



Reflective Account

How can I support the improvement of the quality of Jude's leadership as a primary school head teacher?



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'My sense is that this was a challenge to a family conscience issue, which was supported by a meta conscience. I am sure that it also really helped Jude as a piece of leadership role modelling.'

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This account is part of the first **ecl** research project we called 'The Schools We Need'. The main focus of the project was to use constellations as a way of bringing much needed support to head teachers who often found themselves as leaders in an isolated place. The writings by the practitioner/researchers and the head teachers formed part of the data collection for the project as a whole, and actually enables us to track the development of a new approach to coaching that integrates some of the key systemic principles and practices. It was a highly experimental project, asking both the practitioner and the head teacher to work live with issues and develop tools and processes as they went along.

The names of the head and teachers have been changed to protect confidentiality.

What was my question all about?

This account is written with the intention of illuminating my awareness of both my, and to some extent, Jude's experience as a head teacher, during the period July 2002 – April 2003 as part of the 'Schools We Need' project.

I recognise that I cannot write Jude's lived experience as a head teacher during this process, but feel that I was a silent witness to her experience over this period and wanted to capture enough of my sense of her story to sit alongside her account.

This was a period of great personal development for me too. I noticed a number of changes in my professional life during this period, but for the purposes of clarity have in the main kept my focus to my work with Jude. In so doing I accept the loss of some of the holistic inquiry that characterised this period, and the fullness of my living relationship as a systemic coach. I thus write to some extent as an observer and reflector, which may convey greater objectivity than was actually the case.

Jude is the head of a large primary school in North Wiltshire for over 500 pupils. She had been invited to one workshop on constellations before being asked to join the research project so had some experience of the approach we were developing. We first met in July 2002 near to the end

of the school year. We then worked together for the next two terms until the Easter break in April 2003.

Towards the end of work together, Jude had a second constellation. I think that was extremely helpful in both supporting her developing leadership and gaining her the right sort of support in the school. The bulk of this report refers to the initial constellation that occurred in Sept 2002 as this shaped most of work together.

What was Jude's burning issue?

When I met Jude she was very distressed about an inappropriate relationship that was happening between a member of staff and her daughter, who was working as a cleaner in the school. This was her presenting issue. The notes below reflect Judith Hemming's (the person who was supervising me) fine tuning of the issues in our initial session after Jude's constellation. These three insights were to steer my work throughout the project. I would not have seen the situation so clearly on my own. Judith cut through some of the emotional confluence that could have characterised my work.

1. Crossing the boundary between mother and head teacher which isn't good for either role
2. The leader's authority needs to be in service of the pupils not the personal needs of a member of staff
3. Carrying the systemic conflict of whether the head is an authority figure or a nurturer – wanting to save people is not in her remit (I respect you with your own separate destiny)

What did I see as my objectives as a systemic coach?

These were agreed with Judith at my first supervision. I was particularly cognisant of objectives 3 and 4 as challenges to my own family conscience that I believe pulls against my development as a constellator/coach.

1. Support in coaching around what it means to take authority
2. Coach Jude in how to create a structure for the children who will be most secure when the school's authority works on their behalf
3. Do not try to solve problems that people have to face themselves
4. Don't supply what needs to be done by others
5. Look at what is not occurring and focus on where its not occurring in the system
6. Enable her to establish her boundaries and limits so that staff can trust her
7. Avoid both the strong pull of the secondary issues that are strongly shaping the field and even getting into the primary feelings to find a separate and centred place
8. Find the authority to say what I see
9. Bring the needs into focus, name what is missing, but don't supply it

What did we do and what difference did it make?

How has the constellation helped with her understanding of this issue?

Jude had a constellation in September 2002 that provided many insights for us to work with over the coming months. My reflections read:

Jude is now talking about the need for greater distance in her work.

She is actively turning her attention "outwards" to the school and its community, rather than her previous emphasis on the needs of the teachers. For example, parents welcome her standing at the school gates at going home time.

Jude has thought more about issues of hierarchy in the school generally, the admin office and within her teaching team where another teacher leads on literacy.

She has started to gain greater separation between home and work.

