

Trauma in organizations

Introduction

In October 2009 Angwynn St Just facilitated a workshop about trauma. A year before I had some experience on trauma-release from Peter Levine, after I had fallen on a mountain. These two experiences led me to the question: What about trauma in Organizations?

People can be traumatized, but can organizations be traumatized as well? And what is traumatized exactly? Can a department be traumatized? An organization doesn't have a body, but can organizations have symptoms as if they were a body? Or perhaps it's possible that there is a field that can be traumatized? From my area of work: the systemic perspective of phenomena in organizations, I could not find any colleagues that had looked into trauma in organizations. This felt like reason enough to organize a workshop related to this theme and, stimulated by the many questions, investigate this further.

In this article I also include my experience (in several countries) with constellations in organizations where trauma played a part. It's sort of a report of a couple of experiences up until now. These experiences stem from working with constellations and systemic observations. To be clear: the implementations of the results of the constellation, (what you can actually do on a practical level in the organization with the information the constellation has given), have been done by the issue holders themselves. While I am writing this article I do not have much information about these implementations, unfortunately.

An obvious question: How to prevent a trauma reaction in case of radical events, such as mass redundancies, accidents, abrupt change, bankruptcy, etc., is still open terrain to be explored.

Trauma

We will follow Anngwyn St Just's definition. We speak of trauma when;

- The system is so overwhelmed by an experience that it is not capable to bounce back to its original strength and
- There are broken connections.

If a system can bounce back after a radical event we usually speak of stress or a turbulent period instead of a trauma.

A trauma is always systemic; the effect of a trauma is broken connections; with colleagues, with the home front, with the purpose of the organization, with your passion, with the outside world and other stakeholders around the organization. We once facilitated a constellation in a ministry where the question was;

"How to repair a broken connection after a radical epidemic? During this epidemic, thousands of animals had to be killed so the virus would not spread. After this had happened there was a deep gap between the ministry and a big part of the (agricultural) society."

A broken connection can also be a fracture in time. We once facilitated a constellation with a woman, who at 16 ended up with a SCI when she fell off a ladder while painting the farmhouse of her parents. This woman was exceptionally complete at a personal level and fully at peace with her life. During the constellation it became obvious that for her time and her personal

development had made leaps forward, but for her family and her parents in particular time stood still from her accident on. The system of the woman had bounced back and was even stronger ('the gift of the wound'), but the system of the family had not bounced back, it was stuck in time and therefore the connection was broken.

Energy release

If an antelope is attacked by a lion it can either fight or run. If neither is possible the animal will freeze and will fall down as if dead. If the antelope survives it will shake off all the energy that could not find its way out during the attack. It appears that humans have lost this ability. The work of Peter Levine aims, amongst other things, at releasing this energy from the body. Guiding this process demands a tremendous amount of skills and craftsman/womanship. With this energy release you can prevent someone from freezing again, unable to act adequately, in a similar situation like the original traumatic event. In my case my body froze on top of stairs when they were as steep as the slope I had fallen on, but it also froze when someone behind me pulled away a chair even when I had not intended to sit down on it.

A couple of months later I had my first trauma session. The result of this session was that my legs were attached to my body again. After the second trauma session a small hole in my memory was filled again (the first half second of the fall). Especially the latter turned out to be very nice; as if events instead of being abruptly cut off could now flow again. In my line of work with trauma in organizations I do not feel experienced and skilled enough to work with energy release.

Symptoms of trauma in

A couple of symptoms of trauma, mentioned by people (leaders of organizations and/or employees) during a systemic workshop, are;

- Rigidity of the organization when proposing change or a new direction. You could see this as reactivating: The often subconsciously stored memory from an earlier trauma gets triggered again by the proposed change.
- Broken connections, between for instance older employees and newer employees that despite mutual willingness, can't be put back together again.
- No flow between different divisions of an organization or between the organization and the outside world. It's difficult to have flow when there are broken connections.
- There can also be a trauma reaction in the surroundings of the organization. Someone in the workshop remembered what it felt like in Oss (a town in the Netherlands) when one day the letters ORGANON (name of the pharmaceutical multinational) were taken of the building and changed into others. You can ask yourself in what way the disappearance of big Dutch brands can lead to trauma reactions.
- The organization or the department appears to be standing still in time. In an organizational constellation, a dimensional image of the organizational system, where departments, products, board of directors and other elements are represented by people, you see similar symptoms. *When you keep the image of a deer caught in headlights in mind, you sometimes see at a glance that this applies to a part of the constellation or to the constellation as a whole.
- In the workshop it became clear as well that if representatives are cold or feel their surroundings turn cold, it can be a very strong clue there can be trauma involved.
- Another clue to look for is when a big part of the people in the constellation is focused on the past instead of the future.

- Finally, sometimes the arms, hands and/or legs of the representatives move almost subconsciously and often uncontrollably as if they are fighting or running away, even if this was not possible in the real situation.

