

## Gundi Vater

*Assisting the development of individuals and organizations*

### Extract from a 2002 interview by Christina Zettl

**Dr. Vater, you are known as somebody who confronts participants, if needed, during your workshops.**

**How does one get such a reputation?**



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If we get along well, I really express my opinions and perceptions quite clearly and make my view as an outside observer available to the participants - with humour and the winking of an eye. Such interventions, though, always have a history. The participants feel seen, recognized, appreciated and met on an equal level.

Humour is a really important part of learning and experiencing. To laugh at oneself means to take one-self seriously while simultaneously being able to open up your mind. That opens up space for an encounter. Humour and curiosity facilitate new and unusual ways of thinking and acting. Fears and reservations find their place as a "check-and-balance" for potential trespassing beyond defined limits.

Differences between people and their views are a real gift, even if this sometimes seems difficult and challenging.

Normative and narrowing statements and perspectives such as "one must" etc., draw my attention. In order to address and move the hearts of the participants, more allowing, "letting go" and permitting is helpful"

**In your work, the word "responsibility" is often mentioned. What kind of responsibility do you have in mind?**

It is my particular concern that people see and understand that they are part of a whole, part of the surrounding field, as it were. The basic conditions may be more or less broad, but people have to see that they are responsible for their own feelings and experiences and for the part upon which they have some effect. Therefore, one has to face the fact that often one is not just a "victim" but sometimes also a "perpetrator", the actor or at least co-creator. To see it in that way could expand and extend the felt space and area of responsibility, movement and action.

Top managers are particularly required to keep an eye not only on the enterprise, ensuring its survival, but also to look carefully at their own actions and their effects. What they notice, stress, neglect, treat casually or choose to particularly emphasise, how they meet people, how they handle crises and mistakes, how they "produce guidance", are all carefully observed, interpreted and thus

very often part of executive and organisation culture.

I help develop the interaction between "guiding and being guided", to invite people to become aware of mutual dependencies, to enable them to be more transparent.

Suitable occasions for communication and structures have to be developed to reveal these things, to articulate different aspects and points of view and to develop common images and opinions.

### **When you are working, do you first take the perspective of the organisation or of the individuals?**

I particularly look at the interaction between both parts and the connection with the customer:

- How can different kinds of logic be used and involved?
- How can reliable handling of mutual expectations within an organisation be developed?
- What does contact with the customers look like? Etc.

Basically, it is about more or less firmly connecting the economic logic with the logic of people so that both parts derive benefit and find an acceptable balance. That makes it necessary to come to terms with future trends and changes within basic economic conditions and the new demands upon guidance that come from them.

I enjoy the contact, the encounter, the dialogue with people and their questions. I feel comfortable at the point where the demands of the organisation and the work environment meet with the potential of people, where multiple sides have to be coordinated to uncover the resources of all.

### **What does systemic organisational consulting mean for you?**

It is not so easy to answer that question with just one sentence. For me, systemic organisational consulting has much to do with the previously individual responsibility of the members of an organisation within their field of activity and their role as a part of the whole. As a systemic organisational consultant, I look at "the big picture" and simultaneously at the individual units, the people and their interactions, as well as at strengthening their respective responsibility.

Within the enterprise, only parts of a person are visible and effective; others are invisible - not perceived or which go unused. What is visible is what is crucial and, hence, what produces a certain effect. Motives cannot be seen from the outside.

One's intentions and adjustments are important and significant because they contribute to defining one's room to move, like a "self-fulfilling prophecy". This can be pleasant but also very irritating. Understanding and accepting these facts and learning to deal with them, learning that one is not only at the mercy of that process can clear new room for movement.

One's view of things and, therefore, what one does, is in each case an individual interpretation of a

situation and not the whole "truth", though they are a substantial part of it. In this sense, systemic organisational consulting means to find at least a shared picture of the situation.

This works best with a description to the organisation of what one perceives and observes, which patterns of interaction are detected, and relatively less mention about something that should be or does not exist.

Respect and appreciation for history and efforts cannot be dismissed by consultants; it is necessary to respect what exists, what the members have achieved within the enterprise thus far. Usually a long history of success has brought the enterprise to where it currently stands. Changing demands and basic conditions reveal the boundaries of past solutions and make the search for new solutions necessary and urgent. The devaluation of past history is a normal human reaction. If things no longer run smoothly and new ways have to be found, things may have to be changed radically. This devaluation happens with the belief that this will facilitate change and create more motivation for change. Usually the opposite is the case.

Therefore, in my consulting projects, I do not look so much at things that have not worked but more at the often still-hidden potential and resources that have not been used thus far and which could form attractive future alternatives.

In conclusion, as a systemic organisational consultant, I have learned to lose the illusion that there is such a thing as a perfect intervention. It is best to realize that there is something like a common search process for an apt solution that is certainly the more laborious but also the more satisfying way.

### **You have been in the consulting business for more than two decades. How have the perspectives shifted during this time?**

Doubtlessly, a radicalisation of organisational transformation processes has taken place in recent years. Things usually have to be initiated earlier, faster and more clearly than was the case in the past, even when many things are not yet decided and still uncertain, complex and unclear. For many years, single fighters/lone lead-ers/individual executives were at the head of enterprises. Now, management teams in charge seem ready, teams that can master new challenges only together. I assume that the successful interaction of teams at the head of enterprises will increasingly become a "success and competition" factor, similar to the power of enterprises to tie those with expertise and key players together within the enterprise.