

'SPEAKING TOGETHER': Applying the principles and practice of dialogue

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“Some time ago there was an anthropologist who lived for a long while with a North American tribe. It was a small group of about fifty people ... Now, from time to time that tribe met like this in a circle. They just talked and talked and talked, apparently to no purpose. They made no decisions. There was no leader. And everybody could participate. There may have been wise men or wise women who were listened to a bit more – the older ones – but everybody could talk. The meeting went on, until it finally seemed to stop for no reason at all and the group dispersed. Yet after that, everybody seemed to know what to do, because they understood each other so well. Then they could get together in smaller groups and do something or decide things.”

(Bohm 1996)

The following account of Dialogue is based mainly on the work of David Bohm and those theorists and practitioners who have been influenced by his work.

Here are some quotes which will start to move us into the right territory:

“Dialogue ... is about a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together.”

“Dialogue ... is a conversation with a center, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channelling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarization and into a greater common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people.”

" In essence a dialogue is a flow of meaning."

(Isaacs, 1999)

“In a dialogue ... nobody is trying to win ... There is a different sort of spirit to it. In a dialogue, there is no attempt to gain points, or to make your particular view prevail. Rather, whenever any mistake is discovered on the part of anybody, everybody gains”

(Bohm 1996)

A little bit of theory

The theoretical basis for the form of dialogue practised in the Center for Organizational Learning's Dialogue Project lies in David Bohm's work on the nature of thought. To put this simply, Bohm believed that there was something fundamentally amiss with our thinking. He called this fragmentation. This is the way in which we have learnt firstly to divide up and categorise the world and secondly (crucially) that we then act as though we have not done any such thing and as though the product of our thinking was an exact representation of reality. Bohm was a physicist and his thinking was based on quantum theory, according to which the observer and the

observed are not in reality separate entities and that what we observe is a creation of our own perception:

“What you perceive, in other words, is not determined by independent external properties of ‘parts’ of reality, but is a function of the ways in which you try to perceive that reality.”
(Isaacs, 1993)

The practice of dialogue is intended to change the way we think and the way we think about the way we think. Dialogue creates this change *collectively* by means of a large group speaking together in a circle.

The way that it does this is through the four practices (Listening, Respecting, Suspending and Voicing) outlined below. Isaacs developed these practices based on four ‘principles’ that Bohm proposed as being key to the way the world (including the neurology of thought) is constructed.

Bohm’s four principles are:

PARTICIPATION: according to which the world does not consist of separate bits and pieces but is intrinsically whole. The observer and the observed are not truly separate, even though we create an artificial separation so as to describe and manipulate the world. Bohm perceived the problem in all this to be that we mistake this fragmented thinking for reality itself. We then try to *impose order*. He saw dialogue as a way of modelling a more participative way of being together. Here it seems to me that he was using dialogue as a *metaphor* for reality, as well as a *tool* or method for thinking together. Bohm had a conception of the world of thought being like a kind of field in which we all participate – our mistake is in identifying with thoughts and claiming them as our own.

COHERENCE: In a way, this is a route to knowledge. Bohm saw all knowledge as imperfect “because it is an abstraction of the whole”. He therefore advocated looking for incoherence between our intentions and our results, as this will point to where knowledge is defective. It is then possible to move on and learn more. This concept becomes fundamental in situations of conflict and underpins the notion of ‘respect’ in dialogue.

AWARENESS or PROPRIOCEPTION: This is the same principle that allows us to be aware of the impulse to move in the physical world: Bohm believed that the same principle could be developed in the mental world, so that we could become aware of thought arising, rather than immediately identifying with it. This process would also allow us to be more aware of the results of our thoughts – in our feelings, perceptions and actions.

ENFOLDMENT: As it relates to thought, this is the principle that indicates that a thought does not disappear “once we have finished with it”, but that thoughts emerge into consciousness and back again. He saw the universe as a whole consisting of an ‘implicate order’ underlying what is manifest in the physical and mental realms. This has implications for how we view our ‘ownership’ of our mental contents.

Four key practices of dialogue

Isaacs (1999) takes Bohm’s four principles and relates them to four key practices for dialogue.

LISTENING

Underlying the practice of listening is the principle of “participation”. Isaacs quotes Bohm in likening this to listening to music – no one element or note of the music makes sense on its own. We listen to a whole piece and in some sense therefore “each part of the

music contains information about the whole piece". The implication is that by listening deeply we put ourselves in touch with a larger whole – people's words carry not just an immediate meaning but a whole context and connections. The whole person is "enfolded" in every part of their conversation. This has enormous implications for the potential richness of meaning that we can bring into conversation if we're able to be present and listen. In preparing to listen at this deep level, Isaacs identifies five practices. He believes these can be practised individually at any time, and are strengthened by the practice of doing this collectively.

