

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

### *The Dialogic Organization Development Approach to Transformation and Change*

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In the last 30 years, the post-modern orientation in the social sciences, and the discoveries in non-linear and complexity natural sciences, have been influential in altering ideas about change and change practices. These ideas and change practices have led to a variety of methods (see Table 31.1) that deviate from key tenets of the diagnostic forms of organization development (OD) created during the 1960s-1970s. We have labeled these ideas and practices Dialogic OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2009) and have been studying their common philosophical basis, and how they actually create change in practice (Bushe & Marshak, 2014a). Overall, we've concluded that simply having "good dialogues" is not enough to create change, but that Dialogic OD approaches can help leaders and organizations meet adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1998) and create transformational change (Bushe & Marshak, 2015a). In this chapter, we identify eight key premises of a Dialogic OD Mindset and contrast these with a Diagnostic Mindset. We also identify the three core change processes that, whether practitioners are aware of it or not, are the source of change in Dialogic OD efforts. Based on our research we believe that Dialogic OD

practices are now widely used, but under a variety of names and without a clear understanding of their shared premises nor their similarities and differences with foundational OD. Furthermore, dialogic methods seem to be especially effective when dealing with two types of contemporary issues. One is when the prevailing ways of thinking, talking about, and addressing organizational dilemmas traps an organization and its leaders in repetitive but futile responses. The other is when facing wicked problems, paradoxical issues and adaptive challenges, where there is little agreement about what's happening and where there are no known solutions or remedies available to address the situation. Dialogic approaches work by fostering generativity to develop new possibilities rather than problem-solving, altering the prevailing narratives and stories that limit new thinking, and working with the self-organizing, emergent properties of complex systems. Dialogic OD offers a viable alternative to the create a vision, plan a path to it, and implement through action teams practice of organizational change, and is better able to meet some of the challenging complexities of twenty-first century organizing.

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**Table 31.1 Examples of Dialogic OD Methods**

1. Art of Convening (Neal and Neal)	21. Preferred Futuring (Lippitt)
2. Art of Hosting (artofhosting.org)	22. Reflexive Inquiry (Oliver)
3. Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider)	23. REAL model (Wasserman & Gallegos)
4. Charrettes (Lennertz)	24. Real Time Strategic Change (Jacobs)
5. Community Learning (Fulton)	25. Re-Description (Storch)
6. Complex Responsive Processes of Relating (Shaw)	26. Search Conference (Emery & Emery)
7. Conference Model (Axelrod)	27. Six Conversations (Block)
8. Coordinated Management of Meaning (Pearce & Cronen)	28. SOAR (Stavros)
9. Cycle of Resolution (Levine)	29. Social Labs (Hassan)
10. Dynamic Facilitation (Rough)	30. Solution Focused Dialogue (Jackson & McKergow)
11. Engaging Emergence (Holman)	31. Sustained Dialogue (Saunders)
12. Future Search (Weisbord)	32. Syntegration (Beer)
13. Intergroup Dialogue (Nagada, Gurin)	33. Systemic Sustainability (Amodeo & Cox)
14. Moments of Impact (Ertel & Solomon)	34. Talking stick (preindustrial)
15. Narrative Mediation (Winslade & Monk)	35. Technology of Participation (Spencer)
16. Open Space Technology (Owen)	36. Theory U (Scharmer)
17. Organizational Learning Conversations (Bushe)	37. Visual Explorer (Palus & Horth)
18. Participative Design (M. Emery)	38. Whole Scale Change (Dannemiller)
19. PeerSpirit Circles (Baldwin)	39. Work Out (Ashkenas)
20. Polarity Management (Johnson)	40. World Café (Brown & Issacs)

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## *EIGHT KEY PREMISES OF DIALOGIC OD*

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Dialogic OD is still an evolving convergence of newer premises, principles, and resulting practices that lead practitioners to approach situations with a different way of thinking and acting. We hope to speed up this convergence by giving it its own name and identity - Dialogic OD - and inviting OD practitioners into a conversation about its underlying premises and practices, both now and going forward.

Based on our review of the range of methods listed in Table 31.1 and an in-depth analysis of six major theories of Dialogic OD practice (Bushe & Marshak, 2014b), we have identified eight key premises that we believe shape the Dialogic OD mindset: a set of fundamental beliefs about organizations and change that differ in important ways from the thinking found in Diagnostic OD.

1. *Reality and relationships are socially constructed.* The Dialogic OD mindset believes that organizations are socially constructed realities. It is how we socially define and describe objective and subjective “facts” that influence what people think and do. In every conversation, this reality is being created, maintained, and/or changed. Furthermore, there is no single objective social reality. Instead, there are many different “truths” about any organization, some dominant and some peripheral.
2. *Organizations are meaning making systems.* The Dialogic OD mindset thinks of organizations not just as open systems

interacting with an environment, but as dialogic systems in which people are continuously sense-making and meaning-making, individually and in groups. What happens in organizations is influenced more by how people interact and make meaning than how presumably objective external factors and forces impact the system.

