

Schools We Need Project

Val's Constellation and the follow-up experience

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Shadow Coach to the Head teacher of Crockerton School

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The issue

Val is a head teacher of a small rural Primary School, she is a teaching head and has been teaching at the school for 12 years. This issue was based around a family in the school. Two children from the same family had been upset and misbehaving in the school. Single mother, her mother, two children and father who still lives locally with new partner and children. The two parents were not coping with their relationship and their two girls were caught between their parent's emotional turmoil.

The school seemed to have become the focus of the mother's anxieties, anger and frustration. Tension had developed between the mother and certain members of staff and in an attempt to mediate Val had become the mother's counsellor, confidante and at times butt of her fury. No matter how hard Val tried to support the staff they felt that she was taking the mother's side against them.

The Constellation

Judith, the constellator asked Val to choose representatives for the following: grandmother, mother, father, herself, one person for the children of the school, two for the children of the family, and two for the staff. She then asked Val to take these representatives by the shoulder and put them in their places in relation to one another.

KEY

B = grandmother

C = mother

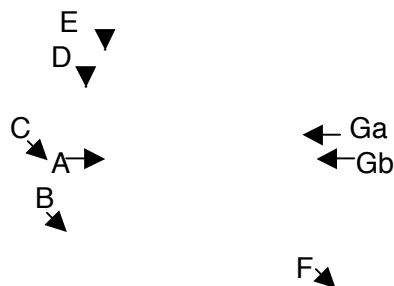
F= father

D = Head teacher

E = children of the school

A = children of the family

Ga/Gb = staff at the school



Judith: What's happening for the grandmother?

Grandmother : I can't look at the children or my daughter – I feel I have let them down. I don't know what to do – (looking down)

Judith: (to Val) – it may be regret.

Judith: What's happening for the children of the school?

Children of the school – I feel safe behind the head, I want to lean towards the head

Judith: and the mother?

Mother: I feel sick, my knees are going. I feel dizzy (looking down) – sad and sick

Judith: ...and the children of the family?

Children of the family: I'm feeling surrounded. There's a lot going on behind I don't like, I'm confused – in front of me I can trust

Judith: and the father?

Father: I feel there's no way out of it – I'm looking at a distance. There's no part to play – I'm alienated

Judith: and for you ?(Staff Ga)

Staff (Ga): I'm pushed to the front to represent – where do we go next to solve a problem. I'm protecting the rest of the staff

Judith: ...and for you (to staff Gb)

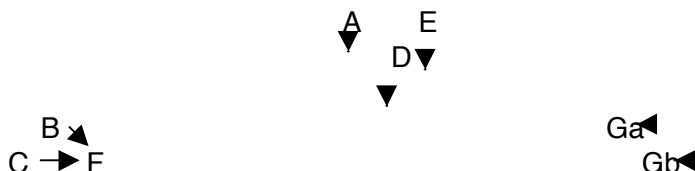
Staff (Gb): I'm being blocked out

Judith: What's happening to the head?

Headteacher: I don't know which way to turn – I don't want to be with one group, I want to be more in the middle. Particularly to have distance from the staff.

Judith: to everyone - 'Nearly embarrassing chaos until I know what to do. I'm going to make moves.'

(Judith moves the father to look at both the mother and the grandmother. She moves the children of the family to stand by children of the school and the head to stand in front of them. She moves the staff slightly out.)



Judith: How's that for the staff?Gb)

Staff (Gb): Still being pushed

Judith: and for the children of the family?

Children of the family: I'm feeling safer

Judith: and for the grandmother?

Grandmother: I want to turn away

Judith: (turning to Val) 'She (the grandmother) can't keep out of it. How quickly we become part of a system. What's happening to the father?

Father: I feel its confrontational, I'm a barrier to everyone.

(Judith moves the father behind the grandmother and the mother)

Judith: (to father) what's changed for you?

Father: I feel more comfortable – they (pointing to the mother and the grandmother) are an obstruction between what I want.

(Judith turns the grandmother and the mother to face each other)

Judith: What's happening to the grandmother?

Grandmother: I want her to say something to me, I want it to happen, but I don't want to do it.

Judith: (turning to Val) 'She (pointing to the grandmother) is behaving like a child'

(To mother) Tell her (pointing at grandmother) 'You are my mother and I am your daughter. You will carry the consequences of all that you've done'. 'I'm just your daughter'

Mother: *'You are my mother and I am your daughter. You will carry the consequences of all that you've done'. 'I'm just your daughter'.*

Judith: What's that like for mother?

