Dialogic Organization Development and the Generative Change Model: Opportunities and Challenges for Managing Global Crises

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The Challenge

Dialogic Organization Development (OD) methods (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; 2015a) emerged over the past 30 years to aid organizations and leaders in addressing increasingly complex (Snowden, 2002), adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1998). These are problems with many moving parts, known and unknown interdependencies, that span multiple boundaries and require not just changes in behavior, but changes in attitudes, perceptions and cognitive maps of stakeholders. Global Crises such as global warming, the Covid-19 pandemic, and mass migrations clearly fit that description. Successful cases of Dialogic OD in large group settings of hundreds or even thousands of participants (e.g. Cooperrider, 2012; Davies, 1992; Lukensmeyer, 2015) appear to follow what we have described as the Generative Change Model (Bushe, 2020; Marshak & Bushe, 2018). These methods have been used for community and social issues but there are crucial differences between organizations and communities that, to our knowledge, have not been reckoned with to produce reliably successful generative change processes at the community, let alone global level. In this chapter we will briefly describe Dialogic OD, and then the Generative Change Model and why it is more effective for managing volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) challenges, like global crises, than more traditional planned change approaches. We will conclude with two challenges we see that have to be resolved for generative change processes to be used successfully for global issues.

What is Dialogic OD

In parallel with the increasingly complex and uncertain contexts and challenges organizations face have been the advancement and application of new ideas from the social sciences. While offering new insights and approaches to social change, they also suggest a less controllable, more ambiguous, world calling for letting go of long established and culturally reinforced notions of command and control leadership.

The dominant theories about leadership and change for most of the last century imagined organizations as machines or living organisms where leaders diagnosed problems and maladies (and sometimes opportunities) and prescribed remedies. On a global stage the dominant imagery tended to be about fighting wars, whether with other countries, radical groups, pandemic viruses, ecological exploitation, and so on. This helps to re-enforce a culture of heroic leadership where leaders and their warriors on the front lines are implicitly or explicitly responsible for addressing and defeating problematic situations.

In the latter part of the last century new theories began to emerge that offered new ways of thinking which led to new recommendations for change practices and leader behavior. One set of influential ideas referred to here as the interpretive social sciences (Richardson & Fowers, 1998), (in which we would include social constructionism (Gergen, 2015: Rorty, 1979) and social discourse (e.g. Grant, Hardy, Oswick & Putnam, 2004) questioned if there is any objective reality independent of how people interact and make meaning from their experiences. Human interactions and conversations lead to social agreements and narratives which in turn define what is possible and proper. Leaders are important participants in the processes of meaning making (Smircich & Morgan, 1982) by their ability to influence social agreements and convey a preferred story or narrative, but not through their superior ability to analyze and convey objective facts. In essence these more recent ideas in the social sciences envisioned a world that is more subjective than previously considered and where leaders have less objectively defined and certain ways of addressing situations.

Almost in parallel with these developments, new theories in the physical sciences challenged the long-held cause and effect ideas of Newtonian physics (Aggazi & Montecucco, 2002; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). The universe was not a giant machine; change did not require forces acting on objects nor outside interventions to cause or direct change. Instead chaotic systems could self-organize without outside involvement. By the beginning of this century some organizational consultants were suggesting that by allowing or encouraging an organization to move to the edge of chaos it would then self-organize to a more effective level of performance (Owen, 2008; Pascale, Millemann & Gioja, 2000, Wheatley, 2006). This is a radical challenge to the command and control orientation of many leaders and asks them to not try to intervene to fix the situation, but stand aside and contain the edge of chaos while emergent processes involving a diversity of stakeholders lead to new solutions requiring their active support, but outside of their control.

These newer ideas about social construction and emergent change have been incorporated into newer change methodologies in organization development and allied approaches, including for example, Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search and Open Space Technology, all of which have been used in a variety of contexts to address social and global concerns. These are exciting developments that hold great promise for the challenges of contemporary times. Recently, to help clarify and define what's different about these newer approaches to change, we labeled them as "Dialogic OD." It's important to understand that Dialogic OD is not simply about dialogue, or prescribing ways in which people ought to talk and listen. We selected that title to

contrast this set of practices with more conventional "Diagnostic OD" approaches in use from the mid-20th century which explicitly or implicitly assumed problems could be identified, objectively analyzed, and that managed interventions could realize desired future states. We also selected that label because all the different methods we classify as dialogic practices agree that transformational change occurs by changing the on-going conversations and resulting meaning-making that have become patterned and routinized in the subject organization. As we sought to understand the underlying similarities in dozens of different methodologies and identify what makes them effective (or not) we concluded that it is not the method, but the mindset of leaders and change agents that makes the difference (Bushe & Marshak, 2014; 2016). The contours of this mindset are described in a variety of articles and book chapters (see also Bushe & Marshak, 2015b) but importantly include premises that invite leaders and change agents to move away from traditional problem-solving, analyze and envision, command and control, thinking and doing.

