

CHAPTER 2

Awareness

Introduction

The Gestalt coaching approach has an existential emphasis: the challenge is to respond to and deal with *what* is rather than *why* it is or *what it should be*. In order to do that, as a Gestalt coach, you need to be aware of yourself and what is going on around you in the present all of the time. We are born with this awareness, but it is dulled as we fall in with the doctrines inherent in the education system and grow into the demands and expectations of family and society. This ability has to be rediscovered and nurtured if we are to experience the world as alive, bright and interesting. You will see how essential it is the more familiar you become with Gestalt.

This chapter is about developing awareness and starts with the Gestalt concept of Figure and Ground.

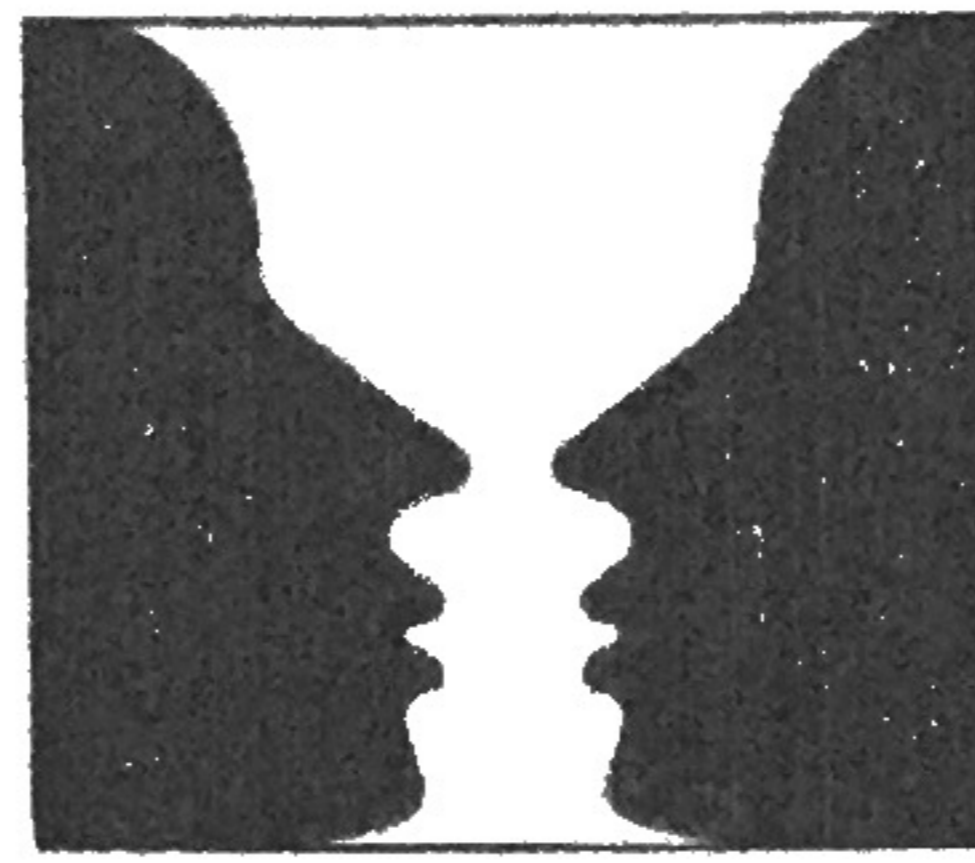
Figure and Ground

As you read this text, the words you are focusing on are, in Gestalt terms, the **figure of interest** or just **'Figure'**. Your attention is on tracking the flow and meaning of this sentence – these words – and, while the previous sentence is still in your mind, it has receded from the forefront of your interest and become part of the **background** or **'Ground'**.

In fact as you are now reading this sentence (*the current Figure*) you can also be aware of the Ground of the whole page, the book, your hands holding it, where it is in the room and a multitude of different potential points of focus in the Ground. But you choose to stay focused on these words as Figure and the rest stays in the Ground.

The work of the early Gestalt psychologists was concerned with the way that we perceive the world. The diagram below and used on the front cover image, is accredited to Edgar Rubin, a Danish psychologist, whose work on Figure and Ground was viewed by Gestalt psychologists as basic to their understanding. This is one of the best known visual images, clearly demonstrating the perceptual distinction made by the brain between Figure and Ground and the hypothesis that we can only draw out one Figure at a time from the Ground.

