



igniting engagement

Introducing Constellations at Work

In the UK at this time, the practice of organisational constellations is still relatively unknown. The field is very different from the field of family constellations: the organisational work is still finding its place alongside other systemic and solutions-focused approaches to change and development, as well as coming to terms with the different issues of organisational need and business culture. The potential contribution that constellations can make to make to organisations is highly significant, but introducing constellations at work needs care both for the integrity of the work, for the organisational cultures that this work can influence, and for the shifts in orientation that consultants and coaches need to open themselves to if we are to make best use of the work. This paper is a personal reflection on some ways of introducing and working with Bert Hellinger's systemic constellations in a number of different organisational contexts.

RESPECTING SYSTEMIC DIFFERENCE

Organisational constellations work undoubtedly represents a pioneering new paradigm approach to change and development, which is challenging, both for practitioners and for clients. Some of the challenges of working with constellations in organisational settings do not only come from the groundbreaking nature of the approach itself, which can be difficult to describe in ways that are simple and accessible. They also come from some of the difficulties inherent in transferring and adapting this profound work from its origins and main field of application in family systems psychotherapy, into larger and more complex strategic systems.

I think it is important to take the work forward into organisations in ways which acknowledge the founding of the work through Bert Hellinger's innovative thinking about 'Orders of Love'. Also, in my opinion, organisational constellators from management and consulting backgrounds need to be respectful of the heritage from therapist colleagues working in family systems (from whom as a consultant I am still learning so much) and who have been the original pioneers of this work.

At the same time, the different contexts, cultures, needs and circumstances of organisations need to be acknowledged. Psychotherapeutic and family systems approaches are not always directly transferable into the organisational domain. For example, some of the 'orders' upon which the work is predicated differ in their application in organisations. While everyone has an inalienable right to belong to their family system, in organisations belonging is contingent upon one's acceptance of leadership, upon competent use of skill, and other variables.

In addition, organisational applications of the work are not always so relationally profound as within family systems work. I have used constellations in work settings to explore how to improve the reach of a brand through rebalancing elements such as websites, mailshots and other marketing media; to understand what was preventing a creative company bringing successful new products to market; to explore financial strategy for a new business about to undertake a merger; and how to manage service provision for a public sector organisation faced with relentlessly shifting political agendas. Naturally there are human considerations that relate to these more impersonal issues, but often my experience of organisational constellations has been that illumination is enough. Restoring a wholeness of perspective does not carry nor need to carry any immediate or obviously healing charge for individuals. Simply surfacing unacknowledged truths can be of sufficient service to the client and their organisational system.

Despite some of the important differences between family and organisational constellations, happily there is still a lot of creative cross-fertilisation occurring across disciplines in the UK and elsewhere. A number of constellations practitioners I know are now quite naturally talking about 'systemic constellations work' rather than family constellations or organisational constellations, and people on family systems workshops I attend are genuinely interested in less personal applications of the work beyond organisations, in community and even environmental systems. Working across systems is an exciting area of application and one that I am particularly interested in.

There is much that practitioners from family and organisational fields can learn from and with each other. I believe that this is particularly true with systemic constellations work, perhaps more so than with other forms of systemic work that I have encountered in organisations, which are not so radically inclusive and therefore place less emphasis on the importance and benefits of working sensitively and skilfully across family, organisational and social systems boundaries. Of course, part of the skill here is to separate and 'bracket' issues that belong to different systems, rather than attempt to do too much. It is impossible to resolve an issue from one system within the context of another system. Nevertheless, a constellation is a remarkable tool for working simply and effectively with multiple and complex inter-relationships across different systems (including families and organisations), and for calibrating interventions at different points of a system in a way that respects the whole organisation as well as its constituent parts in a way that we normally never get to do as consultants and coaches.

For example, we know from constellations work that entanglements can happen when we confuse systems boundaries and - out of awareness - treat our boss as though she is our mother, or our father as though he is God, and so on. People often innocently try to work out the issues from one system of reference in another system, with disruptive effects. This seems particularly to be the case especially around issues of authority and our place in relation to hierarchy. Disentangling systemic dynamics is core to this work, within as well as across systems.

