The Dialogic Mindset:
Leading Emergent Change in a Complex World

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Abstract

The "visionary leader" narrative and performance mindset that predominate in theories and practices of "Change Leadership" are no longer effective in an environment of multi-dimensional diversity marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Developments over the past thirty years in organization development theory and practice, which have led to what we call Dialogic Organization Development, implicitly suggest a different leadership narrative and mindset are needed. Consistent with transformational OD practice, seven core assumptions of a Dialogic Mindset for leaders are described. Relying on one person to "show the way" has become a barrier to leaders enacting the kind of emergent change processes needed in rapidly changing, complex organizations. The contours of a new leadership narrative are identified followed by a discussion of the implications for leadership development.

Keywords: Leadership, leadership development, organization change, dialogic mindset, VUCA

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In this article, we describe the dominant leadership narrative, which focuses on establishing visions and plans, assumes organizations are mostly stable entities, and presumes that data and analysis can solve problems. We argue that this dominant leadership narrative is no longer viable in a complex, interdependent, and multi-cultural world. A new narrative of leadership is forming that is more capable of guiding the emergent, generative organization and change processes required of interdependent systems in a multi-dimensional, diverse world marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). This narrative also includes new organization development practices that do not fit the dominant paradigm. Our ongoing study of these newer change practices (Bushe & Marshak, 2009, 2014, 2015) leads us to argue that successful leadership will require very different assumptions about organizing and leading from the prevailing "Performance Mindset" that emphasizes instrumental and measurable goal setting and achievement. We identify seven assumptions of a "Dialogic Mindset" we think underlie successful leadership practice in a VUCA world. The continuing emphasis on being a heroic, strategic thinker who can envision viable futures and the path to those futures does little to prepare today's leaders for the complex, ever-changing challenges they face. Instead, leaders need to utlize complexity and uncertainty in ways that encourage and enable generative and transformational change. We conclude by discussing three key attributes such leaders will require: the capacity to manage their own anxiety about "letting go" as well as the anxiety emergent leadership creates for followers who expect leaders to provide answers; practicing high levels of self-differentiation; and operating from advanced stages of ego development.

The Leader As Visionary Model

The prevailing narrative of leadership is based on the assumption that great leaders must have vision and the ability to lead followers to that vision. Leaders, followers, and commentators alike assume that being a visionary is indispensable to organizational leadership. For example, more than 70 years ago, Dimock (1945) described the requirements of executive leadership, one of which was "a clear vision of his goals and how to achieve them" (p.139). Later, management gurus began to distinguish between vision and goals. Some noted vision is abstract while goals are concrete (Locke & Latham, 1990) while others suggested that having vision is the ability to see the goals realized in a possible future (Levin, 2000) with enough clarity that paths to those goals become visible.

The ability to set and achieve a vision or goals continues to be central to definitions of leadership (Rupprecht, Waldrop, & Grawitch, 2013; Sternberg, 2013). However, there are other models advanced in recent years that better address the realities of today's VUCA world. After all, what if things are too complex and changing in our multi-cultural, global world for any executive to know what products or services to make, what markets to pursue, or how best to structure and manage their organization? How do we know if a vision is the right vision, except in retrospect? What about all those organizations that have followed a "failed" or failing vision (e.g. Nortel Networks, Blackberry, Washington Mutual, Circuit City, Ames Department Stores, Lehman Brothers, and so on)? The complex realities of what leaders must deal with on a daily basis now challenge the traditional views of leadership and have begun to stimulate alternative ways of thinking about leadership and change.

For example, a leading voice supporting an alternative paradigm is Heifetz's (1998) leadership model that indirectly challenges the heroic, visionary orthodoxy. He divides the decision situations leaders face into *technical problems*, which can be defined and solved through a top-down imposition of technical rationality; and *adaptive challenges,* which can only be "solved" through the voluntary engagement of the people who will have to change what they do and how they think. In Heifetz's alternative narrative of leadership, adaptive leaders identify challenges but instead of providing solutions, they encourage employees and other stakeholders to propose and act on their own solutions. Others offer complimentary perspectives. For example, David Snowden and his Cynefin Model of contingency approaches to decision-making point out that when cause-effect relations aren't fully understood, an emergent approach is more effective (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Sharmer (2009) argues that leaders need to "let go and let come" in order to "lead from the emerging future." Stacey (2001, 2015) argues that all organizing is inherently so complex and emergent that the traditional narratives about leadership are no longer applicable—if they ever were.

Interestingly, over the past thirty years, an increasing array of Organization Development and allied approaches and methods implicitly call for a leadership narrative different from the heroic, visionary orthodoxy. These newer approaches and methods differ from the founding principles of Organization Development and require leaders to be something other than "visionary" in how they address change and transformation in their organizations.

The Emerging Model Of Dialogic Change And Leadership

Our research into the increasing number of Organization Development approaches that violate central tenets of foundational Organization Development change theory led us to appreciate the underlying similarities in assumptions and intent of methods as dissimilar as Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Open Space Technology, Dynamic Facilitation and Reflexive Inquiry, the Cycle of Resolution and Narrative Coaching, among many, many others.[1] In our research, we grouped them under the label "Dialogic OD" because all of these methods, in one way or another, agree that transformational change requires *changing the conversation* (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). We chose this label also because it contrasted well with foundational Lewinian change theory, action research methods, and attention to organizations as open systems, which we labeled "Diagnostic OD." Furthermore, we concluded that these Dialogic OD methods emerged precisely because they help leaders and organizations respond to the complexities of managing change in ambiguous, turbulent, complex, and multi-cultural situations (Bushe & Marshak, 2015).

