

Chapter 10: I'm Better When I Move: Facilitating Movement and Energy in Groups from a Gestalt Perspective

by Walt Hopkins

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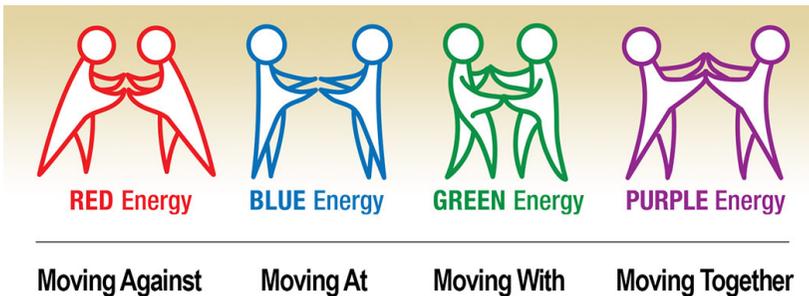
“I’m better when I move” is the story of my lifetime journey as a Gestalt practitioner using movement in groups. It is a story of how I keep learning to spend more time moving—and less time getting lost in my head trying to think things out—and how I keep supporting and teaching participants of groups to do the same. I offer and define seven key principles that have been effective in getting me out of my head sooner: use of energy; sensations – emotions – thoughts; use of self; presence; use of group; noticing; and resistance. I am intentionally writing in first person and present tense.

1. Use of Energy: Red, Blue, Green, Purple

It’s midnight. I’m standing alone in the softly-lit Green Room at Eynsham Hall, near Oxford in England. I’m reviewing the row of flipchart easels that I will use with a group tomorrow morning. I’ve just finished creating these charts in four colours: red, blue, green, and purple. Tomorrow I will explain to the group how each of these colours represents an energy to use in communicating with others.

But now it is time to rehearse. As I have done for decades since I first developed this Gestalt-based approach to movement work, I move through each flipchart in turn and I say aloud what I plan to say in the morning. In addition to rehearsing the words, I am rehearsing the movements that go with each chart. I am moving myself into each movement, just as I will invite the participants to move into each movement in the morning.

Figure 1: Movement and Energy



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It's morning. I reveal the first chart with its bright red image of two people using RED Energy. I go to the chair where I have stacked shirts in the four different colours, and I pull on the red one. I ask for a volunteer wearing red. I ask the volunteer to put one foot back as a brace and to then put up both hands and push on my hands—just like the image on the chart in Figure 1. Then I ask the whole group to find partners and do the same thing. Some laughter, some hesitation—and now we are moving.

2. Sensations—Emotions—Thoughts

Now I ask people to do the energy exercise again—this time with mouth shut and mind open—and to notice three things. Easily remembered by tennis players, these are the “Three SET Points: Sensations, Emotions, Thoughts.” What do you notice as Sensations in your body such as tension, fatigue, relaxation, calmness, imbalance, balance? What do you notice as Emotions connected to those Sensations such as confusion, happiness, sadness, anxiety, excitement, relief? What do you notice as Thoughts about what is going on such as strange, funny, puzzling, challenging, boring, stimulating? (Hopkins 2012, p. 113)

I ask for one-word descriptions of the Sensations, Emotions, and Thoughts that people notice. I write them—in red—on a flipchart and then I use the wide range of reactions to point out Three SET Points of learnings from the experience:

1. You experience these Sensations, Emotions, and Thoughts even though you are not talking during the exercise.
2. Different people have different—even opposite—Sensations, Emotions, and Thoughts while using the same energy.

- You may have positive experiences with an energy that other people have negative experiences with. So while you may feel comfortable using that energy, the other person may feel uncomfortable. And vice versa. (Hopkins 2012, p. 114)

After we gather the SET words, I introduce the Energy. This is RED Energy or what I also call Moving Against Energy. The first movement of RED Energy is Demanding, as in “I want....”

Now the volunteer and I demonstrate the other half of RED Energy. We begin with our hands pushing against each other as before. Then I decrease the pressure with one hand and increase it with the other. Our arms go back and forth. After the whole group does this, I again ask for Three SET Points. The second movement of RED Energy is Exchanging, as in “If you...then I...” Putting the two movements of RED Energy together creates a result: Demanding + Exchanging = Deal. (Table A)

Table A: Four Energies

Now I reach for the blue shirt and go through the same process for BLUE, then GREEN, and then PURPLE. Each time, we experience the two Movements

ENERGY COLOR, DIRECTION, MOVEMENTS = RESULTS				
Color	Energy Direction	Movement Ways to “SAY” What I Want	Movement Ways to “GET” What I Want	Four Results
Red	Moving Against	Demanding	Exchanging	Deal
Blue	Moving At	Proposing	Reasoning	Solution
Green	Moving With	Sharing	Listening	Understanding
Purple	Moving Together	Envisioning	Connecting	Cooperation

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of each Energy that equal a Result. BLUE Energy: Proposing + Reasoning = Solution. GREEN Energy: Sharing + Listening = Understanding. PURPLE Energy: Envisioning + Connecting = Cooperation.

