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The SySt-Model of the Solution Focus

An example of a Solution Geometric Interview with conflict parties in an organization

Keywords: Systemic structural constellations, SySt, SySt-Model, principles of solution focus, Solution Geometric Interview, transverbal language

Summary:

In this article a new method is presented which allows a client to

- physically experience the parts of a solution as determined by the miracle question
- experience the perspectives of other people (groups of people)
- go through the conflict situations in an as-if-form
- enter into a dialogue with the conflict partners.

By changing perspectives, an attitude of multidirectional partiality can be experienced in one's own body. The method of the Solution Geometric Interview, a form of Systemic Structural Constellation (SySt), permits a change in the perspectives of the conflict partners and enhances their esteem for one another. Thus an understanding for one another is generated, or as Steve de Shazer said: we find more useful forms of misunderstanding. This method helps to initiate solutions and to discover the first steps towards the miracle.

The SySt-Model

The Systemic Structural Constellations (SySt) developed by the author and Matthias Varga von Kibéd are seen by us as a form of language, the *transverbal language*, spoken not by a single person, but by a group of persons. This language combines and goes beyond both of verbal and transverbal language. The basis of this language is the *representative perception* (see below). The persons in the constellation are symbols of aspects, for example elements of the original system. They are arranged in the room in a way which seems fitting for the client¹.

¹ I am using the word 'client' here since the notion 'customer' in the solution focused approach describes a specific category of interaction between consultant and the person he/she is working with.

In such an arrangement, therefore, the persons become symbols of the elements of the system which the client has a question about. Thus the Persons become representatives of the aspects of the original system. The differences in their bodily perception represent differences in the simulated system. This type of perception we call representative perception, since the bodily perceptions of the persons in the constellation are not related to differences in their own lives, but primarily to differences in the elements of the original system they represent. The body of the representatives serves as an organ of perception for aspects of the simulated system.

The transverbal language is spoken by the representatives in interaction with the client. The transverbal language shows itself in the verbal utterances of the representatives and relates to differences in their bodily perception.

The goal of this kind of group simulation is to “reconstellate” by repositioning the representatives in such a way that the constellation resembles more closely the client’s goal. What the client’s goal is we discover by her answers to the miracle question in the interview before the beginning of the constellation. Interventions during the SySt are positioning (putting representatives in new places and adding representatives), process work (for example ritual dialogues between representatives and other forms of rituals) and tests. These interventions can be seen as an explorative action for the simulated system. This helps to generate new ideas for next steps in the original system.

At the end the client follows in the footsteps of her representative in the solution picture and experiences how it feels for her now to see the elements of the constellation being related to one another in a new way. The solution picture in the SySt correlates to the answers to the miracle question in the Solution-Focused interview. It symbolizes a sudden change. It gives the client a more intense bodily experience than the experience of the miracle question in the Solution-Focused interview. The transfer of the effects of a SySt-solution picture into everyday life is analogous to a step by step change and can be compared to the work with scaling questions in the Solution-Focused approach.

Thousands of constellations supported the thesis that changes in the constellated system enhance changes in the original system, even if the clients are not part of the original system, but rather are connected with it only as consultants, mediators, supervisors or therapists.

This description may sound somewhat out of the ordinary to the reader who is not familiar with group simulation methods, as for example psychodrama (Moreno), soziometry (Moreno)¹ and sculpturing (Virginia Satir). It may sound astonishing that persons can perceive in some way changes in a different system without being in-

¹ For the solution focused work an interesting combination of sociometric methods with the solution focused methodology was developed by Paul Jackson in his “spatial sorting” approach..

formed about this system and that they are thereby able to enhance changes within this system. For twenty years we have been working with constellations and related approaches and we have made such observations again and again. Therefore, we use this method even though we are not able to give a full explanation¹ for the effects of constellation work.

At this point I suggest a thought experiment to establish a context in which representative perception would be quite a normal phenomenon. Usually we suppose that individuals are separated from one another and therefore ask the question “How is it possible that information is transferred from one person to the other?”. Let us suppose we are not separate individuals but connected, then we might ask: “How come that we do not know of something?” This perspective fits the experience of representative perception.