Jude was talking about being more grounded and trusting more fully in her leadership towards the end of our work together. I think that the second constellation in the February 2003 half term, followed by a final coaching session with me, really helped to nudge the process along. As you read this report, you will see a story of progress that then starts to falter and the second constellation really delivered added value by strengthening her progress. I was glad that we were able to follow her through to this second level and give the extra nudge that can really make the difference when working in a subtle way.

What are the actions that she has taken as a head as a result of this constellation?

- Encouraging her daughter to leave
- Literacy meeting – acknowledge his leadership + offered coaching
- Moves on sacking – started the process with the Local Educational Authority a little reluctant
- More importantly, what Jude has stopped doing as a result of her developing more effective leadership. She has actively distanced herself from personal issues of staff and hasn't been involved in counselling in the admin office.

After the second February constellation, Jude recruited a new deputy head. This recruitment was significant as Jude appointed her with a belief in her own leadership and didn't appoint someone to "secretly lead" as it seemed had been the case in the past. My hope is that she was really starting to strengthen the school system through taking her leadership more fully. One supporting piece of evidence to this hope is that she didn't surrender her leadership to data coming out of the second constellation where we explored the issue, and in which a male representative was "appointed". I think that she 'choicefully' accepted some of the insights of the constellation, but didn't take it as a literal prescription. I am sure this reflects a maturing leader.

How has the subsequent coaching support with me helped or otherwise?

Session one and two: 'Prepping'

I initially met Jude in July 2002. She was very upset and wouldn't speak to me about her issues until I had agreed confidentiality. She gave me a lot of detail about her school and her particular burning issue around a teacher making an advance to her daughter who worked as a cleaner in the school. It seemed to have all the complexity of a home-work interface that constellations could support. After providing her with a useful listening board at our first meeting, the second

meeting was really to let her give me an update on the issue and her feelings around it. She was calmer, even though the issue remained.

Session three: Working with the consequences of time as it manifests in the present and clarifying the leadership function to enhance the energy within the system

When I first visited Jude after her initial constellation she had done very little. Her daughter was still working in the school and she still seemed ambivalent about sacking Phil. I told her that her daughter needed to go so that she could act more freely in removing Phil, as she may be feeling guilty at wanting him to go to secure her daughter's place. This touched an unresolved issue for Jude as both she and her daughter still felt that he should go and the daughter stay. I was firm that her daughter needed to be loved in the family system not the school system.

We looked at how she could deal effectively with Phil and I felt that we needed to shift focus from him so directly to what he was stopping her from achieving as a head. If she could talk to her vision for the school, then he could 'shape up' or go.

We explored ways of tracking his performance and the difficulties of the kids behaving if she sat in. I suggested that the teachers video their own performance and then assess with her how they could improve. This Jude liked and thought that she could link it to a teaching initiative to get pupils to reply in sentences rather than words. I don't think Jude ever did this.

I had a slight hunch that he was in some way serving as a scapegoat for her habits and her lack of clear direction. She admitted that she had only had educational conversations with one teacher, the rest of her conversations were around caring for the system, such as which pupil had fallen over.

A strong theme of the session was working with Jude on issues of motherhood and leadership. She talked repeatedly of being over burdened and staff being over-burdened. I was aware of how exhausted I felt as I was listening to her. I said that with 500 pupils and a teaching staff of 21+ administrative/support staff that this is a lot of people to care for.

At this stage in her leadership Jude was still using a motherhood benchmark implicitly in her value system, "I don't mother everyone. I am not that good a mother". I pointed out that she only needed to be a good mother in her family system and that her children probably thought she was good. Jude offered the thought that she was more likely to fall into caring than leading, as it was easier. She seemed doubtful of her leadership capability

Jude also suggested that she wasn't always over caring and had previously had to 'get rid of' six members of staff who were under-performing. I asked Jude to take me through what she did, partly to remind her of success and partly to see if there was a pattern that we could use to inform her reluctance to dismiss Phil. I had a hunch that some of the exhaustion came from their unacknowledged loss. We constellated the 'leaving teachers', 'current teachers', 'Jude' and 'the pupils'. We used physical objects in her room and I got her to switch chairs as she spoke from each perspective. At first Jude wanted to say that the sacked teachers had moved on, but when I asked her what it was really like for them she said that they felt hurt and unacknowledged. I then asked her to acknowledge them.

