IOCTI 2008: Systemic Constellations Reformated for Management Contexts

Claude Rosselet

In the first part of this lecture, I'm going to outline the differences between the constellation work in a seminar group and the constellation work within a team or a working group. The differences (that makes differences) can be found on the level of the subject, on the level of the focus and on the level of the representatives.

The Subject of Management Constellations

The subject of the format of Management Constellations is not the relationships between individuals - or groups of individuals - regarding a certain task which is not further defined (as it is the usual practise in the "classical" Organizational Constellation). The subject is the interaction between. For example

- the sales channel, the marketing strategies, the total quality management, an innovation project and the annual objective of turnover of a specific business unit - or

- the routines of the manufacturing department, the perfectionism of the members of the staff, programs for reducing the overheads, the most important supplier and the shareholder value.

This means that already at the beginning of the constellation work there is a high complexity due to various dimensions interacting with each other. These interactions are mostly characterised by a lot of conflicts.

For handling with this entanglement, it is useful to have a kind of map. To this purpose, management models are helpful navigators. They help to focus - and to stabilise – the awareness on a specific level and to mark out the borders of the system. Management models are – like the different structural forms in the work of

Matthias Varga von Kibéd – a kind of *heuristic grid* for the work with management issues.

The use of such a model serves as following:

- in the first place, clarify the request or question the team brings in, to define the borders of the system and the elements to set up in the constellation,
- then, it serves as a navigator during the constellation work and
- finally, it serves to give orientation on how to define the measures for putting into practice a solution after the constellation.

The *St. Gallen Management Model* describes four dimensions of a firm or an organization and their respective interrelationships. These dimensions are the following:

- *Stakeholders*: As competitors, suppliers, investors, customers and employees
- *Processes*: As management processes, business processes and support processes
- *Modes of Development*: Which are optimization and renewal
- *Configurating Forces*: Which are strategies, structures and culture

By using management models, we are reminded that a research on an organization is always a specific section through this organization: What we can observe is an intersecting plain and not the organization as a whole. This means that we will not obtain the absolute truth about a fact in an organization, but deeper insights for creating new hypothesises. These hypothesises are the base for interventions that have to be put into action. Constellation work in management contexts never substitutes action!

The Focus of Management Constellations

The focus in Management Constellations does not represent a single person (nor the point of view or the perspective of a single person), but an entire team. This

implicates that a common request or issue for the whole team has to be established – and the way to get there is a solution-focused discourse including all persons involved in a management team. When I work with a team, the start of the proceeding is always an conversation to clarify the request and then to define the elements and the borders of the system.

To combine this proceeding with a Dialog - in the sense of David Bohm - after the constellation is a great convenience, as it gives the opportunity for sharing insights and developing ways to translate them into practice. Usually a Dialog provides further and also deeper insights into the dynamics of an organization.

The fact that the constellation work is embedded in procedures where the language is used has also an influence on the language used during the constellation work.

While in the "classical" family constellation we observe a *performative use* of the language (of the facilitator) - the language is applied like an action - my constellation work is shaped by a reflexive use of the language. There is also a difference regarding the client. Instead of a deeply moved - and physically present - protagonist, I set up the representative of reflecting observers. These reflecting observers are only a part of an organization; they represents the Client System. The organization as a whole "body" in its enormous complexity remains part of the context -which is not physically participating in the setting. (Occasionnally, it can be represented within the constellation as a context factor.)

The Representatives of Management Constellations: Constellation Work within Management Teams

"Why should I invest three days if it is possible to receive a reply to my question in two hours?" - This statement from a busy manager was daunting because it referred to the difficulty in bringing managers to a seminar lasting several days. But it was honest. And it enclosed the seed of the solution.

If busy managers don't want to visit seminars with constellation work, then the constellation work has to move to the managers. The constellation work with the subject "organization" has to take place within organizations.

At first, that sounded very obvious and simple. On the methodical side there already existed the possibility of focussing and multiple forms of constellations. But there was *one* obstacle standing in the way of carrying out this idea: Important and experienced facilitators had said, that constellation work with persons of an involved client system was inadmissible. It wouldn't work if involved people were set up as representatives. These people would be biased and, consequently, would not or not in a correct way express their perceptions.

Statements of this kind had made an impact. Consultants with the knowing how of the constellation work have therefore been very cautious about doing constellations within management teams. But: If they set up, they mostly succeeded. Provided that they worked with organizational issues!

Within a management team I desist from setting up the relationships between the members of this team. That means I don't focus on the psychological aspects of interpersonal relationships but on the functional dynamics between organizational units. I set up issues that are of relevant interest for a team relating to its embedding in an organizational context.

By plunging into the working context and the connected adjustments, the constellation work has lost a part of its magic. It strips off the character of a *ritual of transition* that consists in an intervention which is proposed by a supervisor and aims to transform a problem into a solution.

This means that the constellation work in part loses the suggestive power of a ritual. *It becomes an intervention that ensures communication about communication.* And it serves to the sense making processes of a management team (Karl Weick).

To summarise the most important differences to the constellation work in a seminar group is:

A Management Constellation is a format

- to resolve issues of getting organised around a task
- a format that works at the task level, not at an interpersonal level
- a format which is practised within members of a team or a group
- a format which is compatible with other systemic procedures – it is not a single intervention, but it is part of other interventions
- a format which applies a variety of different constellation forms and techniques.

