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# Dialogic Meaning-Making in Action

By Robert J. Marshak

This discussion builds on an earlier *OD Practitioner* article and explains in greater depth how coaches and consultants can use generative conversations to help clients address limiting assumptions and create new possibilities (see Marshak, 2004). The phrase “dialogic meaning-making in action” is used to capture the essence of this method and is based on the premise that the way people see and act in the world is determined by the contents of often out-of-awareness mindsets that may be identified and addressed during everyday conversations. To help support understanding and practice of the method, the underlying premises and core concepts are reviewed along with examples to illustrate key ideas and suggested actions.

## Beginning Definitions

A central concern of the discussion is about words and their meaning(s) so let’s begin with some simple working definitions intended to convey how some terms should be understood. The definitions are hopefully in everyday language but are drawn from social science literatures relevant to the topic. No attempt is made to present formal definitions or reconcile differing nuances debated in the technical literatures. And, to be transparent, the definitions convey how I understand the terms based on my experiences as a consultant as well as someone who has made contributions to several of the relevant literatures, including dialogic organization development, organizational discourse studies, covert processes in organizations, and

cognitive linguistics (Marshak, 1993; 1998; 2004; 2006; 2013; Bushe & Marshak, 2015). Most importantly they are the types of definitions I have offered clients when asked what I am seeing, thinking, or doing.

**Mindset** is the constellation of conscious and unconscious assumptions, beliefs, premises, and frameworks that shape how something is interpreted and the resulting reactions and responses. For example, someone may have a “scarcity mindset” that sees things in terms of absence, rarity, deficiencies, or what’s missing.

**Meaning-making** is the process of how people interpret and make sense of situations, events, outcomes, others’ actions, as well as their own actions. Someone with a scarcity mindset may tend to interpret a ten-ounce glass with five ounces of liquid as “half empty.”

**The active role of language** assumes that talk and text do more than just objectively report things, but instead construct the mindsets that shape meaning-making. It is also assumed that language in use, for example word images or storylines, can reveal unspoken premises and out-of-awareness frameworks. If a person with a scarcity mindset successfully influences everyone they encounter to describe similarly filled glasses as half empty and as a result everyone else experiences a sense of scarcity, then people’s mindsets and meaning-making will have been constructed through the “story of the half empty glass.” Additionally, hearing someone recount the

Table 1. *Dialogic Meaning-Making Core Concepts*

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| • Language is constructive.  |
| • Language conveys literal and symbolic, as well as conscious and unconscious, meanings. |
| • Conversations continually create the meanings that shape social reality.               |
| • Double-loop learning is needed for generative change.                                  |
| • There are three processes that help lead to dialogic generative change.                |

story of the half empty glass might suggest the possibility that they have a scarcity mindset about things.

**Dialogic change** is the process wherein established and repetitive ways of talking about things are disrupted and new ways of talking lead to new ways of thinking and acting. Suppose we return to the community of people who all recount the story of the half empty glass and then add newcomers who point out the glass has enough liquid for any and all purposes. They then suggest the issue is the glasses are too large, not that there is too little liquid. If this happened, then maybe the ongoing talk and meaning-making about scarcity would be disrupted. It might then be possible for a new way of talking about things to emerge, leading to a change in mindsets and resulting meaning-making—perhaps that the organization’s glasses are larger than needed and a “right-sizing” effort is needed.

**Dialogic meaning-making through generative conversations** is a coaching and consulting practice where language (talk) becomes the core tool for helping clients and client systems reflect on how they are making meaning of their situation, any limitations that it is creating, and new language to create new possibilities. Because language, such as narratives, storylines and word images, is considered a primary means to construct a person’s or system’s reality and not just objectively communicate things, seeking to change the prevailing stories, metaphors, slogans and the like is assumed to generate new meaning-making leading to new behaviors and actions.

### The Practice of Dialogic Meaning-Making

All coaching and consulting are based in conversations carried out between two or more people. Typically, participants in these exchanges don’t think very much about the language they are using. Consequently, except when there are misunderstandings or confusion, the specific words and phrases are listened to less than for the presumed intended message(s). Another view of what is going on in such exchanges, however, assumes that the words and phrases are not simply literal accounts, but are also symbolic and constructive. When we assume that language conveys implicit meanings and symbols and not just explicit, rationally intended statements, we are led to wonder what the specific words and phrases being used by a client signify about how that person is experiencing the world. We might ask ourselves:

What is the structure of beliefs, orientations, and ways of interpreting the world that is leading this person to describe things in this particular way or to use those specific word phrases and images? What words and phrases might we use in return to get “in sync with,” or confront, or alter the client’s inner perceptions and assumptions that may be limiting their choice(s), and are often deeply held or even out-of-awareness?

