



Organisational Constellation Case Study:

A major UK blue chip organisation

7 November 2003

Introducing the case study

The issue holder works as a senior manager for a major UK organisation within their supply function. She commissioned a bespoke workshop to explore some of the hidden dynamics she suspects were affecting a major culture change programme she has been working on over a period of two years. In spite of considerable resource being put into making it work, she senses it is increasingly getting stuck.

But why?

During the day several constellations take place which address a variety of issues from macro to micro, following the concerns of the Issue Holder, her 'soon to be' successor and the consultant who has given external support to the programme. As the constellations unfold. This case study focuses on the first of these constellations.

The constellator is Judith Hemming. Judith is one of Britain's foremost practitioners of constellations and has been teaching this innovative work in Europe, the USA and Australia for over 10 years (www.movingconstellations.com).

First constellation

Initial interview

In the first constellation, the presenting issue is a desire to understand why, despite the Function being seemingly successfully re-organised, it has 'not infused the overall business with strength'. This phrasing in itself is interesting – it may indicate an overblown view of itself within the business. The issue holder wants insight into what 'we need to do as a business and how the Function division can help it'.

Setting up

Judith decides to start this constellation with a single person in the centre representing the Supply Function (the Function). She thought it would be helpful to build up the constellation slowly and see the individual influence within the systemic field. During the whole process, representatives for the Function, Supporting Values, the Business as a whole, the City and the Customers are selected and placed within the constellation. Let's see how the constellation unfolds.

The constellator asks for the Function representative to stand in the circle in which the constellation takes place. Very quickly she starts looking down at something on the floor. From this body language the constellator surmises that 'Something important is missing and is not being acknowledged.'

Establishing the dynamics

The constellator asks someone to lie on the floor and represent whatever the Function is looking at. The immediate impact on the Function is that she "feels better. I'm looking around now for something else."

Constellator to the issue-holder: 'See how powerful just acknowledging its presence is, even though we do not know, at this stage, what that missing element is.'

To find out a bit more, the constellator asks the unknown representative to stand up and face the Function. This does not have a positive effect. The Function finds it harder and threatening, while the unknown representative feels heavy. However, through moving the unknown representative behind the Function, the Function visibly relaxes and feels better.

Constellator to the issue-holder: 'This response intimates that the unknown element is a significant support for the Function'.

The constellator realises it represents Supporting Values. It is quite often the case that the original values give support to the system and/or parts of the system. The constellator asks Supporting Values to remain standing behind the Function and continue giving it support.

It is at this stage the constellator asks for someone to represent the Business as a whole. She asks the Business representative to find her natural place and the other representatives may respond to what happens. The Business falls to the floor and ends up looking at the Function and vice versa.

Constellator to the issue-holder: 'Falling to the floor suggests that the Business in its current position appears to be seriously weak.'

The constellator wants to check what impact this is having on the Function.

Constellator asks Function: 'How are you?'

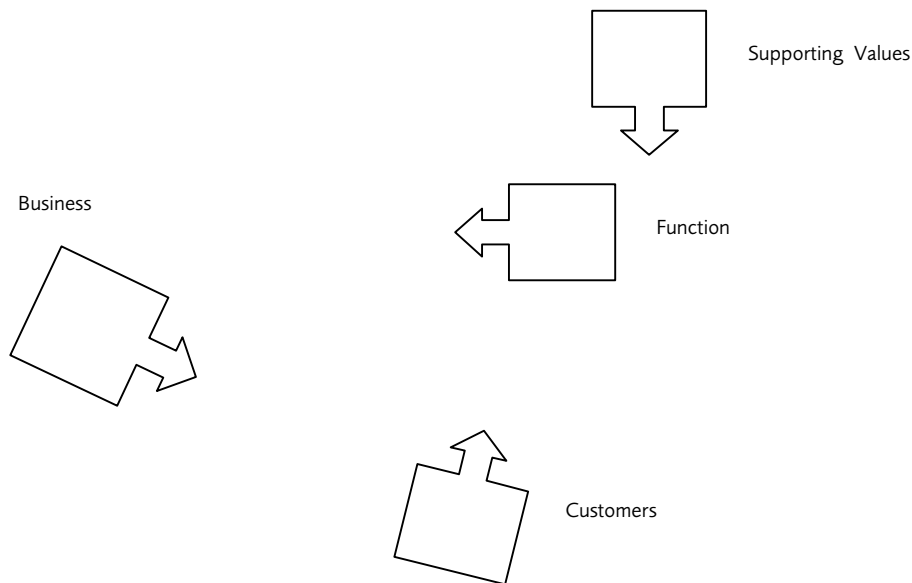
Function says: I really need the support from Supporting Values [this confirms the above suggestion]. I find it easier when Business is on the floor BUT I don't want to get too close.

