

# Management Constellations

## USING CONSTELLATIONS TO SOLVE MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS

We have found that the method of systemic structural constellations is most appropriate in such settings. Developed by Insa Sparrer and Matthias Varga von Kibèd<sup>2</sup> this method offers particular forms of constellations and a useful 'grammar' of intervention which provide us with a range of possibilities for work with internal organisational issues. In addition, the structural approach is generally readily accepted by managers.

A further characteristic of Management Constellations is that we focus on specific questions of management – for example: strategy, change management, improvement of relationships between stakeholder groups. We are not working with interpersonal team dynamics. Therefore we need an explicit contract and specific conditions. The most important point in our work is that Management Constellations are embedded in a larger consultancy process and used in combination with other systemic methods like World Café, Open Space and especially Dialogue.<sup>3</sup> This makes it easier to use 'tacit' knowledge – one gem of organisational systems. With Management Constellations, managers learn about the basic impact of unacknowledged or unresolved situations that are often in the tacit domain of their business culture and they are able to work out and implement sustainable solutions in complex situations.

Over the course of the next three issues of The Knowing Field journal, we will be introducing you to the basics and special considerations of Management

*For several years, Georg Senoner, Claude Rosselet and I have been using systemic constellations in our organisational workshops and consultancy businesses. Our speciality is that we work not only with the client to set up a constellation, but also with those other management team members who are directly affected by the questions and problems under consideration. Working directly with in-house teams in this way requires a special degree of care and experience and a particular methodology we call 'Management Constellations'<sup>1</sup>.*

Constellations. This series of articles is in three parts:

Part I: Systemic Structural Constellations – an introduction to commonly-used methods for Management Constellations.

Part II: Integrating Management Constellations into organisational development or change processes to support managers in facing the challenges of today's business.

Part III: Management Constellations – the scientific and systemic essentials.

### PART I AN INTRODUCTION TO SYSTEMIC STRUCTURAL CONSTELLATIONS IN ORGANISATIONS

The notion of 'grammar' is an important metaphor in structural constellations work. Insa Sparrer and Matthias Varga von Kibèd<sup>4</sup> have remarked that learning about constellations is like learning a new language – we are actually learning to 'speak systemic'. In this respect the structural constellation has its own unique vocabulary, grammar and syntax. From this perspective they have developed a number of specific constellation 'formats'

with fundamental structures which can be used in any context for a specific purpose (just as poems have forms such as: odes, elegies, sonnets, ballads and so on). The different forms of structural constellations support the solutions-focus of this work.

For example, the grammar of the Tetralemma Constellation (Fig. 5) can be used in making decisions about personal career questions and also when a management team is in a decision-making process involving two or more innovative ideas. Other situations in which these constellation forms can be used include: where there's a need for improved co-operation between teams or departments, or for developing corporate or team vision. In addition, individuals, values, goals, tasks, hierarchical levels, departments, products, etc. can also be represented and explored.

By using the actual structure and abstract elements of a problem, systemic structural constellations are working in a 'syntactical' manner. This means our attention goes to what happens between the representatives, what the differences in their perception are and how the overall cumulative picture develops after interventions. This is further reflected

when questions are asked on the different physical feelings that occur. We do not pay much attention to concrete information on these issues. This is left to the interpretations of the client. For us it is neither necessary for the start of the constellation nor for its continuation. However, no harm is done, if it is available.

In addition, systemic structural constellations powerfully incorporate the 'solution-focused' work developed by Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer<sup>5</sup>. This means the client is asked to focus at the beginning on what will be different if the problem is solved, so their energy is concentrating on a positive outcome. Therefore the so-called 'miracle question' is often used. The intention is to keep the client solution- not problem-focused. This mobilises his/her resources and gives options for taking action. The Solution-Focused Interview forms part of the contract prior to the constellation. Thus the constellator gets a clear view of what the preferred outcome is and in which context factors might be looked at.

### WHAT CAN STRUCTURAL CONSTELLATIONS OFFER?

#### *a Team, a Group, an Organisation:*

- Conflict resolution.
- Improved co-operation.
- Mobilisation of resources.
- Support for decision-making processes.
- Review and development of strategies.
- Development of new ideas and support for innovation processes.
- Additional benefits gained from the personal benefit to individual participants.

#### *Individuals:*

- An overview of their own position in complex relationships.
- Help with recognising behaviour patterns.
- Insight into possible ways of moving forward.
- An opportunity to test out new behaviour patterns and perspectives.
- Helpful new 'inner pictures' of situations.
- Expansion of consciousness enabling increased choices.
- Improved access to their own resources.

