29

Social Construction and the Practice of Dialogic Organization Development

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INTRODUCTION

Organization Development (OD), as a field of scholarly inquiry and practice, emerged in the 1950s and became codified by the late 1960s. Three intellectual trends it sprang from were the transition from mechanistic models of organizing to organic, open systems, models (Burns and Stalker, 1961; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1969), the emergence of action research as planned change practice (Lewin, 1946; Lippitt, Watson and Westley, 1958) and the incorporation of humanistic social science into the practice of management (Argyris, 1957; McGregor, 1960) along with the invention of laboratory education (Bradford, Benne and Gibb, 1964; Schein and Bennis, 1965). The social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) is widely regarded as the intellectual founder of what came to be called OD. Lewin and his followers were interested in creating better teams, organizations, communities and societies by engaging their members in scientific self-study that

would lead to better social process and human relations. Many innovations in managerial practice (e.g., leadership training, team-building, survey feedback, diversity and inclusion, participative management, team-based organizing, action research, planned change) are a part of OD.

In Bushe and Marshak (2009, 2014) we describe in depth the differences between foundational Diagnostic OD and those practices that we have grouped and named Dialogic OD, which emerged in the 1980s and have proliferated since. Unlike the inherent positivistic assumptions of Diagnostic OD, Dialogic OD is guided by a set of beliefs based on social constructionist and complexity science premises, intended to stimulate transformational change. Furthermore, transformational Dialogic OD approaches advance practices more associated with generative change rather than traditional planned change. In a VUCA world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, where most strategic

issues organizations face can't be solved using traditional planned change practices, Dialogic OD is increasingly used to address complex organizational situations calling for a more emergent approach (Heifetz, 1998; Snowden and Boone, 2007). Unlike classical OD that assumes diagnosis of the factors and forces limiting performance is possible and necessary to formulate successful change interventions (Anderson, 2017), Dialogic OD practices eschew diagnosis in favor of engaging diverse participants in safe and stimulating containers where new possibilities emerge that alter socially constructed realities.

CRITERIA FOR OD PRACTICE

There are at least five critical criteria that have historically served as guidelines to ensure OD outcomes reflect a search for the common good, and avoid explicit or implicit dominance, control or oppression. How these criteria are met has evolved in Dialogic OD practice, but the criteria themselves have remained and may well serve to define what distinguishes organization development from other organizational change practices. These are listed in Table 29.1.

Democratic Ideals

Beginning with Lewin's research and organizational interventions, organization development practitioners became some of the first to challenge the prevalent autocratic style of

Table 29.1 Five criteria for all OD practices

- Democratic ideals
- Free and informed choice
- Widespread engagement in inquiry
- Widespread opportunities for positive influence
- Developmental movement

business leaders in the 1950's. From those beginning days all OD processes lean toward increasing democratization of the workplace; less in the sense of representative democracy and more in the sense of participatory democracy (Emery and Thorsrud, 1969). More recent Dialogic OD processes like Open Space Technology (Owen, 2008), where there is no authority structure and everyone has equal opportunities to influence outcomes, have greatly extended this democratic ideal.

Free and Informed Choice

One of the main ways in which a more democratized organization is possible is through ensuring people have free and informed choice in decision-making and resulting actions (Argyris, 1970). This has many important ramifications. One is what we would now call transparency; people should have access to information that affects them, and their engagement at work should be predicated on being told the truth. Secondly, the decisions and actions they take should be freely taken, and change processes should avoid any kind of coercion, even subtle kinds. In addition to a moral stance, free and informed choice has the practical consequence that people's commitment to decisions is greater and social organizing processes are more effective. These are similar conditions to what Habermas (1968) called 'ideal speech acts'. Whereas Diagnostic OD practitioners attempt to follow these criteria by trying to occupy a neutral position apart from the systems in which they operate, Dialogic practitioners by contrast believe they are intricately embedded in the ways people make meaning and create social realities. Therefore, they must exercise a high degree of self-reflexivity to mitigate ways in which their rank and status might result in subtle forms of exclusion or coercion (Oliver, 2005).