Supporting Values says: I still feel cold down my side near Business. My sense is I want to stay.

Business says: I have got an ache on my right hand side [the side on which the Function and Supporting Values are standing]. Otherwise I don't feel much.

Constellator to the issue-holder: What you've described about the relative strengths of these two – it will kill the Business. The strength of Supporting Values and the Function together is not useful strength. What we see is a really serious imbalance.

From further discussion with the Issue Holder, the constellator decides to add the City and the Customers to the constellation, starting initially with the Customers, so there is clarity about the impact of each representative as they join the constellation.



When asked how she is, the Customers' response is very telling:

Customer: It just feels like I'm at sea [she is swaying a bit, mainly backwards]. I don't know which way I'm being pulled. I can't stay still.

As for the Business it: is curious about the customers, although its interest fluctuates; and has more energy and the pain goes.

So the Business wakes up when the Customers enter the constellation, while the Function turns away from her and finds it harder to look at Business. It is not surprising the Customers do not know which way she is being pulled.

Constellator to the Issue-Holder: The connection between the Business and Customers, which is crucial, is alive and kicking. The connection between Function and Supporting Values, which looked like strength in fact isn't productive.

The constellator asks the City representative to enter the constellation, placing him near Business and facing the Function. She notices that the Business is ready to get up. She asks Business to get up and find her place. Business ends up standing facing the Customers. City faces the Function and Supporting Values. These two are looking towards the Customers.

The Business gains some strength from having the City's involvement acknowledged. All except the Function are swaying, which may be due to a level of instability or lack of

belief in the presence of solid foundations. The Function is the only part not swaying, but this strength is having a damaging effect.

The constellator places the Supporting Values behind the Function, which is behind the Customers, all facing towards the City. The Business is looking towards the threesome. We already know that Supporting Values gives support to the Function when placed behind her. This support also engenders other reactions:

The Customers feel much more stable and connected, but there's no warmth

The City, although initially a bit wobbly, wakes up and becomes interested in and connected to the Business; and

The Business, still swaying a bit, feels a bit more stable.

Although there is a relative improvement, the system is still not healthy enough.

Moving to resolution

The constellator wants to see what responses occur when the Business is put in front and to the right of the City. The Business looks at the City and then the Customers. The constellator notices that the City's right hand is fidgeting and asks what is going on.

Apart from having transitory feelings of coyness: The City feels there ought to be a connection, but there's not one he can do something with at the moment.

Constellator to The City: What do you think your hand is wanting?

The City's right hand slowly reaches out to the Customers with palm up. As a result:

