

DIALOGUE: CREATING SHARED MEANING AND OTHER BENEFITS FOR BUSINESS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative, phenomenological study explores the process of dialogue built upon the method described by the physicist David Bohm. The study specifically explores the use of the process in business environments as a means to understanding its effects on the business. It describes the dialogue process and explores how it shifts both individuals and a group to a collective, shared understanding. This study describes the experiences of individuals who have facilitated and participated in dialogue processes in a business environment, and their personal accounts of those experiences. The author interviewed six professionals: three external consultants and three internal employees, for the study. It seeks to explore those experiences and show the benefits of shared meaning to business organizations. The findings of this study explain the challenges of introducing the process into a fast paced, task-oriented culture and the courage required by managers and subordinates to suspend roles and status. They explain how, when groups explore their own thinking and behavior together, as experienced in a dialogue circle, group awareness moves toward a shared understanding of problems and issues relevant to the group. They show how the participants of a dialogue process foster an awareness of systems thinking. Participants begin to operate from a position that acknowledges how their decisions affect other parts of the organization. The findings demonstrate the way the process allows the group to access what emerges as new possibilities for future action. The study identifies this state as presence, the necessary capacity for harnessing a group's emerging future.

Keywords: David Bohm; Dialogue; Business Environment; Organizational Learning Environment; Presence; Shared Meaning; Systems Thinking; Transformation

INTRODUCTION

As one of eight children, I grew up in a household where competition was strong. We were encouraged to debate our ideas, which we often did in a robust manner. "I don't know," was not a phrase that passed through my lips easily. Not knowing something was often a sign of weakness, something we all learn at an early age. While mistakes were tolerated, they were disparaged, and I worked harder to show my strengths and keep my weaknesses to myself. "When one human being tells another human what is 'real,' what they are actually doing is making a demand for obedience" (Maturana, 1988). When I attended grade school, the learning method reinforced a parroting back of information, and in the teaching there was a conveyed assumption that memorization and reciting what we *knew* were the keys to learning. After all, every test taken for a grade without the benefit of reflection is confirmation of the negative value of mistakes and the reward of some perfect standard. What was lost was the experience of discovery and reflection, parts of a different process for learning. The rewards and punishments model in a results

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oriented society, rewarding us when we know something and punishing us when we when we make mistakes or don't know the answer, inculcates obedience in young learners at an early age. This was an important influence, shaping my conversational style, attitude and awareness of what was expected of me. I readily consented and tacitly agreed to the prevailing discourse.

As an adult, I began a very personal exploration of the meaning of *presence* at workshops based on the wisdom and knowledge of an ancient tribal culture, which had nothing to do with knowing facts. Among other things, it prompted me to reconsider some of my assumptions, specifically with the way I communicated with others and interacted with my family. The teachings included physical movements, an integral part of understanding the totality of ourselves as energetic beings, who can be more fully aware in the moment, and expanding one's awareness to include the idea of listening with the whole body. Listening with the body is a deeper listening that requires a letting go of habitual thoughts and programmed ways of taking in information. It recognizes how perceptions rely on the body to filter all the information received as physical sensations. Intentionally listening with an awareness of the body creates a quiet, intimate space for "hearing" what we may otherwise miss, ignore or hide beneath the gloss of our beliefs.

The next challenge for me was to integrate this personal, experiential knowledge in a day-to-day, task filled work environment with the purpose of bringing more of my discovering and personal learning self to the office. I spent most of my waking hours there, and a majority of my energy was dedicated to the organization. How could I make the job more meaningful? Considering the benefits for both the individual and the organization, how might we use our energy in a more meaningful way, was the first question I asked. I also started with an identified personal pattern and realization of how I cut myself off from learning: my strong aversion to making mistakes, especially in front of others. I particularly wanted to continue a personal way of discovering, including mistakes; I wanted to 'walk the talk' from those personal discoveries.

When I discovered dialogue as a process, as a part of this research, it was intriguing to me because it represented an opportunity for participants to be in an environment of deep listening and trust. I considered the intent behind the process and resonated with its drive to make connections and to create a space for meaningful discovery and learning in the workplace. I wondered how the process is used in a business environment, and how effective it is for the participants and for the organization. The scope of my interest was satisfied with these questions: "As an organizational learning process in a business environment, how does dialogue change the individual and shift the group? What shifts occur that benefit the business?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following sections will explain what the current literature has to say about what dialogue is, how it helps participants to build skills, how it functions to shift the group through the development stages of dialogue and how it shifts the individual and group from fragmentation to participatory thought and a collective wisdom.

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Dialogue, What It Is

William Isaacs (1993) defines dialogue, "...as a sustained, collective inquiry, into the processes, assumptions, and certainties that compose everyday experience. Yet the experience is of a special kind--the experience of the meaning embodied in a community of people" (p. 25). The etymology of the word dialogue clarifies the intent behind the process: the Greek word *dialogos*, combining the preposition *dia* meaning "across," "through" or "between" and *logos*, from the verb *legein*, meaning "to speak" (Banathy & Jenlink, 2005, p. 5). Physicist David Bohm (1996), who recognized the true nature of thought as a system, rather than as individual truth, further clarifies, "The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a stream of meaning flowing among and through two or more...out of which will emerge some new understanding...something creative" (p. 7). The act of dialoguing means something different than discussion, which etymologically is from the Latin, *discussionem* (nom. *discussio*) "examination..." and *discutere* "strike asunder, break apart," or debate from the Old French, *debatre*, originally "to fight," from de- "down, completely" and *batre* "to beat". The important distinction between dialogue and discussion or debate is that dialogue calls forth a different structure, because in its creative quality, dialogue is not breaking down and examining parts, but allowing meaning to flow and emerge. Ellinor and Gerard (1998) point out that the dialogue process does not hinder disagreement but fosters differing views, harboring a divergent conversational process until the participants naturally converge.

Dialogue may mean many things to Organization Development (OD) practitioners, and there are many conversational methods in use. This paper focuses mainly on the use of the dialogue process based on Bohm's description of dialogue.

