

Bay Area Organization Development Network  
2008 Best in the West (BitW), April 4–5

## Revealing The Excluded Issue: Transparent Diagnosis – Sustainable Results

### Abstract

The following article describes the phenomenological approach of Organizational Constellations as particularly effective in producing clear and transparent diagnosis of organizational processes. Diagnosis using systemic constellations provides information and direction for interventions which are more readily accepted within the organization and which incorporate insights which minimize undesired effects of the interventions chosen. The article includes general information about the facilitation skills required to use the approach effectively.

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### Background Information

Over the last several decades, psychologists and OD practitioners, among others, have developed a large body of knowledge about the self-organizing dynamics within all social systems.

Many of these dynamics arise from beliefs, cultural biases, ingrained processes, and other factors that generate specific organizational behaviors which persist independent of the behaviors and intentions of any one individual in the organization (Oshry, 1999; Simon, 2004; Wheatley, 1996). In contrast to conventional, linear problem/solution approaches to change, systemic thinking holds a larger frame of complex feedback loops, interlocking sub-systems, and the effect of time delays (Senge, 1990) interacting in ways that allow non-common sense interventions to have a large effect on an organization.

Organizational Constellations fit into the systemic phenomenological tradition, which starts with observation of the system and its inherent dynamics. The insights and understandings come from first-hand experience. Through direct experience the previously unknown or "unknowable" is revealed, and the facilitator follows intuitive insights through presence and unfocused attention to the system as a whole (Weber, 2002). While constellation practitioners are able to observe patterns and generalize themes, there is no underlying theory that serves as a reliable predictive framework (Hellinger, 1998).

The patterns and themes which emerge in constellations, can be summarized in three principles (Stam, 2006; Weber, 2002).

**Respect for the structure of the organization**

- The corporate structure and its business units, departments, etc.
- Reporting hierarchy
- Seniority

**Inclusion of and respect for**

- All current members of the organization, regardless of their rank or function
- All who have had significance for the organization during its history -

founders and other major figures, merged or spun off units, etc.

**Balance of giving and taking in the system**

- Fair business practices
- Departmental relationships
- Team dynamics
- Matching authority with responsibility and value of contribution

When organizations disregard any of these basic relational principles, other areas of the system will generate an unconscious balancing dynamic. This displaced compensation adds to the overall difficulties in the system and, because the compensation is largely or entirely unconscious, and thus excluded from attention, difficulties are experienced as persistent and resistant to change. Any attempts to seek localized solutions, any interventions which overlook the network of connections, will not be effective or sustainable from an organizational perspective. Constellations are able to reveal the larger patterns and provide resolutions that affect the source of the difficulties as well as the related balancing dynamics.

In Organizational Constellations these systemic dynamics are expressed in experiential terms of emotions and physical sensations, making the information and its implications very easy to comprehend and leading to dramatic results in an organizational change effort. The particular and unique strength of the approach lies in its ability to reveal the systemic influence that key individuals and their relationships bring to the broader organizational dynamic. In this way it empowers leaders by offering an experience of their effect on the organization and by providing access to specific internal experiences that will produce the desired shift in organizational behavior.

## The Excluded Issue

This article is focused on the value of systemic constellations as a means to reveal organizational dynamics, which, because they have been ignored, overlooked, or denied, continue to create tensions and difficulties in the organization despite changes in personnel or policies and despite previous efforts to create positive change in the system. When these previously excluded issues are revealed, diagnosis becomes transparent and sustainable interventions become possible.

### The Unnamed Elephant

Excluded issues surface in a variety of ways within organizations. One form is commonly known as "The Elephant in the Room" (Hammond & Mayfield, 2004). Members of the organization are aware of the issue or difficulty, but there is tacit or explicit agreement not to include the issue in decision-making. Such agreement to exclude an issue becomes a constant unacknowledged diversion of attention and energy from the actual locations where change efforts can be effective. In an organizational constellation, this diverted attention and energy quickly becomes obvious, as do the compensating behaviors of parts of the system, which are being deprived of the attention and energy they need. The resulting diagnostic clarity greatly simplifies the task of consultants and management in devising and implementing interventions, which produce sustainable results.

### Shifting the Burden

Shifting the burden is another frequent consequence of excluded issues. Peter Senge (Senge, 2001) described and explored this effect, where an underlying problem is difficult to resolve because it is either costly to confront or obscured by the prevailing mindset. Instead of dealing with the real issue, people choose to

define the problem in a way that suggests easy, quick fixes. They often ameliorate the symptoms for a little while until the equilibrium of the system is re-established and the problem symptoms reappear – often in more severe form. The temptation now lies in responding with an increased dose of the same remedy. This creates a vicious cycle that is not unlike addiction.

