

# DIALOGIC PRACTICES IN SMALL GROUPS

## Using Dialogue Then Deliberation to Transform a Warring Leadership Team

By John Inman and  
Tracy A. Thompson

The new organization normal is complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Old paradigms or mindsets of leadership based on positivist and linear approaches to problem solving worked well in predictable and stable contexts, but they are less well-suited to address the complexity and challenges of the current world. If leaders are to create organizations that thrive in the world as it emerges, they need a different mindset, one that enables them to design and host transformative conversations (Groysberg & Slind, 2012).

Because they are rooted in constructivist and interpretive approaches targeted towards changing deep mindsets, Dialogic OD interventions (Bushe, 2010; Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Marshak & Bushe, 2009) offer an appealing means for developing leaders. We begin by discussing the importance of mindsets to OD practice and the key elements of a dialogic mindset. Building from methods that focus on collaborative forms of discourse (Bojer, Roehl, Knuth, & Magner, 2008; Raelin, 2012), we describe the dialogue then deliberation approach, which focuses on creating transformative conversations. We illustrate how an internal OD professional used this approach to shift the mindsets of warring leaders in a business unit of a large telecommunication company, enabling them to work together more effectively, and we conclude with recommendations on how to move forward with the dialogue then deliberation approach.

### Features of a Dialogic OD Mindset

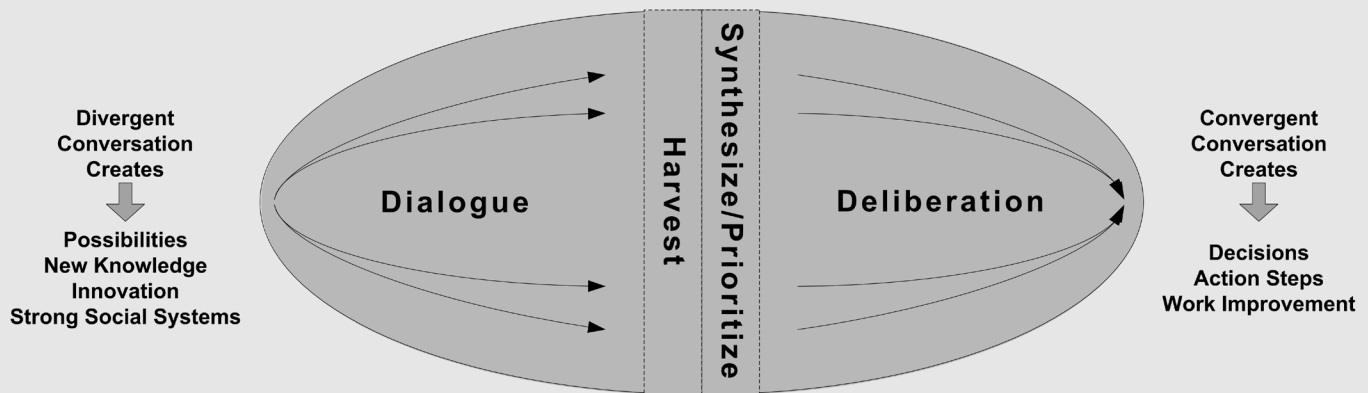
The role of an individual's mindset, how he or she views the world, is central in Dialogic OD. Indeed, Dialogic OD practices target mindsets, not behaviors, because that is what creates self-sustaining change. Focusing on behaviors alone does not alter the underlying mindset that drives the behavior in the first place.

Rather than viewing the organization as something that can be designed, controlled, and predicted, a dialogic mindset sees organizations as being enacted through conversation. In this view, organizations, including their cultures, strategies, and structures, are not things that exist independently; instead organizations are co-created by people one conversation at a time (Ford, 1999; Pearce, 2000). Over time, this enacted organizational structure interacts with ongoing conversations recursively, thus the organization is continuously emerging (Hernes & Bakken, 2003; Hernes, 2008). But how exactly an organization evolves depends on how the conversation flows, and a dialogic mindset embraces the openness and emergent nature of the process.

