

Sustainable Transformation Through Dialogue

By Deepika Nath



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The context of organizations is getting increasingly complex. To retain their competitiveness, organizations have to get more creative, more agile and more communicative in their practice of business. Open, frequent and constructive communication is one of the keys to sustainable success in the long term. Yet most organizational communication is broken. It tends to be more one-way than interactive; more talking and less listening; more advocacy and less inquiry; little room for integrating opposing points of view.

Organizations are networks of relationships – and breakdowns in interpersonal interactions and communication are a frequent occurrence in organizations. For instance, when we see resistance to change, one reason is people feel their ideas and concerns were not heard. When people feel their ideas have been heard and considered, often the resistance dissolves, even if their ideas are not incorporated into the final solution.

To quote Margaret Wheatley¹ “... *human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change – personal change, community and organizational change.*” The behaviors associated with the practice of dialogue are powerful tools for developing the capacity for deep, authentic conversation in organizations.

Dialogue – in brief

The roots of dialogue lie in native traditions – elder councils of the Iroquois, the Quakers, rural India’s panchayat system – and in more contemporary forms of peer spirit circles and talking circles. Dialogue allows for the creation of flow and meaning through and between people; it is a conversation between equals; it is more than one person’s understanding; it makes the implicit explicit – whether assumptions, values or intentions that control and drive behavior; and builds collective meaning and community. Dialogue is inherently relational and collaborative. It helps move past the fragmentation that impedes real communication between individuals and different parts of the same organization.²

The behaviors and practice of dialogue

There is no prescriptive methodology for engaging in dialogue. Dialogue is a process that evolves as the group practices it. It can’t be forced, no matter how hard a group tries. It may feel forced and awkward at the beginning, however as groups get more facile and practiced in their conversation, they will find themselves “in dialogue”.

Dialogue is the giving and receiving of voice – practices that are simultaneous and continuous responsibilities of each individual in the interaction. It is a framework where participants speak simply, authentically and from the heart, and listen openly, attentively and with respect. Four qualities are significant in the design of dialogue and are both the essence and the process of engaging in dialogue. It is in the practice of these behaviors that dialogue emerges in interaction with others.³

Voicing requires the courage to speak your ideas and the courage to hold a silence – to know what is really worthy of being spoken. The key questions: “What needs to be said” and “Who will speak for me if I don’t speak for myself”.

Equally critical are the other three practices of Listening, Respecting and Suspending, because these help create the space within which an individual can voice their ideas – they allow the receiving of voice.

Listening is attending to the spoken and unspoken aspects of the conversation, the tone, the reactions and feelings – listening with “more than our ears”. It requires letting go of resistance, and silencing the inner chatter of the mind – the “already listening” aspect of many interactions. The key questions: “What is missing” and “How does this feel”.

Respecting is the willingness and ability to honor the other(s), and respecting differences without needing to fix them or bring them to resolution. It requires deep inquiry to understand the other’s intention. The key question: “How does what I see fit into a larger whole?”

Suspending one’s judgment is not to defend or advocate for one’s position but to keep an open mind and inquire into the position of another – the experiences, assumptions and beliefs that contribute to this position. Suspending judgment leads to trust and safety, allowing open, honest and authentic communication.

How dialogic practices can impact the organization

OD practitioners act at multiple levels in an organization. At the inter-personal level, the practices of dialogue can deepen the quality of conversation between individuals – resulting in higher levels of collaboration, enlisting and influencing others more powerfully, engaging diverse stakeholders in the success of initiatives and incorporating a variety of perspectives into developing solutions in a safe and generative manner.

The practice of dialogue can be invaluable to a team. For instance, high performing teams are characterized by strong communication and a commitment to the success and growth of the team members. Dialogue enables the creation of a safe and trusting culture within the team, which then leads to the open communication and shared learning and growth.

A senior leadership team at a Fortune 100 company demonstrated a lack of trust, poor listening skills, high levels of judgment and lobbying for individual agendas. I introduced them to the practices of dialogue. Over time, these practices helped them become a more cohesive team where there was a genuine effort to listen to dissenting points of view without reacting, and engage in a process of inquiry to understand the basis for differences in perspective – qualities that helped move the team from being highly dysfunctional to increasing the efficiency of the process and quality of their decisions⁴. It improved inter-personal relationships within the team, and enhanced the level of satisfaction individual leaders had around their participation and membership in the team.

We introduced dialogic practice to the newly created leadership team of a start-up agency. The team had diverse skills, experience and reasons for joining the start-up. Over several rounds of conversation where there was a willingness to engage in deep listening and inquiry, we were able to establish a safe container which allowed the group to be vulnerable and speak honestly as they co-created the organization’s core values and defined their unique footprint in the marketplace. Issues affecting each element of the organization were raised and openly talked about in this space; decisions were made drawing upon the collective knowledge of the team; and an environment of trust and connection was created amongst a team whose members were new to the organization.

At the level of the organization, dialogue's ability to tap into the knowledge/wisdom of the collective can be a valuable enabler of a learning culture. As the business environment becomes more complex, a single individual simply does not have all the requisite knowledge to succeed. By necessity there must be reliance on collective intelligence. Through conversation, people are able to create, refine and share their knowledge. Dialogue provides a mind-set for real conversations and also contributes to creating an environment of safe risk taking and learning. In management-union relations in the steel mills in the '80s, the introduction of dialogue as a way of communicating led to collaboration between management and unions to define ways of changing their business.⁵

Introducing and using the practice of dialogue in organizations

Introducing dialogue into an organization is at its simplest, the promotion and practice of the principles described above. For example, when I introduced the leadership team at the Fortune 100 Company to dialogue, I started with a simple format. They would sit in a circle when they met; they created a "talking stick" that was used at all their meetings to ensure each person had a chance to voice "what needed to be said" from their perspective; they followed the principles of being honest and authentic when they spoke, being deeply present and attentive when another spoke, being succinct and allowing for silence as well as spontaneous expression⁶ as a way of making operational the practices of dialogue.

Initially there was awkwardness in their process and holding a silence was extremely difficult. Over time, as they became more comfortable and facile with the practices, they were able to move away from advocating for their point of view towards inquiry, they became more at ease with silence, and their interactions took on a more collaborative and creative quality.

In conclusion

Dialogue is not a tool or a methodology. For there to be a real culture of dialogue, it has to be an essential part of any approach to organizational transformation – "all problem-solving groups should begin in a dialogue format to facilitate the building of sufficient common ground and mutual trust, and to make it possible to tell what is really going on in one's mind."⁷ With this context, dialogue must be part of an organization's drinking water, cultivated as an essential skill for all members of the organization.

Dialogue is not a quick fix nor is the journey easy – it requires risk-taking, patience and a willingness to let go of the familiar and embrace the unfamiliar and new⁸. Over time it can be a catalyst, allowing for generative and creative problem solving. When facilitated well, dialogue fosters the kind of openness and trust that characterize healthy evolving organizations and transformation that can be sustained.

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