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A Science of the Soul

By Diane Hetherington
and Elizabeth S. Hostetler

Lessons from the field

A consultant was hired to help reduce conflict in an intensive care unit. Interview data showed that nurses and techs had different views about their roles, and it seemed that role clarification was called for. After setting up a constellation to look at the underlying dynamics, the consultant could see that nurses and techs did not want a different relationship with each other, but with their manager, whose focus was outside the unit. When the consultant followed this lead, the manager reported overload and got help renegotiating her commitments. The team improved.

A senior corporate executive had a reputation for firing people if they disagreed with him. A coach learned that long ago an ancestor faced a firing squad for disagreeing with the state. The leader's behavior was a form of love, an act of hidden loyalty to a person he had never met. After looking at the hidden dynamic his behavior changed.

Background

An explosion of interest in the application of organization constellations and systemic theory has occurred around the world in the past few years. The Bert Hellinger approach for systemic solutions with families and organizations has rapidly caught worldwide interest. Now in more than 25 countries consultants, coaches, therapists, and the practitioners of family and organization constellations are working with the Hellinger approach.

We want to share what we have learned about the unconscious grounding that influences choice, behavior, and outcomes. Our hope is to provide an opening that allows you to bring a new kind of clarity to your work through the use of these principles.

Bert Hellinger, born in Germany, acknowledges several important influences on his life and work: his parents, whose faith immunized him against accepting Hitler's National Socialism; his 20 years as a priest, particularly as a missionary to the Zulu; and his participation in interracial, ecumenical training in group dynamics led by Anglican clergy. After leaving the priesthood, he studied psychoanalysis, and eventually developed an interest in Gestalt Therapy and Transactional Analysis. It was in Hellinger's later training in family therapy that he first encountered the family constellations. His unique approach to family constellations has become the hallmark of Hellinger's work and his observations about—and insights into—human entanglements and their resolution, have touched the lives of thousands throughout the world.

The organization constellation work grows out of the Hellinger family constellation work. Over many years and many constellations, certain principles have consistently shown up that apply to organizations and other systems as well as families.

Context

The observations from constellations

CONFERENCE CONNECTION

Diane Hetherington and Elizabeth S. Hostetler are presenters at the 2007 OD Network Annual Conference in Baltimore at the following session:

**Systemic Solutions:
Seeing Hidden Dynamics**

Tuesday, October 23
3:30 – 5:00 PM

have helped us understand powerful perspectives that transcend our commonly held view of how to deal with organizational issues such as culture change, change management, organization design, restructuring, strategic planning, leadership effectiveness, teamwork, retention, power dynamics, conflict, and performance.

The system as a unit of study.

Systems theory explores phenomena in terms of the dynamic patterns of relationship, looking at the principles of organization that give the content meaning rather than on the content itself. Our individual challenges often have to do with context—with our relational networks, the makeup of others' personalities in relation to ours, where we stand within the relational systems, and how we function from where we stand.

Each part of the system is connected to, or can have its own effect upon, every other part. Each component operates as part of a larger whole. The components function according to their position in the network rather than according to their persona.

To take one part out of the whole and analyze it separately gives misleading results, first, because each part functions differently outside the system, and second, because even inside the system each part functions differently depending on where it is placed in relation to the others.

Scientific method starts with a hypothesis, followed by an experiment to test outcomes under different conditions. Skilled observation is an important element. The data collected is tangible, and interpretation is made at the mental level, making this a science of the mind. Constellation work also uses hypotheses—insight—followed by careful observation. Using a phenomenological approach, it draws on information from the field of the system under observation. This information, or energy, is tangible, yet subtle, and lies so deep in the system that it is sometimes called movements of the soul. This, then, is a science of the soul.

In early tribal days, the group survived only when all members played their part

to give the group what it needed to survive. The oldest ones led and the youngest ones followed. When they were too old or ill to contribute, they stayed behind as the group went on. Everyone understood that their purpose was to further the group—survival depended upon it—and any violation of that consciousness resulted in guilt.

