

An Introduction to Advances in Dialogic Organization Development

By Robert J. Marshak and
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This special issue of the *OD Practitioner* continues a conversation with the organization development (OD) community about Dialogic OD that we started a number of years ago (Bushe, 2005, 2009; Bushe & Marshak, 2008, 2009; Marshak, 2006). As long time OD practitioners and educators we believe there is now a bifurcation in the field between what we are calling Diagnostic and Dialogic OD that is not well recognized nor understood and we hope this special issue of the *OD Practitioner* will help stimulate new understandings and ideas for practice.

Foundational or Diagnostic OD is grounded in the 1950s-1970s formative period that established organization development as a distinct set of premises and practices. Broadly speaking, Diagnostic OD emerged to improve the functioning of overly bounded, hierarchical organizations by thinking of them as living, open systems. Following Kurt Lewin's and Ron Lippitt's theories, small intact groups were considered to be both the target of and vehicle for planned change using data-based action research methodologies (Lewin, 1943, 1947; Lippitt, Watson, & Westley, 1958). Because of the early focus on the functioning of teams OD consultants of that era were expected to have highly developed competencies in small group dynamics and process consultation (Schein, 1969) often acquired through T-Group experiences. Although not exclusively so, the orientation of early action research methods was on diagnosing the contributing factors to the "real" (rather than the presenting) organizational

problem(s). Change was the result of a normative-re-educative process (Chin & Benne, 1969) of increasing awareness through accurate diagnosis and engaging members in formulating changes based on that new awareness.

Starting in the 1980s and accelerating into the present, OD has been influenced by developments in the social, biological, and physical sciences as well as newer interventions and approaches to change created by innovative practitioners. These include social construction, the complexity sciences, the linguistic turn in the social sciences, Appreciative Inquiry, and large group methods. In combination and over time these have now coalesced enough to set the outlines of a different paradigm we are calling Dialogic OD. This includes a number of practices that are usually known as large group interventions but which we also label dialogic to draw attention to some of the ways in which they significantly differ from earlier OD premises and practices.

Rather than a focus on open systems, Dialogic OD is based, in part, on a view of organizations as dialogic systems where individual, group, and organizational actions result from socially constructed realities created and sustained by the prevailing narratives, stories, metaphors, and conversations through which people make meaning about their experiences. From this perspective change results from changing the conversations that shape everyday thinking and behavior by involving more and different voices, altering how and which people engage with each other,

and/or by stimulating alternative or generative images to shape how people think about things. Thus instead of change driven by diagnosing how to objectively align or re-align organizational elements (strategies, structures, systems, people practices, etc.) with the demands of a broader environment as suggested by open systems theory, the dialogic systems perspective invites considering how to induce new ways of thinking by altering the ongoing organizational conversations that continuously create, re-create, and frame understanding and action (Barrett, Thomas, & Hocevar, 1995; Marshak & Grant, 2011).

The selection of articles in this special issue offer a broad range of Dialogic OD premises, practices, and settings from coaching to working with community organizations. The authors come from a variety of backgrounds, and are located in North America and Europe, demonstrating the wide interest in dialogic practices. Each of the articles sheds light on the mindsets and practices associated with Dialogic OD. Each article adds an interesting perspective to what is still an underdefined field of practice, and helps to illustrate why these practices can be both exciting and impactful.

The issue is divided into three sections after the initial article by **Stefan Cantore** and **Wendy Hick**, who start us off by offering a glimpse of what a dialogic consulting process looks like from the perspective of the consultant and the client. Dialogic OD in Practice: Conversational Approaches to Change in a UK Primary School will be of particular interest for readers looking for a concrete description of Dialogic OD in action. It provides a detailed account of the dance of thinking and conversation between client and consultant as they co-created and co-facilitated a one-day intervention at a school. The presentation offers insight into the mindsets behind what the client and consultant did and their commitment to a conversational approach to change. The case example provides the one-day design they used and also illustrates the importance of leadership commitment, the client and consultant operating from a shared mindset, and

their being willing to stay with uncertainty about what will emerge from the dialogic process.