### HOW IS REPRESENTATIVE PERCEPTION VIEWED IN STRUCTURAL CONSTELLATION WORK?

As a representative, we physically perceive how it feels to be in a specific place in the system. We feel heat, cold, pain, laughter, indifference, etc. In structural constellations no value is placed on these perceptions. Instead, the focus is on the differences that occur through changes in the environment. A check is made on whether these changes result in an improvement or deterioration in some aspect of the system, or if there is simply a more neutral difference. In this way the representatives' comments contain valuable clues for the development of the constellation process.

### HOW TO WORK WITH STRUCTURAL CONSTELLATIONS

The methodology of systemic structural constellations in organisations is normally applied as one element of a larger, more comprehensive assignment. The work begins with a solution-focused interview with the client. It is

important to identify what interventions have already been implemented successfully. This puts the client in touch with currently available resources and supports a positive outcome, thereby enabling them to leave a stagnant, blocked problematic mental state and interrupt habitual patterns of thought and action. During the interview, the elements of the constellation are worked out and the specifics of the assignment defined.

#### *Initial Picture*

The client selects a representative for each element of the problem being constellated, and using his/her own feelings or intuition, takes them to an appropriate position in the room. Next, usually following the order in which they were positioned, the constellation leader asks each representative how they feel. The focus is on the physical perception of the representative's body: assessing whether the feelings are comfortable, uncomfortable or very simply just existing and whether the addition of further representatives has altered their feelings.

#### *Interventions: Changes / Process Work / Tests*

In contrast to the more phenomenological approach of many family constellations, every structural constellation is entirely solution-focused. We will expand on this point in our next article in this series.

Systemic structural constellations work with the differences in perception mentioned above and interventions are made with the intention of introducing improvements in order to find a helpful solution. Re-arrangements, tests and work on process simply flow into one another. Sparrer and Varga von Kibéd<sup>3</sup> have developed specific interventions for different

constellation forms. By working with special forms and grammar, there is a broad range of tools at the disposal of the constellation leader. Learning and implementing these tools however, as with any skill, demands practice, a lot of love and respect, and continuous contact with the client. Working with systemic structural constellations, it is important to work at the pace of the client. Rather than pursuit of excellence, transparency and an appropriate speed should be used to keep the client focused.

### SOLUTION CONSTELLATION

The setting up of the initial constellation can sometimes have a tremendous effect on the client. The process is emergent, and there are no pre-formed solutions that the facilitator imposes – each constellation reveals its own unique solution, which emerges during the process and reflects precisely what it is possible to achieve in this situation. Always mindful of the client and their issue, the constellation leader will use the grammar and form of systemic structural constellations to support the solution unless alternatives are called for.

### Types of Representative

Systemic structural constellations not only include a number of different constellation forms (such as the tetralemma, the values triangle and others), it also distinguishes between three different kinds of representatives. Structural constellations are undertaken with: Actual Representatives, Places and Free Elements. The differentiation of representatives influences the constellation sequence and the interventions made.

#### 1. Actual Representatives

These include, for example, the 'Focus', members of the team, the goal etc. In the case of the 'Focus' we are not representing the client personally, but more specifically their work role.

#### 2. Places

These are representatives who remain in one position throughout the whole constellation and cannot be moved. For example, in one constellation form called a 'Values Triangle' we work with three fixed poles – Trust, Structure, Knowledge. These remain in pre-set positions while other representatives move.

#### 3. Free Elements

These are often qualities such as: wisdom, humour, harmony etc. They can generally simply do as they please, for instance: move around the constellation at will, remove other representatives and so on.

### SELECTION OF TYPES OF STRUCTURAL CONSTELLATION OFTEN USED IN ORGANISATIONS

In this section I shall describe, with examples, some of the common formats used in structural constellations work.

#### *Problem Constellation (Sparrer/Varga von Kibéd)*<sup>3</sup>

A problem arises when a goal is not achieved because: the hurdles are too great; the resources are not accessible enough; there is a benefit associated with not achieving the goal. Maybe the over-riding task that will follow the achievement of the goal is not clear. The problem constellation possesses a fundamental structure that can be deployed in a variety of situations. It frequently converts apparent barriers to useful resources.