Later as small tribes encountered each other, “us versus them” thinking started. Loyalty to “their” group replaced the notion of loyalty to “the” group, and the rules about how to relate to others

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changed. Later still, the rules changed again to those of a personal consciousness, which we see in evidence now in developed nations. The reality is however, that all levels of consciousness still exist in us at the soul level. Many things that are routinely accepted as appropriate thought and action actually violate the rules that are now hidden in our unconscious, and many difficult problems result. For instance, when a younger leader fails to show respect for an older, or longer-tenured employee, a feeling of disrespect may permeate the team's relationships and have a negative impact on their work. Constellation work helps to reveal and resolve this kind of dilemma. (Hellinger, *Systemic Solutions Bulletin*, 2001 Issue 2, pages 10-11.)

How Constellations work

Constellations offer a mechanism for seeing hidden dynamics in systems. After a brief interview to clarify the issue, the facilitator sets up individuals to serve as representatives for the aspects of the issue being explored. The representatives have

an experience of being that which they represent. A sense of knowing is revealed through subtle feelings and movements. What emerges includes the relationships of all members of a system, entanglements that block freedom and growth, and the connections between victims and perpetrators. A constellation provides information from the past that significantly impacts the present. From this perspective, we can find solutions to the unknown aspects that are holding the problem in place.

The facilitator holds the space for the client to acknowledge what is. The facilitator does not seek a particular outcome. Each movement as it is revealed leads to the next step. Each moment is directed by the one that precedes it. Sometimes it is enough simply for the client to look, to see differently. At other times the facilitator guides the representatives into a new relationship with each other so that long-standing difficulties are resolved. Possible solutions are revealed that would not otherwise have been conceived. A constellation provides a fast and powerful opportunity to look at a particular situation/system in a way that allows previously hidden dynamics to surface.

Many of the technologies that OD offers are built on the assumption that feedback is a powerful form of learning. We know that looking at the real, unvarnished current reality can lead to movement. Constellations offer a form of feedback that sidesteps normal forms of denial, often held in place by a sense of shame. What might take years in a

coaching or consulting relationship can happen in an hour of constellation time.

In the relationships revealed through the constellation, it is apparent that each of us is a part of a larger whole, that the choices we make are in some sense dictated by the needs of the system, that morality is local, not universal, and that blame has no meaning. One can see that all of us, victims and perpetrators, are related in intimate ways, and that we easily trade places. One can see here that victims are not better than perpetrators, and that each does their part to hold painful dynamics in place. The work moves people from a parochial morality, where blame is possible, to one in which true reconciliation becomes possible. We have found that constellation work can result in stunningly powerful results back in the client system. Perhaps these come as a result of the client's new insight, or perhaps as a result of non-local healing. When one part of a system moves, the other parts move, too. A rebalancing takes place, as the system seeks a new equilibrium.

In one constellation, a young woman with an illness had not talked to her mother for many years. After doing a constellation in which reconciliation became possible, her mother, living on another continent, called her the next day to see how she was.

The knowing field

An energy field is present in each system that reveals itself under certain conditions. The "field" simultaneously holds the energy of each member—past and present—as well as the energy of the whole system. The interrelationships of the parts within the whole system, team, or family are available for observation.

The U Theory by Senge, Scharmer, Flowers, and Jaworski talks about the deep knowing that is seeking to emerge. This inner knowing is tapped in varied ways, including meditation and inquiry, movement, nature and/or vision quests in nature. Their model seeks to access the deep inner knowing that is part of a larger emerging field by connecting to authentic presence. Constellation work shows a way to listen to what emerges from the knowing

field of a system as well. A constellation accesses information beyond the mental level, opening up possibilities that were not previously available. We see a special application to the *Presencing* Model at the Letting Go Stage—you can only let go of dynamics that you hold in awareness—and the Letting Come Stage as you move into possible solutions.

Principles

Every culture, generation, and group develops norms. As the groups change, the norms change as well. Hellinger has observed that there are some principles so fundamental to human kind, regardless of country, culture or age, and that change so slowly, they seem nearly timeless. We

describe three basic principles here: 1) orders, including hierarchy and the right to belong, 2) conscience, and 3) the balance of giving and taking.

Orders: Hierarchy and Right to Belong

The system requires that certain priorities and orders of precedence are observed (length of service, technical competency, qualification, hierarchy, stakes in the system) There is a hierarchy in an organization—official or hidden. These differences exist and it works best to acknowledge them.

