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## Hosting stakeholders for engagement in generative change

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*Gervase Bushe's work in the developing field of Dialogic Organisation Development (Bushe & Marshak, 2015) has put him at the forefront of those working with inquiry-based change processes, helping individuals, groups, organisations and communities take on complex challenges and wicked problems. This overarching field includes both Solution Focus and Appreciative Inquiry and is based on attending to narrative, emergence and generativity, rather than the more customary problems of diagnosis and analysis. A key element for engaging stakeholders in dialogue is a possibility-focused purpose statement that captures something they all care about. The most powerful purpose statement is a 'generative image' which offers a new way to see attractive possibilities, ideas and connections. Here Gervase writes about the importance of hosting, rather than facilitating, stakeholder groups in these processes.<sup>1</sup>*

### The generative change model

In the literature on how leaders can manage in complexity, there are basically two solutions. One is to find ways to reduce the complexity to the level of complicated so that rational data-driven problem-solving models can be used. The other is to manage complexity by working in an iterative way, using 'probes'; relatively small innovations which explore the space of what works and give vital feedback to guide next steps. The Generative Change Model is based on the second solution.

The idea is that in complexity, it is not possible to understand what affects what except in retrospect. So to figure out what to do, try a little fail-safe experiment

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Bushe G.R. *The Dynamics of Generative Change*, BMI Publishing (2019).

and see what happens. Some people have called these experiments ‘probes’ (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998; Jackson & McKergow, 2002; Snowden & Boone, 2007), a term I will use here. Collins and Hanson (2011) call this process “fire bullets, then cannonballs”. Rather than assuming anyone is smart enough to anticipate all the possible permutations of all the factors influencing a situation ahead of time (the ‘vision’), assume you can’t really predict what will work. Instead, launch as many probes as possible and learn as you go. When something works, scale it up. There are many other names for probes, like experiments, pilot projects, prototypes, and so on. What you do, essentially, is to keep firing bullets until you hit something, then you bring in the cannon.

The Generative Change Model (Marshak & Bushe, 2018) identifies the steps required to engage the people who will have to change in conversations where they come up with new ideas (probes) they are willing to act on. They are encouraged to self-initiate action while leaders pay attention to what’s working and what isn’t. The good ideas and innovations are scaled up. More importantly, however, the generative change process creates a more adaptive, agile organisation, better able to tackle increasing complexity and produce far more change far more quickly than anyone familiar with planned change would consider reasonable.

As shown in Figure 1, Generative Change begins by identifying the “adaptive challenge” that leaders are willing to put time, effort and resources into managing. I say managing, because adaptive challenges are never “solved” – which is a major reason why spending a lot of time and resources identifying “the vision” is generally not useful. This then needs to be re-articulated into a “purpose” that will frame the adaptive challenge in a way that captures something stakeholders care about and attract them to engage in generative conversations. The difference between a vision and purpose is that the former describes a clear end state, and often the path to it. A purpose, on the other hand, describes what the organisation is trying to do every day, and may never fully accomplish. Typically, there are many different ways to accomplish a purpose, which increases the potential for generative conversations to take place.

Most Dialogic OD methods (see [www.dialogicod.net/toolsandmethods.pdf](http://www.dialogicod.net/toolsandmethods.pdf) for an up-to-date list) are ways to design generative conversations. Learning these different methods is very useful as it offers you a wide array of “tools for your tool belt” – but using them in a simple “paint by numbers” way will lead to inconsistent results. Dialogic Organisation Development is a theory base for

