

Creating organisational flow: using Hellinger constellation work for unblocking the past



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Bronwen Rees interviews Sebastian Green, organisational anthropologist, on the work of Bert Hellinger and its application in organisational change. This radical approach offers us a systemic 21st century approach to organisational consulting.

IHAVE worked in the area of organisational change for 20 years, as both editor and academic. Practices and methods have come and gone, but rarely have initiatives been seen to work, or if they have done, then the perceived immediate benefits have disappeared soon after implementation. One of the reasons is that the change itself is introduced as a concept, and more often than not imposed from the top-down – indeed it has become an organisational truism that change will not happen if it is not supported from the top.

This often means that superficial changes are enacted which may well affect organisational hierarchies, without taking into account the emotional and psychological shift that employees need to make so that their hearts are truly aligned with the espoused values of the organisation. How often have you worked in an organisation where, while the top management changes, and their systems change – it is simply ‘work as usual’ in the ranks, but with an added layer of cynicism as one level is replaced by another? This leads to passive resistance, disempowerment and the emergence of disciplinarian hierarchies.

The increasing numbers of depressed people in the workplace, financial crisis and global warming has been setting off alarm bells for organisations, as they struggle to find ways of motivating staff and encouraging creativity. It has become clear, as we have been pointing to from the first issue of *Interconnections*, that the world is changing, and so too are our paradigms for organising, and thinking about organisation. Radical measures and approaches are required in these times of turbulence; it is no longer about changing organisations; rather about how organisations can adapt to the rapid flow of change.

One approach that is growing in importance is the work of Bert Hellinger – which has been developed in therapeutic settings, but which is now being taken up in the corporate world. Central to this approach is the ‘Constellation’, a potentially powerful method for enhancing our ability to become aware of, and recognise the impact of systemic relationships on organisation structure and process.

Hellinger and others working in this tradition maintain that we need to become more sensitive to the phenomenon of the energy field created and sustained by relational systems and to the hidden dynamics therein. This energy field can be likened, but also experientially evidenced, as the elusive ‘culture’ that has engaged organisational scientists for over 50 years. Whilst Hellinger himself would not necessarily want to theorise too much about this ‘discovery’, it represents a potent force for healthy change, drawing as it does on understandings of tribal systems, quantum physics, psychodynamics, cognitive behaviours and humanistic therapeutic schools, in a unique fusion of past, present and future.

This has enormous potency in creating and recreating organisational cultures that are based on health rather than pathological conditions. I talked to Sebastian Green about his experience of working with the Hellinger method, and what he believes it offers for current organisational praxis.

Q When did you first come across this method, and how have you been using it?

I was relatively late to Hellinger’s work, first coming across it in the early 2000s. I attended a family constellation workshop given by Philippa Lubbock and then went to a workshop given by Hunter Beaumont. At these, I experienced family system dynamics in a totally new way. I saw how people have unconscious and often divided loyalties to their families that have an effect on their health and well-being and affect how successfully they and their families lead their lives. I began to appreciate how relationships can be reordered via re-examining the family dynamics through enacting the family constellation, and how people’s energies can be unblocked and flow more freely. I learned how when a person has been excluded from a family or when an event or a history has been ignored, denied or marginalised, the very fact of bringing it to light may allow members of the family to soften, to relax and to begin a forwards movement that was hitherto blocked.

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Very taken with the work, I enrolled in what was then the first Hellinger training in London given by some highly skilled constellators: Barbara Stones, Philippa Lubbock, Richard Wallstein, Judith Hemming, Karen Hedley and Jutta ten Herkel. Through this I was acquainted with organisation constellations and then attended a workshop in Cambridge given by Gunthard Weber, who had been responsible along with Hunter Beaumont for translating Bert Hellinger’s work into English and bringing it to a wider public.