#### Elements:

All elements are actual representatives:

**Focus:** Who has the problem?

**Goal:** What should happen?

**Barriers:** What is standing between the focus and the goal?

**Resources:** What could be achieved by reaching the goal?

**Hidden benefit:** What might be positive about not achieving the goal?

**Future task:** What comes after reaching the goal?

#### Example:

A team of engineers were not able to develop a new application. They set up:

**Focus:** The team

**Goal:** The new application

**Barrier 1:** Too few resources

**Barrier 2:** Old equipment

**Barrier 3:** Not named, but there

**Resource 1:** Experiences of the team

**Resource 2:** Not named, but there

**The hidden benefit**

**The future task**

It turned out that they weren't making full use of their available experience and Barrier 1 needed to be newly negotiated. As long as they weren't developing the application they had no future task to face – that was the hidden benefit. The constellation showed the team they would also have to use their internal resources and their abundant experience to maximise their workflow potential.

#### *Constellation for approaching a Goal (Sparrer/Varga von Kibéd)*<sup>6</sup>

This simple constellation form is always appropriate when a goal needs to be achieved:

#### Elements:

Focus

Goal

Time-line (place)

The Focus is positioned. The client remains behind the Focus and is asked where in the room the future lies and where the past is. These two points are marked. The Time-line runs from the past through the Focus to the future. The position and direction of the representatives can give the constellation leader helpful clues. The Time-line is a 'Place' and therefore cannot be changed during the process. The right side of the Time-line is symbolic of the outer world. The left side symbolises the internal side. The Focus and the Time-line form the border between internal and external world.

**Example:**

A sales team wanted to reach a specific turnover – this goal was set by the team leader and his boss. In addition to the mentioned elements, we set up the customers, the potential customers and the product range. In the first picture (Fig. 1) the Focus (the sales team) was looking away from the potential customers and had a good relationship to the customers. The Goal was on the left side of the Focus and not in his sight.

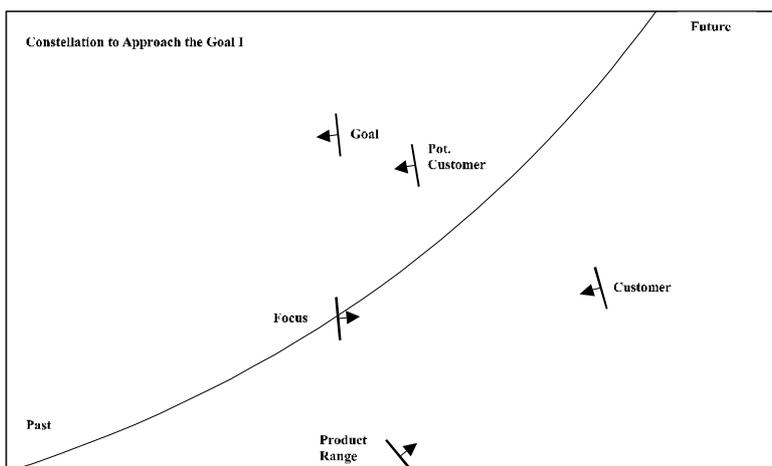


Fig. 1

Firstly we brought the Goal to a position in the future where it could be seen clearly by the Focus. Then the Focus and the Goal made

contact; the Focus acknowledged the Goal as given and good. After this there was a kind of positive tension between them. Then the Focus confirmed his positive contact with the customers. Finally, he made contact with the potential customers, who were interested in the Focus and his product range.

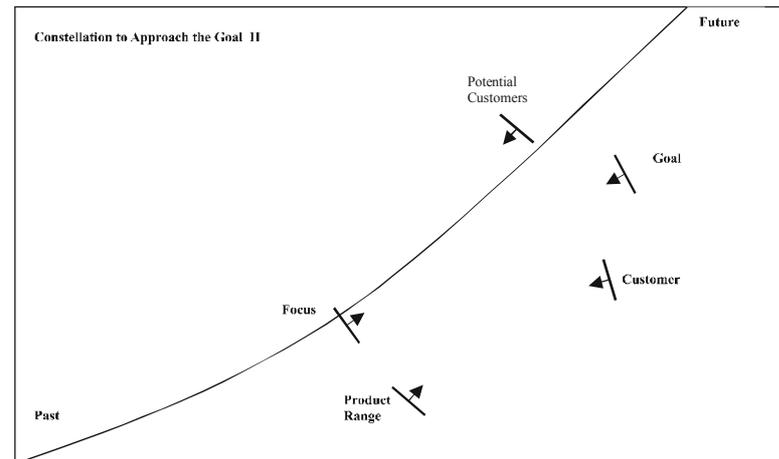


Fig. 2

Bringing the Goal from an internal position and making it clearly visible gave the Focus direction and, with some re-arrangement of the other representatives, enabled it to move powerfully towards its goal. (Fig. 2)

*Constellation of a De-focused Theme (Sparrer/Narga von Kibéd)*

When the formulation of a theme is vague, or when there is a lack of clarity around the context, it can

be assumed that the real issue is something that has not been stated.

