

“The first step of a leader’s learning journey starts with aligning their understanding of generative leadership with their purpose, stretching their imagination to see systemic impacts, and clarifying the purpose that engages stakeholders in the right conversations.”

Preparing Leaders to Hold Space for Self and Others During Generative Change Events

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Abstract

Leaders face increasingly complex challenges, prompting a renewed focus on engaging stakeholders in organizational change processes. Traditional approaches to change, relying on external experts, have been unsatisfactory and leaders are seeking new methods that address the shortcomings. The Dialogic OD mindset, which involves giving stakeholders significant influence over change, has proven to be more effective in producing rapid, transformational change, but leaders often resist using these approaches. Generative change strategies, such as emergent strategy, co-design, open space, among many, emphasize trying things out and learning as you go, which contradicts the preference for certainty and predictability among managers. Generative leadership challenges the belief that leaders have all the answers and instead invites others to make decisions and self-initiate action. Leaders may feel uncomfortable and unsure of their role in leading generative change processes and need coaching and support. To prepare leaders to hold generative spaces, we offer a “a three-legged stool” for OD consultants and coaches to better support leaders before dialogic events: conceptual alignment, embodied self-scaffolding, and contracting the “what ifs.”

Keywords: generative leadership; dialogic OD; leading in uncertainty; managing ambiguity

The increasingly complex, adaptive challenges leaders face have prompted a resurgence in the importance leaders place on engaging stakeholders in organizational change processes. In our experience, there is widespread dissatisfaction with ‘diagnostic’ approaches to change that rely on task forces or external experts to analyze problems and recommend solutions, often resulting in inadequate transformational outcomes (Hastings & Schwartz, 2022). This dissatisfaction has sparked a strong desire among leaders to explore new and innovative approaches to change that can address the inherent shortcomings of more classical methods for managing change. Even though many cases and empirical evidence demonstrate that

applying a Dialogic OD mindset and methods (Bushe & Marshak, 2014) produces far more change, far more rapidly (Bushe & Nagaishii, 2018; Hasting & Schwartz, 2022) by inviting those who will have to change, to have significant influence over the “what will change” and “how change will occur,” OD professionals continue to experience significant resistance from leaders to utilizing them.

A generative change strategy for managing complex, adaptive challenges has been proposed in many different ways with many different labels—emergent strategy (Mintzberg, 1978), probe-sense-respond (Snowden & Boone, 2007), fire bullets then cannon balls (Collins & Hansen, 2011), design thinking for iterative

problem-solving (Brown, 2008), adaptive leadership in complex and uncertain environments (Heifetz et al., 2009), strategy as simple rules (Eisenhardt & Sull, 2001), agile business strategizing (Haines, 2014), or even going back several decades to the “muddling through” approach to decision making (Lindblom, 1959). All these approaches come down to this basic rule: ‘try stuff out and learn as you go’. While it is fairly easy for leaders to grasp the logic of ‘try stuff out and learn as you go’ when no one really knows what will work, it violates some key narratives and expectations common in performance-oriented organizations (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008).

Bushe (2019), and Bushe and Marshak, (2016) have argued that “generative leadership” violates a key belief leaders and those they work for and with, hold about leadership—that leaders have a vision. Having a vision means they have the answer(s) to the challenges their teams and organizations face. When those above, or those below, turn to the leader and ask what to do, they expect an answer—otherwise, why is that person the leader? But the high engagement and generative change strategies¹ utilized by Dialogic OD practitioners (Bushe & Lewis, 2023) require leaders to begin from a place of not knowing, a place of authentically inviting others to answer the question of “what should we do?”

Other violated beliefs or expectations include the idea that ‘first you figure out the right answer and then you put time and effort into it’. Instead, time and effort are put into things that may not work out, which leads down blind alleys and creates unexpected results (Eisenhardt, 1989). In the same vein, another challenged belief is the assumption that outcomes can be accurately predicted in advance and that there is a single “right” answer to every problem (March, 1991). Similarly, “Trying stuff out” also contradicts the traditional preference for avoiding failure and minimizing

1. Both strategies rely on large group processes to produce ideas for change, but a high engagement strategy produces ideas that are then given to leaders to decide what to do with, while a generative change strategy is one in which participants are encouraged to act on their ideas without waiting for permission or a plan.

risks, which is often deeply ingrained in performance-oriented organizations (Edmonson, 1999).

