

Before Saying “Hello”: A Commentary on Novellino

Servaas van Beekum

Abstract

This article, written from the perspective of an organizational consultant, comments on Novellino’s (2011) article about the first interview in psychotherapy. The author’s aim is to highlight the complexity created by the organizational context, which is present even prior to the first interview. An organizational consultant is entangled in a variety of steps, thoughts, and reflections that take place before seeing the organizational client for the first time. Some main areas of complexity are explored, and a case vignette is presented.

I liked Novellino’s (2011) refreshing article, which outlines the principles of psychodynamically oriented transactional analysis psychotherapy in relation to the first interview. He describes how Berne’s attention to reaching a contractual agreement about the “construction of a work *environment*” (p. 284) received little attention in comparison to his numerous articles about contracting for therapeutic goals. Berne’s legacy about contracting became more about the content than the process. I agree with Novellino that it is time to reconsider the process, and I thus focus on that aspect in this article.

Berne’s (1972/1996) *Hello* book is a profound reflection on script development. In it he followed Freud’s practice of using mythological and cultural figures, delivered in tales and literature, to understand human scripts. Novellino has elaborated on this with insightful analyses of several cultural (dysfunctional) male script roles, such as Pinocchio (Novellino, 2000), Don Juan (Novellino, 2006), and Frodo (Novellino, 2008), each analysis a treasure to read.

Berne’s (1972/1996) *Hello* book can easily be misunderstood to reflect his exclusive interest in what happens “after saying hello.” This is not the case in Berne’s other writings, especially

in *Principles of Group Treatment* (1966/1994). With his article, Novellino returns to a discounted area when he points out the importance of “how to say hello,” especially in the first interview. He explores the work of other authors, expands the understanding of process in the first interview, and creates a structure with six steps for that interview. This is where I differ a bit.

I am skeptical of what I call *seductive model clarity*, that is, the tendency to divide complexity into manageable “steps”: six steps here, four positions there, twelve injunctions, six advantages of games, and so on. This is a particularly strong tendency in transactional analysis, where we seem obsessed with creating structured meaning. We let the curiosity for continuous learning and being in the hard and anxious space of not knowing to be taken over by the pressure to find structure, answers, or solutions.

Raab (1997) described how “knowing is a defense against learning,” which follows the notion that “creating structure is a defense against anxiety” (p. 168). An important contribution from gestalt psychology is that when the gestalt is closed and we “know,” the learning stops (Nevis, 1987). This is fine in mathematics, but when we deal with human nature and human behavior in consulting or psychotherapy, there is obvious value in not finding the structure or the answer but instead continuing to question and letting a truth emerge for which clients can take responsibility.

This is not an easy task. I struggle with this in my professional roles, and my sense about Novellino’s article is that he also struggles with the integration of the wish for analytic exploration and the pressure to find steps and answers. However, every structuring of complexity eventually kills off the enormity that we face in social and psychological life. This urge is related to the often-mentioned comment about how the map is not the territory, an idea for which we owe Korzybski (1933) much credit.

Consider the difference between many of the well-structured books in transactional analysis, which contain all of the concepts plus exercises in a readable overview, and the collective works of Eric Berne, which present his incongruencies and inconsistencies, his contradictions, his search for meaning, and the development of his ideas over time. Where the clarity of the well-structured book helps us to learn quickly and provides answers from conceptual insights, the searching for meaning in Berne’s original work keeps us wondering about these insights and provides for further questioning. Berne was an explorer, as Freud was, and I share with Novellino the wish to bring more exploration and wondering into our professions. I know what speaks to me most, and yet I also know which books sell best in current times.

In organizational consulting, this contrast is very much in the foreground. Based on the myth of controllability, organizations often demand quick answers about how to manage things better. They want a well-structured book—even better a short article, and even better a simple one-page handout that explains it all. The reality, of course, is much more complex and multidimensional. Consultants, especially the more analytically minded, like complexity and do not succumb to their own and/or their client’s anxieties about the enormity of it all. On the contrary, they consider it part of their professional ethos to provide containment so that organizations can deal with that complexity and anxiety. In the process of consulting, they do not begin dealing with this when they sit with the organizational client for a meeting; the complexity is already at work in their mind and in the emerging relationship in the lead up to the first interview, “before saying hello” (with acknowledgment to Cecilia Waldekranz-Piselli, who used the “before we say hello” question in a 1999 article about the body in relation to script).