**Elements:**

All elements are actual representatives:

Focus

Presented theme (the actual issue) together with the client. A title is found for this.

Hidden theme / what it is also about / what in addition is relevant is also marked as such in the constellation, so that 'what it's all about' becomes visible.

**Example:**

A manager failed again and again to set objectives for her staff. Having covered all the necessary elements, she was asked: what else matters? Setting up the Focus, the Presented Theme, 'leading by objectives' and the Hidden Theme, the Focus became fixed on: 'What it is also about'. After doing some process work between the Focus and 'What it is also about' the Focus was able to slowly begin looking at the Presented Theme and felt able to be in good contact with it. (Figs. 3, 4)

In the defocused theme constellation nobody but the client knows what the hidden theme is about. In this instance the work was very helpful to the client and she now likes leading by objectives.

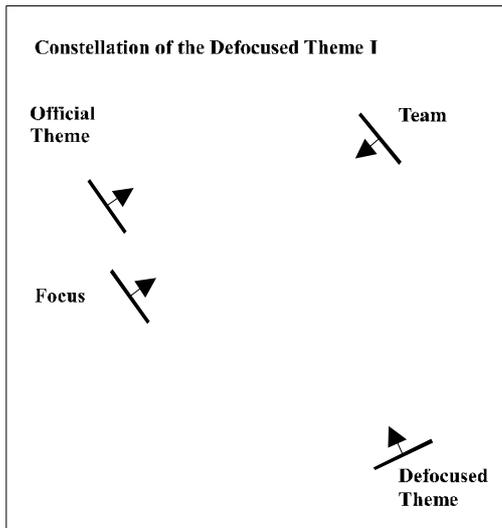


Fig. 3

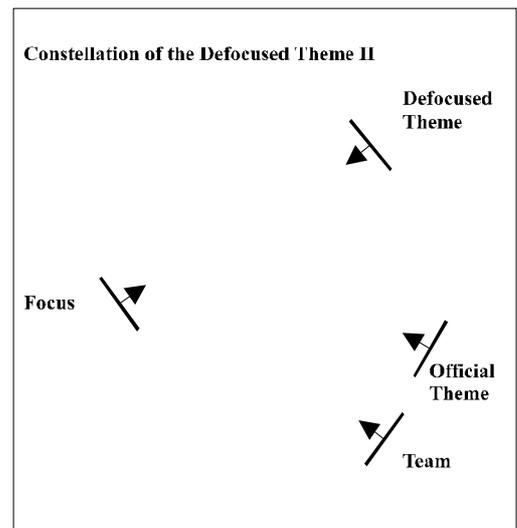


Fig. 4

**Tetralemma Constellation / Multiple Decision Constellation (Sparrer/Narga von Kibéd)<sup>3</sup>**

This approach is appropriate when a choice has to be made between two or more alternatives. Situations requiring a decision can be physically experienced through the perception of the perspective of 'the one possibility' and 'the other possibility'. Truths which had been overlooked appear as 'both' and new choices open up in the 4th position 'neither'. The 5th position, 'none of all these and not even that' makes the constellation really exciting – solutions frequently appear that may not even have been considered possible.

**Elements:**

- Focus
- Either
- Or: Together these form the bipolarity, the dilemma. They are designated 'Places'
- Both: The overlooked connection; Designated Place
- Neither: The overlooked context; Designated Place
- None of these, and not even that: The reflexive pattern interruption; Free Element

The Tetralemma Constellation (TLC) proceeds through a set

process. The representative of the client called the 'Focus' makes a journey along the different positions. He starts at 'Either' and looks from there at 'Or'. He makes contact and then walks over to 'Or'. From there he looks at 'Either' and so on. He changes the positions little by little until he is able to experience the 'As well as', before reaching the position of 'Both'. From there he contactfully meets with the position 'Neither' and moves there and looks at 'Both'. This movement should be repeated several times. The Focus could also meet the 5th position, the Free Element on its journey. (Fig. 5)

**Examples:**

1. A client was asked to run for President of an Association. She was already very engaged with the Association. She worked as a teacher and was also a mother of four adult children.

The dilemma was: 'Yes – run for President' or 'No – have more time for herself and her family'. By working through the process she learned to widen her view and also ask for special conditions which would enable her to be a President as well as looking after herself and her family.