Widespread Engagement in Inquiry

Another early contribution of Lewin and his followers' research was to show that engaging those who have to change in processes of self-study and participation in decision-making reduced resistance to change (Coch and French, 1948). A signature value of OD is to engage individuals and teams in inquiry. In the initial formulations of Diagnostic OD this meant scientific forms of inquiry. A main differentiator of Dialogic OD has been the incorporation of other forms of inquiry, like appreciative inquiry, that are less based on the notion of 'understanding as uncovering what can't be seen' (e.g., diagnosis), and more interested in the idea of 'understanding as assigning meaning' (Gergen, 1978). Additionally, traditional OD methods tended to engage people in small groups that represented the larger system. Dialogic OD practitioners, on the other hand, lean toward large group methods that seek to engage the 'system-as-a-whole' in events with large numbers of participants at the same time (Bunker and Alban, 2006).

Widespread Opportunities for Meaningful Influence

Providing all system members with meaningful influence has been a hallmark of OD since its beginning, coming under different names, such as participation, empowerment, inverting the pyramid, and most recently, engagement. Traditionally, OD processes engaged employees in making proposals that were vetted by management so that changes were decided on by leaders with the input of others (Friedlander and Brown, 1974). Dialogic OD processes go further in proposing that leaders let changes emerge from the interactions of stakeholders, and instead of vetting proposals, support their emergence and invest in those showing the most promise (Bushe, 2020).

Developmental Movement

Finally, OD has historically attended to psychological notions of 'development'. Developmental models portray a sequence of stages or phases that individuals, groups and sometimes larger systems go through in a process of becoming ever more capable, integrated and whole. Recently, Bushe and Nagaishi (2018) synthesized three qualities of development that underlie OD processes at the individual, relational and organizational levels: (1) the more developed a system, the greater the level of self-awareness – it can talk to itself about itself; (2) the more developed a system, the less it is driven by reactive, non-rational processes and the more it is able to integrate emotion and reason; and (3) the more developed a system the more it is able to actualize its potential. We believe these criteria can and should be used to assess the quality and success of any OD effort, diagnostic or dialogic.

Having established the essential values of any kind of organization development practice, we now turn to a description of the specifics of Dialogic forms of OD.

DIALOGIC ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

In recent decades the postmodern and linguistic turn in the social sciences, and the discoveries in non-linear and complexity natural sciences, have altered ideas about change and change practices. These have spawned methods like appreciative inquiry, open space technology, world café, art of hosting, and the conference model, to name a few (see Bushe (online) for a bibliography of Dialogic OD methods). We group and label as Dialogic OD those practices that explicitly or implicitly treat organizations as networks of meaning-making where individual, group and organizational actions result from self-organizing, emergent, socially constructed

realities that are created and sustained by the prevailing narratives, relationships and conversations. From this perspective change results from 'changing the conversations' that shape everyday thinking and behavior by, for example, involving more and different voices, altering how people talk to each other, challenging and/or disrupting limiting patterns, and/or by stimulating alternative narratives or generative images to re-story current realities. Although easy to misconstrue, Dialogic OD is not simply about creating good dialogues or better exchanges of information. Dialogic OD practitioners explicitly or implicitly hold social constructionist (Barrett, 2015) and complex responsive systems perspectives (Stacey, 2015) about organizing processes. This results in very different ideas about leadership, organizing, and change from traditional OD and managerial perspectives. Consequently, Dialogic OD seeks to improve teams and organizations by engaging with the ongoing flow of conversations that continuously create, re-create and frame understanding and action (e.g., Barrett, Thomas and Hocevar, 1995; Bartunek and Woodman, 2015; Nistelrooij and Sminia, 2010; Shaw, 2002; Whitney, 1996).

CHANGE PROCESSES IN DIALOGIC OD

In other writings we have emphasized that what distinguishes Diagnostic and Dialogic practices are not so much the methods as the 'mindset' of the practitioners using those methods (Bushe and Marshak, 2014, 2015a). By mindset we mean the beliefs and assumptions about organizing and change that guide how a practitioner uses any particular method (Aguiar and Tonelli, 2018). Dialogic OD rests on a combination of social constructionist assumptions (Camargo-Borges and Rasera, 2013) and complexity science assumptions (Shemer and Agmon-Snir, 2019). Below, we

briefly review the key premises of what we call the Dialogic OD mindset.

