"When the complexity of the issues leaders and organizations are facing is very high, the application of diagnostic protocols and pre-existing knowledge to identify and then implement change is unlikely to be successful."

My Journey into Dialogic Organization Development

By Robert J. Marshak

In recent years I have been working with my colleague Gervase Bushe to conceptualize and describe a form of organization development (OD) we are calling Dialogic Organization Development in contrast to the foundational form of OD we call Diagnostic OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; 2014a; 2015; Marshak & Bushe, 2009; 2013). Not surprisingly many of my longtime colleagues have wondered where this interest came from and if there was some trigger event that started me down this path. The following history of the insights and experiences that led me into Dialogic OD may provide some answers.

First, in a Nutshell, What is Dialogic OD?

Dialogic OD is a still developing mindset (rather than a set of specific methods) that reflects the convergence of recent thinking about how language creates social reality combined with concepts of emergence and self-organizing applied to organizational change (Bushe & Marshak, 2014b). Organizations are conceived to be complex adaptive, meaning-making systems, more so than open systems, wherein narratives, stories, metaphors, and conversations continuously construct social reality through the day-to-day interactions of organizational members. Diagnosis of problems or opportunities is eschewed in favor of inquiry and generative processes that help stimulate the emergence of new and potentially transformational insights and possibilities that are especially needed when facing highly complex, novel organizational challenges. Leaders and consultants can help foster, support, and/or accelerate the emergence of transformational possibilities by encouraging disruptions to taken for granted ways of thinking and acting and the use of generative images to stimulate new organizational conversations and narratives. Because social reality continuously emerges through any and all interactions, the consultant is always part of the unfolding processes of stability and change rather than a neutral facilitator who stands apart from the system. This mindset contrasts with Diagnostic OD thinking in several important ways that are described below and summarized in *Table 1* (next page).

Core Diagnostic OD Assumptions

To illustrate this contention let's look more closely at three interrelated, core assumptions that help form Diagnostic OD thinking and practices.

1. Organizations and organizational behavior result from an underlying, objective reality that includes the factors and forces causing the present situation. Diagnosis and analysis of these factors and forces should precede any intervention(s) intended to achieve a more desired future state.
2. Organizational change can be envisioned, planned, and managed using processes to intentionally move from one semi-stable equilibrium to another through acts of "unfreezing-movement-refreezing."
3. The consultant collaborates with members of the organization, but stands apart from them in order to be

an independent, neutral, facilitator of diagnostic and intervention methods.

Core Dialogic OD Assumptions

In contrast, and to re-emphasize what has been said above, the Dialogic OD Mindset leads to quite different orientations along similar dimensions to the practice of OD:

1. Organizations and organizational behavior are socially created realities resulting from the on-going interactions of members, stakeholders, interested parties, and so on. Processes of inquiry, especially reflexive and generative inquiry, can disrupt the status quo and create new awareness, new knowledge, and new narratives that have the potential to transform the organization.
2. Everyday social reality is continuously created and re-created through human interactions. Transformational change results when there are significant shifts in language, conversations, and communication patterns that allow for or encourage the emergence of new possibilities. Because human interactions can produce unexpected results, organizing is a process of ongoing complexity, flux and emergence, and specific outcomes can be intended, but rarely controlled.
3. The Dialogic OD consultant collaborates by intentionally becoming part of the on-going interactions and emerging narratives that are re-shaping and transforming the organization. A consultant can never stand objectively apart from the system. Both doing and non-doing convey meaning. Consequently the consultant needs to be self-reflexive about how his or her actions and inactions contribute to organizational meaning-making.

Furthermore, Dialogic OD practitioners assume that dialogic processes are a more effective way to deal with highly complex, novel organizational challenges requiring transformational change. When the complexity of the issues leaders and organizations are facing is very high, the application of diagnostic protocols and pre-existing knowledge to identify and then implement change is unlikely to be successful. This has been described as the difference between technical problems and adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1998), or as the difference between complicated and complex decision situations (Snowden, 2000). Dialogic OD practitioners believe that dialogic processes are the most effective way to deal with adaptive, complex challenges.