Dialogic OD argues that transformational change requires at least one of the following three enablers, and that research is needed to untangle whether they can be effective singly or only in combination. These are 1) a core narrative about the nature of the organization and/or the presenting challenge is changed; 2) there is a disruption to current processes of organizing in a way that stimulates the emergence of new, better, and adapted processes, and 3) a generative image emerges that creates opportunities for new conversations, thoughts and actions (Bushe & Marshak, 2014, 2015).

The Generative Change Model

One strand of Dialogic OD works with large groups, sometimes whole organizations, utilizing dialogic methods and mindsets to produce rapid transformational change. We have found it helpful to provide leaders and change agents with a conceptual model that explains generative change processes that are based on a dialogic mindset, and how and why they differ from traditional planned change processes in organization development. We have found the Generative Change Model broad enough that it encompasses a wide variety of specific methods, specific enough that its use can be imagined by people who are used to planned change, and revealing enough that it points to important considerations for leaders and change agents utilizing Dialogic OD methods.

By the traditional planned change approach (Lippit, Watson and Wesley, 1958) we mean the attempt to manage change by first identifying the problem needing change, collecting and analyzing data in order to arrive at a preferred solution sanctioned by leadership, and then attempting to implement that solution down through the managerial hierarchy. We suggest that this process is best suited for what Heifetz (1998) calls technical problems, or Snowden & Boone (2007) identify as simple and complicated decision situations. It's lack of fit with adaptive challenges or complex and chaotic situations is one explanation for the widespread lack of success of planned change in organizations (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Eaton, 2010)

A generative change process, on the other hand, begins when a complex, adaptive challenge or wicked problem has been identified and accepted as requiring attention and not denial. Leaders and change agents then reframe it in a way that will capture the interest and engagement of the diverse stakeholders who must ultimately generate, embrace and enact the thinking and actions needed for transformational change. This purpose statement is used to engage the people who will have to change into joining one or more events designed to produce "generative conversations" – conversations that will lead to new ideas people want to act on. These are normally events involving large groups of participants that are designed to bring together the diversity of stakeholders; deepen the group's understanding of the systemic nature of the issues; allow people with similar interests and ideas to find each other; and ultimately launch as many pilot projects as possible, with basic guardrails articulated by organizational leaders. At the end of these events participants are encouraged to take initiative and act on their ideas without waiting for permission. Processes for monitoring what then takes place allow leaders to learn from the pilots, support promising initiatives and scale up and embed successful ones. Figure 1 depicts the model. Key differences between planned change and generative change are shown in Table 1.

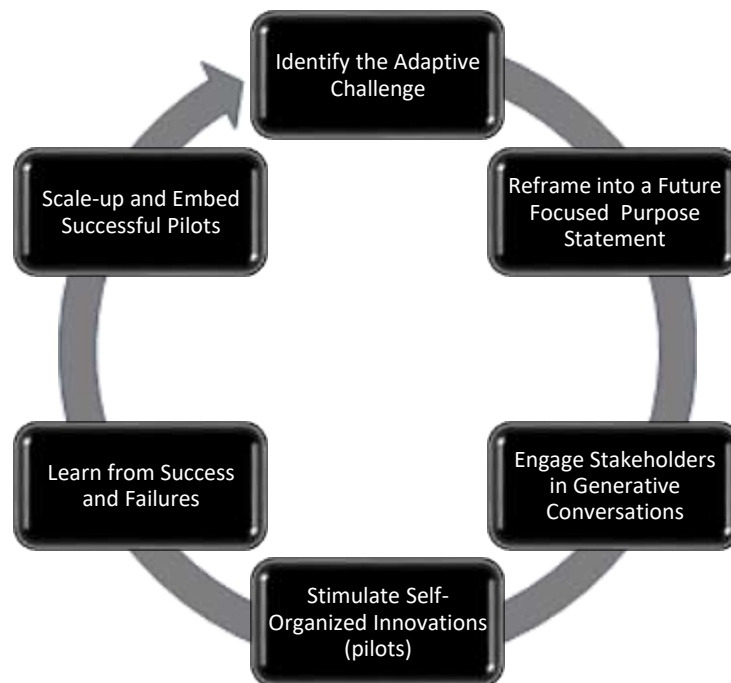Figure 1 – The Generative Change Model (Bushe, 2020)

