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CHAPTER 11

DIALOGUE AS SHARED SOCIAL SPACE IN MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The surrounding conditions for management and organizations are changing on different levels, including the socio-political level, and call for new competencies to deal with increasing complexity and contradictory realities. Against this background, the paper links dialogue as a concept explained in Senge's learning organization framework and dialectic knowledge to decision making processes in management and organizations. Dialogue is explained as shared social space in reference to Lewin's related insights and Bohm's thoughts on shared meaning and examined with regard to its possibilities and limitations in practice.

INTRODUCTION –
CHANGING CONDITIONS CALL FOR NEW COMPETENCIES

This paper seeks to establish and explain the links between dialogue, dialectic knowledge and decision processes in management and organizations. Modern business is frequently characterized by the fast speed of projects and large numbers of stakeholders from different cultures and environments. Since this results in increasingly complex decision making processes, contemporary business practice needs effective ways of dealing with increasingly contradictory realities. How can a company reconcile, for example, its goal of short term revenues with a sustainable strategy for the future? A dialogue-based approach which enables the parties involved to listen to each other and gives transparency to their arguments can be helpful, and we suggest to linking such dialogue with dialectic knowledge. Dialectics implies a way of dealing with different views, contradictions and conflicts. Laske (2010, p. 1) presents dialectic thinking not as a method, but as a way of thinking that does not know where it will end up, but is open to the possible results.

Dialogue and dialectic knowledge are important elements in organizational communication and learning. Indeed, dialogue is part of the core discipline of "team learning" in Peter Senge's seminal learning organization framework (Senge, 1993) and features strongly in Edgar Schein's work on culture and organizational learning (Schein, 1993) as well as in Kurt Lewin's insights into social space (Lewin, 1939). Dialogue opens a social space – in itself an important phase in decision processes. It is also an enabler in organizational transformations working on the dialectic between the now and the then, i.e. the current situation in an organization and its future development. Thus decision makers are introduced to new perspectives on how to balance the inherent contradictions in their organizations.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DECISION MAKING PROCESSES IN MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONS

The more complex the organizational world becomes, the more people in all parts of organizations have to remain in permanent touch with the essence of their professional work: the decision making process. "Judgment is the core, the nucleus, of leadership. With good judgment, little else matters. Without it, nothing else matters." (Tichy & Bennis, 2007, p. 5) Yet judgment is also "the proverbial elephant on the dining room table that no one dares to speak about." (ibid, p. 5).

When we look at decision making in organizations, we have to look at the interplay of people in their professional roles, at teams and networks, and at the complete organizational system in its social and environmental context.

What is the Problem With Decision Making in Organiszations?

In general, the propensity of organizations to learn from their past decisions and decision processes is very poor (Ackoff, 2007). Nobody in the organizational world would seriously deny that a joint, focused awareness on better decision processes has the potential to generate aligned energy, increase the number of win-win situations and produce better results. There is clearly a growing need for organizations to opt more frequently for real decision making instead of just drifting, i.e. carrying on with business as usual.

An erratic higher risk level in a global context urgently deserves a new and more profound approach to how we look at, sense and frame decision making, and how we go about investing in and closing the gap between the paramount importance and limited conscious awareness of personal and organizational learning.

Why is it so Important to Focus on the Decision Process in its Entirety?

People who establish and focus on the complete decision process quite simply make better decisions. People who see decision making as a multi-step process no longer find themselves staring spellbound – either as culprits or victims – as they wait for an apparently magical hammer to fall. They know that the decision process has to run through several phases and that decisions cannot be made in isolation, but are part of a complete process that must be followed from beginning to end. The best decisions are those that can be turned into focused action. They are best made in a dynamic process that balances the need for speed, sustainability, simplicity and variety. Only then can decision makers maintain their ability to act in the best possible way and achieve the best results.

DIALOGUE – AN ATTEMPT AT A DESCRIPTION

Background and Meaning of Dialogue

The word "dialogue" originates from the Greek διάλογος (*dialogos*) for "conversation or discourse", which is itself made up of the components διά (*dia*, meaning "through, inter") and λόγος (*logos*, meaning "speech, oration). *Logos* can also be understood to mean "word" or "meaning of words", which leads to our understanding of "*dia-logos*" as "through words" or "that which comes to flow through words".