Three Change Enablers

Dialogic OD emphasizes discourse, emergence and generativity to foster or accelerate change (Bushe and Marshak, 2014, 2015b). Generativity creates change by stimulating new ideas and the motivation to act on them (Bushe, 2013a; Castillo and Trinh, 2019). Emergence creates change by disrupting stable patterns and creating opportunities for new thoughts and actions to emerge (Holman, 2015; Oswick, 2013). Narrative and discourse create change by altering the stories and symbols people use to make meaning of themselves and the situations they are in (Chlopczyk and Erlach, 2019; Marshak, 2020).

For some practitioners this also means conceiving of organizations as in constant flux where there is no need to induce dissatisfaction to unfreeze and move a static system. 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 consultant is described by some as a choreographer or stage manager who helps to create a 'container' (Bushe, 2010; Corrigan, 2015) and designs and fosters conversations among the participants. Increasingly this role of the dialogic consultant is referred to as 'hosting' (McKergow, 2020) or 'convening'.

Principle Beliefs

The principle beliefs about change that form the dialogic approach (Bushe and Marshak, 2014, 2016) include:

1 Organizational 'reality' is a social construct that emerges through dialogic processes (Yu and Sun, 2012). What any particular group believes is 'reality,' 'truth' or 'the ways things are' is created, conveyed and changed through relationships, stories, narratives and other symbolic

interactions. 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. For example, how people interpret the motivations behind a leader's statements comes more from how people they interact with talk about it, than the leader's words themselves.

2   Language does more than simply convey information. Instead language creates, frames, sustains and transforms social experience, shapes organizational thinking, and influences resulting organizational behavior (Barrett, 2015). For example, a client who wants to 'fix a problem' may be operating from an implicit frame that assumes people are parts in a mechanistic system. A client who wants to 'develop the group' may be operating from an organic frame which implies that growth, health and well-being are necessary for success (Marshak, 2019).

3   Narratives are coherent storylines shared by a group of people that help them make sense of their world and provide a rationale for decisions and actions (Dailey and Browning, 2014). It is assumed that in any organization different narratives about the same things exist. Dialogic OD consultants do not work at deciding which narratives are 'right'. Instead they seek 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 (Swart, 2019).

4   Any organization at any one time is undergoing a variety of changes, at varying speeds, some intended and some unintended. Change is part of the continuous process of self-organizing that occurs in all human collectives. New organizational behaviors and practices result from emergent rather than directed processes (Silva and Guerrini, 2018). One does not plan for a specific change, but instead helps to foster the generative conditions that lead to new, adaptive ways of thinking and doing.

The conditions that lead to transformative generative change include most or all of the following:

• Disrupting prevailing social realties by adding diversity of ideas, questions, actors, processes, and so forth to the existing situation. This introduces new narratives and perspectives from which new social agreements can emerge.

• Creating a 'container' that provides the right ingredients and space for participants to inquire together and makes room for both individual and collective expression through which old ways of doing things are contested and new possibilities emerge.

• Emphasizing generativity rather than benchmarking, best practices and pre-packaged solutions. A generative process will produce new ideas that people want to act on (Bushe, 2013a). A generative image offers people novel ways of thinking and acting that they want to act on (Bushe and Storch, 2015).

• Inviting the 'whole person' – not just the mind, but the physical, emotional, intellectual, and even spiritual aspects of self.

In sum, Dialogic OD practitioners assume 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 practitioner is to help foster or accelerate new ways of talking, thinking, and interacting that lead to the emergence of transformational possibilities. This is usually done by identifying a purpose for the change that stakeholders care about, introducing greater diversity into conversations, hosting generative interactions that shift focus from problems to possibilities, fostering a container or space for different conversations to take place, and convening interactions intended to lead to useful outcomes.

DIALOGIC OD PRACTICE

In Dialogic OD there is always need for a clear sponsor with 'ownership' of the situation to be addressed (Bushe, 2013b). A key difference in Dialogic OD from 'change management' is that the sponsor usually does not have a 'vision' of an end state they are driving toward. Instead what is needed is what Schein (2016) calls an 'adaptive move'.

