

## **We are our own client or: encounter the organisation**

Ulrich Sollmann, Dipl.rer.soc., CBT, Gestalttherapist, management coach

### **Prologue: Lowen's personal testimony**

„When I die don't kill me”, Lowen once said, a little sad, as the one who knew what was to happen to him. With these words he offered his personal testimony and at the same time he defined a dilemma which many founders of psychotherapy schools were familiar with. I remember well the interview of the psychoanalyst Eissler with the old Wilhelm Reich: They talked about the fate of those founders, and about the dynamics of needing to find distance to the founder, after his death. Some may call this “father-killing”, but some call it a necessary phase of finding one's identity, one's own power and vision which brings the development of the school to a higher state/level of meaning and/or organisation. For me this is quite natural because the founder's charisma is gone. And from now on we are the organisation.

In the early 1990ies the situation in the psychotherapeutic field had changed rapidly, at least in Europe:

- Scarce interest in joining a training group
- Financial problems in the institutes
- Other schools adapted bioenergetic concepts and integrated them into their own system
- Reduced number of members in the institutes
- Implementation of (rigid) psychotherapy laws
- Basic critique on the Bioenergetic Analysis
- The field of psychotherapy developed competition and/or a battle of power systems (medical doctors, psychologists, academic psychotherapists, insurance companies, psychotherapy schools etc.)

In short: the Bioenergetic Analysis is often (at least in Germany) regarded as a method somewhat between esoteric, exotic or not enough scientifically grounded.

The Bioenergetic Analysis has no lobby in the systems of power.

And the Bioenergetic Analysis does not dare stand up from within it's own power in this power race.

This mirrors the organisational dynamics in the bioenergetic field, the current state of us refusing power as an inevitable part of our organisational development. I am concerned how

we can successfully effect other power systems outside our own community, if we refuse to empower ourselves in our “own house”.

The process described above gave us the opportunity to identify with a German and/or European ground with all its uniqueness, specific difficulties and problems to be solved. It also rebalanced the relationship between the IIBA, the efbab and the DVBA as organisations. Phases of distance changed with phases of dialogue so that we came into contact with our specific identification and a fruitful cooperation between the DVBA, the efbab and the IIBA evolved.

We all are the IIBA!

In my opinion this process of organisational forming and learning was a necessary must for the bioenergetic community. The more we grew, the more urgent became the organisational identification. This learning process led us from face-to-face and a family-like communication (small group/organisation) to the inevitable next step: to an organisation with different ways of communication, participation, structure, roles and functioning.

**The permission to be different –**

**Or: working with the group process**

“Well, you must know that I developed the Bioenergetic Analysis as a one-on-one therapy. I had enough to do with it. So if you like, develop/adapt it as a group therapy”. I remember well the discussion between Al Lowen and me at the International Conference of Bioenergetic Analysis in Mexico 1982. It was the time, when I tried to bring together my experience as Bioenergetic therapist\_ with my skill as a therapist who also worked with the group process. I was familiar with the Bioenergetic Analysis as a one-on-one therapy in the context of a group, as it was offered by the official training program within the IIBA. There we had worked in pairs, triads or by sharing as well as giving feedback on the group level.

When a problem on the group level occurred we usually shared our feelings and points of view. Often the trainer offered a one-on-one session in front of the group, in exploration of how far the client was personally touched by the group problem. As most of us could identify in one way or another, this remained a deep experience. It became also a rich experience as we learned by identification with the trainer/therapist how to work individually with the client

and it enriched our experience by the various perspectives shown in the feedback of the group.

Underlying this, a process existed in the group, which effected us as a group. This process mirrored unconscious group wishes, problems and issues. In those days however a group-process could neither be put into words nor be worked out on the group-level. Sometimes I got the impression that it would have been necessary or even urgent to integrate both: the one-on-one session in the group and the process in the group as a group.

I was glad about Al's encouragement. I began to work bioenergetically more consciously with the process in the group I studied different concepts of group therapy (psychoanalysis, encounter, Gestalt etc.) and published articles, illustrating the way I worked in/with the group, explaining what I did, and putting things together. All this I did in order to initiate the discussion on bioenergetic group analysis.

Over time I got more and more convinced about the importance of the interplay between one-on-one sessions in the group and the process in the group. I also began to believe in the possibility of conceptualising bioenergetic group analysis. At the same time I experienced that it worked, and that more colleagues joined the discussion.