The *metaphor of separation* as well as the *metaphor of connection* are useful in order to understand different experiences. Therefore I suggest looking with both eyes simultaneously at the world, so that we get a multi-dimensional picture related to separation and connection – in analogy to Viktor Frankl’s metaphor of “seeing with both eyes” which he proposed for the solution of paradoxes. The separate contradicting pictures of both eyes simultaneously generate input in the brain and are reconstructed by the brain into a consistent picture with a new dimension: the spatial perception of depth.

The SySt-Model of the Solution Focus: Solution-Focused SySt

A special group of SySt are the Solution-Focused SySt. They were developed by the author to compare SySt with Solution-Focused interviews. They are a combination of SySt and Solution-Focused interviews. In principle there are two forms of combination:

1. Translation of parts of the Solution-Focused interview into SySt

Solution Constellation:

Here parts of the Solution-Focused interview (as focus, goal, miracle, context of miracle, exceptions) are constellated with persons in the room.

¹ Some examples of early systematic research into the effective principles of SySt® are to be found in the books of G. Höppner und P. Schlötter.

Goal Approximation Constellation:

In this format, a timeline is added to the parts of the Solution Constellation. The work on the timeline is correlated to the working with scales in the Solution-Focused interview.

12 Squares Constellation:

In this format, the Goal Approximation Constellation is supplemented by making a difference between the internal and the external context. The coordinate of time (past, present, near future (before the miracle) and broad future (after the miracle)) and the coordinate of context (with internal context, border and external context) generate an area that is divided into twelve squares. The other representatives (focus, goal, miracle, context of miracle and exceptions) are arranged by the client on these squares.

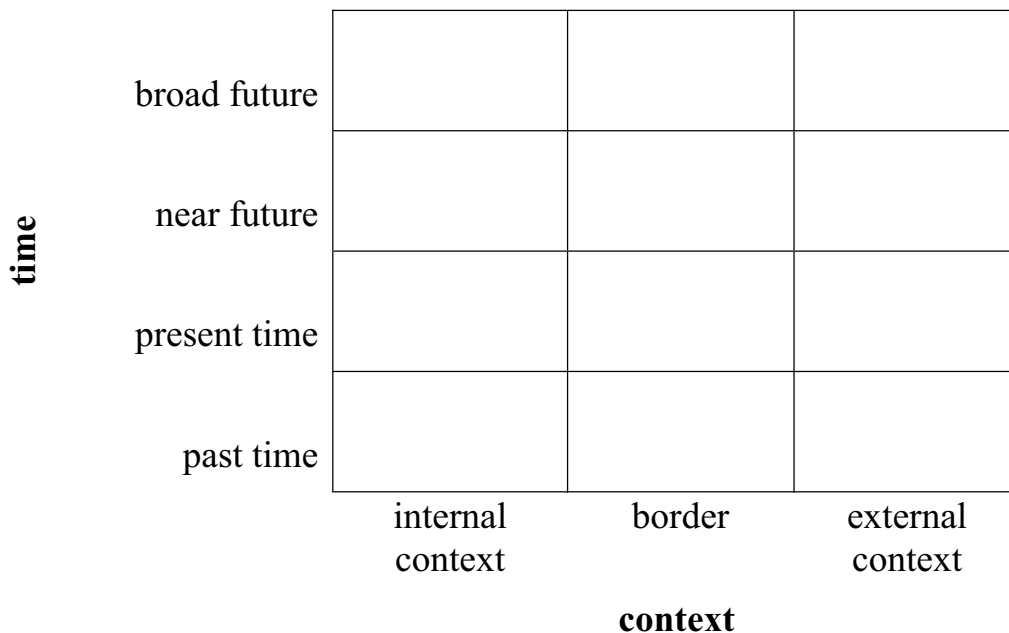


Fig.: Twelve square schema

In all these formats the parts of solution gained by the Solution-Focused interview are arranged and re-arranged in the room, missing parts are added and the relationship between different parts is altered with the aim of sufficiently improving the situation of the representatives. The advantage of such a SySt in comparison with the Solution-Focused interview lies in

- the stronger intensity of experience
- the possibility of systematic testing actions and
- the enhanced transparency of the solution.

With the help of the timeline und the twelve square table, parts of the solution and the problem can be sorted in a way which makes sense.