Diagnostic Organization Development methods, in keeping with the models of organizations and leadership prevalent during the foundational period of Organization Development (1950s-1970s), are designed to help leaders address necessary changes by producing clear visions, goals, and plans, and through collaboratively collecting and analyzing data to guide action planning. How much those who must change are involved in data collection, analysis, and planning varies, but "participation" is generally viewed as the key to overcoming the inevitable resistance to change. While the engagement of everyone in problem-solving is encouraged, it is expected that leaders will decide on solutions, identify goals, and the path to those goals usually through top-down, "waterfall" interventions. Research often finds that such planned change efforts result in low success rates, which raises the question: might some of this failure be the result of treating the adaptive challenges of today like the technical problems of the past?

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[1] See www.dialogicod.net/toolsandmethods.pdf for a continuously updated bibliography of Dialogic OD methods.

Implicit in all Dialogic Organization Development methods is a very different narrative of leadership more aligned with the needs of adaptive challenges in a complex world. Notable contributors to this new narrative of leadership and change include Frank Barrett (2012), Harrison Owen (2008), Deborah Rowland (Rowland & Higgs, 2008), Ed Schein (2013), Patricia Shaw (2002), Marvin Weisbord (Weisbord & Janoff, 2015), and Meg Wheatley (1992). This implicit model of leadership, which is more aligned with the needs of organizations in a VUCA world, runs counter to the visionary leader narrative's widespread *Performance Mindset.* The remainder of this paper will briefly outline the Performance Mindset and then the assumptions of the Dialogic Leadership Mindset implied by insights from Dialogic Organization Development and based in practices of inquiry and learning rather than command and control. The article concludes with a discussion of what will be required of leaders adopting such a mindset.

The Performance Mindset And Organizational Learning

A Performance Mindset looks at all activities as a means to an end—how they are instrumental to goal setting and achievement—preferably with assurances that they will reliably produce desired outcomes. From this perspective, dialogic processes can appear to be of questionable value as they focus on engaging people in reflection and interaction, rely on self-organizing processes and emergence, and seek to achieve desired outcomes by "changing the conversation." It's all talk and no action (Marshak, 1998). Operating from a Performance Mindset, the concerned leader would likely exclaim: "How is paying for my employees to take a day off work, sit around, and talk about some big complex issue going to be productive?" The Performance Mindset just sees a waste of time unless an identified problem is solved or there is a clear set of action items produced that will be implemented at management's direction. Otherwise, the manager is potentially losing a day of revenue paying for a day in which no work gets done.

The Performance Mindset goes hand in hand with the dominant leadership narrative: the great leader is one who can shape the performance of his or her followers and provide them the context, targets, resources, motivation, and direction to achieve. People who can do these things are great leaders, and those who cannot are failures. Recently, Schein (2013) has referred to this as *Do and Tell* leadership and bemoans its dominance and detrimental impacts on addressing today's complex, adaptive challenges.

To be sustainably successful, organizations have to manage learning as well as performing. This is one of the core paradoxes of management and organization theory: how to create organizations that can be simultaneously innovative and efficient; that is, how to best organize in order to learn and perform at the same time (Lawrence & Dyer, 1984)? The most efficient forms of organizing, like assembly-line manufacturing, are also the least able to adapt and change. Our business models for succeeding in complex, uncertain environments, like popular music or pharmaceuticals, are highly inefficient and spend lots of money on innovation hoping for one monster hit to pay it all back. Learning and performing are paradoxically related because when someone is focused on performing well, they usually are not learning anything, and vice versa. One of the core dilemmas of business organizations in the 21st century is how to be efficient and innovative at the same time.

To accomplish this, organizations need ambidextrous leaders who can operate from a Performance Mindset *and* a Dialogic Mindset. The fundamental premises of Dialogic Organization Development that we discovered can teach leaders: 1) how to structure collective inquiry to produce high value learning, new ideas, new networks, and people acting on their good ideas; 2) how to create new performance levels from engaging the motivation and ideas that lie dormant in their organizations' social networks.

The Performance Mindset isn't necessarily opposed to a Dialogic Mindset. It recognizes that organizations cannot continue to perform without learning. Stuff happens, things change, and people have to adapt, yet in the dominant leadership narrative, learning depends on experts, wise teachers, and heroic leaders who can show us the way. It does not know how to deal with situations in which no one knows the "right" answers or "best practices" are not applicable. The Performance Mindset knows very little about how to inquire into collective experience in ways that catalyze the emergence of new ideas, processes, and solutions by aligning with and amplifying the untapped wisdom in the organization.

Instead of telling people what to do and how to do it, a leader using a Dialogic Mindset might ask questions like: “Do we understand why people come to work each day?” “When do they bring the best of themselves and care about the company’s results?” “What do we do to make it more likely that people who work here will have new ideas and act on the good ones?” “How do we ensure that the people who have to cope with change at the front lines are able to adapt quickly and effectively?”

The Dialogic Mindset: Collective Inquiry and Learning as a Transformational Process

Our in-depth analysis articulated the Dialogic Organization Development Mindset and summarized the theory and practice of Organization Development models based in complexity science and those based in interpretive social science (Bushe & Marshak, 2014). We identified the unique and common characteristics of each approach and how their underlying ideas and practices were merging to create a new way of thinking about organizations and change. Our focus in that work was on the Dialogic Mindset of the Organization Development Practitioner. Here, we adapt and apply those insights to create what we call the seven assumptions of the Leader’s Dialogic Mindset. These assumptions are shown in Table 1 and briefly described in the following pages.