The five practices are:

- *Be aware of thought*

Notice how much our thinking arises out of memory, out of a "net of thought", how we have a host of ready made responses and opinions. Things are already categorised in our minds, which makes fresh, intelligent thinking difficult. Listening to your own thinking and its limitations is the first step.

- *Stick to the facts*

Listen to what is actually being said without jumping to conclusions or judgments. Often we treat our inferences and conclusions as if they were facts and do not test them, so they harden into unchallenged conclusions. We look for evidence that we are right, not for evidence that we are wrong. We need to observe the *process* of our own inferences.

- *Follow the disturbance*

Look for what happens when what we hear disturbs us emotionally. We need to face our emotional reactions to what is being said and be prepared both to look at what that means and, separately, to see how others are experiencing the world. Isaacs advocates asking "In what ways am I doing to others the very things I claim they should not do?" He believes that "Listening to our own actions, we begin to see what we have been doing to others."

- *Listen without resistance*

Recognise and put to one side the "resistances and reactions that we feel to what someone else is saying." *Notice* the reaction and then continue to listen.

- *Stand still*

Cultivate inner silence, using all of the practices above to get beyond the usual noisy turmoil that prevents us from hearing.

'The art of listening together'

In dialogue these practices are taken into a collective setting. This involves a fundamental shift in perspective, becoming "an advocate for the whole" – not just listening from my own or another's perspective. This explains why true dialogue is thought only to be possible with fairly large numbers. For smaller numbers there is not sufficient diversity in the room to represent a 'whole'. When we listen for the whole, we "speak to the centre of the circle", not just to individuals.

RESPECTING

Defined as "looking again" at a person with the intention of taking in more of them, understanding what has created their particular experience. Underlying the practice of

respect is the principle of “coherence”. Based on a concept of wholeness, this leads us to look for the possibility that whatever is unfolding in the dialogue is doing so from some element of commonality. It involves cultivating a capacity for respect “for myself, for others, for difference, and for those in particular who oppose what I have to say”. Dialogue therefore seeks the wholeness, or otherwise, in conversation. It is inclusive in nature, not divisive, allowing the concurrent holding of a range of points of view. It’s important to remember this is not about reaching agreement – it’s more like being able to tolerate difference, conflict, pain, anger, all the elements that are likely to arise in a group.

The four practices for learning to respect are:

- *Stand at the hub*

Isaacs pictures a spinning wheel and suggests that our awareness needs to be centred at the hub of the wheel “which might be thought of as the essence of things”. He believes this is a first step to remove ourselves from the turmoil of past and future and to really engage with another person as they actually are.

- *Centering*

Isaacs relates this to the martial arts practice of becoming “rooted but flexible”. This prevents one from being blown off course by those in opposition.

- *Listen as if it were all in me*

Based on the idea that if we can perceive something in another, it’s also a part of our own mental world. Particularly when irritated by someone’s contribution, we can examine our own thought processes, feelings and behaviour, to find where we might have the same thing in us. From this point it is easier to fully acknowledge the other – not to agree, but to include whatever it is in the whole.

- *Make it strange*

Sometimes by rushing to a point of understanding, we make assumptions about others that are invalid, by assigning them to a category too readily. By making the other strange, there is a chance to experience them in a new way that is about them, and not about you.

Respect in groups

In the context of dialogue, Isaacs advocates allowing and respecting the polarisation that appears in groups, without trying to fix it or come to agreement. This involves making deliberate space for different points of view, however extreme, so that they become a part of the whole. Isaacs says it is important to allow the tension that this brings about and not to try to relieve it. This allows space for new understanding.

SUSPENDING

Underlying the practice of suspension is the principle of awareness. The idea is that by reflecting in the moment, we come to see and understand what is going on in our own minds, as it’s happening. This idea is closely related to the notion that we construct our own social reality – the practice of suspension is to observe and acknowledge that as it happens.

Suspending means holding up your opinions, your certainties, your judgments and your thinking “in a way that lets us and others see and understand it”. Isaacs believes this is difficult because we identify what we think with who we are. But it is only by suspending thought – neither identifying with nor suppressing it – that we can enter into dialogue that

can allow for movement. He locates the meaning of the word 'suspend' in its root, which means 'stretch' or 'spin', and says that to suspend thought is "to spin it out so that it can be seen, like a web between two beams in a barn".