How it Helps Participants to Build Skills

Essentially, dialogue is used to learn about the nature of a problem (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 22) and is often separated from the process of decision-making. Because it is a group process that shifts the individual participant from producing answers to listening, a new conversational structure is formed. It is reflected in the physical structure, a circle, where the participants sit in a circle of chairs, referred to as a dialogue circle. The container creates a spacious environment for new possibilities and for collective wisdom to emerge (Briskin, Erickson, Ott & Callanan, 2009). Fundamentally, the dialogue process recognizes that one's thoughts are not the whole truth (Bohm, 1992), they are only a part of a larger truth (Isaacs, 1999). It is in the shift of taking new actions (suspending judgment, listening instead of reacting, writing down thoughts instead of reactively speaking them, inquiring instead of advocating) and reflecting on the underlying value of those actions, when the shift in thinking occurs (Argyris, 1997). The dialogue process based on Bohm's theory engenders transformative learning for the individual participants by introducing and drawing attention to new ways for acting differently, reflecting on assumptions and helping to align values to action (Isaacs, 1999). Bohm theorized and applied a process of dialogue among groups of 15 to 40 participants (1996) by engaging them in generative, nondirective dialogue. Today OD practitioners have adapted the Bohmian process for organizations. The adapted form is more directive

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and it is facilitated, sometimes with a result in mind, of changing the way things are done, or it is used for an organization-wide change in the way people think about each other (Isaacs, 1999). Participants are counseled to learn and develop their capacity for greater awareness. Glenna Gerard and Linda Teurfs (1995) name the *Building Blocks*, the essential tools that help individual participants to enter into and engage in the process. The tools are Suspension of Judgment; Identification of Assumptions; Listening; and Inquiry and Reflection (p. 146-147) (See Figure 1). Each tool is itself a method of self-reflection in that to build capacity, one must reflect on one's current habits in thinking in order to acknowledge it, identify it, alter it in some way, or shift to a new way of perceiving or acting.

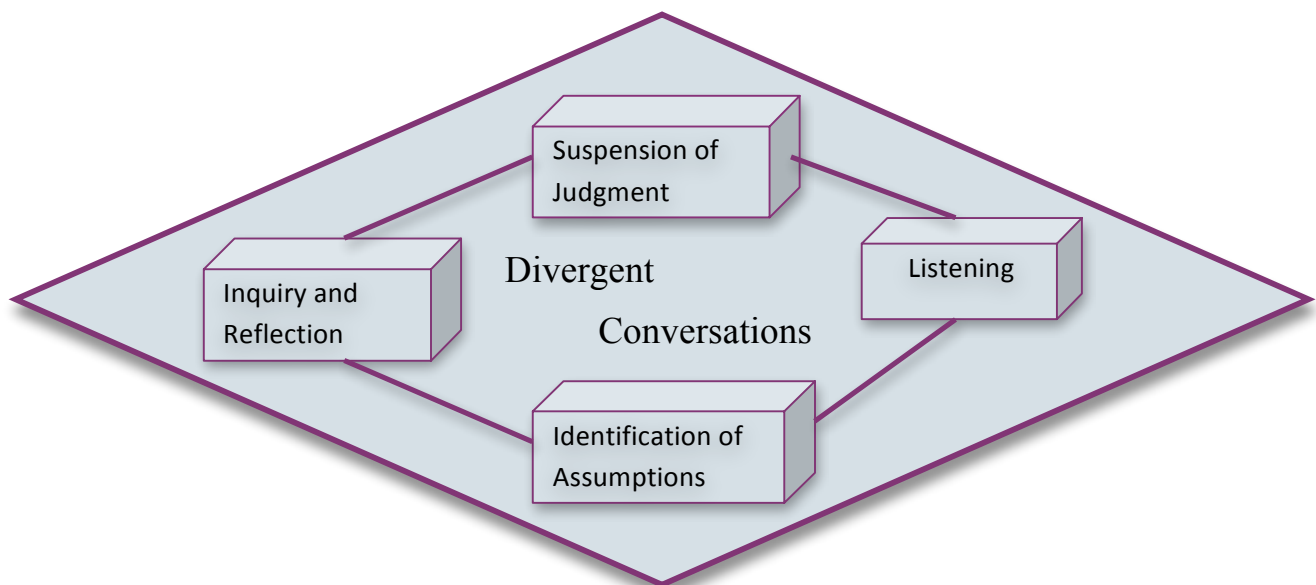


Figure 1. The Building Blocks of Dialogue. Adapted from Gerard & Teurfs (1995, p. 146). The skills are practiced during divergent conversations while in the dialogue circle, and may be used in any conversation.

In the work environment the shift for the leader of an intact team, a team consisting of manager(s) and subordinates, in a dialogue circle requires the leader to become an equal participant and to follow the same guidelines as the rest of the group. As it is with conversational leadership, there is a letting go of hierarchy and the impulse to control, and an opening up to what is emerging. David Whyte describes the difference from the traditional leader, "The traditional approach is for the leader to figure out what is right, and then persuade others to do it. Alternatively, engaging in conversational leadership is to 'invite what you do not expect,' bringing you to the frontier of what is emerging in your organization and asking you to turn into it, rather than away from it" (Whyte, n.d.). Conversational leaders recognize that organizations are living networks where information and change emerge from conversations, the real work within the organization. The leader in a dialogue process fares best when s/he is willing to engage in it for the joy of discovery and suspend the need for a solution.