1. Reality and relationships are socially constructed.

What people believe to be true, right, and

Table 1: Seven Assumptions of the Leader’s Dialogic Mindset

1. Reality and relationships are socially constructed.
2. Organizations are social networks of meaning making.
3. Transformational leadership shapes how meaning is made and especially the narratives which guide people’s experience.
4. Organizations are continuously changing, in both intended and unintended ways, with multiple changes occurring at various speeds.
5. Groups and organizations are inherently self-organizing, but disruption is required for transformational adaptation and change.
6. Adaptive challenges are too complex for anyone to analyze all the variables and know the correct answer in advance, so the answer is to use emergent change processes.
7. Leading emergent change requires mobilizing stakeholders to self-initiate action, then monitoring and embedding the most promising initiatives.

important emerge through socialization and day-to-day conversations. In one organization, the "bottom line" is all-important; in another, it is growth and market share. Remember the dot-com bubble, when businesses without revenue were trading at astronomical valuations? That "irrational exuberance" was a socially constructed reality. Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar (1995) demonstrate how the introduction of quality management, like any change, doesn't happen all of a sudden, but rather meaning and relationships are slowly changed through thousands of conversations. In 1980, one of us worked at General Motors, when "quality" in that organization meant: "conformity to specifications," "cost more to get," and "automotive engineers know what a quality car is and customers don't." By 1990, "quality" meant "whatever the customer wants," and it could be achieved at lower costs by building it right the first time. This change did not occur as a result of any single change program, planned set of events, or training program, but rather emerged over time after many different change programs, events, and changes in strategic direction. And yet, there were still groups where a different "quality narrative" held sway.

Social construction is powerfully influenced by what leaders talk about, share, endorse, read, comment upon, ignore, dismiss, negate, or downplay. Nonetheless, there are other powerful influences, and leaders cannot just insert or implement new social "realities" like they might a mandated reorganization, new strategy, or new performance standards. Indeed, attempts to implement a new social reality using the same kind of processes one would use to implement a new computer system always results in unintended consequences—usually, unhappy ones (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). Social reality emerges out of the multitude of day-to-day interactions embedded in social contexts. Leaders need to have an eye and ear for what people in the organization are saying, reading, and writing about organizational dynamics. Ignoring interactions that are dismissive of critical issues could be as dangerous as ignoring downturns in productivity, sales, and revenues. It becomes an essential aspect of leadership to encourage interactions, conversations, and resulting social agreements about what the organization, its people, and its stakeholders should pay attention to and be concerned with, and then encourage the development of new ideas to address them.

2. Organizations are social networks of meaning-making.

Human beings are compelled to make sense of what we and others are doing and what is going on around us (Weick, 1995). In organizations, an active fantasy life is always present where people make up what is going on in the organization and with their leaders—what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what they are likely to do next. How much is fantasy and how much is reality depends on how much straight-talk takes place, who talks with who, and how willing leaders are to be transparent. And, of course, people don't just make sense of their leaders, but also make sense of other groups, customers, suppliers, and all important stakeholders. When things are not making sense, people might go and directly ask the source of confusion "what's going on?" "Why did this happen?" But more often than not, people will talk to trusted colleagues, friends, and spouses (or just themselves) to figure out what is going on. These networks create common beliefs about what others are thinking, feeling, and wanting, and then people act as if their beliefs are true (Bushe, 2009). The Dialogic Mindset assumes that what happens in organizations is influenced more by how people interact and make common meaning than by how presumably objective factors and forces impact the organization. This also means that attending to, listening to, and including marginalized or excluded voices is critical for innovation in a diverse world with a complex array of factors, influences, and stakeholders.

From a Performance Mindset, a leader might seek to measure and diagnose the competitive environment and the organization's existing vision, mission, strategy, structure, operating systems, technological capabilities, human resources practices, and the like. Drawing on experts and trusted managers, these factors would be explicitly "measured" against a model or standards, then remedies to develop or re-align the organization for competitive success would be announced. This mindset assumes that the organization or leader's success and failure depends on how well interventions to directly change these factors are developed and implemented. A statement like, "To be more competitive we need to move from product-line divisions to a global three-way matrix involving products, functions, and markets," sounds sensible and expected from leaders, even if we are not sure what it means.

Environmental forces and organizational factors are obviously important, but leaders who also view organizations as social networks of meaning-making will pay equal or even greater attention to what people throughout the organization are thinking and saying and how they make sense of their daily work experiences. What stories and anecdotes do they tell about what is needed for individual and organizational success and failure? How do they interpret current and ideal performance? Who do they hold responsible for what? What do people believe is possible and not possible in their job and the organization?

Furthermore, the meaning of things may differ in different parts of the organization, inviting inquiry into varying interpretations that may exist in different sectors and networks of the organization. Leaders who view organizations as networks of meaning-making understand that complicated innovations that worked in one organization cannot simply be copied in another. The fate of any innovation will depend on the perceptions that develop about what the innovation is, the motivations and competence of those championing it, and what will be lost and gained. These perceptions are not random or unpredictable, but emerge from socially constructed realities and the networks of meaning-making that foster and reinforce them.

3. Transformational leadership shapes how meaning is made and especially the narratives which guide people's experience.

The meanings and interpretations that arise in organizations are shaped and reinforced by the narratives or "storylines" that help explain to people how to make sense of what they see taking place. For example, if a company decides to build a new manufacturing plant in a developing country, how people will make meaning of this expansion will depend on the story they have about the organization, its competitive environment, and its leaders. People who have a story about the organizations' leaders as caring, capable stewards may decide that off-shoring cuts costs and ensures survival and growth. People who have a story about their leaders as ruthless and greedy may decide that off-shoring leads to job losses and decline.

Leaders with a Dialogic Mindset understand that the actual reasons for why they take whatever decisions they take are not as influential as the interpretations people make about those decisions. It's the narratives people hold that will determine how people see and react to leadership decisions. Developing new narratives and meanings to shape new and agreed upon ways of thinking is a core part of transformational leadership. New narratives stimulate new meanings which in turn will allow previously impossible or incompatible actions to be seen as not only possible, but long overdue.