3. *Language, broadly defined, matters.* The Dialogic OD mindset thinks that words (and other forms of communication) do more than convey information, they create meaning. Thinking is powerfully influenced by written and verbal communications and the underlying narratives, stories and metaphors people use when engaging with each other. Change is created and sustained by changing what words mean and by changing the words, stories and narratives that are used in groups and organizations.
4. *Creating change requires changing conversations.* The social construction of reality occurs through the conversations people have, everyday. Change requires changing the conversations that normally take place. This can occur from changing who is in conversation with whom (e.g., increasing diversity, including marginalized voices), what is being talked about, how those conversations take place, increasing conversational skills, and by asking what is being created from the content and process of current conversations.
5. *Groups and organizations are inherently self-organizing.* The Dialogic OD mindset believes that organizations are self organizing, emergent systems where social

reality is being constructed every day. The Dialogic OD mindset finds it more useful to think of organizations as continuous flows, rather than stable entities, where different processes, structures and ideas vary in how quickly they are changing. OD practitioners may nudge, accelerate, deflect, punctuate, or disrupt these normal processes, but they do not unfreeze and re-freeze them. Stakeholders who care about the state of the system, who are able to develop rich enough information networks, and are not constrained by any one group's power, will frequently find ways to respond to challenges that are too complex for leaders to successfully address through planning and controlling approaches. Instead, the leader's job in Dialogic OD approaches is to create spaces where useful changes can emerge, and then support and amplify those changes.

**6. Increase differentiation in participative inquiry and engagement before seeking coherence.** In foundational OD, organizational system members are involved at various times in diagnosing themselves and making action choices to address identified issues. The Dialogic OD mindset reflects a much broader conception of engagement that is based on methods of inquiry intended to discover new and transformational possibilities. The resulting processes of participative inquiry (rather than diagnosis), engagement, and reflection are designed to: a) maximize diversity, b) encourage stakeholders to voice their unique perspectives, concerns and aspirations, and c) surface the variety

of perspectives and motivations in the system, without privileging anyone, before seeking new convergences and coherence.

**7. Transformational change is more emergent than planned.** Transformational change cannot be planned toward some predetermined future state. Rather, transformation requires holding an intention while moving into the unknown. Disrupting current patterns in a way that engages people in uncovering collective intentions and shared motivations is required. As a result, change processes are more opportunistic and heterarchical, where change can and does come from anywhere in the organization, more than planned, hierarchical and top-down.

**8. Consultants are a part of the process, not apart from the process.** OD practitioners cannot stand outside the social construction of reality, acting as independent facilitators of social interaction. Their mere presence is part of the discursive context that influences the meaning making taking place. OD practitioners need to be aware of their own immersion in the organization and reflexively consider what meanings they are creating and what narratives their actions are privileging and marginalizing.

As shown in Figure 31.1, these *premises lead to different ways of thinking* about the basic building blocks of organization transformation and change, even as practitioners may on the surface seem to engage in similar steps as in Diagnostic OD. For example, one can use AI methods diagnostically: collect and analyze stories during Discovery, identify preferred

outcomes during Dream, propose alternative actions during Design, and choose and implement changes during Destiny. Yet when decisions and actions follow from a Dialogic OD mindset, the choices made and actions taken will be very different (Bushe, 2012). As Shaw (2002) notes in discussing foundational OD, "Above all I want to propose that if

organizing is understood essentially as a conversational process, an inescapably self-organizing process of participating in the spontaneous emergence of continuity and change, then we need a rather different way of thinking about any kind of organizational practice that focuses on change" ( p. 11).

**Figure 31.1. Contrasting Polar Ideal Types: Diagnostic and Dialogic Mindsets**

<b>Diagnostic OD</b>		<b>Dialogic OD</b>
	<b>Ontology</b>	
Positivism Objective Reality	.....	Interpretive, Constructionist Social Reality
	<b>Organizations are</b>	
Open Systems	.....	Dialogic Networks
	<b>Emphasis on</b>	
Behavior and Results	.....	Discourse and Generativity
	<b>Change is</b>	
Planned Episodic More developmental	.....	Emergent Continuous and iterative More transformational
	<b>Consultants</b>	
Stay apart at the margins Partner with	.....	Are immersed with Part of
	<b>Change Processes</b>	
Hierarchical Start at top, work down	.....	Heterarchical Start anywhere, spread out

From Bushe, G.R., & Marshak, R.J. (2014b). The dialogic mindset in organization development. *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, 22, p.86.

