

# Bringing the Roots of Organizations to Light

by Jan Jacob Stam

Early one April morning this year I was walking through the majestic redwoods of Muir Woods where El Niño had cast its influence on California nature. Down in the valley I saw an oak tree lying on the moist soil. It had been lying there for a long time; fallen down on its way up to the sunlight. From its trunk new thin branches sprouted with shy pale green leaves, reaching straight up for the sun.

This oak was doing its best to fulfill its purpose in nature, adhering to the possibilities and limitations of ecological principles and to its environment. This image came to me during a couple of Bert Hellinger and Hunter Beaumont's workshops on family constellations which I was fortunate to attend.

Hellinger's work has been discussed in previous articles in *Anchor Point* this year. I would like to share the applications of constellations in organizational systems and touch on some fundamental questions about the relationship of this work to the field of NLP.

In Western society all around us organizations are craving structuring or bonding principles and new paradigms in order to deal with the fast growing complexity of society. Systemic approaches as to organizations offer promising new ways of thinking. Having been introduced to family constellations a couple of years ago and as a trained NeuroLinguistic Programmer I was impressed by the depth and impact of this approach and immediately started to put things together and explore.

How family constellation work is done has been discussed extensively in previous articles in *Anchor Point*. "Exploring the PsychoSpiritual Motifs of the Family Mind," by Tim Hallbom and Kris Johnson, August, 1997; "Families in the Social Panorama," February, 1998, and "Systemic Voodoo," March, 1998, both by Lucas Derks; and "Hellinger's Family Constellation With Individuals, NLP, and Hypnotherapy," June, 1998, By Wolfgang Lenk. To be brief: Hellinger works with a large group of people. He asks a client to choose people from the audience to represent the client's family members including the client himself. The client then intuitively places the representatives in relationship to each other. This constellation brings certain dynamics in the family system to light, dynamics which influence people's approach to life. The representatives often have strong feelings which correspond with the feelings of the actual family members. They, so to speak, tap the energy of the family mind of the client's family system. Hellinger then moves the representatives in order to see if a "better solution" is possible. The reports from the representatives about their feelings in the constellation, the experience and intuition of the therapist,

moving in the energy field of the constellation, and information from the client are important factors in the process of finding a more peaceful and balanced constellation. For the client this has a penetrative effect on the soul.

This work inspired us to examine whether a similar kind of dynamic exists in organizations; and, if so, to explore how it can enrich organizational development.

### **Example**

A manager of a governmental organization reported suffering from enduring stress, hypertension, headaches, and sleeping problems. He asked me as a consultant to coach him for a period of time. We dealt with his feelings of stress on a number of occasions using NLP approaches, dealing with organizational issues, and more; which seemed to work for a short time. But his feelings of stress kept coming back.

Then we set up his organization constellation. One main dynamic was his predecessor, standing very close behind him, evoking feelings in the client's representative of being choked. Moving the predecessor to another place gave the client's representative a feeling of relief, but more needed to be done. In a ritual, the manager gave his predecessor a burden in the form of a briefcase, saying, "This is not mine, it belongs to you." "Yes," the predecessor said, "This is mine. I'll take it from you. Now I can leave. I wish you and your department good luck in the future." The stress did not return.

During the last year, in which I have been able to explore the possibilities of using family constellation work in organizations, it appears that there are several ways of doing this. In individual coaching it worked quite well to have the client move in a virtual space and point out the places where the key persons in his organization were present. This map was then drawn on a flip chart, and from there we worked on finding a more appropriate constellation. It was even better to work with pieces of paper or felt laid out on the floor by the client. By standing on the pieces of paper the client was able to access the feelings of the people he represented. This way the client was a kind of multipurpose representative.

Another interesting experience for me, as a consultant, was that whenever I was hired to diagnose problems in an organization I myself was able to picture the constellation in these organizations. For a diagnosis I usually interview the key people in regard to the issue, asking them: "Would you tell me your story?" Then suddenly when all the information is gathered, in some cases, a constellation pops up in my mind. Interestingly enough, when I, using a diagram, reported the constellation to those who had been interviewed, they often gave a sigh of relief, stating: "This is exactly what has been going on here." Strangely enough, this telling the truth (as the clients often named it) in itself seemed to have a very positive effect on the organization as a whole and quite often made other interventions unnecessary. On two occasions, some time after such a session, people in the organization who had not been present

remarked: "I don't know what happened, but I got my place back in this organization."

However, the most profound way is to create a situation in which the clients are able to set up a constellation of their organization with the help of representatives.

So far we have found out a couple of things in this work.

In the first phase, the "intake," it is important to find out if the question of the client is a systemic one. So far there are no hard criteria to make this distinction. But there are a number of indications.