I say to the group, “If I had just given a lecture on the energies—instead of getting you up and moving first—and now asked you for your reactions, I’d

be getting a lot of resistance. The beauty of working with body movement in a group is that you and the other participants are doing your own research in the here and now with your most trusted source: yourself.”

That is why I begin with movement rather than talking about it. If someone wants proof that these energies work, then Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman offer the perfect response: “. . .we present nothing that you cannot verify for yourself in terms of your own behaviour.” (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951, p. 7). I also refer to Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (Carroll 1865): “The best way to explain it is to do it.”

When I finish introducing a group to the Energy Model, I encourage people to “keep it in mind” and then—in my ongoing attempt to add a new phrase to the language—I also encourage people to “keep it in body” as a way of remembering the experience of each energy.

Use Of Self: My Own Journey Into Using Movement In Groups

It’s evening—a long time ago in a country far, far away. I am in my late twenties. It’s the first year of my first training programme at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (GIC). I am talking in the group—but not getting anywhere. I make a note about our trainer, Janet Leon: “Janet is trying to get me to move.” I’m beginning the long journey to discovering that moving helps.

But first I invest a lot of energy in resisting the whole idea of moving. And I keep getting nowhere. Eventually, some weeks later, I risk moving briefly and Janet sighs in relief. I’ve begun to move.

Use of self means to me that I make use now of how I have resisted in the past—as part of my own learning. Now I can honour your resistance as you begin learning the same things.

It’s another evening a year later. In another training group at GIC, Gestalt therapist Miriam (Mim) Polster is working with our group on dreams. I offer a recent dream: I am swimming in the lake and approaching a pier. I am worn out and need help to get out of the water. United States President Nixon is on the pier and refuses to help me out.

I talk about how I see a connection between this dream and the foundation that just rejected my grant application. Mim moves me away from talking about it and into movement. She offers me an experiment—an experience in which we

co-create what happens. Mim gradually scales up the experiment, checking with me as we go. Mim reminds us of the “safe emergency” in which the person doing the work pays attention to both ends of that continuum with two questions: Am I getting enough support to feel **safe** in doing this experiment? Am I feeling enough **risk** in doing this that I think I might learn something? (Polster and Polster 1973, pp. 234-235)

Mim encourages the rest of the group to get involved. Some members of the group provide chairs and cushions as needed. Joan volunteers to take the role of Nixon on the pier, saying that she wants to learn how it feels to be like Nixon.

Mim then suggests that I swim. Forty-five years later, I still feel the soft roughness of the carpet as I do a crawl stroke across the floor to the pier and see Nixon towering over me (Joan is standing on a chair). Nixon tells me I cannot come out of the water. I keep holding on and hoping. Joan, as Nixon, screams down at me that by asking her permission, I give her power and she will never give me anything. I will have to get it myself. Eventually, I ignore Nixon and stop asking for help. I pull myself up on my own and I walk past Nixon into my own future. (Hopkins 1974, p. 90)

I’m Better When I Move

Several years before I began learning about Gestalt, I saw a movie with a memorable scene about moving: Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. In a long conversation with my lifetime friend Johnny King—after we watched the film again recently—I realised that my favourite scene in the film matches my own experience.

While looking at Sundance’s gun, a man tosses his tobacco pouch 30 yards away, and challenges Sundance to hit it. Sundance tries to put the gun back in his holster, but the man insists that he just point it. Sundance aims—and misses. Then he says to the man, “Can I move?”

“Move? What the hell you mean, move?”

Sundance draws, hits the pouch on the ground—and again in the air. In the best tradition of a laconic cowboy, he then says, “I’m better when I move.”

“I’m better when I move” is my lifetime learning as a Gestalt practitioner. I can still get lost in my head, lost in my words, lost in hanging on too long, lost in trying to figure it all out. The difference now is that I can get out of my head sooner—sometimes just by taking a walk. I’m better when I move.

