

Dialogic Organization Development: Emerging Directions

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In 2009, Bob Marshak and I published a paper making a distinction between the traditional approach to organization development (OD) that we had grown up in and new forms of OD practice that violated some central OD tenets, particularly requiring diagnosis before embarking on change (Bushe and Marshak 2009). Our distinction between *Diagnostic* and *Dialogic* captured the imagination of academics and practitioners. Dialogic OD has proven to be a generative image, spurring new research and models, some of which will be reviewed in this chapter. After a brief summary of the chapter produced for the previous edition of this book (Bushe and Marshak 2016a) we look at how Dialogic OD continues to evolve for large systems applications, process consulting, and team building.

A Brief Overview of the Basic Ideas

The initial intent was to show that new forms of OD had emerged since the mid-1980s, like Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search, Open Space, and World Café that did not conform with, and in some ways violated, central principles of OD found in U.S. textbooks and taught in U.S. graduate programs (see Table 17.1 for a list of 66 dialogically used methods). The Diagnostic mindset emerged in the 50s and 60s, a product of the desire to bring social science thinking into management and replace the mechanistic organizing paradigm with an organic one. The Dialogic Mindset emerged in the 80s and

90s as expressions of social constructionist and complexity science paradigms. Since then, we have emphasized that Diagnostic and Dialogic are not methods but mindsets, that most OD methods can be used from either mindset, and that successful OD practitioners are likely to use a unique combination of Diagnostic and Dialogic Mindsets. Tables that summarize crucial differences between the Diagnostic and Dialogic Mindset and the key assumptions and beliefs we identified as the basics of a Dialogic Mindset (Bushe and Marshak 2009; 2014; 2015) are available by following links in the resource section at the end of this chapter. A Dialogic Mindset attends to how social reality is constructed, maintained, and changed through narratives, generative conversations, and emergent processes.

Bob and I contend that practitioners of successful *change leadership* are more likely to use a Dialogic Mindset, particularly when dealing with complex, wicked, adaptive challenges (Bushe and Marshak 2016b). Hastings and Schwartz (2022) found that leaders who used a Dialogic Mindset were successful at attaining change outcomes 90% of the time. They also found that leaders oscillated between diagnostic and dialogic approaches in many successful projects, and recent cases of successful change are finding something similar (e.g., Gilpin-Jackson and Axelrod 2021). It's worth noting that out of the 79 change efforts Hastings and Schwarz studied,

Table 17.1 Methods That Can Be Used with a Dialogic Mindset

1. ACT (Miles & Kanazawa)	33. Organizational Learning Conversations (Bushe)
2. AgendShift (Burrows)	34. Organizational Theatre (Teichmann)
3. Art of Convening (Neal & Neal)	35. Participative Design (M. Emery)
4. Art of Hosting (artofhosting.org)	36. PeerSpirit Circles (Baldwin)
5. Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider)	37. Polarity Management (Johnson)
6. Circle Way (see PeerSpirit Circles)	38. Preferred Futuring (Lippitt)
7. Charrettes (Lennertz)	39. Public Conversations Project (Herzig & Chasin)
8. Co-Design (Gilbert)	40. Reflexive Inquiry (Oliver)
9. Community Learning (Fulton)	41. REAL model (Wasserman & Gallegos)
10. Complex Responsive Processes of Relating (Shaw)	42. Real Time Strategic Change (Jacobs)
11. Conference Model (Axelrod)	43. Re-Description (Storch)
12. Coordinated Management of Meaning (Pearce & Cronen)	44. Sandpits (UK Engineering Research Council)
13. Cycle of Resolution (Levine)	45. Search Conference (Emery & Emery)
14. Design Thinking (Coughlan)	46. Six Conversations (Block)
15. Dialogue (Issacs)	47. Situated Dialogic Action Research (Shotter)
16. Dialogic Process Consulting (Marshak)	48. SOAR (Stavros)
17. Dialogic Team Coaching (Bratt)	49. Social Labs (Hassan)
18. Dynamic Facilitation (Rough)	50. Solution Focused Dialogue (Jackson & McKergow)
19. Engaging Emergence (Holman)	51. Spiral of Co-Creation (Stilger)
20. Future Search (Weisbord & Janoff)	52. Stakeholder Dialogue (Kuenkel)
21. Generative Change Model (Bushe)	53. Sustained Dialogue (Saunders)
22. Group Jazz (see Liberating Structures)	54. Syntegration (Beer)
23. Hosting (McKergow)	55. Swirling Spiral Model (Averbuch)
24. Humble Consulting (Schein)	56. Systemic Sustainability (Amodeo & Cox)
25. Ideas Factory and Ideas Lab (see Sandpits)	57. Talking stick (preindustrial)
26. Intergroup Dialogue (Nagada & Gurin)	58. Technology of Participation (Spencer)
27. LEGO Serious Play (Roos & Victor)	59. Theory U (Scharmer)
28. Liberating Structures (Kimball)	60. Transition Design (Irwin)
29. LIFE Session Storytelling (Roddy)	61. Virtuous Meetings (Danskin & Lind)
30. Moments of Impact (Ertel & Solomon)	62. Visual Consulting (Sibbett)
31. Narrative Mediation (Winslade & Monk)	63. Visual Explorer (Palus & Horth)
32. Open Space Technology (Owen)	64. Whole Scale Change (Dannemiller)
	65. Work Out (Ashkenas)
	66. World Café (Brown & Issac)

Source: Bushe, G.R. (2024) Dialogic OD Tools and Methods: A Bibliography; Ver 16.

