

# **How conscience works in work and organizations**

## **Hand-out for the International Organization Constellation Training Intensive**

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The most important merit of Bert Hellinger is not so much the development of the method of system constellations but much more the insights into how conscience works in systems.

Personal conscience and collective conscience and the struggle between the two of them.

### **Personal conscience**

Personal conscience binds us to our group. Our family, our region of birth, our religion, our culture, our language and our country. It also binds us to our work, our colleagues, and the organisation we take part in.

Personal conscience works as a kind of sense organ of equilibrium.

It is in our consciousness and guides by feelings of guilt and innocence. Personal conscience works directly and gives us information about at least three areas:

- Bond: do I still belong to a group or not?
- Balance in giving and taking: do I owe someone or does someone owe me?
- Order: am I at the right/legitimate place in this system?

### **Bond**

Actions that increase our rights to belong to a group are coupled with feelings of innocence and pleasure. Things that go against norms and values of our own group and put our right to belong to this group at stake are coupled with feelings of guilt. Personal conscience makes the own group feel strong and takes care of keeping the group together and keeping the distinction and boundaries to other groups clear.

How this works can be easily checked by asking yourself what you do to belong to a department, an organisation, a professional group, or maybe to an ideal or a trend. And which effects have the things you do on feelings of guilt and innocence.

So it is imaginable that someone with feelings of innocence does the most horrible things. The people who crashed into the World Trade Centre in New York with a hijacked plane did this perhaps with a good conscience: it binds them to their group.

Feelings of guilt appear when someone does something that endangers his/her rights to belong to their group.

Founding a family with a partner means that sooner or later you have to admit that the other family is as valuable as your own family. And that makes you guilty towards your own family.

How it works is easy to imagine: a ten-year old child smoked cigarettes with a friend in her parents' house, where nobody smokes and smoking is a taboo. Some days later she wants to talk about it and says to her mother: 'Mum, I have smoked'. Imagine how she feels.

Or she tells her friends when they hang around somewhere: 'We have smoked'. Imagine how she feels.

In organisations the question is often about to which group people belong: belonging to the club of all Heads of Technical Departments in a certain area was sometimes more important for the Heads than to belong to their own organisation.

And to which system belong medical specialists in a University hospital? To the hospital they work in, to their department, to their university and their doctors in training, to their colleagues? When do you render yourself guilty when you do something for another department?

How does it come that bond and loyalty are often stronger at the bottom in the organisation than at the top? And what, in this context, means loyal to a brand?

### **Balance in giving and taking**

Personal conscience also guides when there is an exchange among people.

When someone has received something this person will feel the necessity to give the other person something back in order to equal the balance of conscience.

When the other person gives back a bit more to the first one, the first person will tend to give something again to the first. And then a fruitful exchange may steadily grow.

It can work this way between partners in a relationship, but also in a work situation. Someone gives his/her talents, his/her efforts to an organisation. That gives security, continuity, recognition, and a frame to do the work and a salary in return.

That can bring the employee to do just a bit more and to give the best of him/herself.

And so you can also imagine how such an exchange can dry up. Which makes the bond loosen.

A strong unbalance in giving and taking makes that someone cannot stay.

A secretary gave constantly more than her boss asked for. She also cleaned up, gave presents and did extra tasks. The boss felt more and more oppressed and although they spoke about it several times the only solution was to give her another place.

The balance of giving and taking also works when someone has been done an injustice. Then a right or a need appears to do injustice to the other one too, or to demand at least something to reinstall the balance so they can again look each other in the eye.

But when the one person, in reply to the injustice done to him/her, does more injustice or hurts the other one more, than that person feels in the position to do again more harm to the first person.

That is a good model for escalation.

When the first person, in answer to the injustice done to him/her demands less from the other one, but does this clearly and firm decided, the balance can be restored and they can look at each other again.

It is remarkable how precise people's sense of equilibrium is in this balance of taking and giving. Some people take care of constantly giving more than taking, so that clients are constantly in debt to them. But the effect can be that the clients feel not really free and have difficulties in behaving like adults.

There is an exception. In families the balance between giving and taking from parents to children is uneven. Parents give more and children take more.

Children cannot and should not bring this equilibrium into balance.

They can compensate this unbalance by passing on what they have received to their children or to a social project, without asking something in return.

For some schools or training or teachers the same rule holds. Students can not compensate for what they receive. That is why they feel they should do something good with what they learned to others. Teachers or institutions you are grateful to, can be respected by passing on new insights by, for example, publishing those insights.

A capable energetic female manager in Amsterdam was head of a group of employees and wondered why they did not achieve as much as could be expected, considering their training and experience.

What appeared was that several employees had a Jewish background and they received a grant from a fund for relatives of holocaust victims. Then the manager realised that the fact they received this grant contributed to their state of feeling a victim and so they were limited in their possibilities. She went back to work with new insights.

How big should a golden handshake be so that the person involved and the organisation feel acknowledged and free again? What is a suitable payment for a consultant so that the organisation and the consultant feel free again at the end?

The 'inner price barometer' can give you an idea. Imagine you get twice as much money for a service or product you have just given. Does it make the transaction and the whole stronger or weaker? Does it make you and the other

system feel freer or more bound? And what happens if you get one and a half times the amount? Or two third?

## **Order**

Personal conscience is also at work in a third area of feelings of guilt and innocence. What is the right place for me in the system, a place I can trust, which gives me safety and quietness so that I can do my work well.

If someone works from the right place it is coupled with feelings of innocence.

In organisations the right place is much more difficult to determine than in families. In families it follows the flow of life: grandparents come before parents who come before children who come before grandchildren. And in the family the first child comes before the second etc.

