

A conceptual framework for practicing inclusive dialogic organization development in times of uncertainty and complexity

Dialogic
organization
development

Chang-kyu Kwon

*Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership,
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, Illinois, USA, and*

Kibum Kwon

*Department of Higher Education and Learning Technology,
Texas A&M University-Commerce, Commerce, Texas, USA*

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual framework for practicing inclusive dialogic organization development (OD).

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reviews and presents Robert Kegan's theory and practice of deliberately developmental organization as an exemplary model for dialogic OD.

Findings – The paper suggests three conditions to make the constantly emerging organizational reality socially just, equitable and inclusive – whole self, psychological safety and leader vulnerability.

Originality/value – The originality of this paper lies in making explicit issues of power in dialogic OD literature and providing implications for human resource development on how to lead and develop organizations inclusively in times of uncertainty and complexity.

Keywords Dialogic organization development, Deliberately developmental organization, Diversity, Inclusion, Social justice, Transformative learning

Paper type Conceptual paper

Current organizational operating climates of uncertainty and complexity are calling for human resource development (HRD) to fundamentally rethink how organization development (OD) needs to be practiced (Yorks and Nicolaidis, 2012). For example, through the global experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations have realized that planning and strategizing based on an objective and accurate assessment of reality is neither possible nor effective. To deal with rapid changes, it was necessary for organizations to engage quickly with new ideas and experiment. This required organizational members come together and exchange perspectives in real time to make sense of the emerging reality. Overall, organizational leaders had to take a people-centric approach to successfully promote cooperation and harness the collective insights that could be gained from individual employees for effective problem-solving (Amis and Janz, 2020; Bierema, 2020; Caringal-Go *et al.*, 2021; Dirani *et al.*, 2020).

More specifically, the pandemic's disruptive work environment has provided a springboard for realizing the benefits of dialogic OD. Distinct from classical diagnostic OD, which aims to provide a snapshot of organizational reality and use it as a basis for organizational change, dialogic OD focuses on how new understandings of organizational reality are continuously constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed through day-to-day



communication among organizational members. Dialogic OD is viewed as a dynamic and emergent phenomenon rather than a static and prescribed one (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), which is appropriate when organizations should give themselves to the rhythm and flow of unpredictable environmental change (Laloux, 2014; Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013).

If organizational leaders and HRD practitioners start to both theoretically and practically recognize dialogic OD as a legitimate approach, the remaining concern is then how to ensure that the voices of organizational members with different levels of power (whether positional or sociocultural) are equally expressed, heard and reflected in the process of co-constructing shared organizational reality. Existing literature on dialogic OD tends to assume that engaging in a dialogic process itself will “naturally” lead to the inclusion of diverse worldviews and does not explicitly incorporate issues of power, equity or social justice. Although Wasserman (2015) tried to discuss this point by aligning mindsets, values and practices in dialogic OD, it is mostly focused on practitioner perspectives and does not provide a conceptually sound theoretical justification for inclusive dialogic OD. A failure to address this gap may result in the silence or marginalization of differing views in organizations, which will only stifle the generative potential of individuals and the organizations comprised by them.

Therefore, the conceptual inquiry of this article is guided by the following question: what conditions enable the practice of inclusive dialogic OD in times of uncertainty and complexity? To answer this research question, this article first begins by distinguishing dialogic from diagnostic OD. The article then introduces Robert Kegan’s theory and practice of deliberately developmental organization (DDO) as an exemplary model for dialogic OD, from which we will draw three conditions necessary in practicing inclusive dialogic OD. Finally, a discussion and a conclusion will be presented highlighting the usefulness of this conceptual framework along with implications for HRD research and practice.

Diagnostic and dialogic organization development

The original conception of OD is traced back to the mid-20th century when Kurt Lewin, one of the most influential scholars in the field of applied behavior science, wrote extensively about planned change (Burnes, 2004; Burnes and Cooke, 2012). Classical OD has “a strong positivist orientation,” which “presumes the existence of an objective, discernable reality” (Bushe and Marshak, 2009, p. 350). Lewin (1946) proposed action research model as a methodology for OD, where stakeholders of a particular organizational issue come together and participate in a repeated process of analyzing, fact-finding, planning, executing and evaluating. This approach is diagnostic because its driver of change is valid empirical data that accurately represent the reality of an organization, and the role of OD consultants is to help organizational members gain knowledge about root problems and to provide solutions for fixing them (Dickens and Watkins, 1999). In other words, change interventions that are designed to reinforce new behaviors are developed in light of the desired organizational state and implemented with the expectation that such efforts will lead to optimal organizational outcomes.