This means transformational leadership will encourage some meanings or interpretations over others. For example, they will try to ensure that "doing more with less" is interpreted as a call to re-invent how work is done rather than a demand to "work harder and longer with fewer workers to achieve the same results." They will also pay attention to what meanings are being made in the organization, how those meanings come into being, what sustains or challenges them, and what the leader might do to encourage the emergence of new meanings to meet new situations. Finally, while leaders may be able to influence meanings people make about important organizational factors, they will not be able to dictate them. Therefore, leaders should also seek to influence the processes of meaning-making, including the use of various structured engagements and events intended to influence how and what people think, as well as what they do.

4. Organizations are continuously changing, in both intended and unintended ways, with multiple changes occurring at various speeds.

One of the legacies from 20th century thinking that influences the Performance Mindset (and Diagnostic Organization Development) is the tendency to think of organizations as entities with inherent stability (inertia) where change is something that occasionally happens between periods of stability through processes of unfreezing, movement, and refreezing (Marshak, 2004). Certainly, there are times of stability and forces for stability, but the Dialogic Mindset sees organizations as flow processes in which lots of things are moving at different speeds and change is merely a matter of temporal perspective. From this point of view, "stability" is just slow moving change. Furthermore, what is changing and why things are changing is often out of the hands of any person or group. Change inside organizations can be the consequence of changes in the political, social, technological, economic, or natural environment. Any single "planned change" has to contend with a multitude of other forces pushing the organization in a myriad of ways. The larger and more complex the organization, the more likely a variety of planned changes are simultaneously underway and at various stages of unfolding. The image of change as a unitary sequence of strategic analysis, vision, and implementation seems like an oversimplification or very limited view to the Dialogic Mindset.

For example, an organization, with which one of us consulted, was formed as a major division of an international corporation through the acquisition of two smaller independent companies in North America and Europe. The presidents of these smaller companies were retained to run them, but the organization put a new CEO in place to oversee the total operation. Initially, the division focused change efforts on operational efficiencies in manufacturing. While working on this, the need for a more "integrated" division emerged as a pressing requirement. At first, the meaning of "an integrated global organization" was unclear, yet sparked new conversations that led to efforts to change the division's structure, brand and marketing plans, career pathways, and organizational identity and name. As these efforts were underway, outside factors contributed even more requirements for change. Stock market analysts were anxious to see improved profitability after the acquisitions and pressed for cuts in employees and expenses; the competitive environment was in the midst of shifting from competition based on quality to competition based on price; the costs of base materials began to shift wildly; and political factors in Asia were impeding efforts towards another planned acquisition in order to complete the original vision for major operations in North America, Europe, and Asia. The political and cultural dynamics within the top team composed of a new CEO, two former presidents (who each thought he should be CEO), and members from Columbia, France, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the USA all compounded these perturbations. All of this unfolded over a period of only two and a half years!

5. Groups and organizations are inherently self-organizing, but disruption is required for transformational adaptation and change.

In nature, order emerges without a plan or leadership. Science has recently taught us that complex behavior emerges from a few simple rules (Holman, 2015). This is easily seen when catastrophes occur and large numbers of people are able to self-organize rapidly in response. Self-organization occurs in organizations wherever and whenever there is ambiguity and space for innovation and adaptation to emerge. Whether that self-organization will be more or less beneficial to the organization depends on leadership and the narratives that guide people's meaning-making. The Performance Mindset assumes that without proactive leadership there will be disorganization, anxiety, and chaos, so order needs to be imposed. It may be true that you can impose (temporary) order more quickly than it will emerge, and therefore this may seem like a more productive route, especially when anxiety is high. However, leaders cannot unilaterally impose the meanings people will make of situations. Furthermore, well-intended efforts to control may lead to narratives of oppression, and narratives detailing complex rules and specific behaviors often lead only to compliance and submissive responses. In a world of uncertainty and complexity, the Dialogic Mindset seeks to work with, rather than against, self-organizing processes, and attempts to shape them, when possible, toward organizational needs.

Unless the on-going processes of self-organization are disrupted, they may continue to recreate familiar, but limiting patterns of thought and action and thereby pose a barrier to necessary learning and adaptation. The self-organizing properties of systems will re-organize into more complex, adaptive states only when close to chaos (Waldrop, 1992); this is replicated in organizations (Pascale, Milleman, & Gioja, 2001). While the Performance

Mindset views disruption as an unwelcome threat to success and thus something to guard against and avoid, the Dialogic Mindset understands that disruption is integral to transformational change and embraces it (Holman, 2010). In order for adaptive self-organizing processes to emerge in organizations, people must believe that the old order no longer works, there is no going back, and that true transformation in thinking and action is needed. The leader may guide a transformation in response to an unplanned disruption (e.g., a new disruptive technology that poses an existential threat to the organization). Alternatively, the leader may have to encourage disruption to existing narratives and patterns of meaning-making to create the necessary stimulus for innovation and adaptation. In the latter case, the leader is, in effect, doing the very opposite of the visionary narrative. Rather than show people the way forward, the leader shows them that the current way is no longer tenable and must be thrown out. Instead of imposing a new vision to address the adaptive challenge, the leader creates disruption to support collective inquiry and processes of self-organization and emergence.

6. Adaptive challenges are too complex for anyone to analyze all the variables and know the correct answer in advance, so the answer is to use emergent change processes.

In a world of ambiguity and uncertainty, where diverse networks of people are socially constructing reality in every conversation, where meaning can be created, maintained, or destroyed at a moment's notice, and where factors emerge and change in varying ways and at varying rates of speed, it is impossible to know in advance what will cause what. There are few "best practices" that can be relied on to work in any specific situation. What new technology will people embrace? What HR practices will really engage employees? What corporate policies will increase innovation? The answers to these can only be seen in retrospect after something has succeeded (or failed). Who foresaw all the implications of the internet for the music business, newspapers, and now the taxi and hotel businesses? On the other hand, though widely expected to be disruptive, why has it had, to date, such small impact on the business models for higher education?