In one constellation I worked on recently with a colleague, Sue Abbotson, a Managing Director of a newly-merged business was having problems relating to his Sales Director, who was on the Board. Although the Sales Director had been primarily responsible for the deal which had profited both merged companies, and still had lots to offer the business, the MD could not find a good place for him in the new organisational structure he was developing. When we remained working scrupulously in the organisational domain, whatever configuration we tried, the issue was unaffected. It was clear that the source of the MD's dilemma lay in the family sphere. Tentatively, my colleague put in 'male support' for the MD (resisting openly calling this representative 'father' which would have been too jarring in this context). This made a slight positive difference, in that the representatives for the business felt more relaxed and focused. However, the MD could not fully take in the male support. The constellation was brought to a conclusion at this point. Over a coffee we spoke privately to the MD alone, and suggested the source of his dilemma might reside in his relationship with his father. He was understandably surprised, and rejected the idea, saying that this could not possibly be the case as he had not spoken to his father for many years... We ended the conversation at this point, and returned to the group, trusting that somehow the frame of the issue had been enlarged enough.

I believe that there is more possibility of an organisational constellation touching upon deeper and more personal family issues in this way, than vice versa. This holds particular challenges for organisational consultants drawn to this approach. We need to ensure that we commit to our own ongoing personal development, and ideally to receive training in family systems dynamics. Clearly it is responsible practice for us to keep the larger bias of the work in the organisational realm, and not to interfere in people's family systems unless it is essential, and then only minimally. My point is that there are overlapping areas that organisational consultants using constellations are likely to encounter, as in the vignette above, or when working with family businesses, for example.

FIRST HURDLES

There are some more basic practice dilemmas facing consultants who wish to introduce constellations to their organisational clients other than knowing how to balance different systems' influences in a constellation, as in the previous example. Some of the 'first hurdles' are because systemic constellations work is so new, innovative and powerful. Organisational clients usually have some 'first hurdle' questions, among which are: what is a constellation,

what are its applications, when would it ideally be used, how does it work, what will the process deliver, what will be its benefits, who else has used the work, and what will it cost?

It is important to meet these questions directly and succinctly, although anyone familiar with the work knows that some of the questions are difficult to meet fully - constellations represent an innovation where practice is in advance of theory, so straightforward answers are not so easy to provide! Related to this is the consideration that to present the work in purely organisational terms misrepresents it, and sets false expectations for clients who might reject the work if they are surprised by the unorthodox approach and the occasional deeply revealing insights that are likely.

Until recently my own strategy has been to flag up the innovative and searching nature of the work, and to hold back from suggesting that it can be used too widely. I talk about the fact that a constellation is a way of looking at hidden dynamics that are 'below the radar' of awareness and which can entangle projects and people over long periods of time if not attended to. I suggest that the most appropriate first uses of a constellation are where there are recurrent problems (described by one colleague, Jessica Richards, as 'ground-hog day' problems) that are not amenable to conventional approaches, and which might already have had considerable effort and resource devoted to them with no satisfactory or sustainable results. Another area of application I point to, is where progress is urgently required in areas where little or no data is available. Starting with conveying a sense of the weight of issues the work can address, and stressing the fact that it is not necessarily a 'first port of call' for a manager, seems to do justice to the work and to help contextualise its unusual approach. Another organisational colleague, Andy Stuck, describes constellations as 'an unusual option for an unsettling time' - again, framing the difference of the work and pointing to when it can be most effectively applied.

Another early consideration in taking constellations into large organisations is that aspects of the language of systemic constellations work can generate resistance in organisational ears. For example, notions of 'soul' and of 'healing' can be difficult to express and explore in corporate settings. Equally there is a need for client education about the epistemological and methodological framework of constellations - things such as phenomenology, the 'orders of love', the 'knowing field' and the related phenomenon of 'representative perception' need meticulous contextualising, robust handling and occasional reframing are they really 'orders of love' in organisations, for example? Can we talk about 'intuition' rather than 'the knowing field' (recognising that there are considerably deeper things going on in a constellation than intuitive process)? Even working with the body in organisational settings has different cultural sensitivities and sometimes even taboos. These things need careful attention.