<https://b-m-institute.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Tools-and-MethodsV.16.pdf>

62% of leaders used only a diagnostic approach, and only a third of those were successful. That's consistent with past studies showing low success rates of change management, and with Bushe and Nagaishi's (2018) argument that OD is almost always successful when leaders lead the process, but stakeholders decide on the content of change.

A dialogic mindset can inform large-group OD methods, small-group team building, and process consultation. The rest of the chapter describes some innovations in both areas.

Emerging Directions in Large System Dialogic OD

The Dialogic Mindset was strongly intertwined with the rise of large group interventions (Bunker and Alban 1996). Bringing hundreds of people into the same

room to plan change led to much greater alignment and more rapid implementation of change than the use of small groups in earlier forms of OD. The design and facilitation of large group events has evolved as the Dialogic Mindset has expanded. Also, it has impacted efforts to increase diversity and inclusion.

High Engagement and Generative Change Strategies

While those who utilize large group methods can operate from a Diagnostic or Dialogic Mindset, Bushe and Lewis (2023) identified two strategies Dialogic OD practitioners use with large group methods: high engagement and generative. While both strategies utilize a Dialogic Mindset, the key differences are that a high engagement strategy brings large groups together when there already is a change vision, inviting stakeholders to propose how to accomplish that vision. The outputs of large group events are fed into a traditional planned change process. Alternatively, shared purpose guides a generative strategy, and the output of large group events is the launch of multiple self-organized change initiatives. I have identified a generative change model (Bushe 2020; Marshak and Bushe 2018), and there is evidence that it can produce transformational change much more rapidly than planned change approaches (Bushe and Kassam 2005; Bushe 2020). However, generative change requires a very different image of leadership (Bushe 2019; Bushe and Marshak 2016b), with a need for much greater engagement of senior change sponsors after large group events in monitoring, amplifying, and embedding successful innovations (Roehrig, Schewendenwein, and Bushe 2015).

Purpose, Not Vision, for Emergent Change

A rising chorus is making the case that engaging stakeholders in emergent change processes requires a shared purpose, which is different from the classical understanding of a vision for change (Bushe 2021; Davis et al. 2010; Malnight et al. 2019; Pregmark et al. 2023). A vision describes an end state the change is working toward, while a purpose describes what the organization is trying to do every day. Planned change needs a vision, but it gets in the way of emergent change. A vision usually narrows down appropriate action considerably. Encouraging stakeholders to self-initiate action to pursue a purpose opens up a much wider field of innovation, works with the inherent motivations people hold, and avoids many of the causes of resistance to change.

Without a shared purpose, self-organizing processes may result in individuals and groups maximizing their agendas and interests at the group's expense (Bushe and Marshak 2022). A truly shared purpose that stakeholders care about makes it much more likely that emergent change will benefit everyone. While we identified generative images as an integral aspect of Dialogic OD early on, I now argue (Bushe 2020) that they are the most potent form of common purpose and very useful to identify before holding large group events.

Consultants/Leaders as Hosts, not Facilitators

Dialogic OD practitioners have moved away from the notion of facilitation and toward the image of hosting. A facilitator actively guides a group toward some outcome, while a host sets up the conditions for groups to be self-organizing and

then steps away (Corrigan 2012; McKergow 2020). As Ray and Goppelt (2013) have pointed out, when a traditional facilitator leads from the front, often collecting ideas on a board, the conversation is not between group members but between them and the facilitator. The results tend to be more clichéd and abstract ideas that are rarely acted on after the meeting. As Bushe (2020) notes, "I am now of the opinion that if the people in the room are talking to me (the consultant) instead of to each other, something's wrong" (57). With hosting, most of the consultant's work happens before convening a large group, intending to get people into conversations as quickly as possible and then fade into the background (Weisbord and Janoff, 2007). Much work is now focusing on how to prepare leaders to host generative change events (e.g., Choueiter, Bushe, and Belemlih 2023), where they must act quite differently from common expectations of leaders.

