The Challenges of Organisational Constellations

Ty Francis

Most managers and consultants in the UK have not yet heard of constellations. The theory and practice of constellating is still in a period of creative adjustment as it migrates from its original application in intimate systems - in family therapy settings - to the altogether different context of strategic organisational development (OD).

Despite the manifold contributions of organisational constellations - being so strongly solutions-focused, and with a clear action-imperative in providing support for something new to happen - there are also challenges to this emerging discipline as it finds its place among other, more established OD practices.

The first challenge faced by constellations practitioners is to contextualise the work within the range of systemic approaches that are deployed in organisations, and to understand some of the 'drag factors' that have prevented the full promise of existing systemic approaches being realised.

It seems to me that organisations have been ambivalent, so far, about the contribution of systemic work. My experience has been that most clients, across different sectors, still regard systems approaches as peripheral rather than central to their mainstream theories of practice.

The Grip of Individualism

Many organisational clients as well as consultants are oblivious of how deeply we are hot-wired for systemic relating. Our bodies themselves are made up of systems – respiratory, digestive, circulatory and others. We are born into family systems, that form a basis for community and social systems, which rely on the environmental system… Yet despite this natural systemic underpinning,

our prevailing cultural paradigm of individualism makes it difficult to accept that there is no 'I' without an 'us'.

Many existing systemic approaches to organisational change have made inroads into challenging this paradigm, with practical tools that really make a difference to organisational functioning. To name but a few, interventions such as Fred Emery's Search Conference, or Harrison Owen's Open Space Technology, Barry Oshry's Powerlab approach, the relational consulting practices of Ed Schein, Roger Harrison, Edwin Nevis and many others have demonstrated some of the range and utility of systemic approaches to organisational change.

However, we still work largely in the grip of individualism. Although things get stuck for reasons that go way beyond individual competence, our ways of managing and measuring performance (for example) are still extremely individualistic. We still behave as if performance is all about personal skills and competencies, individual attitude, solo capability. We still rarely measure outcomes in terms of the whole system's well-being. We still fix parts without attending to the whole.

Why have systemic practices not had as much impact in organisations as they could have? One reason for this is quite simply that large group interventions such as Weisbord and Janoff's Future Search take some weeks to set up and execute, and are relatively high-risk change strategies, as getting so many different stakeholders in the same room can be as fraught as it can be transformational. In addition, some highly relational approaches such as William Isaacs' Dialogue are not always perceived to be particularly solutions-focused. Also, in some instances (such as with Peter Senge's recent work on presence), it can be difficult to translate systemic theory into simple, everyday practice.

OD practitioners today are increasingly experiencing pressure for our work to become shorter and more focused. Large-scale, one-size-fits-all change initiatives that take months of set-up time are dying out. Clients are more selective in terms of who they develop and their method of development. Shorter interventions, with a keener solutions-focus and with a greater capability for cut-through, that also use less consultant hours are being called for. Interestingly, constellations work fits the bill beautifully, in these respects.

Constellations as a Systemic Approach

As the emerging systemic approach for working holistically with change, constellations work is different from other systemic organisational interventions in several respects. For example, it is a brief, economical process which is neither time-intensive nor resource-intensive for the organisation; it does not require actual representatives of the system to be physically present; it is as useful for rapid diagnosis as for issue-resolution or the testing of possible solutions and strategies; its versatility makes it as relevant for work with individual leaders and managers as for large organisations, multiple stakeholders and multinational businesses.

Because constellations work advocates drawing on the *collective intelligence* of a system, suggesting a different approach to change, and because it illuminates the usefulness of thinking intuitively, from the neck

down in a more embodied way, it can provide often unimaginable solutions to some of our most taxing problems. Paradoxically, these are also some of the reasons why organisational people find the process so challenging.

Ultimately, the constellating process is deeply experiential, and preferences quite radically different ways of knowing. The insights that come from a constellation are not just derived from the more culturally acceptable, logical, intellectual thinking 'from the neck up' - but also on our overall 'felt sense' - on using our embodied knowledge and collective wisdom.