Jude was physically relieved at appreciating their contribution. It was helpful when I clarified that their lack of competence meant that they didn't have a right to belong anymore, but their place could still be honoured. Indeed she appreciated their intention. Afterwards she said that she had always wanted to say good-bye to them. We then took these teachers out of the system. I thought that it might help to restore some of the hierarchy of give and take so that any teachers who might be carrying too much could carry less. We experimented with finding her place that was acceptable to both Jude and the staff.

We restored some of the hierarchy between her and her staff placing her to the side of the teachers and saying I am the leader here and will insist on a high standard of performance for the pupils. It will cost me, but that is my responsibility. I wasn't entirely sure about the last bit and Jude questioned what it would cost her. I pointed out that she would have to give up some of her habits and that this was her responsibility. The teachers didn't need to make her feel better or take responsibility for her. Again she was far better when forced to take her leadership and say, "I am the leader" rather than her preference which was "I want to be the leader." The energy in the room felt more relaxed.

Session four: Working with the orders of place and hierarchy

She snapped at her daughter for talking to her inappropriately at school – "no-one talks to me like this at work".

We reflected on the 'ideal' shapes for her leadership, which she thought should be a straight line leading to a common vision and the shape that emerged. We also talked about the hierarchy of the whole school and the place of the administration team in this. Were the lower levels of the hierarchy (i.e. those without functional position) based on competence or on length of time they had been in the system?

We explored her story of the confusion that seemed to exist around leadership in a matrix team. We agreed that Jude should clarify the appropriate leadership for the head of literacy for literacy team meetings where she (Jude) is a member of the team. She was particularly jolted by his reference to not wanting anything 'airy fairy' from her. She felt that she was very airy-fairy when she first came to the school and sees this as "being into ideas but not into systems". She was certainly carrying a charge around his comment.

Her lovely piece of work with some Year 5 girls – she was so confident in her professional place as a teacher – a third role for her other than mother or leader where she seemed happy and capable.

We talked about the tensions in the administration office. She is more comfortable with the less senior member of the office and needs to 'do more' with the senior administrator who she talks to more on the hoof.

We talked about 5 ordering principles:

- Time
- Space
- Hierarchy
- Give and Take
- Bonding and belonging

Session five: Reviewing actions taken and establishing a modified concern – working with the orders of roles and functions

Jude reported a positive sense of things changing and how good coincidences seemed to happen after our meetings – she wondered whether this was simply because she was looking for them. Some of these coincidences are talked to in more detail below.

Jude focused this coaching session on three themes:

1. Her relationship with John the team leader for literacy (the man she referred to in session two who didn't want anything 'airy fairy')
2. The administration office
3. Her daughter and Phil (the teacher who was the focus of the initial constellation)

1. As a result of clarifying the hierarchy between herself and John, Jude noted some important changes in their working.

She told John that he was the leader when working on literacy. He apparently said this wasn't a problem. However, since then they have had some useful one to one time together with her as his head coaching him on his team leadership. They both wanted to improve the reading skills in the school and she wanted to go about this by increasing the level of shared reading and he wanted to go for more individual reading. She felt that by osmosis he seemed change his mind and presented her with ideas for shared reading. I noted that the solution wasn't quite as we had literally discussed vis-à-vis her clarifying his leadership in literacy meetings and yet an improvement seemed to have happened. She felt that he was responding well to the one to one time they were having together and that they both seemed to be facing educational issues clearly.

I noted that something seemed to have shifted between them and she agrees that there was a shift. I think that we were working here with clearer roles and functions and that the educational purpose was clearer than when we last spoke.

2. The administration office

The administration office was an area for concern last time. Jude's relationship to the senior office manager is not as warm as it is to the other office staff. My sense was that they are a microcosm of the wider system dynamics and that we had more time to look at them in this session. I had imagined that we might constellate the administration office at this session, but when it came to our meeting my sense was that things were shifting and didn't need another constellation. I have worked with homoeopathy for years and one principle is not to repeat a remedy until the previous one has stopped working. I assume a similar principle operates within constellations, as they are both approaches that work with field energies. Given Jude's positive start and talk of good coincidences I felt that subtle nudging was all that Jude needed.