In a family, the rules of the archetypal/primitive system, or great soul, are simple. Every member has a right to belong, and if a member is excluded, another will take his or her place so that balance will

Organization Applications for Constellations

Team effectiveness. Constellations offer a new look at the dynamics of power and conflict, helping teams move beyond blame to resolution. Leaders can see where the team is strong and where there are gaps in talents and/or processes.

Strategy development. Leaders can evaluate competing strategic plans to gain insight into stakeholders' reactions, as well as efficacy in the environment.

Organizational restructuring, mergers and acquisitions. A change in organizational structure results in a change in the system dynamics. Leaders can gain insights into the conditions necessary for the new organization to flourish, and for the old organization to close with respect.

Leadership effectiveness. Where does the leader fit into the "order" of the system? If she or he is a newcomer to the organization should she or he lead from behind and if so, how? What is the most effective way to lead the members of the team?

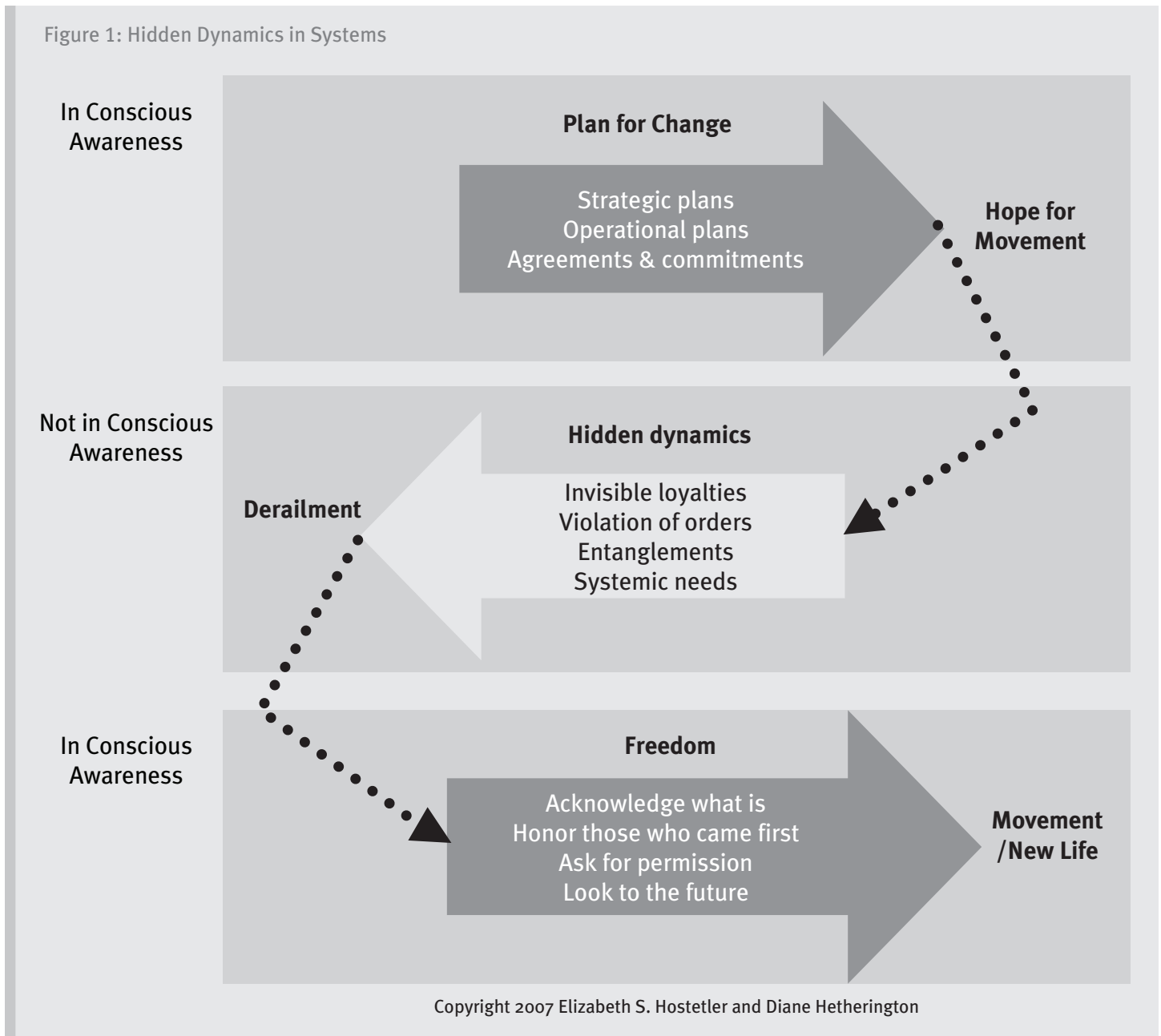
Coaching for individual performance. Coaches can determine if the source of the problem lies in the organization's dynamics or in the individual's personal circumstances. Constellations can point to the healing solution.

