified somatics coach, and a recognized Gestalt coaching pioneer. 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 certification. Dorothy honed her rich teaching, coaching, and consulting skills while serving in leadership 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. Dorothy presents additional training and development opportunities at the International Coach Federation conferences, the Organization Development Network conferences, and by invitation.

Interviewer: Dorothy, you are a person who is clearly recognized as a pioneer in Gestalt coaching. Can you tell us how you came to find this great work?

Dorothy Siminovitch: In 1991, I graduated from the Department of Organizational Behavior at Case Western in Cleveland, and I had already been both a practicing consultant and therapist at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. I was asked by Scott Cowen, the Dean of the Business School, "What is it you're going to be doing in the world?" I said, "I'm going to be doing organizational therapy."

Cowen was unhappy when I said that, but I told him, "Don't worry, that's not going to be the title I use. It's going to be a different description of the work since I know it's not therapy." It's interesting, because that is where the beginning of coaching started in my practice—right at that moment of identifying my work to the Dean.

In the beginning of my coaching practice in the 1990s, I would tell clients, “This is not therapy. I think that there’s a new ‘term’ out there called ‘coaching,’ and I think that process is what is going to serve you in moving you forward towards your goal in a more proactive and exciting manner. Moreover, in coaching, we can articulate a stronger, more collaborative and more transparent partnership that will engage you more fully in your learning process.”

This so-called “new” process is actually what Gestalt is all about. Gestalt theory was waiting to be married to coaching, because it’s collaborative. Gestalt theory already suggests that the client is their own best self-expert and that the coach needs to trust the client to be a co-expert in the process. Gestalt theory and methodology are tailor-made to join with coaching.

I feel great pride in having been the person to join Gestalt together with coaching in 1995. I think the Internet came up in 1997, but if you searched “Gestalt Coaching,” you didn’t see it anywhere on the Internet. It feels like a dream to remember that no one had put Gestalt theory together with coaching until I started talking to people about it. I remember how resistant professionals were to the concept of coaching, and how persistent I had to be to get people to listen to this new possibility. Now, many Gestalt centers have coaching workshops and programs, but back in the mid-nineties, my colleagues thought it was a fad.

Our very first workshop at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland was in 1996, called “Gestalt Coaching—Enhancing Your Competencies.” We knew Gestalt coaching had a future based on the response to those first workshops. Vikki Brock had just published her dissertation in *The Sourcebook of Coaching History*. I feel gratitude for being recognized as the pioneer of Gestalt coaching.

I: How do you see Gestalt coaching as a response to what is needed now?

DS: It’s a great question. First I’d like to identify what the U.S. Army has introduced to help its military folks be adaptive and resilient to threats and dangers. It uses this term called VUCA: V for *volatility*, U for *uncertainty*, C for *complexity*, and A for *ambiguity*. I think those terms, which can be both good and bad, are truly the conditions of the 21st century. Highly volatile, predominantly uncertain much of the time—so much is changing, and so much is complex. We pull one thread out of an issue and it’s connected to so much else. Even when we think we hear an answer, there’s ambiguity in it.

What Gestalt coaching really offers is a methodology for having a stance towards these four challenges and an adaptive response towards the ever-present VUCA conditions of our lives. These VUCA conditions are actually always around us, waxing and waning in their dynamic presentation. What is needed is a way to recognize how to use personal vision when volatility arises, offer understanding when there is uncertainty, suggest organizing strategy when there is complexity, and offer stabilizing practices to move through ambiguity.

I: In which parts of our lives can Gestalt coaching assist us?

DS: The first thing Gestalt coaching really works with is to help the person—each of us—really get centered in our own presence. What is it that we really bring that is unique, the psychosocial fingerprint that says, “This is who I am, this is my unique identity”? There is an old adage that says, “Don’t bother being anyone else—they’re all taken. Be yourself.” It’s one of our great challenges, and I think we need to discover how to be ourselves. I think coaching is such a wonderful answer to assisting people in finding their alignment with their vision, their truth, and the unique offer they can make to oneself and others.

The second thing is that it’s so easy to get off-centered in the challenges of everyday life. The concept of derailment is real and is as threatening to successful people as to those in search of the path towards success. When you say to people, “Just get centered,” it takes practice and discipline. I think we can help with the practices that keep people strong in their strengths and centered, so that they can stay resilient against derailment.

The third thing that is so challenging is where to start in the work of strengthening one’s presence and one’s offer in the world. We have this great concept in the Gestalt method which comes from general systems theory. The Level of Systems concept really refers to the human levels that hold our experience, from individuals to dyads, to groups, organizations, communities, and larger contexts. It is always relevant to ask, “Where do we need to intervene for development?” Do we start working at the individual level, couples, or teams? Do we start with the group level? Where is the best level of the human system to intervene in the complexity of life? It all depends on who our client is, what their challenge is, and what level of system holds most richness for intervention.

No matter where you start, you better understand that each different level is connected to other levels. We may think we know best where to start, but really, we may start with the greatest strength or challenge while also appreciating other levels. We may work individually with an executive and then ask to observe the executive across all the

other configurations of his/her work system to be able to come back with more data about how we can coach this same executive at the individual level of system—the self-system. Even when coaching executives at the individual level, we need to hold in our consciousness that all executives are responsible for groups of people, and therefore, we need to be able to recognize which of their issues need support to be effective at the group level.