Her administration situation is compounded presently by the death of the brother of one member of the admin team and the breakdown of the marriage of another. Jude told me that she joined an ad hoc meeting of her deputy and the senior admin worker talking with concern for the woman with the marital difficulties. She did not think they were gossiping, but she was concerned that they felt the woman was worried about the impact of the marital breakdown on her children. They also told Jude that the woman concerned had no one to talk to. Jude asked whether she should counsel the woman concerned as she had a good chemistry with her and enjoyed counselling as an aspect of her head teacher responsibilities.

I was aware that this was a situation where in Gestalt terms I could very easily become confluent with Jude. I noted that she was fidgety and less certain than in her previous story telling. I also noted that I felt a pressure to know the 'correct' answer and was confused as to what it was. I felt my yearning to want to make it better and yet intuitively was sure that this wasn't appropriate. Her phenomenological data and my confusion seemed to point against her getting into counselling. At this moment I drew on the presence of the constellator. I asked her a question to give me time to ground myself, 'What did she intuitively feel?' I didn't really listen to her answer, I simply held a waiting position and listened to thoughts from a more empty position inside me.

The strongest intuitive feeling was that given the entanglements of her own home-work situation Jude shouldn't do this counselling, even though she would in some ways be very good at it. From this more grounded place I felt that it was necessary to call on what for me is 'my meanness' an energy that I can lack when I get into over giving. Using this energy I experimented with telling Jude not to get into the counselling herself, but to use her hierarchy of the deputy head or the office manager. I suggested that should there eventually be a performance issue with the person involved due to her personal difficulties that Jude could intervene more effectively as the head if someone else had done the counselling. I also suggested that should the woman need to talk to her as a Head about her children who go to the school, and then Jude was freer to give her counselling as a parent if she wasn't counselling her as a manager. Jude looked physically relieved at my advice.

This was a wonderful opportunity for me to experience the paradox that by being "meaner" I actually gave more true support. I had to allow a part of myself into the field to serve Jude better. My sense is that this was a challenge to a family conscience issue, which was supported by a 'meta conscience'. I am sure that it also really helped Jude as a piece of leadership role modelling.

An interesting piece of data that emerged in this discussion was that the previous head seemed to get so caught up in looking after everyone that she didn't tend to the teaching issues in the school. I reminded Jude that we were working fundamentally to the purpose of providing education and that she needed to keep her leadership strong for the internal/external boundary, rather than get sucked into all the caring in the school. It was interesting confirmation that the pressures Jude feels could be systemic as well as intra-personal.

3. Her daughter and the teacher issue

An interesting turn of events here is that Jude's daughter is now really ill with glandular fever and so cannot come to work as a cleaner. Jude is concerned that her daughter is so poorly and took time off school to be with her, but is pleased that she can use this to get her daughter to give up her job. I assumed that her illness was positive but wonder whether it could mean anything else. We went on to talk about Phil the teacher and his continuing underperformance. She has now reached the situation where he has been officially noted as failing in an observed lesson. She has taken County Hall advice and is officially starting a capability procedure. A possible complication is that John (in Para 1) above is responsible for coaching Phil and therefore feels some failure for Phil's failure. Jude cannot talk to John at this stage about this, as it wouldn't be fair procedurally. I suggested that as a leader she could support John later on recognising that Phil's capability may not be a sign of his poor coaching, but is down to Phil. She could use this as an opportunity to work in role modelling not being overly responsible.

I was aware of a dark feeling as we had this discussion and was glad that her daughter was safely out of the school. Jude seemed focused on her next steps, but concerned for the affects on her other staff. We decided to re-watch the constellation video from September to see whether there were any clues from other representatives. I guess I feel a little helpless and a little scared that we are entering into the bigger issue of her initial constellation. I suspect that things will worsen as we move into the entanglement in a live sense and that I may need to support the movement of the system into the pain. I hope that the admin case study has given us a small fractal of this behaviour to build from.