Isaacs proposes two levels of suspension: the first is simply to state openly the "contents of your consciousness", thoughts, feelings, opinions, so that all can see what is going on. The second level is to 'move upstream' and be aware that thoughts and feelings arise in oneself in the very personal context of history and memory – hence they are our own productions, not objective facts about the external world. This awareness makes a crucial difference to the way we communicate them to others.

The five practices for suspension are:

- *Suspend certainty*

Noticing our thoughts as *objects*, not as maps of the outer world, and questioning our certainties. Isaacs calls the process "mining for the questions ... the really important, hard questions that keep people up nights and go to the heart of our concerns". He suggests we "cultivate the suspension of answers".

- *Seek the order between*

Taking a position and sticking to it is highly valued in our culture. To unlock this limitation on intelligent enquiry, look for the unresolved issues around which people are polarising. Positional thinking is always partial and dialogue is about working with the whole, not about compromising between opposites or finding 'the right answer'. In dialogue therefore we would 'suspend' the polar opposites and look for what exists between and around them.

- *Try frame experiments*

This refers to Schon's practice of re-framing. It is intended to shift settled perspectives: "the art of trying to see people in a different light".

- *Externalise thought*

Externalising our thoughts and dilemmas enables us to work them through collectively. Isaacs believes this works because our commonality as humans means we share much more than we think we do. There is a network of thought that is in all of us and that we in turn inhabit.

- *Ask: What am I missing? How does the problem work?*

Consider what is being systematically left out of the conversation. Instead of looking immediately for solutions to problems, consider more carefully how the problem arises – what has produced this situation in the first place? These are reflective practices designed to delve around outside the limits imposed by thoughts, opinions, judgments and certainties.

Suspension in groups

Collectively, suspension means surfacing issues of importance to everyone, in a way that invites a fresh response. Isaacs points out that most groups will have habitual patterns of engagement and believes that the practice of suspending can help the group to expand its range of alternatives beyond fixed points of view. It is helpful to consider the group from a collective point of view and to think of the individuals as parts of the whole. Isaacs calls this "sensing the system". The concept of 'conservation' is important here: what is the group trying to conserve or sustain?

VOICING

Speaking your voice starts with listening internally. The question to ask is “What needs to be expressed now?” It means listening carefully so as to choose what to say and what not to say in the moment. He advocates using silence to ‘let the picture develop’ before speaking, and to trust the silence and what will come out of it. Paradoxically, there is also a sense of speaking without knowing exactly what you are going to say, so this practice seems to me to be about focusing inwards, rather than rehearsing thoughts before speaking.

Behind the practice of speaking your voice is the principle of “enfoldment”. This relates to Bohm’s theory of implicate and explicate order. Bohm suggests that the reason quantum physics is so counter-intuitive is that what we are seeing is the ‘surface’ or ‘explicate order’ of reality. Underlying this is something that he sees as pure process, the ‘implicate order’. These two together make the whole. The explicate is constantly unfolding from and folding back into the underlying implicate order, rather as a tree emerges from a seed. What has this got to do with dialogue? Bohm transferred his vision of reality into the neurological world of thought and believed that thought emerges from an implicate order in just the same way that the physical world does. By focusing on the place where thought arises, we find a more authentic voice than the artificial voices of the thoughts themselves.

In dialogue therefore, Isaacs proposes there can be an underlying order to the conversation from which individuals may express a range of elements – it’s the underlying connection, the larger whole, which makes dialogue potentially so productive.

The five practices for speaking your own voice are:

- *Playing your own music*

Ask yourself: If I don’t speak my own voice, who will? First finding and then having the courage to speak with your own voice is the challenge.

- *Overcome self-censorship*

One way of doing this is to consider what might be the risk if you don’t speak, as well as the risk if you do. Consider what it is that you really want to create.

- *Jump into the void*

Isaacs compares this to musical improvisation and contrasts it with ‘speaking from memory’ using the sort of pre-rehearsed formulations that are so familiar.

- *Ask: what do I want to be known for?*

Isaacs believes we repress the ‘golden’ sides of ourselves as well as the dark sides. ‘What do I want to be known for?’ encourages us to hold in mind what we truly care most about and to be prepared to speak our own truth.

Finding voice in a group

The voice of the whole group is characterised as an emerging story, a whole that wants to be articulated. It’s important to note that this does not imply agreement or compromise. It’s like a whole cloth, woven out of different strands. Isaacs believes that the lesson from his practice with the steel mill management and unions is that the practice of dialogue can enable people to move the story along, so it doesn’t stay stuck in the past or in limited categorisations of people and behaviour.

