



## CHAPTER TEN

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# DIALOGIC ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

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Organization development (OD) emerged in the 1960s as an identifiable field of practice that included action research, survey research, T-groups, humanistic psychology, open systems theory, team building, and process consultation. Since then, ideas and methods have enriched and expanded its range of theories and approaches. Many of these ideas and methods have converged since the 1980s into a form of OD that differs in important ways from earlier OD theory and practice. We have labeled this recent development “dialogic OD” and contrasted it with forms of “diagnostic OD” based on the earlier, foundational ideas and practices (Bushe & Marshak, 2009, Marshak & Bushe, 2013). The purpose of this chapter is to introduce and explain what dialogic OD is and in what ways it is both similar to and differs from other forms of OD, the basic methods or practices associated with it, and ways to think about when to use it. Throughout, we make references to additional, useful information on dialogic OD theory and practice.

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### Basic Differences Between Diagnostic and Dialogic Organization Development

In the last thirty years the postmodern and linguistic turn 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 have spawned methods like appreciative inquiry, open space, world café, re-description, art of hosting, and the conference model, to name a few (see Bushe, 2013), that are philosophically based in a different paradigm from the modernist, positivism of diagnostic OD. Rather than a focus on organizations as open systems, dialogic OD is based on a view of organizations as dialogic systems where individual, group, and organizational actions result from self-organizing, socially constructed realities created and sustained by the prevailing narratives, stories, and conversations through which people make meaning about their experiences. Organizations are considered to be complex phenomena whereby what people think and do is in a continuous process of meaning making and emergence. From this perspective change results from “changing the conversations” that shape everyday thinking and behavior through involving more and different voices, altering how and which people talk to each other, and/or by stimulating alternative or generative images, to shape how people think about things.

Consequently, although easy to misconstrue, dialogic OD is not simply about creating good dialogues or objective exchanges of information. Furthermore, instead of change driven by diagnosing how to objectively align or re-align organizational elements with the demands of a broader environment as suggested by open systems theory, the dialogic systems perspective invites considering how to induce new ways of thinking by engaging with the ongoing organizational conversations that continuously create, re-create, and frame understanding and action (Barrett, Thomas, & Hocevar, 1995, Grant & Marshak, 2011; van Nistelrooij & Sminia, 2010; Whitney, 1996).

## Foundational Concepts

Diagnostic OD is based on the change theories developed in the 1940s and 1950s by Kurt Lewin and Ron Lippitt. Change is conceptualized as a planned process of “unfreezing” a current social equilibrium, creating “movement” to a new and more desirable future equilibrium that then needs to be “refrozen” to sustain the change. A key aspect of planned change is action research, which includes “diagnosis” of the existing situation—the elements, factors, and forces maintaining the current state—in order to know where and how to intervene to induce movement in the direction of the desired state.

In the late 1960s open systems theories became an integral part of OD, leading to models of how organizational elements (mission, strategies, structures, systems, leadership, culture, etc.) needed to be aligned with each other and strategically responsive to external environments in order to position the organization for future success. This led to the development of a number of different diagnostic models in the 1970s and 1980s identifying key organizational elements that needed to be part of an OD planned change effort.

In sum, then, the diagnostic OD model of change involves conceptualizing organizations as open systems that need to have all of their elements in alignment and responsive to changing environmental conditions and competitive threats. The current state of the team, organization, or community should be diagnosed to ascertain what aspects need to be changed and what means will best achieve the planned for outcome(s). Change results from a planned process of unfreezing, movement, and refreezing. Furthermore, this should be done through a collaborative action research process emphasizing valid data, informed choice, and commitment.

## Dialogic Concepts

Dialogic OD, on the other hand, has emerged from the confluence of a number of significantly different concepts and practices associated with organizational change. These are still being developed in differing combinations, but all in a way to suggest that dialogic OD proceeds from a different mindset about change, even though it generally adheres to the same underlying values and ethics as all forms of OD.

Instead of diagnostic action research methods, dialogic OD emphasizes discourse, emergence and generativity to foster or accelerate change. Generativity creates change by offering people new images that allow them to see old things in new ways and to make new actions available that couldn't be conceived before. Emergence creates change by disrupting stable patterns and creating opportunities for new thoughts and actions to emerge. Narrative and discourse create change by altering the stories and symbols people use to make meaning of themselves and the situations they are in.