2. A Company had to decide which of two new products they wanted

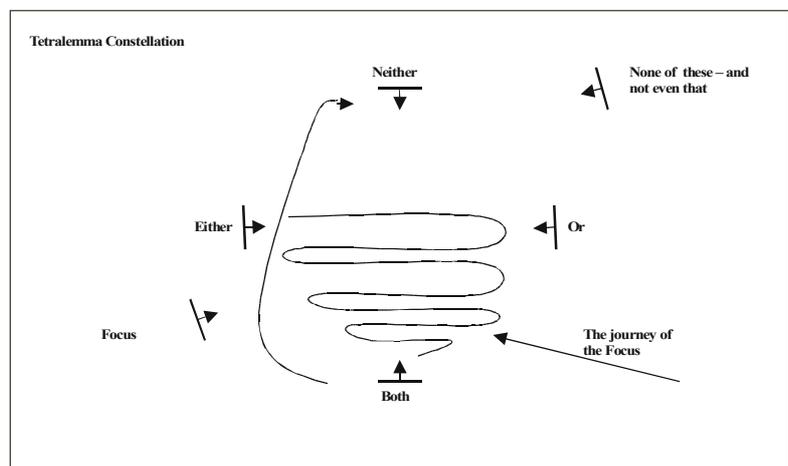


Fig. 5

to produce. After doing some clarification on the 4<sup>th</sup> position the question had changed and the team found a practical solution – to produce and distribute both products.

**Constellation of Belief Polarities (Sparrer/Varga von Kibéd) <sup>3</sup>**

This form is based on the Values triangle of Knowledge, Trust and Structure. An organisation that wishes to act in a balanced manner needs to consider all three elements equally. Vision, strategy and mission statements can be reviewed with the constellation of belief polarities (CBP), and where necessary balanced out.

**Elements:**

The poles: Knowledge / Trust / Structure – ‘Places’

Focus: Actual representatives

Wisdom: Free Element

Where appropriate, further elements that are important aspects of the theme. (Fig. 6)

**Example:**

A management team had worked out a new mission for their department. In the belief polarities we set up the Focus (mission statement). There was an imbalance at the structure pole and the team recognised clearly what was missing. They added this part and the mission statement felt more

powerful and was appreciated by the employees.

**TASK AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CONSTELLATION LEADER WORKING WITH SYSTEMIC STRUCTURAL CONSTELLATIONS**

Our role as constellation leader is to be ‘a good host’. This means we focus on ensuring a comfortable, open and secure environment in which potentially difficult situations can find a good place and be dealt with in a respectful manner. With his key quote: “A headache is not a sign of a lack of aspirin,” Matthias Varga von Kibéd calls on constellation leaders to beware of cognitive illusions and causal thinking.

In constellations, we see the *effects* of changes, not the *reasons* for these changes – the *why*. To work with the effect, it is not important to know the why. It is not the constellation leaders who know what is good and right. We assume that the solution already exists in the system, the team, the company or the family. Our task is to respect the choices and perceptions of the client and to create space for the already existing ‘intelligence’ to emerge.

As constellation leaders, we are continuously forming hypotheses on possible next steps and checking these by using one of the interventions described above. However, within the complex workings of a constellation, it is impossible to define the precise

contributions played by individual interventions to the overall solution.

As well as the tools for systemic structural constellations (grammar, process interventions, testing), constellation leaders need to have experience of working with groups, a good understanding of group dynamics and individual processes as well as a respectful attitude embracing the principles of dialogue.

**SUMMARY**

The pragmatic way in which systemic structural constellation work is used to address problems at work provides a valuable support in the everyday work life of managers. By using systemic structural constellations in management constellations we can work on an extremely broad range of questions. These methods are particularly useful when working with managers on specific questions regarding challenging change processes and for finding sustainable solutions.

**Acknowledgement:**

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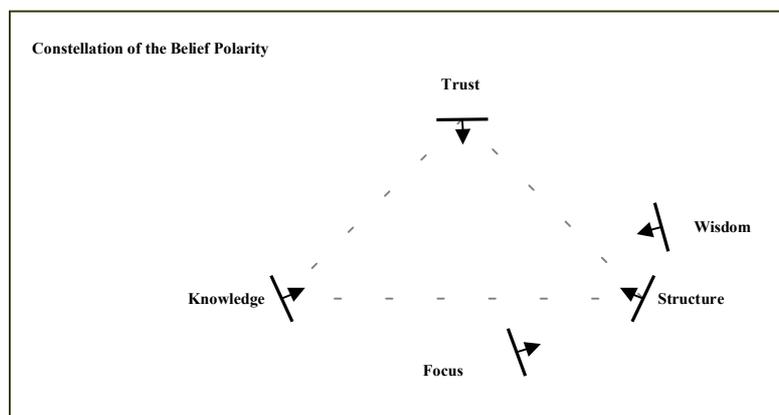


Fig. 6