Alternatively, dialogic OD is based on social constructionism, which postulates the existence of multiple realities and involves shifting belief and value systems within organizations. Instead of purposefully bringing about change by diagnosing and solving factual problems, dialogic OD uses narratives, images, metaphors or texts embedded in the interactions of individuals as a means for unfolding change (Bushe and Marshak, 2009, 2015; Marshak and Grant, 2008). Organizational reality is always in the state of change through the ongoing discursive activities that constitute an organization (Ford, 1999; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). People coexist as a community, collectively make sense of

themselves and their relationships, negotiate identities and change dynamics and contexts. Hence, knowledge within organizations is not viewed as a fixed absolute entity but something that constantly emerges from relational sensemaking (Chiva and Alegre, 2005; Kakhara and Serensen, 2002).

Issues concerning diversity and power are of great interest among proponents of dialogic OD, as they are inextricable from human relations (Marshak and Grant, 2008). Considering that the co-construction of shared organizational reality occurs in an intersubjective domain (in which various sociocultural identities of individuals coexist and interact), it is natural for social constructionists to claim that power dynamics would come into play in such social and organizational processes. Many scholars have argued the need to take power and politics into account in understanding the complexity of organizational life so that a more democratic organizational space can be created for the full expression of pluralistic ideas, which open up meaningful learning and development opportunities for all (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2000; Fenwick, 2008).

From a similar vantage point, Bushe and Marshak (2009) stated that the role of consultants who adopt social constructionists' perspective on OD is "to help create and maintain a safe and bounded space for interactions and to explicitly or implicitly attend to the political dynamics inherent in bringing together different stakeholders with different bases of power and beliefs" (p. 356). Ultimately, the goal is to reach and engage in the state of open conscious conversation "in which no speaker is excluded, and in which no particular content is excluded" (Bohm, 1996, p. xi). Bohm (1996) further argued that our ability to engage in a free flow of meaning – that is, an ability to hold multiple truths without judgment or an attempt to defend, argue or convince others' fixed positions – holds the potential for dialogically resolving numerous unprecedented organizational and societal challenges, thereby liberating humanity as a whole.

Despite the fundamentally different assumptions under which each OD approach operates, both diagnostic and dialogic OD espouse humanistic and democratic values (Burnes and Cooke, 2012). Lewin's (1946) primary motivation for theorizing intergroup relations and social change was to address the persisting problem of discrimination against minorities, and in his conception, the equal participation of all stakeholders across the system – both minorities and majorities – was at the center of the change process. Likewise, ensuring that the voices of all stakeholders are included in constructing a common aspiration and vision of the organization is also crucial in dialogic OD (Bushe and Marshak, 2009, 2015; Marshak and Grant, 2008). The difference is that diagnostic OD encourages stakeholder participation for the purpose of solving problems by discovering an already existing organizational reality and aligning it with the "true" reality, whereas dialogic OD does so for the purpose of co-creating conversational contexts in the spirit of open inquiry and dialogue, profoundly influencing the way organizational members interpret, talk about and act in given situations.

Another noteworthy point in terms of the difference between diagnostic and dialogic OD is the directionality of the change process. Marshak and Bushe (2022) stated that diagnostic OD is characterized by top-down and prescribed change. Diagnostic OD tends to use a command-and-control style of leadership in managing change because the top-down approach emphasizes the implementation of change interventions by formulating a series of required actions to reach predetermined conclusions. On the contrary, dialogic OD is characterized by bottom-up and emergent change that encourages the participation of employees who possess psychological ownership for change (Rothwell *et al.*, 2015). The bottom-up approach focuses on identifying what people believe and then feeds that information back to management as a starting point for change. Here, organizational

members have a significant amount of autonomy in leading change, though it is still important to get buy-in from management as they are the ones that ultimately control resources and reward systems of the organization. [Table 1](#) summarizes the distinction between diagnostic and dialogic OD.

In what follows, Robert Kegan's theory and practice of DDO will be presented as a basis for conceptualizing three conditions necessary in practicing inclusive dialogic OD.

Theory and practice of deliberately developmental organization

Robert Kegan is a retired faculty from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and is widely known for his long-time contributions to literature on adult development. Notably, his constructive-developmental theory explains the lifelong growth of human beings' mental complexity: from being impulsive to socializing, self-authoring and self-transforming ([Kegan, 1994](#)). [Kegan and Lahey's \(2016\)](#) DDO is an application of how such growth in one's meaning-making capacity can intentionally be cultivated in an organizational context. DDOs radically differ from traditional organizations in that their main organizing principle is centered around personal development, as distinct from organizational performance.