2. Simultaneity of SySt and the Solution-Focused interview: The Solution Geometric Interview

In this format the representatives of the original system are constellated in the space and are asked by the facilitator about which differences they are experiencing. Afterwards they sit down on chairs in the constellated arrangement. The facilitator also takes a seat in the round of the representatives and conducts a Solution-Focused interview with them. Especially the miracle question is very useful here. Also all the other Solution-Focused questions can be asked, as questions for exceptions and scaling questions. The Solution Geometric Interview is a Solution-Focused interview with constellated representatives.

The Solution Geometric Interview becomes part of the representative perception.

The representatives, who are not informed about the issues at stake in the original system, find their answers to the Solution-Focused questions not by thinking, but by perception and by noticing what is coming into their minds. They let themselves be surprised by which words they discover, which pictures or other forms of perception might appear. The language here becomes part of the perception. The organ for this perception is the body of the persons in the constellation.

Solution-Focused interview and Solution Geometric Interview differ also in the answers given in them. The original persons of the simulated system describe the answers of the representatives as follows:

- The answer is fitting. Before, I couldn't remember this point.
- That is a gut feeling. Up to now I myself hadn't found words for that feeling.
- In some way I knew that, but I couldn't put it in words.
- I didn't know that I felt so connected with ...(person, to which client is loyal) ... so that I was not able to take steps towards my solution.
- The constellation showed me I was in a dilemma between being connected to ... (person, to which the client behaves loyal) ... and taking steps in the direction of the solution.
- That is literally what Mr. /Mrs. X said.

The Solution Geometric Interview adds some new and sometimes forgotten aspect to the Solution-Focused interview. Therefore it is a useful supplement to the Solution-Focused interview.

Each Solution Geometric Interview begins with a Solution-Focused interview, so that both forms of interview are easy to compare. The differences between both methods are described by clients in the following way:

- My experience during the SySt was much more vivid than during the Solution-Focused interview. It is as if the miracle had already happened.
- I got many new ideas with the help of the Solution-Focused interview. The SySt has added to them some important points.
- In the SySt I could act myself. For instance, I could get into dialogue with ... (persons of the context of the miracle)... That was very helpful.
- The SySt has clarified a lot for me. The experience was much stronger and more intense than during the Solution-Focused interview.

What are the criteria of the solution focus?

How does the solution focus manifest itself in the SFT and in the SySt-Model?

Both methods, the verbal technique of the SFT and the constellation work of the SySt-model, can be used in a Solution-Focused way. In this sense I understand the solution focus as a more general concept which can be used in different ways. What are the criteria of the solution focus?

These are the criteria of the solution focus as I see them. I will explain how to identify them in the SFT and in the SySt-Model:

1. The solution is independent from the problem. Therefore an analysis of the problem is not generally necessary for the solution.

SFT: With the help of the miracle question und the questions for exceptions we are able to step into the realm of the solution without knowing the problem of the client. It is sufficient to know in which direction she wants to go.

SySt-Model: In principle we can do the constellation without knowing in detail the problem of the client. It is sufficient to know which elements belong to the original system (the state of which should be changed).

2. You can find the solution by changing perspective. Therefore the world as a whole is changing, not only a part of it.

SFT: The miracle question for instance is not a normal question with an answer, but it is a trance induction for entering into the world of solutions. The client is entering a new world: Everything is different here, even if the facts are not changed.

Before giving answers the client has already begun to enter into the new world. This change is a sort of reversal: the perspective shifts from the past and discovers the pos-

sibilities of the future. The perspective leaves the problem and reaches out for the solution.

SySt-Model: The answer to the miracle question corresponds to the solution picture of a SySt, which the client enters at the end of constellation work. Like the answers to the miracle question the solution picture can be seen as the beginning of something (and not as the end of something). The relationship between the elements of the constellated system has changed, the elements remain the same (New elements can be added, but these belonged to the system already before the constellation work began). There is a change in the structure, the way the elements connect with each other, usually due to a prior change of the form, - the form being - in the sense of Wittgenstein - space of possibilities for change in the structure. Thus, for example, the representative of the client can be freed by ritual interventions from her fixation on an obstacle or a trauma, which diminished her space of possibilities. Afterwards she can change her position and look in the direction of her goal.