Table 1: *Contrasting Assumptions for OD Practice*

	Dialogic OD	Diagnostic OD
Influence Organization Action Via:	Social inquiry processes that themselves create new awareness, knowledge, and possibilities.	Objective diagnosis and analysis of existing facts and forces before intervening.
Change Happens When:	Engagement of stakeholders in ways that create disruptions and shifts in the on-going patterns of communication and stability lead to the emergence of new possibilities.	Application of known expertise is used to identify, plan and manage the implementation of episodic change: unfreeze-movement-refreeze.
Consultant Orientation:	Involved facilitator (or host/convener) who becomes part of and acts with the system.	Neutral facilitator who stands apart from and acts on the system.

Adapted from Bushe and Marshak (2015)

Although there are more differences (and similarities) between Diagnostic and Dialogic OD, these are some of the most important for understanding how and why Dialogic OD thinking and practice differ from the way OD has historically been taught and practiced. For more in-depth information see *www.dialogicod.net* and *Dialogic Organization Development: The Theory and Practice of Transformational Change* (Bushe & Marshak, 2015).

My Journey

Mid-1980s: Metaphors and Covert Processes

My first orientation to what I am now calling Dialogic OD came in the mid-1980s when I began paying explicit attention to, and working with, metaphors and covert processes in my consulting and training practices. A pivotal moment came when I was working with Linda Ackerman (now Linda Ackerman-Anderson) on an organization change training project and began talking a little about her then recent article differentiating developmental, transitional, and transformational types of change (Ackerman, 1986). I had always been attuned to language and asked what her metaphors or word images were for consulting to "transformational change" since at that time there was considerable controversy within the OD community about whether or not Organization Transformation was different from Organization Development. She replied: "re-birth and mid-wife," and I thought to myself: Well, that metaphor or image would probably not go over very well in the command and control executive suites of that time. As an aside, I smiled to myself years later recalling that moment with Linda when a type of transformational change called "re-engineering" became a wildly successful term in the early 1990s, replacing other less successful terms such as: "re-new" and "re-invent."

In that same conversation with Linda I also wondered about what I called a fourth type of change exemplified by a phrase I had heard for years during my previous decade as an internal OD consultant in a government agency: "If it's not broke, don't fix it." Later, it struck me that when people used that phrase they were implicitly thinking of the organization as a machine and whether or not it needed fixing or maintaining. Thus the name for the type of change I was struggling to conceptualize became "maintenance" (Marshak, 1993a). From that moment on I found myself "deep listening" with a third ear for

the explicit and implicit metaphors people were using to talk about whatever change they were involved in (Marshak, 2004). More often than not I thought they were explicitly calling for one kind of dramatic change, but implicitly describing it using machine-like, "fix and maintain" language. For example, "we need to completely transform our business," but "because we need to get things up and running quickly, let's not waste our time looking at things that have been working successfully in the past." To me, this incongruity led to incongruent demands and commitments (e.g., wanting total transformation in three months with no real commitment of resources) and therefore the likelihood of an unsuccessful change effort. So I began acting on the metaphors and implicit word imagery people were using both during contracting and later during engagements and interventions of one kind or another. Bob: "Gee, it sounds like you are looking for a quick fix, is that right? Client: Well, yes, no, maybe…" And, then we would have a very different kind of interaction than we had had up until that point.

My movement into acting on the explicit and implicit metaphors and word images I encountered and trusting that they were somehow statements of a person's reality, whether conscious or not, was re-enforced by my work on covert processes during this same period. My colleague Judith Katz and I co-created and co-trained a one-week NTL workshop on "Dealing with Covert Processes" starting in the late 1980s. Part of the workshop involved having participants work with metaphors and drawings as ways to discern out of awareness dynamics or issues that when revealed through symbolic representations became discussable if there was enough psychological safety provided by the workshop setting (Marshak & Katz, 1992; Marshak, 2006a).

