

# Dialogic Process Consulting<sup>1</sup>

Robert J. Marshak, Ph.D.

I first started developing ideas about what I am now calling *Dialogic Process Consulting* in the mid-1990s when I began collaborating with David Grant, Cliff Oswick, and Tom Keenoy, then at Kings College London, who were organizing conferences and publications that led to the new academic field of Organizational Discourse Studies (Marshak, 1998). It was during this period that I began to think about organizations not only as open systems, but in terms of discursive or dialogic meaning-making processes. I now 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 (Marshak, 2020).

## What is Dialogic Process Consulting?

Dialogic process consulting helps clients to more effectively perceive, understand, and take action by focusing on “dialogic meaning-making processes” as a key variable that shapes individual, group and organizational behavior. In general, it involves client interactions where potentially limiting mindsets are discerned and confronted through narratives, stories, metaphors, word images, and the like, in order to generate the emergence of new ways of thinking and acting. I do this in my practice by listening for and confronting conceptual metaphors and implicit storylines.

## Some Core Premises

Dialogic process consulting begins with the premise that people experience the world through mostly out of awareness mindsets that help create meaning and reinforce social reality by organizing how events are interpreted, categorized, and related. Additionally, if the mediating mindset(s) shaping what is said and done in a specific situation can be modified, then generative change may be possible.

How people talk about things, the words, phrases and word images they use, is further assumed to be a primary means whereby mindsets are created, reinforced, revealed, and modified. Consequently, if you listen carefully, you can hear cues and clues in what is being said that may reveal the underlying mindset(s) operating in a particular situation. You may then be able to implicitly or explicitly challenge, reinforce, align with, and/or modify the mindset(s). Thus, when working dialogically I address the way meaning and “reality” are potentially being limited or constrained by the mindset(s) of the individual or system I am working with in order to create greater awareness and options for action. I do not address the specifics of what is said; instead I address the mindset that frames what is said.

## Deep Listening and Transforming Talk

There are two important skill sets needed to work effectively as a dialogic process consultant. One is *Deep Listening* and the other *Transforming Talk*. Deep listening involves:

- Listening for the information the client is overtly conveying.
- Listening for explicit metaphors, word images, storylines, and so on.

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<sup>1</sup> The following is excerpted from Bob’s new book *Dialogic Process Consulting; Generative Meaning-making in Action* (BMI, 2020)

- Listening for implicit metaphors, word images, and storylines in addition to explicit expressions.
- Listening for what is said or emphasized and also for what is not said or is deemphasized.

While deep listening to a client(s) the consultant or coach has the opportunity to be intentional about influencing dialogic meaning-making through one or more transforming talk processes:

- **Reflect** back to the client images, themes, and assumptions in order to bring to awareness ways of seeing things that may be limiting possibilities and choices.
- **Reframe** the client's potentially limiting mindset by inviting or offering alternative ways to see and experience a situation.
- **Rethink** with the client and replace any limiting images and themes with more enabling and compelling ones.
- **Release** feelings by the client of guilt, anxiety, fear, sadness, anger, etc. associated with seeing things in new ways.
- **Reintegrate** with the client, as needed, new images, storylines, and thematic coherence that will shape future thought and action.

## A Brief Example

This highly abbreviated example of dialogic process consulting occurred during an early meeting with a senior executive charged with the “complete transformation” of their organization due to increased global competition, including: corporate culture, leadership, strategy, structure, reward systems, people factors, and so on. *Italics are used to highlight deep listening and transforming talk aspects of the conversation.*

**Executive:** We need to start thinking about what aspects of the organization should be changed. I don't think we have to look at manufacturing. That's been *running smoothly and efficiently* for a few years now. I don't want to *waste our time* with something *unless it's not running properly*. Maybe we should make a list of things that are *clearly broken*. We *can't afford* to have a lot of *down time* talking about things that *don't need to be fixed*. We need to get this organization *up and running* quickly. I hope you have your *tool kit* handy. (**Deep listening for how the assignment is being implicitly conceptualized**).

**Consultant:** Hmm. As I listen to you it sounds to me almost like you are talking about *fixing or repairing a broken machine* (**Reflecting**). I thought the assignment was more like being asked to *create a whole new organization* (**Reframing**).

**Executive:** Well, when you put it that way maybe we need 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 is needed then *fixing broken parts* (**Deep listening**).

**Consultant:** What if your task was to *re-design or re-invent the entire organization and how executives like you function* (**Rethinking**)?

**Executive:** Well, that would make my task a *completely different story*. I'd have to *re-think and look at everything starting with me and my behavior*, Whew. *That's scary*. (**Deep listening**).

**Consultant:** What aspects are *most scary* to you (**Releasing**)?

**Executive:** The whole thing. When I think of it that way *I feel overwhelmed and very vulnerable* (**Deep listening**).

**Consultant:** Yes, that is understandable. How might you think differently about your role and yourself that would make you feel less overwhelmed and vulnerable (**Reintegrating**)?

In this example the consultant “disrupts” the conversation about *fixing what’s broken* and invites the executive to consider a different metaphorical image to guide the assignment. The invitation leads to reconsideration of the initial implicit assumptions and adoption of a different image and implications to guide the work.

## Three Conditions are Needed for Change

Change in dialogic meaning-making is possible during conversational interactions if three conditions are met to some degree and in any order:

- Something must disrupt or challenge the 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.

## Concluding Comments

A coach or consultant who seeks to be intentional about dialogic process consulting assumes socially constructed realities are continuously being created, sustained and changed through stories, word images, and conversations. Their role is to help foster, support, and/or accelerate new ways of talking and thinking that lead to the emergence of generative possibilities. The implications of this is that dialogic process consultants and coaches need to 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.

## References

Marshak, R. J. (1998). A discourse on discourse: Redeeming the meaning of talk. In D. Grant, T. Keenoy, & C. Osrick (Eds.), *Discourse and Organization* (pp.15-30). London: Sage.

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