

Conditions for Dialogue

Why dialogue matters ©

Dr Neil Preston

Organisational Psychologist - PsyOpus

From Diagnosis to Dialogue

There is little recognition in the literature on organisational development (OD) that a quiet revolution is going on. It appears that there is an emergent practice where dialogue is used as a tool to develop organisations beyond the classical diagnostic model. Let me explain.

Many of the traditional organisational development models are steeped in the modernist "medical model" paradigm. This model is fundamentally based upon a deficit model of the human condition. Within the model there are some fundamental assumptions. The first assumption is that there is pathology. Pathology stems from the Greek word *pathos* meaning suffering and is one of the three forms of classical rhetoric which includes *logos* (logic) and *ethos* (ethics). In other words, one way of persuading us to do something in an organisation is to argue that it is pathological. The second assumption is that there is a known 'cause' to the pathos which requires another Greek work *diagnosis* to determine the source and hence cure of the malady. Diagnosis comes from two words *dia* and *gnosis* which means to know across something. In other words analysis is required to understand the cause and nature of the illness. The third assumption is that the cause of the illness is stable enough to seek an intervention to change the cause and thus affect a cure. Sounds reasonable enough? However there are some inherent problems when it comes to OD.

The first problem is that the medical model by its nature focuses on the deficits of an organisational system and not its strengths. Most change occurs by employing the strengths of a system not its deficits – this is called the strength based model. The second problem is if the system is incredibly fluid, by the time you find the correct cause of the illness, the conditions have changed underneath you. This is similar to when strains of viruses keep on morphing into new illnesses. In short the diagnostic model may not be agile enough to tackle complex dynamic conditions.

Diagnostic approaches to OD stem from the scientific logical positivist approach to tackling problems. This model gives an appearance of linear rationality where one step is to follow from the other. This step wise approach follows a logical approach towards the ultimate solution often seen in LinkedIn advertisement on the six steps to success etc... This is commonly known as what Conklin (2010) calls the waterfall method as presented in the figure below.

The appearance of linear rationality



This objectivist approach to organisations treats organisations as facts and suits those who understand problems that have both singular causes and hence singular solution – this is not the case for dialogical approaches.

Let's talk about it shall we?

Remember the other form of Greek rhetoric *logos* or logic? Dialogue is to employ the rhetoric of logic by talking about it. Like diagnosis, dialogue has assumptions that guide its reason as a method to solving problems. Dialogical methods in developing organisations does not treat organisations as facts but rather 'social constructions' that are negotiated that may also involve power and political processes. Essentially truth emerges out of the conditions of dialogue and does not exist as some objective material fact. What is valued in dialogue is inquiry and sense making and instead of finding the 'causes of things' examines the conditions that gives rise to the probability of thing's emerging. In essence, dialogical approaches to OD tend to be more post-modern, post-structural and non-linear, while diagnostic techniques tend to be modern, structural and linear. So which method is right? It all depends on the nature of the problem you are tackling. According to Conklin if your

problem is wicked or complex, dialogical processes maybe a better fit. But before you use dialogical methods to tackle and tame your wicked problem, what conditions do you need for dialogue to occur.

Conditions for dialogue

Many theorists and researchers have examined what conditions best encourage good dialogue in organisations. Let's examine some of the key ones.

Power neutrality and psychological safety

It is almost impossible to have genuine dialogue where there is no reasonable power neutrality. Now I did not say power neutral that is virtually impossible with human beings since power operates both formally and informally in any social endeavour. Humans are exquisite social creatures, we assess whether truth speaking is safe in any given dialogue or interaction. If we do not feel psychologically safe in a conversation we will either keep quiet, lie or affirm the dominant point of view. Either way you can't solve complex problem without the full discretionary freedom of people speaking their truth.

Turn taking – from monologue to dialogue

Wooley et.al. (2010) recognised that one of the greatest predictors of team performance and collective intelligence (CQ) is the degree to which people take turn in speaking. Monologues occur where one person dominates the conversation over 80% of the time while other people just happen to be in the room while the *monologer* is having a conversation with their own ideas. Conditions that encourage turn taking is essential for raising the CQ in the room. Even the smartest guy in the room cannot solve a wicked problem where CQ is required. Turn taking reduces monological or should I say maniacal solutions!

Genuine enquiry by using genuine questions

Essentially there are only 2 questions in a dialogue – a genuine question and an ingenuine one. In true collaboration a genuine question is one you truly don't know the answer to. Ingenuine questions are those you know the answer to and will cajole, coerce, convince or corrupt someone into the answer – none of these ways of relating are collaborative in nature. Genuine inquiry is learning to ask the right question where the answer emerges out of the wisdom of the crowd.

Intentionality – serving performance over power

Dialogue is used to solve agreed and compelling problems of the group. Power players are there to solve their problem which may not be shared by those in the room. So it is vitally important with dialogue that people achieve shared commitment through shared understanding (Conklin, 2010). The 'shared bit' is serving performance by raising collective intelligence to solve complex problems.

Lean into ambiguity

Dialogue requires both the deductive reasoning of logic but also the abductive reasoning of sense, intuition, pattern and image. As mentioned before in previous papers, dialogue will often pivot from divergent to convergent thinking (see paper 3). Being comfortable with this constant movement is a key skill in dialogue. If you are uncomfortable with ambiguity you will often want to close down a conversation, not to declare a problem solved but to reduce your own anxiety!

A degree of self knowledge

Without some self reflection and inner work it is almost impossible to be aware of aspects of ourselves that both enables and disables collaborative dialogue. Psychologists can speak of 'secondary gain' where the primary purpose of seeking a shared goal is relegated to a secondary need of an individual. In other words, it may benefit us to continue to be the old combative, coercive or cajoling individual we have always been when it comes to dialoguing with others.

Transpersonal sensitivity

The skill of understanding and accommodating *the other* is critical in genuine dialogue. Transpersonal skills in understanding the needs of others is critical. More on this later.

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