At the outset, it is important to stress that as a system, organisations are quite different to families. People do not choose their families and the loyalties to organisations are of a different order to those pertaining in families, yet some of the same principles that Hellinger has deduced for families, also have relevance within organisations. His insights and constellations methodology can bring a powerful new dimension to professional and organisational development, and business consultancy.

Q What are the differences between these methods and traditional organisational change programmes?

I don’t think there is one, traditional, organisational change programme rather there are as many varieties as there are different organisational paradigms and different consulting models. What Hellinger’s approach brings is a distinctive, phenomenological and systemic approach that is quite different to those informed by say, classical systems theory and intentional social engineering. His method privileges the unconscious and hidden dynamics in organisation life. He brings a creative and challenging way of working with executives which, in my experience, always reveals something new that I had not anticipated in advance but which in retrospect seemed intriguing, subtle and, with the benefit of hindsight, obvious.

Hellinger’s principles as applied to organisations, support a way of working with executives which is deeply respectful of people and their contribution. It is highly ethical, holistic and non-intrusive. The latter is implicit in the phenomenological stance required of consultants who choose to work in this way. What is often construed as a personal issue – e.g. someone, or some group blocking or resisting change – is often shown to be a systemic one. (This approach to organisations was not, of course, the first to acknowledge this: there is a long tradition emerging out of the work of psychoanalyst Bion and others which explains why, ‘Within or-

ganisations, it is often easier to ascribe a staff member's behaviour to personal problems than it is to discover the link with institutional dynamics.' (Halton 1994:16).

Hellinger is also deeply respectful of historical and ancestral roots, and of function and hierarchy. This contrasts with much of the prescriptive organisation change literature which talks of uprooting old skills, getting rid of dead wood (tree surgery metaphors abound) flattening hierarchies, starting with a clean slate, rejecting traditional and outmoded ways of doing things, reinventing, reengineering, and renewal. Hellinger's work shows that if you don't acknowledge the past and respect what people have contributed, then the effects may come back to haunt those who have ignored or tried to suppress this. You have to say goodbye properly to the old before you can embrace the new.

Q **What are the main principles of the work and how did Hellinger develop it?**

Perhaps what Hellinger has catalysed through the medium of the Organisation Constellation (which to a large degree has been developed by his followers such as Gunthard Weber, Barbara Stones, Jutta ten Hekel, Jan Jacob Stam and Judith Hemming), is a systemic, rather than analytical, approach to consulting:

'Using systemic constellation, you can tap into the informing field of your business. You can select what you need from this network that receives all relevant information about the web of relationships in the company'. (Horn and Brick 2005: 18)

Recognising these allows us better to model a wide variety of organisational phenomena: corporate culture, morale, strategy (including mergers) and organisation structure through more clearly identifying the nature and process of relations between stakeholders, leaders, managers, staff and important others outside the organisation. These relations are generally obscured by complexity and by hidden dynamics. Hellinger's work also suggests powerful, unconscious and often invisible 'laws' (Horn 2005: 16/17) – I prefer the terms: 'heuristics' or observed 'rules of thumb' – adherence to which allows the possibility of more effective management and leadership.

There are so many principles in his work that I hesitate to privilege some over others. Some of these have already been mentioned

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en passant. What Hellinger gives us is a dynamic, continually emerging, overarching framework, wherein each part relates to each other, each building block equally important. In a previous article (Green and Green, 2003) we inferred the core principles for organisations from those suggested by Barbara Stones for families. These along with some minor editorial improvements are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: **Family System Principles applied to organisations**