In dialogue, speech is used to create a common pool of meaning together. Speaking to the centre of the circle means that people speak as a contribution to the whole – they are not engaged in creating, maintaining or examining interpersonal relationships amongst themselves.

Making it practical: using the principles of dialogue in learning interventions

A number of practitioners have taken elements of dialogue and focused on the practicalities of introducing these into OD interventions. Other large group interventions have different roots but have some obvious similarities, in that they are based on conversation, are non-hierarchical and tend towards large scale and diversity. There is an underpinning, sometimes implicit belief amongst practitioners of large group interventions in the intrinsic value of creating space for transformational conversation amongst people in organisations.

What can we learn from looking at some of the common themes and practices across a range of different large group interventions - such as Future Search, Open Space and Café Conversations? If we look at some of these themes, we may start to get a sense of what is important in the ways that we as practitioners bring people together for conversation in organisations. What is the difference that *makes a difference*?

Making meaning together

Weisbord & Janoff (1995) quote Bohm's concept of a "common pool" of meaning created when people listen to one another – "what they say becomes a part of you, whether you like it or not". Weisbord's Future Search technology seems designed to maximise people's exposure to one another in a structured series of small group discussions, in the hope that a common purpose and action will arise at the end of the process. He admits that evidence of its efficacy is anecdotal but he believes that by confronting complexity, rather than trying to resolve it, actions may come out of the process that are genuinely collective. Future Search shares with dialogue a belief that following a particular conversational process in a group can enable new meaning and new understanding to emerge, leading to new action. By bringing people together to talk in large numbers in a particular way they will develop "a shared psychological field" which is made up of all of their views and experiences.

Margaret Wheatley (Wheatley in Weisbord et al, 1992) sets Future Search in the context of the new sciences and envisages an underlying ordering process that takes hold when we generate large amounts of information and don't attempt to impose order upon it.

Café Conversations also handle large numbers in small groups with people moving from table to table, taking the threads of their conversations with them for exploration in different configurations. As with Future Search and Dialogue, descriptions of Café Conversations include references to something larger than the individuals making up the group – Wheatley (in Brown, 2005) calls it "discovering collective wisdom". The descriptions she quotes (eg "the magic in the middle"; "something coming to life in the middle of the table") are very reminiscent of quotes from people who have experienced Bohmian dialogue. It is intriguing to see that this experience can be generated by a host of small conversations as well as one large scale dialogue.

Authenticity

The 'fourfold way' of Open Space (Owen, 1997) comprises the following injunctions: Show up; Be present; Tell the truth; let it all go. He advocates "being authentically

present". Authenticity is a hallmark of all these ways of interacting together. In the World Café, everyone is deemed to be of equal worth and their contribution is actively encouraged.

Containing a range of voices

One of the reasons given by both Isaacs and Weisbord for large scale dialogue is to ensure a sufficient diversity of stakeholders to represent the whole.

Weisbord (1995) calls this "validating polarities". In Future Search, "To the extent people can live with polarities, they can act on common ground". Weisbord believes that people who express contrary views are invaluable as they may express an aspect of reality the rest of the group is not in touch with. Practices are put in place to ensure that people who express contrary views are not scape-goated by the group. Neither is there an attempt to negotiate a resolution. Conflict is acknowledged, neither confronted nor resolved.

"Bringing the whole system into the room makes feasible a shared encounter with aspects of reality we normally avoid – chaos, complexity, uncertainty" (Weisbord 1995).

Diversity is one of the core principles of Café Conversations. Brown (2005) believes that it is the 'cross-pollination' that occurs by having people move around that makes the most of the diversity in the room.

Size matters

The idea of needing a large group to promote dialogue originates with de Mare et al (1991): "The small group also uses dialogue, but ... not with the same complexity and intensity." The concept of scale is also intrinsically linked to the concept of making meaning together. Patricia Shaw's (2002) approach at Ferrovía was always to ask – who else do we need to talk to? Though this was an emergent process rather than an organised intervention, the principle is the same in that understanding tends to be increased by increasing the numbers of people present in the conversation.

We already know how to have a dialogue

A number of writers and practitioners point to the fact that dialogue is not something new, it is something people already know how to 'do'. Perhaps it has just been squeezed out of our organisations by what Shaw (2002) calls "the professionalization of all kinds of human communication into codified behavioural notions of 'coaching', 'counselling', 'teamwork' or 'leading'". She refers also to the rise and rise of business school education leading to an instrumental view of human behaviour and interaction, focused on delivering results, which ignores the "everyday artistry" by which people make meaning together.

Zohar (1997) points to the practice of dialogue in ancient Greece and to the fact that people appear to understand quite readily what is required of them in a dialogue.