Organizational consultants, internal or external, often become entangled in this vicious cycle when the burden for the solution is shifted to the consultant as expert. The temptation for the "expert" comes in the form of identifying the "solution" in terms of his or her own expertise or comfort zone, so that the consultant focuses on finding "the right tool" rather than addressing the underlying dynamic. In contrast, systemic constellations provide insights into the prevailing dynamic without prejudice. The consultant is able to directly experience the situation from a neutral observer perspective – often together with the client, who will need to agree with and approve any suggested intervention – and proceed with confidence and stakeholder support.

### Systemic Constellations and Sustainable Results

Some basic dynamics are relevant to all systemic change efforts (Grochowiak & Castella, 2001):

1. The problem description is always part of the problem. Offering a solution that stays within the paradigm of the problem description either has minimal effect or shifts the burden to create a new problematic situation in another area of the system.
2. The focus of systemic consulting is on changing the self-description of the advised system to revise the mental models, concepts, and stories that create boundaries implied or insisted upon by the current self-

understanding. The new self-description brings a new perspective or understanding of the problem situation, thus changing the problem description. Removal or change of the problem symptoms becomes a side-effect of a new construction of reality.

3. Every change requires destabilizing the equilibrium of the current situation. Thus, any change effort is perceived, even in the best of circumstances, as a threat to the system as a whole. A successful engagement is able to provide a favorable comparison between the tension generated by instability and the pain experienced in the original problem situation.

Organizational Constellations utilize a simple spatial metaphor in which neutral representatives, who have no connection to the current system, are placed in the space as representatives for people, goals, issues, functions and other aspects of the system. When asked about changes they notice when simple sentences are exchanged, or when their position/location in the Constellation is altered, representatives describe their physical sensations and other internal states. They not only feel the power of unconscious forces, which affect the actions of members of the organization, they are also part of revealing and disentangling those unconscious forces so that new choices and decisions can take effect.

Constellations reveal substantial information about underlying intentions and hidden motivations affecting the system. This information offers new ways of shifting the stabilizing dynamics within an organization by focusing on how the internal stance and experience of the client and of the consultant influence relationships and behavior and affect the prevailing dynamic.

In general, Constellations have two phases that also speak directly to the ways they can be used in a consulting context (Weber, 2002):

1. A diagnostic or assessment phase, in which the present-state dynamic of the system is revealed. This phase of the Constellation often brings surprising connections and relationships to light that have been excluded from consideration before. It lays the important foundation to redefining the problem description and with it the self-description of the organizational system from which new solutions and choices become viable and ultimately necessary.
2. A re-resolution phase, in which simple sentences and changes in location of representatives are used to evaluate the effect of interventions and changes in attitudes/internal stances on the prevailing dynamic. Constellation facilitators generally look for the state in which representatives report inner strength, clarified relationships to each other, and relief from the initial tension and strain that were experienced during the assessment phase.

Constellations are useful in assessing organizational systemic dynamics where the aspects represented in the Constellation are larger organizational units, such as team, departments, business divisions, etc. Additionally, they offer valuable insights into the specific relationship dynamics between the individuals involved. Experience teaches us that many situations require attention to both those levels in order to develop long-term sustainable solutions.

Constellations are well-suited to the elimination of "the water-cooler background type of noise" that can distract from the true issues. Constellations can quickly and efficiently bring focus to the key systemic dynamics that

contribute most to the current situation and behavior, and point to the shifts and changes that will produce significant movements towards resolving the situation. Constellations can be used at any level within the system - from high-level overviews (e.g. departmental interactions or company/customer relations), to relationships between individuals (e.g. the head of marketing and the head of sales), to specific personal issues affecting single individuals (e.g. a new CEO who can't get traction with his/her VP of Operations).

Constellations have a track record of being effective in the following four broad categories (Francis, 2005) that overlap and affect each other:

- Leadership and governance
  - Clarity and strength of leadership, leadership development
  - Power dynamics
  - Decision-making support - on both a strategic and a tactical level
  - Cultural change management
  - Family businesses, where the business and private sphere overlap
- Restructuring
  - Clarify or change collaboration dynamics and responsibilities
  - Quality of collaboration
  - Plan and implement mergers and acquisitions
- Conflict resolution
  - Open disagreements and power struggles
  - Unacknowledged issues that lead to paralysis and poor performance
- Consultant effectiveness
  - Clarify engagement relationship
  - Clarify the most effective approach to work systemically in above situations

## Facilitation

The effectiveness of an Organizational Constellation depends significantly on the ability

of the facilitator. Therefore making best use of this approach entails choosing the right facilitator. In addition to meeting your usual criteria for selecting a consultant or collaborator, a Constellation facilitator should possess clear observational skills, a sociological and systems mind-set, and significant experience with systemic Constellations. (Ulsamer, 2003)