Extensive research has shown that individuals with more complex ways of knowing can demonstrate more effective leadership skills with a wider range of action ([Harris and Kuhnert, 2008](#); [Kuhnert and Lewis, 1987](#); [McCauley et al., 2006](#)), which is applicable to both the leaders and the employees of any organization. Specifically, in an ever-changing business environment, a leaders' capacity to not only establish their own ways of leading and managing organizations (self-authoring) but also to constantly reexamine and revise their established operating mechanisms as necessary (self-transforming) has become vitally important. For employees who have historically been taught not to question and to simply follow the directions of leaders (socializing), greater autonomy, independence and responsibility are demanded to grow as active contributing members of their organizations (self-authoring). In short, people in contemporary organizations are facing mental demands to lead and perform differently, the conditions of which are created by a DDO.

Compared with concepts in existing literature, a DDO is an evolved form of the *learning organization*, which was popularized by Peter Senge in the 1990s ([Senge, 1990](#)). Despite its underlying values of democracy and liberation that seek self-development opportunities for all, some skeptics of the concept of the learning organization have criticized its neglected view of power and how it may affect the mutual involvement of its members in learning processes ([Coopey, 1995](#); [Snell and Chak, 1998](#)). Their central argument is that the utopian principles of the learning organization could possibly be used as a means for maintaining or even enhancing the existing power of leaders in organizations without providing real growth experiences for employees. [Snell and Chak's \(1998\)](#) analysis of two widely cited learning organizations effectively revealed this concern by demonstrating the gap between the depth of learning engaged in by executives versus grassroots members of these

Table 1.
Distinction between
diagnostic and
dialogic OD

	Diagnostic OD	Dialogic OD
Epistemological paradigm	Positivism	Social constructionism
View on reality	Single absolute	Multiple fluid
Understanding of change	Fact-finding	Meaning-making
Change process	Top-down	Bottom-up

Source: Adapted from [Bushe and Marshak \(2009\)](#)

organizations. In addition, a recent review of the current state of research on the learning organization published by [Watkins and Kim \(2018\)](#) suggested examinations of the influence of social relations on learning processes in organizations as a promising avenue for future research, yet did so without mentioning of the role of power in such collective learning processes. This evidence implies that the role of leaders in learning organizations is assumed to be more as designers of learning rather than as equal participants of learning.

However, a DDO is more conscious of such power dynamics and thus is more intentional about including everyone in learning processes. “DDOs recognize that leadership’s tendency to use its power to design and sustain structures that protect itself from challenge sets a limit on the organization’s ability to exceed itself” ([Kegan and Lahey, 2016](#), p. 110). One distinct way a DDO promotes the development of all its employees is through the notion of *whole self* ([Ferdman and Roberts, 2013](#)), the purpose of which is to close the gap between “real me” and “work me”. By being authentic to one’s inner selves and by being radically open and transparent about one’s failures and weaknesses – and the sense of vulnerability that derives from disclosing them – the act of making one’s private self public is encouraged and is used as an opportunity to get feedback from others and grow. More importantly, leaders are not exempted from doing so.

Although traditional organizations emphasize mastery of tasks as a virtue of an effective professional, such a workplace culture that prioritizes performance over learning is likely to sacrifice the role of learning to acquire knowledge and skills for an immediate increase in productivity. In other words, single-loop learning aimed at behavioral change ([Argyris and Schon, 1974](#)) is privileged over more complex forms of learning, thus producing overly instrumental learning practices that objectify and codify subjects of learning for managerial purposes. However, because productivity is not the main organizing principle in a DDO, conditions are created for ongoing reflection, discovery and transformative learning ([Mezirow, 2003](#)). From this perspective, a DDO offers specific methods for how to put into practice the organizational principles posited by the learning organization and, thus, is more descriptive than its prescriptive nature (Lahey, personal communication, November 8, 2017).

In a DDO, there is a spirit of humility that makes people continue to inquire, engage in dialogue and aspire for the greater good. With keen awareness that their perspectives are limited in their ability to fully capture what may be happening in reality, people collectively support each other in making new sense of their experiences, which naturally welcomes and embraces diverse ways of knowing, doing and being in organizations. [Wasserman and Gallegos \(2009\)](#) stated, “It is only when we are able to loosely hold our own perspectives and open to the differences around us that we can move toward a more constructive future that serves all of our diverse needs” (p. 169). In a sense, a DDO becomes a safe learning laboratory where its members can bring all parts of themselves – thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, needs, desires, assumptions, even biases (both conscious and unconscious) and more – as a source of deep mutual learning and understanding ([Edmondson, 1999](#)). [Kwon and Nicolaidis \(2017\)](#) described such an evolved organizational state for continuous learning as diversity being incorporated into the existential level of the organization, where diversity is no longer instrumentalized for the purpose of enhancing the status of the organization.