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Group Shifts and Stages of Development

"Transformative dialogue may be viewed as any form of interchange that succeeds in transforming relationship between those committed to otherwise separate and antagonistic realities (and their related practices) to one in which common and solidifying realities are under construction" (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001, p. 682). Transformation occurs when individuals accept other realities to coexist with their own, even when they appear to conflict. The process of dialogue is a vehicle for learning, which "arises through performance and practice" (Senge, 1995, p. 51). Dialogue creates the conditions for participants to try new behaviors and to shift their thinking, an environment for listening, reflection and sense making. As each participant learns the skills, a climate of non-judgment develops and safety is created. Brown & Bennett (1994) explain how a spirit of inquiry, "opens the social context for learning" (p. 6). As individual participants learn to ask questions from their own curiosity, questions create a "resonant field" where individual thinking is "magnified" and a shift in thinking may occur (Peavey, 1994, as cited in Brown & Bennett, 1994). When all participants act from a position of curiosity and are questioning together, an understanding, "that as individuals, we have the capacity to become part of something larger than ourselves...[and] begin to share a concern for deeper levels of shared meaning (p. 6). The building blocks allow for the development of trust, confidence, stronger self-identity, reflection and learning (Gerard & Teurfs, 1995; Isaacs, 1993) and a shift to shared meaning (Brown & Bennett, 1994).

While learning to increase their capacity during the process, participants are cycling through four stages of development in dialogue. Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard (1998) build on Tuckman's (1965) cycles of group development and William Isaacs' (1993) stages of developments to explain the similarity in experiences of a group dialogue process. (See Figure 2.) William Isaacs (1993) names them as, 1) instability of the container, 2) instability in the container, 3) inquiry in the container, and 4) creativity in the container. When a group begins a dialogue and cycles through the first two stages, it may be experienced as the chaos of dealing with differences. As the participants learn the skills, and continue through it, the group enters the second two stages, letting go of assumptions and accepting differences. At the fourth stage, there is strong group awareness with shared trust and participants speak freely while working through conflict (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998). This is where the divergent conversations dwell most effectively. It is the environment where conversations that need time for divergence, where issues and stuck areas are considered most productively by the group, before making decisions.

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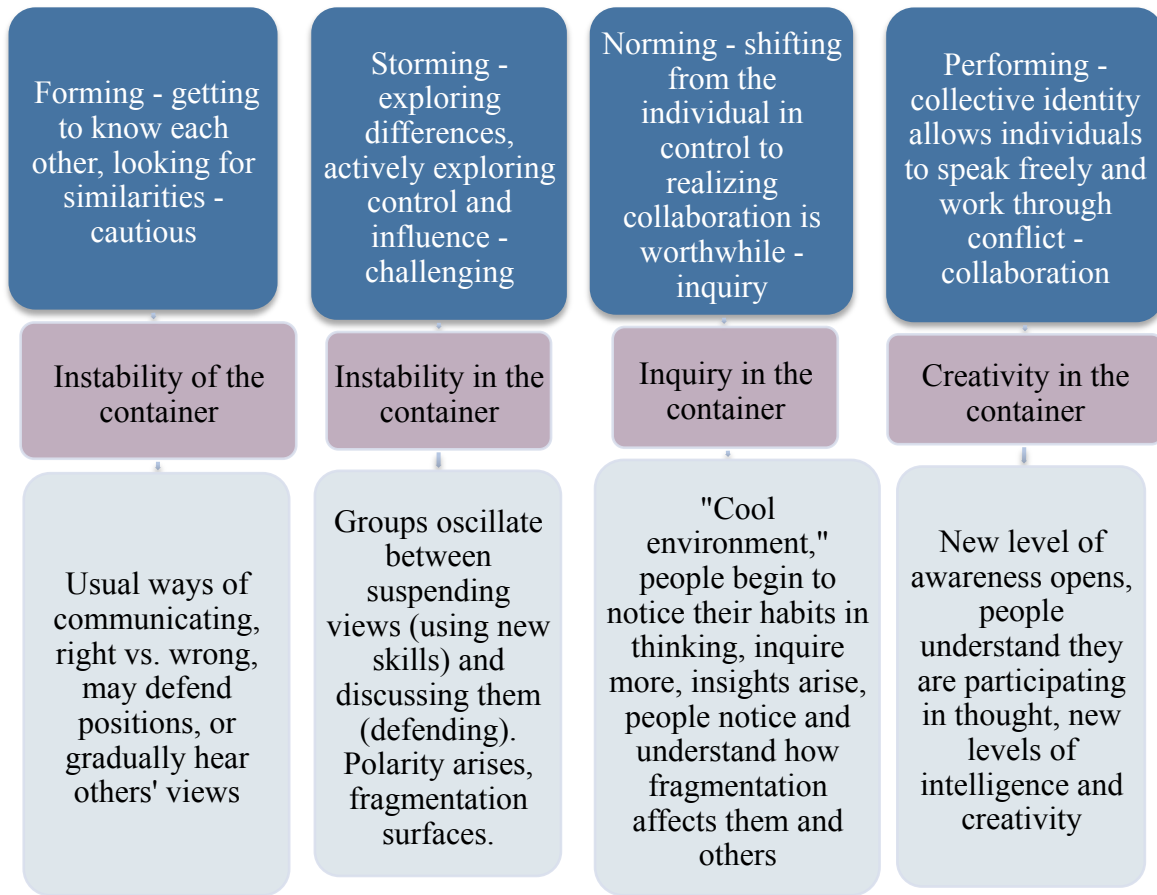


Figure 2. Comparison of the Development of Groups and the Evolution of Dialogue. Development Sequence in Small Groups (Tuckman, 1965); Evolution of Dialogue (Isaacs, 1993); (Elinor & Gerard, 1998, pp.157-158)

Over time, groups engaging in a dialogue process experience a change in consciousness, which extends out to others in the organization. According to Gerard & Teurfs (1995), the participants “develop new attitudes,” which “lead to a transformation in the entire organizational culture. Group members act in the spirit of community both inside and outside the dialogue sessions” (p. 150).