Senge (1990) describes the following core disciplines for building a learning organization: Personal Mastery, Mental Models, Shared Vision and Team Learning, pointing out that the capacity for dialogue and thinking together is fundamental for team learning:

> "The discipline of team learning starts with 'dialogue', the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine 'thinking together.' To the Greeks dia-logos meant a free-flowing of meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually". (Senge, 1993, p. 10)

He also notes the connection between dialogue, team learning and the learning organization:

> "The discipline of dialogue also involves learning how to recognize the patterns of interaction in teams that undermine learning. The patterns of defensiveness are often deeply engrained in how a team operates. If unrecognized, they undermine learning. If recognized and surfaced creatively, they can actually accelerate learning. Team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations. This is where 'the rubber meets the road'; unless teams can learn, the organization cannot learn." (ibid, p. 10)

The importance of dialogue for learning processes in organizations is also emphasized by William N. Isaacs, who applied the concept of dialogue to companies as director of "The Dialogue Project" at MIT. He worked with David Bohm and others in dialogue sessions on shared thinking as an investigative process in the UK. A professor of theoretical physics, Bohm spent much of his later years researching the nature of dialogue. He describes his experience and observations on the development of a group dialogue using the following example:

> "...the weekend began with the expectation that there would be a series of lectures and informative discussions with emphasis on content. It gradually emerged that something more important was actually involved – the awakening of the process of dialogue itself as a free flow of meaning among all the participants. [...] A new kind of mind thus begins to come into being which is based on the development of a common meaning that is constantly transforming in the process of the dialogue. People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting, rather they are participating in this pool of common meaning which is capable of constant development and change." (Bohm, 1985, p. 175)

This example highlights the fact that dialogue is a way of working in a group that is not based on the presentation of results, but places value and emphasis on the process of shared thinking.

Different Perspectives on Dialogue

Isaacs views dialogue as a discipline of collective inquiry and thinking and as a process that can be used to transform the quality of conversation and the thinking behind it:

> "Our experience with the discipline of dialogue suggests that there is a new horizon opening up for the field of management and organizational learning.[...] First, dialogue [...] involves learning about context and the nature of the processes by which people form their paradigms, and thus take action. Second, this field suggests a new range of skills for managers that involve learning how to set up environments or 'fields' in which learning can take place. [...] Third, this discipline stresses the power of collective observation of patterns of collective thought that typically speed by us or influence our behavior without our noticing.

[...] Finally, dialogue is an emerging and potentially powerful mode of inquiry and collective learning for teams. It balances more structured problem-solving approaches with the exploration of fundamental habits of attention and assumption behind traditional problems of thinking." (Isaacs, 1993, pp. 38-39)

This brings us to the potential offered by dialogue for learning in organizations. According to Isaacs, dialogue holds a capacity for managers to realize their thinking patterns and habits while giving them the chance to look deeper into processes and structures of communication and understanding (ibid). He is not the only one who is convinced of its potential for deeper learning in management and organizations; Edgar Schein, the acclaimed MIT professor and expert on organizational culture and process consultation, has also studied dialogue:

"I hope to show that dialogue is indeed not only different from many of the techniques that have been proposed before, but also that it has considerable promise as a problem-formulation and problem-solving philosophy and technology. I will also argue that dialogue is necessary as a vehicle for understanding cultures and subcultures, and that organizational learning will ultimately depend upon such cultural understanding. Dialogue thus becomes a central element of organizational transformation." (Schein, 1993, p. 40)

Schein identifies a further benefit of dialogue for conflict management:

"Dialogue [...] is a basic process for building common understanding, in that it allows one to see the hidden meanings of words, first by seeing such hidden meanings in our own communication. By letting disagreement go, meanings become clearer, and the group gradually builds a shared set of meanings that make much higher levels of mutual understanding and creative thinking possible." (ibid, p. 40)

He also refers to Lewin's work on social space back in 1939 and wonders if the latter might be the pioneer of dialogue, since he was the one who researched the meaning of social space - a highly relevant aspect when it comes to understanding dialogue.