At another more pragmatic level, the process of constellating in its purest form - using a group of strangers in a workshop setting is logistically not easy for a company



to arrange at short notice. Hiring a group of representatives can be costly, and raise significant confidentiality issues. Desktop and floor applications in one-to-one settings have been an important development for consultants and coaches, in this respect. However, some of the depth and subtlety of the work is often sacrificed, and these ways of working are more reflective than dynamic.

Significantly, one of the highest hurdles for the 'constellating consultant' to get over is the fact that this work is not about the practitioner agreeing to pre-determined outcomes, as a consultant or coach would. Organisational contracts are usually very results-focused, and clear about the fact that clients need agreed deliverables within agreed timeframes. Yet a constellator cannot make strong outcome claims.

All the constellator can agree to, is to serve the emergence of an unknown or unacknowledged 'truth' about the system. If we collude with the cultural imperative to be goal-oriented, and try to 'fix' the outcome for the client, even with good intent, we are not working phenomenologically and we degrade the work. It is quite a paradox for a beginning practitioner to be staunchly solutions-focused and also scrupulously unattached to outcomes. The principle of active non-intentionality is important in this work. In the family systems field, for example, there is a real sense that the work is not about healing although greater health and wholeness are often clear outcomes. Trying to remove symptoms for people might have some success at an individual level, but the symptoms often carry a systemic freight which must be borne by someone - so they may recur elsewhere in the system. Acknowledging what is, and helping clients understand how symptoms are acting blindly in the service of something important in the system, means that as a constellator, we do not have to do anything more to support resolution.

One way of handling this dilemma is to be clear that the modes of constellator and consultant are different, and that the constellator's job is simply diagnostic with the added value element of suggesting some viable way forward. Also, in longer-term pieces of organisational work it might be useful to engage the services of a constellator intermittently - say, at the very beginning of a project, and at one or two significant points throughout the project's life cycle. The constellator works as part of the consulting team in this way, but one step removed. This helps preserve the sort of phenomenological distance that enables him or her to remain effective and unencumbered by the sorts of loyalties consultants feel for their clients.

One UK organisation I was a part of works this way to good effect, and also uses a constellator in a supervisory capacity to consultants on a project. This bounded approach means that the client gets the benefit of an innovative and powerful process but it is contextualised alongside other consulting and facilitation processes that are more familiar and trusted. Constellations are not the 'be-all and end-all' in organisational work - other approaches have their place and must be respected, too.

Related to the issue of the contractual promise to the client, is the fact that a constellation is not able to promise a result

within an agreed timeframe. We are not working with causal relationships here, where doing x results in y. Rather, we are working with multiple overlapping contexts which co-influence one another, in ways that are not so predictable. For me, this is not a limiting factor, but part of the excitement of this approach. In one sense, this work is about how fields create action at a distance, in ways that are both subtle and profound, and apparently co-incidental. One client, a senior director of a business, who had done several constellations, noted:

"I can never say that something happened in the constellation and therefore something followed in the business. However, one of our directors retired from the Board after I set up a constellation in which it was obvious that he was not occupying a role that did anything for him or us. Nobody in the business knew that I had done this constellation, and I talked to no-one about it. I was just pondering what to do afterwards, and then received his resignation. This enabled us to recruit and bring someone in to a different role, and a lot of things have flowed from the freedom that gave us."

In another constellation I worked in with senior constellator Judith Hemming, two people from a Health Authority came to explore an issue to do with a project that was faltering. The team was trying to co-ordinate work with strategic partners and stakeholders in wider health and social care networks. The boss could see that there were difficulties but he couldn't unravel them and did not know how best to intervene. In his constellation, the solution was for the project leader to form a new team with a particular set of players. However, the solution could not be put into place in the real organisation as funding was suddenly withdrawn and the project collapsed prematurely. You could say that nothing happened: the boss moved on to other issues and the project leader left the organisation and went to another, unrelated job. However, a year later a new job was advertised which exactly matched the solution in the constellation. The old project leader reapplied and was given the post. It is as though the seed of the solution had found a place where it could germinate, and the field as a whole moved to support it over time.

These are mysterious and powerful dynamics. However, if organisational clients have not experienced a constellation (in particular what it is like to be a representative), it is less than straightforward to make a conventional business case around such results. The boss in the example above might have felt fascinated by the constellations process, but might have seen the work to be fruitless initially, as the constellation did not yield information about the Health Authority's decision to cut the funding so suddenly. It is only the longer perspective that reveals the mystery.