Session six and seven: Watching the video and then reviewing the issues.

This seemed like a turning point for me. Re-watching the video was such a "normalising" process. The emotional turbulence was not evident in the constellation and the constellation seemed to empirically test who belonged in the system and who didn't and searched for where the energy for the school lay. There was a greater emphasis on the role of the senior management team than either of us had remembered, but it was interesting that much of our work had indeed been on energising the hierarchy within the school.

Session eight: Looking at ending our relationship and the role of the new deputy head in providing support in the most beneficial way for the system.

A noticeably short meeting as Jude had to cover for a sick teacher. A good sign hopefully that Jude reported feeling more grounded and less reliant on my visits. She did, however, jokingly refer to her preference for airy-fairness, I suspect that whilst the systemic work starts to shift the context, there are still intra-personal issues for anyone embarking on this process.

Session nine: Checking the written work

Interestingly this session never really happened. I began to feel irritated with Jude as I felt quite responsible for needing to have some written work from her for the project. I was curious as to my reaction as I had worked supportively with Jude until now. I wondered whether I had gotten into a 'drama triangle' with her and was beginning to move from rescuer to persecutor. (I appreciate that this is not constellation language, but it is an honest account of a thought at the time). This was an alarming thought as I had focused my initial objectives around not doing too much to help her and to support Jude in her own leadership. Was I getting entangled?

I used my Community of Practice (COPE) group to constellate this issue. Unfortunately it was a rather hurried constellation at the end of the day, arriving almost as an after-thought. I see this after-thought quality as a moment of attending to my intuition, which I had ignored to that moment. I allowed the field to remind me of my concern.

I cannot even remember the constellation properly, but know that we had four representatives, 'Jude', 'her writing', 'the project' and 'the funders'. I saw a surprising picture of lack of support for Jude and was filled by a humility that took away all my feelings of irritation over the writing process. It seemed that there was a confusion over the purpose of the project and that some tension lay between the funders and the project that affected the field. The project representative asked to be moved out as he was the project manager and felt that he was going 'too heady' as he is involved. Due to our small numbers at a practice group I had to step into this place. I fell as soon as I joined the constellation. I really picked up lack of support, none of us knew whether this was the lack of support in education or not. We hadn't the time or the independent representatives to get a resolution, but it completely changed my feeling state.

I do not know what this may point to on give and take, as the funders seemed to have given more freely than how it was taken in the UK. The constellation pointed to a feeling of obligation that the funders didn't want us to feel.

Session ten: A second constellation

Jude and I went to a learning forum to constellate her issue around support and appointment of a new deputy. On the way in the car I was able to use my COPE insights to reassure her about her writing, to tell her story and not to feel too responsible for 'proving' to the learning group that her previous constellation had worked.

The constellation showed the underlying weakness in her school and showed how vital it was that she was strong in her leadership

Session eleven: Concluding

Jude brought me her writing and I coached her in taking her leadership in the recruitment of her deputy head the next day. Jude was concerned that of her candidates one man was too weak and one too powerful for her to manage, but that the constellation seemed to point to a male candidate. I was aware that she had picked a male representative for the new recruit and so we hadn't actually constellated her with a woman or with her internal candidate. Her initial decisions prior to the constellation affected what was set up. This certainly points to the power of the questions issue holders ask. It possibly points to a co-creative process that can only work if the issue holder is responsible for how they use the answer" they get back.

We discussed how she mustn't take the constellation as a crystal ball reading, only as a pointer to what was necessary in terms of integrating her own "masculinity" or "authority" rather than getting caught up in collegiality followed by "bossiness" that weakened the system. I coached her in the sentic state of anger and showed her how to ground her energy through her hips and legs, rather than through stiffening her neck and going rigid but brittle. I drew on the "Feel the Fear " motivational theory, which suggests that we can tell ourselves "I can do it".

I am left wondering about the issue of "Truth" and partial truths as we glimpse at the issues we ask. In trying to apply the systemic sieve to reduce content that shapes the constellation, could we miss holding the question at all?