"I am persuaded that there is a social space which has all the essential properties of a real empirical space and deserves as much attention by students of geometry and mathematics as the physical space, although it is not a physical one. The perception of social space and the experimental and conceptual investigation of the dynamics and laws of the processes in social space are of fundamental theoretical and practical importance." (Lewin, 1939, p. 7)

Dialogue in Practice

During the 1990s, there was a great deal of interest in the learning ability of organizations. As a specialized form of communication, dialogue plays a prominent role here. People come together in special communication settings to create a shared social space in which creative, collective intelligence can develop. In such spaces, people can detach themselves from the patterns of behavior that dominate their everyday lives and reflect on their own mental models. To create these spaces, the participants in the dialogue must be able to:

1. **Show respect**.
2. **Listen to others**.
3. **Voice opinions**.
4. **Suspend prejudices**.

Dialogue: Four Key Principles

voicing

suspending

listening

respecting

Successful dialogic communication needs special capabilities

Figure 1: Four key principles of dialogue

This way a protective area of trust – a so-called container – is created and provides the participants with the necessary environment to develop these capabilities to the fullest as they share, address and explore their issues. Mechtild Beucke-Galm, a consultant experienced in applying dialogue to organizations, describes it as working in a setting in which somebody presents an idea, someone else picks up on it, and someone else again adds something or brings in an additional perspective. It is not important that everyone speaks or who says what, what matters is that the key issues are discussed.

Much can be said about the setting for dialogue sessions, but we only have space here to focus on a few key characteristics. Specific agreements and instruments – like a 'talking stone' – can help to support the shared thought process. The talking stone is placed in the middle of the circle, and whoever wants to say something picks it up. The process of getting up, fetching the stone from the middle of the circle and returning it after speaking, serves to slow down proceedings. Only the person holding the stone may speak. The stone lets the dialogue develop its own rhythm by preventing one input being followed immediately by the next and placing more value on the periods when nobody speaks. It gives participants the chance to assimilate what has just been said, take a deep breath and be more open and attentive to the next input.

Beucke-Galm (2009, pp. 4-5) notes that dialogue lives through the continuous presence, attentiveness and openness of the participants, which lets them experience reality in the here and now, discuss emotions and practical issues, listen to what is being said between the lines and integrate all that is going on around them. She sees dialogue as a different form of communication culture to "traditional" meetings or typical work-related discussions: it is a shared investigation of issues, relationships, values and inner pictures. The intention is not to create or maintain harmony, but to openly embrace and address issues.

APPLYING DIALOGUE TO MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONS

Selected Examples from the Corporate World

The case studies below illustrate how the principles of dialogue were introduced with regard to decision making processes in different corporate settings. Each case study differs not only from an industry, time and location perspective, but also in the way dialogue was used. They offer proof that dialogue is seldom applied in its purest and fullest form, but is instead adapted to the organizational setting and needs.

Dialogue in the Medical Industry

In this case study, the principles of dialogue were applied in the integration of two US-based medical companies into a German conglomerate. The work with dialogue took place in 2007 on site at the acquired companies in the US, with one of the authors of this article acting as a facilitator.

The circumstances were unusual insofar as the German corporation had bought two US based companies offering similar products within one year. Their product lines were a portfolio addition and a new business for the acquiring firm. The issue now was how best to integrate the two companies into their new parent, align the different cultures and create a new 'business unit culture'. Ultimately, it was decided that they would first be combined into one unit and then integrated in the conglomerate.

The acquiring company understood that there was a need to hold information sessions about the new ownership situation and subsequently bring the new employees of both companies together. Since the first acquired company was based in Los Angeles, the first information sessions were held there, with a similar procedure subsequently used at the second company on the east coast (the future headquarters of the new business unit). In a next step, employees of both companies were then brought together for integration meetings. Bringing together different company cultures is a very sensitive business, and who comes to whom at what time is an important aspect. Dialogue principles like "listening to and respecting one another" become enormously helpful in an integration process and can serve as indicators and enablers of the next steps. This confirms Schein's assertion that dialogue is a necessary vehicle for understanding cultures and subcultures and is therefore a key element of any organizational transformation model (Schein, 1993, p. 40).

The HR departments worked together to organize appropriate events based on the principles of dialogue, while the facilitator identified managers in the new parent organization who were not only familiar with company culture in Germany, but had also worked in the USA and thus had the necessary background and expertise to answer any questions. The event agenda included background information, news about the integration process and the opportunity for employees to ask questions and find out more about the acquisition, the new

corporate culture and the next steps. This is an important basic step for creating trust and openness in the initial phase of an integration process.