In the course of an Organizational Constellation, the facilitator is called upon to be clear and aware about the personal responses of everyone involved - representatives, clients who may be present, and oneself as facilitator. During the Constellation, the facilitator's experience of self as instrument provides guidance on which aspects of the pre-existing system to focus on and acknowledge, what needs to be resolved in order for new dynamics to emerge cleanly and effectively, and how to conclude the Constellation so that the actual client system has the greatest opportunity to move easily into the desired resolution. The facilitator both observes the Constellation and moves within it, participating in the dynamics with the representatives as well as assessing the system as a whole. Facilitators must be able to distinguish between their personal triggers and the information offered by the dynamic of the Constellation. It requires considerable training and inner clarity to discern the difference between one's own responses and those which belong to members of the constellated system.

As the facilitator directs representatives to change positions or to make simple statements, the facilitator calibrates whether the resulting changes in representatives' experiences are useful to the system or not. The phenomenological nature of the work means that the facilitator must be willing to step away from theories and ideas and be surprised and informed by the actual dynamics of the system. The ideal stance combines humble curiosity with self-assuredness (Hellinger, 1999) and the

ability to compassionately direct representatives to move in ways they may not initially consider sensible or wise. Good facilitators have done and continue to do their own inner work to maintain equanimity and awareness in the midst of these complex patterns.

A sociological and systems mind-set provides the ability to identify the multiple levels of nested systems and an appreciation for the cultural norms and collective trances of organizations and of a particular organization. In the archetypal situations described above, the specific consultant is usually not the first person to have been recruited to play dysfunctional roles in the organization. In order to actually do good work and provide value, the consultant must dispassionately recognize the interactions of the organization's history, personnel, and current circumstances and simultaneously to be aware of the rivalries, unspoken assumptions, taboos, and displacements that make up the informal organization as well as the formal structure or hierarchy. With such a stance of observation and assessment, the consultant can choose how and when to offer feedback, information, suggestions and interventions that are most likely to provide genuine and lasting benefit to the client.

Anyone facilitating Organizational Constellations should have significant experience with systemic Constellations, including family Constellations. Although the themes of inclusion, seniority, and mutuality are found in every Constellation (Hellinger, 1998), each Constellation is unique. Resolutions are found within the dynamic of the specific Constellation rather than by applying set rules. Experience and practice over time, noticing the myriad ways in which systemic dynamics are expressed in specific systems, is the best predictor that a facilitator will find a good resolution in each new Constellation. Organizational Constellations also involve the personal and family system dynamics of key

individuals within the organization. These individual dynamics, as expressed by Constellation representatives, will be most evident to a facilitator with experience in family Constellations. An experienced facilitator can incorporate awareness of the organizational resolution while protecting the privacy of the executives and managers who may be represented in the Constellation.

## **Benefits**

Our business ventures are embedded in a network of human relationships. Business success or failure in the twenty-first century depends on the healthy functioning of an organization's internal human relationships as well as the place the organization finds for itself in the complex market networks.

These interpersonal systems, which we know as teams, departments, companies, and markets, conform to universal principles, which guide all human relationships. However, because awareness of these organizational network connections and principles is at an unconscious level, these systemic relationships or "human Constellations" have been little used or referenced by business leaders or consultants as a tool for assessment, decision-making or problem resolution.

The systemic or Organizational Constellation method offers a tool that can depict complex interconnections and reciprocal effects in a clear and simple way. In widespread networks as well as clearly defined teams, this method helps to sort out entanglements and recognize valuable resources hidden in apparent obstacles.

**Differentiation between the "official" story and the real-time actuality or "true" story.**

Within an organizational system a number of elements and people can be connected to one

another in ways that may not be immediately obvious or visible. When there is change in one element, there will be simultaneous change in all the other connected elements. Yet, awareness of organizational network connections and human relationship principles is at an unconscious level in most organizations.

One common response to difficulties is to look for the guilty or responsible person. The "official story" is often something like: The CEO is responsible for her company's failure to meet quarterly financial objectives. The CEO is perceived to be the "cause" of the problem. The CEO is fired and replaced . . . yet the effect remains. Under new leadership, the quarterly objectives improve for about 6 months and then the old pattern of backsliding financials reasserts itself. The company finds itself stuck with the same old, unwanted outcome. In this case there is a systemic problem that has not been acknowledged and the CEO's poor performance is the "official" story. The true story may be much more entangled with the company's history of acquisitions, the founder's untimely death 4 years earlier, and so on. In such an instance, firing the CEO is akin to pulling the light bulb out of a flashing dashboard warning signal . . . and driving on. (Horn; Brick, 2005)

The way Organizational Constellations assess and gather information allows consultants to go beyond linear cause and effect thinking. Consultants are able to look beyond the client's "official story" to the hidden agreements and poisoned contracts that may be influencing the client's unwanted outcomes. When viewed in the context of a Constellation, the consultant can easily see whether the position of a department or the role of an individual is appropriate in the larger company context. The consultant can also utilize the resolutions presented in the Constellation to provide coaching and recommendations about the variety of ways

things can be shifted to improve the functioning of the whole.

