



MASTERING MANAGEMENT CONSTELLATIONS

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Among the many developments in systemic constellations work is the emergence of 'Management Constellations'. This article reflects on my personal experience of this work, and considers its contribution to consulting and coaching practice.

What is a Management Constellation?

I recently participated in a year-long multicultural learning project which introduced the practice of Management Constellations to a group of approximately 20 Organisational Development (OD) consultants and managers from Germany, Switzerland, Italy, France, Spain and the UK.

A Management Constellation owes its origin to a dilemma faced by many organisational constellations facilitators - how to use systemic constellations work within a company on 'live' issues in 'real time' with an 'indigenous' management team. So far, constellations work has mainly been offered through open-access workshops for delegates from different organisations. While there are definite advantages to this approach, which might well continue to form the hard core of organisational constellations work, the reluctance or inability of constellations facilitators to use the process within management teams has, arguably, been a limiting factor in the development of the work in business contexts.

Using constellations within an organisation with actual members of working teams, is the major distinguishing feature of a Management Constellation. This format is best applied where there is a need for attention *to a specific task* rather than a requirement to work at deeper interpersonal or therapeutic levels. In addition, a Management Constellation is regarded as part of an integrated suite of OD interventions (not just constellations) rather than as a self-contained process which provides resolution in itself.

Several practitioners have been developing different forms of business constellations for several years -

for example, Torsten Groth, Gerhard Stey, Carl Ulrich Gminder in Germany, Andy Stuck in the USA and here in the UK, Judith Hemming of the Nowhere Foundation as well as myself. In addition, 'Management Constellations' as a discrete practice is being codified and developed by Italian Georg Senoner, German Henriette Katharina Lingg and Swiss Claude Rosselet. These three collaborators are all independent consultants who have used their 'brand' of Management Constellations with commercial companies and public sector organisations throughout Europe for several years.

In my experience of their work, Management Constellations is more affiliated with structural forms of constellating pioneered by Matthias Varga von Kibéd and Insa Sparrer, rather than the phenomenological form of organisational constellations developed by Gunthard Weber. There has, of course, been some convergence in recent years (at least at the level of technique) between structural and phenomenological constellations forms. Gunthard Weber (2004) notes, "In organisational constellation seminars I repeatedly apply forms and elements of constellations that were developed...as structural constellations."

Working With Teams on Their Own Issues

To many organisational consultants and family therapists who are already familiar with systemic constellations work, it might seem problematic to work directly with actual teams or groups on their issues. Indeed, it is more difficult to ensure clients in a constellation do not enact their tacit or explicit assumptions about one another and the situation they find themselves in. To counter this possibility, Management Constellations facilitators have developed a number of practical adaptations of the form. Generally:

- A Management Constellations strongly emphasises working with issues at the level of task rather than focusing on more interpersonal issues. Where interpersonal issues are the cause of disruption, it is possible that a constellation might not be the intervention of choice with the team as a

whole (although the highest-ranking team member, for instance, might benefit from an off-line organisational constellation with a group of strangers).

- In selecting elements of an issue to be represented, preference is given (as far as is possible) to setting up more abstract elements rather than human elements. For example, in a constellation about a company's marketing strategy, the six elements represented included the focus, the agreed marketing approach, that which was outside the agreed marketing approach, the boundary between the two, the market context, and a free element representing an 'x factor'. In a more phenomenological 'free form' organisational constellation at a different time I have seen representatives include the marketing director, the board, the suppliers, customers and the strategy.
- When a person has to be represented, a keen distinction is made in a Management Constellations that we represent someone's *role* rather than regard them as a fuller person - a distinction that is reinforced through addressing the issue-holder as 'The Focus' rather than using his or her name (This distinction is also made in structural constellations).
- When roles are named (for example, a constellation might need the Sales Director, Human Resources Director and Managing Director to be represented) people are encouraged to stand in one another's shoes or in each position sequentially, rather than represent themselves throughout the constellation.
- Representatives in Management Constellations often find their own initial positions relative to one another, rather than being 'set up' by the facilitator or someone from the team.
- Facilitators try to ensure that Management Constellations are kept as short as possible. It might be that a constellation is set up and engaged with for only 10 minutes to provide a discussion point or a springboard into a consulting technique that would be more familiar to the client.
- Management Constellations makes extensive use of debriefing and discussion after the constellation to process insights and agree next steps with the client team.

One objective of these adaptations is to minimise the

possibility of a change of structural level occurring in the constellation - for example, when a manager's issue is initially located within the organisational domain but suddenly is seen to be much more personal and have its origin in his or her family system. In an open workshop when a traditional organisational constellation is in progress, good practice demands that such changes of structural level are handled sensitively. Clients are either alerted in the moment to the implications of proceeding with something that is 'nearer the knuckle' than first appeared, and given a choice about how to go further, or they are protected to some degree by the constellator being less explicit about who certain representatives really represent (for example, a constellator would put in a representative for 'male strength' rather than 'your father'). In a constellation with a management team, however, such changes in structural level would be more exposing and compromising for clients, so these additional precautions are taken.

