

A brief overview of Organisational Constellations

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"No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it"
Albert Einstein

In this article we show how many organisational change initiatives have low success rates and explore how organisational constellations can give some useful insights into how this occurs. We do not prescribe a theory of organisational change per se, Rather, we suggest that by looking at an organisation as a living human system, we can see how the optimal success of a change process resides in a complex web of patterns. Working with the organisation as a living human system enables us to hold strategic change tensions such as the focus on economic value-add and ideologies of employee contribution in their specific organisational contexts. They can be explored as relational phenomena rather than polar opposites so that leaders can work with awareness of choices and consequences. We outline organisational constellations as a critical tool in mapping human systems, revealing the underlying dynamics that so often thwart change programmes.

Low success rates in change initiatives

'Most change initiatives fail' states Senge (1999) reporting on independent research by McKinsey's in the 1990's. Thomomd and Lettice (2002) further suggest that most organisations 'find themselves disadvantaged by embedded structures, capabilities and outlooks' which limit their capacity to both anticipate and successfully innovate. These assertions are challenging calls to anyone working in the field of organisational change.

It is our experience as inquirers in the practice of personal and organisational transformation that most change initiatives only provide temporary improvements in situations, because the underlying dynamics often remain the same. These underlying patterns of behaviour, thinking and contextual issues considerably reduce the agility of an organisation to change, consuming considerable effort and energy.

Leaders and their teams are often caught in knotted patterns or "entanglements" that prevent a healthy flow of a collective energy and which are impervious to conventional interventions. If you consider your organisation you will be able to identify areas, which seem blocked or resistant to change. Across the organisation it means that the sum of the collective is not always more than or even equal to the sum of its individual parts. There are usually pockets of excellence, individual heroes and moments of peak performance, but too often there is a collective, sub-optimal performance.

Seeing organisations as living human systems

Over the last fifteen years there has been extensive research into the dynamics of human systems. Initially the work was developed on family systems but it was soon realised that the same principles applied to organisational and wider social and environmental issues. The basic premise is that every group or organisation over time, from the smallest to largest, develops patterned ways of operating along with a collective identity that affects the thoughts and actions of all its members.

Building on the work of Hellinger, Weber and Beaumont (1998), Hellinger, ten Hovel and Beaumont (1999), Weber (2000), and Franke (2003) in Germany, the **nowhere** foundation has been developing and refining a methodology called 'systemic organisational constellations' in commercial and public sector organisations.

It enables leaders and change agents to adopt a view of organisations as an intricate web of relationships, providing a sound platform for exploring causes, experimenting with solutions and taking decisions. Working with the whole as a living human system ensures that a problem is not merely moved from one part of the system to another in the guise of making progress; nor does it encourage an improvement in the performance of one aspect of the system, be it a particular person, department or function, at the expense of others.

Radical and sustainable transformation means re-constructing organisations in a way that makes it easier to deal with the contradictions, opposites and multiple systems of thinking which organisations face in today's economic and political environment.

Constellating is an approach to whole systems working which looks at the issues and dynamics of an organisation (or other systems such as a markets, family or community) using people as live representatives to provide feedback on the system. Importantly, it looks at and works with the consequences and hidden loyalties from the past as well as revealing the dynamics in the present. By addressing current situations, it can also work with the future and point to resolving energies, as well as bringing insights about the deep underlying, difficult issues that are holding a team or organisation back.

Working with Invisible Realities

A key principle when working with organisational transformation and innovation is that original beginnings lead to original results. Constellations provides such a beginning by providing fresh insights that can help point the way to the resolution of a burning issue.

Working with issues - The issue is held by the client. They are often an executive within an organisation, or someone who has the power and authority to take action. Typical organisational issues might be difficult team dynamics, clarity of roles within a strategic partnership, the redesign of a business process, the strength of organisational purpose, the place of values or the relationship of the organisation to its clients/ customers/ community.

Mapping the Present - A constellation is set up using people to represent specific elements of the system whether they are people, parts of the organisation or concepts. The arrangement, called a constellation, enables the client to externalise

three dimensionally the inner image they have of their present system. Using feedback from the representatives the relationships between the elements and the underlying dynamics that are shaping a system, are revealed stripped of the details and points of view that lead to opinions and judgements...and lack of clarity.

Testing Hypotheses - The representatives in the constellated system are helped to change their positions and voice what they are sensing and feeling. The constellator interprets this information using it to test hypotheses about what is causing the strains, who or what seems to be holding tensions for the system or appears weighted down inappropriately and where the hidden energies for change are.

To draw on a more familiar experience, a constellation is rather like using a computer spreadsheet, where it is possible to see how changing one value will affect all others. You can move things in the system and see how the rest of the system responds to the change.

Finding Right Place - The constellator is guided by the feedback the representatives give, using it to form the most appropriate configuration within the system, taking into account marginalised or excluded members as well as existing hierarchies. The movement within the constellation helps to establish a better flow of energy through the system by assisting everyone to find their right place for the function they serve. The expression of senses and feelings (phenomenological data) is used to reveal the hidden realities of the system and to resolve hidden dynamics.

The resolved constellation provides insight in the form of a new internal image and a new felt experience for the issue holder. It offers new meanings that can continue to work long after the completion of the constellation.

By working with the unconscious assumptions, naming the taboos, looking at unspoken tensions and acknowledging what is, the system is relaxed – and energy for change is released. This deeper more subtle transformation then supports the more traditional change processes, enabling systems to be re-connected where they have previously been treated as separate parts.

Follow-through

The insights from the initial constellation can provide new ways of engaging in a wider change process. This third phase of co-creation supports the development of a deeper understanding of the insights and a call to action. People use it to seek new meaning in their work; new ways of thinking, acting and behaving. In short it supports the shift in both the viewing and the doing. This is particularly important in organisations because there are such strong pulls to the habits deeply embedded in the culture.

At this stage people are able to face into the realities of situations. They can discover what actions are possible and what are not; they can take steps to put right aspects of the system that are out of place. And, in a more creative vein, they can develop and try out ideas as well as test them for soundness.

Systemic Coaching - A simple way of questing is through the use of systemic coaching. It can be used to support, in an informal but very powerful way, the follow

up work to the constellation. Working on a one to one basis, the client is encouraged to work with the constellating insights exploring their organisational potential as well as personally developing a deeper understanding of systemic thinking in their organisation.

This usually takes the form of a number of one to two-hour sessions with a systemic coach, who witnessed, but didn't necessarily run the constellation. The coach notes the key issues that were presented, the key systemic elements of the issue and the turning points in the constellation that led to its eventual resolution. This forms the basis of the coaching work and helps clients to stay more open to the new possibilities that were generated.

An integral part of a Transformation Programme - Alternatively the initial constellation can also be used as one of a number of techniques in the diagnosis, design and delivery of wider organisational change or transformation programmes.

Conclusion

Organisational constellations are being used more and more widely to help leaders in commercial, government, education and public sector organisations to gain insights into and deeper understanding of the hidden dynamics of their organisations and to interpret and use them to achieve transformation.

References

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The **nowhere** foundation is pioneering the development and delivery of Organisational Constellations in the UK. It provides and facilitates scheduled workshops at which individual leaders and change agents have their most pressing issues examined in a confidential and safe environment. It also arranges bespoke constellations workshops, which are tailored to the needs of single organisations.