

## The Hidden Orders In Human Relationship Systems

**By Bert Hellinger**

An interview with Bert Hellinger about his methods applied in organizations by Humberto del Pozo, in Santiago de Chile, September 1999.

### **What is your model like when applied to solve relationship problems within organizations?**

First I will have to explain what is my model like. The model is derived from the work with Family Constellations. That means that in a group, a person can select representatives for the members of his family and place them in a space in relationship to one another. And as soon as those people have taken up their places they feel like the people they represent without knowing them. So by means of the Family Constellation, we get a real picture of what is going on in the family. If we apply that to organizations, for instance, if we choose representatives for the managers of divisions of a company and a manager places them in relationship to each other, we get a clear picture of the organization and of the feelings that the different members have.

### **What do you mean by clear picture of the feelings of the managers and why is it important to have such a clear picture?**

Lets say the chief of an organization sets up representatives -including one for himself- of his managers and he does it intuitively -without thinking in anything specific. He very quickly gets a picture of how the managers relate to each other and to him. So he may be surprised that some people just look away from him and are oriented outside of the organization, which he might not have noticed before.

That means they are not satisfied with what is going on inside the organization. For instance it may be that the chief executive does not exercise his authority in a way which supports the managers, so they do not feel secure and they don't feel that they can give their best to the organization. Now, if they are competent people they may be looking somewhere else where they may continue their work.

The question is of course if you see this, what steps can be taken to remedy this situation? A consultant doing this work with Constellations in the organization, will take certain steps to find out what is a good solution for all the people concerned. For instance, he will turn the chief executive to face the other managers, and will turn them to face the chief executive. And it may be that some of them are not at the right position. For instance if one manager has joined the organization at a latter date and if he then tries to take the first place, this might annoy the others. So you can put the managers of the various divisions in a certain order, in which each one of them feels that he has the right place.

In an organization you have different kinds of 'Orders' which you have to consider. The first is the one according to function. And the chief executive always takes the first place. The administrator who is his right hand, as we say, stands at his right side. Then the other ones stand according to the importance of their division. But we don't know beforehand exactly what division is the most important one. So we can try to find out. Just by changing the place of the various representatives we find out what they feel is for them a correct order according to function.

There is a second 'Order' operating in families and in organizations, and that is according to signiority. That means that a person who joins an organization at an

earlier date takes precedence over those who came latter. Not that he has a right to command over them. It is just a rank, a dignity he has, by having been in the organization for a longer time.

Now, if there are several who are on the same level of function, the one who came first to the organization must take the first place and such place is left from the key executive, then come the rest.

### **Where does this come from?**

It is an observation. I will give you an example. I was once a consultant for an organization where they where having trouble to agree on the agenda for the next year activities. And I thought, who came at the earliest date, and then I had him stand at my left. I went through all of them until they where exactly in the order of seniority. Then they sat down and they leaned back and said iwhat a relief! So you can see it has an effect if this order is observed.

### **What does this mean for the real practices within an organization, for instance for meetings?**

If they meet at a table, and if they are within a division and none of their functions are different you would place them in the order of seniority, otherwise those who have the highest responsibility come first according to function. Now if at the meeting there are people from functional divisions of different importance and there are several people from each or one division with equal rights, they should be together placed within their subgroup according to rank of seniority.

### **Since when have you been working with this method in organizations?**

Formerly I have been a teacher, and very early I applied group dynamics within a school. We were very successful in self determination within that school. That was in South Africa. So I learned how to work within a large group in a way that the individuals feel on the one hand challenged and on the other hand feel that they have the right place and take responsibility according to their rank and according to their function.

It was a school of 140 boys. A boarding school, with only one man in charge of the whole school. So the whole school choose representatives to represent the boys. They choose five representatives from the upper class and then one from each one of the other classes. And they were a board of pupils actually, and they ran the whole school. If there were any difficulties they managed them on their own. Once a week they reported what was going on, and we gave some orders and so it run quite well. This was the first experience I had in group dynamics, and it was very valuable. Then latter on I did psychotherapy and after a while I started doing Family Constellations and then I was asked some times to advise various organizations: hospitals, psychosomatic clinics and other institutions, on how to solve organizational problems. And so I tested some of the insights I had gained through Family Constellations on organizations. So I developed a body of knowledge which can be easily applied to organizations.