Illustrative Vignette

A trusted colleague told me about a professional contact, the CEO of a consortium that invested in renewable energy, who supposedly was interested in a management change process in one of the companies of this consortium. The

colleague informed me about what had happened so far in his own contact with this CEO and asked me to become involved in this process with him.

Via phone and email we negotiated with the CEO’s personal assistant (PA) a time for a first meeting, in about three weeks. That day we traveled to the site of one of the company plants. We passed through a gate at which the concierges checked our identities and made us fill in forms and sign for visitors’ passes. We then walked to a high-rise building where we passed a metal detector and arrived in a waiting area with a good deal of art on the walls. We had a cup of tea, and while we were waiting to be taken to the CEO’s headquarters, we read through the company’s glossy promotional material, which was available in the waiting area. This looked pretty much the same as their professional Web site, which we had studied before. About 20 minutes late, a woman, who introduced herself as the CEO’s PA, came to pick us up and take us to one of the top floors of the building. There were several open doors on this floor to offices of senior managers. As we passed, some managers ignored us, most looked curiously at us. The CEO’s office door was closed. The PA knocked, opened the door, and we entered for our first interview.

Client Complexity

When working with organizations, there are, in contrast to psychotherapy, some differences when it comes to the first interview. First and most obvious is the client. In psychotherapy the client is an individual, with issues that can be related to his or her individual history and pain. When there is context, it is the historic context of the client’s family and the current context of his or her life. The therapeutic focus is not, with the exception of family therapy, on the context but on the individual. Deeper relational work stays in the realm of the jointly created transference dynamics between therapist and client. Normally, even in a cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) approach, client and therapist work out the complexities of the oedipal triangle by focusing on the vertical parent-child dynamics and transferences. The initial interview is the first encounter to set the goals and

explore the way of working in the therapeutic process.

In consulting to an organization, the client is the organization, an entity with layers and structures beyond the individual. Therefore, an organization provides the consultant with much more complexity, which we can look at from a transactional analysis perspective in terms of the organization's history, script, transactions, games, stroke patterns, and so on. Although the CEO may be the only one in the room in the initial interview, he or she is there in the role of CEO and represents all layers of the organization. As he or she speaks, the wider context enters the room metaphorically. This is a context of financial issues, markets and customers, legislation and regulations, and internal processes of production and communication as well as the people who work there, including managers and other staff. From whichever angle the consultant comes, such a situation demands an openness to transference dynamics beyond the vertical into the horizontal (see van Beekum, 2009).

Boundary Complexity: Time, Task, and Territory

Both psychotherapy and consulting provide a learning environment that contains the client's learning. Containment is a requisite for learning, and healthy boundaries are a requisite for containment. Boundaries are particularly essential for the areas of "time, territory, and task" (Ramsay, 1999, p. 253), which represent the when, where and what of the work.

In the one-on-one frame of psychotherapy and counseling, time and territory are part of the administrative contract; both are not really negotiated but are more or less a given. Psychotherapists normally do not work outside their own offices, and 50-minute sessions are standard. "The requirement of a fixed meeting place, an agreed upon time, are nonnegotiable elements of the frame" (Goldberg, 2009, p. 71). Perhaps the number of sessions will be negotiated, depending on the progress of the work, but the number of sessions is often not negotiable (e.g., when psychotherapists are bound by the constraints of rebates from CBT-driven mental health insurers).

The task in psychotherapy becomes apparent in the treatment contract. Novellino includes in

this contracting therapeutic goals and, more importantly, the construction of a work environment.

In terms of territory, when the organizational consultant enters the organization, he or she enters the client's territory. The consultant is there as the client's guest, which unconsciously sets up different ulteries in the working relationship from those in a psychotherapeutic frame. Often the organizational client unconsciously claims ownership of the consultant, expecting that he or she will do as he or she is told and puts pressure on the consultant to collude with the organization's biases. There are also advantages to working in the client's territory (e.g., the territory is a source of information with which the consultant can work). For these sorts of reasons, the issue of territory demands a high awareness from the consultant.

In consulting to an organization, the times of work and length of sessions are always related to the working contract about the task. The task, the contract to work with, or the goals to reach need to be considered in a multicornered fashion (English, 1975). Berne (1966/1994) acknowledged the "double responsibility [of the] organizational therapist" (p. 15): on the one hand, toward the organization as a whole and on the other, to the individuals in the organization. The consultant comes into the organization to shed light on areas in which the organization experiences a lack of understanding, insight, or skill. He or she needs to find a working relationship with the formal and informal power bases in the organization (Witte, 1973). The consultant's attention for the task is always multi-, multi-, multicornered.