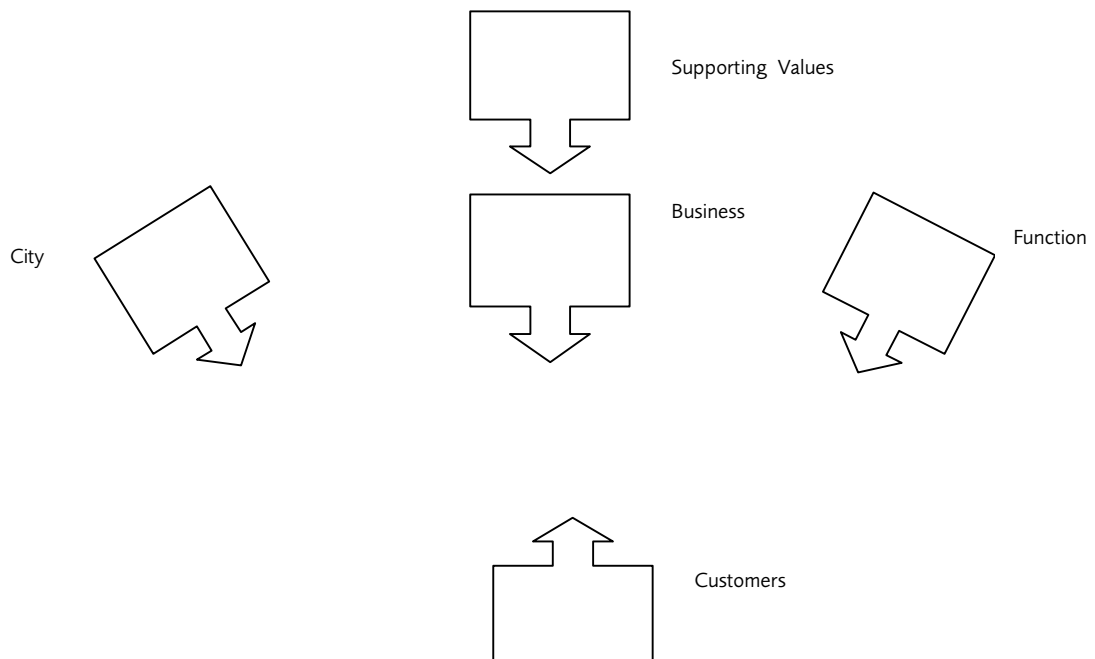
The Customers feels much more stable

Supporting Values feels colder and colder from behind

The Business's whole body leans forward slightly

The relationship between all the parts within the system is not helping anyone particularly.

The constellator decides to experiment and put the representatives into a classically ideal location to find out either whether it works or where the issue(s) lie. As the Supporting Values are those for the whole business it is more appropriate for them to be supporting Business. The Function is on the left of Business as it is lower in the organisation's hierarchy (The whole business is more important than the Function by itself). As the City is the external face, he stands to the right of the Business.



Both the Business and the Function look at the customers.

The Customers is "only interested in the Business and feels all-powerful over it"

The City has no idea who the Function is.

The Function is not comfortable where she is placed – being between the City and the Business is no better.

Wherever the Business is put it is lost, not feeling supported or able to support. Something remains missing.

The constellator asks the Business to face Supporting Values. The Function and the City stand next to each other, both facing the Business but at 90 to her. The Customers is quite a bit behind and to the left of the Business.

Business: 'I just noticed my toe twitching up and down. Now my legs - not running away, more like twitchy legs when you've been sitting down a lot'.

Constellator to Business: "You look like you'd like to get moving.'

Business: "I don't know what these values are."

Constellator to Issue Holder: "What would you say?"

Issue Holder: Quality, passion and customers.

Constellator to Business tell the Supporting Values: 'I'd rather go up in smoke than acknowledge you.'

Business to Supporting Values: 'I'd rather go up in smoke than acknowledge you'.

Constellator: Does it feel true?

Business: Yes, I feel a bit like a rebellious child.

City: [looking animated] When I heard things might be going up in smoke, I got excited.

The constellator to the Issue Holder: 'This disconnect between the Business and Supporting Values shows there's no cohesion anywhere within the whole system. The lack of cohesion may relate to the Business seeing herself above, more important than, her Supporting Values.'

Attempting to correct this imbalance, Business is asked to go right down on to her knees, head right down and her arms in front of her. The bigger the bow that is needed the more out of balance it is.

City: [wobbling back] I'm astonished.

Customers: I don't like to see it [the deep bow].

In response to the Customers saying she doesn't like seeing the deep bow, the constellator says "it's not the sort of thing Customers should look at" and turns the Customers around so that she no longer sees it.

Supporting Values: It feels OK. I'm still cold from behind.

Constellator asks the Business to find her way up very slowly until she can look Supporting Values in her eyes. Business does as instructed and the constellator says to the Customers that she may turn around again, which Customers does.

Constellator to the Issue Holder: 'There's an incredible contact now between Business and Supporting Values – like being smiled on by the sun. This is so important.'

City: [hands move up and a bit back, like when told to put hands up] Now I feel 'hands off'.

Constellator to City: Yes, exactly. How's that for you, Business?

Business: 'Wonderful. I feel like I want to be part of it.'

Constellator: Right. Let's end there. Thank you everyone.

Surfacing key insights

Constellator: We're looking at the critical necessity for the Business to be connected to the values that hold the whole thing together. Here we're looking at founding energy. The fact that you [the Function] were connected actually weakens the system. You are part of the problem and the solution.

Customers: I felt an enormous sense of importance, a real important place – at the end felt warmth, emotion and connection to system.

City: I was astonished at the carnivorous view of City, yet it was respectful when the strength in the Business was there.