Table 1 Contrasting Planned Change and Generative Change (Bushe, 2019)

Aspects	Planned Change	Generative Change
Approach:	**Social engineering**: Identify problem and desired change, analyze required interventions, direct implementation.	**Social innovation**: Identify desired outcome/purpose, engage stakeholders in ways to stimulate innovative possibilities, motivate and support stakeholders to innovate.
Use when:	**State of the art approaches and solutions exist.** Leadership believes it has enough clarity about the situation to sanction a planned change effort.	**Beyond state-of-the-art approaches and solutions are needed.** Leadership is uncertain about how to achieve agreement or specify solutions for the desired state.
Methods:	**Scientific and engineering oriented** • Analyze data • Problem-solving approaches	**Social interaction (Dialogic) and social agreement oriented** • Focus on desired futures • Possibility-inducing approaches
Change through:	Convergence on a solution and effective top-down implementation. **Sense – Analyze – Respond**	Generate many possible innovations, and effective top-down-bottom-up improvisation. **Experiment – Learn – Amplify**
Desired Outcomes:	Acceptance and implementation of changes that address problem(s) or achieve desired results as quickly as feasible.	Self-organizing adaptive actions and/or transformations that can be scaled up and embedded in timely ways.
Role of Leaders:	Performance oriented and directive; front loaded effort Provide *vision* of desired future state Provide resources and clear roles and goals Provide/resource tools and techniques that will diagnose the real issues and provide practical solutions Accept or reject proposed solutions and direct others to implement	Possibility oriented and supportive; back end loaded effort Name the *purpose* that motivates stakeholders Provide resources and clear boundaries Provide/resource opportunities to strengthen the relationships and communications that will stimulate the emergence of adaptive actions people will self-implement Support, scale up and embed most promising innovations

There are three things that make the generative change approach significantly different from a planned change approach. One is a focus on preferred futures \rather than a focus on solving

problems. Along with this is the use of a common purpose embraced by a diversity of stakeholders, instead of a strategic vision articulated by the leader, to drive the change process. The second is widespread engagement by the stakeholders who will have to change rather than mostly the engagement of experts and authorities, in devising the actual changes. The third is use of numerous experiments and pilot projects to learn as you go rather than first agreeing on and then implementing a preferred comprehensive solution. Research on organizational change (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Mirabeau & Maguire, 2014; Rowland & Higgs, 2008) and experience in the field consistently demonstrates that generative change produces more change, more quickly, than the planned change approach, which, as noted earlier, has a fairly poor track record of success.

As a method more aligned with the messy, complex nature of global crises, generative change appears to offer considerable opportunities for leaders and change agents to design effective responses, and indeed, there are many instances where we see what looks like a generative change approach being used. Examples include most of the Earth Summits, the Paris Climate Accords, Walmart's transformation of its global supply chain to net carbon neutral, and attempts to bring peace to the world through the United Religions Initiative.

Challenges Societal Problems Present for Using Generative Change Methods

While there is reason to move forward on the use of generative change methods for addressing global problems, differences between organizations and larger social entities like communities, nations and the world need to be recognized. At the same time, while the level of complexity increases as you scale up, two important issues are the same in all cases for the successful use of Generative Change Methods. These are the need for sponsorship and the ensuring conditions for convivial emergence.

Sponsorship

Successful generative change, like planned change, rests on effective sponsorship, though the nature and practice of sponsorship is very different in planned and generative change models. In the generative change model, sponsorship is most important after generative conversations have taken place and pilot projects launched. Sponsors are the people and groups with authority to change structures, processes and policies to support, embed, and scale up successful pilot projects. They are also the source of most of the resources for whatever pilots need. Without committed and engaged sponsors, even the most enlivening and generative events will have little sustained impact. We have witnessed this pattern of a lack of committed follow through from sponsors in generative change processes ranging from the Paris Climate Accords to inter-agency community service initiatives. Unlike organizations where it is often easy to identify who is needed to sponsor a generative change effort, social problems typically cross multiple boundaries and competing jurisdictions, making it unlikely that only a few people or groups will be needed

to effectively sponsor change. Successful use of generative change methods therefore will call for the initial establishment of the required sponsoring group(s). One example would be the Global Compact, initiated by bringing together leaders of multinational corporations who, one could argue, formed a sponsoring group that led to thousands of pilot projects, many successful, world wide (See https://www.unglobalcompact.org/ and https://aim2flourish.com). A different possible solution has been put forward by Stilger (2017). In communities rebuilding themselves after disasters, he has observed a period of citizen self- authorizing that must take place before agreeing on a common purpose. We're not sure, however, how such high-touch processes might emerge at a global level.