A dialogic mindset also assumes that knowledge and wisdom come from the involvement of more rather than fewer people in the conversation. Such a belief is particularly relevant in environments characterized by complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Research has shown how heterogeneity and diversity in a team can lead to better performance on complex tasks, provided the group process is

Figure 1

## Dialogue Then Deliberation to Develop a World Class Organization



well-managed so that diverse information, knowledge, and perspectives can be fully utilized (c.f., van Kippenberg & Shippers, 2007). A dialogic mindset sees knowledge as being co-created through conversation among a number of diverse people, rather than residing in individual's brains, just waiting to be found or discovered.

### The Dialogue then Deliberation Approach

To those with a dialogic mindset, conversation not only creates organization, it is also central in the change process, for changing the conversation changes individuals (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002) and how they organize (Ford, 1999; Marshak & Grant, 2011). The dialogue then deliberation approach targets conversation directly via two practices, designing the container and hosting the conversation.

### Designing the Container

All conversations occur in a container which includes factors such as the physical space, how it is arranged, the materials available, who is part of the conversation, what kinds of conversations will be occurring, and how the conversation topics will flow over time. The dialogue then deliberation approach emphasizes three choices that are critical for designing a container that will generate transformative conversations. They include involving a diverse group of people, appropriately sequencing the types of conversation, and developing questions that are matched to the kind of conversation required at that time.

Those with a dialogic mindset take for granted the value of convening a diverse group and thus design containers that are more rather than less inclusive. Including a wide variety of individuals from different generations, functional backgrounds, levels in the organization, and ethnicity in the conversation helps ensure that critical aspects of the complex issues facing an organization are not missed. Also, including as many voices as possible in the conversation encourages each person to stay engaged and become part of the solution.

Since organization emerges through conversation, a second critical design element in the dialogue then deliberation approach involves carefully sequencing conversational activities. Conversation can be defined as an umbrella term for a variety of verbal activities including dialogue, deliberation, discussion, and debate. The last three, deliberation, discussion and debate, help people come to a decision. Each works by processing a large number of options through a funnel, narrowing them down to a decision or an answer. In contrast, dialogue is a generative conversational practice that encourages possibilities to emerge. Dialogue should not be confused with brainstorming, which focuses on the processes that help unearth already-existing ideas from the minds of participants. In dialogue, new knowledge, possibilities, and wisdom are co-created through the act of talking together about future-focused questions that matter (Holman, 2010).

Specifically, as suggested by the name of the practice, shifting mindsets, changing

behaviors and arriving at better decisions is best accomplished by using dialogue before deliberation. Starting with dialogue ensures that the team's co-created and collective intelligence and wisdom become the inputs to deliberation. Regardless of how good deliberative practices can be, garbage in, garbage out is always a concern. Co-creating insights via dialogue prevents garbage based on narrow perceptions from being introduced into the deliberative process.

A third element of container design starts with an acute awareness of the power of the question to shape conversation. A question such as "What does the team we want to work in look like?" tends to generate dialogue. A question such as "Which solution should we choose?" tends to generate deliberation. Leaders with a dialogic mindset inherently assume the wisdom of a diverse group of people and allow it to emerge through the astute use and timing of questions, some of which are explicitly targeted towards opening up possibilities and visions and others which help a group come to a collective decision or action plan.

### Hosting

The second practice important to the dialogue then deliberation approach is to host rather than facilitate. Facilitating a group means actively influencing the exact content of the conversation through the use of leading questions and inserting one's own insights. In contrast, hosting means not controlling the conversation or having a clear idea of where you think the

conversation should go as it is occurring. Hosting is about letting the conversation emerge and giving participants as much latitude as possible to focus on issues and topics that matter to them. But that does not mean a leader with a dialogic mindset thinks of conversation as a free for all. Rather it is through carefully designing the container, involving the right people, asking the right questions in the right order, that hosting comes alive.

### **Applying Dialogue then Deliberation to a Warring Leadership Team**

We applied the dialogue then deliberation approach in a business unit of a large telecommunications company with a diverse team of 16 senior leaders that included operational managers, an operational associate director, and managers from human resources, facilities, IT, L&D, OD, business support, and staffing, all of whom reported to a General Manager (GM). Fueled, in part, by the GM's decision to remove the operational managers from the senior leadership meeting and have them meet separately, conflict between the operational and support members in the unit had escalated, and corporate performance metrics showed this unit to be in the lowest quartile of the entire organization.