The meeting and the entire dialogue approach were a success: employees raised questions, valued the opportunity to meet company representatives in person and asked for more such events. So what made it different to other group events? Ultimately not very much, yet some things – like the frank, open attitude and obvious integrity of the managers, the facilitator and other representatives of the acquiring company – clearly made a difference. Since the situation as a whole was characterized by insecurity, mistrust and, at best, curiosity, this opportunity to raise questions and be listened to in a setting which allowed adequate time to address the issues and process the situation was viewed as a helpful step in bringing the companies and cultures together.

Dialogue in the US Fashion Business

This case study shows how the principles of dialogue are applied at a US-based women's clothing designer and retailer. The company was founded in 1984 in New York as a "one woman show", driven by the founder's own desire for simple, functional clothes. It now has some 1,000 employees and over 56 stores in 15 US states and abroad.

Its approach to leadership is grounded in social entrepreneurship, supporting women and work-life balance. When the founder speaks about the company, the high value placed on a dialogue and team oriented, engaging corporate culture immediately becomes obvious. This is also expressed in the company's leadership practices and mission, which revolve around open communication, presence, accessibility, listening openly and showing respect. Employees are encouraged to ask questions, share information, respect other views and get people involved. They are also invited to acknowledge and appreciate efforts, value contributions and team up with others to incorporate different points of view into discussion and decision processes.

So how are the principles of dialogue formulated in the leadership guidelines actually lived in this company? One simple rule has proved its effect: each meeting begins with a three-minute silence. This gives the participants time to center themselves and breathe, instead of just bursting in with their minds still at a previous meeting. The founder believes in the problem-solving potential of the team and speaks of "radical participation". In many companies, decisions are made by a select few; here, large-scale interventions like the "World Café" – which allow many people to think together and make outcomes directly available – are used all the time to make decisions, thus applying the principles of dialogue to decision making. In the 'World Café' setting, participants sit at tables of three to five persons and work on given questions, scribbling their ideas down on a special tablecloth before changing tables and continuing to work on the same questions with new stakeholders at different tables. They are then invited to speak about the process and the results achieved in the whole group.

Additional aspects of effective leadership are put into practice using dialogue principles. One such aspect is the belief in a "no blame culture". Many companies find their bottom line suffers because their culture does not tolerate mistakes or even honor them as a practical source for improvement. Through the founder's example, this company has developed a culture that encourages employees to be open about their mistakes and accept that they will make them. Mistakes are seen as a breeding ground for new solutions and a source of opportunities to learn.

Further examination draws our attention to the "lived dialectics" in this successful company. One such dialectic is the balance between "the individual and the whole", i.e. between the individual employee and the big market picture (including customer needs, regulations and finance laws). The founder brings these two worlds into dialogue by working with employees on critical questions like "What is dying and what is being born?" This co-creative process is also the fertile ground for strategic decisions on products. This participative form of leadership is nurtured by a set of core values and a genuine belief that work is about relationships and a deep respect for elders, ancient cultures and intergenerational participation. The founder lives the dialectics of "the past and the present" and remains convinced that everything matters in life and in business – a conviction that is practiced in leadership and expressed in the company's product. The added value of introducing dialogue in this company is a participative and sustaining form of communication in which questions are at least as important as the answers.

Voices for Dialogue at a Socio-Political Level

The conditions surrounding management and organizations are also changing at a socio-political level. From a European perspective, the debt crisis shows the imbalance between interdependent countries in one international community. Changes in employment, declining orders and social unrest are just some of the consequences for individuals, organizations and societies. The complexity and contradictory realities become particularly visible in decision processes, e.g. in large infrastructure projects.

The Stuttgart 21 project to replace the city's main railway station is one of Europe's largest infrastructure projects and has been a source of great contention between politicians, project representatives and the public. Spiraling costs and insufficient communication led to weekly demonstrations against the project for more than two years. As Heribert Prantl wrote in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper:

> "Demo, demos, democracy: the word demonstration comes from demonstrare, which means 'to show something'. The demonstrations in Stuttgart show that a modern democracy cannot be a state in which decisions are simply executed; when it comes to huge construction projects, a modern democracy must continually campaign for decisions that have already been made – and correct them if necessary." (Translation by the authors.) (Prantl, 2012, p. 4)

This large-scale project serves as an example of how political decisions can be the nucleus in dialogue with the public – a relationship that also plays a crucial role in Bohm's "shared meaning".