THE VALUE OF CONSTELLATIONS AT WORK

It seems to me that constellations are centrally concerned with the issue of what supports 'flow' in systems. Part of the promise of a constellation is that things can move forward with more grace and ease, that sustainable progress can be made, and that new things can happen. By providing a 'living map' of the factors and forces at play in a situation, a constellation provides support for often unimaginable

solutions to present themselves. A constellation suggests that by acknowledging the 'given-ness' of things, a kind of inclusive spaciousness is created through which we can find fresh possibilities and renewed energy for change.

As highly task-oriented, results-driven systems, organisations can derive great benefit from processes that support change. The solutions-focus of a constellation makes it doubly attractive in those settings where grounded practicality is essential and where constructive and creative action is prized. In a constellation, we have a way of exploring and resolving a scale of issues from the private leadership struggles of an individual to more public dilemmas of global strategy or terrorism, for example. In addition, the power of the constellation to reveal previously hidden dynamics, and the authority of the underlying 'orders' that a constellation is predicated upon, and which insist relentlessly on the good of the greater whole, make this approach invaluable in large and complex systems. The sort of change a constellation supports is, quite simply, sorely needed in most organisations.

The benefits of using constellations at work are clear and compelling. The process is versatile, economical and effective. It makes a profound difference at personal and systemic levels. It can help resolve deeply intractable, recurring problems and also suggest potentially viable future possibilities with a minimum of data. Over the eight years that I have been interested in this field, I have experienced systemic constellations work making these and other differences in family and other small businesses, in global corporations, in public sector institutions and in social organisations such as NGOs.

While the approach is incredibly versatile, in my own practice I have noted that there are four key areas of work that organisational interest frequently clusters around. Other constellating consultants will no doubt see things differently. I am sure that these issues are drawn to me as much as I notice them, because of the parallel emergence of my own learning needs along the journey with my clients. The four key areas of application I seem to work with include issues of:

- Leadership and governance
- Restructuring
- Conflict resolution
- Consultant effectiveness

In talking about organisational constellations with clients these days, I raise these as areas that might be of interest to them as they begin to consider what issues to work on. In each of these areas, constellations can be used diagnostically (to determine what the underlying dynamics are), remedially (to point to resolutions that might move a situation on), and prognostically (to glimpse future possibilities). In some instances, all elements seem to be present in a single issue...

In one constellation, for instance, a consultant brought an issue about a company department she was advising which had become steeped in blame, and as a result was becoming dysfunctional. One director in particular was

being scapegoated. The question the consultant posed was two-fold: firstly, would it make any difference if a new person was introduced? For example, was the issue of blame and scapegoating so endemic that it would make any difference who was in the role? Secondly, what could she do that might make a difference? The constellation showed that some of the issues were indeed systemic, and when these were identified and brought into order, it was clear where the consultant had to position herself to have an optimal effect, and what personal qualities she could manifest that would help the departing director and those in the team who remained behind.

The constellation in this instance became a very precise consulting tool, which helped the external consultant find penetrating, effective interventions, and promoted constructive action in ways that did not seem to generate a huge number of unintended consequences, which is what most change agents tend to get lumbered with. Economy of intervention is an important part of this way of working. At the same time, there are enormous learnings about such issues as: how good leaders strengthen systems if they fully take their place and power; how departing people need to be released respectfully, if the system is to proceed onwards unencumbered; and how consultants can neutralise their effectiveness if they inadvertently take the place of someone in the system.

Although case studies such as this illustrate quite complicated inter-related elements, a constellation enables us to touch the complexity of organisational issues without being overwhelmed by them. The systemic 'orders' of time, space, belonging (and the related concept of conscience), give and take, and specific socio-cultural norms of a collective, enable us to realign the organisation. The role the 'orders' play in releasing the energy of the system should also be emphasised.

MOVING FORWARDS

The question of the educational and development needs of the organisational constellator, and the consultant, coach, facilitator or manager interested in applying this approach, is one that needs attention if the work in organisations in the UK is to continue to grow and flourish.

The key issue for me is to begin by thinking of constellations not as a technique that we do with a group of people in the middle of a room, but as something that stands for an entirely new way of looking at how we know things, and opening up more non-judgemental spaces so that constructive change happens naturally, with less resistance and more engagement from others.