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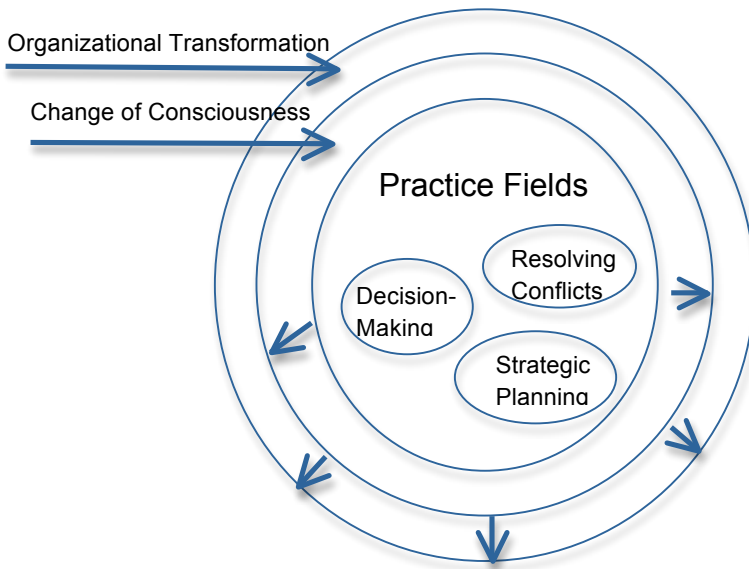


Figure 3. Practice Field skills ripple out to the organization. (Gerard & Teurfs, 1995, p. 149); modified for this paper.

Not only are individuals learning new skills, but also, especially in business environments, participants are addressing important issues or problems while in the circle. When they enter the fourth phase of Isaac's Evolution of Dialogue, and have built the capacity for staying in productive, divergent conversations, they are enhancing the way they function as a group and are better able to make decisions, solve conflicts, implement strategic plans, and allow for diversity, by honoring the diverse views of other participants. These are the types of benefits that may ripple out to the wider organization. (See Figure 3.)

Tacit Understanding and Participatory Thought

At the heart of the dialogue process is shared meaning, or rediscovering that meaningful relationship is shared. Tacit knowledge is the knowledge we know, but cannot tell (Polyani, 1966); the hidden knowledge that is always present, but taken for granted. An awareness of our tacit knowledge, our underlying beliefs, assumptions, aspirations, concerns, and all aspects of thought are cultivated in a dialogue process. Tacit thinking occurs at a level under the radar of the rational. "Dialogue...focuses on transforming the quality of tacit thinking that underlies all interactions" (Isaacs, 2001, p. 712). When participants move toward a *tacit understanding*, group understanding is actualized and informs the collective. Tacit understanding creates an alliance of thought and is vital to generating the wisdom of the collective and is also vital for group creativity and innovation.

Participatory thought, as opposed to literal thought, acknowledges that everything is connected. It means that, "everything partakes of everything...which means that everyone is partaking of whatever is going on...all thoughts, feelings, views, opinions are

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coming in, and are growing in us, even if we think we are resisting them” (Bohm, 1996). However, as Bohm (1996) suggests, if there is no shared, tacit understanding, when we attempt to create something collectively, we easily fall prey to the fragmented nature of thought. “...it is thought which divides everything up. Every division we make is a result of how we think...for convenience, at first. Later we give this separation great importance” (p. 10). We think our opinions are *truth* and then our understanding of what others say to us, our interpretations, becomes the new *truth*. As a result, our understanding is fragmented, and no meaningful connection is possible. Fragmented understandings become our unacknowledged mental models, the fixed, invisible assumptions that influence how we make sense of the world (Senge, 2006). They produce *incoherence*, according to Bohm (1996), and it shows up when our, “intentions and our results do not agree” (p. 88). The notion that this view is mine, or that view is his, makes no sense in participatory thought, since, “all views are just thought...and thought is just thought” (p. 88). This proposition invites diversity and differences. Since thought is not personal, something to be claimed as “mine,” resistance to other views more easily shifts to becoming the subject of inquiry, rather than arguments to defend.

Shared meaning is the basis for culture (Burr, 2003), and when it becomes blurry and incoherent, it has a powerful negative impact on how we are communicating and collaborating with others. As we share our perceptions, assumptions and beliefs, we are contributing to a fuller picture, creating more meaningful and deeper relationships. The process of dialogue is an invitation to create community through conversations (Gerard & Teurfs, 1995). As a group moves closer to an understanding of participatory thought, there is an experience of meaning and possibilities unfolding. Brown and Bennett (1994) explain, “In dialogue, the process of change feels like giving birth to new meaning, out of which we realize creative possibilities for action” (p. 13).

METHODS

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the consultant’s, facilitator’s, and participant’s experience of the dialogue process in a business environment, specifically to gather data on the types of changes occurring for the individual and the group and to explore how those changes affected the business or the organization. The interviews were conducted with six respondents who had experience with one or more dialogue processes. The respondents were three external consultants, Peggy Sebara, Glenna Gerard, Thomas Sullivan, and three respondents internally employed by business organizations. Two of the internal respondents requested anonymity, whom I have designated as I₁ and I₂, were both from organizations in the high technology industry, and the third internal respondent, Jeffrey Davis, currently with EMC², worked for HP and Agilent when he experienced the dialogue process (See Appendix A). Two of the internal participants also learned and facilitated the dialogue process in their organizations, and Jeff Davis was both a team member and a manager when he participated in the process. Peggy Sebara, Glenna Gerard and Thomas Sullivan have worked with large, Fortune 500 corporations, and Glenna Gerard has published books and articles on the topic of dialogue, all representing a breadth and depth of experience and knowledge using dialogue with business clients. The three internal respondents

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represent employees of Fortune 500 corporations¹. Peggy Sebera referred Jeff Davis to me and Glenna Gerard referred both I₁ and I₂ to me.

I interviewed all respondents by telephone and started the conversation by informing them of my interest in dialogue in a business environment, asking, “As an organizational learning process in a business environment, how does dialogue change the individual and the group, and can you identify any measurable outcomes?” I found the question to be awkwardly constructed and it shifted slightly several times. My inquiry became, “As an organizational learning process in a business environment, how does dialogue change the individual and shift the group? What shifts occur that benefit the organization?” All of my respondents were asked either the same questions, or questions with variances relevant to internal employee or external consultant experiences (see Appendix B), and the conversations were recorded. I transcribed the audio recordings, created a collection of quotes, and analyzed them as data until themes emerged.

In addition to the data collected from the respondents I based the Analysis and Discussion section on my experiences of working in a corporate environment, a dialogue circle, personal reflection, and the sum total of my living experiences. The advantage of looking at dialogue, as a transformative process, is that it may be an important and useful tool to move groups to higher performance levels.

