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Organizational Constellations in Individual Consulting Sessions – Emergency Solutions or a Good Solution in an Emergency?

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Organizational constellations are viewed by many as an appropriate and effective tool or method, and they are used to instigate solutions in organizations and enterprises. In individual consultations and in coaching, they have proven themselves for certain problem configurations as well.

When a board member of an enterprise or a higher placed manager has to solve an intra-company problem, it is often inadvisable or impossible to do an organizational constellation in a group setting or even directly with the company employees. The issue can require a degree of secrecy and/or discretion, which is hardly provided within a group setting. Or, the social climate of the company can prohibit employees from speaking freely and authentically as representatives. They might not dare to express how they experience their position based on factors like fearing to lose their position, mobbing and similar things, or they may hold back too much and express themselves as is socially expected or in a harmonizing way.

Often it is difficult to find a sufficiently large, neutral and discrete group of representatives for an organizational constellation at the time when a problem is acute or has intensified. In a constellation of their own system, the employees concerned are seldom capable of taking representatives' positions in an unprejudiced way.

It is often outside the sphere of influence of an employee to have a organizational constellation done for a conflict that affects him. First and foremost, he looks for a discrete and safe setting to talk about the issue and primarily for a solution to his own issues. I have clients who work on different hierarchical and functional levels in the profit and non-profit sectors.

Organizational constellations have been proven effective in individual consultations for the following problem situations:

1. Generally for analysis and diagnosis.
2. Locating the center of conflict and the appropriate level of the organization.
3. Decision situations.
4. When entanglements are perceived between organizational problems and personal and



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family issues.

5. With changes in the company or organizational hierarchy (for instance, promotion or demotion) and their consequences. When one changes one's field of work. When it is difficult to find or fill one's own place in the work system.
6. With team conflicts.

Procedures regarding organizational constellations in the individual consultation.

1. In general

What is set develops mostly from the individual problem situation, and the persons who are set in the constellation are custom tailored for this. I usually combine a constellation of the protagonists of the conflict with relevant inner parts. For example, I might include the person's resources, or abstract elements, like the goal, the "miracle question" (see DeShazer, 1989) or creative elements that arise spontaneously from looking at the problem situation.

I consider it important to have an interview in the beginning and single out the issue of the person in front of me. The organizational structure has to become transparent and a picture has to emerge.

Often, just the possibility of looking at one's work situation from an outside perspective allows many things to appear more clearly and vividly than they did from the "inside." To see this situation placed in three dimensions opens up a wealth of information and allows the client to perceive his or her situation at deeper levels of experience than before.

From this process a hologram-like picture of the client's experience often appears, with very different levels of effect. It becomes visible at the same time where honoring is missing in the company, where a very personal experience comes into play, where the order of rank isn't right, etc. The constellation makes it possible to see all levels simultaneously and look for steps towards solutions and try these out.

2. The procedure of setting organizational constellation in individual consultations.

I always let the client stand in all of the places in the constellation, one after another. This lets him experience the individual states of being and different perceptions that occur in each place. This step in the process already has a good effect (for instance, when someone perceives, that someone with whom he has conflict, also isn't feeling comfortable in his or her own skin.) This experience can relieve or resolve [pressure] on the client when he is



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faced with an overwhelming, unclear or confusing organizational situation. Reducing the complex situation to "constellation places" focuses the client's attention on the essential

topics. The client's self-esteem is considerably strengthened when factors like his own goals or resources, which previously may have appeared to be non-existent or were experienced as ineffective, now play an important role. The client can "claim" his own competence and ability to take independent action.

3. Some examples of helpful experiences with organizational constellations in individual consultations.

In order to demonstrate the procedures that are used, I will give some practical examples.

a) Not truly accepting a promotion.

A leading employee of a company ascended to the position of head of procurement. He had difficulties in filling his new position appropriately, especially when he had to fire employees in the interest of the firm. He felt insecure in his new role. He felt increasingly exhausted, worn-out and overtaxed. We used figures to set him, his former superior who was now functionally of equal rank, one person for the board, one for the company as a whole and two of his co-workers who were previously of equal rank and now were subordinate to him.

The constellation showed that internally he hadn't made the change of identity and was not yet able to embody his new position. He placed himself in the position and rank that he had when he originally joined the company. The next step was to create the appropriate level of rank in the constellation. Here he stood to the left of his former boss, thus the company was at his back, and he could feel its support strengthen him. The former co-workers stood opposite of him from the right to left in the order in which they joined the company. Using methods from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) we looked for the necessary resources he needed in order to fill his new position with strength and integrity. It was also an important step for him to bow down in front of the company as a whole, and to honor it for supporting him and allowing him to become competent and now serve the company from an important position. He felt capable of fulfilling his position and to also tell his former co-workers, "Now I am your superior and my priority is to serve the company." Aside from the constellation work, the individual consultation offers the client the space to express feelings that are connected with this. For this man it was important to acknowledge his fear of having betrayed his former colleagues by being promoted over them.



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b) Locating the conflict.

