

Developing an entrepreneurial vision with the help of systemic constellations

Systemic constellations or more precisely, the specific variation adapted to business and organisational issues that we call Management Constellations, can be a very practical and efficient management tool.

I want to describe one of my latest experiences. It happened at the annual kick-off meeting of a communication agency. The meeting was planned in order help the whole staff to tune in to the challenges and opportunities of the new year. In a previous strategy meeting, the three owners had decided to reorganize the company into four business units, each focusing on a specific range of needs of their respective customers. Now it was time to fill this structure with ideas, projects and goals, in other words, to develop the precise identity and strategy for each division.

We decided to base the workshop on a model derived from the “effectuation” approach developed by Saras Sarasvathy¹. Our model describes business development as the result of the interaction between eight variables:

1. **Identity:** Who are we? What are our abilities? How do our customers perceive us? How do we describe ourselves? Etc.
2. **Products and services:** What do we do? What do we produce? How do we produce it?
3. **Partners:** With whom do we cooperate? What are their capacities? How do we interact? What do we need and get from them? Etc.

4. **Customers:** For whom are we working? What are the needs we are satisfying? How is the relationship with them?
5. **New opportunities:** What else could emerge from the combination of these elements? New needs, new customers, new products, new partners, etc.
6. **New goals:** Which new results do we want to achieve? What is the first step we want to make? What is our dream?
7. **New resources:** What else do we need to reach the goal? Which resources do we have to develop? Which ones do we need to source from outside?
8. **New risks:** What are the risks we are prepared to take? What is the maximum loss we can and want to take?

I believe that the “effectuation” approach reflects much better how entrepreneurs think and behave than the classical strategy models. Entrepreneurs do not conceive their objectives so much as fixed and independent variables (as most business models assume) but they rather see them as depending on the opportunities that arise dynamically from their connections with customers and partners combined with the potential of their organisation. Juggling with these simultaneous interdependencies is one of the abilities that distinguishes entrepreneurs from other folks. But it is not easy to share these mental acrobatics with other people.

And here systemic constellations come in very handy. They offer a moving picture of the manager’s mental maps. Interdependencies can be seen and perceived instantly and simultaneously.

¹ www.effectuation.org

The following were the instructions I gave to the four teams that performed the constellations at the same time in four corners of the room:

“Your task is to develop ideas for defining the strategy for your business unit.

Each team member selects one of the eight concepts that influence the development of your business.

Find a place in the room that reflects the interrelation with the other aspects according to your mental map of the present situation.

From that position start a dialogue with your colleagues about how your business could develop. Observe what is helping and what is hindering the development.

Then move around to find a better position and describe precisely what this move could mean in reality.”

The managers had great fun with this new method and came up with many significant and precious insights. Let me report just a few of them:

- “We realized that we are so much focused on the needs of our present customers and the services we develop to satisfy them, that other new opportunities are completely out of sight. We have to make a step back and look at the bigger picture. Then we have to place the new goals at the same level as our actual customers.”
- “Only when I found no place in the constellation for the concept of risk, I realised that we have never seriously considered the risks that we can afford and we want to take. As a result, the new

resources that we think we need are way too much in our focus. They stood even closer than our new goals. As soon as the risks came in sight, the whole system felt more balanced and powerful.”

- “I have no doubt that our goals stand in the back. We feel this enormous push to be the best in the market. Reading this constellation, I realised, that this can also drive us into burnout. Therefore, we had the idea to put some personal goals like health and family in front. It feels more stable and still all the energy is there.”
- “We knew our division depends very much on the co-operation with the other three business units. Up to now we took their support for granted. In the constellation we became aware, that we have to dedicate more time to negotiating common goals. Only when the representatives of our partners looked at the goal from the same distance we felt it was balanced.”

Most of the managers agreed that these insights would not have emerged, or at least not so quickly, in a classical discussion. Everybody was surprised how rapidly and clearly, the team had come to share a common picture. Based on this picture it was subsequently much easier to describe the strategy in words and figures.

The method of management constellations, combined with a good management theory, is one of the most powerful tools I know.