> "Thought is emerging from the tacit ground, […] and any fundamental change in thought will come from the tacit ground. […] Shared meaning is really the cement that holds society together, and you could say that the present society has very poor quality cement ... The society at large has a very incoherent set of meanings. In fact, this set of 'shared meanings' is so incoherent that it is hard to say that they have any real meaning at all." (Bohm, 1996, p. ix)

Bohm's words inspire us to think about management and organizations from a broader perspective that encompasses the socio-political level. The paradoxes in business, society and politics provide both a challenge and a chance to create conditions for "shared meaning". So what form can such processes to develop "shared meaning" in business, society and politics take? In many cities, citizens are looking for new ways of participating in the key decision processes that concern them. One example is the 2012 referendum on the

construction of a third runway at Munich airport. Traditionally more conservative in their politics, the people of Munich voted clearly against this project – an unthinkable scenario only a few years ago. People in other parts of the world, e.g. Russia or some Arab countries, risk their lives to stand up for their rights. The Occupy movement has also been another way for people to express their demand for a dialogue on the values that define the global economy. A modern democracy ultimately has to maintain the dialogue with its citizens. So how can the leaders of public institutions and political parties create "shared social spaces" in which people can constructively exchange opinions on the issues that matter to them?

In Stuttgart, the arbitration process lasted some six weeks in 2010/2011. The arbitrator, Heiner Geissler, insisted that all meetings be open to the public and broadcast on TV and the internet. This way of facilitating the arbitration created the necessary shared social space and follows a dialogue-based dialectic approach. A referendum was also held in 2011 – giving a further green light to the project, yet also showing how the complexity of decision processes in public projects is defined by practical constraints (in Baden-Württemberg, a quorum of one third of all eligible voters is required in a referendum). Other experiences with referenda, e.g. in Switzerland, also show a strong interdependence with lobbying and media influence. Thus, the frequently demanded involvement in decision processes is often unrealistic as an easy solution. Instead, it is better to bring citizens, experts and politicians together to share their knowledge and perspectives – a useful step also in preparing decisions.

Dialogue in Decision Making Processes

A learning organization can be recognized by the increasing care and professionalism it gives to decision making, where dialogue is an irreplaceable element. Arie de Geus (2008) maintains that if an organization is to learn, it has to take decisions. He distinguishes between 1) simple, routine decisions for which the necessary knowledge is available, and 2) decisions which demand changes in an organization's internal structure. The latter is a social process and involves people working in a group to identify new solutions for new situations. It must be seen and understood as a learning process.

Dialogic communication that produces better quality arguments and discovery helps in the preparation of such decisions. It should be set up as a process to address uncertainty and complexity and must be linked to the actual decision in question. However, it cannot (and should not) become a formal process as such, but instead serve to provide sufficient space for people to think, question the 'sacred cows' and identify blind spots.

Dialogue offers a chance to tap into the organization's collective intelligence and make better decisions. If decision makers can succeed in combining this potential advantage with acceptable timing for their actual decision, the probability of the use of dialogue techniques as a preparatory instrument in decision making grows.

Five Steps through the DECISIO© Process Map

In many organizations, people feel dialogic communication has a delaying effect on decisions and gives sustenance to uncertainties. It is frequently rejected and only used when absolutely necessary. A change in attitude is needed here. To take sustainable action and make decisions that last, we also need to learn to think differently. The process might be slow at the start, but the actual decision and its translation into action can then happen very quickly.
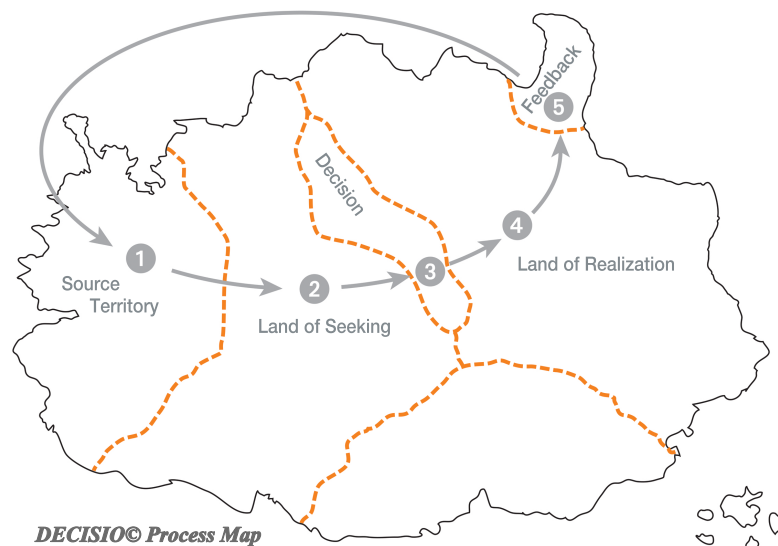