Presence

When I am working in groups—and especially when I am doing movement and energy work with groups—I need to establish my **Presence** and share my **Use of Self**. As Gestalt consultants Mary Ann Rainey and Jonno Hanafin explain, “Presence represents the translation of personal appearance, manner, values, knowledge, reputation, and other characteristics into interest and impact. . . . Presence is use of self with intent.” (Rainey and Hanafin 2014, p.72)

Establishing **Presence** begins as I arrive in a group. I learned this from Sonia Nevis, my mentor at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. When I co-trained my first weekend workshop at GIC with Sonia, I was very nervous. I put on my favourite purple shirt to feel a bit better. When I walked into the Institute, Sonia was coming out of her office—wearing a gorgeous long purple dress. I commented delightedly on our synchronicity. She calmly responded, “Of course. Purple is for power and passion. That is what we are here for.”

When I created my energy model for influencing, I chose a colour for each energy. PURPLE Energy is the energy of power and passion. In 2012, when I published my book about influencing, Sonia wrote to say: “Such a good book—you are probably as proud of it as I am proud of you.” (Nevis, S., 2012, Personal correspondence) The cover of the book is **purple**.

When I pull on the purple shirt while demonstrating PURPLE Energy, I remember Sonia and me wearing purple. Both then and now, I am establishing Presence through Rainey and Hanafin’s “use of self with intent.”

Use Of Group

As I make Use of Self, I also make **Use of Group**. When someone in the group says, “I’ve been sitting too long; I need to move,” I could just watch them stand by the window or I could just begin thinking of some group movement I could offer.

Instead, I make Use of Group by wondering aloud if someone in the group has a way we can all move. Recently, this Use of Group has led to several different forms of group movement, each led by a member of the group, ranging from lively dancing to a slowly flowing tai chi routine. The challenge is to let the group do the work. If they are doing it, then I can just stay out of the way.

Other times, we do Use of Self and Use of Group together—as group and trainer. Let’s imagine that you are telling the group that you feel unsupported in your life. The others in the group start talking with you about how they support you. This is all words. Time to move.

As we begin developing an experiment, I remind us all (including myself) that we are here to Care for you in your experiment and to Dare you to find the right level of Safe Risk—my shorter version of what the Polsters call the Safe Emergency. (Polster and Polster 1973, pp. 234-235)

As much as we may want to Care or Dare, you are the final arbiter of your own Safe Risk. You are already lying on the floor because at least the floor is supporting you. Someone suggests that we physically show how we support you—by lifting you from the floor. As we are scaling up the experiment, I review the Safe Risk again with you AND with the rest of the group. I scale the Risk down by suggesting we only lift you four inches off the floor.

Now I make very sure that you are supported all the way around, with the strongest people above your waist and at your head. Some people check their own level of Safe Risk and shift places. I am assessing your weight before deciding that the risk for us and for you is safe enough. In any case, I am at or near your head so that I can keep both an eye and a hand on you.

We rehearse the lift and then we do it. We hold you in the air—just a few inches above the floor—and then return you safely to earth. After the shining eyes and before the conversation, I use two of my more frequent words in a T Group: “Sloooow down.” After intense work, we need to pause and breathe. I suggest that you use your journals to reflect on what you have learned. For these intense experiences, I offer **Seven Quick Bits** as ways for journaling concisely about what’s most important at the moment. (Hopkins 2017, p.13)

Much Ado About Noticing

I often begin a group with a flipchart that says Much Ado About Nothing and then I share my favourite learning about this play. Shakespeare loved puns and he uses one in this title. In the English of his day, the word “nothing” was pronounced more like “noting” and this play is full of characters leaning around a corner to notice what other people are doing. I frame the week ahead as much ado about **noticing**. I’m going to be noticing, and I’m encouraging you to notice too.

During the past fifty years, I have participated in hundreds of groups, and facilitated hundreds more. Some are T Groups, some are management teams, and some are volunteer groups. In all these groups, I use at least some of my Gestalt training at least some of the time. With two of the groups recently, I made a small intervention that changed how those groups have worked ever since. In both cases, I noticed that the meeting room was set up with a head table for the leaders facing rows of chairs for everyone else. I simply suggested that we move the chairs into a circle. One of the goals in Gestalt work is enabling people to move into contact. That is easier, as well as much more likely, when each of us can see and be seen.

Just as I finished writing the previous paragraph, a colleague from one of those groups stopped in for a chat. I mentioned that I had been writing about that small intervention. Sheila reacted instantly, “That was not a small intervention! It transformed the group four years ago and has kept us going since then.”

I do a lot of noticing without intervening. As Yogi Berra said to his baseball players, “You can observe a lot by watching.” (Berra 1998, p. 95)

Moving With Resistance

Resistance happens often in groups. Here is another opportunity for Use of Self. I know about resistance from years of doing it so thoroughly during my Gestalt training. I haven’t stopped resisting, but I do recognise it a lot faster. So when someone starts resisting, I am ready. I could present a lecture on my seven learnings about resistance. Or we could move.