Fig 2.1: Rubin's vase¹



You either see the two black profiles OR the white vase. Try as you might you cannot see both at the same time because by choosing one Figure (*the black profiles*), the white space has to be construed as Ground. Similarly, if you see the vase (*white space*) as Figure, you will see the black space as Ground. One Figure/Ground image precludes the other. If you know the image, you may think that you see both at once, but if you focus, you do only see one image at a time.

While this is simple and obvious on the face of it, the concept has enormous implications for the way that we live our lives: what we choose to focus on as Figure and how this shapes the Ground.

When you feel positive or negative about someone (*the Figure of interest*), your feeling is in relation to a number of factors (*the Ground*) eg:

- the immediate behaviour they are exhibiting
- the whole person and the quality of connection between you and that person
- the history of the relationship
- the wider context

The Figure you focus on influences the way you perceive the Ground and vice versa. If you change what you focus on as Figure, it automatically changes the Ground and therefore shifts your perceptions and your experience.

Implications for the coach

As a coach, your coachee is the Figure within the context or Ground of your work. When your attention is caught by something significant in what the coachee says or does, that then becomes the Figure against the Ground of your experience of the coachee. This new Figure then shapes the intervention you choose to make. In the example below the Figure for the coach changes from Mark's attitude to the context of the coaching and why he was there (*which had been the Ground*). Once that was explored and clarified, the session could move on.

1. Created by Edgar Rubin (1886-1951).

EXAMPLE

Mark was one of a cohort of talent who had taken up the offer of coaching from his organisation to help him develop his role and his capability (*the Ground*).

In the first coaching session, Mark sat well back in his chair with his legs stretched out, ankles crossed. He was polite but diffident, making very little eye contact. He answered the coach's questions briefly but without energy or commitment. If he started to expand, he seemed to lose the will to end his sentences, which tailed off before they got to the point. This was the first Figure of interest for the coach - his lack of energy and motivation. Various reactions and images came to the coach around lack of confidence and adolescent rebellious attitudes.

Puzzled by this, but able to delay judgement and stay only with what he was sensing from minute to minute, the coach simply followed the flow of the session.

When he asked Mark what he wanted from the coaching sessions, the response bordered on hostile: 'Well, it's up to you isn't it?' Further investigation and discussion revealed that Mark had the impression that he had been 'put up for coaching by his line manager' as a remedial intervention. He had felt affronted by this, which explained his hostility. It also explained his diffident attitude at the beginning of the session (*the coach's initial Figure*).

The coach's perception of the Figure (*Mark's attitude*) changed as the Ground (*the coaching context and Mark's reaction to it*) emerged and a new Figure formed.

Changing the Figure/Ground configuration

Negotiation, mediation, settling a row are all about changing the Figure/Ground configuration. While there is often little change in the actual circumstances of a situation, there is a big change in the way it is perceived, how we understand and react to it. A locked, entrenched position - a fixed gestalt - will get in the way of clarity and resolution. A freer, more fluid approach will allow new Figures or gestalts to emerge, making resolution possible. In the scenario above, if the coach had followed the first Figure and jumped to the conclusion that Mark lacked confidence before letting the Figure emerge more clearly, the coaching would probably have had a different and more circuitous trajectory.

The flow of Figure/Ground formation

Another aspect of Figure/Ground formation is the ability to allow one Figure of interest to emerge and then recede into Ground. To illustrate this, stop reading at the end of this sentence, put the book down and simply look up and around the space that you are in at the moment.

Look up NOW...

Ah...now you're back with these words as Figure. When you looked around, did you notice that your eyes drifted from one object or Figure to the next Figure, maybe resting for a moment on something that you were curious about? You may even have stopped looking round and become aware of a strange noise, an itch or ache, or even a smell. All of these Figures were there in the Ground and emerged easily when your attention rested on them, then went back into Ground when your attention moved on.

Yes, you might say – so what? That's normal!

You are absolutely right, that is a normal flow of experience. In Gestalt terms, the ability to allow this to happen freely and easily is the primary measure of good mental health and well-being. As we've said above, allowing something interesting to become the Figure as it emerges from the Ground is a natural, healthy process. We engage with it and, when satisfied, we withdraw from it and it slips back into the Ground. This is known as the contact-withdrawal rhythm: the ebb and flow of life.

This Ground has layers and depth. We've just addressed the surface experience of moving from one object to another. However, our whole life experience forms the basis of our deep personal Ground sometimes referred to as the Fertile Void. We can always tap into wealth of experience if we allow the space and time.