

PROFILE- Integrative leadership and empathy

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Applying and utilising Gestalt therapy group processes within teams and organisations deploys the sequence of contacting (Perls et al, 1951) the field emergent self (Philippon, 2001; cited Marie-Anne Chidiac, 2011), which is implicitly and explicitly social and relational (Jacobs, 2005 p. 54). This experience and process leads to integrative leadership as well as increased empathy, via the appreciation of individual, cultural and group differences, and overall better relationships and communication.

In a salient article by Marie-Anne Chidiac (British Gestalt Journal 2011: vol 20, no. 1 pp. 42-51) she explains the historical background of the Gestalt approach and how this was developed. Elucidating how both Kurt Lewin, who coined the term 'group dynamics', and Fitz Perls were influenced by the early German psychologists and physicians (such as Koehler, Wertheimer, Koffka and Goldstein) she shows that group dynamics and Gestalt therapy share common roots in psychology and philosophy.

Both approaches evolved simultaneously, yet initially independently in the US, as Lewin and Perls developed their ideas in different fields of applications: individuals for Perls and systems for Lewin (Kepner, chapter 1 p. 20; cited Marie-Anne Chidiac, 2011, vol 20, no. 1, p. 42-51).

In the 1950s there was great interest in group behaviour as well as theories of group development (Shutz, 1958; Bion, 1961; and Berne 1966; and on the organisational front Ed Nevis, 1997; and later by Syer and Connolly 'How a Team works' regarding systems and organisational analysis, 1996, and Gestalt approaches with teams 'Team Spirit', 1986).

The Gestalt notion of field theory looks at the system from within by mapping the influences or contexts on an individual or subsystem. By Gestalt field theory, this refers to building on the work by Lewin (1951) integrating fundamental Gestalt constructs as contact, theory of self, as well as relational (others and environment and situation) and phenomenological considerations (see writings on Gestalt field theory by Yontef, 1993; Parlett, 1991, 1997; Staemmler, 2006; and Gaffney, 2008a; cited Marie-Anne Chidiac, Gestalt Journal, vol 20, no. 1).

What is integrative leadership: the new third way of thinking?

"Integrative thinkers don't mind a messy problem. In fact, they welcome complexity, because that is where the best answers come from," explains Roger Martin, 2007; cited Harvard Business Review Winter 2008.

We are in interesting, challenging and exciting times, and no more so than in sport. It is refreshing to notice and convey the leadership skills of both Andy Flower (England Cricket Team Director) and Alan Shearer (Newcastle United Manager), both taking over in messy and uncertain circumstances and prevailing as well as creating a change in belief, culture and attitude amongst players and the team.

Flower is an example of a successful leader. Previously a successful captain, Flower thinks and approaches situations differently than an unsuccessful leader and portrays integrative thinking. He is an example of an integrative thinker. He conveys the qualities of a successful leader; this is shown by his decision-making and his ability to gain and maintain the utmost respect from his team (players and support staff).

The strengths in Flower's leadership skills are conveyed in his ability to make tough decisions, and at times unpopular decisions, taking the individual, unique situation and players into account, reflecting on the correct solution whilst maintaining calm and confidence within the team and England Squad. Flower has and is creating a mentally tough environment as well as a culture of understanding and communication; the strength of communication and the understanding of relationships and awareness of individuals can be seen in the Flower and Strauss partnership. A strong bond exists between the captain and team director.

What this means is that Andy Flower can hold two opposing ideas in his mind at once and at the same time (Martin, 2007). Therefore, rather than deciding or choosing A or B, Flower forges and creates an innovative 'third way' of thinking that contains elements of each and further develops and improves on them. Both Flower and Shearer convey and exhibit the ability of the new 'habit of thought', creating new solutions 'the power of simultaneous vision from different standpoints' (Martin, 2007) in difficult and challenging environments and unstable cultures.

Flower is creating new habits and behaviours in the players and within the team by enabling and instilling belief and allowing the players to be themselves, as well as creating a sense of unity and collective belief within the team. Recognising individual strengths and listening to individual player needs as Flower did, when requested by Bopara to have specific practice and to address his own individual needs; this affected the overall team performance in a positive way.

Shearer, by choosing and enabling his subs to come on and play a vital role, secured a victory against Middlesbrough, encouraging a winning mentality and collective belief. Making perceived risky decisions, he can again be viewed as an integrative thinker and successful leader; under pressure Shearer viewed the problem as a whole, examined how the parts fit together and how decisions affect one another and then creatively resolved the tension and deadlock by generating innovative, some may suggest risky, substitutions. However, the creative way of thinking by Shearer and the new 'third way of thinking' enabled and instilled belief in the team which enabled Newcastle to win a key relegation battle.

The same integrative and 'third way of thinking' can be said of Flower who has made some innovative, brave, decisions in playing Onions and Bopara, which was and is indeed a masterstroke as is the selection of Napier and Foster for the 20/20. The leadership of Flower is refreshing whereby he is creating a culture within the team to believe in themselves, each other and to develop accountability, responsibility, honesty and a winning mentality – by recognising magnificent performances and utilising his integrative thinking. Indeed this is a time whereby English cricket is experiencing a truly remarkable and humbling leader.

The integrative leader conveys and understands empathy, applies empathetic listening, questioning and behaviours so that there is a better understanding of self, others and the group team as 'a whole', as well as the organisation itself.

Finally, research findings from evolutionary biology, psychology, sociology, political science and experimental economics (The Unselfish Gene; HBR, Yochai Benkler, July/August 2011) suggest that instead of using controls or carrots and sticks to motivate people, companies and organisations should use systems that rely on engagement and a sense of common purpose. According to Benkler (2011), several levers can assist executives and employees in building cooperative systems and allow more effective leadership to occur – by encouraging communication, honesty, ensuring authentic framing, fostering empathy and solidarity, guaranteeing fairness and morality, and using rewards and punishments that appeal to intrinsic motivations, relying on reputation and reciprocity as well as ensuring flexibility and meaning.

This is in line with Gaffney's (2006a) proposal of group development in what he describes as the 'existential dilemma' and what Fairfield (2004) on the other hand refers to first for the need to create 'dialogic conditions' to increase the potential for group growth (p. 347; cited from Marie Anne Chidiac, British Gestalt Journal, Vol 20, no. 1 p. 45).

Therefore, the integrative leader can allow and create the 'creative adjustment' (Marie Anne Chidiac, 2011; cited Fairfield 2004) required for group growth, as well as foster individual uniqueness and creativity whilst sustaining team cohesiveness, thus, ultimately being an effective leader.

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