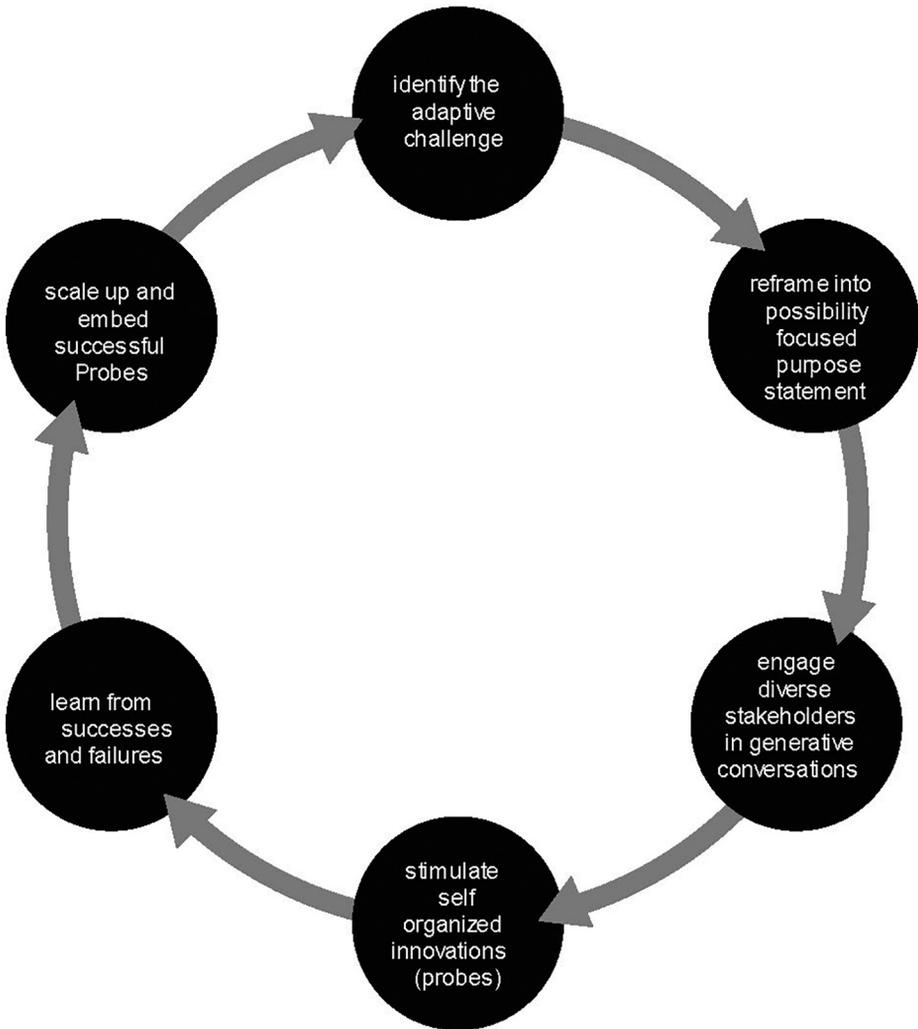


Figure 1: The Generative Change Model

how to use any method in a way that will lead to more consistently successful change. You want to be able to mix and match different methods with the best chance of achieving the desired outcomes with this group, at this time, in this place with the opportunities and constraints it faces.

## Preparing for generative conversations

When using a generative change process, I tell my clients “the ideal is to close down the whole organisation and put everyone in the same room for a couple days. If we can’t do that, let’s work back from that to what we can do”. I look for ways to work with the natural ebb and flow of this organisation’s life. One of my mantras is “whoever will need to change needs to be invited to the conversation”. It doesn’t mean they have to show up, but a fundamental assumption about generative change is that more change happens more quickly the more stakeholders are involved in the same engagement events. If people are forced to show up, however, you don’t know if they really are interested in or engaged by the purpose. Worst case scenario is that they are opposed to the purpose and work to sabotage the event.

Making attendance at engagement events voluntary makes it more likely that everyone there is predisposed to positively contribute. In many organisations there will be a group of people who are not interested in getting engaged. Typically, they are older employees with just a few years of service left before they retire. Not everyone has to engage for generative change to happen. Work with the willing. On the other hand, it is often the case that some key people or groups need to be part of the event for it to be successful. Think of people with control over key resources. People who control organisational processes. People whose opposition to an idea could kill it. The last thing you want to do is hold an engagement event that gets people excited and builds momentum for change and then gets killed by some authority who doesn’t understand what is going on or doesn’t support it.