Even if they find the logic of “try stuff out and learn as you go” compelling, we find many leaders unclear about what their role is during a generative change process and uncomfortable with the ambiguity that comes from leading into the unknown. Not only do they need to manage their own discomfort and anxiety, but they will also need to hold the discomfort and anxiety others in the organization may experience from staying long enough in a place of not knowing—that liminal space between and betwixt formal and informal organizational practice, required for real creative answers to complex problems to emerge (Sturdy et al., 2006).

In this paper, we share our thoughts and experiences with preparing leaders to lead an emergent, generative change process. Unless the leader has had successful experiences of holding the container for groups of people to engage complex issues for which there are no pre-set answers, they are likely to be facing concerns about how to lead appropriately and uncomfortable feelings that will need to be acknowledged and managed for effective leadership. While there are things leaders must do to produce successful generative change during and after large group events, here we focus only on coaching before events to prepare the leader to show up and lead effectively. This assumes the consultant has developed a level two or level three relationship² (Schein & Schein, 2018) with the leader, so there is enough trust to surface and discuss uncomfortable things.

In this regard, we offer a three-legged stool (Figure 1) that can provide the stability a leader needs to step into the unfolding unknown with purpose and agency.

Conceptual Alignment

For many leaders, “leading from behind” is an unusual and uncomfortable proposition.

2. Referring to Schein’s categorization of relationship levels based on trust and openness, allowing them to openly address and tackle sensitive and uncomfortable matters.

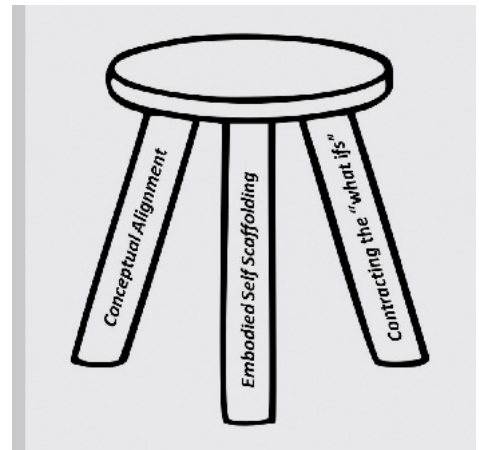


Figure 1. Conceptual Alignment, Embodied Self Scaffolding, and Contracting the “what ifs”

Yet it is exactly what they will need to do to hold a container for generative conversations to take place successfully—conversations among stakeholders that lead to new ideas those stakeholders want to act on (Bushe, 2020). If they haven’t conceptually made a clear linkage between holding a space of not knowing, and accomplishing their purpose, it will be very difficult for them to lead generatively.

To prepare to show up in that way, it is essential that leaders are clear about why they want to convene a space for generative conversations—the intention they hold for the event, for themselves, and for the larger purpose they are pursuing. Over a series of conversations, the dialogic practitioner needs to ensure the leaders have developed a clear theory of action that links what they want to accomplish with a generative leadership approach.

Clarify the Intention for the Event From the Leaders’ Point of View

Before entering one or more large group events designed to produce generative conversations, leaders need to be clear on what they are trying to accomplish and why this is the way to do it. Why is holding a space for generative conversations the best way to accomplish it? How does this align with their beliefs about what leaders need to do to make that happen? In this process, we may be educating as well as drawing out what leaders believe to be true. If they don’t believe that leading generatively, holding a space of not knowing, encouraging others to step in with ideas and strategies, and then ‘learning as you go’ is the best way to accomplish their purpose, then utilizing an

emergent change strategy is probably not a good idea.

Stretch Their Imagination so It Is More Systemic and Global

Leaders also need to work on imagining how the results of an upcoming event could positively impact their change agenda in other ways. What could the ripple effects be? How could this impact things that might happen in the future? How could this event help them connect to both the past and the future. They could look for examples from the past of success and failure in creating these kinds of

produce anxiety from the uncertainty that can accompany it, both in the leader and in those depending on them. The purpose needs to be framed in a way that touches something stakeholders care about, and when possible, turned into a “generative image,” a powerful metaphorical tool that stimulates creative thinking, fosters dialogue, and unlocks new insights in complex situations (Bushe, 1998, 2013, 2019, 2020). A generative change process does not need a generative image, but it does need a purpose that will draw the people who will have to change into conversations about ‘how to change.’

their first impulse is to withdraw, but that isn’t effective. One of the metaphors dialogic practitioners are increasingly using is that of a “host” (McKergow, 2020), in creating a hospitable and constructive space for conversations that lead to positive change. McKergow explores the skills and mindset required for effective hosting, which involves facilitating meaningful dialogue, encouraging participation, and fostering a collaborative atmosphere.