To reiterate, ongoing learning among diverse epistemologies and ontologies that transcend power differentials is made possible in a DDO through leaders being equally subject to feedback, challenge and transformation. Leaders are open to and willing to engage in mutual inquiry and dialogue with employees rather than persisting in their perspectives, which is a radical shift in the way leaders show up in organizations ([Brown, 2018](#)). In this regard, all members of a DDO, regardless of their positional power, are co-creators of the constantly evolving developmental culture of the organization. This developmentally oriented power dynamic is what essentially makes a DDO an exemplary model for dialogic OD.

Insights from deliberately developmental organizations: three conditions for inclusive dialogic organization development

Thus far, the core tenets of DDO have been discussed. This was done to illuminate three conditions necessary in practicing inclusive dialogic OD. In this section, these three conditions – whole self, psychological safety and leader vulnerability – are presented with each of their definitions and relationships to the practicing of inclusive dialogic OD.

Whole self

The term whole self has not been widely used in the literature, with few exceptions (Ferdman and Roberts, 2013; Laloux, 2014; Yorks and Kasl, 2002); however, it is safe to argue that Kegan and Lahey's (2016) understanding of whole self as a key practice of a DDO aligns with what is generally known as "authentic self". In their comprehensive review of authenticity across the domains of management, marketing, psychology and sociology, Lehman *et al.* (2019) found that the most common conceptualization of authenticity made by scholars was "consistency between an entity's external expressions and its internal values and beliefs" (p. 12). Laloux (2014) similarly defined whole self like Kegan and Lahey (2016) did, as unmasking one's professional self to stay true to and act according to one's inner self. Yorks and Kasl (2002) added another important dimension of whole self in theorizing whole-person learning by suggesting that not only the cognitive but also the affective and imaginal dimensions of learning should be promoted to be able to fully engage learners, especially when there is a high level of diversity among them. Ferdman and Roberts (2013) are some of the few scholars who make an explicit connection between the notion of whole self and inclusion. They stated:

Inclusion starts with our selves – recognizing and honoring the various components, characteristics and identities that combine in each of us to make a whole person. To include others effectively and wholeheartedly, we first have to include ourselves; when we acknowledge the diversity of experiences, interests and values that exist within ourselves, we are better equipped to notice and recognize the diversity around us in a more generative manner (Ferdman and Roberts, 2013, p. 95).

Taken together, therefore, whole self is defined in this article as staying consistent to one's inner self, including one's cognitive, affective and spiritual dimensions. Based on this definition, bringing one's whole self to organizational life is crucial because it facilitates the expression of deep thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and identities that are often suppressed by norms socially constructed by dominant groups. As each and every organizational member consciously speaks up for what they believe to be "real" or "genuine" or "true" or "authentic" to them, it is more likely that discourse in organizations will be diversified, making visible a wide range of sociocultural norms that would otherwise be dismissed. People would purposefully align their intention with action to be integral to who they are, and this is what makes an interaction truly emancipatory, dialogic and co-creative (Kwon and Nicolaidis, 2017). This whole self feature is well shown in Kegan and Lahey's (2016) presentation of DDOs. As discussed earlier, in a DDO, there is a firm belief that closing gaps between work and life (and reducing disconnections between truth and what is actually being said and done) makes difficult business issues more resolvable – and, more importantly, more inclusive. Kegan and Lahey (2016) further stated, "Full humanity is not just welcome but required here" (p. 103).

Psychological safety

Psychological safety is the foundational condition from which people can bring their whole selves. Defined as "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking"

