Dialogos' Intellectual Heritage

Dialogos International, LLC is an international for-profit consulting corporation with two offices, one in the United States and one in the United Kingdom. Dialogos is a world leader and pioneer in developing dialogue and organizational learning practices. Our principals are the originators of many of the central techniques commonly found in many business and consulting practices, including organizational learning, dialogue, and dialogic process consultation. Our stance is that we both write about and are expert practitioners in doing what we talk about. We conduct, produce and publish research related to dialogue, sustainability, and organizational learning (Isaacs, 1999; Hanig et al, 2002; Isaacs, 1999; Kleiner, 1996).

Organizations as Living Systems

The work of Dialogos incorporates several different threads of dialogue and systems-related practice. System Dynamics is a body of knowledge about of systems modeling and intervention, developed originally by Jay Forrester at MIT (Forrester, 1960-1971; Kleiner, 1996). Structural Dynamics is an outgrowth of family systems theory applied to organizational contexts (Kantor, 1994 and 1999). Dialogue is a theory of thought and communication developed by David Bohm and expanded to organizational and leadership contexts by William Isaacs (Isaacs, 1999).

Central to all of these threads of work is the concept of a "living system"– that human groups (including formal organizations like the Bank) can be engaged with as alive entities in which decision-makers act in complementary patterns, but without the costs and bureaucratic inertia of top-down command-and-control management. Most efforts to make large organizations resilient and proactive fail, however, because they seek to impose a new form and stated purpose on the organization – which simply reinforces the old command-and-control style. The Dialogos work succeeds because it takes into account (and embodies in itself) the primary characteristics of living organizations:

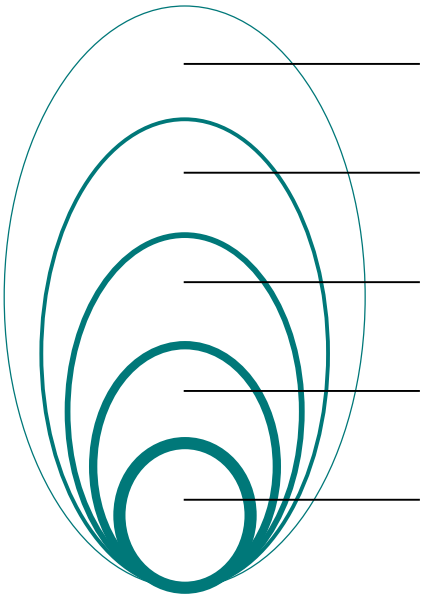
> **Participation** – Everyone in a living organization takes part in the thinking and interaction of the whole – not just the senior-most levels, but project teams, "change" leaders, and even people who seem "resistant" or "dispensable." Powerful patterns of influence resonate throughout the organization, not merely up and down the hierarchy. For this reason, we design our initiatives to "get all the voices in the room:" to make sure people know that their perspective is heard, and that all perspectives are comprehended by the decision-makers. Applying this principles involves inviting all participants in an intervention to become conscious of how they are themselves aspects of the very situation they are seeking to change "out there." Implies creating generative "microcosms" within a system that begin to display a different quality of inquiry about problems and a different range of behaviors that display solutions to those problems as a way of setting something in motion for the larger system.
>
> **Enfolding Coherence** treats the existence of the current reality facing an individual or an organizational system as the result of a necessary set of forces and causes. While not passing judgment on whether this reality is good or bad, this principle compels us to come to a clear-sighted understanding of why things look and work as they do. It also sets the stage to enable us to design a future that reduces unintended consequences of policies and action, but working with things as they are, and not from illusions we might project about how things should or could now be.

Unfolding Potential – When living systems are young, they often have a different physical form than when they are mature. An acorn doesn't resemble an oak tree. But the form of the oak tree is ready to unfold from the acorn. Similarly, living organizations have a distinct potential form and purpose, that continues to evolve as the organization grows. Discerning and following that "unfolding potential" is a matter of recognizing the context which is calling for the organization to change: the needs and priorities of existing constituents, as well as the constituents who are not yet seen as such, but on whom the organization's future may depend. Applying this principles entails discerning not only what is possible, given the current reality, but discerning the deep potential carried in the situation, even if it is not fully yet grasped or realizable by the system as a whole. It also entails articulating the core questions actually driving behavior and passion in the setting, and then asking what is the capacity of the system to catalyze deeper potential at every level, and what might be getting in the way of that unfolding process.