Recruitment and retention. Does a specific candidate fit in the organization, both from the candidate's and from the organization's perspective? Those who are hiring can also learn customer and colleague reaction to different candidates. Sound hiring reduces turnover.

Decision-making. Through a constellation it is possible to look at different options and see which one makes the client, and the system stronger.

Marketing. Different products can be tested in different markets. See potential clients' reactions and feelings towards a product or service, brand and/or brand name positioning.

Figure 1: Hidden Dynamics in Systems



be achieved. In an organization everyone has a right to belong as long as his or her contribution to the system is valued. In an organization those who come first are deserving of a certain respect. If this hierarchy is violated, then dis-order may occur. Even those with a low ranking job must be respected for their contribution by higher level leaders who arrive later or the system will be out of order. When things are out of order, the system experiences tension, stress, discord and lower productivity.

Individual performance: improving outcomes. A consultant in an international corporation was having trouble pleasing

his boss and feared dismissal. Through a constellation, he looked at his relationships with his boss and the other consultants in the system, as well as the customers in China, India, and America. He could see that the consultant assigned to India was attracting the attention of the American customers, who had been assigned to him. He could see why his boss thought he looked weak.

He discovered that he had violated a basic rule of order. Even though the consultant in India had joined the system first, he had failed to show special respect for her. In a hidden dynamic, she retaliated by taking his clients. After acknowledging what was, the constellation facilitators led

him in a ritual of respect that changed the energy in the system. All were relieved, and a new, healthier equilibrium was created. A new leader must acknowledge and appreciate what has been done before.

Conscience

To belong to a group means to follow the rules of that group. Conscience grows out of this loyalty. Those who violate the rules experience guilt, which encourages them to return to the prescribed ways. If they do, they are received and can experience a feeling of innocence again.

What we can easily see is that different groups have different rules. People behave differently at church than they do at work.

They know what to do, and not do, in each place.

Because we belong to our families, unconsciously, we follow their rules. Some rules protect us from harm and other rules harm us. One person found that to be a member in good standing in his family, he had to be unhealthy in a specific way. A pattern of alcoholism, divorce, illness or suicide can be observed across generations in some families. Repeating the pattern is a sign of loyalty to those who came before. Patterns of loyalty occur in unconscious ways in organizational life as well. It was difficult to understand why two administrative assistants were fighting over whose paper was in the copier, until we looked at the rivalry between their bosses.

While each group has its own rules, there is a larger system with operating rules of its own. By observing hidden dynamics through a constellation, we can see which movements bring us into greater order, where we thrive, and which movements take us further out of order, where significant difficulties lie.

Balance of giving and taking

Everyone has an opportunity for giving and taking—between individuals, between individuals and the system, and between different parts of the system. Either too much altruism (giving) or too much exploitation (taking) creates an imbalance in the system. There is a sense of relaxation when they are acknowledged. A healthy, relaxed relationship requires a balance of giving and taking—a fair day's work for a fair day's pay and appropriate compensation for work well done

The most valuable gift one person can give another is honor and respect. If one person gives too much, the other is continually indebted to the giver and may feel guilty or have difficulty behaving like an adult in the relationship. Conversely, when an individual is unable or unwilling to receive from another, he/she keeps the relationship out of balance—holding a position of “better than.”