(Edmondson, 1999, p. 353), psychological safety has been tested extensively in relationship to constructs such as employee voice behavior (Liu *et al.*, 2015), learning behavior (Carmeli, Brueller and Dutton, 2009) and creativity (Agarwal and Farndale, 2017). As employees feel trusted and comfortable raising their perspectives and challenging the status quo, the disruptions coming from these forms of communicative feedback are likely to result in the exchange of new ideas, experiments and innovations. Notably, Kwon *et al.* (2020) found that psychological safety is positively related to transformative learning in the workplace context. Analyzing survey responses from a steel manufacturing company in the USA, they reported the mediating effects of social support, attitude toward uncertainty and criticality on the relationship between psychological safety and transformative learning. This finding has a particular implication for thinking about the role of psychological safety in practicing inclusive dialogic OD because transformative learning – being aware of and shifting one's own assumptions and biases that constrain one's action in the world (Mezirow, 2003) – is an essential process that individuals need to go through to recognize and disrupt deeply embedded patterns of behavior in organizations. Wasserman (2015) stated, “in the context of not knowing, each can attune to the other in a way that creates a mutuality of considering, honoring, valuing, and respecting connections, distinctions and that which one does not understand” (p. 342). In a DDO, the notion of “home” is a safe environment where human growth and development are encouraged (Kegan and Lahey, 2016). This is the same idea of a “holding environment” that appeared in Kegan's earlier writing, where he asserted that appropriate support and challenge should be in place for people to evolve into more complex ways of knowing that are inclusive of diversity (Kegan, 1994).

A growing number of studies are recognizing the importance of psychological safety in creating an inclusive workplace culture where individuals experience both a sense of belonging and uniqueness. Roberge and van Dick (2010) argued that individual identities become more salient when there is psychological safety in diverse teams. Aday and Schmader (2019) proposed the SAFE model that predicts individuals' sense of authenticity in any organization. They argued that three factors – self-concept fit (cognitive fluency), goal fit (motivational fluency) and social fit (interpersonal fluency) – need to be considered in tandem when attempting to foster a sense of authenticity, especially for those who often experience identity threats. Empirically, Williams *et al.* (2016) found that the presence of psychological safety facilitated race talk. Shore, Cleveland and Sanchez (2018) also suggested psychological safety as a crucial and yet not widely explored condition for inclusion.

Leader vulnerability

Nienaber *et al.* (2015) argued that the concept of vulnerability is often referred to by academics studying trust, but surprisingly, there is not much literature that directly focuses on it. Among these few efforts, Brown (2018) defined vulnerability as “the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (p. 23) and highlighted “having the courage to show up when you can't control the outcome” (Brown, 2018, p. 20). Brown also developed the construct of vulnerability as a way of creating a culture of connection, acceptance and inclusion. Experiencing a sense of vulnerability is inevitable for anyone undergoing developmental growth; however, particularly in the context of leader–follower relationships, being able to show up with one's vulnerability means letting go of the desire to control and exert power over employees, which is prevalent in many modern organizations (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Scholars have recognized the limitation of such an achievement-oriented, egocentric way of organizing that uses shame – “the feeling that washes over us and makes us feel so flawed that we question whether we're

worthy of love, belonging, and connection” (Brown, 2018, p. 75) – only to make employees cover up and shut themselves off from being seen and heard by one another (Fisher, Rooke and Torbert, 2000; Laloux, 2014; Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013). Kegan and Lahey (2016) maintained that one of the most important changes made in a DDO is the transfer of authority downward. For example, leaders are not an exception when people in a DDO engage in systematic learning and improvement processes. Leaders are equally subject to challenging and transforming their habitual ways of knowing, doing and being, which allows for deep collective learning of all. In short, the fundamental shift in the way people in organizations perceive, hold and relate to power as described above is conducive to cultivating leader vulnerability, psychological safety and whole self – three conditions for inclusive dialogic OD, which are depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1 depicts that as leaders intentionally let go of their power and allow themselves to be vulnerable enough to learn, grow and develop with their followers, their followers would then feel more comfortable bringing their whole selves in co-creating shared organizational reality with their leaders. However, this does not mean that leaders should disempower themselves. Nor does this mean that leaders should grant power to and equalize it with followers. Rather, both parties should take up a form of power that is mutually transforming (Torbert, 1991) and is thus transcendent of power differentials and generative (Kwon and Nicolaides, 2017, 2019; Nicolaides, 2015). Evidence has shown that it is hard for followers to be true to themselves before leaders do so. In examining factors leading to engagement in quality improvement work in a health-care setting, Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) found that there is a positive association between status and psychological safety: people in a lower power status perceive less psychological safety and vice versa. Bunderson and Reagans (2010) further insisted that when the powerless do not feel psychologically safe, they tend to be distracted in pursuing collective goals, resistant to taking risks and inquiring, and less active in sharing different perspectives.