We as coaches and consultants can use the insights provided by a symbolic and constructionist view of language to aid us with meaning-making interventions with our clients. Our conversations with clients can

be generative as well as informational; they have the potential to construct and reinforce meanings and therefore perceptions and possibilities (Schön, 1993). Generative conversations, then, are interactions where the coach or consultant is intentional about using the symbolic and constructionist aspects of language to help clients better assess the ways they are conceptualizing and addressing their situations: their dilemmas, difficulties, opportunities, and possibilities.

### Core Concepts

There are five core concepts that help us to understand and effectively work in this way. Those concepts are listed in *Table 1* and described in more detail below.

#### Language is constructive

Unlike the mirror-image theory of language which supposes talk and text should only report and describe aspects of an objective, independent reality, the constructionist theory of language places language and especially conversations at the center of meaning-making and the ongoing social construction of reality (Barrett, 2015; Gergen, 2009). Adherents of this core concept suggest that organizational phenomena exist only as far as they are constructed through reciprocal conversations that implicitly assert and affirm agreed upon social meanings. This is not to claim that organizations are nothing but people talking to each other, but rather that conversations are the principle means by which organization members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are, what they should do, and what the requirements are for their own and organizational success, indeed even what “success” means.

What any particular individual or group believes is “reality,” “truth,” or “the ways things are,” is a socially constructed mindset. 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. Different individuals, groups, strata, and silos of an organization might, of

course, develop their own mindsets about a particular issue through internalized stories, word images, narratives, and so on that define the way things are as they see and experience them. Attention to the prevailing conversations of individuals and groups within an organization, what they are about, how they are created and sustained, what impacts they may have on perception and action, and how they may change over time becomes, as a result, a central aspect of dialogic coaching and consulting. This also implies the added complexity that there may be potentially multiple realities (different stories, different narratives, different images, different mindsets, and so on) in any given situation, including the social realities of coaches and consultants.

Consequently, changing the behavior of individuals and groups—for example about the strategic requirements for success or about needed organizational changes—requires challenging or changing the storylines, images, narratives, and so on that shape the mindsets which govern thought and action. This concept helps us to understand that more than continuing to talk about things in established ways may be necessary to change mindsets. Instead, alternative conversations which convey ideas and images that generate new possibilities may be necessary. Consider how the implicit mindset and metaphor that an “organization is a machine” naturally leads to thinking and talking about keeping things smooth running and when necessary hiring a consultant to bring a tool kit to repair what’s broken. What happens if a different implicit metaphor begins to shape talk and action? Suppose instead of a mechanistic storyline the leader of the organization begins talking about the “organization is a living organism” needing a healthy environment to learn, grow, and develop to its fullest potential (Marshak, 1993; Oswick & Marshak, 2012).

### **Language conveys literal and symbolic, as well as conscious and unconscious, meanings**

In most day-to-day interactions there is a tendency to assume that “people say what they mean and mean what they say” and

that what is said is consciously intended and no more. This core concept challenges that assumption. Instead, language in all its forms, including day-to-day conversations, is assumed to convey both literal and symbolic information coming from both a person’s conscious and unconscious mind. Indeed, sometimes important meanings from a person’s unconscious are conveyed symbolically, whether consciously intended or not (Jung, 1964). Yes, Dr. Freud, sometimes a cigar is more than just a cigar (and sometimes it’s not). If this core concept has any validity and the cues and clues to how someone is making meaning in a situation is also connected to out-of-awareness symbolic expressions, then the generative, dialogic coach or consultant must develop skills in listening both literally and symbolically.

Cognitive linguists, especially Lakoff and Johnson in their seminal work, suggest that virtually all subjective thought and reasoning is shaped by underlying *conceptual metaphors* (1980; 1999). “Conceptual metaphor is pervasive in both thought and language. It is hard to think of a common subjective experience that is not conventionally conceptualized in terms of metaphor.” (1999, p. 45). They also assert that the conceptual metaphors that shape most of our reasoning operate out-of-awareness in the *cognitive unconscious*. ... (M)ost of our thought is unconscious, not in the Freudian sense of being repressed, but in the sense that it operates beneath the level of cognitive awareness, inaccessible to consciousness and operating too quickly to be focused on” (1999, p. 10).