When dealing with a complex, multi-dimensional world, expecting a leader to be able to see the future and show the way may cause more problems than it solves. One of the most common findings of studies of companies managing complexity and innovation is that trying to figure out the right answer before you engage the people who will have to implement that answer is a road to ruin. For example, Collins and Hansen (2011) found in their study of companies that thrived in uncertainty that those pursuing big visions were outperformed by leaders who did not try to identify the right new product or service and made a big bet. Instead, the more successful leaders encouraged numerous small experiments, learning as they went, in a more emergent process of change. In environments of uncertainty, successful companies "fire bullets, then cannonballs." Snowden and Boone (2007) write that what works and why can only be understood in retrospect, so first send out probes, then sense and respond. And yet, figuring out what to do before you do anything is precisely what the dominant leadership narrative calls for. Instead, try many small, fail-safe experiments to see what, in this situation, really leads to what, and will actually do what you hope it will.

In the new leadership narrative, the leader does not know in advance what the content of the change will be, but does provide a process for change (Rowland & Higgs, 2008) that engages those people who will help the organization learn and adapt through collective inquiry. However, unlike the Performance Mindset, in which diagnostic and analytic inquiry is used to collect information and then to plan and implement change, the Dialogic Mindset sees collective inquiry and change occurring simultaneously. Through processes of engaging people in collective inquiry, transformational change occurs when at least one of three critical ingredients are present (Bushe & Marshak, 2014; 2015): 1) Reactions to disruption are channeled so that the natural processes of self-organization and emergence lead to a reorganization at a higher level of complexity; 2) The process of change stimulates the creation of new core narratives that provide people with new storylines about the organization thereby shaping new adaptive behaviors; 3) Generative images and processes surface and are utilized to increase the production of new ideas and the motivation to act on them.

7. Leading emergent change requires mobilizing stakeholders to self-initiate action, then monitoring and embedding the most promising initiatives.

All the previous assumptions inform the Dialogic Mindset's basic framework for learning and adapting under conditions of diversity, complexity, and adaptive challenges. The leader's job is not to have a grand vision and show people how to reach it. The leader's job is to frame adaptive challenges and complex contexts in ways that mobilize the diverse networks of people who must change so that they will want to change. This leadership focuses on creating conditions that unleash the energy and ideas latent in the organization so that emergent, self-organizing processes serve the organization. This leadership works to enrich social networks so that people with similar motivations and ideas can find and support each other in order to take on complex conditions and adaptive challenges through self-initiated actions and small experiments. Rather than vet ideas, manage projects, check implementation plans, and so on, the Dialogic Mindset wants to encourage the emergence of new ideas and possibilities fostered by different narratives and meanings that challenge the status quo. This mindset seeks to tap into the latent motivation that exists among small groups of people who are passionate about their ideas and unleash them to take action. The leader, along with others, then monitors the results, and those experiments that show promise are nurtured and allocated resources. Once it becomes clear which initiatives will work, they are built upon, scaled up, and embedded into the organization (Roehrig, Schwendenwein, & Bushe, 2015).

For example, in the earlier case of the newly formed division, the leader and leadership team had no clear ideas about what needed to be done or how. They knew they needed to create a successful division, but at first attempted to make each of the acquired units independently successful. The CEO, despite pressure to conform to the visionary leader narrative, instead launched an effort that brought key second tier managers from all geographies and functions together on a quarterly basis to engage each other and confront adaptive challenges in a "management development" learning context that also included learning the principles of dialogue. This provided a safe container for the exchange of storylines and the relatively rapid emergence of a new narrative about the importance of "global integration." At first no one knew what "global integration" really meant, but it served as a *generative image* (Bushe & Storch, 2015) that fostered new meanings across the previously independent units and functions and led the teams to propose a variety of initiatives that advanced this ideal. Teams were encouraged to act on their proposals and, in conjunction with managers throughout the organization, develop their own ideas about what global integration meant in terms of all aspects of the division: strategy, structure, systems, image, culture, identity, and so forth.

Implications for Developing Leaders

The Organization Development approaches of the past 30 years that we have clustered under the "Dialogic Organization Development Mindset" imply (implicitly and explicitly) a model of leadership that differs from the dominant *leader as visionary* narrative. We think these newer OD processes and the beginnings of a new narrative of leadership have emerged precisely because organizational leaders now face complexity, uncertainty, and diversity that cannot be successfully managed by the Performance Mindset that emphasizes facts, figures, and best practices to identify specific targets and how to move towards them. Instead, this new model of leadership for a VUCA world emphasizes emergent, socially constructed meaning-making in order to foster collective attention towards adaptive challenges and to stimulate bottom-up, locally responsive solutions.

One widely recognized problem organizations face is that lower level managers advance up the ranks because of their ability to meet performance targets and this produces too much of a narrow, short-term perspective and reliance on what was successful in the past at the executive level. Often organizations and leadership development programs try to ameliorate this through educational and developmental assignments aimed at increasing the "strategic thinking" of those grooming for senior roles. While these approaches may help, they still operate within the leader as visionary narrative. More than skills, we believe a new narrative of leadership is needed at this time, a widespread belief about what a leader is and what a leader does that is consistent with the assumptions of the Dialogic Mindset. Then followers and other stakeholders will understand why leaders aren't offering a vision. They will be able to recognize a kind of leadership that manages complexity through emergent change processes. They will appreciate those leaders who can hold ambiguity and uncertainty in ways that encourage people to manage their discomfort, and even anxiety, long enough to produce truly innovative and adaptive responses to the complex challenges facing organizations today.

In our experience, leaders who can do this are currently rare, but those who can, in addition to holding some or all of the assumptions of the Dialogic Mindset, share some traits that make it possible for them to lead others emergently. Here we will note three such traits and suggest that programs and coaching which seek to develop leaders for a VUCA world need to focus on how to develop these traits: increased capacity to cope with anxiety (their own and others'); high levels of self-differentiation; and high levels of ego development.