Assumption and Biases

As one who has learned and practiced exercises in self-mastery, I am biased when making the choice of whether or not a self-reflective or a group-reflective process that slows down decision-making is relevant in a work environment. My assumption is that any opportunity one encounters in becoming more acquainted with the totality of oneself and taking advantage of a collaborative group for learning is an opportunity not to be lost. I also carry the assumption that collaboration and deeper self-expression is important to everyday life and help to create a mood of creativity and to generate innovation.

DATA PRESENTATION

Three major themes emerged from the interviews: 1) Getting Started: Intentions and Challenges, Angst and Strategy; 2) Transformation Shifts in Thinking and Trying Out New Skills: Leader’s Shift, Individual Shift, Group Shift; and 3) The Effect on the Organization. The italicized type that follows each theme indicates a direct quote from the respondents.

Getting Started: Intentions and Challenges, Angst and Strategy

Intentions and Challenges

¹ Retrieved from http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2010/full_list/

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Speaking about the issues they intended to change, all of the internal respondents articulated some of their existing cultural realities and the challenges those realities brought forth.

The internal respondent, I₂, whose company ranked in the top Fortune 100, described the organization's culture in conversational and qualitative terms, *Frankly the more senior level leaders in the organization, they're not used to listening, and as an organization, we're not known for innovation, we're not known for collaboration, we're known for executing and doing it quickly.* Why they chose to utilize the dialogue process, as one of the strategies to help shift the culture, I₂ described:

We're moving to a stakeholder model approach to business, which is what we've done. [We're] saying that, "All of our stakeholders are equally important, and it's not just about our shareholders," so, fundamentally, the shift of purpose and values within an organization combined with a stakeholder approach to business requires a culture to transform.

I₁ pointed out the obstacles in their existing culture, *in an organization where there's such speed and results orientation, there's not a lot of time for reflection. I believe that all human beings need time for reflection,* and explained why they chose to hire a consultant to implement the process:

[to] help [us] move away from compliance orientation to a personal choice orientation. It simply means that if you look at safety from only a compliance orientation, what you get is, people only following rules, and then when you're in situations where there isn't a rule that governs behavior, you're justified in taking risks.

In speaking about Peggy Sebera's choice to facilitate the dialogue process with his team, Jeff Davis explained:

What I was after at the time, I was promoted into a division I already knew had a lot of competition and skepticism, and I was looking for a way to get past the issues, and make it a powerful combined team. [The primary] issues were personal conflicts and communication.

Angst

All three of the internal respondents spoke of their apprehension, when dialogue was introduced to their respective groups for the first time.

I₁ spoke about the concern, *I was really worried when we were talking about the dialogue process, because it's perceived as slower; it's kind of like, what's this hippy thing we've got going on? I really thought it was going to be rejected.* Jeff explained, *I would say that the first meeting, there was an awful lot of trepidation, because, if this didn't work, I would have felt really bad.* I₂ foresaw the challenge to leaders:

As you get more senior...they have this notion that dialogue takes a lot of time...So there are these assumptions they have about dialogue that aren't necessarily accurate or true...the more senior you get, the more they expect to go in and purely advocate. If you inquire, it's perceived as a lack of skill or authority.

Strategy for Introducing Dialogue

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While Peggy, Glenna and Thomas all recognize the value of the dialogue for their clients, not all of them use it explicitly. Thomas explained, *it tends to be embedded, and, on occasion we orchestrate times when groups that we're working with engage in a dialogue. Sometimes, that can just be a mechanism to get people to talk about the things they need to talk about.* Even when the client hires a consultant to facilitate the dialogue process, like some of the cultural reasons stated above, initiating the process in business calls for thoughtful consideration of how to introduce it. Glenna explained:

if the organization, and this is something I've learned over the years, that within business organizations, what people are going to value the most is something that's going to help them to move towards their outcomes...where people are in conversation, in dialogue about real live business issues as they're practicing the skills, the more the value that's going to create for people.

Peggy spoke about an approach she takes with business clients:

Well the thing of it is, nobody in the world ever comes together as a group and says let's look at our thinking. Nobody ever does that, so you've got to guise it. "We're here to solve the team's problems and learn how to communicate better in a group."

Transformation: Shifts in Thinking and Trying Out New Skills

Three key sub-themes surfaced in the theme of Transformation, all referring to shifts in thinking and awareness: a) the Leader's Shift, b) an Individual Shift, and c) the Group Shift.

The Leader's Shift: Flattening the Power Dynamic

The leader's shift, especially in the context of an intact team, often may be the most difficult individual shift both for the leader and for the rest of the group, unless the leader intends to use the process to explore the impact of his management style.

Glenna shared her experience with a leader in an academic setting:

the truth is that the hierarchies exist everywhere...We had to go to [the leader] and basically say, this is actually what we're observing. We know you say that, "you want this to be an equal playing field, yet your actions, after the sessions, are not demonstrating this. In fact you're demonstrating just the opposite." We had to tell her we couldn't work with her anymore because we lacked [group] integrity.

On the other hand, flattening the power dynamic may be challenging to the subordinates, as explained by I₁, *Whether it's egalitarian or not, you still have that person that's responsible for rating your performance and your pay...it took time for people to act naturally, there are some things we're going to talk about and some we're not.* Peggy described, when managers are used to setting the tone for the group:

I have gotten into situations when a manager would speak as if what they have to say was the truth, and I will come and say, "so that's one point of view, are there any others?" And everybody's mouths fall open. "Let's all remember, we all have our own perspective, and we're going to balance this by knowing that in this dialogue we are all equal, and we all share our thoughts equally.

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Jeff, as a manager, explained why he welcomed the dialogue process:

Part of the process here is constructing an environment where you get that real straight stuff. My management belief is that, if I understand all of it, whether it is good, bad or indifferent, it's a hell of a lot better than just listening selectively. I'm also of the opinion...I'm only as good as my opinion, so I want the whole team to work effectively, and if I'm the problem, I need to know.