FAMILY SYSTEM PRINCIPLES*	ORGANISATIONAL QUESTIONS
1 Everybody in the system needs to belong.	Who is missing: ignored, forgotten, marginalised, or excluded? Have people been dismissed unfairly? Are people who have 'energetically' left still present in the system? Do we know of and respect our predecessors and their achievements?
2 Everybody needs honouring and to be in their right place.	Is the past honoured and acknowledged? Are people treated as objects or with dignity? Is length of service acknowledged?
3 Those who come later take from those who came earlier. This order of precedence must be honoured.	Is the hierarchy of role and responsibility respected? Do those with privilege and power accept their responsibility to those they serve?
4 Hierarchy between parents and children; parents give; children take.	Do the senior staff work in the service of the company and its stakeholders?
5 In a relationship between parents, the giving and taking needs to be in equilibrium.	Is work/life balance equitable? is there a balance between what people are asked to do and the rewards they receive? Is there mutual respect?
6 Guilt and merit belong with whoever earned them.	Do people take responsibility for their actions and are they held accountable? Is recognition given to those people, at all levels, who go the further mile?

Weber, as reported by Alun Reynolds (2006: 47) compared the family and organisation principles. He shows how in families, membership is unconditional and timeless whereas in organisations it is conditional on competence and commitment and time-limited. In organisations, as in families, other things being equal, those who join earlier have greater weight than those who come later, although the new system has precedence over the old. Leadership in family systems arises out of birth, whereas in

organisations it arises out of appointment and ability to lead.

Both family and organisation constellations are solutions focused.

To these, might be added, at least four other core principles for organisations.

The first, is acknowledging ‘what is’, the title of one of Hellinger’s books. Popular management discourse has long favoured a search for best practice and a preoccupation with heroic behaviour rather than a willingness to acknowledge what is, warts and all. The hyperbole of management gurus aims to seduce us into believing that an ideal (that is, *their* ideal) is possible. To avoid the dangers of idealisation, we need to delve below the surface rhetoric to reveal what lies hidden, out of awareness, unconscious. Hellinger is following a well-worn path here, one which has become the hallmark of those applying psychoanalytically informed approaches to organisations, most notably those writers from the Tavistock school. These allow us to see more clearly and more quickly organisation defense mechanisms: suppression, denial, idealisation, and blame. In turn this redirects our attention away from simple dichotomous, categories of say, victim and perpetrator, organisation blockers and organisation champions to the systemic conditions that thereby find expression.

Following on from this, another core principle is that if an organisation (or someone or a dominant coalition in an organisation) benefits from ‘unethical’ actions, then experience from constellations and their aftermath suggest that there are systemic consequences (Hellinger, 2006). This is an implication of principle 6 in Table 1, but in today’s post-Enron world, we see the systemic consequences of greed, not just in high profile fraud cases but everywhere, most recently in the current global financial meltdown. Hellinger’s work on the different types or levels of Conscience is particularly helpful here. He shows how the need to belong to one group can allow one in good conscience to do unspeakable things to other groups. It also shows how better attunement to Conscience at the broader societal level, raises new possibilities and possibly orient people to avoid systemically disastrous consequences. (One has to be careful here, for Hellinger’s views argue the limitations of intentionality, the importance of fate and a non-moralising conceptualisation of Conscience).

The third principle is somewhat abstract, but nonetheless important for organisation consultants, especially those engaged

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with family businesses. The principle is that different systems need to be separated, at least conceptually, such that enmeshment between them can be highlighted and care taken to accord each their rightful place. In a recent article on Family Business (Weber cited in Reynolds, 2006; Green and Green 2008), Colette Green has described how one might do this through the combination of psychodynamic and Hellinger approaches. In setting up any organisation constellation, it is crucial to choose the right system for the question. In family businesses this becomes particularly problematic due to the overlap between family and business issues. The enmeshment of family and business matters here is itself systemic: the two systems are intertwined. In family business constellations, we cannot excise the family system from the business system and just focus on the business issues. How this can be done is still an emerging area of inquiry though one way is described in the article just mentioned.