Typically, sponsors are responding to some problem, concern, or challenge but don't know exactly what changes will effectively address the situation. What is essential is that they can enunciate a 'purpose' (described in more detail below) that is meaningful to them and those who will have to change. (Bushe2020). A purpose might identify something external to the system (e.g., meet the needs of a new customer demographic) or internal to the system (e.g., increase collaboration between groups). Sponsors engaging Dialogic OD methods must be willing to experiment and 'try things and learn as we go', launching many different experiments in accomplishing the purpose

Although there are a variety of Dialogic methods and approaches, all assume that change requires a change in the prevailing patterns of narratives and conversations. Some Dialogic OD processes work at the individual and small group level, and can be less formal and structured (see Bushe and Marshak, 2015b: Marshak 2020). Here we will focus on the more structured approaches that operate at the large group and organization levels.

Structured Dialogic OD and Generative Change

Structured approaches to Dialogic OD involve one or more events that are designed to produce a change in core narratives and stimulate self-organized innovations. These events are designed to enhance relationships and enable more creativity and engagement. Generative images and questions are used to elicit new ideas (see Bushe, 2020 for examples). These in turn lead to consideration of new options and changes previously unimagined. Involved participants make personal, voluntary commitments to new behaviors and projects. After the event(s), new thinking, connections and talking allows people to make new choices in day-to-day interactions. There may be self-organized group projects

stimulated during the events, but the transformation in the social construction of reality comes from participants altering old narratives and evolving new attitudes and assumptions as they make sense of their day-to-day interactions.

Our research suggests that when structured Dialogic OD practices, like appreciative inquiry, future search and art of hosting result in transformational change, they more or less follow a common sequence of activities which we call the 'generative change model' (Bushe, 2020; Marshak and Bushe, 2018), as shown in Figure 29.1.

Identify the adaptive challenge

Dialogic OD processes are most appropriate for addressing complex adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1998) while diagnostic, planned change approaches are more suitable for what Heifetz calls technical problems. Technical problems can be operationally defined and lend themselves to application of expertise to identify optimal solutions. When implemented, the problem stays solved until something else changes. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are more complex, where cause-effect relations can only be discerned in retrospect. Addressing such challenges require changes to the social construction of reality. Adaptation will require experiments, wrong turns and learning from failure as well as success. Research suggests that such problems are better managed by stimulating many bottom-up experiments or pilot projects, seeing what works, and then scaling up and embedding those that do (Bushe and Nagaishi, 2018).

Reframe the adaptive challenge into a future-focused purpose statement that identifies what the relevant stakeholders care about and will attract their interest and effort

A common purpose (or shared identity) makes it possible for a large group of people
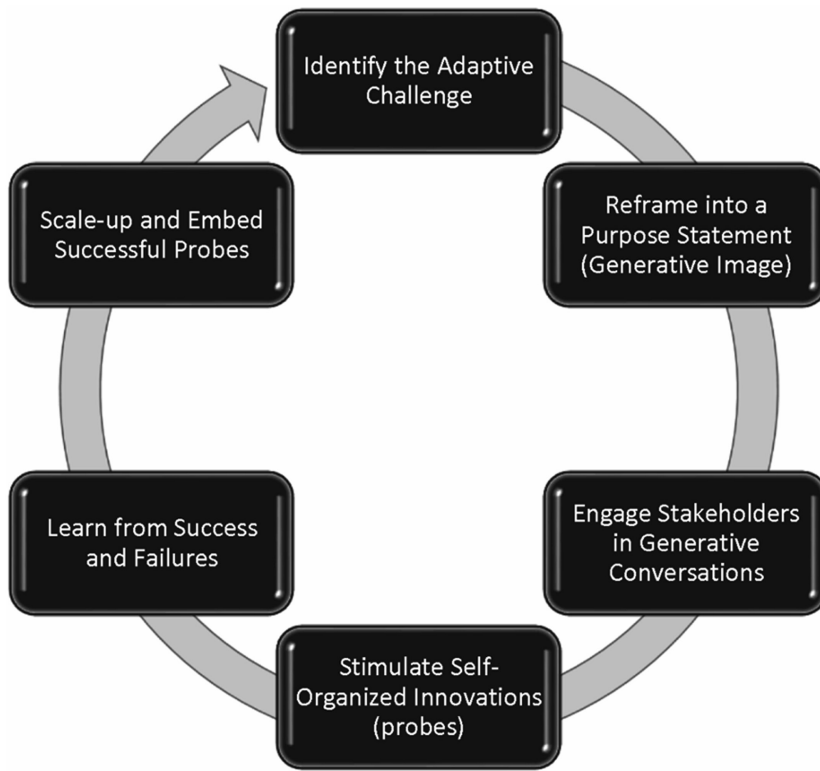
Figure 29.1   The generative change model

