

Using the Paradoxical Theory of Change in Organizations

Rick Maurer

Abstract: Arnold Beisser's paradoxical theory of change has had a profound impact on the practice of Gestalt therapy. The notion of "becoming what is" rather than trying to force a change, applies equally well at other levels of system as well. This article explores ways that Beisser's theory can be used to orient and guide the work of people trying to influence the work of organizations.

In 1970, Arnold Beisser wrote a short paper titled "The Paradoxical Theory of Change."ⁱ Except for *Gestalt Therapy* by Perls, Hefferline and Goodmanⁱⁱ, it appears to be the most referenced work in all of Gestalt literature. Just as it has had a profound impact on therapists, it can serve those of us working in organizations equally well. But first some background.

In an attempt to explain a theory of change that Fritz Perls developed but never explicitly articulated, Beisser wrote, "... change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not. Change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what he is – to be fully invested in his current positions. By rejecting the role of change agent, we make meaningful and orderly change possible."ⁱⁱⁱ

He goes on to say that the Gestalt therapist does not attempt to change but rather to "encourage, even insist, that the patient be where and what he is." In other words, you can't force change to occur, you can only create the conditions for it to happen. And those who work from a Gestalt stance would say that heightening awareness of the current state – especially including the fragments and disowned portions of the self -- is what allows movement to occur. This is true in therapy and it is just as true when we attempt to influence work teams and organizations. In fact, at the end of Beisser's article, he suggests, "I believe the same change theory outlined here is also applicable to social systems, that orderly change within social systems is in the direction of integration and holism. . ."^{iv}

The War Between What Is and What Should Be

Beisser suggests that people coming to therapy are at "war between what is and what should be." And those same phenomena are alive and well inside organizations of all sizes from the three person mental health clinic to a major international corporation. The need for rapid change has never been greater, and that compelling figure can cause those leading change to focus solely on what *should be* and miss getting a full picture of *what is*. Consequently, they often find that the same issues that hindered progress before are still with them even after they've spent millions reorganizing or merging or installing a new software system. To use our language, unfinished business has done them in.

A manager, executive, employee, or consultant who uses Beisser's work as a guide attempts to support the client in coming into contact with the richest possible picture of *what is*. While the attention to the paradoxical theory may stay the same for the therapist and the manager or consultant inside an organization, the focus of the work changes. For example, a therapist serves the individual, couple, or family that he or she is seeing. A consultant might work with individuals, a pair, or a small group as well, but it is usually in service of the work of the total organization.

The work is to help clients see and own what they might not be seeing. Often people in organizations recognize a problem, but don't get it in their bones. For example, managers may see the impact of their company's poor management-labor relations, but not consider how they are contributing to the problem.

Let's imagine that a department asked us to assist them in grappling with their business challenges. We invite people to reflect on what was of interest to them – their fears, hopes, questions, and concerns. While doing this we keep looking for ways to help create sufficient safety (support for contact) so that people can talk about some of these issues with their colleagues. This process begins to bring “fragments” into the awareness of a larger group. Imagine that Margaret says, “I'm worried about the finances. I think our company may be headed for trouble.”

And let's say that people are reluctant to look at that issue. This would be an opportunity to use the paradoxical theory as a guide. We could stop the conversation from moving to someone else's figure at that moment and support exploration of Margaret's comment. We might ask the group to explore what Margaret was saying in an effort to understand what she sees. We could encourage the group to search for hard data as well – and help Margaret give voice to the ways she may be making meaning from the data she sees.

We could encourage others to express how they view this situation, affording each of speakers the same level of attention. We might play devil's advocate and invite people to imagine that Margaret's statement was true: what would the implications be if this were true? This search for meaning often broadens the group's view of what is. The group begins to see the subjective process of how people make meaning, as well as getting objective information such as financial data out in the open.

Although there is no guarantee that this process would broaden anyone's perspective, it often does. Imagine that this process did heighten awareness of a potential problem, and let's further assume that members of the group were not in a conspiracy to cover-up this information. At this point, people probably would begin to mobilize energy toward taking some action on this new figure. They might decide to gather more information to check their assumptions, or explore ways to influence senior management publicly or anonymously, or explore the consequences of blowing the whistle on what they see, or individually determine that this would be a good time to dust off their resumes and get out. None of these options would be possible without this fuller awareness of *what is*.