An internal OD consultant initiated a conversation with the GM to express a concern that the GM's leadership team was separating further and that a direct intervention would be needed to fix the situation. Agreeing, the GM gave the consultant a total of four hours of the leadership team's time away from the business unit and asked for a resolution in three weeks. Although he did not want to be involved in the actual intervention, the GM promised to abide by whatever plan was developed by the group.

### **Preliminary Conversations**

Backed by the GM, the internal consultant approached the 16 senior leaders, each of whom agreed to a meeting to talk about the GM's decision to allot four hours of manager time away from the unit and to decide how they, as a group, wanted to handle it.

All of the support leaders but only one of the operational leaders showed up to the meeting. At the meeting, the leaders talked about their frustrations and perceptions, and they asked the consultant to talk to the entire team (themselves and those from operations who were not present) about their working relationships.

The survey and additional information garnered through individual interviews made one thing crystal clear: there were plenty of hurt feelings. The operational management team felt marginalized and the support management team felt snubbed. Within a week, the GM convened another meeting with all 16 leaders and the consultant to decide how the team would allocate their four hours of time away from the unit. They unanimously decided to hold two 2-hour sessions over the next 10 days.

### **Designing the Session Containers**

To pull the team together, create a new future, and complete a sustainable plan of action, the consultant designed and hosted a two phase process based on dialogue then deliberation. The first two-hour session was focused on breaking down barriers, building understanding, healing hurt feelings, opening up possibilities, and co-creating a new future. The harvest from that initial dialogue was used to outline a new future, and the second two-hour deliberative session provided a venue for the leadership team to decide how they would achieve their new future.

### **Session One: Dialogue**

The first session started with an overhead of the organization's diversity statement: To create "... an environment where people with different backgrounds and perspectives can collaborate effectively to create products and services that delight customers." Tying the goals of the session to an already-existing organizational aspiration reduced the friction that might have otherwise surfaced, set the context for the conversation to communicate what success looked like from a larger organizational

perspective, and made salient what was not happening on the site.

The consultant framed the two sessions as a conversation to collectively co-create a new story to live into. To start, he explained that each individual and team had constructed a current story, were telling those stories as if they were real, and were living them out. The results of this process were creating the problems experienced on the site. He used some of the data collected before the session to tell the story from the perspective of both the operations group and the support group. The host also highlighted the importance of honoring the stories, even though they were not happy ones. This helped ensure that no one felt wrong and that all were validated about what they felt. Once the stories were spoken out loud for all to hear, the host explained that this was the last time these were going to be told and that the following conversation would help them look into the future and create a new story to live into.

The second hour of the session focused on dialogue using The World Café (TWC) process (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). As a scalable small group process (Pruitt & Thomas, 2007), TWC was chosen because it fosters highly collaborative conversations between diverse individuals, in this case a leadership team comprised of individuals with different backgrounds, roles, levels in management, and ages. TWC tends to minimize power differentials, providing the space for each voice to emerge in the dialogue (Dessel & Rogge, 2008), and it brings people together, thus allowing the wisdom of a group to emerge, all in a non-facilitated format.

The Café design consisted of three rounds of 20-minute conversations. After each round, the table selected a host to stay at the table and the rest of the participants rotated out to other tables, thus ensuring extensive cross-pollination of ideas among everyone in the group. The table host reviewed the prior conversation with the new participants and in turn the new participants shared conversations from other tables and the dialogue continued. Four tables were set with

paper, markers, and pens, with room for four leaders each. The questions were as follows:

- » **First round:** Who are we being that the eyes of every person in this site are shinning? (The leadership team had previously been exposed to the work of Ben Zander.)
- » **Second round:** What are we doing that the eyes of every person in this site are shining?
- » **Third round:** What is our new story?

The last half hour of the session was devoted to harvesting the insights and wisdom generated in the small group dialogues. At the end of the third round, each table was given an additional 15 minutes to capture their ideas of what was to be included in the new story. After each table finished their harvest, they posted their insights on a wall to provide a graphic recording of the wisdom generated for all to see. In the final 15 minutes of the session, everyone was invited to add further thoughts to the graphic wall.