Coping with Anxiety

It is important to acknowledge the impact of anxiety for leaders and organizational members in effectively working in a world of high complexity, ambiguity, diversity, and volatility. Anxiety and change are widely acknowledged to be linked in a "Goldilocks" relationship. If a person or group experiences too little anxiety, there is no motivation to change. If they experience too much anxiety they will deny, distort, defend, or are otherwise too fearful to change. Only when there is enough anxiety to motivate a search for new thoughts and behaviors, yet not so much as to lead to fearful debilitation, will change occur. Given the demand for on-going change and adaptation in today's organizations, our concern is not so much whether there is enough uncertainty and anxiety to motivate change, but whether or not leaders and organizational members are overwhelmed with too much complexity, uncertainty, and associated anxiety thus leading to defensive reactions and calls for a visionary leader to provide magical answers. Let's consider this question by recapping and extending our discussion of leadership models and mindsets in today's organizational world.

Anxiety and contemporary organizational change.

The visionary leader narrative calls for individuals *worthy of leadership* to be able to assess situations, envision desired outcomes, plan how to achieve them, and manage implementation efforts. Followers also know this narrative and expect individuals *worthy of leadership* to be able to fulfill this role. So in addition to any anxiety created through trying to cope with the complexities of today's organizations, leaders and members must also confront the anxiety that may arise when a leader does not meet those expectations. Further, the greater the organizational uncertainty, the greater the expectations and desire for decisive, visionary action. To not fulfill that role implies the leader is unworthy and a failure.

Leaders who buy in to the visionary leader narrative and Performance Mindset will face situations where they are unable to plan and control outcomes. As long as they explicitly or implicitly hold to that narrative they have two main options. One option is to continue to try and control outcomes by adopting new planning models, hiring more or different experts, blaming failures on others or overwhelming resistance to change. The second option is to deny the need for change, to adopt a *let's wait to see how things develop* attitude, or to defensively explain how there is nothing anyone can do about the situation. Both are ways for the leader operating from a visionary leader mindset to protect their sense of worthiness in the face of a situation they cannot predict and control. Yet both options follow from a positioning that is inappropriate to the complexities of the situation and will likely to lead to organizational failure.

Similarly, followers who hold the visionary leader narrative and Performance Mindset will look at the leader through these lens and potentially respond in one of two ways. One is to expect the leader to become a better visionary or be considered a failure. Regardless of the complexity, uncertainty or ambiguity of the situation the leader is expected to demonstrate visionary leadership qualities or risk losing their followership. The second way is to deny the situation: "This is all cyclical." "This too will pass." "Next quarter will be different." Consequently, there is the potential for both leaders and followers operating from the visionary leader narrative to tacitly collude in denying the seriousness, urgency, and potential impact of uncertain circumstances in order to reduce their anxiety to manageable levels. The way out of this trap, however, is not to better develop leaders capable of embodying the visionary narrative, but to recognize that a different leadership narrative and actions are more effective in the face of the complex, adaptive challenges in a multi-cultural, multi-dimensional world.

Anxiety and the new leadership narrative.

Many contemporary strategic and leadership models that acknowledge complexity attempt to find ways to simplify to an extent that the Performance Mindset can still apply. The Dialogic Mindset, however, does not see simplification as the solution to managing complexity. Instead it helps us to understand why the complexity of some situations in today's organizations exceeds the ability and capacity of anyone to plan, manage, and control change. In the face of that complexity, it also offers an alternative approach that holds off on committing to any course of action while seeking new ideas and possibilities to address pressing concerns. In essence, it explains the need to adopt less of a planning and engineering approach to change in favor of one that relies more on inquiry open to new possibilities and the endorsement of desirable, yet unplanned outcomes. Instead of increasing anxiety when attempts to plan and control change fail, a new leadership narrative will lessen anxiety by explaining what is actually being experienced and why. The leader may not be able to control change, but people will have more certainty about what is needed and the roles and processes that are more likely to lead to innovation and true transformation. Organizational members will understand why the leader is not providing a vision, why a more emergent approach is likely to be more effective, and what they and their leaders need to do to enact their parts of the unfolding story.

What name becomes attached to this new leadership narrative is anyone's guess. However, even with an accepted leadership narrative that helps us to understand the kinds of actions leaders and followers must take in a VUCA world, the challenges posed by complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty can produce anxiety in leaders that reduces their ability to lead from a Dialogic Mindset. We turn now to considering two additional qualities that are likely required for leadership in a VUCA world that we think need to be included when we think about leadership development that supports this new narrative of leadership.

Self-Differentiation

The theories and practices that have evolved in family systems therapy may offer some valuable insights into what may be involved in developing leaders who can have a "non-anxious presence" (Friedman, 1985) since a central focus of these theories is on the production, consequences, and regulation of anxiety in social groups (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The concept of self-differentiation, developed by Murray Bowen (1978), refers to the ability to be an individual while staying in emotional contact with others and is particularly useful in understanding the requirements and challenges of leading inquiry and learning in organizations (Bushe, 2009; Short, 1991).

Benefits of self-differentiation

The concept assumes that the more differentiated a person, the more they can cooperate, look out for themselves and others, and operate rationally in stressful as well as calm situations without losing their own interests and identity while trying to meet or fulfill others' needs and ambitions (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). According to Bushe (2009), leaders operating in self-differentiated ways know what their experience is, are able and willing to describe it to their followers, and are curious about the experience of others. They know what they think, feel, and want and can act on that with or without the approval of others. Yet they also want to know what the experience of their followers are, and are open and curious to hearing what others think, feel and want, and stay connected without becoming emotionally hijacked. Operating on the assumption that everyone creates their own experience, they do not take responsibility for others' experience and do not hold others responsible for their own experience. As a result, they are able to create climates of high engagement where people are willing to tell each other the truth of their experience (Bushe & O'Malley, 2013)—all qualities needed for dialogic inquiry and learning.