In addition to the seven 'rules of thumb' of Management Constellations mentioned above, it is worth noting that there is also a bias towards using 'fixed form' rather than 'free form' constellations in exploring supervision issues. That is to say, issues are generally worked through in Management Constellations using a number of the structural constellations forms developed by Von Kibéd, such as the Tetralemma, Belief Polarities Triangle, Values Square, Defocused Theme Constellation or others. This is not so rigid, however - free-form constellations from the phenomenological school are also deployed, or used in combination with fixed forms (for example, situating a free-form constellation within the framework of a Resource Triangle).

Two Mini-Case Studies

Two examples of Management Constellations will illuminate the process.

In the first example, a consultant colleague worked with a simulation of her client group of four senior managers of a subsidiary of a major facilities management corporation. Their issue was to resolve disagreements about how best to achieve their business objectives. In the previous meeting of the managers, there had been a vigorous exchange of conflicting views which had resulted in stalemate. A tense atmosphere persisted between the members of the management team. The consultant was expected



to break the deadlock and restore amicable relations as far as possible.

Rather than work dialogically, at the level of relationships (as many experienced consultants might do) the consultant introduced the possibility of a Management Constellation. The situation was described simply at the level of the task - that there were two conflicting approaches to reaching the business goals, which could be called 'Approach A' and 'Approach B'. There was a parent company, and the subsidiary itself. There was also the goal of making a profit. These elements were written on different coloured card 'placemats' and laid out on the floor firstly by the key advocate for Approach A, and then by the key advocate for Approach B (so that two variations of the pattern were apparent). Each time, the team was asked to 'read' the constellation - to describe what they saw and inferred from the proximity and direction of the elements represented by the placemats. Then members of the management team were asked to stand on the placemats and report their feelings and impressions. When data had been gathered in this way, some changes in the formation were suggested by the consultant, agreed by the team, and people were invited to stand on different placemats and again, report their insights. Finally, the team was invited to sit down and discuss their perceptions in terms of what they had observed was blocking them, what they had seen differently as a result of this process, and what three next steps were suggested. In terms of outcomes, the consultant reported that she felt enabled to introduce management constellations to a team which had never experienced this work before. In her own words, "I realised that a Management Constellation is a powerful tool for working explicitly with the inner pictures of a team that are always implicitly present in meetings, and therefore difficult to work with."

In the second example of a Management Constellations, the Management Constellations learning group itself was wrestling with the elements required to establish a 'vision' to support connection after the end of the learning project. Brainstorming had generated more than a dozen elements such as Communication, Creativity, Team Spirit, Resources, Purpose and others... The question was, which of these elements in which combination did we need to pay particular attention to as a group if we were to generate a compelling vision that would point the way to the future of the group?

A free-form, 'hidden' Management Constellations was used, set within the fixed form of a Resource Triangle

(which had also been set up in the room prior to the brainstorming and group discussion). A member of the group took the initiative to facilitate the process, and wrote the elements that had been brainstormed on separate pieces of coloured card, which were concealed from all members of the group, who sat in a large circle around the periphery of the room. Someone from the group was asked to represent the Focus (in this case, the learning group itself) and the volunteer was asked to find his place in the room. Someone else was asked to represent The Future of the Group and she found her place, some considerable distance from the Focus. One by one, different members were then invited to take a card and without showing it to anyone else, and to find their place relative to the Focus. As each representative for a 'hidden' element settled, the Focus was asked to report his responses - many of which were very dramatic. The process took forty-five minutes, and was incredibly compelling for the whole group. When each representative had found their place, the facilitator summarised the responses of the Focus, and each element was finally asked to identify itself by reading the word on the pieces of coloured card.

There were great surprises for the group during this 'reveal' process. For example, Creativity was anathema to the Focus. Resources and Risk were the most compelling and attractive elements to help move towards the Future. Team Spirit was not recognised as being important to the Focus, but played a crucial part in cohering the other elements. After the Management Constellations, the data was discussed informally and energetically by the group.

The constellation represented a key switch-point in the life of the group. It not only clarified important aspects of the group dynamic, but coincidentally members who had represented some hidden elements played a vital role later in the day of moving the group on when it was stuck. For example, the female representative of Team Spirit leaped up at some difficult point in the afternoon's proceedings and spoke to each group member personally, reminding us of the positive essence we each brought to the group. This became a critical intervention, and several members mused about how she embodied the element she had unwittingly represented in the constellation. Also, after the closure of this Management Constellations, the group was more able to attend to its present business and later in the week, the group committed to meet again in a different form - some sort of future was assured.



Positive Aspects of Management Constellations

From the client's perspective, the Management Constellations has the same virtues as organisational and family systems constellations. It is solutions-focused, incisive, provides apparently reliable 'next step' data in complex or ambiguous circumstances, supports multi-modal attention by the client to core issues... In addition a Management Constellations provides a whole team simultaneously with a systemic perspective. Facilitating this sort of 'self-listening' can provide powerful alternative viewpoints that are experienced by the team as non-partisan and which can therefore be collectively 'owned' and acted upon by.