I happen to enjoy working in groups, but there are people that really work better at the individual, dyad, or interpersonal level. Gestalt coaching theory supports people in finding out, through practice, the levels of system, how to get strong at recognizing those levels, and how to intervene effectively. It is only through practice that we learn how to recognize the different boundary points across the levels of the human and how to recognize where the work is: at the individual level of the client, at the interpersonal level between client and others, or sometimes at the shared boundaries that the client may have in dyads and groups.

Very often, when we see people “stuck” in some issue, one profound action is to ask them where the issue of the work needs to be addressed. Working group-level issues at the individual level will be less powerful, at best, or even a total failure. Individual issues that need maximum confidentiality cannot be worked at the group level. It is important to know, and to be skilled at managing, the differences.

The core strength of Gestalt coaching is assisting people to be clear about what they’re aware of. Very often people become kind of excited, and they’ve heard the expression, “Ready, aim, fire.” That’s actually a very destructive way of going about learning or change, because they’re not paying attention to what they’re excited about or aware of. Gestalt coaches help you get interested in what you are paying attention to. Out of that, you are going to choose what to act on.

Gestalt coaches will ask these four things:

What is the gift of your presence?

How do you keep yourself centered across challenges?

Where do you habitually pay attention, and how aware are you of those habituations?

How skilled are you in paying attention to process across levels of systems?

Gestalt is a process theory, and we’re very good at helping people really stay in the moment. In the moment, however, everything can change so quickly—even in this phone call. How to stay centered? How to figure out how you are doing? How to read the cues, whether they are social cues, environmental cues, or unexpected visceral cues?

The one that is most important in our very fast-moving times is how to read our own cues to really make meaning of how we're doing. Those are some of the things that we teach from Gestalt coaching.

I: What is the best advice that you can give to cope with our volatile times and shifting economy and environment?

DS: There was a Jungian thinker by the name of Wallace Stevens. He said that in every age, each of us is called to respond to the challenges of that age, or that leadership defines itself in every age. I think that one of the things to really remind people of is that each of us has more resources than we really fully know. Our challenge is to embrace our own resources—embrace what we're paying attention to, embrace what we think are the issues to which we want to respond. Amongst the diversity of all of us, there is a diversity of leadership presence and gifts needed for the numerous challenges in both our environment and our economy.

I think that one of the things to do instead of questioning deficiencies is really to respond to opportunities that everyone has within themselves, for one thing, and also to embrace the opportunities that they can act on.

I: What are the vital elements for businesses in the 21 century?

DS: I think some of the tremendous needs for businesses in the 21st century are actually connected to the same needs for individuals: businesses need to be able to identify what the brand is, the particular product or excellence that they're offering, but also to maintain agility and to be able to see that their product continues to meet the needs of the market—to be agile, and to be a trustworthy resource for whatever market needs they are responding to.

Second, trust in the products and in the services is one of the great elements in the 21st century. You cannot put any price on how valuable trust is. You just know if trust is broken, no price will repair it. It is critical to learn how to evolve both the product and oneself while holding to the core of being trustworthy.

The third thing is the need for ongoing innovation, and therefore, learning. No matter what your *product* is, it may be short-term: how do we *continue* to learn? This is true for organizations, and for all their human resources. It is true for all of us in the 21st century who wish to make a difference in one's work, in one's society, and in one's family system.

I: How would you like to inspire others?

DS: I want people in my presence to feel inspired for their own possibilities. I want to feel that I have been a catalyst to people and in their trajectory toward their possibilities. My job, especially as a Gestalt-trained coach, is to work with the visible and invisible to assist people in their attainment of what has previously been imagined as unattainable. When clients attain what they have been imagining, hoping for, or dreaming about, indeed, that does feel miraculous.

21st Century Opportunity:

The Once and Future Possibility is adapted from something we call “The Cycle of Experience.” These are the questions I ask people:

1. What do you find yourself paying attention to outside yourself (something of compelling interest) or inside yourself (a dream or vision) that gives you a lot of signals that say it’s important?
2. Out of what you’ve been paying attention to outside yourself or inside yourself, what energizing title are you going to give to this?
3. As you make contact with this new excitement for yourself, what do you notice in yourself? What hunger gets satisfied?
4. What did you learn that you might do, and what stops you from doing it? What did you learn about your own process that you need to stay aware of and responsible for?

21st Century Success:

I always go back to the story of an interview I did for my dissertation in 1990. Ron Barbaro was the president of the Prudential Company of America in Canada at the time. He had been fundraising and doing volunteer work at an AIDS hospice in Toronto. He was devastated by these patients. At one point, a patient said to him, “If we have a policy with Prudential, why don’t you—as a business leader in the insurance sector—help us die with dignity? The minute we die, there’s all this money that’s available to our beneficiaries, but we’re dying without hope, and without money.”

Ron came up with an experimental program to give AIDS patients their benefit money before they died. Policy applicants were screened to see if they might be AIDS patients and then approached to receive their insurance benefit dollars. The first time they approached policy holders with this proposal, recipients were overjoyed and the news went viral around the world. The program caused a shift in the industry.

This story is a leadership lesson for the 21st century because it teaches us that leadership

presence is a vital contribution to any system. Ron demonstrated how trust in product, leadership, and organization could be evolved.

What is uppermost in this profoundly transformational story is how Ron Barbaro used his awareness to start envisioning new possibilities. He remains a powerful example of how vision, understanding, strategy, and practice are needed to move self and others forward. Gestalt coaching is a powerful method to support this process.

“Being coached by Dorothy is like playing chess with a professional—she seems always to be a step or two ahead, even when the moves are unexpected. I am amazed at her ability to translate fluid moments into valuable teaching/learning points.”

Arzu Pervizpour Dedeoglu, Director of HR

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