Therapists and consultants who work with system dynamics report a kinesthetic radar for systemic entanglements. When the client talks about his issue you can sense three kinds of emotions.

Primary emotions are an instant reaction to something that happens, for instance one gets angry at being attacked. The anger gives the strength for self-defense and is over soon afterwards. The expression of a primary emotion is direct and can easily be recognized.

Secondary emotions are a substitute for another emotion. For example anger as a substitute for helplessness. The consultant recognizes this when the client continues to talk about the issue and the consultant senses that the issue is really about something else.

A third kind of emotion is systemic: feelings that are taken on from the system. It is as if these emotions are not really expressed by the client, although they are very authentic; they seem to come through the client. When this kind of emotion is recognized, it is a strong indication that there is a systemic issue at work.

Another kind of indication is when an issue is perpetuated in an organization for years and years, a number of consultants have worked on it before, and nothing lasting has happened. It is also an indication when you stumble onto secrets and taboos during your first explorations. In that case it can be very helpful to inquire about the past: "What has happened? What has not been finished? Who has left the company in a bad way? Who has not been honored?"

Regarding the future situation of the client we have found out that when a desired state is not "permitted" or the client can not fully accept being in a desired state, then this is a strong indication of a systemic issue. To find out if there is a systemic issue it can be helpful to ask an individual the question: "Who are you honoring by showing this behavior?"

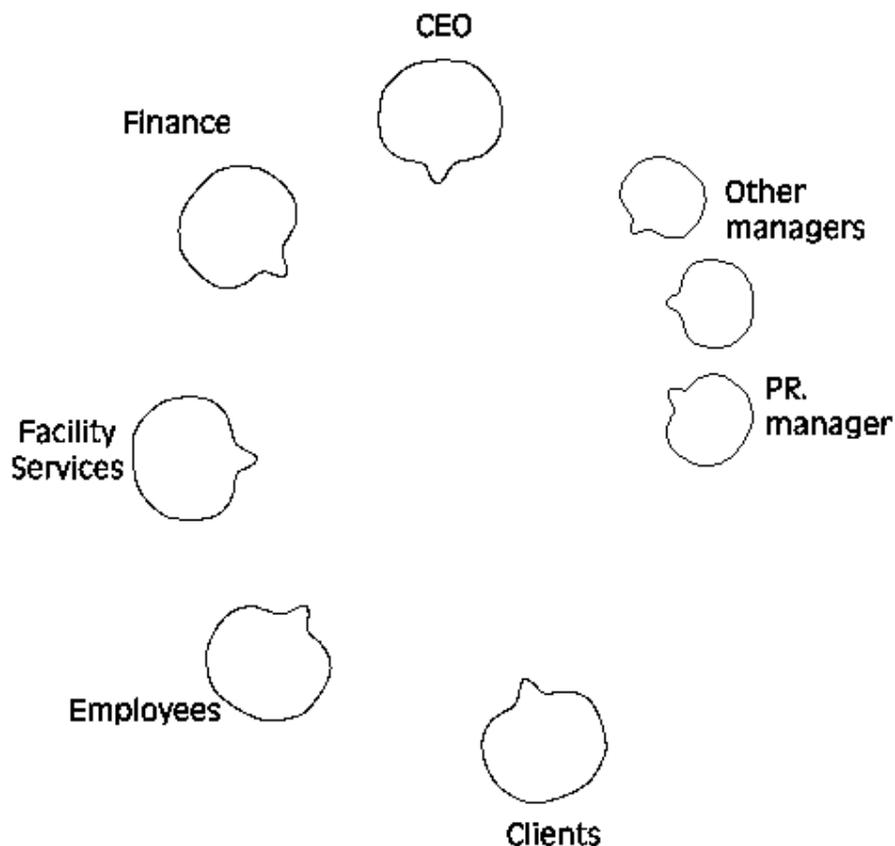
In the second phase a constellation is set up. In family constellations you work with the present family or the client's family of origin. In organizations certain questions must be asked in order to figure out who of the present people or predecessors are key persons. A product can also be a key element and therefore needs to be set up by a representative. The same goes for the clients

of a firm or all the employees of a department. They can be represented by a single representative in the constellation. Seniority is important in the sense of who came first. Founders often play an important role when they are not honored and remembered properly after they have left.

When the constellation is set up, the picture as a whole together with the information from the representatives (their feelings and their tendencies to go to another place in the constellation or leave) gives an insight into the dynamics of what is going on.

The main question is: "Is everyone in the system in the position where he or she belongs, in such a way, that the system as a whole can work and individuals can excel as well as they would like?"

