

Wings for Change

Systemic organizational development

*Wings for Change – Systemic organizational
development*

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Contents

- Preface** **1**

- Sources for this book** **3**

- I. Part One** **7**
 - I.1. General systemic principles 8
 - I.2. Systems want to be complete 9
 - I.3. Systems want to exchange 15
 - I.4. Organisations want intrinsic order 23
 - I.5. Systems want to reach their destiny 45

- II. Part Two** **51**
 - II.1. The lifecycle of an organisation 52
 - II.2. Change from a systemic perspective 56
 - II.3. Problems, symptoms and solutions 64
 - II.4. Three consciences and four movements 69
 - II.5. Organisations from the perspective of the spirit-mind . . . 78
 - II.6. Organisational constellations 82
 - II.7. Organisation: field or structure? 89
 - II.8. Innovation, Theory U and systemic work 94

- III. Part Three** **107**
 - III.1. Success 108
 - III.2. Business Transfer 110
 - III.3. Fraud 117
 - III.4. Justice 119
 - III.5. The glass ceiling 122
 - III.6. Taking leave and saying goodbye 125
 - III.7. Dismissal 128
 - III.8. Entrepreneurship 130
 - III.9. Stuck! 137

III.10.Trauma in organisations	140
III.11.Money	158
III.12.Trust	161
III.13.The contract	165
III.14.Delegating	166
III.15.Licences	167
III.16.The success-inhibition script	172
III.17.Downsizing	175
Looking ahead	181
Sources	183
About the author: Jan Jacob Stam	187
About the editor: James G. Campbell	189
About the translator: Dymphie Kies	191
About the Dutch Bert Hellinger Institute	193
About Het Noorderlicht	195

Preface

This is a book about organisations. About organisations seen from a systemic perspective. There are many ways of looking at organisations and this is simply one of them. Some might find this perspective a little strange; just see what pleases you in it and what does not. Maybe there are eye openers; maybe it will touch you or maybe you will not like it at all.

Systemic work's full name is systemic phenomenological work. It is a branch on the tree of system-approaches applied to organisations. By phenomenological we mean that we see and accept reality exactly as it is revealed to us.

The systemic way of looking is an approach, a philosophy and a different way of looking at the world. It provides a complementary and sometimes surprising image of reality.

Another branch of this systemic tree is a method we can easily use to examine reality. Known as a constellation, it was developed in Germany, with Bert Hellinger making the most important contribution. Family constellations are now rather well known in the Netherlands and many other countries around the world; organisational constellations are also becoming an increasingly well-known and trusted tool, especially among organisational consultants. Trusted, even though, as yet, we do not know how a constellation actually works. When you use a group of people to represent the elements of a system (people who know nothing about that system) suddenly this constellation seems to reflect the core issues of the relationships in that system, that organisation: the undercurrents suddenly become visible. Many books have been written about constellation methods, so we'll keep it short here. You can read more about organisational constellations in chapter II.6.

It is important to know that the constellations method has provided us with an enormous treasury of insights into how social systems function, what underlies their dysfunction and how this dysfunctional state can be transformed into one of health, flow and flourishing.

Clearly, organisational systems are different from family systems. This is why organisations deserve their own place: they are not just a particular kind of family system. Organisations keep society together, whether we like it or not, and all those organisations form a part of our societies, of our countries and of the world in which we live. Each of us is a unique part of our own family, but we all form part of our society and our world. Organisations sit somewhere in between, sometimes operating smoothly, sometimes stuck. Judgements and opinions form a part of us all. Organisations are subject to far more opinions and judgements than families. The phenomenological way of looking is one of having no judgement and wanting to change nothing. Of accepting the world just as it is. Strangely enough, facing and accepting reality, just as it is, often begins a process of change. Constellations have proven to be a good way to face what is.

This book is also about patterns. We are not always aware of the presence of patterns, or that we simply live in them and with them, as if we cannot do or know otherwise. Certain patterns, particularly unhealthy ones, can be persistent and stay in organisations for decades. Resisting patterns (usually in innocence of them) is a good way of ensuring they persist. What helps, is to face the truth and to take it as it is. Otto Scharmer, creator of the popular approach called Theory U, and a systemic thinker from the approach of 'learning' organisations, discovered that change starts with 'a shift in the inner place from which we operate'. By recognising patterns, facing them and taking them as they are (sigh... from my own experience I know this is easier said than done) such a shift in this inner place can take place. And then, sometimes, something totally new arises.

Sources for this book

This book arose out of encounters with hundreds of people, in more than twenty countries. People who run a company or work in or for one. People with a passion for their work that shows in new ideas, in satisfaction, in beaming with the feeling of being in the right place, in their strength and taking responsibility. A passion that sometimes translates into hate, incomprehension, tiredness, feeling stuck or feeling like a failure.

The encounters were with one-man or one-woman businesses, with small companies, with family companies – and all their complications – with companies that have grown since their birth to a couple of hundred workers and with globally-renowned multinational corporations.