It is often not possible to do a constellation, or even a desktop constellation, in the workplace. Instead, it is essential to work more homoeopathically, inserting potent fragments of systemic constellations work into workplace conversations, facilitated away-days, and other settings. I find this often takes the form of innocuously suggesting constellation sentences to clients, or of making phenomenological observations that bring certain things more into focus, or offering a small bow of acknowledgment in the form of a nod of the head, or



changing a seating plan to one that is more 'ordered'. There are so many creative ways to insert constellations approaches into work spaces, and they make a difference when offered from the place of the consultant's non-judgmental presence rather than as a technique.

In integrating constellations into my own practice, I have had to relax and release many received understandings that are current in more conventional systemic organisational consulting. It has also been essential to take on new and often uncomfortable concepts. This has been disorienting at times, but necessary. Most other forms of systemic practice in organisations, for example, do not explicitly hold the view that problems persist across generations. While it is advisable in consulting work to start with the present, I have observed that problems with the founding energy of the business often hold the key to organisational transformation. It is through systemic

Constellations work that I have discovered this and found practical tools of working with it.

Also, part of the challenge for me, and possibly for some other organisational constellators coming from management backgrounds, has been to really understand that there is a way in which a system seems to know about itself, and have its own form of consciousness which takes priority over more individual needs. This is a unique learning for me, from systemic constellations work. Hellinger talks about this as a 'soul', which is really not a very business-like term. Yet we could see the 'soul' in this context as a pattern of reproduction - something that reminds the whole system of what it is and where it is going.

Finding more organisationally resonant ways of distilling and communicating these concepts is important, and for me has opened up creative avenues of thinking and developed my practice quite powerfully. For example, one brand development project I was engaged with had to do with illuminating the 'special-ness' of the client organisation so that staff would feel proud and customers would be drawn to the company. While I did not constellate this company, the thinking about 'soul' (which we called 'the corporate DNA' on this assignment) from systemic constellations work gave a very different starting point to the project. The project was not concerned with adding any marketing magic, as the commissioning client originally supposed, but about unfolding the qualities of the founding energy of the company, and the deeper patterns of current behaviour that made the business unique. The process of working in this way was more engaging for staff, as well as more respectful of the organisation and more interesting for me.

As constellating consultants, we also need to be able to learn at what level of a system to intervene, if at all. A friend was recently talking to me about the poor service at a day-clinic in a local hospital he had attended. Patients were walking out because there were no consultants and nurses to deal with the queues. We talked speculatively about what could be done from the perspective of systemic constellations work. Towards the end of our conversation, he let slip that there had been a road accident that morning

to the north of the city. He had heard on the news that a lorry had overturned on the motorway and shed its load. This detail was salutary for me, as the issues he described in this hospital had nothing to do with the *clinical system*. Instead, an unrelated accident had snarled up the *transport system* and kept healthcare professionals from travelling to work. Apparently, this was quite common in the region! I recalled how often, in my early consulting experience, I had Started from the wrong place, or put great effort in the wrong place!

With experience, constellating consultants develop discrimination to separate the systemic issues in organisations from structural or developmental issues. The reason something might not be going well could have to do with sudden work overload during busy periods, when Human Resource teams cannot recruit quickly enough, or when there are skill shortages and training requirements, for example. It is not that these issues are not systemic, but recognising that these belong to more structural areas points the way to where solutions can be found, which might not need a constellation at all.

Finally, there is a need for more practice-based research into using constellations in different organisational settings. After all, the purpose, context and culture as well as some of the issues of commercial companies differ greatly from those of public sector organisations. Also, the issues of schools, hospitals, prisons and local government organisations are also different in many respects from one another. While the differences between organisations are not to be overstated in reference to this work, as the underlying orders that regulate systemic functioning are common to all, my point is that working in depth and over time in these contexts does require respectful but non-confluent familiarity with the client's issues.

More discussion with, and writing from other organisational consulting and constellating colleagues (as well as from therapists interested in this different field of practice) would help energise organisational constellations in the UK. I think these forms of collaboration might also create the communal energy and evidence-base our clients need to understand the deep contribution the work can make. I'd like to end by inviting such collaboration.

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