Relational Complexity

Consultant and psychotherapist begin a working alliance with a client with awareness of a frame of working in a one- or two-person psychology (Hargaden & Sills, 2002; Stark, 1999; Tudor, 2011). The relationship with the client develops as the content of the client's story unfolds and the direction of development becomes clearer. The dynamics of transference and countertransference are always there, irrespective of whether the therapist or consultant is, in fact, working with these perspectives.

Again, the complexity makes the difference. In psychotherapy, there are two people in the room, and each represents his or her own complex conscious and unconscious world. When the therapist works with his or her inner feelings and countertransference awareness toward the client in the room, the unconscious connection between the two can be explored for the good of the client.

In consulting, the process is the same but the complexity is different. The consultant's countertransference is not restricted to the CEO in the room but stretches to encompass the organization as a whole. The client is not an individual but a system, including other role keepers, departments, groups, and subsystems. Containing and addressing this multilayered complexity of a client system is way beyond the capacity of a single operating consultant. The best thing the consultant can do is to have at least one other colleague with him or her in the first interview. This allows the countertransference to be spread over more individuals and makes it possible for the consultant system to begin operating as a mirror of the client system. This opens up for consideration the dynamics between the consultants practically, mentally, and emotionally and the possible ways these carry information about the client. We can call this *the systemic parallel process in action*.

Role Complexity

The role of the consultant(s) is all but unilateral and therefore must be clearly negotiated in order to restrict the multitude of projections. In negotiations about the task, the consultant can be drawn into various roles: the expert, the teacher, the behavioral or communications trainer, the coach, the facilitator, the team developer, the process moderator, the supervisor, and so on (Balling, 2000). With each role, the expectations, projections, and transference can vary from that of rescuer to good parent, shining light, ultimate hope, and make-it-all-better person, on the one hand, or powerless softie, useless outsider, or the next failure, on the other.

Organizational Complexity

As part of an organizational contract, including administrative, professional, and psychologi-

cal aspects, Berne (1963) stressed the importance of drawing an authority diagram that represents the public structure of the organization. This diagram shows "everyone inside the organization and as much of the external hierarchy as possible" (Berne, 1966/1994, p. 17). This includes everyone from the elevator operators, secretaries, and gatekeepers to the department directors, section heads, and senior management at the highest levels. The external hierarchy includes founders and funders, the board, and the shareholders. Berne originally wrote about an organizational therapist (now referred to as an organizational consultant) who uses the organizational chart as a formal representation of the authority diagram. He argued that the consultant needs to be "political and procedural" (p. 145) in setting up his work relationships. The political aspect demands that the consultant become familiar with the personal aspects of the group authority because the personalities of that group may impinge on his professional operating space. The procedural aspects demand that the consultant pay attention to the formal chart in order to obtain a clear understanding of his or her position in relation to those who have roles, responsibilities, and power in the organization. Clear lines of authority not only show who is accountable but also provide the channels for possibly locating and changing dysfunctional work practices.

Anxiety Complexity

Obholzer (1994) described three layers of anxiety that need to be understood in working with organizations:

1. Primitive anxieties, which "refer to the ever-present and all-pervasive anxiety that besets the whole of mankind" (p. 206). Organizations and social institutions protect us from social and personal breakdown, and any time they fail to do so, especially in times of change, this primitive anxiety emerges in major ways.
2. Anxieties that arise from the nature of the work, that is, work-specific anxieties. These can be so strong that the work environment organizes itself so as to protect the members of the organization from feeling these anxieties (Menzies, 1970).

3. Personal anxieties arising from past experience that are triggered by here-and-now events, both conscious and unconscious. People—employees in organizations, citizens of a country, and so on—have the need to be contained by organizational entities of which they are a part. Stability and predictability are key elements in the process of containment.

Organizational change always challenges stability and therefore triggers all three layers of anxiety at all levels of an organization. The most predictable reactions in an organization that opts for “management change” are variations of social defenses to protect from the anxieties triggered by the change process. In individuals, these social defenses manifest as denial, sabotage, repression, regression, introjection, sublimation, or projection. In larger entities, such as groups and organizations, these defenses are acted out in survival dynamics such as fighting, dependency, “me first,” pairing, or the attitude that nothing is wrong and we are all OK. Consultants entering an organization anticipate encountering these types of defenses and are prepared to find that their presence may trigger chains of anxiety, including very primitive ones.