Recognising this systemic interdependence has important implications for those working with and in family businesses. Contrary to received business wisdom, you can’t sort out family business issues without first understanding and addressing the relationships and family entanglements which so often lie at the heart of business conflict. As Jutta ten Herkel (2002) points out: ‘In the family business the underlying family system has more weight’. If you put the needs of the business first, you subordinate the family to the business, and you privilege the material over the social with potentially disastrous effects. The family system is the most important system to which we belong, it answers our need for belonging and our need for relationship, and it should be honoured as such. Saving or growing the business must not be done at the expense of damaging or destroying the family.

Q How is this work carried out?

Jan Jacob Stam (2008) has noted four emerging directions for organisation constellations: (1) Organisation Constellation workshops with people from different organisations who bring an issue from their own organisation (2) In-Company Constellations with people from the same organisation, an outside facilitator and ‘clean’ representatives from outside the organisation who don’t know about the company and its issues, (3) In-Company Constellations with an internal facilitator and ‘knowing’ representatives,

and (4) Systemic consulting without the use of Constellations. Each involves differences in procedure and process according to different contextual factors and the interested reader is referred to Stam's (January, 2008) article in *The Knowing Field*.

There are many different ways of 'setting up', 'enabling', 'conducting', 'facilitating', or 'leading', an Organisation Constellation indeed the variety of ways used to describe this speaks to these differences. But just for illustrative purposes, let's use a simple case of type (1). (This is an edited down and amended version of what we have described elsewhere [Green and Green 2003; 2007] and it doesn't deal with all the contextual factors identified by Stam, Weber, and others.)

In an open workshop, the client is invited to describe to the constellator his or her problem, issue or concern. The constellator then explores or decides or affirms with the client, which is the central issue to be explored. S/he generally asks the client to choose a small number of people (depending on what is relevant to the issue) to represent certain members, groups or stakeholders of the organisation or its competitors. This could even take the form of abstract constructs such as organisation values or generic strategies, (or in the case of project management constellations: Scope, Quality, Time and Cost). The possibilities here are endless. The constellator then places these people physically in relation to each other in a constellation.

These open workshops have the advantage of constellations being done with independent representatives rather than with the actual people involved, but even so, they are in relationships to one another. If actual colleagues are involved, then there is the real danger of people: clamming up through fear of being exposed or of being seen as heretical; making matters worse; or of subordinates trying to impress senior management and vice versa. As Weber, cited in Green and Green (2003), cogently suggests: 'Everyone is wary of bringing up taboo topics or exposing secrets. In these situations, the art of concealing the truth and the fear of getting serious flak from co-workers or triggering further arguments by showing precisely what is happening in the system causes team members to set up harmonious, but less than truthful, pictures of the system, and representatives to make non-committal or vague statements.' Of course, this raises issues of the action of power, but this is an on-going inquiry.

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The constellator then listens and watches with the client as an underlying story is revealed. By observing where the representatives have been positioned and what they report from that position within the constellation the dynamics become visible.

New representatives for people or abstract constructs may be introduced by the constellator, depending on what occurs. The focus of the constellation is on relationship dynamics and the systemic forces that underpin them. 'We start with a small story but as the work progresses the story is amplified... Stories remind us of the complexity of life – as we complete the story we include people who are forgotten' (Beaumont, 2002).

What happens next depends on what has emerged. Some Organisation Constellation specialists feel that the constellator should stop the constellation here rather than move to the resolution stage (i.e. attempting to show what may be required for resolution). If entanglements are revealed or if someone or something important which has previously been ignored is now brought to light, it may be appropriate to see whether a movement toward resolution is possible within the constellation. Sentences such as 'I value your support' or 'Thank you for your help' may be suggested to representatives or representatives may be moved to new positions, or representatives may do this of their own accord.

Yet, it may also make sense to work with the client in a more private setting at a later date and outside the workshop. The consultant can then revert to In-house constellations and may, of course, combine the Organisation Constellation with a theory or recipe-based intervention (many management consultancies have a uniform business model from which they derive scale economies) to try to resolve issues highlighted by the constellation. But to do this is to mix paradigms. If one is to stay within the spirit of the phenomenological stance implicit in Hellinger's approach, the consultant seeks to avoid preconceived notions of what the client should do next to try to resolve the situation. Instead/s/he helps the client to interpret what has emerged, and to explore options. And s/he may run a further constellation unencumbered by the previous issues.