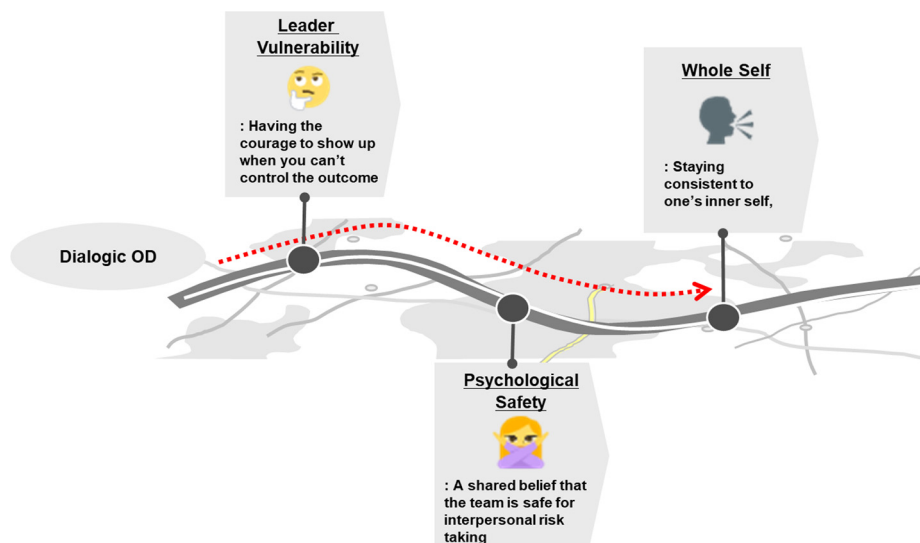


Figure 1.
Three conditions for
inclusive dialogic OD

Source: Authors' own work

Although, in this article, the discussion of the context in which mutual transformation takes place has been focused on the leader–follower relationship, the same principles can in fact be applied to all forms of relationships involving different levels of power. It is not always easy to acknowledge the partiality of one’s understanding of reality, and yet, as individuals or groups in power (the privileged) courageously do so, such an endeavor is likely to lead to the creation of a relational space in which their counterparts (the oppressed) can bring full voices which otherwise would be silenced. A recent study conducted by [Kwon \(2021\)](#) using critical discourse analysis with employees with disabilities in DDOs demonstrated the potential of a dialogic process in challenging the pervasive societal discourse on ableism. The analysis of interview data gathered from employees with disabilities revealed that the participants openly communicated their distinct needs to their able-bodied colleagues, which contrasts the experiences of many people with disabilities in the workplace who often report the difficulties associated with disability disclosure. That is, when conditions for inquiry, dialogue and learning are in place, there is much room for increasing discursive diversity in organizations, helping to dialogically develop in a more inclusive manner.

The point made herein is not that individuals with marginalized identities will never be discriminated against or experience complete inclusion by practicing the three conditions for inclusive dialogic OD discussed above. Marginalized people may be further stereotyped for disclosing their whole selves; however, through their ongoing discursive resistance, the hierarchical and binary social relations prevalent in organizations would be constantly disrupted and can potentially be reordered. Admittedly, the true hope for this resistance (and largely the theory proposed in this article) lies on the idea that leaders (or virtually anyone with power) in organizations are equally ready to take risks and be vulnerable in relationships. The engagement of the powerful in deep learning subsequently opens up a safe and trustworthy space for the discursive feedback of the powerless to be effective and become a legitimate part of organizational knowledge. The interactions of individual whole selves across levels of power then contribute to building a shared reality of the organization that is not only co-creative and inclusive but also emergent and constantly changing. The conceptualization offered in this article deepens our understanding of the process of how inclusive social construction may occur among diverse organizational members, which is the basis for inclusive dialogic OD.

Discussion

In this article, we proposed a conceptual framework for practicing inclusive dialogic OD using the theory and practice of DDO. We believe our contribution is novel and timely as both organizational leaders and HRD practitioners of today are asked to lead and develop organizations in the midst of high uncertainty and complexity while attending to the sensitive issues of diversity and inclusion. Above all, this article extends the literature on dialogic OD by articulating the conditions in which the idea of inclusivity can be explicitly integrated into the practice of dialogic OD. Although dialogic OD is useful in revealing socially constructed organizational reality based on humanistic and democratic values, its processes may unintentionally exclude and marginalize the voices of the powerless, especially since members of dominant groups often consider their views to be “normal”. Our suggestion for a new concept of inclusive dialogic OD, therefore, strengthens the theoretical foundations of dialogic OD by recognizing and promoting the diverse narratives of underrepresented groups, which can enrich our understanding of the multidimensionality of organizational life ([Wasserman, 2015](#)).