The first section, **THEORIES OF DIALOGIC CONSULTATION**, offers four articles focused on theories that can guide the Dialogic OD consultant. Each goes some way in attempting to answer questions about the underlying theory base of Dialogic OD practice. While complimentary, each emphasizes a different underlying process for the transformational potential of Dialogic OD: generativity, emergence, re-description, and reflexivity.

The section begins with **Gervase R. Bushe** in Dialogic OD: A Theory of Practice describing his generic model of Dialogic OD practice and its underlying theory of

world, and a framework for designing dialogic engagements. She also explains the relationship of dialogic practices to the theory and processes of emergence which includes stages of disruption, differentiation, and coherence. For her, Dialogic OD involves three main aspects: 1) Creating a container for dialogue by asking possibility oriented questions, inviting diversity into the system, and being welcoming; 2) Creating opportunities for individual expression and making connections; and 3) Creating ways for people to reflect together to find meaning and coherence. She explains why and how Dialogic OD makes diversity and encouragement of differentiation a source of strength and creativity and the basis for real community.

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how social reality is transformed. Bushe offers a conceptual and practical overview to themes, topics, and a vocabulary that will turn up in varying degrees in all the articles in this issue. Arguing that a coherent theory of practice is necessary for the field to learn and evolve, his discussion offers detailed explanations about how Dialogic OD is targeted to transformational change in complex or chaotic situations and involves three main phases: getting ready, holding dialogic events, and incorporating emergent changes. The article proposes the central role of generativity in Dialogic OD, the need for senior sponsorship of dialogic events, the role of the consultant in creating and enacting generative containers, and identifies 27 different methods that can be used in a Dialogic OD process.

The next article by **Peggy Holman**, A Call to Engage: Realizing the Potential of Dialogic Organization Development, offers an overview of what Dialogic OD is, why it is critically important in today's

Jacob Storch and Morten Ziethen in Re-description: A Source of Generativity in Dialogic Organization Development shift the focus of discussion to a more in-depth understanding of a key aspect of dialogic practice, that language constructs reality. Using Richard Rorty's philosophy of language they explain how transformational change results when the local agreed upon language or way of talking about things is shifted to new ways of talking and thinking via re-description. This creates generativity and the emergence of new ways of understanding and experiencing things. They also provide a case example of a shift from talking about the effects of recession on a consulting company to a more energized discussion when using the generative image of "re-session." The fact that re-session had no agreed upon meaning in the company's local language allowed the participants to create new meanings and new ways of thinking. Their provocative proposition is that

transformation cannot occur without such a change in language.

Christine Oliver and Stephen Fitzgerald in *How to Explore Meaning Making Patterns in Dialogic OD and Coaching* offer an approach and tool for collaborative meaning making between the client and consultant/coach. Their premise is that changes to the ongoing thoughts, feelings, and actions in individuals and organizations occur when embedded and cyclical patterns of stories and interactions are identified, challenged, and altered, thereby changing the narrative(s) guiding thought and behavior. They propose that a core purpose of Dialogic OD is to increase the organization's capacity for such reflexive dialogues. They also discuss the premise

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that the client and consultant are co-creators of meaning and illustrate their approach with an extensive coaching case presentation that also illustrates the main types of patterns and stories one is likely to encounter. They include tips for how to establish collaborative authority, whereby client and consultant participate together in meaning making.

Section Two, **DIALOGIC PRACTICES IN SMALL GROUPS**, offers a series of cases along with theoretical commentary. Each describes a way of working with small groups in organizations grounded in dialogical thinking. They are similar in their emphasis on emergence and in their divergence from facilitation, but they also have some interesting contrasts in their application of that thinking.

John Inman and Tracy A. Thompson in *Using Dialogue Then Deliberation to Transform a Warring Leadership Team* describe their dialogic approach for helping a management group create a new story to live into. They explain the Dialogic OD

mindset they work from, which consists of two main elements: 1) Designing a container for conversations; and 2) Hosting (rather than facilitating) the conversations. The case example helps clarify the difference between hosting and facilitating. As a host their concern is less about facilitating or controlling the conversation and more about the design of the container in which conversations will unfold. The case is somewhat unique in offering an example of a dialogical, transformational change process occurring within limited time constraints.