### **In business contexts what would be a challenge for each one of the members of a team of managers and what would be their contribution to the organization?**

The first thing is they would have to agree to the authority of their chief executive. Now the chief executive has to use his authority to make it possible for the

managers of the subdivisions to do their best. He is actually in the service of the other managers. And if they understand this, that he is in their service by using his authority, then they have a certain freedom, where they can develop their sphere. Now if there are various divisions, it is important that they are coordinated and this is done of course by an exchange on a regular basis, where first they report actually what they do in their divisions, second what they need in their divisions and third what is the next thing they plan. Now if each of the managers reports that in a boarding meeting, all have an idea of what is going on in the whole of the organization. It is very important that while each one of them reports that nobody interrupts. Nobody speaks until everybody has presented what is going on in his organization. If that has been done all the others understand what each one needs in his division. Now they may contribute to support what is going on there and they also see what the others can do for them. Then there will be an exchange. They will see how they can really cooperate for the best of all the individual divisions.

**In your experience what are the main problems encountered in the work as a consultant in organizations?**

One is the question if whether the chief executive exercises his authority in the service of all the others. Now sometimes someone wants to be very democratic and it seems like he supports the others, but there are many things that must be decided from the top. For if they have to discuss all the details which one man can decide, all the time, they lose a lot of energy, and it is a lot of waste. So the chief executive has to be a real authority. And authority is readily accepted if all the others feel it is in their service. Authority is rejected and opposed if a man claims power without using it for the benefit of the others. This is one important point.

Second, the individuals must have a clear description of their responsibilities. There must be clear boundaries between the various divisions, and nobody must be allowed to interfere in a way which obstructs the work being done there. And of course there must be cooperation between the various divisions in the way which I just described.

**What kind of conflicts of authority are more common when, for example, an owner appoints a general manager?**

The owner of a company has always the highest authority and the general manager can only exercise his authority if he has the support of the owner. So the first thing is that he respects the owner and reports to him and gets his support. In any organization the most important step for improving is that people respect each other, that is the most important thing. People who are respected give their best. And the person who must be respected first of all is the general manager - the chief or the owner. If he is respected, he gives liberty and freedom to his collaborators to do as they feel is best.

**Can you give examples of when the chief is not respected so that we might understand better what you mean with respect?**

Lets say a general manager thinks he is better and he wants to change the organization according to his ideas. Then there will be others in the company who are loyal to the owner, so he creates a division, which is very detrimental for the development of the organization. Now a manager who doesn't respect the one in top, must be fired. There is no other solution. Very often trouble is also created if one in a lower position is very ambitious and wants to climb to the top and wants to oust others from their places. This creates insecurity among the others, then they are often obstructed and the energy flows just into quarreling.

### **How do you see that when Constellations are set up?**

You see that immediately, because people feel hatred or distrust toward others, and in a Constellation they feel like the real people. So if you see that, then you can arrange something so that it is settled among those concerned.

### **How is that done?**

The chief executive has to do this. He calls a conference, and the best thing to do is to allow everybody just to tell what his needs are, and what are his aims, so that he can do his work in the best possible way. And if all have listened, then each one of them says what must be changed in the whole set up so that the aims of all those who have expressed their concerns are satisfied.

### **As a consultant, how can you manage to arrive to a solution by working with the representatives of the people concerned and setting up a Constellation?**

If you work with a small group of managers, including the top executive and a few other people who may even not belong to the organization, and you just place the people who have already been set up in a Constellation -for example, by the chief executive- in the right order, everybody can see where all the others, including the representative of himself, feel good. Now because you have representatives, nobody who is really ambitious for instance, can obstruct the Constellation, because the people reflect what is actually going on. And those really concerned are just watching it, so they are told to listen by just watching. This is of course very effective. They can't defend against it, no reason will help them, because it is so clear in front of all those watching the Constellation.

### **Just reordering the people in the Constellation is it clear what the solution is for those participating in it?**

Not only for them, also for those watching it, for they see how people react. So this is of course a very powerful tool to demonstrate what is going on and also to demonstrate what is a good solution for the organization.

### **Observing your work I have noticed you also have people say things to each other or do some gestures with regards to another, what is this for, and what do you seek in doing this?**

I let people sometimes bow in front of a person that they have despised. Just a small bow of respect. And you can see how it changes the climate immediately if such gestures of respect are sought. And sometimes if somebody has hurt somebody I let him say "I am sorry", just like that, nothing more. And if it is expressed it changes the climate immediately.