I was working in a hospital that was going through massive change. It was moving from a non-profit to a profit-making institution. The shift to paying attention to the demands of making a profit, keeping an eye on what their “competitors” were doing, and trying to create a unique and attractive presence in their city, was challenging. The executives knew the financial portion of the *what is* picture for their hospital since they had access to critical financial data. But this was only part of the picture. One missing piece for them was knowledge about the people who worked for them. They simply didn't know a lot about what they could expect. For example, they didn't know that morale was at an all-time low. People had little confidence in the leadership of the organization. Some employees were fearful that they might lose their jobs. All of these factors could impact job performance and quality of work, not to mention their ability to attract and retain talented employees. In addition, these human factors were having a ripple effect out in the community. Employees belonged to churches and clubs and kids' soccer leagues, and they talked

to their friends and neighbors. This bad word of mouth was beginning to undermine the reputation of an institution that was trying to survive in a highly competitive world.

The executives had only a mild interest in finding out more about employees. Most believed if they kept focused on the numbers and had a sound plan, they could be successful. Without fully embracing *what is*, they were willing to create and implement plans that they hoped would move them toward their goals.

Beisser suggests that the practitioner sometimes needs to “insist” that the clients be where they are. Since the executive team was planning a retreat to clarify direction, I suggested that they should get information from employees. I told the CEO that she and the other executives needed to conduct these focus groups themselves. I also told her that her colleagues would balk at this and complain that it would be a waste of time. I *insisted* that she use her power and *insist* that her executive team hold these meetings.

Begrudgingly, they conducted the focus groups. These meetings created a shift in the thinking of some on the executive team. I recall the Chief Operating Officer, quoting what employees told him during these meetings. Clearly, he had been influenced by the concerns he heard in those meetings. Because the COO was respected, his colleagues listened and used this new data to influence what they included in their plans. For example, they realized that they needed to not only keep people better informed about what was going on, but also get them involved in addressing the challenges facing them.

As simple as these examples may sound, they are not the way work usually gets done in organizations. An “I’m late, I’m late for a very important date” panic often pushes people past much interest in awareness of what is. Traditional consultants, since they are hired for their expert opinion and to solve problems, often collude and push the client to mobilize energy and take some major action when slowing down and going deeper into seeing the current state would actually serve them better.

Top Dog Meets Under Dog

Beisser says, “a patient comes to therapy because he wants to be changed. . . the therapist who seeks to help a patient has left the egalitarian position and become the knowing expert, with the patient playing the helpless person. . .”^v This leads to dependency or rejection of the person who is attempting to influence. When organizations rely too heavily on a single person, team, or bureaucratic structure to influence their thinking they not only give away power, but also they give away responsibility as well. In other words, they reduce their ability to make contact with the situation since they look at things from under the table where the good underdogs lie.

While we might “insist” and use a provocative intervention in this instance, this type of intervention tends to work best in relationships where both parties – the intervener and the client - feel like they are on relatively equal footing. Without a solid relationship, a provocative intervention may upset the fragile balance of status between us, and when that occurs we risk breaking contact. We become top dog to their underdog.

If we remember that our primary role is to heighten awareness, we avoid some of the traps of inadvertently (or consciously) playing the top dog who has all the answers. For example, it is common for consultants to conduct surveys regarding people’s reactions to something going on inside the organization. More traditional consultants often gather the data, organize it, and make their own interpretations. On one hand this makes sense. Consultants often have been

around the track many times and can easily spot critical themes in organizations. This seems like this could be helpful and save time. Sometimes it can be, but when we move to action and suggest what should be figural, we give clients little opportunity to consider the data or make meaning for themselves. In effect we are saying: I am top dog, listen to me and go along.