In the middle of the 80's we therefore started an ongoing work group with representatives of all training institutes in Germany. We explained our individual experience in working with groups as bioenergetic therapists and compared this with the different training groups we had experienced as group models.

We illustrated our personal way of working with the group process by showing examples and basic working-concepts. One result out of this was the integration of a special training module "Working with group process as bioenergetic therapist" into the official curriculum. During that time big steps were done on the organisational level in the bioenergetic field. The German Association of Bioenergetic Analysis (DVBA) was founded as well as the European Association of Bioenergetic Analysis (efbab). Both organisations were created in order to focus on collegial and scientific communication, on scientific research, on political representation of Bioenergetic Analysts and of Bioenergetic Analysis as a psychotherapeutic method. (Both organisations do not offer any training in bioenergetics). The engagement in

these activities, especially in the process of legalisation of psychotherapy (at least in Germany), and in the effort to find one's own profile in comparison to the IIBA, both brought us together in a very specific way. Many of us were convinced that the growth of the bioenergetic community would inevitably lead to the process of organisational learning. Many of us, at the same time, also began to experience power issues. Power is of course part of an organisation. But power as we experienced it in the DVBA and the efbab also, was a necessary way to find one's own space compared to the IIBA, one's own identification, one's own boundary.

The process of organisational learning in the IIBA was influenced by at least 5 other aspects:

### **Daring distance to Lowen**

The senior trainers who together with Al Lowen had given life to the bioenergetic community – some may call them “the ideal fathers”- retired, lost influence on the training programs or passed away.

Younger colleagues became official trainers of the IIBA. The local trainers felt more responsible for the interests of the local training groups. Their efforts led to modifications of the official curriculum, concerning issues like: working with group-dynamics, integrating new scientific results, etc.

At the same time the local institutes grew older and felt mature, grown up within the IIBA. On the psychodynamic level this also can be understood as fighting against the “ideal fathers” i. e. the senior trainers, especially the “ultimate father”, Al Lowen, who was often experienced as overpowering. Finding one's own distance to Lowen meant finding one's own place in the IIBA. This also meant: adding a new facet of life to the IIBA as an organisation.

### **The “Back to the basics project”**

When Al Lowen visited training groups all over the world, he was shocked by the fact, that they did no longer work with the body as it had been usually taught in the IIBA. He started a re-identification process which was accompanied by the restructuring process “back to the basics”. Trainers had to officially identify with the basic ideas of Lowen's Bioenergetic Analysis.

After having resigned from the presidency of the IIBA, Al Lowen recaptured his old role in the IIBA like an “angry father” confronting **his** “children” with **his** values, **his** point of view

on the world, **his** way of understanding the Bioenergetic Analysis and therapy. Al seemed to do this in order to bind all trainers and colleagues.

This “Back to the basics project” also was connected to the self-commitment of all trainers to Lowen’s basic bioenergetic concepts, to **his** way of working with the body.

The “Back to the basics project” also led to some unsolvable conflicts within the IIBA. Some trainers separated from Al Lowen and the IIBA, others were rejected by Lowen.

On an organisational level this can be judged as a normal development in an organisation, especially normal as the founder of the organisation still lived and / or still was actively striving for clarity of his ideas, his concepts and theories. Asking for everybody’s “confession of faith”, Lowen tried for the last time in his life to implant his heritage, the principles of the Bioenergetic Analysis, into everybody’s heart and soul. This was also the step of a father who was professionally convinced, but felt personally helpless, disappointed and angry. He needed to protect his “life-work”, because he subconsciously felt that his organisation had changed.

Even though this step was very much criticised, it also helped many colleagues to win more distance to Lowen and his concepts, thus increasing their independence. This distance which is extremely necessary for gaining one’s own standpoint, one’s own professional identity, allowed all colleagues to meet with Al on a mature ground.

Additionally, this distance also helped many of us to complain without getting too sad. It helped the anger which covered tears when saying goodbye to Al Lowen, to him as the “ultimate father”. This anger was also an encoded cry of our own helplessness and loneliness facing the future without Al Lowen. This future seemed like looking into the mirror seeing only oneself, and we anticipated how difficult the future and the restructuring of the organisation would be.