Think about the purpose you are trying to accomplish, the stakeholders who are key to accomplishing it, and the kinds of changes they are likely to propose. Now think about who else will have to support those changes – those people need not only to be invited to the event; they need to have the generative change process explained to them as well as why they are so critical to its success. Hopefully, the purpose will be of interest to them as well, and the event can be scheduled so they can attend. Sometimes the group can make changes internally without needing the consent of others. In other cases, however, when a whole other part of the organisation has to be part of the process, you will need to take the time to ensure that the right person from that part of the organisation is co-sponsoring the event, or someone higher up that both groups ultimately report to is a sponsor; that they understand the generative change model, and sign off on the purpose and design of the process.

A key to increasing the creativity and innovation that emerges from engagement events is increasing the diversity of participants. Innovation is often found at the margins of organisations, among those who have not had much voice or ability to influence the organisation. It is through different perspectives rubbing up against each other that new ideas are born. Open Space Technology, in which participants design the entire content of the event during the event, can be incredibly transformational or produce very little and this seems to depend on the amount of ‘heat’ in the room – the more heat, the more transformation. Harrison Owen (2008) has identified the following ingredients as necessary for successful Open Space: a purpose people really care about, conflict, passion, urgency, diversity of views and voluntary presence. When there is a lot of energy and desire for change amongst the group of stakeholders, you don’t need a lot of design. When there is less urgency or passion, some structure really helps. But in all cases, you need different perspectives in the mix to produce something new, and people who care enough about it to mix it up.

## Hosting, not facilitating

A facilitator is someone who helps a group of people work together effectively by guiding conversations, asking questions, helping spread participation, capturing ideas, suggesting processes for group work and then leading them. Normally, they don’t have a personal interest in the issues being discussed, so they can guide interactions to produce outcomes the entire group is satisfied with.

However, there are some who question whether this kind of facilitating produces less generative conversations (Goppelt & Ray, 2015; Zubizarreta, 2014). When a consultant stands at the front of the group, capturing what people are saying on a board, all eyes are on him or her. This is not a conversation among stakeholders, this is a conversation where stakeholders are feeding the consultant what they think they are being asked for. Often, the outputs are clichéd, easy to justify, and abstract and while they might look like a great list rarely power any change in behaviour. I am now of the opinion that if the people in the room are talking to me (the consultant) instead of to each other, something’s wrong.

Hosting, on the other hand, is about creating ‘containers’ that support people to have new and better conversations (Bushe, 2010). Typically, these are not facilitated; one reason is that it would require a small army of facilitators to have one for every small group. Instead, engagement events need to be designed so that small groups can work on their own. How much structure will be required depends on the group, its size, and how familiar or foreign the tasks they will be

asked to do. It's not unusual to design a workbook that describes to participants what each step in the day is, provides cues and questions for small group discussions, and so on. Overall, generative conversations need to be designed to step people through a sequence of activities where the following questions are answered:

- 1) Do people know why they are here? If not, design a process to make that happen.
- 2) Are people willing to say what they really think, feel and want? If not, design a process that will make it more likely that people will.
- 3) Do people know what they need to know in order to come up with practical new ideas and innovations? If not, design a process that will help them discover what they need to know.

Good hosting requires paying attention to the energy and being ready to redesign on the fly when unexpected things show up (Bushe, 2010). You will want the design to be sequenced so that it naturally leads to people self-selecting themselves into groups focused on something they want to work on, producing applicable new ideas and experiments they will be motivated to act on.

### Checklist for hosting generative conversations

- ✓ You have a clear purpose that people care about, and have identified what is in bounds and what is out of bounds.
- ✓ You have the right space for people to be able to move around, as needed.
- ✓ The key sponsor(s) will be there at the beginning to explain the purpose and process and answer questions, and there at the end to hear and bless probes. If they can be there for the entire event, even better.
- ✓ Your design will ensure that people know why they are there, can say what they think, and will get whatever information they need to come up with practical ideas.
- ✓ You have provided just the right amount of structure so people have a sense of the beginning, middle and end of the event, and can step into productive conversations they want to be having.
- ✓ You create opportunities for the large group to check in on what is happening without long, labourious 'report outs'.

- ✓ Your design helps people who don't know each other very well uncover who has similar interests, motivations and ideas and lets them team up to create a probe.
- ✓ There is some way of supporting/amplifying people's commitment to acting on their ideas.

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