For some practitioners this also means conceiving of organizations as in constant flux where there is no need to use diagnosis or data-feedback to induce the dissatisfaction needed to unfreeze and move a static system (see for example, Holman, 2010, Marshak 2013a; Shaw, 2002). Especially when

working with larger groups, the role of the dialogic OD consultant is not described as a “facilitator” as it is in diagnostic OD. Instead, the OD consultant is described by some as a choreographer or stage manager who helps to create a “container” and designs and fosters conversations among the participants. Increasingly this role of the dialogic consultant is being referred to as “hosting” (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) or “convening” (Neal & Neal, 2011). A summary of the key characteristics of dialogic OD are provided in Exhibit 10.1 and a more in-depth description of the differences between diagnostic and dialogic OD can be found in Bushe & Marshak (2009).

Importantly, however, dialogic OD practices share many or most all of the same underlying values as foundational OD, which is why we consider it a form of OD and not another type of change paradigm. These include shared democratic, humanistic, and collaborative inquiry values.

### Exhibit 10.1. Key Characteristics of Dialogic OD

**Important Influences:** foundational OD, social construction, the complexity sciences, the linguistic turn in the social sciences, appreciative inquiry, and open space, among others.

**Organizations are** self-organizing, socially constructed realities created, sustained and changed by the prevailing narratives, stories, and conversations through which people make meaning about their experiences.

**Change Theory:** change emerges from disturbances that change the conversations, which shape meaning making and everyday thinking and behavior.

**Change Practices:** Co-inquiry, collective discovery, and generativity are emphasized to foster or accelerate change by involving more and different voices, altering how and which people talk with each other, and/or by stimulating alternative or generative images to shape how people think about things. The emphasis is on changing conversations to change mindsets and ways of thinking that lead to new behaviors.

**Role of the Consultant:** Differs somewhat depending on the size of the group and nature of the change task. At one extreme, large group episodic change processes, the consultant acts as an architect, designing the nature of the containers that will host new conversations and the processes that will support positive changes that emerge from those conversations. At the other extreme, with individual coaching or small group continuous change processes, the consultant engages with the client’s day-to-day meaning making by seeking to alter prevailing narratives and discourses and thereby support the emergence of different ways of thinking and acting.

**Core Values:** Democratic, humanistic, and collaborative inquiry

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## Change Processes in Dialogic OD

Practitioners of dialogic OD operate from a different mindset than consultants using other forms of OD. The principle beliefs about change that form the dialogic mindset include:

1. Change is part of the continuous process of self-organizing (Jantsch, 1980; Olson & Eoyang, 2001) that occurs in all human collectives. New organizational behaviors and practices result from emergent rather than directed processes. In other words, one does not plan for a specific change, but instead helps to foster the conditions that lead to new ways of thinking and new possibilities (e.g., Holman, 2010; Owen, 2008a; Shaw, 2002).
2. Organizational “reality” is a social construct that emerges through dialogic processes. What any particular group believes is “reality,” “truth,” or “the ways things are”, is created, conveyed, and changed through mental models, stories, narratives, and other symbolic interactions. Thus, how things are framed and talked about becomes a significant, if not the most significant context shaping how people think about and respond to any situation (e.g., Cooperrider, Barrett, & Srivastva, 1995).
3. A central premise is that language does more than simply convey information. Instead language creates, frames, sustains, and transforms social experience, shapes organizational members’ mindsets, and influences the resulting organizational behavior (e.g., Barrett, Thomas & Hocevar, 1995; Grant & Marshak, 2011).
4. Narratives are coherent stories that are shared by a group of people and explain how things are, help them make sense of their world, and provide a rationale for decisions and actions. It’s assumed that in any organization there are a variety of different narratives about the same things. Dialogic OD consultants do not work at deciding which narratives are “right,” but they can try to help people look at the consequences of the narratives they hold, understand the variety of narratives influencing situations, recognize which narratives are “privileged” or suppressed, and/or support the emergence of new narratives (e.g., Barry, 1997; Swart, 2013).
5. The dialogic conditions that lead to emergent change include most or all of the following:
  - Disrupting prevailing social reality by adding diversity of ideas, questions, actors, processes, and so forth to the existing situation.