Q In what contexts can it, and has it, been used?

By context, here I will take the business issue explored in a constellation rather than the way the constellation is to be set up.

People used to say that it should be restricted to systemic (as opposed to purely personal) organisational or management issues but this begs the question as to what is and is not systemic and whether a non-systemic issue has systemic aspects. I have found organisational constellations useful in a variety of settings dealing with such diverse topics as strategic positioning, mergers and acquisitions, organisation conflict and morale, corporate culture, family business and organisational structure. Some constellators also suggest that the motivation of the client (for example, expressed desire for a forward movement rather than a desire to remain stuck in victim mode, blaming others) and the seriousness or substantiality of the issue are important determinants of whether or not to proceed.

Q Can you give us any examples of this work?

Recently, I have been working mainly with Constellations in two areas of management inquiry. The first is Project Management. Constellations are, I think, very helpful for project managers who, being more naturally drawn to scientific modes of management, can be challenged in a positive and safe way by Constellations to acknowledge the interpersonal, human and emotional side of management. For example, resorting to rational analytic management helps little with political or cultural problems such as the need to bargain for resources from different functional areas of the organisation. (Typical PM solutions such as ‘refer problems to the Project Sponsor’ ignore the complexity of interpersonal relations and corporate jockeying for position). I have found it useful to set up representatives of the parameters that influence PM decisions, such as Cost, Time, Quality and Scope, or for the key players such as Project Sponsor, Functional Heads and Project Leader to explore why text book solutions contained in the Project Management Book of Knowledge (PMBOK) don’t always work.

The other area I have found particularly suitable for Constellations is strategic decision making. The Constellation can be presented to senior executives as a way of modelling decisions in a creative and, for them, highly novel way. Strategic decisions revolve around what are called ‘wicked’ rather than ‘tame’ problems because there is no single criterion to define a best solution; there is always room for improvement. The problem is a symptom

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of another problem, and once a solution is attempted, there is no going back. This uncertainty and complexity provides an ideal setting for the Organisation Constellation. In my experience, representing key strategic decision variables such as assets or core competencies alongside key strategy stakeholders (Customers, Competitors, Suppliers, Shareholders) or setting up generic strategies (Cost, Quality, First Mover, Reactor, Defender) alongside environmental forces of competition (Buyers, Suppliers, New Entrants, Substitutes) always throws up new and engaging solutions which either challenge existing conceptions of what is going on or points to new ways of moving forwards. It also generally throws up factors which haven’t even been considered which creates an immediate engagement and interest in the possibilities opened up by the constellation.

There is not room here to provide an actual case study, so I would refer interested readers to the journal: *The Knowing Field* which has published quite a number of organisation constellations.

Q How long does it take to train to be able to carry this work out?

How long is a piece of string? If one is new to the sort of work and ideas that inform Hellinger’s approach, I think it takes a minimum of five years’ immersion in Hellinger training to come to a workable understanding of his ideas and methodology. It also takes much time to develop the skills to do the work safely by which I mean avoiding the risk of exposing, demeaning or humiliating someone. (I must admit to failing this myself in one of the first organisation constellations I ran). It may be that a solid grounding in both psychotherapy and organisation theory or strategic management are required. For those with good business and organisational knowledge, it is also takes quite a time to abandon the knowledgeable, consultant as expert role for that of the informed observer adopting a phenomenological stance which combines humility with fearlessness. Yet, having said this, some people dive in quickly and do better work than others who have been training for years. There are constellators, and unfortunately I am not one of them, who just seem to have the innate skills to discriminate which issue is worthy of exploration in a constellation and an intuitive grasp of what to do, and what not to do in setting up and working through a constellation.