Individual Shifts

Individual shifts occur when the participants learn a new skill or skills and try them out in the dialogue circle. The facilitator in a dialogue guides the individual to new understanding and to help participants toward new actions.

Thomas explained how, as a facilitator, he steers individuals to a shift:

What is useful for people in that moment, in business settings generally, is to have some sense of the nature of where they locate the source of their own experience. And to the extent that you locate the source of your own experience outside yourself, you have essentially in a structural way, put yourself in a position of being a victim. The question then becomes, "Is that the way you want it to be?" because in that position it depends entirely about the other.

Peggy facilitated individual shifts by:

throw[ing] them right into doing it, so I don't have to tell them what could go wrong. They're observing the shift between their ordinary way of just advocating, advocating, advocating, and the shift between beginning to check their own assumptions and listening and inquiry. So by the third dialogue, in the afternoon, they're really thinking [differently].

I₂ offered a finding when the individual shift does not happen:

you're always going to have your skeptics. I think especially when you look at having four generations of workers and leaders. I think there are some folks that, naturally, will never make the shift and there are always one or two people in the class that you see that look at dialogue and just fundamentally dismiss it. Yes, I absolutely see that, and there's typically one or two in every class.

Group Shift

A shift to group awareness is observed, often during group reflection after each session in the dialogue circle. All of the respondents shared their experiences of the group shifting to a collective, group awareness. I₂ gave an example of the individuals beginning to value other views:

One of the things that happen is, we ask, [and] they take turns, "only advocate for what you think is the most important thing for this business challenge, and the other person can only inquire." What happens is people start to realize, "wait a minute, every single person has a little bit of a different perspective, based on what's important to them, based on their experiences, based on their functional technical expertise," and you start to see a [group] shift happen, when they realize everybody's point of view is valid.

Peggy described how individual issues affect a group and the benefits of collectively processing through them:

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It isn't good enough that just the two people resolve the issue, because everybody else still carries it. That's another thing about groups. If you don't resolve the issue in front of the group, the group will hold those two people as enemies even after they've cleared things up. Because they have to go through the process too, seeing what the assumptions were.

Thomas shared how a group, *would always begin to fight over who was responsible for what was going on instead of resolving things together*, and responded differently after working with him over many months to resolve a business issue where the stakes were high. *When faced with a tough moment, instead of fragmenting, they came together as a whole.*

The Effect on the Organization

All of the respondents, who experienced the dialogue process either as facilitators and/or participants, believed that individuals or groups were higher functioning because of their experience in a dialogue circle. They shared examples of both the benefits of dialogue on the organization and how it might backfire.

I₁ connected the value of the process to the organization:

What I would say, as a result of those three or four interventions, as well as us being a [Society for Organizational Learning] SOL organization, we had people thinking more systemically, and the people most impacted by that was the factory staff. I think they were high[er] performing as a staff than their colleagues in other factories in the network.

Glenna explained how the organization may or may not benefit from the process:

if you think about the fact that dialogue will always call into question the status quo...and if the system can use that as a way to learn about itself and innovate and move forward, then, dialogue becomes that system's best friend, but if the system is threatened by that, then, dialogue becomes a useless conversation.

Peggy spoke to the cultural value of the process, *The miracle is nobody ever gets together and says, "Let's look at our thinking, let's look at our assumptions."* That is revolutionary, that's why it works. Jeff explained the difficulty for tracking the sustainable value in the dialogue process, but acknowledges the importance for the group to keep it going and remain aware of the tool:

It's hard to translate these things into your global organizational metrics, [and] it's difficult...People keep demanding it and wanting [dialogue] and I still hear some comments now and then from these organizations that [dialogue] is continuing and sustaining, not so much from a need for a facilitator, but they are still using the practitioner's tool. If they can just name it, it's a heck of a step.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Reflecting back on my questions: As an organizational learning process in a business environment, how does dialogue change the individual and shift the group? What shifts occur that benefit the organization? It may be helpful to acknowledge first that organizations change or transform because the individuals and groups within them are

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changing them. As the data presented above suggests, dialogue changes the individual and shifts the group in a fundamental way. It further indicates that shifts in thinking may be profound shifts, releasing energy for individuals to contribute more authentically. The shift in a group may be the first time they have ever experienced a shared, participatory understanding of their problems and issues, and it may be a first time discovery of how to create together. The data illustrates that groups, who achieve some level of shared understanding, improve the structure of their work environment by influencing the culture. The knowledge learned from the experience tends to ripple out into the organization, as individuals weave it through new connections.

Four major findings emerged from my review of the data: 1) Meaningful conversations in a task oriented culture require courage of leaders and subordinates; 2) Dialogue creates a learning environment and opens a door to authenticity and presence; 3) Organizations benefit from presence and shared understanding; and 4) Individuals think more systemically after an experience with the dialogue process. The following section details how these findings relate to my initial research questions.

1) Meaningful Conversations Require Courage

David Whyte defines meaningful conversation:

A real conversation is one that, no matter how slowly, helps you make sense of the world around you. It can tackle great universal questions, or it can be about your work group's puzzling lack of respect for you or why a division of your company is refusing to go in a previously agreed-upon direction. (Burrell, 2007, p. 28)

One of the reasons dialogue results in noteworthy transformations in business organizations may be found in the contrast between the existing culture and what is created. In the literature there are examples of the use of dialogue process in business environments, but it is uncommon. The difficulties became clearer to me, as the internal respondents shared the reasons why they were introducing dialogue into their organizations. It is usually counter-cultural. Both I₁ and I₂ hired Glenna to provoke fundamental cultural shifts. I₁ described the culture as "fast paced," and "action oriented," a description that sounds familiar to most people in corporate environments. The value of the process to I₁'s organization was to facilitate a slowing down and to introduce reflection as the alternative, "because they're constantly jumping from one thing to the next." Personally, I experienced a failure to stay present and speak up more authentically in a fast paced corporate culture. It was due in part, because I ignored the effects of speeding up to focus on tasks, and because I responded to the pressure from a faulty mental model. I tried to speak and act in the way I believed people would take me seriously.