This article also adds to prior literature on diversity and inclusion by offering new insights on how to increase discursive diversity in organizations. [Callahan \(2007\)](#)

distinguished between practices of increasing the social representation of organizational members and actually giving them voices to fully participate. She described the former as noncritical and the latter as a strategy for challenging taken-for-granted practices in organizations. As such, many studies have shown that efforts for simply hiring, retaining and promoting diverse organizational members from underrepresented groups are limited in their ability to challenge and transform organizational culture of homogeneity. For example, [Dashper's \(2019\)](#) analysis of the interview data gathered from 30 participants in a women-only career development program (specifically designed to tackle gender inequality in a female-dominated event management company) revealed gender fatigue and ambivalent attitudes among the participants. This finding paradoxically shows how strong the tendency to conform to the status quo of masculinity is, even in a work environment that has more female than male employees. This finding also points to the need for HRD to move away from assumptions that uncritically consider diversity-focused training and development as the solution for enhancing equity and inclusion in organizations and to instead strive for a culture change ([Collins, 2017](#)). In short, by adopting “the idea that organizations come into being through multiple interconnected communicative practices” ([Trittin and Schoeneborn, 2017](#), p. 13) and further articulating the conditions in which organizational members can engage in inclusive communicative practices, this article shifts the focus of inclusion in diversity research from individual human beings and their characteristics to discourses that are expressed and manifested in everyday organizational life as the primary unit of analysis.

As a result, this article challenges the notion that diversity and inclusion work is something that is separate or supplemental from core organizational activities. Principles of dialogic OD tell us that “what” and “how” people talk about organizational reality creates a new order of discourse, which subsequently alters the context in which people hold assumptions, establish identities, build relationships and take action. As we become more conscious about how we design dialogic contexts and interact using the three conditions described in this article, diversity and inclusion will become something that is integrated and normal in our everyday organizational life ([Kwon and Nicolaidis, 2017](#)), and thus, people would no longer have to suffer from experiencing unintended gaps between what they say versus what they do ([Mor Barak et al., 2022](#)).

Implications for research

In light of our contributions to literature highlighted above, we encourage future research not only to add discursive diversity as an important dimension of the evaluation of dialogic OD but also to examine its effects as an indicator of the intervention effectiveness. This includes whether the diversity of discourses is made available in organizations to represent diverse perspectives and also whether those discourses are capable of producing the actual transformation of, or lead to the reproduction of taken-for-granted assumptions, practices and power dynamics in organizations. Connecting the theory and practice of dialogic OD with critical diversity study's school of thought that uses discourse as a way of revealing inequitable social structures is a novel line of inquiry that can further develop the concept of inclusive dialogic OD ([Janssens and Steyaert, 2019](#)). Potential future research questions include:

- RQ1.* How can the dual impacts of discursive diversity (e.g. transformation and reproduction of taken-for-granted assumptions, practices and power dynamics) be assessed in relation to the effectiveness of dialogic OD?

RQ2. How do discursive and nondiscursive elements interact to produce in/equality in organizations?

Also, despite the importance of whole self in achieving inclusive dialogic OD, currently, there is a limited understanding of what it means for a person with a marginalized identity to bring one's whole self to work from an empirical standpoint. What is further unknown is how one's multiple identities intersect to be expressed and contribute to inclusive dialogic OD processes. Because it is very likely that individuals will express their whole selves differently according to various individual, organizational and societal factors, future research can, therefore, benefit from developing a comprehensive multi-level framework that considers various factors that shape the enactment of one's whole self. Below are several research questions that can be explored in future studies in the context of organizational inclusion and dialogic OD:

- *Individual level:* What does it mean for a person with a marginalized identity to bring one's whole self to work? How do diverse identities (e.g. gender, race, religion, nationality, language, sexual orientation, disability, etc.) and their intersections impact one's expression of whole self? Are there any similarities or differences in the way people perceive and express their whole selves across different group memberships?
- *Organizational level:* What organizational climates (e.g. psychological safety), policies and practices exist to facilitate or hinder one's expression of whole self?
- *Societal level:* What industry and/or occupational norms, values and expectations exist to facilitate or hinder one's expression of whole self?

In addition, we suggest future research to pay particular attention to leader vulnerability and its relationship to inclusive dialogic OD, not only because it is a crucial step for actualizing psychological safety and whole self but also because there have been limited considerations for the role of leadership in OD broadly and dialogic OD in particular (Hastings and Schwarz, 2022). From a leadership perspective, more can be learned beyond the knowledge gained from traditional leadership theories, such as the characteristics of high-performing leaders' behaviors as well as the roles and responsibilities of leaders for organizational success at the individual level.