While this is actually quite natural and normal for leaders and other experienced people, it is rarely admitted or talked about! A Chief Executive I interviewed about strategy recently was honest enough to admit:

> 'My best ideas come in the potting shed or the bath, not in the boardroom. Most of my strategy development is about something I feel rather than something researched. I commission research to get concreteness around my feeling for things, and to help other people engage practically. The nearest official way of normalising this is to say we had a brainstorm to create the strategy – the meeting institutionalises the idea I drop in, which goes on to a flipchart or onto PowerPoint, and before you know where you are you've got some evidence and you put the plan into action. It's not a cynical process- it's just how things happen. And when it works, people remark 'it's an idea whose time has come'.

However, such candour is not common. Because a constellation is a method of drawing on embodied insight at will and with skill, it seems to me to be at the same time attractive and embarrassing for managers. This is not least because working in such embodied ways can be quite a catalytic experience - people feel 'moved' emotionally, things shift in us and around us, and we reconnect differently with one another and with work. In the context of a factory floor, or of a supermarket staff room, or of a board room, this is disturbing at a number of levels!

In addition, I believe the fundamental philosophy of constellations is unique among systemic approaches, and is also extremely challenging. The informing heuristics of constellations (called 'the orders' in constellations work) suggest a more organic approach to change which is often about accepting limits and constraints. This is extremely counter-cultural for organisational strategists committed to constant growth, and who are used to a more colluding approach from consultants who do not get business by telling our clients that constant growth is not possible. The paradox is that by accepting 'what is', we can often begin to see truly fruitful possibilities, and collectively create different possibilities that involve less effort and release more energy.

Finally, the constellations philosophy is radically inclusive and insists on respectfully acknowledging everyone who has been or remains an important part of the system. This includes respecting even 'bad'

bosses, as well as people who have been dismissed during a period of down-sizing. To tell clients that such people must be given an honourable place in the organisation's awareness, and also that the past influences the present in ways that are against the grain of our individualistic and Newtonian perspectives, is tricky. Usually there is a joint fantasy between consultants and managers that we can create change with a blank sheet of paper, and look towards the future without much reference to the past – we can just ignore the history and heritage of the organisation as if it is of no influence or value. If anything goes wrong, we just push forward with more effort or a different game plan, loading more initiatives on to an already full plate. Constellations work deeply challenges such practices, and therefore intellectually and experientially takes some getting used to!

Creative Adjustments

There is certainly a place for constellations work within management development, business development and organisational development practices. It is also true that the current form of organisational constellations work in the UK is still heavily influenced by a therapeutic modality, and mainly conducted in 'open access' workshop settings that use representatives from outside the system. While acknowledging the benefits of these factors, they also represent constraints to the fuller deployment of constellations work in organisations.

The development of constellations work in one-to-one settings undoubtedly helps coaches and consultants demonstrate the relevance of the approach. However, the development of approaches that work with 'indigenous' in-house teams is also required, together with some separation of more personally intrusive, 'healing' approaches (which require a different working contract with the client), along with the skilful integration of constellations work with other, more established OD practices.

It is clear that team members cannot be as neutral as external people in acting as representatives. However, it should be borne in mind that often in an organisational constellation we set up representatives for the *roles or functions* people assume in a team, rather than for the actual people themselves. This also provides some protection of the private sphere of team members.

Separating the roles and functions of participants from the individuals themselves, and letting team members stand in one another's positions can provide 360^0 perspectives and so help people come to terms with their colleagues' different pressures and so support team functioning. It can be extremely useful for people to experientially understand the position of their boss or other team members they have trouble with (however, if there are deep difficulties between team members, it might be better to work with people separately). Team members can then exchange views on how it feels to be in the position of the sales force, or the suppliers, or customers, for example.

In working with organisations, it is sometimes also advisable to insert a representative for the purpose or goal of the organisation, project or

team, and also sometimes for the customer. Organisational systems are founded for a purpose, and if this purpose (along with the roles and functions which support the achievement of the purpose) is not explicitly acknowledged or included, representatives might reflect the dynamics or patterns that belong to the family system of the client.

While family therapists might feel at home in this domain, organisational consultants need to be alert to avoid such a shift in structural level, because we normally have no permission from the client to work on personal and family issues. German Structural Constellator Mathias Varga von Kibed has developed a technique which he calls 'systematically ambiguous intervention'. This makes it possible to work simultaneously on the family level in an indirect way, whenever a shift in structural level occurs, while the constellator continues to use a language more appropriate to the business context.