The interaction among the combined support and management teams had produced new language and the ingredients for a different story to emerge. After the session, the consultant collected and listed every insight from the harvests. He then reduced the list, eliminating redundancies, and wove together a new story for the team, incorporating all of the actual phrases and concepts from the session which appear as bolded text below:

### Story to Live Into

**We are one site.** In everything that we do we portray a **unified voice** to the site as a whole. We accomplish this first by **including** all leadership at the table providing a forum (container) for us to work together, get to know each other, and build **trust** and **rapport**. We understand at our core that when we do not work together the logical outcome is misunderstanding, miscommunication, and mistrust: A lot of misses. We regularly meet as a leadership team to work **proactively** on the future of the site and to **jointly**

**solve problems as partners.** And when solving problems, our initiatives and solutions are **simplified** and designed to drive **performance**, easy to **understand**, and use direct and understandable language insuring easy implementation.

This unity of mind and action supports our desire to live the diversity vision of the enterprise “to be a diverse team creating an environment where people with different backgrounds and perspectives can **collaborate** effectively to create products and services that delight customers.” We ask, “Do we have all of the perspectives we need to solve this problem?” before we act and always consider how our decision **impacts** others. As a team of talented professional managers, our practice is differentiated based on our ability to **coach, consult, and collaborate**. We demonstrate our professional capabilities through **asking questions, listening with an open mind, proactively** looking for ways to **solve problems together, recognizing** in others small wins, improvement, and big wins, and finally through reaching out a **helping hand** to others rather than just providing feedback.

We understand that the enterprise is a high pressure fast changing culture and that no matter what we do, we do **make mistakes** and that is perfectly OK as long as we ask, “What did we learn?” and “What are we going to do differently based on our learning?” After all we are humans and not robots. In every situation there is **positive** movement and we focus on the **positive** rather than the negative. As we focus on the **positive**, when we do have a **question or insight** for another manager we seek out that person and **talk with them directly** as we have learned that if we do not do this we are bound to blow the issue out of proportion. We do not simply wait for input however; we proactively reach out and ask others to be a part of our business always keeping in mind that we as a team own the whole site.

And finally we know in our hearts that we each **care** deeply about each other’s **success** and that of the site. We live our story and insure that we **leave no one behind**; if one of us fails, we all fail.

### Session Two: Deliberation

The second session shifted the conversation from dialogue to deliberation. Like the earlier dialogue session, this second session was designed to foster collaboration and small group work, but unlike the prior session, this conversation was designed to move the group towards determining the specific things they would need to do to live into their new reality. Prior to the session, the consultant sent out an agenda for the second session which included the story to live into as well as the raw data from the TWC harvest. Each manager had a day to review the story and key areas of focus and to suggest changes before the second session. The consultant used this feedback to finalize four topic areas to be discussed.

When the leaders arrived, they self-selected into one of four tables based on their personal interest in the topics. Self selection increased each leader’s engagement in the topic and with others to assertively move solutions forward. Table teams drafted a proposed course of action including the content, context, and time line for the specific topic areas during the first hour. The four table topics were as follows:

- » **Table one:** Define rules of engagement
- » **Table two:** Activities to help bring the team together
- » **Table three:** How do we structure projects going forward, and how do we generate a commitment?
- » **Table four:** Action items to consider

After one-hour of deliberation, table teams captured the proposed plans on flip charts and posted the results on the wall. During the second hour, table teams presented their recommendations to the whole leadership team, and the conversation was opened to questions and challenges. At the conclusion of the two hour deliberative

session, the teams unanimously and enthusiastically accepted the four plans, and they made commitments to move each one forward.

### **Developing and Delivering the Final Plan**

After the session, the consultant synthesized all of the information into one coherent plan of action which was sent out to the leadership team for input. After integrating feedback from all of the leaders, the leadership team and the consultant presented the final plan to the GM. Implementation started immediately after the GM's approval.