Mother: I feel very hot. Easier.

Judith: What's changed for the grandmother?

Grandmother: I feel quite indignant – I haven't done anything. I don't know why she's blaming me.

Judith: (To the mother). Tell her (the grandmother) 'whatever you did or didn't do I leave it with you'

Mother: *'whatever you did or didn't do I leave it with you'.*

Judith: (to grandmother) what's that like?

Grandmother: I can come to terms with that.

Judith: (to grandmother) stronger or weaker?

Grandmother: Stronger

Judith: (To Mother) better or worse?

Mother: Better

Judith turns the mother to face the father. To the mother she says 'Look at your partner'
(Mother and father look at each other)

Judith: What's that like for the father?

Father: Total confusion. I liked what I heard. Seeing a shadow behind.
Judith: ...and for the mother?
Mother: I feel warmer
Judith: Tell him (the father) 'what a pity, I'm sorry'
Mother: 'What a pity' I'm sorry'.
Judith: What's that like to hear?
Father: I feel pretty hopeless – it's a bridge that's been built but too late.
Judith: Clearly too late. Tell her (the mother) 'there's still time that we can be parents'
Father: 'There's still time that we can be parents'
 Judith turns the father and mother to face the children



Judith: What's happening for the children of the family?

Children of the family: I feel upset, agitated, cold, confused. I was more upset while it was happening and I'm better now that they're looking at me.
 (Judith moves the children of the family to stand directly in front of the parents.)

Judith: What's that like for the parents?

Father: I want to bring her closer

Mother: Yes I want to bring her closer

Judith to the children of the family: 'What's it like to know how much they want to support you?

Tell them (the parents) 'I'm hurting and I need you both'

Children of the family: 'I'm hurting and I need you both'

Judith says to the father and the mother: See what needs to happen?

Judith: (to mother) Tell them (the children) 'You may take from your father all that he is'

Mother: (looking at the children) 'You may take from your father all that he is'

Children of the family looks at father

Judith: (to the children) You hadn't known he was safe.

(To children of the family) Tell him (pointing at the father) 'I've missed you'

Children of the family: 'I've missed you'

Judith: (to the father) What's that like?

Father: Emotional

Judith: (to the children) Tell your father 'I miss you but my right place is with mum, but you're always in my heart'.

Children of the family: 'I miss you but my right place is with mum, but you're always in my heart.' I need to take a step back (the children take a step back from their father).

Judith: What's happening for the grandmother?

Grandmother: I still want to be part of their lives.
(Judith turns the mother to face the grandmother)

Judith: Tell her (pointing at the grandmother) 'I'm here because of you – you're part of our lives as a grandmother'

Mother: 'I'm here because of you – you're part of our lives as a grandmother'

Judith: What's that like to hear?

Grandmother: I feel good. I've been told my role.

Judith: What's happened to the rest of you? She moves near to the Head

Head: I liked it when the children were here (gesturing to her side) – I felt its right they (pointing to the parents) are dealing with it. It feels better.

Judith: (she moves near the children of the school) And you?

Children of the school: I felt pushed out when the girls were by the head – I felt upset and now pleased its being sorted

(Judith moves the Children of the family next to the Children of the school and they seem to move together)

Judith: (to the Head) – look how they (pointing at the children) wriggle their way together

Head: I want to be there (pointing at the kids)

Judith: Tell them (the children) 'I see you're getting on well without me'

Head: 'I see you're getting on well without me'

Judith: Did that reduce the feeling of sorting it out?

Head: Yes

Judith: (turning to staff) – What's been happening?

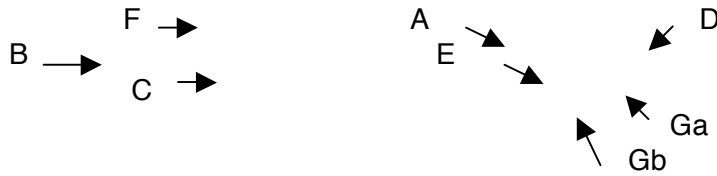
Staff (Ga): The confrontations gone – (Judith moves Ga in front of other staff Gb)

Staff (Ga): Horrible

Judith: (turning to Val on the holding circle). What a loyal staff. This can't be sorted out until they're in the right place

(Judith moves the head to stand to the right of the Ga Staff and the Gb staff to the left of Ga staff. The children of the family an the school are looking at the head and the staff and the parents and the grandmother stand a way off looking at everybody.)

