

# Using constellations and psychodrama - Coaching Constellations

## Seeing patterns, illuminating dynamics, facilitating solutions

By John Whittington (UK), 2010 ICF Conference

When I first came across constellations, I was resistant, sceptical. My natural British reserve kicked in. The experience didn't seem to make sense on a number of levels.

Constellations, a facilitated process which creates a kind of "living map" of relationship systems, rely in their original workshop format, on the use of "representatives"—people from amongst the workshop participants who know nothing of the actual person or concept they are representing. They stand in relationship to each other within a defined space. In a few moments, they begin to experience precise feelings and make responses that belong to the person they are representing. Forgotten information, hidden loyalties and patterns surface that lead to deep insights for the person bringing the issue or question. one-to-one coaching settings. The maps—external expressions of internal and often unconscious patterns—reveal hidden dynamics and resources, working effortlessly alongside other interventions.

The idea of being able to stand in place of someone you'll never meet and experience feelings which are not your own, then discover that your feelings, behaviors and even words mirror those of the real person, seemed both unlikely and, well, just too much for my rational mind. I left my first workshop experience eight years ago, not imagining I'd return, let alone train in the work and facilitate it as a daily part of my personal and professional coaching. Today, the principles that underpin the work and the practices that illuminate issues with such startling clarity form the firm foundations for my work with private clients, leaders of international businesses and teams alike.

"Systemic constellations," to give them their full name, were originated by the German philosopher, therapist and coach Bert Hellinger. Developed in the context of family systems, practitioners quickly saw their potential in other human systems including coaching around personal or work-related issues. If you translate the words "systemic constellation" literally, you get "a group of objects which stand together to form a pattern." This rather dry description doesn't capture the impact of the dynamic maps created by constellations whether in workshop or in the processes, I was able to apply the work across my coaching. Impact and results were greatly enhanced as a result.

Placing individuals in context of the larger truths of the system they occupy constellations disentangle people from hidden dynamics and then support them to find a better place in relationship to the whole. This creates an inner shift that leads to fresh clarity and enduring resolution. Constellation workshops, particularly when exploring personal and family issues, are often profoundly moving because the dynamics they reveal are universal to the human experience.

Over time, I learnt that the constellation workshop experience transfers with impact into a coaching relationship and process in a way that allows for depth within a practical and

solutions-oriented framework. As I found my stance, developed my understanding of the underlying principles and the application of

I was very surprised to discover how easily constellations translated from workshop to tabletop. Using objects (I started with whatever was available—coffee cups, Post-its, etc.) clients are able to create a three-dimensional expression of their issue and then work with the coach to illuminate and clarify many kinds of challenges.

Like others, I now use the approach in a wide range of contexts. The initial stage of a constellation—mapping what is—is often useful in coach selection meetings, or “chemistry checks” where a new perspective on the individuals’ place in their system opens up something that allows a deeper connection with their developmental issues

I often find myself using constellations when a client is struggling to find the words to describe the challenge they face or when an interpersonal or developmental issue feels stuck or there is difficulty in reaching a goal. If a fresh diagnosis is called for or there is little energy, missing information or resources, I know I can trust this methodology to reveal something new.

This first stage of a constellation—mapping—can be used early on by coaches while a fuller understanding and practice develops. The hidden depths emerge as your own journey with this profound methodology evolves.

So I hope that you may find yourself in a workshop one day and that your experience leads you to reflect on the potential benefits to you, your coaching work and your clients. If you find yourself feeling resistant or sceptical, be careful, you may be coming back for more!

*John Whittington is a Personal Coach who works with some of the worlds’ most successful individuals on personal and leadership development. The constellations approach and methodology is a core part of his work and he shares the principles and practices in experiential workshops, learning and supervision circles around the world. His website provides further information, links and resources as well as access to his e-book of the same name: CoachingConstellations.com.*

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