For example, in working with a client recently who wanted to explore why he was not thriving in business, I set up a representative for him, and positioned in front of him, facing him, a representative for his business goal. His representative could not look at this goal, but stared at the floor instead. I suspected that the underlying cause of his inability to move towards his goal lay in the family rather than business domain – and might have to do with a difficult relationship with his father. Rather than inserting a representative for the parent, however, I put in someone to represent 'the flow of masculine energy'. There was an instant and much-strengthened response from the representative, and the strategic work moved forward.

Putting a representative in for the customer can also be important, as ultimately organisational work is directed towards clients and customers. Representing the customer is a litmus test that enables the constellator to gauge the relevance of the solution. In private correspondence, an Italian colleague, organisational constellator Georg Senoner (see www.management-constellations.com) also notes:

> 'Inserting other context factors such as the board to which the team reports, the strategy or values of the organisation also helps to make it clear for which specific situation you want to find a solution. I find it very important when I work with organisations to clearly define the boundaries of the sub-system within which I work. The boundary is determined by the extension of the client's power to directly influence the other elements represented in the constellation. I would always start by moving the elements within that boundary and test the reaction of the elements which are beyond the boundary (for example, a hierarchically higher function or the general strategy of the company). I do not want to feed the

illusion that the client can directly change the system beyond his range of power.'

I believe that the future of organisational constellations work also depends on integrating the constellating practice with other OD processes. The greater degree of complexity in working within large strategic systems requires creative adaptations of constellations work. For example, a constellation can be used as an experiential kick-start to a Dialogue process. It can be used with a steering group of a large group intervention to surface stakeholder issues and prepare for and even follow up the main participatory process. Some of my colleagues have also explored integrating constellations into Appreciative Inquiry (see Abbotson & Lustig, below).

The challenges for OD professionals are therefore paradoxical: to introduce clients to a powerfully useful new process, in its purest form, which requires a loyalty to systemic constellations work; while also remaining loyal to the cultural context of our clients so that we can best meet their needs and be of greatest service. In other words, do we put the process first or the client? In my experience, this is a highly creative tension. Engaging mindfully with the dilemmas of 'organisational fit' will enable variations of practice to emerge in the future, that I believe contribute both to organisational clients and to the emerging discipline of organisational constellations.

Conclusion

Constellations do not replace conventional organisational development approaches, but they do offer a highly creative and energising addition to the mix. It may be that the underlying wisdom of the constellations approach (the principles of 'orders' described in the inset panel) in fact comes to provide the central orienting constructs of OD work in the future. Certainly I have found my own practice as a consultant and coach has been deepened considerably by the theory of practice provided by constellations.

Constellations are helpful because they offer solutions that are specific, clear and often highly original. Because constellations reveal and work with the deeper dynamics of systems, the solutions they point towards have a higher probability of being sustainable.

At the same time, the different requirements of strategic systems need to be taken seriously if this work is to continue to have relevance. The guiding wisdom of the work needs to be carefully reframed – for instance, talk of 'movements of the soul' and 'orders of love' is counter-cultural in most organisational contexts, and it is difficult to gain permission for any form of work involving body awareness.

I have found that managers are most likely to agree to a constellation when other, more

Continued on Page 40

Continued from page 39

tried and trusted, conventional approaches have been attempted without much benefit; when problems are too complex for starting-points to be easily recognisable, or when there is insufficient time and data to develop plans from. It is not that constellations work in organisations should be positioned as a solution of last resort. However, at this stage of market maturity, defining the best entry point for the work is critical to ensuring its ongoing up-take. If the work is first experienced by managers in areas where other processes shed no light, I believe constellations will thrive in organisations, and help organisations thrive.

Further Reading

Abbotson, S. & Lustig, P. (2005) 'Organisational Constellations Meets Appreciative Inquiry', in Positive Approaches to Change, pp 93-107, ed McKergow, M. & Clarke, J. Solutions Books, Cheltenham.