Judith: How's that? (to the staff and the Head)



Staff and Head: Feels good

Judith: (to mother and father) Take your ex-partner's hand and turn to the head and say to her 'thanks for your trust and your authority'

Father to Head: 'Thanks for your trust and your authority'

Mother to Head: 'Thanks for your trust and your authority'.

Judith: (to head) Say to them (parents) 'I'm doing this on behalf of the children and this is my right place. Its stressful not to be recognised.'

Head: 'I'm doing this on behalf of the children and this is my right place. Its stressful not to be recognised.'

(Judith moves the children to stand in front of the parents and looking at the staff and head, she turns the parents to look at the children)

Judith: Good?

Everybody is satisfied.



The constellation ends.

Shadow Coach's Reflections

This constellation was carried out within a Cluster of Heads conference. Val, had heard a little about constellations but had never experienced one, despite this she volunteered to do the first constellation to look at her issue. My first impression of her was that she was willing to push herself in order to take risks and that she had a tendency to take charge (Judith felt that there were parallels with the grandmother in the constellation).

Val's constellation was quite startling and one that she herself was very affected by. When the parents acknowledged her place as head teacher, Val was crying hard outside the constellation. I imagined it was hugely important to be seen and that this was unusual for her. I came away from the constellation with several points that I felt would be worthwhile addressing in my follow-up sessions with Val.

- The family needs to sort out their issues outside of the school (boundaries)
- The head needs to keep a relative amount of distance from the children in order for them to sort themselves.
- Moving back generally in order to increase her authority
- The head needs to be respected and seen
- The head needs to use her authority in order to set boundaries between what belongs in the family and what belongs in the school.

I also wondered in what ways had the constellation changed Val's perception of what's been happening? Where did her energies lie, what did she not say? I set up my first appointment with these questions and hypotheses in mind. This appointment was arranged 2 weeks after the constellation. Immediately after the constellation Val's excitement was evident. She had a mass of ideas bubbling up, questions and emotion. Two weeks would give her an opportunity to digest, integrate and reflect on her experience.

Follow-up work

My first impression of the school was a small family environment, set in the middle of a beautiful village in a wood. The children were playing out in the playground when I arrived, lunchtime. Val greeted me warmly and led me into the staff room where I sat rather awkwardly with all the staff on lunch break. The staff were very friendly, and I did wonder whether we were to have our meeting with them all. We did move to Val's office, a small room off the staff room.

I was very struck at being the 'outsider' but with a sense of knowing the school quite intimately. The constellation had allowed me to see below the surface of what was going on and to hold an internal resolution of this system.

Val had found the constellation extremely powerful. The issue of the family had receded into the distance and was not now where her energy lay, but the real areas of interest stemmed from what the constellation had 'shown' her.

- Authority – not with the children but with the staff. This led her to tell me some history. Val was a staff member when the head walked out (she found him sobbing on the school steps). He never returned and Val stepped into his place and has grown into the role of Head. She feels very supported but is aware that it is a role that does not sit comfortably. We talked about being recognised as the head – a big thing to have happened in the constellation and where Val sobbed. She talked about how hard it was to be recognised and that she could do that to others but found it hard for herself.
- Grief – the school holds grief, the last children who knew the old head are leaving this year. The children often invited the old Head to attend school events but he never came.
- Holding too much – over responsibility. For example with the children she finds it difficult to stand back and knows that she needs to. She talked about mothering the school, her son had noticed this and she had been pleased. (Even though her son had not meant it kindly). I flagged that up to explore in the future.
- Support – Val talked about what her need as a head was around support – to be given time and how much she recognised this as a growing need for head teachers generally.

Val found this first session very useful, was tearful and was aware how much more she had talked about herself and her role than ever before. I was aware of how deep we went in a very short space of time. I felt we had met on another level, both having witnessed the underlying issues in the constellation and hence starting from a powerful place.

I was deeply struck by the impact that both the constellation and then this follow-up had made on Val. She was able to talk with someone independent of her system and as a result was able to see things differently. I was aware of how much boundaries are an issue for Val and that potentially the boundaries with me weren't clear. I made a note to put these in place next time i.e. the number of meetings, the end date and the purpose of these meetings. I had a strong feeling that authority for Val was a primary focus and aware how much that is for me at the moment.