The next article by **Keith W. Ray and Joan Goppelt**, *From Special to Ordinary: Performing Dialogic OD in Day-to-Day Complexity*, offers a rich discussion of

how the shift to incorporating discursive, complexity, and meaning making premises leads to different ways of thinking and acting as an OD consultant. They describe a dialogic approach grounded in the theory of complex responsive processes, which does not include hosting special events or creating containers but works with everyday conversations in which consultants are fully engaged in organizational meaning making processes. Their dialogic approach emphasizes four dimensions: 1) Questioning dominant discourses and seeking to delay convergence; 2) Being mindful of patterns of inclusion and exclusion that increase or decrease diversity; 3) Working with everyday interactions and ways of relating; and 4) Considering follow-on actions as experiments, not plans. Change is achieved by disrupting previously semistable discursive patterns and by expanding conversations across various communities.

The last article in this section is **Rosa Zubizarreta's** *Co-Creative Dialogue for Meeting Practical Challenges: New*

Approaches. She explains the premises and facilitation practices related to a specific dialogic approach focused on emergence and the co-creation of meaning and how it differs from more traditional approaches. A main focus of the article is fostering collective creativity, arguing that because creativity is non-linear, facilitation methods also need to be non-linear. Some suggestions turn widely accepted facilitation techniques on their head, such as welcoming initial solutions instead of actively delaying solution finding. Four important aspects of Dynamic Facilitation to foster creativity are introduced and illustrated. These include: 1) The facilitator as an advocate who demonstrates multipartiality rather than being a neutral, objective presence; 2) Protecting the emergence of a creative field by maximizing creative tension while minimizing interpersonal anxiety; 3) Retroactively organizing information rather than using a preplanned agenda; and 4) Holding space for emergent convergences rather than trying to facilitate towards a managed convergence.

Section **THREE DIAGNOSIS AND DIALOGOS**, raises issues about the interplay of diagnosis and dialogue in organization development. Are they actually competing, complimentary, or something else? What are the implications for OD practice without diagnosis?

Robert J. Marshak in *The Controversy over Diagnosis in Contemporary Organization Development* summarizes five different arguments that are made against diagnosis and the counterpoints to each. He argues that the field of OD would be better served by moving away from point and counterpoint, either/or debates about diagnosis and instead actively thinking in terms of both/and, contingency, or mixed/blended approaches. One type of contingency model is presented as an illustration. He raises a concern that moving away from diagnosis might encourage newer practitioners to not assimilate complex models of group and organizational functioning, with a resulting loss of discernment in their work. Marshak concludes by asserting the critical importance for OD consultants to have well developed theories and skills to assess various situations encountered

in an OD engagement whether this is called diagnosis, scoping, sizing things up, or whatever.

Yabome Gilpin-Jackson illustrates and extends some of Marshak's points in *Practicing in the Grey Area* between Dialogic and Diagnostic Organization Development: Lessons from a Healthcare Case Study. Using a case example, she suggests the need to clearly understand the mindsets of both approaches in order to be able to move between the two when and how needed. She explains how she and the others in the case made choices to use diagnostic, and then dialogic interventions, and the reasoning behind those choices. The article proposes a grey zone requiring use of both approaches when: 1) Complexity of the situation is moderate to high (suggesting the need for a dialogic approach); but 2) System readiness to use a dialogic approach is moderate to low (suggesting a diagnostic approach).

Because we are exploring new terrain, many of these articles are theoretically challenging and full of interesting implications for the practice of OD. Many are worth reading more than once. Seeking out and working with the authors of these articles has been an exciting and inspiring time for us. The coherence in many of the underlying images and approaches described in this special issue offer, we think, a convincing illustration of the possibility of creating a coherent theory and practice of Dialogic OD. The many differences in perspective and detail, however, also point to the early stages of that work, and the need for further conversations to identify and begin convergence on a coherent narrative about the theory and practice of Dialogic OD. We hope you will find this special issue as stimulating and fruitful as we have. Finally,

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