### **Results**

The four-hour format of this intervention caused little disruption in leaders' lives, yet it delivered large results. The dialogue then deliberation sessions allowed the managers to appreciate one another, their roles, and the value that each brought to the team, and it brought the team closer together. For example, one leader said, "Everyone had similar issues and concerns. We were not so different when we started talking." The dialogue-based conversation in session one provided an important foundation that allowed the team to implement and buy into the critical projects developed in the deliberative second session. The diversity of ages, roles, and backgrounds provided the ingredients for passionate engagement and a rich set of perspectives on what the future could look like and how to get there. The group's new-found respect for one another was especially apparent during the second session, where leaders were able to challenge one another's opinions regardless of who offered the idea up for deliberation.

Energized by the two sessions, the leaders were beginning to see that the new working relationships they had forged through dialogue then deliberation would enable them to live into their new, positive story. As one leader reflected, "I think that the process of discovery and the journey that we as a team went through to come to a place where we created our own story was huge! We now have a document and story

that is our own." The following quote about the entire experience is indicative of the feelings and hopes of the team:

The three question method was both thought and dialogue provoking. It was a very positive and effective way of getting the team members engaged. It was very rewarding to see that when each of the teams posted their thoughts on the second day that we were all thinking in pretty much the same direction. That was very encouraging. I think the plan we have come up with is a great start and will be a living evolving process as the leadership team matures.

In addition to enabling them to co-create a new organization and story to live into that was cooperative and inclusive, the intervention also worked at a deep level to subtly shift leaders' mindsets which in turn altered behaviors in the weeks and months that followed. Not only were they able to articulate and appreciate the power of transformative conversations in shaping future behavior, the consultant observed the leaders actively living into and enacting their story. The leaders in support were collaborating with their counterparts in operations and vice versa. Moreover, some leaders were even explicitly modeling the dialogue then deliberation approach in their day to day interactions with each other and their subordinates, thus revealing a more dialogic mindset. From a larger organizational perspective, the increasingly collaborative behaviors led to very tangible outcomes, increasing the unit's performance from the bottom quartile to the top quartile in just one quarter. Performance stayed at this higher level for one and a half years until corporate cutbacks caused a downturn in morale. Shortly thereafter the business unit was eliminated in a reorganization.

### **Moving Forward with Dialogue then Deliberation**

A dialogue then deliberation approach requires paying special attention to how a conversation's container is designed and

how it is hosted. Effective conversations are ones in which a diverse range of minds are present, the intent of the conversation is strategically sequenced, questions are artfully posed, and the host stays out of the way to allow the wisdom of the group to emerge. Adding dialogue to the front of conversations improves the knowledge, information, and wisdom in the ensuing deliberative conversations. Hosting reduces the inherent power differentials that exist in a typical facilitated session and opens up the conversation to possibilities that are co-created by everyone in the conversation, possibilities that no one person creates or owns.

Although we have attempted to distill the dialogue then deliberation approach down into a concise set of practices, it is not a simple OD intervention. Knowing when to use dialogue and deliberation paradoxically requires a dialogic mindset, and executing it effectively requires considerable skill. A dialogic mind continually asks questions such as, "Is there anything that we should know, that if we did know it, would fundamentally change our direction?" or "Who should be in this conversation that has not been included?" or "How do we begin to understand the complexity that surrounds this issue?" Such questions can often trigger the need for dialogue then deliberation.

In terms of the skills involved, designing and hosting transformative conversations has less to do with controlling the conversation or the outcomes and more to do with controlling the design of the container for the conversation. Some leaders and practitioners may face difficulties switching from influencing the content of the conversation to influencing the structure of the container. These are different skill sets and both need to be well developed to be able to move effortlessly between facilitating and hosting conversations.