Source: Bushe (2020).

to self-organize for the common good with-
out directive or facilitative leadership.
Without a common purpose, collaborative
relationships are unlikely to form. A purpose
is different from a vision, goal or objective,
all of which identify a preferred future state.
A purpose identifies what the group or
organization is trying to do every day, and in
many cases there is no expectation that they
will ever completely accomplish that pur-
pose. A sponsor cannot choose any purpose
and hope to stimulate generative change,
however. They have to frame the adaptive
challenge in a way that captures what the
majority of stakeholders inherently care
about. Sponsors may have the power to
compel some people to engage, but probably
not all the people who are key stakeholders.
More importantly, compelling engagement

violates conditions for ideal speech acts, and
people who don't want to be engaged are
unlikely to make a contribution. Depending
on voluntary participation requires inviting
people to events in a way that will attract
them to come (for example, Axelrod, 2010
and McKergow, 2020).

Bushe (2013a, 2020) has emphasized the
transformative potential of framing a pur-
pose statement in the form of a generative
image. Generative images are a combina-
tion of words that identify the purpose being
pursued in a way that is short enough to be
easily remembered and sweet enough that
they attract people into conversations. Most
importantly, by their very nature they open up
new vistas for thinking and acting. For exam-
ple, inviting airline employees to inquire into
'exceptional arrival experiences' generated a

host of innovations that the prior conversation on lost luggage had not (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

Design and host generative conversations among diverse stakeholders

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 are the assumptions 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.

One area of common agreement in dialogic practice is the need to ensure the capacity of participants to engage in inclusive conversations as part of the change process. For example, the art of hosting emphasizes the need for 'welcoming', including the invitation to attend, the café-like setting with inviting tables to sit at, and so on, particularly when groups are highly diverse (Brown and Issacs, 2005). An image common amongst Dialogic OD practitioners, is that of 'container' (Corrigan, 2015). '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).

Another area of agreement is designing and 'hosting' dialogic OD events, especially those involving large groups, so that people can interact productively without the need for 'facilitation' (Storch, 2015; Weisbord, 2012). Often this is through conversations structured through specific questions designed to be maximally generative (e.g., Southern, 2015; Whitney et al., 2014), although it can also involve more self-organizing processes where participants identify the conversations they want to have, as in Open Space (Owen, 2008). Hosting is seen as a complex interplay of planning and adapting in the moment, with the host ready to lead when needed, with the intent to pass ownership to participants as quickly as possible (McKergow, 2020)

Stimulate self-organized probes, pilot projects and innovations

At some point the Dialogic OD process shifts from generative conversations to launching action. This might look like agreements among participants to work together differently, back on the job in the following days. Some dialogic practices focus on making sense of the variety of conversations and experiences that have occurred during events to provide guidance for moving forward. Some focus on getting people ready to launch new initiatives that have been stimulated by the event(s). Practice varies considerably amongst Dialogic OD practitioners, and is affected by the intentions of the initiative, as well as the expectations and culture of the group or organization. Often, rather than expecting collective agreement on singular action(s), practices may also make visible ideas or projects that small groups of people commit to pursuing. Additionally, people may discuss how they might act differently and then be encouraged to act on what they find most personally relevant and meaningful.