What does a great host do to organize and run a successful gathering? There is the quality of the invitation. There is the way people are greeted as they enter the event. There are the planned activities and how the host directs the guests into those activities. There is the way the host participates with the guests and attends to the space the guests are interacting in. It is necessary for the host to provide just enough direction so the guest can get on with enjoying themselves and then retreats to a position where they can see the whole and be ready to intervene when needed. Typically, this hosting role will be shared by leaders and Dialogic OD practitioners, and some discussion of how they will do that is necessary—something we address below, under the heading of contracting.

In this perspective, leaders open the space, clarify the purpose of the event and any guardrails for ideas and proposals they will support, and then become one more participant—to step into an equal footing with the rest of the participants (Isaacs, 1999). Of course, they can never really be just one more participant because of the weight of their authority, but they can step lightly enough to ensure others are not overwhelmed or intimidated by their presence. One metaphor that can help is to think of themselves as the 500-pound gorilla on the trampoline. If they have had the experience of jumping on a trampoline with others, they will get this. When multiple people are jumping on a trampoline at the same time, whoever is heaviest has to synchronize their movements or they make it impossible for others to jump. Leaders will need to be attentive to when their participation is opening up others, and when it is closing others down, and synchronize their actions.

Inviting leaders to imagine the best of all possible outcomes can be very useful. This is best done not just as an intellectual exercise but as an embodied one. Dialogic OD practitioners could invite leaders to take some time to turn inward and step into that possibility by imagining, for instance, that they are at the conclusion of a supremely successful event. What do they see, think, feel, and want? It is also helpful to assist them in envisioning both themselves and how the success will look like a few months after the event.

changes. What kind of organization are they trying to create? How does a generative approach fit with that?

Identify the Purpose That Will Engage Stakeholders in the Right Conversations

Leaders of emergent change processes are expected as well to work on a compelling purpose instead of a vision (Bushe, 2020). A purpose is what the team or organization is trying to do every day, without any stipulation about how to accomplish it. This creates the necessary focus for stakeholders to produce new ideas that can support the leader’s change agenda while ensuring a lot of space for innovative ideas and practices to emerge (Bushe, 2021). A vision, on the other hand, is one way to accomplish a purpose and so creates only a narrow space for stakeholders to participate and influence the change process. A vision provides the answer to “what should we do,” while a purpose does not, and so providing only a purpose can feel unsatisfying and

What Will Success Look Like?

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What Do Leaders Need to Do to Contribute to the Generativity of the Space

Here we shift to examine their intention for themselves during the event. How do they think they will need to show up to hold a container for generative conversations? This is often an area of confusion for leaders who don’t have much experience leading emergent change processes. Often,

Embodied Self -Scaffolding

Conceptual alignment provides leaders with the intellectual grounding they need to enter a generative leadership space for the first time, but it is not enough. Leaders also need to prepare to be emotionally activated by things they will see and hear. Here, Dialogic OD practitioners need to challenge leaders on how much tolerance they will have for very different points of view. It is necessary to provide scenarios and have them imagine what that would be like and discuss how to respond effectively. They should consider how they are going to react to people feeling empowered to step in and suggest strategies and actions? Additionally, how much control will they be uncomfortable giving up? What might they say and do when faced with beliefs and opinions very different from their own? How will they react when people surface dissatisfaction with the current situation, with past decisions, policies, and actions, perhaps even with the event itself?

Acknowledge Leaders' Fears and Concerns

This part of preparation begins with listening to their fears and what is important to them and ensuring they feel heard and understood. Dialogic OD practitioners can first start with fears related to the workshop. If leaders have no apparent fears, practitioners can double check if they are not in a denial mode or if they are just not conscious of their fears by asking: *Which participants are likely to demonstrate opposition? What would such an assumption be based on? What kind of behaviors would irritate them? Is there a recent tension with one of the participants?*

Very often, the behaviors that trigger leaders' frustration, impatience, or defiance are either a discrepancy between a participant's behavior in the workshop (engaged) and in his daily work (not engaged), or a misinterpreted reaction of the participant's behavior related to an old tension between them both. When leaders give superficial answers or feel overconfident, practitioners can either explore deeper fears (*when you feel/think this, what do you really fear?*) or ask the question 'and what else?' followed

by a silent moment to let any additional important information emerge.