## *THE CORE PROCESSES OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE IN DIALOGIC OD*

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Simply having good “dialogues”, creating spaces where people are willing and able to speak their minds and listen carefully to one another, is not sufficient for transformational change to occur. We propose that three underlying change processes, singly or in combination, are essential to the successful use of any of the Dialogic OD methods listed in Table 31.1 (Bushe & Marshak, 2015a). Said another way, we believe that failures of any Dialogic OD method to stimulate transformational change is a result of none of the following three transformational processes having happened.

### *Transformational Process 1: Emergence*

Transformation Process 1 is when a disruption in the ongoing social construction of reality is stimulated or engaged in a way that leads to a more complex re-organization. This disruption occurs when the previous order or pattern of social relations falls apart, and there is little chance of going back to the way things were. Disruptions can be planned or unplanned, and the group or organization may be able to self-organize around them without much conscious leadership. From a Dialogic OD perspective, however, transformation is unlikely to take place without disruption of the “established” meaning-making processes (Holman, 2015; Stacey, 2015).

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A variety of Dialogic OD methods can be used to create containers for productive conversations to take place that support re-organizing at higher levels of complexity despite the anxiety that disruptive endings can create. However, once disrupted, it is impossible to plan or control what might then happen; the options range from complete dissolution to reorganization at a higher level of complexity (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). Practitioners operating from a dialogic mindset tend to encourage leaders to confront and push the system close to chaos while expanding and enriching the networks amongst stakeholders, rather than pursuing diagnostically induced planned change from a current to a desired future state. It is at the close to chaos boundary that self-organizing changes can emerge (Kauffman, 1995; Pascale, Milleman & Gioia, 2001). Dialogic OD practitioners assume that fully engaging organizational members in such self-organization will lead to more impactful changes, more quickly, than attempts to plan and implement prescribed changes.

### *Transformational Process 2: Narrative*

Transformational Process 2 is when there is a change to one or more core narratives. Core narratives are the storylines people use to explain and bring coherence to their organizational lives by making sense of ongoing “facts” and events. Changing what people think or their social agreements - for example about the role of women in organizations, or about hierarchical

structures, or even about how change happens in organizations - requires changing the common, prevailing storylines endorsed by those presently and/or historically in power (Marshak & Grant, 2008). Stories are a way of managing change, particularly culture change, and transformational change is often constituted by transformations in the narratives that participants author (e.g., Brown & Humphreys 2003; Buchanan & Dawson, 2007). A variety of the methods listed in Table 31.1 can be used as a conscious intervention into the narratives and story making processes of an organization (Storch, 2015; Swart, 2015).

### *Transformational Process 3: Generativity*

The third transformation process happens when a generative image is introduced or surfaces that provides new and compelling alternatives for thinking and acting. A generative image is one or more words, pictures, or other symbols that provide new ways of thinking about social and organizational reality. They, in effect, allow people to imagine alternative decisions and actions that could not be imagined before the generative image surfaced. “Sustainable development” is one iconic example of a generative image. Even though it cannot be defined (one quality of truly generative images) it continues to spin off innovations more than 25 years after it was first coined. A second property of generative images is that they are compelling; people want to act on the new

opportunities the generative image evokes. A variety of the methods listed in Table 31.1 are often supported by using generative images as the initiating themes or questions for inquiry (Bushe, 2013b) or by evoking new generative images in the process of dialogue and inquiry (Storch & Zithen, 2013). Bushe’s research has found that generative images are central to successful applications of AI (Bushe, 1998, 2010, 2013a; Bushe & Kassam, 2005), and we propose that they are also central to Dialogic OD approaches more broadly defined (Bushe & Storch, 2015).

### *WHAT DO DIALOGIC OD PRACTITIONERS DO?*

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Dialogic OD practice differs along a continuum from episodic change practices to continuous change practices (Bushe & Marshak, 2014a). An episodic change practice focuses on one or more events intended to help a group or organization transform from one semi-stable state to another. A continuous change practice is based on a stream of ongoing interactions intended to make small alterations to the ongoing patterns of interaction or self-organization that, over time, accumulate into a transformed state of being.