### **What if someone has been fired unjustly?**

If in an organization a person is fired unjustly all the others feel insecure, so their loyalty is no longer the same as it had been before. Thus the gain envisioned if somebody is fired must be compared to the lost which is going on among all the other employees afterwards. So it must be considered very carefully.

Now if someone has been unjustly fired and if that is the proper thing to do, the person who did that may say "I have seen that I unjustly fired you ...". And if is

appropriate, the man who fired him, can recall the person and say to him: "I see I have unjustly fired you and I reinstate you". This would immediately reinforce the loyalty of all the employees. Sometimes that is not appropriate, then there should be a gesture like: "I am sorry about that", and if he can not be reinstated, at least he feels respected. Sometimes it is also appropriate to give him some support to find another place to continue working.

**How do you manage this in Constellations, for it seems you are talking about what can be done in real cases, in reality, not with the representatives in a Constellation?**

As I told you, in a Constellation, I will show that. If the others suddenly feel insecure, unhappy or uncomfortable, I would bring in a representative of the person fired and we will try out what are the appropriate words to say and so on. You will thus immediately see what effects it has on the person that has been fired.

**What do you mean by "try out" in a Constellation?**

Lets say the manager who fired the employee says to him: "I see it was unjust". Maybe the employee is not satisfied. Then what can be tried is that the higher authority takes up the case and tells him. Maybe he might now feel respected. You can also try out if it is necessary to reinstate the person or not.

**Can you give other examples of how useful can this method be in organizations? I have in mind seeing you setting up a Constellation with representatives of people who were sought to be part in a project, during the workshop yesterday in Santiago.**

In that particular case I remember it was not quite clear who exactly is the key responsible person... is it the person who designs the project?, or the man financing it, or the owner of the land where the real estate development will be constructed? So it took some time to find out by the reactions of the people. At first I was of the opinion that the one who finances the project is the most important, but it turned out that not, just by the reactions of the representatives. Then it turned out that the man most important was the designer of the project, and that he then needs the support of the financier -who stood at his right side-, and of the owner of the land who stood at his left side. But then from the reactions they manifested towards each other it turned out that the designer and the owner of the land both had the same interest and that at their other hand had to be the man who offered the financing. It became clear that the man who designs the project did not trust the financier, so it was also clear he had to look for alternative means of financing the project just to strengthen his own position with regards to the financier.

Latter we choose a representative of the project and we placed her in front of all concerned and suddenly they were all facing it and focusing on the project, which strengthened all of them. So this is what a Constellation can show. How the arrangement can be solved properly.

**Can this method be used to find solutions in research or marketing projects?**

Well if this would come out I could draw on my experience with relationship systems, so in some way it could be done. But what you must know is that in this kind of work the expertise of those concerned must be respected all the time. So a

consultant can just have a say about relationships, but not about content. That must be up to the people who know their job.

**What can an organization do to prevent the emergence of relationship problems within it?**

Well if those in charge have some idea of the Orders which work behind relationships, for instance the exchange of giving and taking which has to reach a balance, and they consider it, they can avoid a lot of trouble. In the other hand each organization is something living which runs into trouble from time to time, and if there is a crisis these are means to look at it and to find solutions to go on.

**Can this method be applied by someone within the organization or is it necessary to have an external consultant?**

If they know about these Orders they can do it on their own. An external consultant is necessary only if their own resources are exhausted. It is also a matter of respecting their authority. The same if you do, for instance, couples therapy. I would never work with a couple as such, because then I would interfere in their authority. But if they individually ask me for some advise... I can tell each of them, and then allow them to set it on their own. And in the same way I work with a company. If a chief executive asks me for advise I can give him a few tips about what to do, and it might be enough, and okey. If he needs more he will come back and so on. I am just at his service.

**How can someone gain experience or knowledge about the Orders which operate within relationship systems?**

This can be done by watching, participating or setting Constellations. You rapidly gain a lot of experience by being a representative in other's people Family Constellations or company Constellations, for you experience yourself the feelings of what is right for the one who you represent and for the others involved in a system from their reactions, and you also gain an understanding of the importance of trusting and articulating in words your own feelings.

**When do you propose to set up a Constellation?**

Well if they have run into real trouble and don't know how to go on, then this has to be done. It is a very powerful tool then.

**Thank you professor Bert Hellinger for this enlightening interview.**

It has been a pleasure to me.