Figure 2: DECISIO© Process Map

The "decision process map" approach shown above provides orientation and/or structure and serves as a communication instrument in decision making. Its metaphoric gestalt promotes insights that are generally inaccessible to the traditional "digital" way of thinking.

The map treats decision making as a five-step journey and takes us into territories where we can sense uncertainty, intangibles, surprises and/or risks and changes in perspective. This journey takes us from the **source** (1) into the **search territory** (2) through the actual **resolution** (3) to the **implementation territory** (4) and back to the "**feedback" peninsula** (5) where we can view the decision process as a whole. In other words, it helps us design a process that allows us to assume responsibility and act.

This is where dialogue comes into play. It can augment the rational aspects behind decision making by opening up the imagination to the emotional aspects, ambiguities and intuitions. Through the train of thoughts which develops in the dialogue, thoughts can turn into thinking and new insights can grow. People can cross the lines that divide individual interests and opposing positions; and people can work together to reach more sound and sustainable decisions. This is an excellent approach in the preparation phase of a decision (when people are exploring the source (1) and the search territory (2)). The dialogue and the work in the feedback phase (5) also helps those involved to learn from critical decisions.

Step 1: Source territory

The source territory is the space in which the actual issue is identified – without ifs or buts. What are the potential risks or opportunities? What needs to be taken into consideration? What are the consequences of failure? Is it the right time for such a decision? What needs to be done to succeed together? This territory is home to those aspects which steer decision making behavior and which come into effect throughout the entire process.

Step 2: Search territory

The point here is to recognize the actual opportunities and determine the right time for a decision. It is important in this phase to brave uncertainty and remain alert and open. Even the dark corners of the territory have to be explored. Participants work together to consider many different "shared" perspectives, discover depth and variety, sharpen and define goals, develop and reject images.

Step 3: Resolution

The thinking and planning process has come to an end. Consideration must be given to the actions which need to be taken and the resources and competencies required. When it comes to "the decision", Susanne Ehmer (2004, p. 217) suggests that dialogue is not a suitable approach. Decisions have a safeguarding effect on the survival of an organization. In this phase, it is better to rely on trusted forms of communication that provide security.

Step 4: Realization

The decision process now takes on a totally different character. This is where all the thinking, wanting, planning and imagining is translated into action. Those in charge need to secure the flexibility and capacity to react in the event that reality proves to be different or has changed more quickly than anticipated when the decision was made. Dialogic units in this phase would seem more to hinder the people involved.

Step 5: Feedback and Lessons Learned

Wrong decisions in organizations can be costly and have debilitating effects. They are good starting points for and sources of individual and collective learning. Bringing together different perspectives as "stories and truths" reveals the different mental models that together led to the (incorrect) decision. This is the starting point for subsequent process optimization – the lessons learned can be translated to the actual organization.

THE FUNCTION OF DIALOGUE —
POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS IN MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONS

Plea for a New Level of Sobriety in the Relationship between Dialogue and Organizations

In the past, there has been a great deal of experimentation surrounding the use of dialogue. Its use in organizations went hand in hand with high expectations of change and was probably also linked to a latent need for spiritual hold and a search for meaning. Nowadays, the initial excitement has calmed down. Often, it doesn't fit the logic behind everyday actions. Experience shows that dialogue is still generally only used in very specific situations, which are not time critical and can accommodate the potential personal irritation that comes with the awareness that you hadn't known or realized something.

To What Extent Can Dialogue Actually be Implemented in the Organizational Context?

Michael Rautenberg (2010), a consultant who researched the use of dialogue in organizations, discusses the difficulties involved, particularly if serious heed is given to the notion of organizations as systems. He points out that organizations normally develop particular contextual conditions for communication processes which prevent the creation of shared social spaces. These include:

- uncircumventable, asymmetric constellations of relationships

- task-oriented role responsibilities attached to every job

- dynamics of power and influence

- inherent structural mechanisms

He argues for a new level of sobriety (in dialogue) and a redesign of the relationship between dialogue and organizations: in their organizational roles and posts, people are restricted in their freedom to communicate and act. This would significantly reduce the original demands of Senge, Schein, Isaacs and Bohm.