I then found myself in my consulting practice at that time starting to invite clients to discuss their metaphors or analogies for what they were encountering or even to have them draw "a symbolic picture that represents (your team, your organization, your biggest issue, your hoped for future….)." Sometimes this was done during or after a data-feedback session, but increasingly instead of a data-feedback session. The here-and-now discussion of images and reactions to symbolic representations had an immediacy and power different from reviewing and discussing what people had said in private interviews some weeks or months beforehand, even though that type of feedback had its own type of power and impact. For example, I recall a meeting of a team of internal consultants who had just learned a few days before that they were to be disbanded as an organizational unit. While people in the meeting tried to put a brave face on events their language and conversations repeatedly included or evoked images of "going down with the ship," "(rats) abandoning ship," "everyone for themselves," "where are the life preservers," and so on. I did not do much other than reflect back to them the language and implicit storyline they were using and then to wonder how it would sound if instead of talking about the "sinking ship" they discussed where they wanted to go next and how. That brief invitation changed the climate and conversation that had been going on and led to a noticeable change in self-images from a group of "victims" to a collection of more empowered "adventurers."

These kinds of experiences solidified my belief in the power of conscious and unconscious word images and storylines to create reality and thereby define the limits as well as possibilities for individuals, teams, and organizations. It also meant that if someone(s) or something challenged the prevailing image or conception then there would be the possibility that a new image might emerge and be adopted. Thus in my practice I started to reflect back to clients the metaphors and storylines that I thought I was hearing them express (Marshak, 2004; 2013). Sometimes I offered alternatives, and sometimes nothing at all, just an open pause to see how they might respond. Sometimes I would get back a "Yes, that's what it's like…" and then they would elaborate or suddenly realize how they had been limiting their thinking or experience. Sometimes I would get back. "No, that's not what it's like. It's more like…" and then they would explore the actual controlling metaphor, image or storyline that had become more conscious to them.

Early 1990s: Confucian Philosophy and Reflections on Changes in OD Practices

In the early 1990s I made several trips to Korea to present workshops on organizational change. Courtesy of obligatory military service this was familiar territory as I had been trained in the Korean language and culture for a year before being stationed in Korea during 1971. Despite that background, interactions in the workshops seemed a little "off" and I became convinced that there was something about change in the deep culture of Korea that was different from my Western theories and assumptions. Because Korea has a deeply-rooted Confucian heritage I immersed myself for several years in reading Confucian and Taoist philosophy and eventually developed and published my understanding of the core assumptions and differences between classical OD change theory (think unfreeze-movement-refreeze) and Confucian as well as Taoist change theory (think *yin-yang*). In brief, classical OD theory, like most Western thought, tends to assume a universe of independent entities in equilibrium that when acted upon will produce change that is both linear and episodic. In contrast, Confucian and Taoist thinking assume a universe of interdependent manifestations that are ultimately one entity. Change is assumed to be continuous and cyclical. For example *yin* is always in the process of becoming *yang* that in turn is becoming *yin*. As soon as something reaches its full manifestation it will start to become something else. For example, when the tide coming in has reached its zenith it starts going out; when something in a constantly changing universe becomes completely still some kind of movement will then begin. As this alternative paradigm of change became clearer to me the implications for OD practice also became clearer. For example, in an interdependent universe the consultant is always part of the system and can never act independent of it, and can, in fact, invite change in the system by changing oneself. Furthermore, one does not intervene to

create change since ongoing change is the natural order of the universe. Instead one acts to help restore balance and harmony to a "stuck" system. For more detail see Marshak (1993b; 1994; 2012).

In terms of my journey into Dialogic OD this interlude had a profound impact on my eventual thinking in two important ways:

Firstly, the exercise of discerning both classical OD and Confucian assumptions about change taught me the value and practice of anthropological thinking. In this instance it meant not just discerning and contrasting assumptions, but linking and interpreting assumptions from their own coherent system of thought. In essence, trying to understand change with a Confucian mind rather than interpreting Confucian assumptions from a Western OD mind. This became a valuable orientation and skill years later as I began to try to discern how a set of assumptions that seemed different from classical Diagnostic OD might have their own logic even if that logic had not been clearly articulated. Related to this was a vivid understanding that assumptions quite different from the OD model I had been taught and read about in text books could exist and could have their own internal logic as opposed to being "deviant" thinking.