In organisation the right place is connected to several, sometimes-contradictory principles. Seniority is important, the fact of how long a person is part of an organisation. The place in the hierarchy is important: if someone considers him/herself better than the boss, this is often coupled with feelings of guilt.

The professional group is important, as well as specialism. In a group practice the physiotherapists have another place than the doctors.

The order of training someone followed can also be important or the different jobs a person has had can influence personal conscience.

When an engineer decides to become a social worker he will get a totally different strength if he still respects his ancient training and job than if he rejects that part of his life and considers it as a lost part of his life and the wrong choice.

## **Collective conscience**

Collective conscience works unconsciously, in service to the system as a whole. The function of collective conscience is to guarantee the progress of the system as a whole. And then the system as a whole comes before the individual. The fact that collective conscience works unconsciously and people can be taken into service of the system as a whole, without knowing or wanting it, makes it difficult to perceive.

Constellations are a good aid to bring to light those mechanisms. Often surprising and for the people involved different than they had thought.

In collective conscience the principles of bond, balance in giving and taking and order are also at work. But in another way than with personal conscience.

## **Everybody has the same right to a place.**

A system does not allow that members get lost or are excluded, without compensation later in the system.

When a founder is later dismissed from his organisation in a unpleasant way this can stay perceptible for years, also by people who entered the organisation much later and who never knew the person in question.

Being excluded also happens when people get unreal/figurative functions or when people think and speak arrogantly and moralistically about them.

If four functions are created after a merging of four town communities in order to give the four town clerks their job, while actually only three jobs are needed, the fourth clerk is excluded, although he is still working for the organisation.

And this is perceptible for everybody.

When someone is excluded it will be compensated later by someone else who wants to follow the excluded person, or who identifies him/herself with this person.

This person will then behave in the same way as the excluded person, for example by striving after the same aims or he/she will atone in another way by for example, not being successful. Original aims of an organisation can also be excluded after a certain time.

This often comes back as a difficult and unexplainable conflict among the employees.

### **Balance in giving and taking**

Collective conscience also works with the balance of giving and taking in a system as a whole. Collective conscience does not allow that somebody in a system has a big advantage at the cost of someone else, without compensation in another way later.

If a family company has become rich at the cost of health or sometimes even death of employees or clients, without anyone taking the responsibility for it or taking into account the consequences, then later someone will often unconsciously feel guilty about it and will tend to atone for it.

Collective conscience seems to 'grab' anyone or any element for that purpose later.

This function of collective conscience in organisations can be seen when someone seems to bear a burden out of scale that has nothing to do with what this person has done in the organisation.

Sometimes you get the impression that someone tries to make up for something and it is not clear what it is and who for. And it never seems enough. You can sometimes see it at the body posture of people, head down and as if loaded with a burden that is felt as unpleasant for colleagues and unexplainable at the same time.

### **Order**

For collective conscience earlier members or elements of a system have priority over who or what arrived later. In a certain way collective conscience is 'cruel'

because it 'punishes' people who arrived later for injustice that had be done before they arrived.

What arrived earlier is 'more important' than what arrived later.

That also means that those who arrived later should not interfere in matters of those who were there before them, nor should they feel better than those who came earlier. In organisations collective conscience does not only work towards those who came earlier or later but also at the same time in the hierarchy. People higher in hierarchy are considered for collective conscience as if they came earlier.

### **The struggle between personal and collective conscience**

What is tragic about the function of personal and collective conscience is that they can work against each other. Someone can do something with good personal conscience while someone else will have to do penance for this by the function of collective conscience.

When we look at organisations while keeping this in mind, a new image appears.

When we see the coherence of all and try to imagine what has happened in an organisation, what made things work as they work now. And if we try to imagine what struggle is going on between personal and collective conscience, than many presuppositions and judgements may disappear.

If a director fires immediately the employee who mistreated patients, the director acts from personal conscience. The perpetrator rendered him/herself guilty of mistreatment and has broken the rules of the organisation and has lost the right to belong to the organisation. But by excluding the perpetrator an infringement of collective conscience arises. Years later this theme reappeared constantly as a hidden tumour, causing restlessness in the organisation, without clear reasons for the people concerned.

### **Loving in the problem.**

A beautiful sentence by Jakob Schneider, a German therapist with a large experience in constellations is: how does he/she loves *in* the problem?

It is about the way you can look at people in organisations who struggle with personal and collective conscience.

You look at somebody or at a situation and you wonder: in what way each one is bound in the mechanisms of personal and collective conscience. You look at them without wanting to change something, without wanting to help, without judgement but ready to see that it is as it is.

If you are the consultant of the organisation mentioned in the previous paragraph and you would say that the director did not handle correctly by firing the perpetrator, it is possible that the director closes his heart and excludes the consultant.

## **The way out**

The question is now: how can you help? Is there a way out of the trap of the two consciences or are we at their mercy? Are there ways to free oneself of what happened in the past?

Insight in the function of the consciences, even only at the beginning or in a premature phase, can already be liberating.

By observing people, work situations and organisations systematically there are possibilities to see through the events to what happened in the background.

Already observing that opens new possibilities and space for a new movement.

A constellation helps to bring to light the function of consciences. But it is only a method, like the use of an x-ray set. It is much more important to get in touch with the question: 'What did possibly take place in the background, in the real organisation'. 'Which far-reaching event had such an influence here?' 'Who or what has been excluded here?' 'What has happened to cause such a burden on so many people?'

The systemic eye, systemic work and constellations make it possible to include excluded people again in the system, to face which guilt had to be borne and possibly to do something about it, maybe only symbolically.

It can be helpful to restore order to bring about quietness. And above all it can help to develop insight in conditions under which people and organisations can thrive.