Issue Holder's colleague: I felt angry at the Business when it was on the floor. In addition, I had pride in the Function's strength and surprised about the damage it's doing due to its strength.

Issue Holder: Customers are lost but want us to be successful. We have lost our way since not having a family member on the executive board (this happened three years ago). The Board will not be pinned down to pushing through a look at values.

The Issue Holder gains the insight she wanted.

The resolution that emerges is the critical necessity for the Business to be attached to its founding values and energy. In addition, the Function needs to get back in balance with the rest of the business and cease considering itself more important.

What happened in the follow-up constellations?

The constellations that follow delve into particular aspects of the situation. First the Board is constellated and its relationship with the insights from the first constellation. One of the factors that arises out of this constellation is the lack of acknowledgement of what is.

For instance,

- Differences in length of service ("I've been longer than you..."),
- Hierarchy ("I owe my place to you – I'm only here because of you") and
- The unspoken ("I wanted your [the Managing Director's] job and lost it").

Once acknowledgement and respect is present, more positive energy starts flowing. In addition, other personal and relationship issues came to the fore, to which the issue holder and external consultant need to give considerable thought.

The third constellation looks at the position the external consultant needs to take and the final constellation explores how best to hand over the issue holder's job to her successor

so that the constructive work continues. The constellator lets the successor and the person whose job she will be given be in the constellation rather than have representatives. This allows those individuals to have direct experience of the powerful feelings that take place.

The constellator asks the predecessor representatives to get in a line behind the successor and having someone represent future generations facing them. The successor feels an amazing sense of solid and rich support, which she knows she will be able to call on when she is in the job. In addition, her predecessor says to her boss "I've used the opportunities you've given me ... and now I'm going to pass them on." This adds to the strong positive impressions the successor has. She adds "I stand in line." She is taking what went before in service of the future, humbly yet with strength.

The next few months...in the words of the Issue Holder

- **What thoughts and ideas did the issue-holder, the supporting consultant and her colleague develop after the constellations?**

The most poignant thought over the coming weeks was the Supply Function's strength actually having a negative influence on the whole business. We hadn't seen that but recognised it in the constellation. The change programme had been developed with good intent in order to change a function that was actually preventing the whole business moving forward due to years of underinvestment. This need for change in the function had been so strong, and the level of resource put into it so high that it had created a considerable imbalance in the organisation. The Supply Function had continued on its path without paying enough attention to the impact on the rest.

How to help the business re-connect to founding values was also uppermost in my thoughts. It had been an area that had shown strongly in the work we did to change the function but, again, we had continued building that connection to values with a view that the rest of the business was not ready, but there wasn't time for the business to catch up.

- **What did they do differently?**

The first step was to share the constellations with the Board Director of the Supply Function who sponsored the change programme. Attempting to share the essence of the outcome without them having experienced constellations was challenging.

As a result there were some changes to the programme; A focus on involving more stakeholders from around the business to shape the future together. Also, the cultural components of the programme were reviewed to focus on building strength with the business rather than in isolation as a function.

- **What happened in the business?**

This was a period of significant change for the business overall. A number of changes of personnel were occurring:

As the person heading up the culture component of the programme, I had decided to move on and was in the process of handing the role over to someone who had not had any involvement or attachment to date.

There were a number of moves starting to occur at Board level too. The first of these involved the resignation of a Board member who had been highlighted in the second constellation as being part of an entanglement. (She actually resigned whilst the constellation was being run.)

During the next four to six months there were a number of other changes occurring, which resulted in a radical overhaul of the company's business strategy.

One of the Board members affected was the Head of Supply

Within six months the culture change programme had been stopped altogether.

- **If they had their time again what they have done differently?**

The most obvious learning is to have taken a wider business approach to the change, giving the business more opportunity to shape and 'buy into' what was happening in the Supply Function. To focus on just one part seemed to create an underlying resistance (maybe even resentment) in other areas

Another would be to seriously test assumptions (probably using constellations) as intention and result ended up being very different.

Also, to work with the wider business on the cultural changes that would be necessary to support the growth of the whole.

The writer

Helen Harrison, of [Monkswood Associates](#), thoroughly enjoys working with executives and key staff to find ways for making change work for their organisations, individuals and themselves. She would welcome comments or questions via email at helen@monkswoodassociates.co.uk or telephone +44 (0) 1453.835 263.

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