Here’s how it might begin: You sound frustrated, “I don’t know what to do. That person just keeps resisting me.” Other people in the room begin offering you advice. I’m tempted to offer my own advice, so I go into my head. My head is a nice place to be—I spend a lot of time there. However, as the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio points out, it is your body that actually provides the ongoing stream of data that enables your physical brain to create what we like to call the mind: “Moment by moment, the brain has available a dynamic representation of an entity with a limited range of possible states—the body.” (Damasio 2000, p. 142) Your body gives you a lot of information—if you pay attention.

So once again, I move out of my head—and I ask you to stand up with me. I hold up my hand with the palm facing toward you. You take the hint and do the same. I put my hand against yours. You accept that. I put on some pressure. You do the same. Then I ask the rest of the group to stand with a partner and do what we have just done—and then do it again with the opposite person putting pressure on first. I ask what you noticed. You all noticed that you pushed back.

Now that you've had the experience, I share my Seven Learnings about Resistance from my many years of resisting, as well as being resisted. (Hopkins 2012, pp. 15-22)

1. Resistance is **Normal**.
You resist instinctively. So does everyone else. It's normal. Even if you gave a bit of ground, at some point you stopped and pushed back. It's normal.
2. Resistance is an **Alert**.
When you sense resistance from someone else or within yourself, this is an alert to pay special attention. Notice that both of you are resisting.
3. Resistance is an **Iceberg**.
Even small surface hints of resistance (from others or within you) may be clues to much deeper resistance below. Explore with care—paying attention to cultural differences.
4. Resistance is **Contact**.
Again we begin with an exercise. I put pressure on your hand and ask you to remove your hand suddenly. Even though I brace myself, I may still stagger at first. If someone walks away from you, you can do nothing. But if someone resists you, you are in contact and you can continue to work.
5. Resistance is an **Opportunity**.
If you are resisting something, you have energy and you can learn from what you are resisting. If I'm resisting you, then you can listen to me and find out more about my resistance. If I don't have to defend myself against your attack, I can change much more easily.
6. **Pay Attention** to the resistance.
When you sense resistance in yourself or others, pay careful attention to what you are thinking and feeling. You might discover that the resistance is more complicated than you thought. Ed Nevis and his colleagues offer this possibility with their comment on multiple realities: "Another reason

for a more respectful reaction to realities other than one's own is that resistance is not an all-or-nothing but rather is best seen as ambivalence.” (Nevis, Lancourt, Vassalo 1996, p. 60.)

7. Move With the resistance.

We begin with the original exercise of palm against palm. Then I let you push me backward. I step backward a few steps, moving with your energy as you continue to push me. I notice that although we are going in **your** direction, we are at least **moving**. That opens up possibilities. As we keep moving I begin drifting to the left and gradually we change direction. If I keep doing that, we can end up moving in my direction after all. Or perhaps we move in a direction that neither of us had chosen originally.

If you stop moving against me, I can still move myself around to stand beside you. From that position I am more able to see things from your perspective. That might encourage me to change my approach. Or maybe we both will. (Hopkins 2012, pp. 15-22)

After we have been through the seven learnings, I ask you to stand with the person who has been resisting you. You do the first step with each other. I point out that both of you are now resisting and both of you now have the opportunity to move with the other, instead of resisting each other.

We are approaching the end of this version of my learnings about using movement and energy in groups. Just as I would in a group, I have shared the four **Energies** of RED, BLUE, GREEN, and PURPLE, as well as the **Three SET** Points. I have shared stories of **Use of Self**—with intent—to establish **Presence**. I have shared stories about involving participants in **Use of Group** by encouraging Much Ado about **Noticing**. And finally, we have moved through the seven learnings about **Resistance**.

In a group, this gradual process of experiencing all these ways of using movement and energy, makes it possible for us to do experiments later in the week that build on all those movement experiences. Let's imagine how it might happen.

You are talking about how you are trying to reach a goal, but other people are blocking your way. Some members of the group are giving you advice. I ask if you are willing to do an experiment. You say yes.

I review Safe Risk with you and review Care and Dare with everyone. I ask if you play any sports and you say football. We scale up an experiment with a cushion

for a ball and two chairs to define the goal. I challenge you to make your goal. My long-forgotten brief time as a goalie re-emerges, and I block several attempts. By this time, the group is cheering you on and you are becoming more determined to score—while I am getting better at blocking. When you finally do score the goal, you are totally energised and ready to move toward your real goal. I encourage you to note how are feeling now so you can keep it in body and return to that energised feeling each time you need to encourage yourself to move on your goal.

The group bursts into spontaneous dancing in celebration of your success—and then more dancing in celebration of our learnings as a flowing, growing group.

Like Sundance, we are all better when we move.

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