3. The solution starts with a sudden change. This change starts within the person and not just in the outside world.

SFT: The miracle happens suddenly in the night. This is shown by a very different way of experiencing, new actions and a new style of thinking of the client. If she reports that the world around her has changed, the facilitator continues asking until she is mentioning things, which are independent from a change in her surroundings. Now the client is really entering her world of solutions.

SySt-Model: A sudden change is initiated in the constellation work by

- changing the place of the representatives: The representatives, who cannot see each other, can be repositioned, so that they suddenly get into contact.
- adding forgotten elements of the system: The addition of such forgotten elements can suddenly change the whole system of relationships of the elements.
- Rituals for the removal of context overlaps: When there was a confusion (i.e. the client acts as if she had confused herself with somebody else instead)¹ the representative of the client can go towards the representative of the person with which this confusion occurred. When she has then reached a position immediately opposite of that other person('s representative) often feeling a specially deep connection or fascination in that moment (going into a sort of deep confluence or “identification”), she is turned around softly but in a quite sudden way by the facilitator. Thereby a change towards being “fully with herself” is effected. Her whole world suddenly starts to change.

¹ There can be e.g. confusions with an earlier age of oneself, or with past experiences and persons we feel very connected with

- Entrance of the client into the solution picture. Here the client makes the shift from a state in which she is dissociated from the solution picture towards a state in which she is associated with it.¹

4. The solution of the problem manifests itself in the way it vanishes; likewise, blockades dissolve and processes become fluid again and make new actions possible.

SFT: In the Solution-Focused interview the client forgets more and more about her problems, she mentions them less often. In the solution the facts connect in a different way. Their former way of being in a problematic relationship with each other ends without trace, just as a triangle vanishes when the three points are arranged on a line (example from Wittgenstein).

SySt-Model: In constellation work the relationship between the elements is changed by repositioning. The problem consists in the elements being connected with each other in a certain way. By process work blockades are transformed into processes.

5. Sudden change gives us hope, continuous change enables action. It is important to combine these two forms of change (Principle of Transcontinuity (Luc Isebaert)).

SFT: A sudden change takes place in the miracle question, a continuous change we

SySt-Model: A sudden change takes place in repositioning representatives and in the rituals for the removal of a context overlap. A continuous change is characteristic for most of process work, of the work with the timeline and in the use of seeding ideas for actions.

6. With the notion of “solution” there is no specific connection with a content, but a dissolution of the problem and a beginning of something new. The solution gives an experience of a reversal and is something basic – not every time something different. In this respect there is only one solution, out of which the variety of the special single solutions flows.

SFT: The client is usually asked the miracle question only once, because there is only *one* miracle. In the following sessions the miracle can be remembered, for example by working with scales, “10” standing for the miracle. The miracle is a new context, within which everything is changed- not a program for a different content.

SySt-Model: In the SySt there is no concept of content for the solution. The solution can be found in the last picture of the constellation and is perceived as the beginning of something. In the following session the client can get supplements to the solution by working further on it in the transverbal language. These supplements are not new

¹ This sudden process can be mitigated in SySt-work by the so-called Alter-Ego-Method.

solutions, but the expansion of this *one* solution and new aspects of it. To avoid interpretations, we work with differences:

- For example we ask the representatives for change by questions like “is it now better or worse or equal or different for you?” like Steve de Shazer said: “We can understand what “better” means without knowing what “good” means”.
- We understand our interventions as questions to the constellated system. They are for testing, and are intended as proposals, not as orders.
- The work with representatives on the timeline can be seen as embodied scale work.

7. In the space of the solution there opens up a space of possibilities, which have not been realised up to the present. By this opening the possibilities of choice are enlarged for the client.

SFT: The miracle question is a hypothetical question, which is started in hypothetical mode (*suppose* in the following night there would happen a miracle ...) and mostly ends in the descriptive mode (... How do you notice that the miracle *has happened?*). By this a space of possibilities opens which the client experiences as real. By experiencing these new possibilities (the miracle question can be answered by the client only if the client experiences the miracle), they become facts for the client, which in every day life the client can realise.