Reflections on the Vignette

Many questions, observations, and reflections may emerge for the consultant as he or she prepares for the first interview. These are triggered by physical and practical events around the prospective organization, public announcements, research carried out via brochures and Web sites, exploring the Internet, and thinking about the complexity of issues opened up by the referral. All these may mirror something that is relevant for understanding the organizational client before the first interview even takes place.

Thus, thinking about the client system starts in the earliest stages of the referral process. To return to the vignette described earlier, that situation began with the “trusted colleague.” That label refers to a long-term relationship of collegiality between that person and me. However, in what sort of historic roles between us did this collegiality take shape? Was it from an

“old-boys’ network” going back to high school? Were we both trainees in a postdoctoral management training or former members of the same therapy group? Had we worked together on previous projects and if so, in what sorts of roles? Was our relationship always equal or was one a former boss of the other? How, in general, had our professional relationship developed over time? Why did my colleague ask me and not someone else? Did I offer special expertise for the work in this company, was there chemistry between us, was he paying back a favor, or was he managing unaddressed guilt from a previous relationship? Questions like these lead to first thoughts about the organization; answers to them may shed light on or lead to hypotheses about conscious and unconscious organizational dynamics.

It turns out that my colleague, “through his network,” knew the CEO who represented the client system. What sort of network was it? And what sort of relationship did they really have? Did it come from the Freemasons or the Lions network; a business network group; a consulting, charity, or political network; or one of the social network Web sites such as Linked In, MySpace, or even Facebook? Did his previous contact with the CEO occur in professional meetings, through e-mail, or through social gatherings ranging from birthday parties to drinks after work in the pub? Or all of the above? How did the management change question come up in their encounters? Did the CEO ask for it, or did my colleague bring it up? Did he offer to talk with the CEO about this, or did the CEO want another conversation? How did my colleague (if at all) introduce to the CEO the idea of inviting me to participate, and what did he tell him about me? Thoughts about these questions raise awareness about cons and game invitations that are already present and how these may relate to our “soft spots” as consultants.

The colleague wanted me to become involved in the process. Did he have thoughts about my role? In what capacity did he want me to participate, in what sort of involvement, for how long, and with what intent? What sort of work relation did he see us developing? Could our projected work relationship have already been an indicator of the sort of questions that

may have been alive in the organization? Did the way we got together for this work already mirror something for the organization?

In this vignette, there was a consortium that invested and a company that dealt with renewable energy. What was the impact of the investors, shareholders, and board? Why was the consortium's CEO starting this process rather than the general manager of the specific company? What did the board want for this company? Was this a "problem company" within the consortium, and if so, how did that relate to other companies within the consortium? What was the primary product of this company?

"Renewable energy" sounds like a nice metaphor for a management change process. Did the CEO want to renew the company's energy? And did senior managers and other staff share this wish? Such questions offer a first awareness of the complexity of the client as an organization, with people working in different roles and with different responsibilities but all in some way connected with renewable energy as their primary product. Yet how did this product sit in the minds and the hearts of the CEO and his staff? In what way did they identify with this product in all layers of the company?

This brings us back to the issue of management change, which is a rather meaningless phrase so far. Because management change is so often the projected remedy for all perceived problems in a company, it requires further consideration. In the vignette, when management had to change, who were the managers that the CEO was thinking of? Did they include or exclude the CEO himself? And what sort of change was he thinking of? "Cutting dead wood" or seeking to legitimize splitting off the company if the intervention was not successful? Which problems was the change supposed to tackle? How were these problems perceived by him, and even more importantly, how were they perceived by important others, such as senior managers, work staff, or even the board? Were the company problems related to other parts of the consortium? Were they old problems that arose again and again? Did they represent a repetitive drama within the company? And if the problems were familiar, how were they addressed in the past and what did people think about what

did not work? Were we called in after a series of failings with other consultants (and wannabe surrogates) and predestined to also fail?

We negotiated a meeting time via the CEO's PA. Obviously, the CEO had a certain clarity about his role that did not include making such arrangements himself. This was repeated later when we came for the first interview. The PA was the go between. Was this a signal of role clarity and delegation of authority in the company or a never-reflected societal and company attitude of men exercising power over women?

There was glossy promotional material and a professional Web site for this organization, which revealed a well-developed externalized self-*imago*. This, of course, is always important to test out. The multiple boundaries on entering the plant and the office building, the identity checks, forms, visitors' passes, and metal detector indicated a strong sense of boundary and organizational angst. We felt intimidated, but was that the intention? There might have been a well-developed differentiation between in and out, them and us. Were these boundaries to protect against the outside world or protect the company from something leaking out? Why did the company need those boundaries and such a strong split between inside and outside?