When practiced effectively, the dialogue then deliberation approach can be used to transform leaders' beliefs about themselves and others in their organization to enhance performance, relationships, understanding, and engagement. Although Western leaders are comfortable engaging

in deliberative conversation, they are less comfortable and familiar with dialogue. The dialogue then deliberation approach can remind them of the importance and benefits of dialogue. At a more fundamental level, this approach can help to shift leader's mindsets to become more inherently dialogic. However, mindsets don't change overnight and neither do organizations. Busy and stressed leaders are rarely able to gain large blocks of time away from operations. Starting to transform an organization may require small interventions like the one described above that allow leaders to experience the benefits of such a shift in mindset, one person at a time. Leaders will need continual reinforcement to continue with these practices, since the dominant organizational mindset focuses on gathering information about a problem, figuring out what to do, and then implementing that envisioned solution, often with only minimal input from others. However, the payoffs are big for those who recognize the emergent nature of organizations. Those who can design appropriate containers for and host inclusive, transformative conversations are those who will co-create thriving and sustainable organizations.

## References

- Baker, A. C., Jensen, P. J., & Kolb, D. A. (2002). *Conversational learning: An experiential approach to knowledge creation*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books.
- Bojer, M. M., Roehl, H., Knuth, M., & Magner, C. (2008). *Mapping dialogue: Essential tools for social change*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications.
- Brown, J., & Isaacs, D. (2005). *The world café: Shaping our futures through conversations that matter*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Bushe, G. R. (2010). Dialogic OD: Turning away from diagnosis. In W. Rothwell, R. Sullivan, J. Stravros, & A. Sullivan (Eds.), *Practicing organization development: A guide for managing and leading change* (3rd ed.) (pp. 617–623). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bushe, G. R., & Marshak, R. J. (2009). Revisioning organization development: Diagnostic and dialogic premises and patterns of practice. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 45(3), 348–368.
- Dessel, A., & Rogge, M. E. (Winter, 2008). Evaluation of intergroup dialogue: A review of the empirical literature. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 26(2), 199–238.
- Ford, D. F. (1999). Organizational change as shifting conversations. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 12(6), 480–500.
- Groysberg, B., & Slind, M. (2012). Leadership is a conversation. *Harvard Business Review*, 90(6), 76–84.
- Hernes, T. (2008). *Understanding organization as process: Theory for a tangled world*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hernes, T., & Bakken, T. (2003). Implications of self-reference: Niklas Luhmann's autopoiesis and organization theory. *Organization Studies*, 24(9), 1511–1535.
- Holman, P. (2010). *Engaging emergence: Turning upheaval into opportunity*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Marshak, R. J. (2009). *Organizational change: Views from the edge*. Bethel, ME: The Lewin Center.
- Marshak, R. J., & Bushe, G. R. (2009). Further reflections on diagnostic and dialogic forms of organization development. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 45(3), 378–383.
- Marshak, R. J., & Grant, D. (2011). Creating change by changing the conversation. *OD Practitioner*, 43(3), 2–7.
- Pearce, W. B., & Pearce, K. A. (1998). Transcendent storytelling: Abilities for systemic practitioners and their clients. *Human Systems*, 9, 167–185.
- Pearce, W. B. (2007). *Making social worlds: A communication perspective*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Pruitt, B., & Thomas, P. (2007). *Democratic dialogue: A handbook for practitioners*. New York, NY: CIDA, IDEA, OAS, UNDP.
- Raelin, J. A. (2012). Dialogue and deliberation as expressions of democratic leadership in participatory organizational change. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 25(1), 7–23.
- van Knippenberg, D., & Schippers, M. C. (2007). Work group diversity. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 58, 515–541.
- Wilson, M., & Gerber, L. E. (2008). How generational theory can improve teaching: Strategies for working with the "Millennials." *Currents in Teaching and Learning*, 1(1), 29–44.

**John Inman, EdM, MA, PHR**, is the founder and principle of John Inman Dialogue ([www.johninmandialogue.com](http://www.johninmandialogue.com)), an international consultancy focused on designing containers for, convening, and hosting conversations for organizations and communities of all types. His passion is developing healthy and productive social systems where all individuals are able to thrive in the current world of complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity. He is located in Seattle, Washington and can be reached at [John@johninmandialogue.com](mailto:John@johninmandialogue.com).

**Tracy A. Thompson, PhD**, is an Associate Professor of Management at the Milgard School of Business, University of Washington Tacoma. She teaches courses in organizational change, and strategic management, and her current research activities on the rise of a new organizational form, the benefit corporation. She can be reached at [tracyat@uw.edu](mailto:tracyat@uw.edu).