SySt-Model: The experience of the miracle gets enlarged by constellation work. The client experiences the new possibilities in her own body. The possibility of trial actions transforms the possibilities into realities for the client. The interventions of the facilitator are questions beginning with “Suppose ...”, the answers of the representatives show the effects of the interventions the facilitator has made. The reactions of the client verify or falsify what happened in the constellation. The reactions of the client transform the offers connected with the constellation work into descriptions. The world of the client opens up and gives more possibilities of choice to her.

8. There is a change in ascribing meaning to the facts by the client. The facts themselves do not change, but they can be changed by different behaviours of the client or of persons belonging to the system.

SFT: Elements or facts of the problem, like persons, material objects, etc. also appear in the miracle - and if not, the facilitator asks the client how she will get along with these givens after the miracle has happened. By this new way of dealing with the facts and material things (which also comprises a new way to relate to what is given) the whole system for the client is changed. She now perceives the world as different. By this, for instance, a symptom can be transformed into a helpful signal or a conflict

into a learning situation. The miracle creates a new frame for the world, in which new possibilities grow. Thereby the whole situation is put into a new frame (reframing).

SySt-Model: In the SySt the elements (for example persons, material things, abstract concepts, like goals, miracles and exceptions) of the original system are arranged in the space with persons as representatives. The special arrangement reflects the relationship between them. The solution appears in a new arrangement of the elements, which now have more suitable relationships to one another. By this the client gets new choices for actions. The elements remain the same, none of them are excluded from the system. Thus a transformation of the given is effected.

9. Because the notion of solution is not connected to any content, the facilitator has to abstain from interpretations, or in other words, the facilitator has to abandon all her concepts as far as possible. Regarding the contents which the client mentions, the facilitator enters the world of the client or the world of the original system. The clients do not have to adapt to the world of the facilitator when speaking about content.

SFT: In the dialogue with the client the facilitator only asks questions, makes appreciative observations and proposals for experiments. The effects of this are judged by the client herself. By this the facilitator adds no new content to the process.

SySt-Model: The interventions of the facilitator are meant as questions to the system, the answers of the representatives show possibilities. It is important that the facilitator has no previously fixed concepts for the solution, but lets herself be surprised by the structural constellation.

Case Example: A Situation of Stalemate within an Organisation

Original Situation

In a business organisation we find a stalemate between a project team, the next level of management (the heads of the department, the deputy head of the department) and the board of executive directors. The team was given the task by the board of directors to develop a new model of customer care for a specific group of customers. The deputy head of this department is an expert on customer care for this specific group. He proposed his model for customer care to the board of executive directors. This proposal was accepted and made obligatory for everybody concerned in this company. The team that had in the meantime worked out its own concept for customer care was passed over. Up to the moment of intervention the team was obstructing the implementation of the deputy head's concept, declaring his ideas "unethical". One member of the team is a former head of department. She had stepped down from that post and is now working as a team member again.

The client for the constellation is a member of the project team. Her aim is to get new ideas for action. The stalemate situation has been going on for seven months already. Neither the client nor the other conflict parties have any ideas about how a solution for this might be worked out. If no solution is found the board of executive directors has threatened to fire some members.

The author as facilitator of the constellation guided the client to choose and constellate representatives for the conflict parties in question from inside and outside the team :

Inside the team:

- F: the focus as the representative for the client herself
- TO: team members unconditionally opposed to the new concept
- TN: team members neutral with regard to the new concept
- one specific important team member M
- FM: the former head of department, who stepped down (FM)

Outside the team:

- the heads of department
- the deputy head of department
- the board of executive directors

These representatives were constellated by the client, interviewed about their reactions by the facilitator and given chairs to sit down on the pattern of the constellated arrangement. The facilitator joined them by taking a chair within the constellated group of representatives. She then interviewed them with a Solution-Focused group interview by putting the miracle question simultaneously to the whole constellated group of representatives. The interview delivered the *following results*:

1. Everybody concerned was interested in a dialogue of all parties and also interested in finding a solution.
2. The conflict did not seem to be on the level of opposing concepts, but on the level of interpersonal relationships. The original topic about the question of ethical appropriateness of the new concept was transformed into the topic "How to avoid face loss?". Quite often, during the Solution Geometric Interview new topics appear and old ones are transformed or even vanish, thus giving access to new solutions.
3. The deputy head can avoid loss of face if his new concept is in the future no longer considered unethical by the team, i.e. if this judgement is taken back by them.
4. FM (the former head of department) was willing to direct this dialogue. She had an idea of how to act according to the deputy head's concept without vio-

lating her ethical principles. In the later course of the Solution Geometric Interview it was seen to be important that she restricted her influence on the dialogue to a facilitating function, refraining from introducing her own ideas on the subject matter, thus avoiding any possible loss of face on the side of the heads of department.