A female leading employee looked for clarification because of a conflict on the leadership level of her company. She looked for quite some time at herself for possible deficits and mistakes with the consequence that her work activities were increasingly paralyzed. When it came to light in an organizational constellation that the foremost area of tension was between her superior and his boss, and that this had nothing to do with her, she felt relieved. We could then look in a relaxed way at how she could create better boundaries to the conflict occurring between these two, so she could stay out of it and regain her strength.

c) The effect of taking on a trauma in a family enterprise.

The boss of a hotel enterprise that had been in his family for generations, came to a consultation because he had strong fears that often overcame him when he was on site, and because he had massive problems with his leadership of the employees. In the organizational constellation he stood totally isolated and turned away from his employees in such a way that he had no contact with them. When he took his place, he had a dark image of his (in reality, just freshly renovated) hotel: he saw it as dark and empty. Then in front of this image other images emerged: ruins and a big ditch. He showed great fear. We found out that during the war his father had been a driver for the S.S. and had to drive officers to mass executions. After the war the father did not process these experiences and couldn't find his way anymore in his company. The son had taken on the fear and images of the father. When this came to light, and the son could give back the father's destiny and guilt that he had carried, the son could then turn to his company and his employees and was full of energy again and could take his place.

d) A constellation from an individual supervision case study.

A middle-aged woman had worked for more than 22 years in a company and almost the whole time with one boss. The boss had recently retired. Since then she had conflicts with the new boss. She had the impression that he, as an academic, wanted to get rid of all old, non-academic employees. She felt increasingly depressed and reacted with psycho-somatic problems.

The following positions were placed: the client, the old boss, the new boss, the new boss' superior, the company as a whole, the goal of the client (that was in her best interest, and which until now she might have known only subconsciously), and her resources.

The consultant let the client do the following constellation with stencils and then stood in



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all of the positions in the constellation herself. Her most important perceptions were: on the place of the client she felt visibly uneasy, isolated and under great tension. On the place

of the new boss, however, she also felt insecure and wavered. The resources of the client were hardly noticeable and on the place for her goals the consultant felt unrest and heart palpitations. Here she faced a wall and no perspective for the future was in sight.

In a next step the consultant changed the constellation in this way, she set the bosses in the appropriate order of rank. Now the client had the old boss in her view for the first time, and when the consultant stood on the client's place and looked to the old boss, she clearly felt sadness mixed with feelings of anger. Questioning the client revealed that she lived alone and did not have a very fulfilling private life. The relationship to her old boss had been an important focal point for her life. She had done a lot for him and now felt angry that he hadn't given back as much as he had received. When she told the old boss, "It has been a good time. What a pity that it is over. I keep you well in my heart," she was noticeably relieved.

When the consultant stood in the position of the new boss in the newly created rank order, and honored the old boss and his merits with a small bow, the new boss also relaxed. The client then took her own place and the consultant put the stencil for her goal behind the company and her resources beside her and let her look at the company.

Her face lightened up and the consultant let her say to the company, "You are important for me." She visibly experienced a greater flow of energy here. When she looked to the goal she also felt more energy there, and a sentence spontaneously emerged. "That's where it continues." Now she also experienced the resources more intensely and as a support. Looking to the new boss and his superior was now easily possible for her. She could honor them all and didn't experience a threat any more. Her energy was directed fully towards the company and the goal behind it.

4. Possibilities and limits of organizational constellations in individual consultations.

Organizational constellations in individual consultation sessions or in coaching have the advantage of confidentiality and a secure space in which to uncover the relevant conflict dynamic. When personal and private issues have a role in the conflict, the individual session offers a protected realm for solution-focused, deep, goal-oriented work.

a) Possibilities.



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Our experiences in the family and our image of the family structure and imprint our perceptions of relationships. This overlaps into professional contexts. In the individual situation I can see and resolve the personal and the organizational structural issues (for

instance, disturbances in the order of rank, lack of honoring of merits, or an unclear organizational structure), and in the protected atmosphere of a private session, I can also talk with the client about personal issues, name things more directly or, if needed, work covertly and indirectly. If there is there a block or deficit in the personal area, a hindrance for solution, I can add solution-focused methods like for instance, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, to the organizational constellation.

b) Limits.

A big disadvantage to doing organizational constellations in individual sessions is this: one has to do without the comments of the representatives and work with what is immediately visible. The perceptions of the system are limited to the intuition and experiences of the client and the consultant as they stand in the individual roles or places. When the client has little ability to sense the feelings that arise in this situation, her possibilities for the experience are, at least in the beginning, limited. In this case, I make use of trance elements from hypnotherapy. Based on my perception of the problem situation and possible solutions, I describe as vividly as possible a potential solution scenario "as if" certain solutions steps could happen just now. For the most part, the client reacts then with an inner, non-verbal movement and internal search processes are set in motion.

Another limitation in individual work is that sometimes the persons who have to take the necessary solutions steps are not the ones who come into the consultation. The person who comes, has to take the solution picture that is shown, back to the organization with the trust that it will have a systemic effect there, and that it will influence the occurrence of the possible solutions steps for the organization.

To work with organizational constellations according to the Hellinger method in an individual session is such a new area that in my opinion, we still anticipate many new insights and developments of new and creative procedures.