I₂ spoke about the culture at the leadership level, the people we look up to for guidance, and to emulate: "the more senior you get, the more they expect to go in and purely advocate. If you inquire, it's perceived as a lack of skill or authority." He acknowledged both the pressure to know everything, plus the affect of the fast pace, hearing from executives, "I'm the leader, I'm expected to have all the answers, I don't have time to stop and listen, I've got to execute." Leaders are expected to make decisions and act as if

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their decisions are the best way forward. When they act from a position of having all the answers, they are operating from mental models that may not be shared with others, and whose underlying assumptions may not have been fully considered.

When leaders participate in dialogue processes, they essentially are slowing down to see what emerges, and allowing the system to create change from within. It can be a complicated shift when the effects of a power dynamic are unacknowledged. It requires the leader to let go of control and to be open to hearing what his/her subordinates have to say without interfering. The leader must allow all other individuals to speak frankly and openly, and is compelled to disclose what s/he is thinking. Peggy reported, "To be honest, it takes time to learn how to be honest about power in a group, because usually we just all freeze up. Every time I have been brave about it, the leader has come...made me his partner." It requires courage for subordinates, managers, even OD practitioners to step into the unknown, when the outcomes may be a surprise. There is a lot at stake for the subordinate and the manager. The high stakes are good reasons for learning the language of dialogue: the skills become the syntax that participants of a dialogue circle can take with them into any conversation. The dialogue process paves the way for the shift of role and status to equality. As an example of this, I₁ reported, "There were a lot of techniques to help people get to that point [of speaking as peers] in the conversation." Jeff considered it a big accomplishment to allow people the opportunity of a level playing field and to feel what it was like to engage fully as peers to managers. Glenna pointed out the accomplishment for the leader, the skills learned to create an effective dialogue may be used elsewhere, "where you wouldn't necessarily say, I'm using dialogue, you would just say, I now know how to balance advocacy and inquiry more effectively, I'm more masterful or skillful with using those skills as a leader." It was notable that I₂, who had implemented the process as a leadership development tool, did not have an experience of the process with a team of both managers and subordinates, and had no plans to use it in that way.

2) Authenticity and Presence in a Learning Environment

Dialogue creates a learning environment that is a doorway to authenticity and presence. It is one of the marvels of the dialogue process that the group helps the individual to learn the skills, and by that act it sets up a space for learning together. Chris Argyris (1991) explains that it is only when we look at our own behaviors and actions, that we can learn the true source of a problem, and then change the way we act. He calls it "double loop learning." The effect of double loop learning is a deep shift in thinking and behavior based on having learned what is governing our decisions and actions. The dialogue process provides a double-loop learning environment.

I heard from all of the respondents how the group helps the individuals to learn new ways of listening, checking out assumptions and entering a "spirit of inquiry" (Brown & Bennett, 1996). I₂ shared what she heard from an individual in the reflection part of the dialogue session, "I always find myself advocating," and then how, "participants are really beginning to see the value in inquiry itself so that you can understand the assumptions, and the filters, and the way that they use the data to come to the conclusions that they came to, is really useful information." Peggy shared how the group begins to

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self-correct, “They’re remembering to make an inquiry and feeling kind of proud about it.” These are examples of individuals understanding the value in learning to express themselves more fully. They are bringing up thoughts that usually remain unexpressed and feeling satisfied and rewarded by the accomplishment.

I₁ expressed surprise to find out that it was, “the doing it in a group form that actually made it really stick, or made it work in the company.” Participants are learning to be more authentic in a business environment among witnesses of peers, or of managers and subordinates. Shifting from mental models of how they “should be” behaving to speaking more authentically. As I₁ shared, “there is always the risk taker that was willing to step out and say, “well, since no one else is going to say this, I’m going to.” Based on her years of facilitating dialogue and transferring the facilitator skills to others, Glenna believes people are longing for the kind of conversation where they may speak freely and learn from each other. If the conditions are created to allow that to happen, people move into it. As they work through live business problems, the group enters a new way of being, of inquiring and listening, learning from a place of authentic curiosity and shifting behaviors to be differently together.

Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers (2004) speak about the way they defined presence, “as being fully conscious and aware in the present moment...as deep listening, of being open beyond one’s preconceptions and historical ways of making sense,” but ultimately expanding the scope of the definition to a deeper understanding of presence:

as leading to a state of “letting come,” of consciously participating in a larger field for change. When this happens, the field shifts and the forces shaping a situation can move from re-creating the past to manifesting or realizing an emerging future. (p.11-12)

Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers (2004) declare that the way to build capacity for realizing the emerging future is presence. It has been shown in the literature how dialogue creates the container for accessing the emerging future.

The process has been described by Brown and Bennett (1994) as, “a spiral pattern of growth,” symbolized by a conch shell cut to reveal the spiral. In the beginning of the process there is an experience of spiraling downward to uncover underlying assumptions and we link them to our thoughts. As conversations deepen, “silence seems full rather than empty.” After reflecting deeply within ourselves, we experience a shift in energy, “releasing upward new insights and creative opportunities” (p.13). The experience allows one to tap into a silent knowledge deep within. It is part of silent knowledge that usually remains invisible and may be difficult to express. Don Juan speaking to Carlos Castaneda (1984), “Silent knowledge is something that all of us have,” he went on. [sic] “Something that has complete mastery, complete knowledge of everything. [sic] But it cannot think, therefore, it cannot speak of what it knows (p. 76).

In the learning environment in organizations, where real business issues are considered, there is an opportunity in the dialogue process for individuals to align more authentically

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to who they are, and at the same time to develop group awareness and to understand more fully where they want to go and how they will get there.

3) Benefits for Organizations: Diversity of Thought and Shared Meaning

As Individuals and groups within organizations create and recreate, spinning their views and perceptions into a web of ideas and processes, dialogue makes visible those invisible spider web connections. Glossing over differences does not work. It creates polite conversation until the stakes are high and an important decision is to be made. Groups in dialogue circles learn more deeply by getting to the source of problems in part by allowing for different views to surface.