After acknowledging leaders' fears, OD practitioners need to prepare them to face reality, anticipating feeling uncomfortable and yet remaining fully present to what will happen. Practitioners can also help leaders devise strategies for how they will park their reactions and continue to hold space for diverse ideas and points of view. Among these strategies, leaders can work on physically anchoring an imagined positive response to an anticipated trigger or exploring the positive side of the fear.

Help Leaders Find Their Daring

One thing that can hold leaders' anxieties is being congruent with their values and their purpose while activating their "daring." A first step for OD practitioners, when leaders become conscious of their fears, is to ask them, "In the name of what are you willing to overcome your fear and dare . . . ?" The aim here is to reconnect leaders to a value, a personal higher purpose (e.g., learning, growing, resilience, etc.), or a professional one (e.g., empowering the team to have more time for strategic reflection . . .). A second step is to help them find their "daring" by inviting them to remember a "peak moment" in their life where they truly dared to take a risk and be vulnerable in the sense of not knowing how their action or attitude was going to be "received" or judged and to identify what gave them the energy and the guts to do it.

By exploring the three higher levels of Dilts' (1999) network of logical levels (beliefs/values, identity/mission, spirituality), the OD practitioner can help leaders connect to their abilities to manage their impulse to react to their triggers, while keeping in mind what being a generative leader is really about for them.

Another way of helping leaders embody the new "holding" attitude is to play with symbolic language. One of the metaphors leaders can find useful is to imagine tides on a beach. A strong tide will wash far up the shore, but it will recede into the ocean. Imagine what is causing the leader to react as that tide washing up the shore and encourage them to feel secure that it will recede.

What happens if the leader tries to put up a wall to stop the tide? It crashes into the wall and explodes. Thus, practitioners can advise leaders to be patient when an incoming tide is pushing leaders' buttons—it will reverse and flow back out.

Ensure Leaders Believe in the Legitimacy of Their Leadership Role

The most reactive leaders are sometimes the ones who are most unsure about themselves. Behind the bluster, bullying, and a "thin skin" are doubts leaders have about themselves—do they really deserve to be the leader, are they imposters just a step away from being exposed? So, it might be useful to broaden leaders' awareness of what leadership is, for instance by sharing academic or practitioner studies on new leadership models. Practitioners can also discuss with leaders why they think they currently hold this leadership position, what makes them legitimate, or connect them to past memories of when they felt legitimate by leveraging and supporting the best in others.

Contracting the What Ifs

What also helps leaders is to know that the OD practitioner will be there to support them when the heat is up or when they have stepped into difficult terrain by listening to their fears and worst-case scenarios and discussing what would be the best options be if they were to occur.

How Will Consultants Act if They see Leaders Getting in the Way of Their Intent?

The relational contract between leaders and OD practitioners anticipates how both can cooperate to better manage a situation where the leaders' behavior contradicts the intention they shared at the beginning of the workshop or in any other apparent "counterproductive" attitude they might observe.

How Comfortable Will Leaders Be if Practitioners Visibly Intervene?

It is important for practitioners to examine, understand, and communicate intervention dynamics. When practitioners notice someone saying something that causes

leaders' reactivity, how would they like to handle it? Do practitioners have the leaders' permission to intervene? How will they quickly signal each other that something warrants discussion?

We find it useful to discuss why we think modeling appropriate ways for others to intervene and creating new norms for being skillfully transparent when things go awry, is a good way to go. Being skillfully transparent involves describing experience without making judgments (Bushe, 2009) and asking leaders questions that will help them be descriptive. Practitioners can also invite others to describe their different

starts with aligning their understanding of generative leadership with their purpose, stretching their imagination to see systemic impacts, and clarifying the purpose that engages stakeholders in the right conversations. A second step is to envision success, understand how to contribute to a generative space and address their fears and concerns. Third, leaders should find their daring by connecting to their values and higher purpose. This is something leaders can do to prepare to lead in emergent, generative change events, and OD practitioners can guide leaders to arrive at that stage of preparedness.

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experiences, making the point that, to learn from our collective experience we have to allow the variety of experiences to be voiced without judging. Modeling is a delicate yet effective way to remind leaders and display ways to allow people to have their own experience and find ways to hold the tension of opposites.

Summary

Leaders who are not familiar with hosting generative conversations need to learn how to hold generative spaces before events take place. To prepare leaders to adopt an appropriate attitude during events, a three-legged stool approach is proposed, and includes conceptual alignment, embodied self-scaffolding, and contracting the “what ifs.” The first step of a leader’s learning journey

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