Years later Al Lowen regretted in his autobiography the “back to the basics period”. He confessed, that it had been wrong to force the bioenergetic community to a commitment in such a rigid way. Lowen seems to know about the role and function of his personal narcissism in the process of development of the IIBA. The narcissistic wound of the “back to the basics period” is however deep. Many of our colleagues, who turned back from Lowen in those days go on devaluated Lowen as “bad father”. This helps them to cope with their own narcissistic structure which remains being hurt. But this also depends the gap between our own history and an innovational process in our community. To make it short: rejecting Lowen as “bad father” seems to justify the rejection of the bioenergetic analysis in toto.

Therefore it is more than urgent for us to communicate openly and more specifically on that period and its influence on the acceptance as well as the innovation of the bioenergetic analysis. But also to communicate more generously that will mean less narcissistic alert among ourselves.

### **Role and function of the Bioenergetic Analysis in the professional community**

When Al Lowen retired from being president of the IIBA, a deep transformational process started on the organisational level. Parallel to this, the organisation of bodypsychotherapy grew in Europe and expanded to the USA. The bioenergetic community did not join this organisation. It tried to find its own way. The main focus was to build its own globally functioning organisation as a net of affiliated training institutes which guaranteed close to the same standards and level of training. But it also risked to be regarded as an isolated and arrogant school of psychotherapy.

This step meant taking a risk, yet it was an important phase of consolidation of the concepts of Bioenergetic Analysis, and of anchoring the identification with Al Lowen and his ideas in various countries. The IIBA as our organisation remained a founder ruled organisation with its particular elements, structure, culture and dynamics until the middle of the 90's. This made us strong, important and well known. As "sons and daughters" of Al Lowen we took advantage of his publicity, of his millions of sold books which were translated into many languages. We benefited from his fame. We benefited from the fact that clients came to our offices in huge numbers to work with bioenergetics after having read Al's books or having seen him on TV.

On the other hand this separated us too much from other schools of bodypsychotherapy (at least in Germany and in Europe).

All this was shaken, when Lowen retired. Soon we became aware of our situation. We had to restructure the IIBA, and could no longer feel safe in the deep identification with Lowen, his books and his concepts. It also led us to the experience that we were not familiar with organising ourselves in a different way than we were used to in Lowen's time. Trying to do so was painful. Things did not function as we hoped. Our Growth developed much slower than we wanted. Our trust in people was damaged during the time of the new managing director who (within a short period of time) wasted some hundred thousands of US-\$, all the resources Al had left behind for the IIBA and its future after retiring.

Many of us, disappointed, lost identification with the Bioenergetic Analysis. Many of us were not motivated anymore to be engaged in the organisational field. Many of us also resigned under the sobering disillusion that we were not yet prepared for our own organisation. We did not yet have an organisation with a clear vision, solid strategies, a well grounded program, convincing roles and functioning which is trusted by it's members.

Today it is not clear yet whether we have reached the turning point, when disappointment and resentment change into solid trust and fruitful activities. We have to fill the power vacuum which Lowen has left behind. But who dares pick up the power in the organisation? The "old father's" power in the "brother-and-sister-organisation"? Who is courageous enough to decide things on an organisational level? To decide, to step forward in the competition within the own family?

What makes it so frightening?

It's more than urgent that we grow up and take over the role. It is necessary to develop a solid professional organisation, to be well known in the therapeutic community. But most of all, to survive as bioenergetic community. To do so, also means to pick up the power AI has left behind.

### **Bioenergetic Analysis and sciences**

For the last 15 years colleagues tried to integrate various new scientific concepts into the Bioenergetic Analysis, like "Neuro-physiology, Baby-research, and so on". This led to a beginning anchoring of the Bioenergetic Analysis in the field of other scientific theories. It also led to critical views on Lowen's concepts and to separation from the Bioenergetic Analysis and / or the IIBA as an organisation. We found out where the Bioenergetic Analysis is lacking explanation or clear enough theoretical background/backing. On the other hand we began to realize where other sciences can learn from us. But how about the culture of communication in the bioenergetic field on these issues? And I mean by that - how about the targeting and organisation of such a dialogue? The official integration of these issues into the concepts of Bioenergetic Analysis as well as into it's curriculum. And how do we join the scientific dialogue in the scientific field itself? On scientific congresses?