Leaders operating with less self-differentiation will tend to manage their own and others' anxiety through one of two basic ways: 1) They can dismiss or otherwise disconnect from others so that they don't think about what those others are experiencing and what impact they might be having on them, and express no curiosity about others' experience. As a result, they have little ability or interest in inquiry-based forms of leadership. 2) Alternatively, they can try to change other people's experience to be more in line with their own thinking, often unaware that the motivation to do so may come from a desire to reduce any discomfort they feel when confronted by unwelcomed comments from others. Whether knowingly or unwittingly, they let their followers know what the "approved" thoughts, feelings, and wants are, reducing the likelihood that people will be willing to openly share with the leader any part of their experience that might make the leader anxious. Instead of inquiry and putting things "on the table," important topics will remain undiscussed (Marshak, 2006). While they may appear caring and claim they want authentic engagement, such leaders make it impossible to create the climates of clarity and safety required for real inquiry (Friedman, 1985)

Self-differentiated leadership.

Leading in a way that engages the real complexity of a situation without grasping at simplistic solutions to maintain illusions of knowledge and control requires self-differentiated leaders for a number of reasons. First, it requires leaders who are able to sustain connections without feeling responsible for other people's fears even as anxiety increases. As discussed earlier, one of the reasons the visionary leadership narrative is so dominant is that believing that there is someone who knows what to do and will lead us to salvation decreases our anxiety in ambiguous situations. For a leader to acknowledge that he or she doesn't know, and that no one can really know what will work until we try something and see what happens, is not reassuring and can be interpreted as a failure of (visionary) leadership. Consequently, a leader with poor self-differentiation will either be swept up in the emotional appeal to do something, or back off even further and become distant and unavailable. Either approach will only increase the anxiety in the system or lead to collective denial of the very real and complex challenges facing the organization.

Secondly, creating a space in which something new can emerge requires leaders who are not only able to engage others, but are able to bring very diverse parties and perspectives into the mix in a way that is generative rather than conflictual. Because a self-differentiated leader does not need to censor unorthodox points of view or contrary opinions to sustain their own emotional calm, they can hold and model a space in which contrary views can be expressed. This is critical, as the generative potential of emergent change processes depend, to a great extent, on the creativity and innovation that comes from including people and ideas who have, in the past, been left out or marginalized (Holman, 2010).

Ego Development

Besides self-differentiation, are there any other personal qualities needed for a leader to successfully operate from a Dialogic Mindset? One possibility comes from Constructivist Developmental Theory (Loevinger, 1976), which identifies a sequence of cognitive frameworks people go through in developing ever-increasing cognitive complexity and self-awareness. This model of ego development helps to explain the underlying psychological processes that may help distinguish leaders who can operate from a Dialogic Mindset from those who can't as well as the developmental journey required to get there. Similar models with different labels have been applied to issues of leadership and organization in a number of different ways (Beck & Cowen, 2005; Cowie, 2013; Laloux, 2014; Torbert, 2004).

Briefly, there are between seven and nine stages of development identified through hundreds of rigorous studies using the sentence completion test (Hy & Loevinger, 1996) and its variants (Cook-Greuter, 2010). Each stage is nested in the previous—that is, the cognitive abilities and frameworks developed at early stages are required for development to later stages, so that no stage can be skipped. Those at later stages can use the mental processes of earlier stages but those at earlier stages cannot use those of later stages. It is generally believed that people can understand the logic of the next stage but can't really operate from it (i.e., able to talk the talk but not walk the walk). Table 2 shows the percentages of adults at each stage of ego development from four different studies.

Stages of ego development and the dialogic mindset.

As the first three studies (primarily from North American samples) show, around 80% of adults in random samples score no higher than the "conventional stages." Yet a wide range of leadership theorists working with this model agree that conventional stages of ego development are not well-suited to leading in a VUCA world; rather, a VUCA world requires leaders operating at the later, "post-conventional" stages (cf., Cowie, 2012; Laloux, 2014; Torbert, 2004). For example, Torbert

Table 2. *Percentages of Adults at Different Stages of Ego Development*

		Study 1 N = 804	Study 2 N = thousands	Study 3 N = 64	Study 4 N = 37
(childhood)	Impulsive	.07	0	0	0
	(transitional)	.05	0	0	0
	Self-protective	1.9	5	0	0
	(transitional)	2.6	0	0	0
conventional	Conformist	6.8	12	3.1	0
	Self-aware	26.1	38	35.9	6.9
	Conscientious	40.9	30	43.7	27.6
	Subtotals	***78.4***	***85***	***82.8***	***34.5***
post-conventional	Individualistic	14.1	10	15.6	37.9
	Autonomous	4.8	4	1.6	18
	Integrated	1.4	1	0	6
		Loevinger, 1985	Rooke & Torbert, 2005 (managers)	Bushe & Gibbs, 1990 (1 company)	Bushe, 1993 (Members of CCI[2])

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[2] Unpublished study of Certified Consultants International (CCI) members, a body set up by NTL to certify T-group and OD consultants that no longer exists.

(2004, p.108) describes the "action logic" of leaders at the autonomous stage as placing "high value on timely action inquiry, mutuality and autonomy; attentive…to unique historical moments, interweaves short-term goal-orientedness with longer-term developmental process-orientedness; aware of paradox that what one sees depends on one's action-logic; creative at conflict resolution."

According to Cowie (2012, p.33-35) leaders at this stage "give up certainty for curiosity because 'not knowing' is now a state which does not threaten my sense of who I am. Embrace complexity, paradox, ambiguity, uncertainty and flux because I now know that reality is not defined by *my* wishes, hopes, fears, anxieties, theories and beliefs, or those of my cultural group…Challenge business as usual and find creative solutions to problems because I am not invested in the preservation of my organisation *as-it-is* as the venue in which I affirm my identity… Advance an international rather than a merely multi-national position because I now understand the meaning of a globalized (i.e. an interrelated and interdependent) world."