Subsequent sessions. We made a contract to meet for six sessions exploring the areas that the constellation had highlighted, and to keep in mind the effect of having support to do this. I found the relationship with Val very easy, she willingly explored both her desire to use my support and the difficulty in doing that. She easily stepped back from the system to explore her role in it. I was aware that I had to hold on to my own place of authority in order to really support Val, to challenge and keep enough distance to be useful – a parallel process.

Very quickly Val put boundaries in place with parents and staff, her role became clearer and in parallel with my role with her. From meeting to meeting Val had obviously been looking at herself a lot and her position within the School. Distancing herself became painful, as the constellation had shown, and for a while she struggled with how to be distant but still involved.

I struggled throughout with keeping my support clear, not to be drawn in too far, ensuring that our meetings were with focus but allowing enough time to let Val express her difficulties. We managed to get clearer the difference between counselling and my role. This confusion within education is very apparent. The only way that this kind of one-to-one support tends to be experienced is within the counselling relationship and that's not what ours was. I was at the time, and still am, fascinated with the difference between counselling, mentoring, non-managerial supervision and coaching. I have found myself becoming clearer as time has gone on.

As the sessions came to an end I began to talk with Val about the Natural Orders within systems. We looked at the history of Val's headship in relation to **Conscience**. Val had moved from being a teacher for many years at this small school and suddenly Acting Head and then Head. Where did her allegiance lie? Judith Hemming writes of Conscience 'we all belong to more than one group. What is permitted in one differs from what is permitted in another ... our behaviour changes accordingly as we move from one reference system to another. When we land in 2 different groups at the same time we get confused. Confusion and worry permit us to stay the same – it's a systemic strategy for stasis.'

This made a lot of sense to Val. She is a teaching head, teaching 2 days a week. She realised that on the days that she wasn't teaching she dressed differently, felt different and she could clearly feel herself as the Head teacher. On the days when she taught she was aware of confusion about her role, a greater pull between the two. I imagine this is particularly pertinent for teaching heads in small schools.

Concluding

The impact of history on the school was huge. We talked together about the order of **Time**, the irreversible direction, acknowledging what came before. By talking to me about the previous head teacher Val had recognised how much she took responsibility for the school, shouldering that burden.

For the first time Val has acknowledged the effect that the previous head's sudden departure has had on the school. Seeing for the first time the truth of the pain that the school felt, heightened by the smallness of the school. She was able to acknowledge it but not feel responsible, to remember it but recognise that she couldn't take away that pain. I was aware of how a burden lifted from her after this acknowledgment.

I have begun to see some of the peculiarities that belong to such a small school, the feeling of a homely place almost more than a school, the head very much being the

mother figure, the sense of belonging to the school. It interesting to look at this in terms of the natural order **Belonging**.

The Head teacher as mother feeds into Val's difficulty at letting go and delegating. The pressure from the system is to strengthen that nurturing mother energy, in that way she will belong. When the school was in crisis when Val first became Head teacher, this would have been important. As the school has grown so it has become important to let go, an important lesson to learn in any parenting. Val's challenge is to delegate responsibility to the staff and to the parents of the children, not to be everything to everybody. Hence the importance of using her Authority and setting her boundaries, and the continuing importance to be able to step back to look in on the system. The importance of being recognised as the Head teacher.

Giving and receiving has to be balanced within a system for it to feel strengthened. Head teachers are required to give enormous amounts to their schools, support the other teachers, parents, children, governors and the community. The challenge seems to be able to take from the school. Delegating is a form of taking, using the system to off load excess responsibility. Val recognised that she needed to do this more and that as she did so, the easier it became and the more her senior teacher felt recognised.

She was able to take a little more from her staff. There is still a difficulty for Val to be truly recognised in her role, her constellation pointing out the relaxing effect this had on the school. The whole way that Val has used me as support has enabled her to take more for herself and to recognise the importance of being seen as the head teacher and thanked, that is an area of development for her, but one which will have a huge impact on the school itself.

I have found my role as shadow coach with Val enormously gratifying. Her energy to explore her system, herself in that system and the effect that this whole process has had on her, has been exciting and touching.

Alison Barclay, June 2003

The Schools We Need project was research funded by the River Rock Foundation, in Maine, and carried out by the **nowhere** foundation using systemic constellations as a primary tool. The project ran from June 2002 to October 2003.