Sometimes it is confusing that the traditional, well known organizational hierarchy is not the system's hierarchy. The latter is of bigger influence. Sometimes it appears from the constellation that the wife of the president is the real boss, or that the founder who died years ago is still very present and ruling. By setting up the constellation, the deep structure of an organization or a team comes to life. Hellinger reports to have discovered a certain standard order in family systems, so there seems to be something similar in organizations:



## **Example of a standard order in an organizational system**

By standard order we mean a kind of archetypal constellation which is balanced. And just like the fallen oak in Muir Woods, there are many other constellations which work out fine, formed by their history and possibilities. In the third phase, the consultant explores the possibilities for a better constellation by moving the representatives in such a way that there are less entanglements. In an entanglement, people are, for instance, unconsciously inclined to follow someone else's fate or to take on the suffering of another person in the system.

The reactions of the representatives and calibration of physical changes are also used to find out if the constellation is more balanced.

Organization constellations can be mixed up with the client's personal family constellation. This can be brought to light in a very elegant way by placing a new representative from the audience just behind the representative in the constellation on whom the client is focusing, then removing the first representative so that the other is revealed, and asking the client, "Who is this person?" "My grandmother" indicates that at this point the family constellation is (temporarily) taking over the organizational constellation.

In the last phase "releasing statements" are used as in the previously mentioned example: "This belongs to you," "I honor you for what you did for the firm. Now I'm letting you go." These statements have a healing effect and open the way for the client to take his proper place in the system.

Often the question arises of with whom is the constellation set up and whether it is possible to do so with the true members of an organization. Experience shows that in an organization it works fine to have the highest ranking in the systemic hierarchy set up the constellation, because this person usually has greater opportunities to influence the system. But that does not seem to be a hard and fast rule. Hellinger does not set up constellations with the real family members, because the dynamics brought to light using representatives who have no knowledge of the issue nor interest in the outcome keeps the constellation pure.

## **Phenomenology**

Hellinger does not have a theoretical explanation for this work. He uses a phenomenological approach instead of a scientific approach, emphasizing that a scientific approach is the work of the mind and not of the soul. Interestingly enough, my experience is that in an organizational context people also easily pick up the notion of systemic order and entanglements without a full explanation of organizational theory. As every cell in a body (and all those billions of cells which are not there anymore due to the process of renewal every couple of years) contains information about the whole body, so a member of a family or a member of an organization contains information at the deep level of the soul about the system as a whole and its history. Stepping into a

constellation which is set up is like stepping into a field where alien emotions and movements are felt.

### **Organizational consequences**

As a consultant I worked for a company where people talked about an illness in the organization, a dysfunctional member of the management team, and a lot of helplessness going on for many years. The focus in this organization was on this "Dysfunctioning" manager who was causing too many tears in the organization. However, the feelings about him were ambivalent. People also reported that he had done very much for the company, and for that they were grateful. After a constellation set up by the president of the management team it became clear that there were systemic entanglements and due to systemic reasons the dysfunctioning manager did not have a place in this system.

So, from a systemic point of view, having this manager change or improve his behavior or having someone else take his place without solving the entanglements in the present system would not have been successful in the long run. This leads to a whole new way of thinking about organizations and their dynamics.

This also means that when people in a system are not able to fully contribute as they would like to for systemic reasons, focusing on them, developing their skills, maybe working on the level of beliefs and identity may be the wrong approach. This may risk plunging them deeper into trouble and making them punish themselves even more.

Therefore I believe that it could be very useful for coaches, trainers, and consultants to develop a sense with which they can ascertain where systemic issues strongly influence the potentials of the individuals in the system and the system as a whole. In other words, if a coach helps a client to mobilize all his possible resources, while systemic reasons limit the possibilities of fully utilizing these resources, the client would probably become more stuck in a conflict of loyalty between himself and his deep unconscious love for the system.

### **The role of the consultant**

Working with family constellations and organizational constellations is partly a technique and partly an attitude. An important part of that attitude is to open up to the system as a whole. That means that the "bad guys," the perpetrators, also have a place in the heart of the consultant. Being nonjudgmental but just seeing, sensing how things are as they come to light in an organizational system is important for the consultant in order to avoid becoming entangled in the system of that organization. If you suspect this to be the case, the setting up of a constellation and also placing the consultant within it can bring this to light.