In past years, employees gave loyalty to an organization which in return offered the security of lifetime employment and a comfortable retirement. Today,

retention is a big issue—coupled with downsizing, mergers, lay-offs and so forth. The organization reduced practices that encouraged loyalty and the result is loss of loyalty from employees. And, perhaps you have observed occasions when an individual receives a service for free or very low cost and they do not have appropriate respect for what they are receiving or for the individual giving it.

These are not hard and fast rules because the system can ignore them and continue to function. However, when systemic principles are followed, when everything is in order, the organization seems to operate more effectively. Relationships are smoother and performance is improved.

Organization Development Applications

Constellations can be used for a wide range of clients, including individuals, consultants and leaders. They have been used successfully in every arena, including public, private and governmental institutions, in profit and not-for-profit organizations, and in communities. New insights and perspectives, healing, and resolution are possible for some of the most challenging issues of our lives and times.

- » For the **individual**, coaching, career development, goal clarification, role clarification, relationship management and emotional intelligence are a few of the issues that have been addressed. Additionally, constellations may be used to explore options and make decisions.
- » For the **larger levels of systems**, issues include culture change, organizational strategy, structure, leadership, interpersonal dynamics, teams, and community health and the effect of forces on them such as history, globalization, population displacement, and religious and racial intolerance.
- » For the **consultant**, this approach is also highly useful both for seeing the whole system and for finding their “right placement” in a client system. As they look at the impact of their presence in different parts of the system, they can see where there is greatest readiness

Symptoms of Systemic Issues

Response delays. Important decisions are made with difficulty or not at all. Management seems not to be able to adapt and steer the organization. Problems are being worked on for extended periods without any results.

Hidden conflicts. Everybody feels some conflict is going on, though nobody knows what it really is about and who is involved.

Reduced human effectiveness. Some people are performing less effectively than might reasonably be expected, based on the person's qualities, knowledge and experience.

Leadership problems. Employees complain about their leadership or the leader is not generally accepted. Another leadership issue occurs when successor leaders are encountering similar problems with a particular department.

People are not well appreciated. Employees complain about the lack of appreciation for their efforts, or—if not expressed openly—feel like that.

High turnover or sick leave. People have a tendency to leave the organization. High levels of sick leave or many people who face burnout are indications of a systemic issue.

Internal competition. Abnormally high internal competition and many severe power struggles.

for work, and where they can have the greatest positive influence.

Stories from the Field

Team dynamics: finding out why the team isn't functioning well. A leader felt challenged because team members were not honoring their commitments. During a constellation she recalled an earlier time when she was on leave. Her boss was fired, and no one took the time to tell her about it. It

became clear that her current problem was linked to this failure to acknowledge the departure of someone important in the system. After the leader was fired, no one felt safe. Productive work slowed down and team relationships were in disarray. In a constellation, the departure of the former boss was acknowledged and her contributions to the organization were honored. This acknowledgement created the safety that allowed a harmonious shift to occur in the team.

Consulting: identifying the client's real needs. An OD consultant was concerned with her relationship with her client, the new CEO. Through a constellation she found that her client really wanted to leave the system. When she brought a representative for the customer into the constellation, the client returned, and could see both the consultant and the whole system. After that, the consultant supported the CEO with strategies that focused on the customer.

Decision Making: finding the best career choice. A mid-career professional could not find work that sustained him financially. The facilitator invited him to set up a variety of potential career choices. The person representing mediation work started to get weak in the knees and fell to the ground. A representative for psychological counseling work was steady, but not happy. After experimentation, the client found two options that together created a strong, new possibility.

Blocks to success. A client was challenged and unable to succeed in her career. In the interview, the client indicated that her grandfather had been the director of the railroad system, helping transport people to their new homes. When was this? In Germany during World War II. Through the constellation she was able to come out of her innocence and see that which had been deeply denied in her family. Until she acknowledged and honored the fate of her family, she was not free to move forward in her own life.

Closing Questions for Reflection

This work may provide new insight into the questions we have been exploring for a long time. What are the most important things a leader can do to create a healthy organization? What do consultants most frequently overlook, from a systems perspective? What prevents people from using their full potential in organizations?

What is the balance or exchange that leaves each party feeling whole, respected and honored?

And finally, from Hellinger, "With the right thing, there is no choice."

*Out beyond ideas
Of right doing
And wrong doing,
There is a field,
I'll meet you there.*

—Rumi

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