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HOLISTIC + GENERATIVE APPROACHES = CREATIVE + SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

What is an Organizational Constellation?

Working Effectively Where We Have the Greatest Influence.

By Jane Peterson, PhD

A recent New Scientist article pointed out that our systems have become so interlinked that we can no longer use linear cause-effect thinking to understand or predict what they will do. Complexity science now defines our lives. Given the complexity of the systems that executives must now manage, seat-of-the-pants decision-making sneaks in where rational solutions fail.

Systems have organism-like qualities that don't show up in cause-effect thinking but are properties of complex living systems. The initial conditions set in motion a series of events that unfold to lead the organism to its present state. We call this an organization's genome — unless you know the whole history of the organization, it's difficult to know what genes have been switched on, and which have perhaps inadvertently been switched off.

What can we really do as organizational leaders in such complex situations? How can we make wise decisions? If we realize our direct sphere of influence extends to approximately two levels of management, two above and two below, as well as to our peers, then we know that this middle zone is where we will have the most impact. Beyond that our influence is dependent on others to carry our message and intentions. It is within this five level *sphere of influence* that we can have the most direct and lasting positive impact on our organization. While IT and expert sources of information are essential in running today's large far-flung organizations, the web of relationships we work in, on a day-to-day basis, is where we will have the most influence.

We have a lot of tools for working with individuals, from Myers-Briggs to Whitelaw's four essential energies. We have a plethora of whole-system change methods, from Appreciative Inquiry to Open Space. All of these are valuable at addressing their chosen areas, however, where we as organizational leaders, or consultants who work with those leaders, have the most influence isn't on either of these levels. It's in that circle of people we work with day in and day out, even if our contact is "virtual" and they are physically on another continent. How can we be most effective where it counts?

We have an approach now that lets us map the hidden traces of the past in the organizational present, and also see directly the underlying tensions and reactions in the teams and work-groups where we can have the most positive impact. Not since the days of Kurt Lewin and the National Testing Laboratories has an innovation come along that more aptly addresses this "middle" area.



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There is a lot of talk about intuition and attempts to introduce “other intelligences” into organizations. To know how a system works requires an intuitive connection to that system as an organism, with a past, and a current set of actors and challenges. Systemic knowledge is often intuitive knowledge. Intuitive knowledge is tacit knowledge, and tacit knowledge is embodied knowledge. Constellation work brilliantly combines a deep and thorough investigation of the function of systemic conscience – that sense which subtly shapes our decisions and behavior – with our embodied sense of “where we stand” in relation to the important people and issues that make us effective (or not!) in our work world. The process itself is relatively quick, taps into the embodied knowledge we have from living directly in the organizational system, and makes visible the dynamics at play in a way that is easy to grasp and points to possible options. The results are often startling in both their clarity and accuracy.