Wheatley (in Brown, 2005) says the World Café is based on a belief in people. "It works because people *can* work well together ... when they're actively engaged in meaningful conversations around questions that count."

Don't rush to a conclusion

Future Search differs fundamentally from dialogue in that it is highly purposeful and task focused – the aim is to "bring the whole system into the room" to "commit to action plans grounded in reality" (Weisbord 1995) Nevertheless, the way this is conducted is clearly dialogic with an emphasis on "staying with the mess", not trying to eliminate anxiety, and "suspending decisions, conflicts and problem solving". It is not clear that his meaning in

the word 'suspending' is the same as Bohm's but there are clear parallels. All the large group interventions are relatively lengthy as there is a focus on allowing time and space for conversation to develop and to take its own course rather than being shoe-horned into an imposed structure. The structures and techniques are precise but lightweight, in that they allow participants maximum freedom within them.

The magic circle

Bohm, Isaacs, Owen and Dixon all subscribe to the power of the circle to create a forum for dialogue, drawing on the image of the camp fire. "A circle is the only configuration that manifests equal participation ... In a circle there is no 'head of the table'" (Dixon, 1998). "The circle is the fundamental geometry of open human communication" (Owen, 1997).

No leaders

Again it is the 'pure form' dialogue that insists most on the absence of leaders, on the need for the facilitator to hand over the process as soon as possible to the group. Weisbord (1995) and Dixon (1998) both acknowledge the perennial difficulties of groups forming a dependency on facilitators. What most large group interventions do have in common is the perception that the output genuinely does come from the whole group and is not pre-determined or guided by the facilitator. Shaw's conversations on the other hand are entirely open-ended and exploratory.

There is no agenda

This is critical to Bohm's conception of dialogue but understandably rare in other interventions – understandably because of the difficulty of making space in the results-driven environment of commercial organisations for a conversation with no apparent purpose and no foreseeable conclusion. Shaw breaks the mould here by deliberately setting aside the idea of having an agenda in important conversations.

Finding a way forward: a dialogic approach to practice

As a practitioner I have found that the awareness and practice of the principles of dialogue changes how I work with groups, and that this change is amplified by using some of the well known technologies and frameworks and technologies of large group interventions. However, I think it goes further than this and somehow works its way into an approach to development that mirrors the principles of dialogue at quite a deep level, and that resonates with other people regardless of whether or not they are given any introduction to those principles. If in fact the principles of dialogue are 'hard-wired' into human beings, that's hardly surprising.

Schein (1999) believes that dialogue is "a prerequisite at the face-to-face level for any helping relationship". He sees this as a kind of sliding scale, where conversations "become more like dialogues".

So what would it be like to move towards being a 'dialogic practitioner' in working with groups?

Participation/listening: When working with a group as facilitator, you would be considering the group at the level of wholeness rather than looking at the dynamics between fragmented parts. In listening to the group you would be hearing and respecting each individual voice and you would also be listening to the whole as each individual in some way will contain the whole group. In this way the practitioner becomes the "advocate for the whole" (Isaacs, 1999) *on behalf of the group.*

Respect: In practising respect for the group, not trying to reconcile the various points of view, or to advocate one over another, but to help the group to hold the space open for all the polarisation within it, and for the resulting tension. The value for a group, particularly one that is divided or conflicted, is in seeking a place of containment for the whole mess, rather than a point of agreement or compromise.

Suspending: In practising suspending, the practitioner would need to be able to suspend his or her own thoughts about the group and its individual members as they arise and be prepared to hold them up for inspection – and to develop an awareness that our thoughts about the group are just that, and not an objective reality. The benefit of doing that would be to model the process for the group members. We would be helping the group to look for the “order between” the polarisations. I think this goes beyond the ordinary bounds of facilitation because it relates to working on ourselves around how we think about the group we are working with. I am reminded of the importance of what the group is trying to conserve or sustain, as well as to change or transform.

Voicing: Speaking your own voice is the crunch moment! Whether as an internal or an external consultant, there may be a huge gap between what you need to say and what the organisation or an individual can tolerate hearing, and I think this is where a very difficult question of values and authenticity comes in. Perhaps the answer is in the question “What needs to be expressed now?”

The legacy of the practitioner would then be to convey (perhaps through the practice of dialogue as a technology) to the group the ability to do this for themselves. Dialogue is the least manipulative of interventions. It moves us totally away from the instrumental, diagnostic, organisational health metaphor and from the legacy of the engineering metaphor into a way of transformation that is genuinely located in the humans who make up the organisation. Obviously the broader the dialogue across or between organisations, the more this becomes the case.

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