Part of the vision of dialogue is the assumption of “the larger pool of meaning” accessible only to a group...consensus builds more from the idea that we each have a “view,” a way of looking at reality. Each person’s view is a unique perspective on a larger reality. If I can “look out” through your view and you through mine, we will each see something we might not have seen alone. (Senge, 1990, p. 231)

Jeff, as a leader, shared how important it was for him to hear what one person in particular was thinking:

it was the level of tension went way down and it was mainly because he knew that I knew...that I understood where he was coming from and appreciated it and vice versa. [He reported that his] blood pressure went down 12 points, just like that.

The two of them held a negative issue between them until the dialogue circle. Trust was compromised until the unexpressed issue was aired. Thomas spoke of a typical reactive behavior, “But you can’t say the impossible situation when you’re at odds with others, because that exposes you when people are in a position to take advantage of your vulnerability without owning up to any responsibility on their behalf.” The dialogue process gives the individuals the opportunity to express their views in a safe environment. Once trust occurs, I₁ explained, moving to shared meaning is evidenced, when the participants learn to build on the conversation, even if there is disagreement. The shift is visible in the dialogue session. I₁ shared, “disagreement is healthy, and it respects the other person’s opinion and kind of builds on it, like, “Here’s where I differ with that. All comments build on the previous person’s comment, there’s plenty of time for silence, reflection.” The culture shift is evidenced primarily by the pace. “People slow down and are less automatic and less reactive; they actually think,” according to Thomas, who embeds the process in his consulting practice. I₂ reported that overall, “Employees, as a result, feel heard, feel more valued, or more engaged, more committed to the organization,” and honor diversity of thought. This commitment “creates that shared understanding where creativity and innovation can really be fostered.”

4) Systems Thinking

Systems thinking is “a body of knowledge and framework of tools that...make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively” (Senge, 2006, p. 7). Looking at the big picture, knowing how decisions ripple out through the whole system becomes important to individuals in organizations, who are trying to understand the

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scope of their problems and the impact of their decisions. The impact of decisions is unforeseen and unpredictable. In the dialogue process, as explained above, when groups shift to a shared understanding, the sinewy patterns of interactions become visible. All of the respondents saw dialogue groups begin to express a 'big picture' view. I₁ and I₂ made explicit reference to systems thinking and how the dialogue process went "hand in hand" with a systemic view. Jeff heard back from managers of other departments that members of his team, who had participated in the process, showed more collaboration by making connections to the whole. He heard back that, when more than one of his team members showed up at meetings, they were better "able to represent the whole and be effective," or if several of his team were present, "there was more collaboration between them and alignment to get the job done." I₂ reported that the organization operated mostly from silos and there was a realization by the dialogue participants of how decisions made in one part of the organization had an impact on another. Peggy explained how there are oftentimes issues between marketing or sales departments and engineering departments. Her client, Jeff, provided the example of his group of engineers reaching an understanding of the behavior of the marketing department in a dialogue process. The marketing department did not change the way they would over-commit to clients, but because the engineering department understood why, they changed the way they handled it.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for the Field

Overall the data supports the questions: As a transformational process in a business environment, how does dialogue change the individual and shift the group? What are the benefits to the organization? The process of dialogue works well in a business environment, but because it is counter-cultural, it takes support from the influencers in an organization to introduce it into the system. There exist in the literature and in my research examples of Fortune 100 companies using the process, but it is a difficult sell when fast paced, producer oriented cultures see it as taking time away from doing the "real" work. The results of groups participating in the process are positive when they are open to it, and the negative results from my research were reported only when the leader was not ready to let go of role and status. The process works best over time, but individuals take away and use skills they have learned in 3-4 day sessions. Because dialogue is an experiential process, learning occurs at a deeper level. The change to individuals and shifts at a group level are critical to businesses whose values include shifts toward collaboration, creativity and innovation.

Implications for Consultants

The implication of my findings for me as an OD Consultant is manifest in my approach to OD work in general. It has already shifted the way I work with clients by inspiring me to focus more meaningfully on the conversations I hear during the contracting phase all the way through to the final debrief with a client manager. I found that, knowing the skills and trying them out in groups, I am able to learn more by staying in inquiry,

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especially when my body sensations and thoughts are triggered by tension. Not participating in an ongoing dialogue circle makes it harder to build the skills and to experience the depth of shared understanding. It has helped me to see that it is possible to introduce some of the skills in most group interventions, even when they are not explicitly dialogic. My own experience of success has been when I am operating from an authentic position of curiosity, not attempting to impose my agenda and entering into conversations that invite transparency and learning together. The OD practitioner, who is conversant in dialogic skills, increases the likelihood of collaborating successfully with clients and their groups.

CONCLUSION

My findings suggest that OD practitioners are successfully facilitating and implementing the dialogue process in business environments. Dialogue in a business environment acts to fundamentally shift an organization's culture towards collaboration by focusing on conversations, the "real work" in organizations. Dialogue, as a learning environment, opens individuals to systems thinking. The implication of shifting individuals to a deeper understanding of collaboration in groups, and a new way of sensing their connections to others throughout the organization is that its members become open to diversity and lose an "us vs. them" paradigm so prevalent in task-oriented cultures. Individuals drop the tendency to blame others for problems, become curious to understand the issues, where they seek ways to resolve them together. This process over time leads individuals to presence, and leads groups to higher commitment and higher functioning teamwork.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Research Participants

Name	Title	Company	Internal/ External
I ₁	Sr. Organization Development Specialist in Factory Operations	High Tech Industry	Internal
I ₂	Global Talent Management Specialist	High Tech Industry	Internal
Jeffrey Davis	Current: Director of Engineering Previous: Engineering Director Previous: Director of Mfg. Engineering	EMC ² Agilent HP	Internal Internal Internal
Peggy Sebera	Owner, Consultant & Professional Coach	Renaissance Consulting Group	External
Glenna Gerard	Consultant	The Dialogue Group	External
Thomas Sullivan	Associate/Coach	Dialogos	External