Each of those companies is a kind of (little) miracle, with a beating heart – although the outside world might see it differently. I went to tanneries, banks, government organisations of every level, oil companies, supermarket chains, fashion houses, bicycle manufacturers, dentists, medical practices, universities and schools, sauna centres, consultants and helpers of every size and shape. So many different kinds of jobs exist in this world and how special they all are!

Many of these encounters with companies and their people were centred on a question they had about their organisation. *“How can we develop?”* *“How can I leave?”* *“How do I get justice?”* *“Which candidate should I choose?”* *“Is my son a suitable successor?”* *“Why are sales drying up?”* Each question imbued with a beauty and life force of its own, even if that life force expressed itself by wanting to give up.

The encounters and questions turned into hundreds of constellations, each one new, each one vulnerable. Often providing amazing insights for the issue-holder who brought the question, for the other participants and also for me. Insights that helped the company and the people to move forward, to become ‘unstuck’. Such insights are an endless source of pleasure for me. Often I’d hear myself saying to myself, quietly *“Oh, that’s the*

unique way only a systemic perspective can reveal what's really happening in a company”.

These encounters took place in many different settings: constellations with a company's management team, often 'using' a small group from outside the company to represent the elements; open workshops or workshops with a specific theme such as Startups or Money and Investments. 'Guest' clients brought their questions into the hands-on modules of training courses such as Systemic Work in Organisations. Sometimes it was an individual coaching session, a telephone call, an email exchange or even a conversation on a plane. I experience systemic work and constellations as a very special way to meet a company or a country: I see attention and energy focused on a problem, discover systems that always have their own intrinsic movements and, always, there are people who really care about it and people who could not care less.

In amongst all the constellations, from thousands of students and participants in many countries, there were off-hand but sometimes profound questions (*“Oh, how I love those off-hand questions, that cut through everything, opening you to something much wider and deeper than before”*). I have found little that works so well as letting new insights emerge in a group focused on a specific question. This often lifts the whole field above the question.

I come from a family for whom companies actually 'do not really exist' or were seen as a 'necessary evil' or 'improper' or 'indelicate' (*“I notice that I am using the precise words that my grandparents and parents used”*). In a way I have become disloyal to my family as I have become more and more fond of companies. Because they fascinate me. Because it is a miracle how they work – and that they work at all. But mostly because they are worthy of my affection. We cannot avoid the simple fact that companies shape our society; in many cases even more than authorities and governments. This is a truth to which we all have contributed. Crises and prosperity both seem to result from the co-creation of large groups of people and big sections of society, in service to fields of enormous force.

Structure of this book

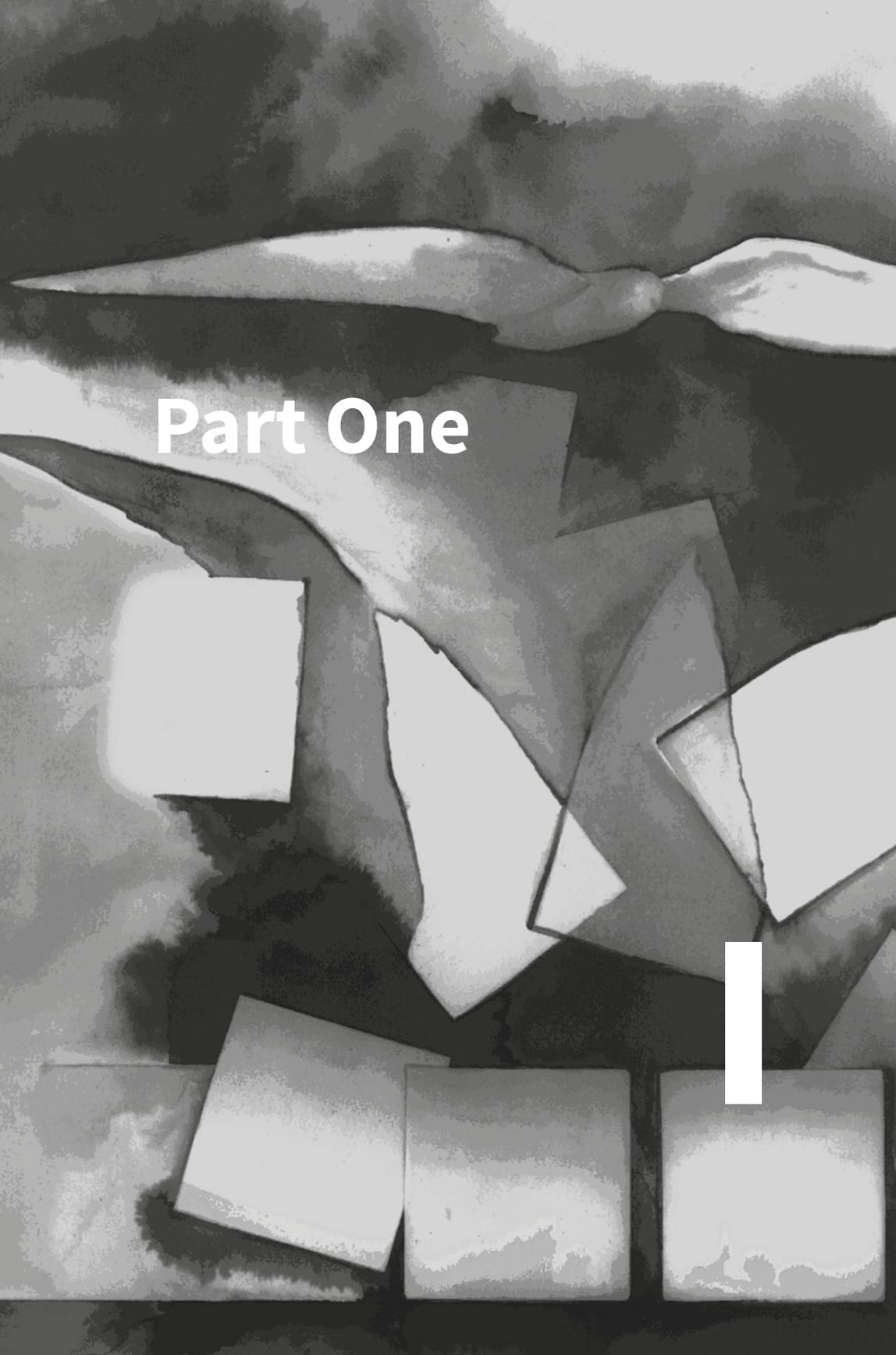
- **Part I.** General systemic principles for understanding organisations.
- **Part II.** Themes about organisational development, about changes and phases in the lifecycle of an organisation and an explanation of what constellations are.
- **Part III.** Seventeen chapters devoted to recurring organisational themes, such as contracts, fraud, investments, trauma, downsizing and mergers.