This introduces new narratives, stories, and perspectives from which new social agreements about the state of affairs, and what to do, can emerge.

- Creating a “container” that provides the right ingredients and space for participants to inquire together, making room for both individual and collective expression through which old ways of thinking are contested and new possibilities emerge. Providing specific dialogic activities or processes that engage participants in interactive processes) intended to create the conditions whereby transformed thinking will emerge.
- Emphasizing generativity rather than solving a problem or enhancing a current condition. A generative process will produce new ideas. A generative idea offers people new ways of thinking and acting they hadn't been able to consider before that they want to act on (Bushe, 2007, 2013). Generative processes can be things like: confronting or reframing prevailing ways of talking about or experiencing things; supporting the coming together of a diversity of participants and their social realities; creating new images, language, or stories that open doors to new ways of conceiving of a situation; and so forth. Importantly, in dialogic OD the focus is on fostering conditions that will lead to new ways of thinking and better outcomes without a commitment to specific changes as is the case in more directive, planned change approaches.
- Inviting the “whole person”—not just the mind, but also the physical, emotional, intellectual, and even spiritual aspects of self. As such, change processes often employ more than words and use other forms of interaction, such as music, art, movement, and other analogical forms of interaction.

In sum, then, a dialogic OD mindset assumes groups and organizations are self-organizing socially constructed realities that are continuously created, conveyed, and changed through narratives, stories, images, and conversations. The role of the consultant is to help foster or accelerate new ways of talking and thinking that lead to the emergence of transformational possibilities. This is usually done by introducing greater diversity into the interactions, asking generative questions that shift focus from problems to possibilities, fostering a container or space for different conversations to take place, and hosting interactions intended to lead to useful outcomes.

We now consider in more detail the methods and practices that follow from a dialogic OD mindset.

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## Dialogic OD Practice

Dialogic OD practice differs along a continuum from episodic change practices to continuous change practices. An episodic change practice focuses on one or more events intended to help a group, small or large, 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.

In either case there is always need for a clear sponsor who has some “ownership” of the group or organization and who employs the dialogic OD consultant to help foster change. Particularly when addressing complex social issues, such as education or health care, sponsoring groups are often composed of multiple organizations. The sponsors usually do not know exactly what changes are wanted or how to achieve them. They may be responding to some problems or concerns, or they may have an intent or general outcome they seek, but they don't know exactly what change will address the concern or create those outcomes. During the entry process, the dialogic OD consultant 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 the range of effected stakeholders to help architect the change effort. This is usually more important when the change target involves a complex issue, for example, transportation in the region, in which there's a desire to engage a large or very large group and when operating from a more episodic change mindset. It's critical for the OD consultant and the sponsor to agree on the intended outcomes 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 aware of the stories, narratives and patterns of discourse they are embedded in (e.g., Oliver, 2005; Swart, 2013). Others do not (e.g., Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008; Owen, 2008b). In either case, all assume that change will require a change in those narratives. Some focus primarily on changing the discourse (e.g., Shaw, 2002; Storch & Ziethen, 2013), while others focus on both discourse and the changes in action that emerge from that (e.g., Cooperrider, 2012; Nissen & Corrigan, 2009).

Like diagnostic OD, Dialogic OD involves both structured interventions (like action research) and experiential interventions (like process consultation). In the following we briefly review both types of dialogic OD practice.

### Structured Dialogic OD

Structured dialogic OD involves one or more events. These events are designed so that relationships are enhanced to enable more creativity and engagement. Generative images and questions are used to elicit new ideas. Sometimes these are already given by leaders or consultants, but most often the process needs to stimulate generative images from the group or organization (see Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990 and Bushe, 2013, for examples). Seeing options for action that didn't occur to them before, new ways to change become possible. Participants make personal, voluntary commitments to new behaviors and projects. After the event(s), new thinking, connections, and talking allow people to make new choices in their day-to-day interactions. There may be self-organized group projects stimulated by the generative image as well, but the transformation in the social construction of reality comes from participants developing different attitudes and assumptions as they make sense of changes in their day-to-day interactions.