Conditions for Convivial Emergence

The generative change model works with self-organizing processes to create change, but self-organization does not necessarily assure that what emerges will promote the collective good as defined by the diverse stakeholders needed for implementation. If we ask the question, "under what conditions will people collectively organize in service to the greater good", two things stand out.

One is common purpose, and this is mainly what drives effective generative change processes in organizations. The early stages of the generative change model rest crucially on the ability of sponsors and change agents to articulate a purpose that addresses the adaptive challenge and captures the interest and energy of stakeholders (Bushe, 2020). Currently, global crises tend to be framed as problems to be fixed following mechanistic imagery, or an enemy to be vanquished, following wartime imagery. While this might mobilize actions to do away with a threat to the status quo it is less likely to generate committed actions to realize collectively agreed upon purposes that advance the greater good. While perhaps sounding simplistic, the difference between vanquishing a problem or achieving a purpose that advances the greater good can be profound. Consider the implications when something like the Covid-19 pandemic is framed as a war. There will be enemies and allies, casualties, front line troops, searches for weapons and strategies to defeat and eliminate the threat and implicit calls for militaristic command and control leaders to take charge in their theater of operations. What if instead, responses to the pandemic were framed by an agreed upon purpose like "health and resilience for all". Such a framing invites globally coordinated actions where success, by definition, requires that all actors must realize positive benefits. In this example it might also lead to leadership and actions that promote positive, collaborative innovation in contrast to command and control actions to destroy or eliminate a threat.

The other condition that supports convivial emergence is a common identity that bridges existing differences. Without a common purpose to bind together people who don't initially have a common identify, self-organizing processes will mainly steer toward looking after the differing needs and interests of the variety of stakeholder groups who do have a group identity. This state of fragmentation is common in organizations and often the first impacts of generative change

processes are to create a sense of common identity amongst diverse stakeholders (Bushe, 2002; Newman & Fitzgerald, 2001; Powley, Fry, Barrett & Bright, 2004). In general, this is done by processes that develop a common perspective on the issues that are of common concern, and find a preferred future they can all agree on. Only after that is established can emergent change approaches hope to be effective. At the global level, we can see at this point in history a certain tribalism taking over as processes that had been tending toward a more planetary sense of identity in the face of common challenges are encountering increasing differentiation of identities that lead to go it alone or competing strategies and actions. Social science research that suggests successive phases of integration and differentiation are common to a variety of developmental processes (e.g., Greiner, 1998; Phinney, 2013; Piaget, 1972) offers a hopeful perspective on our current situation. For example, many have commented that the current breaking down of order has been observed in previous industrial revolutions and the fourth is no exception. Big history suggests that we are at a threshold that will require us to reinvent social and governmental organization at a new level of complexity (Spier, 2010). Developmentally, new levels of complexity tend to emerge in people and groups through dialectical resolution of succeeding swings between integration and differentiation. All this suggests that we will have to find a path from our current differentiation to a greater integration of global identity, one that transcends ethnic or national identities, to be able to utilize generative change processes for successfully managing global issues.

Conclusion

Generative change processes have emerged in organization development to better enable leaders to manage complexity and adaptive challenges. They have also been used for societal and in a few cases, global issues. However, the requirements for their successful use at the societal level have not been as thoroughly investigated. At least two problems, that are easier to resolve at the organizational level, have to be worked out. One is sponsorship. How do we create the level of sponsorship required to support generative change at a global level? Or, are there ways to substitute or overcome for lack of full sponsorship? The second is the need for some commonality that leads people to self-organize for the common good. When dealing with fragmented group identities, how can we create enough of a sense of common identity, or common purpose, to support the emergence of convivial solutions to collective problems? Researchers utilizing generative change processes at societal levels tend to report on the generative events and conversations they are able to produce. We need more longitudinal research tracking the actual impact of such events, and the conditions that support emergent change.

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