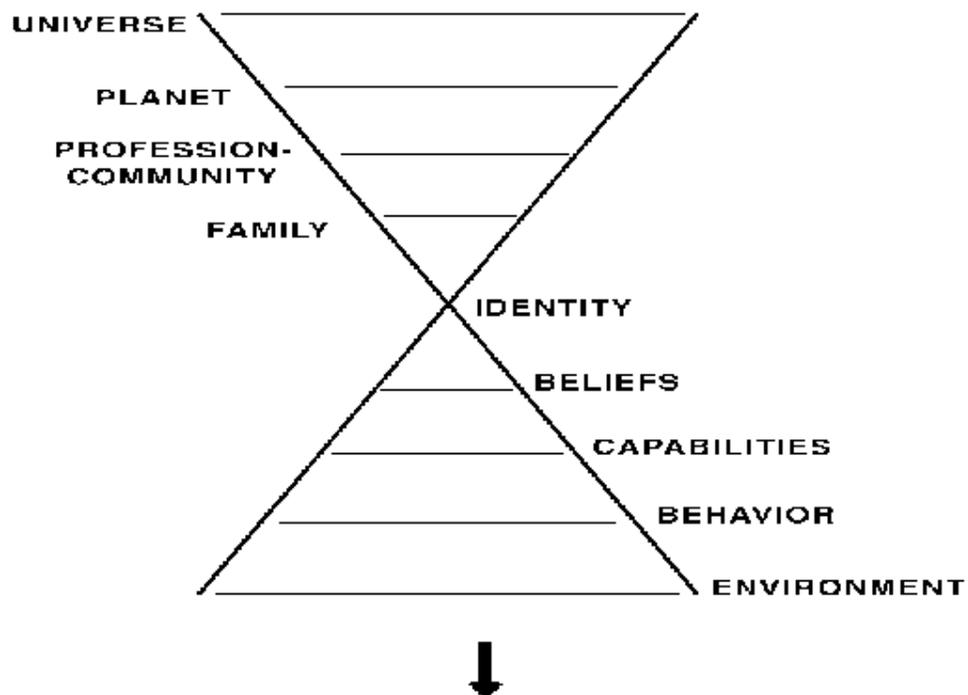
## Constellations and NLP

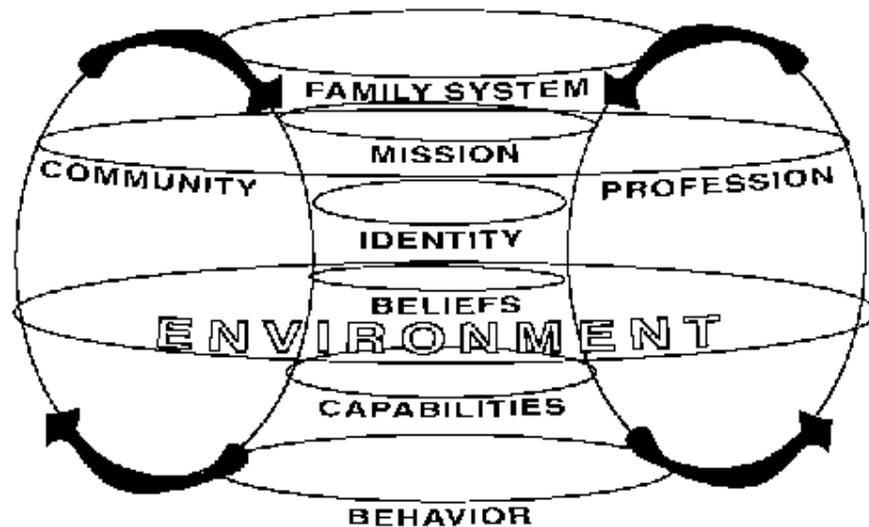
Having worked with NLP for many years now and being struck and touched by the depth and results of the system thinking in family constellations, questions arise how this work can enrich and contribute to NLP.

This is a mere beginning but one can picture some directions:

1. · At several points there have been explorations aimed at bringing NLP up to a higher aggregate level: from individual to group level and community level. Robert Dilts and Robert McDonald have been exploring this in "Group Mind, Team Spirit." Modeling or using system dynamics as in family constellation work may prove to be a field in which this family, organization, culture, and community level of understanding is brought a step closer.
2. The dynamics in a family or organizational constellation are often experienced by the participants as coming through them. That suggests that system dynamic forces can be seen as a kind of environment. Man creates context and context creates man. From there it is a minor step to remodel Robert Dilts' picture of the logical levels:

1.





### The logical levels in systemic perspective

- In the context of family constellation and systemic thinking the NLP concept of *ecology* becomes deeper and richer: "What will be the consequences of my decision for the system to which I belong and its dynamics in the long run?"
- Exploring this field might also give rise to new NLP presuppositions. Lara Ewing invited the NLP community to open up for new presuppositions during the NLP Leadership Conference in Santa Cruz last summer. One such presupposition I would like to explore in the future is: there are certain universal ordering principles in the primary (i.e. family) system which influence the possibilities people have for living to their full potential, or which limit them in their behavior.

With the same deep respect for living systems and looking with awe at an old oak tree, I'm wondering where exploring constellations in systems with the outreached hands of NLP might bring us in the next century. A next step for dreams to come true?

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