Observations about locating the offices of the CEO and senior staff on the top floors, with doors open and closed, the curious or anxious following of who was going into the CEO's office, also triggered our attention as consultants and made us wonder how lonely it was at the top of that organization (Newman, 1972).

Postscript

I do not suggest that my reflections on this vignette are complete. They are actually just a start. The questions raised here are an indication of the level and amount of complexity about which the organizational consultant needs to be aware and reflective. The consultant prepares his or her contribution to the consulting frame from an ongoing awareness that "initial errors in the frame become rapidly institutionalized and are difficult to change" (J. Masterson as cited in Cornell, 1986, p. 6). With questions such as those just described in mind, he or she can enter and "say hello" for the first interview.

Servaas van Beekum, drs, Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analyst (education, counseling, organizations), is a social scientist with a background in analytic, humanistic, and systemic modalities. He is a registered psychotherapist (Pacfa reg) and a psychodynamic consultant to organizations. Servaas is a past president of EATA and the ITAA and co-founder of Group Relations Nederland (1992) and Group Relations Australia (2005), associations that study unconscious group process in organizations. He is globally active as a speaker and consultant while living in Sydney and directing the consulting training arm of the Australian Centre for Integrative Studies (ACIS) (www.acissydney.com.au). Servaas can be reached at servaas@acissydney.com.au .

REFERENCES

- Balling, R. (2000). *OE-Beraterrollen* [OD consultant roles] [Training material]. Stuttgart, Germany: Professio
- Berne, E. (1963). *The structure and dynamics of organizations and groups*. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Berne, E. (1986). *What do you say after you say hello?: The psychology of human destiny*. Beverley Hills, CA: City National Bank. (Original work published 1972)
- Berne, E. (1994). *Principles of group treatment*. Menlo Park, CA: Shea Books. (Original work published 1966)
- Cornell, W. F. (1986). Setting the therapeutic stage: The initial sessions. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 16, 4-10.
- English, F. (1975). The three-cornered contract. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 5, 383-384.
- Goldberg, P. (2009). With respect to the analytic frame: Commentary on paper by Steven Stern. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 19, 69-74.
- Hargaden, H., & Sills, C. (2002). *Transactional analysis: A relational perspective*. London, England: Brunner-Routledge.
- Korzybski, A. (1933). *Science and sanity: An introduction to non-Aristotelian systems and general semantics* (Supplement III, pp. 747-761). Forest Hills, NY: Institute of General Semantics.
- Menzies, I. (1970). *The functioning of social systems as a defense against anxiety*. London, England: Tavistock Institute for Human Relations.
- Nevis, E. (1987). *Organizational consulting: A gestalt approach*. Cleveland, OH: GIC Press.
- Newman, R. (Writer, singer) & Waronker, L., & Titelman, R. (Producers). (1972). *Lonely at the top*. From R. Newman, *Sail away* [Album]. Los Angeles, CA: Reprise Records.
- Novellino, M. (2000). The Pinocchio syndrome. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 30, 292-298.
- Novellino, M. (2006). The Don Juan syndrome: The script of the great losing lover. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 36, 33-43.
- Novellino, M. (2008). A transactional psychoanalysis of Frodo: The conflict of the male adolescent in becoming a man. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 38, 233-237.
- Novellino, M. (2011). Six steps for the first interview: Establishing the frame and work environment in transactional psychoanalysis. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 41, 284-290.
- Obholzer, A. (1994). Afterword. In A. Obholzer & V. Zagier Roberts (Eds.), *The unconscious at work* (pp. 206-210). London, England: Routledge.
- Raab, N. (1997). Becoming an expert in not knowing. *Management Learning*, 28, 161-175.
- Ramsay, S. (1999). After the conference is over. In R. French & R. Vince (Eds.), *Group relations, management and organization* (pp. 250-263). Oxford, England: University Press.
- Stark, M. (1999). *Modes of therapeutic action*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Tudor, K. (2011). Understanding empathy. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 41, 39-57.
- van Beekum, S. (2009). Siblings, aggression, and sexuality: Adding the lateral. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 39, 129-135.
- Waldekranz-Piselli, K. C. (1999). What do we do before we say hello? The body as a stage setting for the script. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 29, 31-48.
- Witte, E. (1973). *Organisation für innovationsentscheidungen, das promotoren-modell* [Organization of innovative decision making: The promoter model]. Göttingen, Germany: Schwarz.