Structured dialogic OD practices, like appreciative inquiry, future search, and art of hosting, involve a common sequence of activities in which the dialogic OD consultant does most, if not all, of the following steps:

*Help the sponsors articulate their wants in a future-focused, possibility-centric way.* The dialogic OD consultant will work with the sponsor, and perhaps a hosting group, to identify the desired outcome of the change effort and craft this into an image that is likely to capture the interest and energy of those who become part of the change process. Typically, these are future focused, in the sense that they identify a desired future, rather than identifying what is wrong with the present, and "possibility-centric" in the sense that they open up possibilities for achieving that desired future rather than focusing convergence on a particular solution. Sometimes these will be described as themes, sometimes as questions to be answered.

*Coach the sponsors in how to nurture emergent change.* Because dialogic OD works on assumptions of emergence and social construction—very different from the planning and controlling image most leaders have of their work—sponsors need to be coached on how to nurture emergent change. Dialogic OD assumes that every change situation is unique, and because of the complexity of human meaning making, what worked in one group or organization may not work in another. Because every interaction is ripe



with possibilities for new meaning making, causes and effects cannot be predicted ahead of time so there is no in point trying to identify and converge on the “right” changes. In such situations, the best change practice is to encourage a variety of changes and then work with those that are successful.

From the outset, sponsors need to understand that the point of these events is not to identify, agree on, and then implement *the* change. It’s to unleash, catalyze, and support the multitude of motivations and ideas among participants, in the service of transforming the group or organization in the desired direction. The design of the change process has to ensure that two key things happen:

1. The people who will ultimately embody and carry out the change are engaged, along with leaders and other stakeholders, in discussing what they desire to create and the changes that can bring about that desired future.
2. Members self-identify, individually and in groups, the changes they want to take responsibility for.

The outcome of events are altered beliefs, mental models, and narratives about the group about what is possible and desirable and the launch of multiple changes by committed individuals and groups, without a lot of winnowing by leaders. Instead, the winnowing happens after the events as what seemed like great ideas fall by the wayside while others pick up momentum.

In structured, dialogic OD, the leader’s key responsibilities are to:

- Identify the desired outcomes in possibility centric terms
- Identify the right participants and inspire them to engage in events
- Participate fully in events as one more participant
- Pay attention to the ideas and projects that gain momentum after events and take the group or organization in the desired direction
- Resource and amplify new, desired behaviors
- Keep asking generative questions

*Identify and include the right stakeholders—emphasize diversity.* Increasingly, practitioners are emphasizing the need to include all the stakeholders who make up the system in events for successful dialogic OD. This can result in events with large numbers of people—from hundreds to thousands. What differentiates them as dialogic OD from other large group interventions

is the mindset behind their practice and the choices that get made as a result. Holman (2013, p. 22) counsels us to “look beyond habitual definitions of who and what makes up a system. Think of protesters outside the doors of power. What would happen if they were invited into an exploratory dialogue? Making space for different perspectives while in a healthy container opens the way for creative engagement.” Weisbord and Janoff (2010) use the acronym “ARE IN” to define who ought to be at dialogic events: those with authority, resources, expertise, information, and need; to which Axelrod (2010) adds those opposed, and to open up to volunteers—anyone who wants to come.

It’s not enough to identify the right people; they have to be invited to events in a way that attracts them to come. Sponsors may have the power to compel some people to attend, but probably not all the people who are key stakeholders to the changes to be made. Their willingness to participate will be influenced by the way in which these events are framed and the way in which they are invited—a key job of sponsors. In emphasizing the need to “widen the circle of engagement,” Axelrod (2010) for example, describes using small group meetings between events to expand participation.

*Design and host the conversations.* What most differentiates dialogic OD methods are the suggestions they offer for how to design and host conversations. Whether it is small groups or large communities, these may be one or a series of events. Unfortunately, the absence of a coherent “dialogic OD narrative” has led dialogic OD practitioners to be mainly known by the method they use. As a result they are often viewed as providers of appreciative inquiry or open space or world café (and so on), and employed by organizations to run those processes rather than to consult at a strategic level to an entire change effort. Perhaps the emerging narrative about dialogic OD as a distinct approach will help them out of this trap, particularly if the strengths, opportunities and limitations the variety of dialogic OD methods offer can be better understood.