An example; A female director, who decided to leave her company during a merger, wondered if she had caused a trauma by leaving. There was a chance she would either become redundant or there would be other reasons for her to leave, so she left. During the constellation the lower leg of the representative of the employees kept making walking movements, like that of a restless horse. The sentence said by the female director that revealed the truth and was therefore helpful, was; 'I could walk away, you could not...'

What helps?

Below there will be a sum of what we have witnessed to be helpful until now while working with constellations on trauma in organizations. The sum of course is far from complete and is also not sufficiently coherent.

'Time-space travel' to pull fragmented parts back together

A time-space journey is a general format that seems to be helpful. During a traumatic event parts of a system are split off. This is possible in different layers. An organization can be split off from different parts of the organization or certain groups of employees, but also inner parts of a person can be split off.

An example of splitting off on the first level is that of a ministry that was cut off from the agricultural part of society. On the second level we saw that a group of fired employees of a housing company were split off from the employees who stayed. These employees were laid off because they did not want to or could not go along with the new course. On the third level the employees who stayed turned out to be cut off from their own work experience, workmanship, and passion for the job.

What works well in the constellation is; when the current director (even if he joined after the traumatic event) says to the group of fired employees; 'The bond with you has been abruptly cut off', 'your vision (a different one than the chosen new course) has become fatal to you'. Especially the last sentence helped the remaining employees to have the courage again to commit to their love for this work. This time-space journey (in the now you go back to the past) takes time, cannot be rushed or pushed. And it needs a safe frame and a safe atmosphere in which this process can take place .

Resources and applying life-lines

Sometimes it is a director who is confronted with a traumatized organization. When he or she is an issue holder for a constellation it is possible to work rather directly with them. There is a distance between him/her and the trauma of the organization. When the issue holder is a victim him/herself of the traumatic event, it is often necessary to, before the time-space journey begins, install lifelines. You can also bring the client into contact with resources that are available to him/her, so they can draw strength from them in difficult situations.

Lifelines can be made, for example, with an anchor in the here and now. You can make sure the client doesn't enter the constellation too much by placing a filter (a chair) between him/her and the constellation.

It's on no account necessary, very unwanted even, that the client enters the traumatic state again.

A colleague that accompanied the client or the facilitator of the constellation can also serve as a lifeline, sitting next to the client during the process.

Resources

Anngwyn St Just often uses resources that people are already wearing on their body; jewelry, clothing, symbols. Often these are connected with meaningful, positive events from someone's life, or are a gift from a loved one or another important person. Together with the client, the facilitator looks for such resources. They can be anchored so the client has constant access to them during the process.

Bond with roots

Research done by Anngwyn St Just shows that people who are most connected to their roots are the people that rebound the most from and are least traumatized by a radical event. Constellations also indicate this. Connecting organizations to their roots seems to create great resilience. With roots, you can think of; the original purpose of the organization, the social distress the establishing of the company was an answer to, but also the local community where the organization is rooted. A case of the management of a bank in Mexico where the resistance of a call Centre appears to be a race issue. Usually the low paid have Indian blood. But underneath the issue of the races lies the question; to what extent is it possible for groups of employees to connect to their roots? You can ask yourself what the consequences are when a factory is moved from a remote region where it was founded and where it has grown to a city which is logistically more attractive. What happens when you uproot a company? What happens when you outsource the production to a low-wage country? Permission from a cut off part to the rest of the system to move on.

A newly appointed head of the department student support of a technical university in Mexico was confronted with a department that could not move. The whole constellation was frozen stiff. Many representatives felt very cold. When asked if something serious had happened, they suddenly remembered that a few years back a student who had been critical of the system had been shot by the police on campus. When this student was represented in the constellation he fell to the floor. He was motionless and stiff. The only sentence said by the department head that brought movement again to the representative of the dead student was; 'You have been killed' and a bit later: 'society has moved on... without you'. At that moment the student opened his eyes. The student said; 'It's good that society has moved on'. With that sentence the current employees felt permission to focus on the future again. They slowly felt some warmth again, their blood started to flow, they got some color back to their faces and very soon after we ended the constellation.

Very often the surviving part of a system feels guilty and does not allow itself to focus fully on the future. In literature about organizations in transition this is named 'survivor syndrome'; instead of the, from the management, expected feelings of gratitude and motivation, the employees who were allowed to stay seem to lose their trust in the organization. Sometimes the unconscious question is: 'Am I next?'.

Finding the first trauma

Research shows that traumas tend to repeat themselves. Even when all the people who went through the first original trauma have left the organization and there isn't even anyone left

who can even consciously remember it. Remarkably, traumas seem to have the tendency to repeat on the anniversary of earlier traumas. Anngwyn St Just and historian Anne Ancelin Schützenberger have done extensive research on this. With the housing corporation, above mentioned as an example a couple of times, we did a second constellation. With the first constellation we had acknowledged and integrated the parts that were cut off during a change in course two years before.