If the clients accept this “help,” they may do it without ever fully coming into contact with the issues for themselves. Or they may resist our efforts, and then the tension between us becomes the figure that gets worked. Before I learned this lesson, I was surprised when clients would turn on me after I had just given them a brilliant analysis (by my own estimation, of course) of their situation. Instead of rising in applause to acknowledge my work, they began to question my methods, my credibility, and my judgment.

Here’s just one example of a time when I forgot Beisser’s advice. The same hospital was considering downsizing. Having seen the devastating impact that a previous round of layoffs had on morale and the quality of work, I wanted to influence the executive team. So I wrote a paper on alternatives to downsizing. I assumed that the thoroughness of my research and the clarity of my writing would create the shift that I was looking for. I was wrong. They politely looked at the paper, thanked me for my fine effort, and moved on to the next agenda item. I broke contact with their *what is* and attempted to move them to consider something that I thought was better for them.

If I could rewind the tape, I would encourage them to fully explore the *what is* picture and examine the implications of downsizing. They might end up agreeing with my position that more layoffs would be harmful, or they might decide to proceed as planned. I could have offered my opinion and ask them to consider it along with all the other opinions and data. If I could do it again, I would seek ways to enrich the ground so that they could make choices that served them well.

Another example. Consultants are often asked to conduct surveys. If we respect the paradoxical theory, we will work with the client to identify what data they want collected, conduct the survey, and then present data back in raw form. This invites the client to make meaning. As consultants, we may enter into the meaning making as well, but as equals, and not as ones who hold superior knowledge or insight. As clients begin to make meaning, rich figures often emerge, which allows them and us to mobilize energy toward some action.

The consultant (or anyone who is working with a group or organization) is providing a boundary for this exploration to take place, rather than doing the work for the client. And since the consultant is freed from the expert role, it allows him or her to pay attention to what stands out for the client, what they avoid, how they make meaning, and so forth. We are freer to remain in contact with the client and not just the content of the work.

Our own ego or our client’s expectation of what a consultant should do, can get in the way of applying the paradoxical theory. There is no easy answer. It is a constant challenge. Heightening our own awareness of what tempts us to break contact with clients can help. Also, creating structures that support fully examining the development of a fuller *what is* picture can be enlightening.

One of these approaches is called Future Search. It was developed by Marvin Weisbord, Sandra Janoff and their colleagues. It is unclear whether they ever heard of Arnold Beisser, but Future Search adheres closely to the principles described in the paradoxical theory.^{vi}

Future Search invites people who have a stake in this change. This group might include senior management, middle management, workers, customers, suppliers, and various departments. “During a Future Search conference, representatives from all key stakeholder groups gather to discuss the future of the organization. Before discussing the future, participants examine the past and the current situations.”^{vii} Large sheets of flipchart paper are posted on the walls, and people write their recollections of the history. With some seventy people huddled around these sheets writing and reading and building off each other, there is often a chaotic and highly energized field that serves the work. Later, various groups report on what they are proud of and sorry for. All of this heightens awareness of what is – what stands out to people about who they are, what’s figural about their history, where people are ashamed, and where they are pleased. The group begins to see a tapestry emerge from the rich fabric of these multiple realities coming together.

Structures to Processes

Beisser argues that traditional Freudian theory turned processes into structures -- from denying to denial. Organizations could teach Freud a few things about turning processes into structures. They do it everyday. People who oppose a corporate change become “resistors” as if resistor was a character type and not a reaction to something in the field. And, in some organizations, unions and management, field and headquarters, marketing and accounting, create fixed Gestalts about their counterparts.

Interventions such as Future Search help break up these fixed impressions. In these sessions finance officers talk with union representatives. Human resources professionals work with managers from manufacturing. People often hear points-of-view that are surprisingly like their own coming from the most unlikely source. When an executive and a union member see that both share a common concern about the way quality has diminished, structures begin to break down. When they hear fears that would never have occurred to them they begin to see things differently. People find that their view of *what is* expands.