Specifically, in recent leadership literature, scholars have begun to explore new leadership theories that may be more appropriate in contemporary organizations that are becoming more horizontal and participatory. For example, one such concept is shared leadership, which is defined as "a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both" (Pearce and Conger, 2003, p. 1). Shared leadership fosters collaborative team-based structures and processes by distributing the leader's unilateral influence and emphasizing the interdependence among team members through the maximization of everyone's unique perspectives, experiences, skills and abilities. In this regard, shared leadership can serve as a useful leadership context for examining leader vulnerability and potentially facilitating psychological safety and whole self for inclusive dialogic OD (Xu *et al.*, 2019). Future studies can explore specific research questions such as:

- What is the relationship between leader vulnerability, psychological safety and whole self?
- What were the limitations of traditional leadership theories in the context of diagnostic and/or dialogic OD?
- How can emerging leadership theories such as shared leadership enhance the discourse on leader vulnerability for inclusive dialogic OD?

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- What are the key characteristics of leaders who effectively implement inclusive dialogic OD? How do these characteristics contribute to the quality and effectiveness of inclusive dialogic OD, particularly from the perspectives of the marginalized?

Implications for practice

We propose several practical actions that organizational leaders and HRD practitioners can take to promote inclusive dialogic OD. First, a simple but powerful method for building up a welcoming and inclusive climate in organizations is to incorporate “check in” at the beginning of every meeting. In many cases, this is often overlooked or done with superficiality for time constraints, but giving everyone involved a chance to share their current situations and feelings in relation to the OD agenda opens up a space in which individuals can engage in deeper conversations (Gordezky, 2015). Another recommendation is to use multiple feedback channels. For some employees, particularly those from underrepresented groups, traditional meetings may not be the best contexts for openly sharing their perspectives. Creating feedback channels outside the meeting or making them even anonymous may help in bringing forth diverse ideas. We also recommend creating formal and informal opportunities for storytelling. Storytelling is an effective tool for revealing one’s personal and professional experiences that may sometimes be emotionally vulnerable. Sharing one’s story of weakness, failure or scar at work requires a great amount of trust and courage among employees, but at the same time has great power for healing, restoration and reconnection. In particular, when used properly by leaders, its effect increases even more by humanizing work group cultures and relationships involving power differentials (Driscoll and McKee, 2007).

Next is empathetic listening. When listening to the ideas presented during check ins, or through innovative feedback channels or storytelling opportunities, it is crucial that the listener moves beyond informational listening and practice empathetic listening to connect with the speaker emotionally (Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013). This allows the speaker to feel like their voices are actually being heard, which then creates a virtuous cycle of building a culture of active listening, trust and safety across the organization. A final recommendation is to foster a learning culture in organizations. This is easier said than done given many organizations’ excessive focus on performance, but as leaders move away from the tendency to seek immediate outcomes and instead engage in humble inquiries (Fisher *et al.*, 2000), it creates conditions for what Bushe and Marshak (2009) called a safe “container” where employees feel more comfortable expressing their diverse perspectives (Schein, 1997, 1999).

Whether dialogic OD will succeed or not depends on how OD consultants can effectively address the political power of an individual or a group and seek to uncover marginalized or silenced voices through high-quality relational practices (Lambrechts *et al.*, 2009). The above-discussed action items will help organizational leaders, HRD practitioners and those with various forms of privileges in organizations to be more intentional and systemic in providing ways for the expression of the whole selves of individuals who may have been socialized to conform to the norms and values of dominant groups and thus excluded from the mainstream discourse. As these individuals become vocal about deep thoughts and feelings that are integral to them, it will increase the likelihood of multiple discourses co-existing in organizations. In the safe-to-be-vulnerable learning environment, people across different levels of power are open to inquiring into their own and each other’s uncritically held assumptions and revising them as necessary. This collective meaning-making is what enables the ongoing inclusive development of organizations, which will only help

organizations become more creative, innovative and productive in today's uncertain and complex environment (Kwon and Nicolaides, 2017, 2019).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to conceptualize how inclusive dialogic OD can be practiced in times of uncertainty and complexity. For dialogue as a means of change to be truly inclusive, the individuals and groups involved in the change process should be fully open to new ideas, meanings and understandings to emerge from diverse epistemologies and ontologies. The sense of vulnerability that derives from challenging old assumption should be embraced, and this transformative learning process can be facilitated in a psychologically safe environment where interpersonal risk-taking is a norm. As each and every organizational member with different levels of power consciously engages in such a dialogic process to co-create shared organizational reality, organizations can develop not only more inclusively but also more adaptively and generatively by increasing their discursive diversity and the learning opportunities created by it.

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Corresponding author

Chang-kyu Kwon can be contacted at: kwonc@illinois.edu

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