If you first want to read more about the constellations method, go to the second part of chapter six: Organisational constellations: methods, conditions and contemplations.

I hope you enjoy reading!

Jan Jacob Stam

Abries, France, January 2012

An abstract collage background featuring various shades of gray and black. The composition includes several torn, irregular pieces of paper or fabric, some overlapping others. There are also several geometric shapes, including squares and rectangles, some of which appear to be cut out or layered. The overall effect is a textured, layered composition.

Part One

I

I.1 General systemic principles for understanding organisations

Fifteen years of systemic work, in organisations and other social systems, has brought to light a number of general principles that we see again and again. We've learned what these principles are, how they 'control' organisational systems and the conditions necessary for these systems to thrive.

Most practitioners work with three main principles, but in this book we introduce a fourth.

The four main principles:

1. Organisational systems want to be complete.
2. Organisational systems want to exchange with other systems, internally and externally.
3. Organisational systems look for and thrive with an intrinsic order.
4. The 'new' principle:
Organisational systems want to reach their destiny.

Maybe it sounds strange, but I use the word 'want' deliberately. Not that we assume that an organisational system has an ego or a will, although that is perhaps true for those who are part of the system. But systems do have tendencies that prevail over the individual. Just as a falling drop of water or a soap bubble tend to move in specific ways, organisational systems tend towards specific, naturally-arising movements. These natural principles can, to a large extent, influence how an organisation comes into being, gets established and develops.

These tendencies or principles of how organisations behave have not been invented or constructed; neither are they the product of human will or fantasy. Through careful observation these principles were noticed and recognised as being intrinsic to organisational and other social systems.

I have often noticed that there is no need to explain to a director of a large organisation how constellations work or what systemic principles are. Sometimes they are surprised to see in images or to hear in words, what they had already unconsciously felt or understood about how those systemic principles work in their company.

There exists a kind of systemic intelligence, a sort of systemic wisdom that contributes enormously to whether organisations flourish or not during times of prosperity and hardship.

The fourth principle, organisations want to reach their destiny, I noticed and refined quite recently, during 2012.

Organisations have emerged from society and also want to achieve something in society and this desire is driven by larger forces than just a business plan or a leader's vision. It is about a kind of evolutionary force, with its own direction, that takes companies along with it. This development is far greater than the capacity of individual plants and species, even of complete ecosystems.

The destiny of organisations is about the larger developments in society: the force that brings about the death and renewal of communities, economies and social systems.

Hellinger calls this force spirit-mind, and many captains of industry know exactly what this is – although they might not call it by this name.

In the following chapters we will go deeply into the first three principles. Chapter II.5, examines, in detail, the fourth principle.

1.2 Systems want to be complete

Organisational systems want to be complete. This is a fundamental principle; not because this would be beautiful or good, but simply because it seems that it is their nature to want this. Every element that forms an organisation, now or in the past, has an equal right to a place in the system, forever. Even if this person, corporate culture, machine, department or production process is currently dysfunctional.

Similar to family systems, in which it does not matter whether someone is living or has died, for an organisation it also is unimportant whether an individual, a department, a function, a goal or a concept is still physically or temporally part of the organisation.

How is it then possible that an element, that once helped form an organisation, becomes excluded, is no longer a part of it? This happens when those in the system (organisation) want to forget it, or see it as a