The match between higher stages of ego development described above and a Dialogic Mindset that embodies the new leadership narrative we describe in this paper suggest this model might help explain a lot of variance in the success and failure of transformational change initiatives. One piece of data to support that comes from study four in Table 2, which shows the stages of ego development of 37 OD consultants whose theory and practice had been vetted by a rigorous peer-review process and could be considered leading exemplars of the profession. We don't think it is coincidence that 65% of them scored at post-conventional stages of ego-development. Instead we think many of them are people who developed to later stages, became disenchanted with the kinds of organizing processes and cultures associated with the Performance Mindset, and left to become consultants in order to create the kinds of organizations they'd like to be members of.

Clearly the importance of ego development to the ability to lead from a dialogic mindset is a fertile area for future research. For us, however, it is a topic of informed speculation describing what is needed to successfully lead in a world of complexity and ambiguity and from a dialogic mindset that involves more than a recipe for a different set of actions, but rather a different way of being that runs counter to conventional wisdom. In short, we suggest that for leaders to be successful in a world of uncertainty and ambiguity they will need to develop beyond conventional ways of thinking, acting, and being.

Challenges for Leader Development

Describing what leaders of the future will need to be able to be and do is one thing. Helping leaders of the present and future develop those ways of being, thinking, and doing is another. This is especially true with psychological and identity dimensions.

Challenges in learning to cope with anxiety

Of the three areas we identify for leadership development to support a new narrative of leadership, processes for learning anxiety reduction, or "self-soothing," are the most developed as they have been the focus of counseling and therapy for many decades. Leadership development programs might benefit from incorporating insights from at least two streams of practical research. One is somatic psychotherapy, also referred to as body-oriented psychotherapy, which works with breathing and muscles to access awareness of and release sources of anxiety (Macnaughton, 2004). The other is mindfulness (Siegel, 2011), a process rooted in Buddhist meditation practices now receiving widespread attention because neuroscientists have found it effectively reduces stress and anxiety (Tang, Hölzel, & Posner, 2015)

Challenges in developing increased self-differentiation in leaders of the future.

Based on this discussion, leadership development programs concerned with creating leaders for a VUCA world would benefit from considering how they can increase the self-differentiation of trainees. There is some guidance in family systems therapy, but it focuses on working on one's self within one's family of origin and current family (Titelman, 2014). This is important work, but to what extent an organization can expect or require that of its employees is problematic. Methods to increase self-differentiation in organizationally acceptable contexts and ways are needed. Currently, to our knowledge, there are limited studies or programs to build upon. One example is Bushe's Clear Leadership (n.d.) program that focuses on increasing the self-differentiation of leaders to increase their capacity to "lead learning" in organizations, but there is little written on the pedagogical processes used in this program or research about its effectiveness in increasing self-differentiation. O'Neill (2007) offers some ideas on coaching for increased self-differentiation that could be incorporated in leadership development activities. For example, based on the assumption that self-differentiation is a balance of being able to state one's position while staying connected to others, she provides simple anchoring mechanisms to help leaders know when they are being too rigid in their positions and not connected, or too vague in their positions and not connected, and some simple actions to get back into balance.

Challenges for supporting greater ego development in leaders of the future.

What little is known about how people develop beyond the conventional stages of ego development, tends to describe the impact of traumatic events (e.g. divorce, getting fired, losing a child) that cause reconsideration of societal injunctions about roles and achievements. There have been attempts to create leadership development programs to increase ego development, perhaps most famously the MBA at Boston College under Bill Torbert's leadership (Torbert, 1987), and increasing interest in how to develop adults beyond conventional stages of development (Esbjörn-Hargens, Reams, & Gunnlaugson, 2010; Pfaffenberger, Marko, & Combs, 2011), but not much proven success. One study suggests processes that increase post-conventional ego-development may only have potency at mid-life (Lilgendahl, Helson & John, 2013). Nonetheless, any leadership development program that hopes to have significant impact on the ability of individuals to lead organizations in a VUCA world will have to consider the role of ego development, either as a prerequisite for inclusion or as developmental goals to work toward. It does appear that people who develop into the post-conventional stages of ego development are interested in their own psychological development, and activities that would commonly be described as "personal growth" (Cowie, 2012; Pfaffenberger, 2013; Scott, 2009). Ways of supporting more leaders into higher stages of ego development that can be provided by organizations is something the leadership, coaching, and organization development fields need to learn more about.

Closing Summary

To summarize, in this paper, we argue that the dominant "visionary leader" narrative makes it difficult for leaders to enact the kinds of leadership behaviors and processes required in complex, multi-cultural organizations within uncertain and rapidly changing environments. These organizations are filled with paradoxical, *wicked*, adaptive challenges to which no one can know the solution because any solution will have to meet local contingencies and constraints which, themselves, are in a constant state of change. Based on our research into Dialogic Organization Development, we offer seven assumptions held by leaders who are able to guide their organizations and successfully take on adaptive challenges. We note how this "Dialogic Mindset" is at odds with the dominant "Performance Mindset" prevalent in business organizations and argue that a new narrative of leadership is required to support leaders in utilizing the kinds of leadership styles and behaviors known to result in transformational change. We conclude by identifying three areas for leadership development activities to support individuals to enact the assumptions of the Dialogic Mindset and the processes of Dialogic OD:

Managing anxiety in self and others, increasing personal self-differentiation, and increasing the stage of ego development leaders are operating from.

As Bushe and O'Malley (2013) argue, leadership development that hopes to change how leaders show up at work must always occur in a context of cultural change as every organization has a leadership culture. Successful transformation in leadership has to simultaneously try to change the culture as it tries to change individuals. From our point of view, the central cultural change requirement and challenge is to create a new narrative and mindset about what it means to be a leader.

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