An example of this way of thinking would be working with a client who said something like:

We have a long road ahead before we can hope to arrive at our desired change destination. I see lots of obstacles along the way especially middle managers who are blocking movement and making us spin our wheels with side trips that go nowhere. I need someone who has been down this road before who can help guide us on the way ahead...

If we listen literally at a surface level, we are likely to hear someone concerned about all the problematic barriers to the desired change. Coaching or consulting responses to those concerns might be to discuss ways to address the potential problems and overcome the barriers and resistance to change.

If we also listen symbolically at a deeper level, we might also hear that the person’s mindset and thinking is being shaped by an underlying conceptual metaphor something like “Change is a Difficult Journey Filled with Obstacles.” Instead of continuing to converse within the boundaries imposed by that implicit framework we might suggest an alternative metaphor that might generate transformed ways in how the person makes meaning of the situation. For example, how might the conversation and choice of intervention activities go if the underlying conceptual metaphor implicitly shaping the client’s mindset was something like “Change is an Opportunity to Realize New Possibilities.” This might lead to thinking more optimistically about intervention activities that seek ways to realize new possibilities to previously difficult dynamics—like the question of whether a ten-ounce glass filled with five ounces of liquid is half full or half empty, how one’s mindset frames the situation generates the ensuing reactions and responses (Schön, 1993).

### **Conversations continually create the meanings that shape social reality**

The importance of conversations to socially construct reality, inform mindsets, and frame experience versus simply convey objective information needs to be understood and cultivated by those who wish to coach or consult dialogically (Ford, 1999; Ford and Ford, 1995). All conversations and communications can be used to challenge, re-enforce, or create new premises and possibilities. This means paying attention to how prevailing beliefs and storylines are reinforced in day-to-day conversations throughout the organization, and especially conversations the coach or consultant engages in with clients and organizational members. They would then have the opportunity to seek to intentionally influence those conversations in ways

that could allow new ideas and possibilities to emerge—not so much by directly offering counter-rationales or argumentation, but by addressing how the client is implicitly framing their experience; that is, by listening for the implicit metaphors and storylines that reveal how a person is interpreting their experience and the responses available to them. For example, coaches and consultants working from a strengths-based orientation might conversationally encourage the client to change their storyline from describing problems and barriers to discovering strengths and possibilities. Another example might be to conversationally note that the client keeps describing the situation they face metaphorically as being “bankrupt” (of ideas, possibilities, resources, and so on) while wondering if the client had any untapped riches such as the good will of others.

Consequently, how to listen to and implicitly influence conversations becomes a central aspect of dialogic meaning-making in action. This could involve, for example, creating safe containers for more open discussions, inviting a broader range of voices and communication modalities into the conversations, changing the types of questions asked, introducing new generative metaphors or images, altering how conversations unfold, and so on (Marshak, 2013; Bushe & Marshak, 2015).

It is important to keep in mind that what is considered to be possible or the way things must be is constantly in the process of being created or re-created in everyday interactions. In other words, mindsets are always in a state of becoming depending on what is being conveyed and reinforced conversationally. Dialogic change is potentially possible at any moment during interactions, whether intentional or not, depending on how ongoing conversations unfold (Shaw, 2002).

### **Double-loop learning is needed for generative change**

In addition to explicit reasoning, how people think about and respond to situations is guided by unexamined or untested assumptions, beliefs, and premises. These are collectively referred to here as *mindsets*. Because people generally don't think

about the underlying, out-of-awareness frameworks that guide how they reason and interpret the world, mindsets have a profound but usually unexamined impact on how people interpret situations and the choices available to them. In the words of the learning organization guru Peter Senge, mindsets are “deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action” (1990, p. 8). Mindsets frame situations and inform what is considered possible. They also prevent people from imagining possibilities that exist outside of their unexamined assumptions. Individual and organizational mindsets, therefore, can form implicit conceptual traps that limit our thinking and require a “mental revolution” in order to change how we will act and react in the world. Such a change in the implicit frameworks that guide behavior requires generative change that alters how something is experienced in a fundamental way. When successful, this is considered *double-loop learning* (Argyris, 1977).