Fritz, R. (1996) Corporate Tides, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco

Hellinger, B. (2002) Insights, Carl-Auer, Heidelberg

Horn, K. & Brick, R. (2005) Invisible Dynamics, Carl-Auer, Heidelberg

Konigsweiser, R. & Hillebrand, M. (2005) Systemic Consultancy in Organisations, Carl-Auer, Heidleberg

Senge, P. et al (2005) Presence, SoL, Cambridge MA

Simon, F. (2004) The Organisation of Self-Organisation, Carl-Auer, Heidelberg

Ty Francis is an organisational coach, consultant and constellator. Originally, his background was in brand strategy and corporate communications before he became interested in organisational development and established his own consulting business. Gestalt-trained, Ty was one of the first people in the UK to introduce constellations to organisations in commercial, public and voluntary sectors nearly ten years ago. As well as running constellations workshops, Ty is committed to integrating Constellations work with other OD and personal development approaches. He has a Master's degree in Human Relations, and is currently completing doctoral research on intuition, creativity and innovation.

Address for correspondence:
Bulkeleigh House, 12 Shavington Avenue, Hoole,
Chester CH2 3RD. Email: ty@qualiagroup.com

Principles of Organisational Constellations

There are several working principles which are engaged with by organisational constellators which are very challenging - usually in positive ways - to organisational consultants and clients. In all cases, these principles are predicated upon the values of respectful acknowledgement, transparency and truth, and the belief that good flow and healthy organisational functioning is achieved by working with 'what is' rather than engaging with hype and 'spin'.

- Acknowledging and dignifying the reality of the organisation as it is, without inflation or false modesty. For example, how is the organisation doing on the market? How are different products or services faring? Is there any strategic planning happening currently? What do customers and suppliers think about the organisation? What is the organisation's financial situation? Is there anything at all denied, not seen, or suppressed in these respects?

- Priority goes to those who assume most responsibility in the organisation. Leadership, for example, must be taken fully, and acknowledged and accepted by everyone in the organisation. This is true even if the founder or leader is perceived to be 'bad'. It is better for those who cannot serve a particular leader or manager to leave, than to carp or actively undermine them – which destabilises the whole enterprise. Where organisations (typically some public, charity and voluntary sector organisations are at risk here) have an ideology of equality, things can become chaotic if this goes unchallenged.

- Seniority and length of service needs acknowledging. Who has served the organisation the longest? Who has given most service in their lifetime and are their contributions appreciated? If a leader comes along later, is s/he prepared to lead initially from a 'lower' place? It can be quite disruptive for a team or even the whole organisation if a newcomer – even with mission-critical skills – is not respectful of the people who have been there the longest.

- The right to belong needs calibrating. In a family system, everyone has an inalienable right to belong, whereas in an organisation the right to belong depends on acknowledging the leadership, and on the application of skills and

competencies. From the perspective of this work, clarity about different levels of belonging has a major effect on staff and customer loyalty. If people who have belonged are not seen, or if people are excluded or forgotten, someone else in the organisation will become disloyal. In addition, because one's right to belong is dependent in no small part on special skills and abilities, those who possess special knowledge must be given the space to unfold their contribution.

- A balance needs to be maintained between giving and taking. Who owes whom recognition and gratitude? Are there equalities in pay and conditions? It can be as weakening for a manager or organisation to over-give a to give too little. If there is a merger, the smaller company must acknowledge that it would not have survived without the larger's money, and the larger company must acknowledge that something special has been added to its mix.

- There is an ethical freight carried by a company's products. There is a special sense in which the product contains the knowledge of the circumstances of its production. It makes a difference, for instance, if your products have been developed in ways which compromised or damaged people in their development. In such cases, shareholders must do something compensatory. In Germany, several examples are cited of companies which thrived after the Second World War as a result of receiving money from dispossessed Jews – but which have struggled for generations with staff retention, market capitalisation and other issues. These issues seem to be at least partially resolved by acknowledging the source of some wealth, and by establishing Trust Funds and other compensatory mechanisms.

- It is important to make clear distinctions between issues that have their origins in personal or organisational contexts. Constellations is elegantly effective in separating the issues that belong to different systems so they can be dealt with directly in the system of origin. For example, we often make category errors, treating our boss as though she is our mother, or our father as though he is god, and so on… constellations clarifies levels of systemic relating and so frees up action within and across different systems.