Secondly, the experience of contrasting Confucian assumptions with what I had learned about OD theory in the early 1970s led me to notice with a new eye the differences in OD assumptions and practices that had begun emerging in the 1980s. Examples include: (a) how Future Search was intentionally designed to not have small groups larger than eight people as a way to avoid the need for facilitation by a consultant at a time when one of the dominant skills and orientations of OD practice was small group facilitation applied to team building interventions; (b) how Open Space Technology did not require a separate pre-intervention diagnostic step; (c) how Appreciative Inquiry was based in social constructionist assumptions and practices rather than objective data collection and diagnostic practices, and (d) how the unfreeze-movement-refreeze Lewinian model of episodic change was being challenged by concepts of emergent, self-organizing, and continuous change found in the complexity sciences and that were also quite similar to what I had found in Confucian and Taoist philosophy.

From this period onward I began wondering if a different form of OD was emerging; one that had its own as yet unarticulated logic. At that time in the early 1990s I could not put the pieces together, but began actively wondering if new ideas about change processes were being disguised or hidden because they were being explained in the OD texts, not from their own logic, but from a classical model of OD with quite different underlying assumptions.

In terms of practice I found myself still dominantly wearing my Lewinian lenses during engagements, but when stuck putting on my Confucian glasses to see if they provided different insights about what to do (or not do). I always got new insights from doing this and through application and practice began to learn more about how to look in two quite different ways at the same situation and how valuable that skill could be.

Mid-1990s to Early-2000s: Organizational Discourse and the Beginnings of Conceptualizing Dialogic OD

My ways of thinking and working from the mid-1980s into the early 1990s were re-enforced during the following decade by my introduction to and work with colleagues in the new academic field of Organizational Discourse Studies. Those experiences supported my evolving practice and also expanded my thinking about organizational change to include ideas based on the linguistic turn in the social sciences; social constructionism; the influence of conceptual metaphors, storylines, and narratives; the role of power and politics in determining preferred storylines and word images; and how transformational change required changes in the explicit and implicit symbols, metaphors, and storylines guiding people's thinking and acting (Grant & Marshak, 2011; Marshak & Grant, 2008; Marshak, 1998; 2002; 2013). It was during this period that I began to think about organizations not only as open systems but as discursive processes, or drawing on my interest in metaphors: thinking about organizations as "conversations" as well as "organisms" (Oswick and Marshak, 2012).

In terms of my practice I continued developing and integrating my insights about metaphors, covert processes, alternative change paradigms, and discursive processes into my consulting engagements. From a distance what I did may not have seemed much different from what my colleagues were doing, but from within myself I was thinking and acting differently than I had in the 1980s. One example comes from a consulting engagement with a high tech executive team locked in conflict over the introduction of a new business model following an acquisition. Sides had clearly formed between the "old timers" and "new comers." I had been engaged at the last minute to help facilitate what promised to be a highly contentious meeting. One classic OD way to have worked in this engagement would have been to try to alter the stereotypes that had formed; ensure all voices were heard in the meeting, encourage non-confrontational interactions; seek to develop a valid diagnosis of the business situation; create a vision of a desired future; and so on. While I had those ideas at hand I also approached the meeting with the mindset that it was a discursive (language-based) event where the participants were co-creating a storyline about their situation and where the interactions could be interpreted as "situated, symbolic action," that is, comments that were outcome oriented, contextually based, and consciously or subconsciously symbolic in nature (Marshak & Heracleous, 2005). Working from that perspective encouraged me to allow the storyline to emerge rather than seeking to more actively facilitate interactions to go in presumably "desired directions." Most importantly, when the meeting became a respectful, but dueling set of exchanges between the most senior old timer and most senior new comer, with everyone else silently watching the encounter, instead of intervening to bring in more voices and interrupt in some way the back and forth interactions it struck me in the moment that I was witnessing a symbolic

single combat between the champions of each side to see whose viewpoint was "right" and should prevail. This encouraged me to pause longer than I would have from another mindset and was rewarded when after one of the champions acknowledged the other had a point (symbolically yielding), everyone quickly engaged in collaboratively designing a new hybrid business model that all agreed was better than anything they could have conceived before the meeting.