What Constitutes a Suitable Organizational Setting for Dialogue?

Increasing environmental complexity poses new challenges, which in turn demand too much of conventional mechanisms of dealing with complexity and question traditional forms of organizational logic. Teamwork is required and places elaborate demands on management. This could well be the chance and the hour for dialogic communication settings. The following examples illustrate some organizational settings that can benefit from dialogue. *(Weick & Sutcliffe: 2003)*

1. **High reliability organizations (HROs).** Dialogue can contribute to cultural development in organizations. Negotiating role boundaries and temporarily suspending hierarchies can help, especially in HROs like airlines or nuclear power plants, where collective mindfulness is an absolute must, since failure would have catastrophic consequences. The constant risk of a threat to their existence leads to the development of a "mindfulness" which can be stabilized through dialogic communication.

2. **When the people in power are on board** and recognize that space for reflection is needed to address the challenges. Given their position in the hierarchy, it is unwise for

top managers or CEOs to participate in the dialogue, but they can encourage, demand or even stipulate the participation of others. They have to endorse the envisaged delaying effect of dialogue on decisions, welcome "thinking outside the box" and incorporate any results in their decisions. This would represent a good cultural agenda.

3. **Systemic strategy development.** Dialogue can also be very effective in different stages of a strategic development process, particularly in situations that require highly protected social spaces in which people can work together to search for new development opportunities. However, it is essential that the participants do not revert to defending what is already established or simply pushing their own preconceived ideas. Scharmer's (2007) deliberations on how to introduce the previously inconceivable "new" into the organization would also find their place here.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of dialogue and dialectic thinking can help managers and organizations to foster genuine 'thinking together' and come up with new solutions and innovations in situations often perceived as dead ends. In addition to objectifying the situation, approaches based on dialogue and dialectic thinking bring people closer together and establish respect and a sense of humanity. They provide the participants with a shared social space to listen to all standpoints, adopt different perspectives and work on their issues in a structured manner.

Dialogue is Helpful in the Decision Preparation Phase

Dialogue is particularly helpful in the decision preparation phase, where it serves as a suitable, robust design to work out the differences in complex topics and create the choices and options needed as the basis for the decision making process.

Dialogue Complements Systemic Organizational Consulting

Systemic organizational consulting is grounded in dialectic thinking and in identifying different dimensions and their effectiveness. Dialogue is a means of making these different dimensions more tangible. As shown in this article, complex situations like company mergers or infrastructure projects benefit from the use of dialogue elements to differentiate between various dimensions like time, content and social aspects. During the Stuttgart 21 arbitration process, participants from the various interest groups used the "Check In" and "Check Out" dialogue tool at the beginning and end of public meetings. This provided the public with more information, greater context and, ultimately, a better understanding of the situation – and can thus be seen as a contributory element in creating the setting and conditions for a "shared meaning" process.

Clearly, an approach to communication based on dialogue and dialectic thinking has great potential, and the lessons learned from the examples in this article also ring true for other conflicts, tensions and contradictory situations in management and organizations. However, dialogue is far from being a "one size fits all" recipe, even though the examples show that it can be used in different types of organizations – from global conglomerates to SMEs. Successful use of a dialogue-dialectic approach would appear to be intrinsically linked to organizational culture. An open, lively culture in which employees are well integrated into decision processes will better foster the use of dialogue and dialectic thinking than a hierarchical, top-down culture. The potential of such an approach depends on how it relates to and is linked with other concepts in the respective organizational setting. The good news

is that it complements the commonly used procedures. Likewise, the socio-political context in which organizations operate can be viewed as an amplifier for applying dialogue-based dialectic elements.

Dialogue Assumes a Bridging Function in Organizational Consulting Projects

Creating awareness for changes in perspectives is a fundamental aspect in systemic organizational consulting. Integrating dialogue with the systemic approach creates a setting in which people can identify differences and thus base their decisions on clear choices and options. Dialogue should thus not be seen as a separate intervention, but as a highly valuable integrative process that bridges the time, contextual and social dimensions of the given situation.

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