Application to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

OD professionals have recently described how a Dialogic Mindset can improve DEI outcomes in organizations. While there is widespread belief that higher levels of diversity and inclusion are associated with better team and organizational performance, the impact of DEI initiatives is often disappointing and sometimes more negative than positive (Nadiv and Kuna 2020). A Dialogic approach moves us away from traditional methods that involve survey feedback, training, and implementation of 'best practices'. For example, Wasserman (2015) describes how "...Dialogic OD practices turn our attention to the deeply embedded patterns that we

may otherwise take for granted, foster a readiness to disrupt these patterns, and enable a shift to alternative and perhaps more inclusive narratives" (329). Miller, Biggs, and Katz (2023) show how a dialogic mindset is foundational to their use of "change champions" for creating a culture of inclusion in organizations.

Emerging Directions in Small System Dialogic OD

A Dialogic Mindset pays attention to different things while interacting with individuals and small groups than a Diagnostic Mindset. The focus is on how meaning is being made and how to intervene productively in the meaning-making process. Recent work has provided new lenses on traditional OD processes like team building and process consulting.

Dialogic Process Consulting

Applying a Dialogic Mindset to process consulting has emerged (Goppelt and Ray 2015; Marshak 2020). These approaches rest on the observation that talk is not simply the conveyance of meaning between people but the active creation of meaning (Barrett 2015; Pearce 2012). Dialogic process consulting involves deep listening (Marshak 2004) for the underlying metaphors and storylines that frame conversations and then questioning them or offering different metaphors and storylines to disrupt stale, non-productive patterns of meaning-making and/or reframe how people think. It focuses on creating generative spaces for new and better conversations to emerge instead of the traditional process consulting focus on the diagnosis and reorientation of behavioral patterns. Applications of a Dialogic Mindset to facilitate non-OD

small group change processes like scrum, agile and lean are emerging (e.g., Burrows 2024).

Dialogic Team Coaching

Bratt (2020) offers a new way to utilize survey data from a Dialogic Mindset for team building. He provides important critiques of the dominant Diagnostic approach. Survey feedback often compares the client team against either a "high-performing team" model, a group development model, or against aggregate data on other teams, to arrive at conclusions about what the focal team needs to work on. Respondents' replies to surveys are fed back anonymously, usually by providing average scores on each scale. Bratt argues that using average scores falls into the "ecological fallacy" trap – the belief that average scores tell us something meaningful about an entity when we are all different at the individual level. Secondly, comparing against a consultant-supplied model or data set robs the team of any agency and sense of responsibility for team-building outcomes. Bratt's approach uses survey data to quickly identify how each team member sees the team by feeding back how each member rated the team on each scale. Inevitably, this shows a wide dispersion in how people view the team's strengths and weaknesses, opening up meaningful conversations. Next, he asks the team to decide which issues are most important for them to work on and then provides tools and processes to work on each. In effect, the team creates its own team-building model, making the work more meaningful to them and more likely to impact what they do on the job.

Summary: Where to Next

Although Dialogic approaches to large group interventions have been with us since the 80s, identifying and naming a common praxis has nurtured an outpouring of innovative theorizing about emergent forms of generative change for managing complexity, wicked problems, and adaptive challenges. There isn't enough room here to summarize significant research findings showcasing the potency of a Dialogic Mindset (e.g., Freidman et al. 2016; Maxton and Bushe 2018) or other new insights into the practice of Dialogic OD (e.g., Averbuch 2015; Lewis 2024; Githens and Verbeten 2022 Stirling-Wilkie 2021; Storch 2015).

I expect new insights into what it means to have a "Dialogic presence" (Averbuch 2021) and the use of self from a Dialogic Mindset, applications of a Dialogic Mindset to coaching and team development, and linkages between the Dialogic Mindset of leaders and the relationship to the ever-increasing use self-organizing forms of organization (e.g., Hamel and Zanini 2020; Laloux 2014) are just around the corner.

Discussion Questions

- What do you think are the important differences between a Diagnostic and Dialogic mindset?
- When do you think either mindset would be most useful for leaders and change agents?
- What skills do you think a Dialogic OD practitioner would need?

Resources

A Guide to Bushe & Marshak's Papers on Dialogic OD: annotated summary:
<https://b-m-institute.com/wp->

[content/uploads/2020/06/A_Guide_to_papers.pdf](https://bush-marshak.com/content/uploads/2020/06/A_Guide_to_papers.pdf)

Bush-Marshak Institute for Dialogic OD:
articles, books, videos and mailing list:
<https://b-m-institute.com>

Dialogic OD: 1-page overview:
<https://www.odnetwork.org/page/dialogic-od>

Introduction to Dialogic OD: 47-page
overview: <https://b-m-institute.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Dialogic-OD-BMI-Companion.pdf>

Video: Bob Marshak Making Sense of OD
and the Emergence of the Dialogic
Mindset:
<https://youtu.be/31XAtMjVkos>

Video: Gervase Bushe Describes Dialogic
OD Mindset:
<https://youtu.be/myyj15AfH3Q>

Video: Gervase Bushe on Generative
Change and Generative Leadership:
<https://youtu.be/bt0AXKHiscx>

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