One area of common agreement in dialogic practice is the need to ensure the capacity of participants to engage in inclusive conversations before getting to the substance of the change. Bushe (2002) describes this as the need to shift a group, large or small, from a pre-identity state to a post-identity state—that is, from where people don’t identify with the group to where they do. The “art of hosting” emphasizes the need for “welcoming,” particularly when groups are highly diverse (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). This is further elaborated in Holman’s (2010) description of creating opportunities for individual expression and connection.

Another area of agreement is the nature of “hosting” dialogic OD events, especially when they involve large groups. Events are designed so that people can interact productively without the need for “facilitation” (Weisbord, 2012). Often this is through a series of conversations structured through specific questions designed to be maximally generative (e.g., Bushe, 2007; Vogt, Brown, & Isaacs, 2003), although it can also involve more self-organizing processes whereby participants identify the conversations they want to have, as in “open space” (Owen, 2008b).

An image common among dialogic OD practitioners, is that of “container.” “As hosts, our work is not to intervene, but rather to create a container—hospitable space for working with whatever arises” (Holman, 2013, p.22). Although some work has been done by Isaacs (1999) and Bushe (2010) to clarify what a container is and how good ones are created, the idea of a container is still more a generative image than a well worked out set of principles and guidelines.

## Harvesting for Action

At some point the dialogic OD process shifts from conversations to launching action. In a small group this might look like agreements among members to act differently, along with different things people say and do back on the job in the following days. Some dialogic practices focus on an inquiry process at this point, in the sense of reflecting back on and making sense of the variety of conversations and experiences that have occurred during events to provide guidance for moving forward (e.g., Holman, 2013, Nissen & Corrigan, 2009). Some focus on preparing people to launch new initiatives that have been stimulated by the event(s) (e.g., Bushe, 2013; Cooperrider, 2012). Practice varies considerably among dialogic OD practitioners and is affected by the intentions of the initiative, as well as expectations and culture of the group or organization. Rather than trying to facilitate convergence, practitioners may design into the process activities through which collective decisions will likely emerge. Often, rather than expecting collective agreement on action, they may also make visible ideas or projects that people commit to pursuing. Additionally, people may discuss how they might act differently and then are encouraged to act on what they find most personally relevant and meaningful. What happens after events is as crucial for the amount and quality of change generated, as the quality of events themselves. Leadership is essential *not* in defining and directing change, but in recognizing small, important change opportunities and working to amplify them into big, important changes. The amount

of change depends on undirected, self-selected individuals and groups just acting differently on their own. They make different choices daily at work, given the new social realities that emerged during the dialogic event. Specific projects might require more coordinated action among team, organization, and/or community members, and in some dialogic OD processes important changes do come from projects that are launched during events. However, the most transformational outcomes rarely come from projects; they come from people talking and thinking differently daily.

After the events, change is facilitated by everyone who participated, tracking the actual changes taking place, and helping sponsors to recognize and amplify desired changes. Often, for the change to lock in, sponsors need to pay attention to what is working, and make changes to the group or organization's infrastructure and operational processes required to fully support those changes.

Structured dialogic OD processes work with groups large and small in an orchestrated sequence of events designed to shift the discourse, create or work with generative images, and disrupt patterns to support emergence of productive changes. But the dialogic OD consultant can also work in much less structured ways, engaging with the day-to-day interactions of a client system, and we now turn to a brief description of that.

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## Dialogic Process Consultation

One of the foundations of organization development is the concept and methods of process consultation, especially as distinct from expert consultation, where the consultant stays mostly out of the "whats" while helping the client to better understand the "hows." As defined by Schein, "process consultation is a set of activities on the part of the consultant that help the client to perceive, understand, and act upon the process events that occur in the client's environment" (Schein, 1969, p. 9). Schein focused primarily on what he considered to be the most crucial human processes for effective organization performance: (1) communication; (2) member roles and functions; (3) group problem solving and decision making; (4) group norms and group growth; (5) leadership and authority; and (6) intergroup cooperation and competition. Process consultation in dialogic OD builds on the foundational idea of helping clients to better perceive, understand, and act on process events, but focuses on "dialogic processes" involving emergence, social construction, generativity, and organizational meaning making more so than the interpersonal and group processes described by Schein.