Endings

Jude phoned to tell me that she had appointed her internal candidate – a woman - and that she was telling people about grounding their energy. She sounded very positive. We haven't met to formally end and to refine her written material as yet, but I feel that this is a process of closure of our relationship, but not of our separate journeys.

What have I learned and what insights have I got?

My key insights regarding the use of coaching support in relation to constellations?

I have done very little conceptualisation of these experiences and notice that refining my presence as a coach and taking a position "beyond neutrality" still feels more like my leading edge, than understanding issues of the field. I have a simple and possibly naive trust in the field and feel that my own journey is more to shift myself to the slower movement of the soul and not

lurch with my learnt habits and my head. I thus have made very little conceptual critique of my experience. I notice a feeling of some loss within myself and within the project at this decision.

My practical insights are:

- The usefulness in 'prepping' Jude before going to her initial constellation – I could establish a relationship and see a burning issue, but could not contract that there might be a wider organisational issue.
- We were glad we didn't watch the video of the constellation until three months later – Jude's emotional charge around the issue was far less and she could see the wider issues in the constellation as a system map, rather than focusing on the pain in her issue. It seemed so much simpler after a few months and validated the broader ranging conversations.
- I didn't establish any lead indicators that might show the impact of the changes within the school – so I have no hard evidence for evaluating outcomes – this may be important in the longer run

How has my understanding of the nature of her school's issues changed as we have worked together and since looking at the video?

The key learning for me was the importance of getting the wider management team energised through strengthening Jude as leader. I have noted deeply the weakening effect of a leader not taking their authority.

What have been the benefits of thinking more systemically?

The importance of history as it manifests itself in the present – if we do not remember and recognise the past are we condemned to repeat it?

Really tackling the clarity of the leadership function and its potential to either create confusion or energise the system. I notice that this is spoken of elsewhere and have started to see new messages in previous writers that I have respected, but haven't read with a notion of natural orders of a field. Stacey (1993) in "Strategy as Order Emerging from Chaos" refers to the need to design in the use of power – "groups in states of submission, rebellion or conformity are incapable of complex learning" clarifying Jude's leadership seemed critical to a better flow.

The importance of appreciating the contribution of everyone in the system, including those who were sacked or "coached out".

What am I delighted about in terms of my development as a systemic coach/constellator?

- Using the mini constellating objects successfully in coaching sessions
- Moving between systems mapping and into thinking around the orders
- Developing the authority in the stance of the constellator to challenge the individual
- Working with the phenomenological data in the coaching sessions

I was struck by this quote from an article on interpersonal autopoiesis that seemed to point to the dangers of entanglements and the power of working with a sense of the soul of the organisation, particularly in relation to time and space:

"To follow another person (mentally, emotionally or spiritually) means to copy, imitate or identify with another's mechanism of intrapersonal autopoiesis, forgetting your real self. This can result in conflicts between the self and mind (confusion in thinking), the self and heart (confusion in feelings), the self and spirit (confusion in the search for identity)."

How do I know that the systemic process was beneficial?

"The need for proof has displaced the value of judgement to the detriment of quality"
Benson (1989)

I cannot prove that the constellation was beneficial, but whilst recognising my bias I support my judgement that it was beneficial in the following way:

New thoughts: Jude is calmer and clearer in her leadership and is talking of greater detachment in her leadership. She is thinking more about the school as a system that serves a purpose.

New words: She reports being more grounded and has separated her home school life. Jude is using words like outer-focus

New feelings: She notes feeling more grounded

New action: She is taking more leadership for herself in her recruitment

I think one final comment that goes back to the purpose of all this work. I don't think I have been entirely clear as to how to use Jude's "action research diary" in this research process. We were not co-inquirers and we didn't track the changes in the school, so much as my inputs and some outputs. Without contradicting my comments from Benson above and worrying too much about "proof" I have some curiosity around the lack of outcome evidence – this could be to do with time, but also could be to do with the nature of systemic coaching rather than with systemic consultancy, as I wasn't getting into the doing side of things and didn't look for tangible evidence. I think that we would need to strengthen the collection of outcomes data in any subsequent research, even if it meant working over a longer time period.