One of the core differences between the generative change model and traditional planned change is the notion that you get more transformational change, more rapidly, when leaders do not decide what the

right solutions are or search for consensus before taking action (Bushe and Nagaishi, 2018). Increasingly Dialogic OD events are designed to help people with similar ideas and motivations find each other, create prototypes, agreements, pilot projects, or proposals that they are encouraged to just go do. This utilization of emergent self-organizing is predicated on sponsors and stake-holders having a clear sense of common purpose and a clear set of boundary conditions for what innovations are acceptable.

Learn from successes and failures and scale up successful pilots

What happens after dialogic events is as crucial as the quality of events themselves. Leadership is essential to recognize small, important change opportunities and work to amplify them into big, important changes. The extent of change depends on undirected, self-selected individuals and groups being motivated on their own to act differently at work given the new social realities that emerged during the dialogic event and are reinforced in everyday conversations following the event. Specific projects sometimes 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. After the events, change is facilitated by putting in place processes for monitoring and tracking the actual changes taking place so leaders can recognize and amplify desired improvements (Bushe, 2020; Roehrig, Schwendenwien and Bushe, 2015).

A Case Example

A Materials Handling group of close to 200 employees responsible for securing and distributing over 5000 items to regional distribution centers scattered across a wide geographical area, was faced with a very complex situation. For a variety of reasons, it was difficult to ensure that the right materials were in the right place at the right time, and have both their internal customers and their employees follow the procedures and processes intended to ensure that. This caused daily conflict and stress for everyone.

While employees wanted to provide good service to their customers, this was also an old, unionized organization where employees expected to be ignored and treated poorly, and cynicism was pervasive. The entire organization had a strong engineering-oriented culture and was used to numbers-driven, top-down leadership and a fear-based management style. There was very little collaboration between the three main functions in the Materials Handling group and a repetitive narrative was used to explain problems: 'upstream takes its eyes off the ball, downstream is hoarding/hiding/losing materials'.

A new manager wanted to change a situation where 'not getting yelled at was a good day' for front-line employees. The management team thought getting employees and customers to follow procedures would do that, but past attempts to engage their customers in defining and agreeing to 'the rules' had not worked. With a Dialogic OD consultant, the leaders recognized that such a purpose would not be compelling to employees and unlikely to engage them in a substantial change process. Instead, they developed a generative image of creating 'stress free customer service'. Breaking with tradition, they invited all levels of employees into a series of Dialogic OD events. At each, employees were encouraged to identify and self-organize 'pilot projects' they would be willing to champion that would increase stress free customer service. A few key criteria/boundaries for what could be proposed were given (e.g., could not increase headcount; had to work with the current IT system), and it was emphasized that projects were going to be seen as experiments, that they did not have to be successful, and what was important was that they keep learning what works and

what doesn't. Any pilots that met the criteria would be supported.

After the first Dialogic OD event managers were astonished when over a dozen pilots were proposed. A coalition of shop floor and regional employees proposed reducing turnaround from the central warehouse to regions from three days to one, which would greatly reduce the stress of field store keepers. The management team did not think this was possible, and were suspicious about the motives for even proposing it, but they decided to follow the employees' energy and see what was possible. A two-day event, now called a crewshop, was held to support this purpose. Soon after they accomplished one-day turnarounds. It took less than six months from the initial contact with the consultant for this profound change in organizational culture to take place, for the management team to reconceptualize their role from problem-solvers to 'problem-setters', and for the old narrative about upstream and downstream to be replaced with 'the system is the problem'.

By amplifying and scaling up one of the projects that emerged from this crewshop, they were able to transform what was, essentially, a pen and paper operation to a fully digitized (barcodes, scanners, wireless databases updated in real-time) warehouse in approximately 18 months. They did this without a vision, a plan, any training, or a budget. They did it through a generative Dialogic OD process. This case is described in detail in Bushe (2020).

CONCLUSION

Dozens of Dialogic OD methods provide those interested in using a social constructionist lens for improving teams and organizations with proven processes. While each method provides useful tools and techniques, we believe there is an underlying dialogic mindset and a generative change process that determines how successfully they are used. Following any change method like a recipe, without understanding their underlying complex adaptive systems and social constructionist foundations, leads to hit and miss applications.

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