Awareness proposes that a system's capacity to be aware of what it is doing as it is doing it is a very high leverage change avenue. Actions included here are a systems capacity to detect and correct error and limits, the quality of reflection a system has about itself and so its capacity for conducting continuous improvement and taking generative action, and its capacity to learn from and respond in a robust manner to shocks, uncertainties and ambiguities.

The Dynamics of Effective Intervention

Derived from these principles is a theory of the complex nature of interventions, in which several different dimensions of activity are all interrelated:



Space is the intangible environment of any human interaction, which limits what kinds of moves are possible. A room where there has been a vicious argument "feels different" than a room where people trust each other and can speak candidly without fear, precisely because the space is different. Space itself can be shaped and influenced in a variety of ways, which in turn influences the quality and direction of human action.

Thinking – The habitual "thinking" of most people consists of the theories and stories that they tell themselves about the world and the way it works. It they can open themselves to consider alternative views of "how things ought to be" and "what we are doing here," they become capable of realizing many more possible forms of action.

Structure defines the patterns of interrelationships and mutual influence among the factors and forces of a system. For example, reward systems influence the choices people make; which influence the profitability of an enterprise; which in turn influence the quality and size of the

rewards. Mapping the structures of a system is often a good first step to become aware of high-leverage interventions.

Patterns – Events that recur over time give rise to patterns of behavior in a system. For example: Receipts may be oscillating. Job satisfaction may be falling. The number of innovations may grow at first but then level off and decline. These are symptoms of the underlying structures of the system; interveners can use their awareness of patterns to diagnose the situation and generate a proactive response.

Action includes chosen steps and moves that people make to achieve their goals. Interveners often try to change organizations by taking new actions, which may or may not be sustained in the organization over time. Often, that depends on whether the action reinforces, or contradicts, the existing space, structure, and thinking of the system.

Dialogic Process Consultation (Learning Laboratories)

Though our work draws on the thread of action learning that stretches back to John Dewey through the work of Kurt Lewin, Chris Argyris, and Edgar Schein (Kleiner, 1996; Kolb, 1984; Argyris, 1985, Schein, 1965), the dialogic approach we use goes beyond participatory action research and action learning. In dialogic process consultation (Schein, 1998), the following principles apply:

- Interventions are jointly designed with participants (who are no longer kept apart as "objects" of the intervention);
- Time for joint reflection with participants is built in, both for evaluation and to develop their capabilities to make use of the actions so far;
- We take part in joint theory-building with participants, helping them to derive a meaningful model (in mind) of the situation.

Dialogos principal William Isaacs pioneered the concept of a learning lab (or "practice field,") in which participants explore practical issues in a reflective space where they can learn by observing actions of their own or others, and then building shared models of the impact of those actions.

Dialogue – Collective Thought

The work of Dialogos is based on keen awareness of the nature of reflective thought (Isaacs, 1999; Isaacs, 1993; Isaacs, 1994a-b). Dialogos principals include some of the world's leading experts in the design and facilitation of generative conversation – conversation that fosters awareness and capability in the service in genuine aspiration. In this sort of facilitation we pay close attention to the quality of the "container:" the conversational environment. For example, one can deliberately create an environment where dangerous perceptions and undiscussable topics can be raised productively, without making people vulnerable.

Four key principles are significant in our dialogue design. These can be simply stated as:

Voice – creating a place for all relevant perspectives and attitudes to be spoken so that they may be heard.

Listening – attention to the spoken and unspoken nature of the conversation and the "acoustics" of the space in the room.

Respect – the acknowledgement of the value of differences and participants' identities.

Suspension – willingness to raise and consider assumptions and perceptions without being bound by them.