It is useful, to regard several principles when doing Management Constellations:

- Keep it simple and short
- Use the wording of the participants
- Reduce complexity. Clarify the issue(s) and the possible good result(s)
- Don't set up a representative for a person. Use abstract elements like functions, configurating forces and processes for example.

The "Murmur" of the Tacit Knowledge

The classical Knowledge Management focuses primarily on the explicit knowledge: on the *Knowing That* and the theoretical knowledge. The outcome is big compilations of data - which is not the way to clarify situations with a high complexity. A multitude of data normally enhances complexity; and it reduces certainty. Managers studying lists are loosing the sense for the whole and the unmistakable instinct for doing the right thing.

By doing so, managers are drifting away from the skills and competences that are shaped through experience and that are the base of true expertise. It isn't so simple to translate mastery into digital datasets. This kind of knowing resists the control of

any kind of management. Michael Polanyi has named this knowledge *Tacit Knowledge*.

Michael Polanyi has used the term of "Tacit Knowledge" for the first time in his theory of cognition respectively theory of perception. He has assumed, that intelligence is already in the practice. Practice is not managed by an external entity that alone owns intelligence. It is, for example, not the head that controls the hand grabbing at the fork. The hand is griping the fork in a self-regulating way. The complex procedure of co-ordination complying with intention is working without demands of the intellect. Michael Polanyi calls these procedures "Implicit Knowledge". This knowledge is naturally at our disposal, but we haven't developed a conceptual understanding of it. The moment when this becomes apparent is when the question about the "What?" and the "How exactly?" keeps us quiet. It seems, however, "that we can know more than we can tell" (Polanyi, p. 4). In his theory Polanyi was concentrating primarily on the individual knowledge. The term "implicit knowledge" doesn't play a major role in his work.

In the important contribution of Ikuijro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi on the Knowledge Management the concept of implicit knowledge is central. In their classic "The Knowledge Creating Company", the interplay between implicit and explicit knowledge is an important topic on their way of looking for an answer to the question on how in companies knowledge will be created. "It is definitively important to know, how companies develop new products, methods and structures. But still more essential is the question on how firms create new knowledge."

In principle they are setting the implicit knowledge equal to the experience or know-how of an expert. And their explorations follow the question on how this expertise can be made available to the whole company.

While Nonaka and Takeuchi put their initial attention at the individual knowledge, the work with Management Constellations focuses on the *social knowledge*. Its attention lays on the implicit or tacit part of this knowledge. It allows a glance at the horizons of expectance, at the orders and at the structures founding a definite practice or *shaping routines*. System constellations are a kind of receptor of the Tacit

Knowledge. They give to the observer a view on the *body of rules and regulations* of a social system: The so-cold *Configurating Forces*.

At present, to make these Configurating Forces accessible, there exist only a few methods that are furthermore rather time-consuming. In this case the constellation work serves as an easy – but not simple – instrument.

The constellation work allows to keep the track of what drives the emergence of social systems. Depending on the point of view, it is named Conscience and is a sort of authority. Or it is a *predisposition of a practice* and is then called "Tacit Knowledge".

A single constellation is always useful. It indeed deepens insights in organizational patterns or *routines*. And the phenomenon of the body resonance is always fascinating the participants. But the implementation of a solution in an organizational context follows a different way than in families. In organizations there are other forms of emergence.

This fact should be considered in the practice of intervention. In dealing with strategic or operational issues we need a sustainable structure to transform the "vision" of the constellation into tangible social practices. This structure is called *Architecture of Intervention* and is sort of a road map of a Management of Change.

Constellations have a lasting effect most notably in a repeated application, particularly if they are used for a certain length of time. Therefore, it is always possible to integrate them in a process of change: Here they inspire the work of groups, like steering boards, project and work groups, and so on. The episodes of a constellation that caused a concrete intervention can be an issue in a later phase. Knowing about the effects of an intervention is always an interesting thing in this context. Looking into this subject allows conclusions about the working of the body of rules and regulations named "Organization".

One of the greatest benefits of constellation work is clarifying the mechanisms which are experienced as blockades in the process of implementation. Often technical rules

of a strategic intent happen to be inconsistent or in contradiction with the basic "grammatical" or cultural rules of an organization. Then, a change process always causes a problem. In that case the access to the basic rules or, in other words, the tacit knowledge of organization given by the system constellation is very helpful. In this kind of discussion a new understanding of blockades is coming up. Constellation work has showed in so many cases that at the base of an obstacle there is a resource.

Furthermore, Management Constellations can also be integrated into the theoretical framework of the MIT-professor Claus Otto Scharmer. With his U-Process he invented a new model for organizational learning. This procedure is an invitation to apply the constellation work. He writes: "In order to operate successfully in this new business environment, business leaders will need to master a new capacity: The capacity to sense, enact and embody the future as it emerges." With this sentence he seems to allude to system constellations. And, in fact, on the level of the imagination and the primary knowing, the constellation work makes accessible the knowing that is named *Tacit Knowledge*.

What I have tried to indicate is the following: Practitioners and theoreticians have frequently alluded to the Tacit Knowledge. The Constellation Work is the method of the first choice to visualise this phenomenon.

Claude Rosselet, CH-8708 Männedorf, in octobre 2008