Double-loop learning connotes the ability to examine and then modify, as appropriate, existing beliefs and assumptions that are guiding thinking and action-taking; in short, the ability to reflect upon, and as appropriate, change the usually out-of-awareness mental mindsets that guide our day-to-day actions. This is different from single-loop learning where one learns how to adapt and problem-solve consistent with one's implicit mindset's untested beliefs and assumptions. It is the ability to address not only problems and issues, but the logic that guides how situations are conceptualized and what is considered to be feasible that makes it a double-loop process. Usually, of course, the implicit beliefs and assumptions that guide our thinking and actions are taken for granted and therefore not readily accessible for consideration. Because the same beliefs and logic applied to the same situation will produce the same results (single-loop), it is only when the existing beliefs and logics are questioned (double-loop) that new possibilities emerge. Double-loop learning therefore requires generative change aimed at altering some aspect of the mindset that is

framing a situation in potentially limiting ways. Reflecting on implicit beliefs that an organization is like a machine with people as mechanistic parts, realizing those beliefs are inappropriate and limiting, and then choosing to think and act from a different and more enabling set of beliefs, would be an example of double-loop learning involving generative change.

### **There are three processes that help lead to dialogic generative change**

Generative conversations have the potential to transform dialogic meaning-making if at least one, and more likely a combination of all three, of these processes occur (Bushe & Marshak, 2015):

- » A disruption in the ongoing social construction of reality is stimulated in a way that leads to the emergence of a more beneficial way of thinking and acting.
- » A new generative image surfaces or is introduced that leads to novel and compelling alternatives for thinking and acting.
- » A change to one or more conceptual metaphors and/or storylines takes place and becomes the prevailing way of thinking and acting.

**A disruption in the ongoing social construction of reality is stimulated in a way that leads to the emergence of a more beneficial way of thinking and acting.** Disruptions to ongoing ways of thinking and acting occur when the implicit conceptual metaphors and storylines within a person's mindset are brought into awareness and recognized as no longer effective or viable. This then creates an opening for a potentially more beneficial metaphor and/or storyline to emerge to shape new patterns of thinking and acting, for example a shift from implicit metaphors or storylines about (tangible) scarcity and poverty to metaphors or storylines about (emotional and social) abundance and plenty. Disruptions can be planned or unplanned, and an individual or group may be able to recognize and replace their limiting way of thinking without the help of a coach or consultant. However, a dialogic coach or consultant can help speed the process

along, or help a stuck client, through generative conversations.

**A new generative image surfaces or is introduced that leads to novel and compelling alternatives for thinking and acting.**

Generative conversations are intended to encourage transformational changes to a client's mindset leading to new ideas and new ways of looking at things. When working dialogically, the coach or consultant may note the existing cognitive frameworks that seem to be creating and limiting possibilities for a client or client system. At that point, given the purpose of the requested help, the consultant or coach could seek to conversationally alter the limiting mindset by encouraging novel and compelling ways of looking at the client's situation. In essence, then, the consultant or coach seeks a new image to emerge that will elicit new and more beneficial ways of thinking and acting. A generative image, then, could be a new conceptual metaphor, a few words suggesting an alternative storyline, or other symbolic media that stimulate new ways of thinking about the client's social and organizational reality. It encourages people to imagine alternative decisions and actions that they could not imagine before the new generative image surfaced.

A second property of generative images is that they are compelling; people want to act on the new opportunities the generative image evokes. It is important to understand that what might be compelling to the coach or consultant may not be compelling to the intended audience. The image of "doing more with less" was once considered by management consultants to be a compelling generative image inviting workers to invent new and more productive ways of working. Unfortunately, this was often experienced by workers from their mindsets as mandating workforce cuts and increased workloads.

**A change to one or more conceptual metaphors and/or storylines takes place and becomes the prevailing way of thinking and acting.** Generative conversations assume that most of what is "real" or "true" to an individual or group in an organization (e.g., what is my job, how best to

achieve it, who is and isn't influential, what are my most important challenges and opportunities, how much influence do I have, and so on) is based on the implicit frameworks within an individual's or group's mindset. That is, regardless of what might or might not be "objectively true" from the perspective of an onlooker, what a person believes to be true (and therefore, what influences their thoughts and actions) is based on mindsets and conceptual metaphors and storylines that construct and reinforce realities for that person. Those frameworks were originally formed, reinforced, and modified based on conversations, readings, teachings, education, and so forth dating to childhood (Marshak, 2006). Every day, in every conversation, those ways of framing reality are continuously being re-created, maintained, sometimes challenged, and sometimes, as a result, changed. People and groups change when new words and ways of talking, like "doing more with less" or "rightsizing" become part of their daily conversations and ways of thinking and acting. The dialogically oriented consultant or coach assumes that transformational change is not possible without the emergence of new, socially agreed upon word images and storylines that explain, support, and reinforce the new reality and possibilities. Consequently, from a dialogic meaning-making perspective, change is both initiated and sustained through ongoing conversational reinforcements to the cognitively unconscious frameworks guiding how people are making meaning of their current reality.