5. The heads of department were willing to accept FM to have this special function in the dialogue only if she asks the heads of the department for permission.

6. As the present heads of department feel responsible for the direction of the dialogue themselves, this shift in responsibility is only possible if permission is given for it by the board of executive directors.

7. The board of executive directors gives permission only if the present management of the department takes the initiative in this process by asking FM to facilitate the process.

8. Even those team members who were opposed to the new concept are ready to engage in a dialogue if the customers are seen as the center of the future concept, i.e. if the perspectives of the customers are better taken into account .

9. The deputy head wishes to lead a dialogue with all concerned. At the same time he fears a possible loss of face. This loss of face can be avoided by constructing a new reading of his concept that no longer is inconsistent with the ethical requirements of the team members.

10. Thus, a step by step agenda for this solution design gradually takes shape:

- The client has a good relationship with FM and can explain to her the schedule for a solution process.
- FM can propose to the heads of department to call a session for a joint dialogue and ask the heads of department for permission to facilitate this process. Thus the heads of department are relieved of a burden without any concurrent loss of face.
- The heads of department can propose these ideas as their own to the board of executive directors, who will be relieved in their turn to see that something constructive is being done.
- As long as this proposal comes from the heads of department they can be perceived as strong by the board of directors. Thus, the agreement of the board of directors to the proposal is more likely.
- In contact with the team the client can suggest to replace the judgement of “unethical” by the concept of “still in need of further elucidation”. In this way the deputy head will be able to take part in the dialogue without any

threat of loss of face and at the same time allow the concept to be discussed in the open.

- It may be helpful to symbolically reposition the customers in the center of the discussion by taking into careful consideration their wishes and ideas. Thus everybody can keep their face and the momentum for positive action is renewed.

The aim of the client was fulfilled already after the Solution Geometric Interview: She had new ideas and approaches about the type and order of her next steps, especially for taking up again the dialogue with her team and FM. By this the stalemate was stopped and it opened up new possibilities for her. The answers of the representatives to the miracle question were quite fitting and pragmatic from her point of view. The representatives' ways of expressing themselves and their objections fitted exactly the client's view of the original persons.

The Solution Geometric Interview offers as a special advantage the possibility of including persons from the system who are not physically present. The representatives express the specific perspectives of the original persons or groups of persons (conflict parties) they stand for. It is easier for them to describe the conflict from their different special perspectives than it might have been for the original members. Often totally new aspects are brought up that are perceived as fitting to the real system by the client, which she herself might not have been able to express. Often, behaviour that up to now seemed strange suddenly becomes understandable. Belonging to the system, the client can evaluate the degree of fittingness of the answers given in the Solution Geometric Interview. Thus, ideas can be generated and at the same time the borders against pure imagination and fantasy are still safeguarded.

Conclusions

1. The principle of solution focus can be transferred from verbal language into the transverbal language of the Systemic Structural Constellations (SySt).
2. Absent conflict partners can (e.g. during the Solution Geometric Interview) be replaced by representatives.
3. Forgotten elements of the conflict system and forgotten context factors can be discovered by means of the transverbal language of Systemic Structural Constellation work (SySt).
4. The perspectives of the conflict partners can be shown by SySt in a form where the representatives experience the different perspectives within their own body. This makes it possible to appreciate the conflict partners, to see them in a new way and to get information about formerly not understandable perspectives.
5. Dialogues between conflict partners can be acted out by changing the perspective in a lively "as-if"-form.

6. Both forms of the miracle question, in the Solution Geometric Interview and in the Solution-Focused dialogue, can supplement each other. In different way, they create ideas for next steps.
7. The Solution Geometric Interview gives a higher degree of proximity with the perceptual process, a stronger “embodiment” of the processes as the Solution-Focused interview. Of course the Solution-Focused interview will still be sufficient in many cases, but its reach is greatly enlarged by the Solution Geometric Interview.

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