The director wanted to explore how the ties with the community, the politics and other parts of society could be reconnected again. In this constellation the corporation was no longer represented by several representatives for the management, the departments and the employees, but by one representative for the whole organization. That representative still showed signs of trauma and said; 'The word 'war' keeps popping up in my head'. And all of a sudden the director (client) said: 'the organization is 94 years old. There are rumors that during the war a neighborhood was bombed; a portion of our housing stock was part of this neighborhood'. This information resonated immediately with the representatives in the constellation. After acknowledging the loss and possible victims the corporation felt able to reconnect with the local community and its politics again.

Recognition of the survival strategy

A consultant tells about the guilty feelings in a department. She explains how guilty the employees felt about fighting for and taking care of themselves and no longer taking care of each other in a time of severe cutbacks. "But by doing this the department was able to survive better as a whole than when they would have kept on taking care of each other", was her insight.

Often you are, even years after the trauma, confronted with the old survival mechanisms -> splitting of, fighting or whatever. At that time it was the only possible and therefore best option. The survival strategy is ok.

Giving options

In a traumatic event there are no options. It seems to be helpful to give a client options. Do we continue, do we stop or do we do something else? What do you want to look at first, and after that?

Finishing movements

The reason a system ends up in 'freeze-mode' is because it could not finish the movements it wanted to make at that time. If you apply full gas and full break at the same time a car won't move, but inside an incredible amount of energy is generated that cannot find its way out.

In constellations it is helpful to encourage exploring what moving arms would do if they would finish their movement. When looking at the system as a whole you could look for; what inner movement is there in this system that wants to reach its destination.... Where does it stagnate..? What is the stagnation a response to? Sometimes you see, when a representative in a constellation has the start of such an energy release, that it resonates with the body of the client who is watching on the side, even though he/she does not always understand the direct link.

But a client (issue holder) is always connected in two ways to the organization the question is about.

The first one being; as someone with a function in the organization, an employee, a director, or any function.

Secondly the issue holder is also part of a system and he has stored holographic information as it were about the system as a whole even before his time.

Constellations show this time and again. In some cases, when a trauma began to release in a constellation, the body of the issue holder also responded. It can be helpful to be mindful of this and ask the issue holder regularly about sensations in his/her body and possibly letting him/her resonate with what is happening in the constellation. It seems to be possible that that body of someone that came into the organization after a traumatic event still acts as a 'body of resonance' with interventions afterwards.

Memory and reality

Earlier we mentioned that according to the experience of trauma-experts, it is not desirable to go back into the trauma itself. A good place to start is there where the system realizes it has survived the trauma. From this point on someone can get into contact with the trauma without having to go inside the trauma again. It's common that the way trauma was saved in the memory is not exactly the same way the actual events took place. Often there are shifts in time and place. This arises from a compilation of memories that are bind together into a cluster, but in fact they consist of parts of several events. You work with what comes to the memory. This is sufficient.

Facing the event

Facing the event is something different from facing those involved or possible victims and perpetrators (with a trauma caused by people). When someone really looks an event in the eye (in a constellation it is easy to put a representative for the event in, this also makes it hard to crawl into the event) there will be a moment where it is made real; we cannot change the event anymore. I cannot change the event or retroactively undo the event.

The event is a historical fact. To a certain extend it has formed me into who I am now. And: The world has moved on. Today's world is as it is. Without this event it would not be the same world as it is today.

Growing larger than the event that has happened to you

In a constellation I was a representative for a father of a family that had been traumatized by the war. The facilitator, Anngwyn, put someone in for the war. And later on gave the sentence; 'War is part of our family'. Instantly two things happened at the same time inside me as a representative; I stopped fighting and experienced such a power in me that I could deal with the world again, and acknowledged war as a part of me.

Several times we saw that the client as well took the event in as one of the inner parts (from the organization or from itself). Growing larger than the event, and integrating the event into the system gives a lot of resilience to possible future situations and reactivations of the original trauma.

I will not forget the moment when the director of an institution for mental healthcare during a conference introduced himself as; I am the director of the organization of Jolanda Venema. Immediately a sigh of relieve went through the room. (Jolanda Venema is a mentally

handicapped woman who was severely mistreated in the institution where she lived. Her parents went public with some pictures of her tied to a wall naked inside the institution.)

To take into consideration: Building your profession on a traumatic event

A man, almost retired, once told that he as a pharmacy student always got exceptionally good grades. Except for the time where he got a 4 for an exam, right after his dad had died. None of his teachers had asked him what had happened or why he ended up with a 4. Now all of a sudden he realized why he had been a student advisor for 30 years. Note well; at the same university. It often happens that people during or after a traumatic event promise that no one will ever have to go through that same experience. The young female teacher who was bullied at school once promised this would not happen to other children anymore. Maybe this is also in a sense growing larger than the event. It is the gift of the trauma.

Translation: Marieke Kramer

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