**A Short Case Example**

The leadership of a mid-sized corporation decided that a "complete transformation" of the organization was needed following a merger and facing increased global competition. A task force was appointed to work on what would be needed and charged with looking at everything: the competitive challenges, corporate culture, leadership, strategy, structure, reward systems, and so on. This example of dialogic meaning-making in action occurred during their first half-day meeting.

**SVP DELTA:** We need to start thinking about what aspects of the organization need to be changed now and in what ways.

**OTHERS:** (*All verbally or head nods.*) Yes, we agree.

**VP BETA:** Well, I don't think we have to look too closely at manufacturing. That's been running smoothly and efficiently since the installation of the computer-aided systems a few years ago. I wouldn't want us to waste our time with something unless there is a clear problem. Maybe we should start making a list of things that are a problem.

**MID-MANAGER ZETA:** Yeah, we can't afford to have a lot of down time talking about things that don't need to be fixed. We need to address what's broken and get this whole organization up and humming as soon as possible.

**SVP THETA:** Yeah, let's not fix things just because we are on this change team. I agree with Beta. Let's inventory everything that's a problem and figure out ways to fix them.

**OTHERS:** (*Murmurs of agreement.*)

**CONSULTANT:** Hmm. As I listen to the discussion it sounds to me almost like you are *talking about fixing or repairing a broken machine*. I thought the assignment was more like being asked to *re-invent the organization*.

**SVP DELTA:** (*After a pause by everyone.*) Well, when you put it that way maybe we are here to re-invent or re-design parts of the organization. I hadn't thought of it that way before, but that sounds more like what we need to do then fixing broken parts.

**CONSULTANT:** Hmm, what if your task was to *re-design or re-invent the entire organization*?

**VP BETA:** Well, that would make our task a completely different story. We'd have to re-think and look at everything.

**OTHERS:** (*Comments and head nods of agreement.*)

**SVP DELTA:** You know we probably should step back and look strategically at the whole operation with a fresh drawing board. How should we begin?

**OTHERS:** (*Pause and then nods and expressions of agreement.*)

In this example the consultant “disrupts” the conversation about *fixing what’s broken* and invites the task force members to consider a different metaphorical image to guide their assignment before there is too much agreement on a potentially misleading conceptualization of their task. The invitation in this example leads to reconsideration of the initial implicit assumptions and adoption of a more appropriate image and mindset to guide their work. The adoption of the new image and mindset is revealed and reinforced by the new way of talking about what needs to be done.

### Summary and Closing Questions

A dialogically oriented coach or consultant who seeks to be intentional about generative conversations assumes socially constructed realities are continuously being created, sustained, and changed through stories, word images, symbols, and conversations. Their role is to help foster, support, and/or accelerate new ways of talking and thinking that lead to the emergence of transformational possibilities.

The implications of this way of thinking is that dialogic consultants and coaches will pay attention to leaders and organizations in terms of their meaning-making processes, seek to address how conversations create social reality, and understand organizational change as a process of continuous emergence shaped by language and conversations.

Finally, change in dialogic meaning-making is possible during conversational interactions if three conditions are met to some degree and in any order. There must be something that disrupts or challenges the ongoing ways people talk about things that is creating current perceptions and patterns of behavior. Something that sparks people to think in new ways that is compelling and offers new possibilities must enter ongoing conversational interactions. A new way of talking about things that creates a new storyline and associated possibilities must emerge and reinforce new ways of thinking and acting.

In brief, then, coaches and consultants with dialogic mindsets conceive of organizations less as machines or organisms or

whatever, and more like ongoing conversations that can reinforce or re-shape implicit perceptions, possibilities, and patterns of behavior.

So, now that you have read this discussion, do you agree? What are the metaphors and storylines about organizations, clients, consultants, and change that guide your thinking and acting?

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