The Five Disciplines of the Learning Organization

Our work also draws upon the five organizational learning disciplines. Popularized by Peter Senge, the five "learning disciplines" have formed the basis of a growing practice for individual, team and organizational development (Senge, 1990 and Senge, et al, 1994, 1999 and 2000). The underlying premise is that "real-world" results are more effectively achieved, especially when flexibility is needed, by galvanizing authentic human commitment. Senge suggests five forms of ongoing practice: Personal Mastery (articulating individual aspiration while fostering keener awareness of existing challenges); Mental Models (uncovering the "theories in use" and mindsets that govern behavior); Shared Vision (designing processes that elicit the common aspirations that can spark extraordinary behavior); Team Learning (learning to transcend barriers and reach beyond agreement to genuine alignment and effectiveness in teams); and Systems Thinking (learning to see recurring interrelationships in complex environments and thus intervene more effectively). Several Dialogos principals and associates are ongoing professional colleagues with Dr. Senge and have contributed to his books: William Isaacs, Michael Goodman, Robert Hanig, Glennifer Gillespie, and *Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* Project editorial director Art Kleiner. Skillful practice of the five learning disciplines has long been a backdrop to the work of Dialogos.

Emerging Organizational Research and Practice

As a meeting ground for theoretically-oriented practitioners in organizational learning, design and intervention work, Dialogos is becoming a center for new work in the field. Among the works in progress by Dialogos associates are:

Collective Leadership (William Isaacs)

Good People (Learning from the Prison Dialogues) (Peter Garrett)

The Core Group: A Theory of Organizational Power and Learning (Art Kleiner, to be published by Doubleday/Random House, 2003)

The Heart of Profound Change: Learning from the Civil Rights Movement (Skip Griffin)

References

Argyris, Chris, 1993: *Knowledge for Action* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).

Bohm, David, 1992: *Thought as a System,* (London: Routledge).

Bohm, David, 1996: *Wholeness and the Implicate Order,* (London: Routledge).

Forrester, Jay, 1961, *Industrial Dynamics* (MIT Press, Productivity Press).

Forrester, Jay, 1969, *Urban Dynamics* (MIT Press, Productivity Press).

Forrester, Jay, 1971, "The Counterintuitive Behavior of Social Systems," *Technology Review,* January 1971, p. 52-68.

Hanig, Robert, Andreas Priestland, Dominic Emery, and Art Kleiner, 2002: “First Level Leaders: Engagement and Design Story” (Cambridge, MA: Dialogos Working Paper and London: BP Report).

Isaacs, William, 1993: "Taking Flight: Dialogue, Collective Thinking, and Organizational Learning," *Organizational Dynamics,* vol. 22, 1993, p. 24-39.

Isaacs, William, 1994a: "Dialogue" and "Designing a Dialogue Session," in Peter Senge, et al., *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (New York: Doubleday).

Isaacs, William, 1994b: "Dialogue: The Power of Collective Thinking," *Reflections on Creating Learning Organizations,* ed. by Kellie T. Wardman (1994, Pegasus Communications).

Isaacs, William, 1999: *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together (*New York: Doubleday).

Kantor, David and Nancy Heaton Lonstein, 1994, “Reframing Team Relationships,” in Senge et al, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (New York, Doubleday), p. 407.

Kantor, David and Steven Ober, 1999, “Heroic Modes,” in Senge et al, *The Dance of Change* (New York, Doubleday), p. 263.

Kleiner, Art, 1996: The Age of Heretics (New York: Doubleday).

Kolb, David, 1984: Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall).

Schein, Edgar, 1998: *Process Consultation, Volume II* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley).

Schein, Edgar, 1965: *Process Consultation: Lessons for Managers and Consultants, Vol. II,* by Edgar H. Schein (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley).

Senge, Peter, 1990: The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization (New York: Doubleday).

Senge, Peter, and Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Rick Ross, Bryan Smith, and George Roth, 1999: *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations* (New York: Doubleday).

Senge, Peter, and Charlotte Roberts, Rick Ross, Bryan Smith, and Art Kleiner, 1994: *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building A Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday).

Senge, Peter, and Nelda Cambron-McCabe, Tim Lucas, Bryan Smith, Art Kleiner, and Janis Dutton, 2000: *Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education* (New York: Doubleday).