#### **Benefits to the Client:**

An organizational system that resolves issues systemically will experience other concrete benefits that can include:

- Employee loyalty and retention
- Increased and sustained productivity
- Stress reduction
- Relief from recurring "stuckness" plateaus
- Streamlining of decision-making process
- Independence and creative thinking

## **Organizational Constellations, Traditional Coaching, and OD Consulting**

Organizational Constellations provide powerful awareness and motivating insights. However Constellations are not solutions that are already in place, nor are they instructions for proceeding with solution implementation. Constellations provide information about a system and its development. Occasionally the insight gained is sufficient, and there is a sense that the system is in the process of accepting and making the required changes.

Often concrete measures are needed to put a solution into practice. Such measures might include expanding the range of responsibilities delegated to an individual or team. Salary adjustments or the creation of interface teams that mediate between conflicting parties in a firm are examples of other possible measures that may need to be taken. Therefore, it is useful to conceive of Organizational Constellations and traditional coaching as complementary components of a successful business or OD consulting practice.

It is possible for any well-intentioned business leader to sabotage a desired solution, even a solution the system is apparently ready for as revealed in a high-level Constellation. Often the solution does not depend on the macro-system (the multi-layered organizational system of the company), but rather on the micro-system (the inner personalities, and sometimes conflicted aspects of one person's personality structure). (Horn; Brick, 2005)

The interface between the business system and the personal system is the point of contact where real movement toward re-resolution will occur. Traditional coaching tools can be

implemented to deconstruct resistance to change and to support team-building and leadership development. OD coaches trained to use a multitude of practical techniques such as voice dialogue, for example, can support individuals to become aware of conflicts within themselves.

During the process of implementation short "issue" Constellations can be organized for individuals and teams to help assess progress and to give individuals a sense of how their personal expectations or beliefs may be impacting the desired outcome.

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## About The Presenters

**Volker Frank** works with small and medium-sized businesses experiencing developmental stagnation, resulting in stressful, time-consuming efforts to reduce internal inefficiencies. Volker supports these organizations by facilitating strategic planning processes that align the leadership teams behind a shared vision and provide accountability with clear responsibilities. In support of the planning process he provides leadership coaching utilizing organizational constellations and NLP-based personal transformation methodologies. He is passionate about assisting organizations to meet their financial objectives in an environment that promotes personal well-being in and around the organization.

Volker has 12 years of consulting experience in the high-tech sector where he has worked across industries and businesses of all sizes, from start-ups to Fortune 500 companies. Volker has been involved in many organizational change initiatives, facilitating collaborative work sessions and developing strategic technology solutions to improve organizational effectiveness.

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**Deborah Gavrin Frangquist** assists businesses and individuals in making appropriate and meaningful decisions in the midst of change. Whether she is coaching an individual manager or facilitating meetings for work groups and leadership teams, Deborah's focus is on identifying what is already working within the organization and supporting people in using

their strengths to achieve business success and personal sustainability.

Deborah's approach to coaching, facilitation, and consulting is rooted in her deep knowledge of economic and technological change and her expertise as a Master NLP Practitioner, Reiki Master, and constellation facilitator. She has the capacity to quickly get to the heart of an issue, identify critical variables, and formulate effective change strategies. Deborah has been practicing for 25 years, currently maintains a consulting practice in San Francisco, and leads constellation workshops in the Bay Area.

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**Annelisa MacBean** is founder and director of Business Foundations, a California-based consulting firm specializing in the coaching and training of corporate managers and executives. Business Foundations emphasizes the development of coaching and mentoring skills for business leaders and provides clients with a unique skill set for managing the "human factor" in business . . . navigating that zone where the personal and professional overlap. Business Foundations has earned the trust of leading Bay Area businesses and organizations - assisting with cultural assessments, conflict resolution, mergers, acquisitions and leadership training.

For the past 25 years, Annelisa has accumulated a unique blend of experiences and perspectives in her roles as entrepreneur, investor, teacher,

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business consultant and counselor. For over a decade she has effectively transposed her understanding of developmental psychology to the corporate environment. Annelisa advocates for the human component of success in all business ventures. She enables leaders to build on the power of human relationships and establish a truly reliable foundation for achieving sustainable business objectives.

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