Following the grassroots` dynamics of such communication you can find many initiatives being engaged with such issues. But they are not monitored enough by the organisation (the IIBA) in order to give energy to this or benefit the organisation. Well, it will take some time to get enriched by this. From Fritz Perls, the founder of the Gestalttherapie, we know that the river flows by itself. So, don't push the river!

But be aware!

Therefore: monitoring all means creating a higher level of organisational awareness, a learning process of giving significance to certain issues, persons and results in our own bioenergetic community. This helps colleagues to participate, to find roles and functions in the organisation. This helps to trust in our own growth and the renewing of the system.

From system theory we know that development takes place at the border of a system. We now have an important chance to learn and develop by realizing what essentially are our (scientific and bioenergetic) basics and what is new. What needs to be adapted, to be changed in order to remain a reliable and important part of the scientific landscape.

### **Legal situation and the power game**

Some years ago, at least in Europe, a movement started of establishing different psychotherapy laws. These are often dominated by the medical system. This also led to an extraordinary and scrutinizing selection of psychotherapy methods. In the end the Bioenergetic Analysis (I think except in Switzerland and Italy) has not been accepted as a scientifically valid method by the government/the law. One consequence of this is that only very few colleagues join a training group now. So we have to say goodbye to the good old times, when almost everything in the field was possible.

### **Do you want to be your own client?**

The answer is: we have to! There is no other way out. No way back to the old times.

From a systemic point of view one can say that we begin to realize that we are our own client, although we have already been the clients for decades, just without knowing it consciously.

Being committed to Bioenergetic Analysis (as a Bioenergetic Analyst), I am very happy to get this chance. What kind of chance do I mean? It's a chance to apply our own thinking models, the architecture of our system, the rich bioenergetic experience on the group level and the process of organizational learning. It is my chance to do what Al meant, when he said "do it, I can't do it any longer."

### **How about tomorrow?**

Of course I don't know the answers. The chance we have is:

- To discuss openly our organisational history and Lowen's concepts.



- To look at new questions.
- To take advantage from other perspectives like: group process, organisational development, etc.
- To really deeply in our heart feel and remember the passion we felt in our first encounter with the bioenergetics and use it as basic motivation.
- To fully realize that it all will help the organisation: this organisation, the IIBA.

We are the organisation!

Here are some thoughts about dealing with organisational learning and structuring. I understand them as guidelines, as important questions and as organisational parameter which are proven in other fields, but most of all as impetus to get engaged.

### **Organisational development ...**

...has to do with the following aspects and we have to deal with them and to work on them:

- **Vision**
  - Where do we want to go?
  - What are our targets or images of the future?
  - Which experience will lead us there?
- **Mission / Identity**
  - Where do we come from?
  - Who are we?
  - How are we? (Our central issues, our roles, function, tradition, etc.)
  - What is our main competence? (Resources, business, etc.)
- **Culture**
  - What are our values?
  - What are the hidden rules of communication within our community?
  - What are aspects of good cooperation?
  - What are criteria of leadership, loyalty, motivation, identification? And of Power?
  - What are main thinking models?
- **Strategic targets**
  - What do we want? (fundamentally and in the long run)
  - Who has already done what?

- Do we have a future for our own?
- **Structure**
  - How is our “hardware”?
  - What is our “state of the art”?
  - How are our structure, our processes in the organisation?
- **Stakeholders**
  - What do we want?
  - What do others want us to do?
  - What expectations do others have on us?
  - By whom are we perhaps dominated?
  - Who decides the success?
- **The market**
  - What is the present situation?
  - What will change soon?
  - What are our “products”?
  - What does the market need?
  - How are the chances and the risks?
- **Field of dynamics/energy**
  - What energy will help us from the here and now to the tomorrow?
  - What energy lives in the possible resistance?
- **Operative targets**
  - What are the operative targets?
  - What are the criteria for that? Are they clear, transparent...? Are they accepted, valid?
- **Concrete projects**
  - How can we define them?
  - Who is responsible?
  - What is the competence, are the resources to be successful?
  - How does such a work group comes together?
- **What needs to be done next? By whom? Up until when?**

Please understand my paper as a personal view on our organisation, on us, on our history. On our identification and community, a community which takes it's energy from all those

different bioenergetic cultures. My ideas are not only connected to Al's ideas and concepts of bioenergetic analysis, but of course also to his passion to live.

[Info@sollmann-online.de](mailto:Info@sollmann-online.de)