By the early 2000s the combination of these kinds of theoretical and consulting experiences along with further reflections on developments in OD theory and practice since the mid-1980s led me to conclude that a newer form of OD was being practiced that did not fit the textbook descriptions of OD. Enough had finally started to come together in my mind to suggest the outlines of an emerging form of OD that had its own logic and set of assumptions different from the foundational ideas I had been taught. The notion that there was a different form of OD based on a set of interrelated assumptions, but not recognized in the official texts of OD encouraged me to start talking about it and writing about it (Marshak, 2005; 2006; 2010). Around this time Gervase was having similar thoughts and we began to collaborate on describing a form of OD based on how inquiry could be more transformational than diagnosis; how language and storylines create social reality; how change is continuous and emergent; how creating containers where large (or small) assemblies of people can be brought together in orchestrated rather than facilitated events; how disrupting repetitive thinking and encouraging generative images can stimulate new possibilities; how believing one can plan or rationally direct change is an illusion; and where it is important to understand the role and ethics of being a consultant who is part of, rather than apart from, the system.

I find myself more interested in, and most effective, when I am drawing attention to and confronting deeply held conceptual metaphors or storylines that are implicitly framing experience. From a dialogic perspective I am seeking to "disrupt" the prevailing storyline (alter or break the taken-for-granted frame) while creating a context or container that is safe enough for people to explore new possibilities.

Reflections on My Practice

Now in 2015, looking back in terms of my own consulting practice and speaking from a Dialogic OD mindset, I would say I had been teaching myself a form of Dialogic Process Consultation where my dominant focus is on how metaphors, storylines, symbolic imagery, and discursive processes shape individual and organizational realities and responses. This is a more unstructured and micro form of Dialogic OD which also includes more structured work with groups and organizations in the form of a single or a series of events and strategic activities (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). It also has meant relaxing or altering some of my previously learned planned change ways of consulting, including the need for "valid data collection" in advance of "intervening," and facilitation towards a specified outcome. Instead, I find myself more interested in, and most effective, when I am drawing attention to and confronting deeply held conceptual metaphors or storylines that are implicitly framing experience. From a dialogic perspective I am seeking to "disrupt" the prevailing storyline (alter or break the taken-for-granted frame) while creating a context or container that is safe enough for people to explore new possibilities. In my case this is often through consideration of alternative conceptual metaphors that serve as generative images allowing new storylines and possibilities to emerge. For example, instead of talking about how to fix the organization, inviting people to talk about how to transform it - how to re-create, re-imagine, or even re-birth it. I also find that I am doing deep listening and raising alternative framings from the very first contact. These early conversational "interventions" often serve to help reshape the direction of the consultation and may suggest where deeply held implicit beliefs are preventing innovation and new possibilities to emerge.

Put another way, in my practice I pay particular attention to finding, forming, and framing reality, that is, how the person, group or organization with whom I am working makes meaning out of their experience. "The glass is half empty or half full" is the classic example of meaning making in action. An organizational example might be a proposal to change existing reporting relationships. Is this put forward to increase competitive advantage, improve coordination and communication, cut costs, politically advantage or disadvantage certain players, demonstrate the power of a new boss, or what? The proposal itself is simply a presenting event. People then apply storylines that ascribe meaning(s) to the event and react accordingly. One storyline will become dominant and thereby creates the "reality" from which subsequent thoughts and actions follow. This orientation towards organizational reality guides me to do three things in practice:

1. Learn and help others to learn one another's reality by understanding their meanings or how they interpret events. "I understand you believe the reorganization proposal is an attempt to cut costs at the expense of the workers."
2. Invite new realities by helping the client and/or stakeholders create new meanings or interpretations. "Is it possible the reorganization is a way to deal with the communication problems between Departments A, B and C?" Or, "Is it possible it could serve as a step towards transforming the organization?" Or, "What's another way of describing this situation that is realistic, but might

offer new opportunities to do things that were impossible in the past?"

3. Encourage alternative realities by inviting or suggesting re-framed meaning(s) or interpretations. "Yes, I understand the reorganization proposal is an attempt to cut costs at the expense of the workers. I wonder if it might also be a way to increase competitive advantage by removing organizational barriers and costs."

Finally, I am mindful that my evolving ideas and insights about Dialogic OD are not shared or embraced by everyone and that by talking and writing about it Gervase and I are potentially "disrupting" the prevailing OD narrative found in most textbooks. At the same time we are trying to legitimate and give voice to a way of thinking and doing we believe is already being practiced under other names around the globe. I will be curious about what will emerge next. My journey continues.

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