## Dialogic Processes

There is a range of discursive processes a dialogic process consultation (PC) might pay attention to. These include:

1. Communication processes, like those identified by Schein, which are primarily focused on who is conveying what information to whom, and in what ways.
2. Identification of prevailing and influential narratives shaping how people think and act. An example is the influence of narratives about the importance of “shareholder value” or the “bottom line” on consideration of options and the resulting choices. This would also include consideration of the dialogic processes that reinforce these narratives and/or exclude alternative storylines.
3. Consideration of how different narratives, storylines, organizational texts at one level of the organization (e.g., at headquarters), affect another level of the organization (e.g., the field). This can include, importantly, considerations about power and who gains and who is disadvantaged by the prevailing or “privileged” narratives.
4. 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.
5. Attention to how conversations unfold or emerge, that is, the sequence of what is discussed and in what ways and how that may influence participants’ thinking and emotions.
6. Consideration of processes of generativity, especially how to foster new images that will influence the ongoing construction and reconstruction of social reality.

In the dialogic process consultant’s mindset, organizational behavior is not created solely by the objective exchange of information. It’s created by the self and socially constructed images and narratives people hold about their situations, the meaning making going on before, during and after events, and the extent to which those things limit or nurture generativity and the emergence of new possibilities. It’s also created by changes in the relationships and networks among people in the organization and the new possibilities that are created when new people are included in conversations, new connections are made, and old relations are re-framed.

## Two Approaches to Dialogic Process Consulting

There is a wide range of activities that could be considered dialogic process engagements. These can be sorted into more episodic or continuous change mindsets and practices. Episodic practices are intended to destabilize semi-stable patterns and generate new possibilities or patterns. Continuous practices are intended, instead, to alter or amplify the ongoing discursive processes to encourage the emergence of new possibilities. In brief, the two types are

*Dialogic PC and episodic change* involves interactions with individuals or teams where potentially limiting mindsets are identified and confronted with narratives, stories, metaphors, images, slogans, and so forth to generate new thinking and possibilities. This type of dialogic PC is widely practiced, but perhaps with less visibility or clarity in the broader OD community about what is being done and why. Dialogic PC methods based in episodic concepts of change tend to use language-based means to promote recognition of limiting patterns, followed by cognitive restructuring to promote generativity, and emergence of new ways of thinking and acting. Some examples of ways this is done is by asking individuals or teams to write or rewrite scripts about their situation (Inman & Thompson, 2013; Oswick, Anthony, Keenoy, Mangham, & Grant, 2000); introducing new words, phrases or images to induce new thought patterns (Storch & Ziethen, 2013); listening for and confronting conceptual metaphors or storylines that are implicitly limiting possibilities and choice (Marshak, 2013b; Oliver & Fitzgerald, 2013); or asking an individual or team to draw or sculpture their situation and then tell the story of what's happening and perhaps what they want to have happen (Barry, 1994). In all these approaches to dialogic PC, methods for recognizing how current narratives, discourses, and conversations are creating stable patterns of limited possibilities, and then seeking to elicit new language and stories to encourage new possibilities, are employed. For example, a client who was not aware that he continually discussed the situation in terms that implied he was alone on the front lines of a war had that imagery reflected back with the invitation to consider other possible scenarios for conceptualizing their situation.

*Dialogic PC and continuous change* involves unstructured and often ongoing interactions with an individual, team or larger group where the intent is to change the regularly occurring conversations and conversational patterns (who, what, when, where, how) and thereby encourage the self-organizing emergence of new patterns, commitments, and ideas. This type of dialogic PC is less well known in the United States and perhaps less practiced,

although its use is spreading. 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 ongoing conversations that occur at all levels and parts of an organization (Goldsmith, Hebabi, & Nishii, 2010; Shaw, 2002). 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. There is no use of specially structured events to shift from a current state to a more desired future state (Ray & Goppelt, 2013). Instead, the consultant joins up with an organization that is assumed to be in the continuous process of becoming, and seeks to accentuate differences from any ongoing dialogic patterns that may be blocking or limiting the organization's ability to evolve, or for new patterns to emerge. For example, in describing a dialogic process intervention with a group of executives stymied by trying to determine the return on investment (ROI) of some change efforts, Ray and Goppelt (2013) explain, "(T)he powerful discourse of ROI made silent an aspect of people's experience of positive change, namely the anecdotal stories of transformation that they were actually using to make decisions and motivate themselves and each other toward action. By questioning the legitimate discourse of ROI, we were able to help amplify a marginalized and important set of beliefs about how change occurs in this organization" (p. 43).