Those sponsoring Dialogic OD usually do not know exactly what changes are needed, wanted or how to achieve them. The complexity of the issues and dynamics leaders and organizations face in the 21st century world of work means that application of “best practices” or pre-existing knowledge to identify and then

implement change is unlikely to be successful. This has been described by Heifetz (1998) as the difference between technical problems and adaptive challenges, and by Snowden & Boone (2000) as the difference between complicated and complex decision situations. Dialogic OD practitioners believe that dialogic processes are the most effective way to deal with adaptive, complex challenges. During the entry process, the Dialogic OD practitioner will work with the sponsors to identify, in general, their intentions and the range of potentially affected stakeholders who need to be engaged in the Dialogic OD process. They may or may not decide it is important to create a “planning” or “hosting” group that in some way represents those stakeholders to help architect the change effort. This is usually more important when the change involves a complex issue, for example: transportation in the region, where there’s a need to engage a large or very large group of stakeholders and when operating from a more episodic change mindset. It’s critical at this stage for the OD practitioner and the sponsor to agree on the desired directions of the change effort and for the sponsor to be able and willing to make the necessary resources, particularly time, money, and personal commitment, available for the project.

Some Dialogic OD methods involve participants in becoming explicitly aware of the stories, narratives, and patterns of discourse they are embedded in while others do not. In either case, all assume that personal and/or organizational change

will require a change in those narratives. Some focus primarily on changing the discourse while others focus on both discourse and the changes in decisions and action that emerge from it. Like Diagnostic OD, Dialogic OD involves both structured interventions (like action research) and experiential interventions (like process consultation). In the following we briefly summarize both types of Dialogic OD practice.

### *Structured Dialogic OD*

Structured Dialogic OD involves one or more events. These events are designed so that relationships and communications are enhanced to enable more creativity and engagement. Practitioners create a “container” (Corrigan, 2015) within which new conversations can take place, new relationships forged, and ideas for change emerge. Much of the difference in Dialogic OD methods concerns ways of orchestrating (rather than facilitating) what happens in these containers. In all cases, when successful, participants make personal, voluntary commitments to new behaviors and projects. An emergent or improvisational, as opposed to a planned implementation, approach to the action phase is generally used. Events are intended to generate and support self-organizing groups with ideas for change to take action, without knowing which of these will actually be successful. Practitioners work with leaders to watch and learn, cultivate the ideas that lead the



organization in the desired direction, amplify their impact, and embed them into the organization's fabric (Roehrig, Schwendenwein, & Bushe, 2015)

### *Unstructured Dialogic OD*

We refer to less structured approaches to Dialogic OD as “dialogic process consultation”. In these approaches, a practitioner will bring a dialogic mindset to one-on-one and small group interactions. In some approaches to dialogic process consultation, the OD practitioner helps individuals become aware of and take more control over the prevailing images, metaphors, and narratives that are shaping how people think and act (Marshak, 2013). They may focus attention to the ways in which conversations that differ from the prevailing wisdom are restricted or encouraged, for example the degree to which a diversity of participants and perspectives are included or excluded in key organizational decisions. They may invite consideration of processes of generativity; especially how to foster new images that will influence the ongoing construction and re-construction of social reality (Storch & Ziethen, 2013).

The most provocative approaches to dialogic process consultation are based on concepts of complexity, meaning making, emergence, and self-organization. These dialogic process activities assume relationships and organizations are continuously re-creating themselves through the on-going conversations that

occur at all levels and parts of an organization, (Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2015). Any shifts in the nature of these conversations, for example, their participants, emphases, or patterns, will encourage incremental shifts that lead groups to self-organize in new and different ways without the need to bring anything to awareness. There is no use of specially structured events to shift from a current state to a more desired future state (Goppelt & Ray, 2015; Ray & Goppelt, 2013). Instead the OD practitioner enters into a team or organization that is assumed to be in the continuous process of becoming, participates fully in the ongoing life of the system while seeking to draw attention to, or modify, any on-going dialogic patterns that may be blocking or limiting the organization's ability to evolve, and/or by accentuating differences that might encourage new patterns to emerge.

### *SUMMARY*

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Dialogic and Diagnostic OD are not two different things – they are different ways of thinking. We believe they both exist, more or less, in the mental maps of individual OD practitioners. Like yin and yang, they can combine in a myriad of ways to affect an OD practitioner's choices and actions. We advocate avoiding either/or arguments and, instead, inquiry into the opportunities for change each mindset provides separately and in combination.

It is unclear to us, at this time, whether dialogic transformational change requires all or most all of the eight premises, and

more than one of the three core transformational processes to be successful. To us and other Dialogic OD practitioners they do seem related, either explicitly or implicitly. It is difficult to imagine, for example, a change in a core narrative that did not also involve a disruption to the prevailing social construction of reality. But changes in core narratives do occur over time, which do not necessarily involve an abrupt disruption. In a world of constant change, however, “disruption” is mainly a matter of temporal perspective. Our current proposition is that transformational change from Dialogic OD results from some combination of the three change processes as supported by the eight key premises. Hopefully, Dialogic OD, and the narrative advanced in this chapter, serves as a generative image evoking new insights into the potential for OD practices to transform organizations and realize more effective organizing.

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