The development of Management Constellations gets neatly around a key issue for organisational constellations practitioners how to sell this form of work to clients - as it becomes simply one of many techniques used in service of resolving client issues. With trust established in the competency of the consultant, the client team more easily lend themselves to this form of facilitation, which is introduced as naturally as one would introduce other, more traditional techniques. Management Constellations to some extent also demystify constellations for clients.

In addition, by using team members in specifically defined ways, a Management Constellation may help surface and deal with intuitive and other non-rational behavioural drivers in ways that are more sympathetic to existing organisational mindsets and culture, and therefore encounter less resistance from managers. Barber (2002) notes of business communities, "What people say they do is often different to what they do. Behaviour is the show, emotions are the fuel, and intellectual rationalisation provides the cover story. In this light, any amount of cause and effect thinking and logical planning will do little to transformation an organisation or person if the deeper energetic drivers are missing." From this perspective, rather than being regarded as a deeper challenge to constellations facilitators, a Management Constellations might actually provide a bridge between classical 'management science' perspectives and a more post-modern paradigm.

By embedding systemic constellations work within the more mainstream consulting process, the method is normalised. It becomes more explicitly a part of the greater whole of systemic approaches to management and organisational development. This is achieved

without sacrificing one of the great strengths of constellations work the holistic and legitimate inclusion of non-rational dimensions within the consulting framework. Many problems have a strong non-rational aspect so it is only reasonable that the resolution process and solution will have strong non-rational aspects too. Such an approach is non-dualistic in a Management Constellation the client is not asked to choose between rational and non-rational approaches in an either/or way, but proceeds towards insight through acknowledgment of both/and possibilities.

Reservations About Management Constellations

The development of this pragmatic approach to working with management teams is a welcome addition to the constellating consultant's armoury. However, as Lingg (2006) - one of the 3 originators of the approach - herself says, "Working directly with in-house teams in this way requires a special degree of care and experience..." The approach is not for the faint-hearted, as working with body process and in the tacit domain of knowledge in an organisation is inevitably problematic because such interventions are so counter-cultural for managers. The introduction of the Management Constellation also requires some skill in using language that is true to the systemic methodology but also grounded and businesslike. The words used to lead the team in to and out of the constellation are important.

This approach is straightforward where there is a clear task without overly complicating interpersonal dynamics, or when a project team would be prepared to forge ahead at the level of the task and ignore for the time being any such relational difficulties in their operating context. However, the greatest difficulty I perceive with the Management Constellations approach is when changes of structural level occur. One of the basic propositions behind Management Constellations is that people in work situations are more identified with their roles than with being full persons. This is not always so in my own experience.

Many people view workplace roles as transitional objects appellations that only partly direct their contributions for the time being. Many employers see things in this way too, and seek to empower employees to make contributions that are beyond their formal roles. Additionally, most people flow between various systemic realities at work, and can find roles themselves to be part of the problem



rather than part of the solution. As O'Donoghue (1997) says, "Often a person's identity, that wild inner complexity of soul and colour of spirit, becomes shrunken in to their work identity. They become prisoners of their role. They limit and reduce their lives."

There is a danger that an approach to systemic constellations work (which at heart is radically inclusive and seeks especially to clarify boundary issues between roles and systems) that begins with freezing issues around a task which is completed by people within rigidly held roles may serve the task but not the people, and ultimately might not be sustainable. Furthermore, in my own experience of consulting and of constellations, the higher one goes up the organisational hierarchy, encountering leadership dilemmas, the more frequently one sees that leaders' issues are intimately connected not with their roles *per se*, but with the generative or degenerative resonances these roles create with deeper and more personal material, that is often familial in origin. Commentators such as Bill Torbert (2003) have long asserted that organisational development is often a parallel process moving in tandem with the development of consciousness of the leaders.

I return to Barber (2002) at this point: "The more cynical reader at this stage might ask: 'Why bother with holism... what [has this] to do with earning a crust of bread and life in the real world?' In reply, I would draw attention to how different levels of reality inform the 'contractual', 'idealised' and 'authentic' dimensions of our consulting and coaching relationships (Greenson, 1967) and point out that if we blind ourselves to these dimensions, we limit our own and our clients' potential."

Conclusion

Despite these reservations, on balance I believe my own practice as a constellating consultant and coach has benefited greatly from exposure to Management Constellations. There are so many times in business when the task is simply what must be attended to, and given priority over the several issues of team members. This is part of the give and take of being at work, in a purposeful and strategic system. Management Constellations recognises this and works 'with the grain' in these situations, where it has validity on its own terms and can make a real contribution.

Personally, being steeped in the phenomenological philosophy and by my nature predisposed to work more interpersonally with clients, I found the constructivist philosophy behind structural constellations (from which Management Constellations draws most of its forms) difficult at time to integrate in my practice. However, results speak for themselves, and those clients I have exposed to this approach have indeed benefited. Management Constellations will be something I shall continue to develop.

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Biographical Note

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