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## When Is Dialogic OD Most Applicable?

The continuing development and spread of approaches and methods that can be considered dialogic OD have also raised questions about when they should be used in addition to, or instead of, other OD methods. Because a narrative of dialogic OD has only recently emerged, there are now only a few tentative answers to those important questions.

The first answer to the question is both philosophical and personal, and implies it is a matter of consultant orientation and not situational choice per se. Put simply, if one's worldview about organizations and change agrees with the premises associated with dialogic OD, then that approach will be pursued. Conversely, other worldviews result in other forms of OD. Selective choice is an option only when the consultant believes that the premises and practices of dialogic OD might fit some situations better than others, while other forms of OD might be wiser choices under other circumstances. There has been some speculation about when

such conditions might apply, but no studies to affirm the speculation. The two main lines of discussion about the situational factors influencing when different forms of OD might be applicable suggest contingency and/or blended models.

Contingency considerations for the use of dialogic OD methods involve some “discernment” of the nature of the presenting situation by the consultant and client, specifically, to what degree the conditions and desired outcomes are more congruent with the premises and practices associated with dialogic or other OD approaches. The Cynefin model (Snowden & Boone, 2007) offers one suggestion for how such a contingency model in OD might evolve.

In the Cynefin model the appropriate decision-making process depends on how well cause-effect relationships are understood. In any specific decision situation, there are likely to be multiple decision “characteristics,” and the model argues that these characteristics require different processes. There are five characteristics. In a *simple decision* cause-effect relationships are known so that best practices can be deployed in response to the situation. In a *complicated decision* causality is not initially known but can be figured out through diagnostic inquiry leading to good enough responses. In a *complex decision* cause-effect relationships are not known, except in retrospect, and emergent responses are called for; first experiment with possible changes through probes and then select the one(s) that best accomplish the objective. In *chaotic decisions* there is no ability to understand cause-effect relationships, so novel responses based mainly on intuition are the best option. Finally, there are no clear leadership options in situations of complete *disorder*.

Extending the Cynefin model to OD situations suggests that the premises and methods associated with more foundational, diagnostic forms of OD, including a formal diagnostic step, “waterfall” interventions, and so forth, might be more applicable when simple and complicated decisions are called for, whereas many of the premises and methods associated with dialogic OD might make greater sense when complex and chaotic decisions are called for, especially as generative responses are needed. This is still a rough framework, but is suggestive of one contingency way of thinking about when and where to use dialogic or other forms of OD.

The third answer considers the possibility of blended approaches that would combine both dialogic and other forms of OD in the same consulting engagement. This would usually happen sequentially (first a diagnostic approach followed by a dialogic one) and, like the contingency model, would depend in part on the presence or absence of certain conditions.



One discussion of a blended model (Gilpin-Jackson, 2013) argues that the main considerations are whether the situation has low or high complexity combined with the level of managerial readiness for leading change. A low level of readiness would be a concerned but not fully committed leadership who might need a data based or proven rational for change. A high level would be a fully committed leadership willing to actively participate in a more emergent process of discovery. This leads to the contingency answer to use dialogic OD when there is high complexity and high readiness for change leadership and use other OD approaches when there is both low readiness to change and low complexity. The blended response occurs in a "grey zone" when there is low readiness and high complexity. In the Gilpin-Jackson case of a highly complex situation with low leadership readiness, first a diagnostic approach was used to gain legitimacy and acceptance and, following success with that approach, dialogic methods were used to encourage the emergence of new thinking to address the complexity of the situation.

These are a few ways for thinking about the question of when and how to use diagnostic and dialogic OD, and we expect a great deal more thinking and writing about these issues in the future.

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## Conclusion

Some of the dialogic OD practices referenced here are not new, but in many places they are still described and understood within the foundational OD narrative that holds organizations as open systems whose health needs to be diagnosed through action research and changes made through application of behavioral science knowledge. That is one way to think about them, but we hope that "dialogic OD" will be a generative image that encourages new frames for thinking about OD and encourages new theories and new practices of organization development to emerge.

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