Another approach, Real Time Strategic Change, provides similar opportunities for people to learn what the organization looks like from various vantage points. Near the end of one session facilitated by Kathie Dannemiller and her colleagues, she asked the head of the plant and the union steward to each give an “I have a dream” speech regarding their operation. Neither knew what the other was going to say. As the union steward spoke, the plant manager sat on the stage dumbfounded. At the end, he walked over and said, “Al, we’ve got the same dream. Let’s do this together.” They embraced (not a common occurrence among auto workers) and the room of some 2000 people erupted in cheers. In Kathi’s words, that “created a shift” from the calcified views management and labor often have of each other.^{viii}

The people who run these events continually watch for the shift to take place. It is a sign that energy is available for work. I believe this shift is what Beisser found so engaging about Perls’ paradoxical approach to change.

Being Who You Are

“The therapist himself, is one who does not seek change, but seeks only to be what he is. . . the end point is reached when each can be himself while still maintaining intimate contact with the other.”^{six} (And yet another paradox!)

Mark Twain once said that “to be good is noble, but to show others how to be good is nobler -- and no trouble.” Tempting as this may be, the Gestalt practitioner’s most powerful intervention is him or herself. Our ability to influence individuals, groups, and organizations comes more from who we are and how we conduct ourselves than it does from any wisdom that we try to pass along. This is what allows us to “be ourselves while maintaining intimate contact with the other.”

This is called presence. What do we choose to bring forward about ourselves and what do we invite ourselves and our clients to attend to? According to Edwin Nevis, “the theories and practices believed to be essential to bring about change in people are manifested, symbolized, or implied in their presence of the consultant.” He goes on to say that, we are “. . . living out of values in such a way that in ‘taking a stance,’ the intervener teaches these important concepts.”^x

We influence by living in the paradox with the client and not by pushing the client somewhere. Our teaching, as it were, comes primarily from how we carry and present ourselves.

Is the Paradoxical Theory Always the Way to Go?

There are times when the paradoxical theory isn’t as needed in organizational work, but I hesitate to say it. The tendency of many of my clients, colleagues, and me is to go fast. So any excuse to forgo attention to heightening awareness of *what is* could be dangerous.

However, there are times when the ground is already so fertile and the people in the organization are already doing such good work attending to the issues Beisser identifies, that we can offer advice, suggestions, and even support movement to action. As a consultant, this could appear as providing our own interpretation to data from focus group meetings, or strongly urging a client to move in a particular direction.

If we remain in awareness during those moments we can pick up signals that let us know if we’ve moved too far too quickly without regard for where the client is. For example, if the client introjects our advice, swallowing whole everything we say without question, that is a strong indication that they are not ready to move. Or if the client rejects our advice out of hand, it could be a sign that we have not built support for contact with what is figural for us.

Having said that, I personally get into more trouble when I try to create shortcuts than when I support the client in exploring whatever the issue is more fully. When in doubt, heightening awareness of what’s in front of us is the better default position.

The Paradoxical Theory of Change can be a formidable tool in helping people who work in organizations design interventions and stay focused on what is most important. Given the pace of change in organizations, it is easy to get seduced and caught up in the frenzy. Beisser’s theory can provide ballast in this otherwise tumultuous sea.

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- ⁱ Beisser, A. (1970) Paradoxical Theory of Change. In: *Gestalt Therapy Now*. ed. Fagen, J. and Shepard, L. New York. Harper Colophon. Reprint available from www.gestalt.org/arnie.htm
- ⁱⁱ Perls, F., Hefferline, R., and Goodman, P. (1951) *Gestalt Therapy*. Highland, NY. Reprinted by Gestalt Journal Press (1994).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Beisser, *Ibid.* page 1.
- ^{iv} *Ibid.* page 3.
- ^v *Ibid.* page 2.
- ^{vi} Weisbord, M. and Janoff, S. (2000) *Future Search*. San Francisco. Berrett-Kohler. 2nd Edition.
- ^{vii} Maurer, R. (1996) *Beyond the Wall of Resistance*. Austin. Bard Press. page 132
- ^{viii} *Ibid.* pages 121-122.
- ^{ix} Beisser. *Ibid.* page 2.
- ^x Nevis, E. (1987) *Organizational Consulting*. Cleveland. GICPress. pages 69-70.
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