

On Dialogue, Culture, and Organizational Learning

Edgar H. Schein

Consider any complex, potentially volatile issue—Arab relations; the problems between Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians; corporate decision making; getting control of the US deficit or health care costs; labor-management relations; and so on. At the root of the issue, we are likely to find communication failures and cultural misunderstandings that prevent the parties from framing the problem in a common way, and thus make it impossible to deal with the problem constructively.

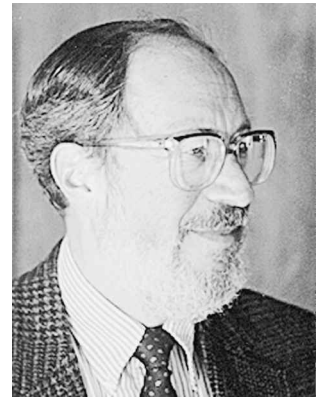
Clearly, we need ways of improving our thought processes, especially in groups where the solution depends on people reaching at least a common formulation of the problem. It is for this reason that governments, communities, and organizations are focusing increasing attention on the theory and practice of dialogue. Proponents of dialogue claim that it holds promise as a way of helping groups reach higher levels of consciousness and thus be more creative and more effective. At the same time, the uninitiated may view dialogue as just one more oversold communication technology—or nothing more than a new variant of sensitivity training.

My goal in this article is to provide one perspective on dialogue, based upon my own direct experience with it. 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 any model of organizational transformation.*

What Is the Problem and Why Is Dialogue Essential?

To answer this question, we must put dialogue, culture, and organizational learning in the context of changes that are occurring in the organizational world. These changes can be stated as a set of propositions, as follows.

- Because of the increasing rate of change in the environment, organizations face an increasing need for rapid learning.
- Because of the growth of technological complexity in all functions, organizational structures and designs are moving toward knowledge-based, distributed information forms.
- Consequently, organizations of all sizes will show a greater tendency to break down into subunits of various sorts, based on technology, products, markets, geographies, occupational communities, and other factors not yet known.
- The subunits of organizations are more and more likely to develop their own subcultures (implying different languages and different assumptions about reality, i.e., different mental models) because of their shared core technologies and their different learning experiences.
- Organizational effectiveness is therefore increasingly dependent on valid communication across subcultural boundaries. Integration across subcultures (the essential



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coordination problem) will increasingly hinge on the ability to develop an overarching common language and mental model.

- Any form of *organizational* learning, therefore, will require the evolution of shared mental models that cut across the subcultures of the organization.
- The evolution of new shared mental models is inhibited by current cultural rules about interaction and communication, making dialogue a necessary first step in learning.

The ultimate reason for learning about the theory and practice of dialogue, then, is that it facilitates and creates new possibilities for valid communication. If we did not need to communicate in groups, then we would not need to work on dialogue. But if problem solving and conflict resolution in groups is increasingly important in our complex world, then the skill of dialogue becomes one of the most fundamental of human skills.

Why do we have so many problems understanding each other? Basically, the answer is that we are all culturally overtrained not only to think in terms of certain consensually validated categories but also to withhold information that would in any way threaten the

current “social order.” From early on in life, we are taught that social relations hinge upon the mutual maintenance of “face.” “Face” can be thought of as the social value that persons attribute to themselves as they enter any interpersonal situation. As the sociologist Erving Goffman has shown so eloquently, we always present ourselves as *some-*

Why do we have so many problems understanding each other?

thing—by name, by title, by our demeanor, by the tone of our voice. And, in so doing, we always claim a certain amount of value or status for ourselves relative to the others in the situation.

Others then must make an immediate choice: to grant us what we have claimed, or to either withhold confirmation or actually challenge us. Consider a simple example of such disconfirmation. To get someone’s attention, I say “Excuse me . . . ,” and the other person responds with “Can’t you see I’m busy?” At this point, I am likely to feel put down or unacknowledged, and if the situation is not repaired, we will both lose face. I will not have been granted the status of a valid question asker, and the other person will have displayed him or herself as “rude.”

In fact, lack of acknowledgment is devastating to most human beings. We are taught early in life not only to pay attention to and acknowledge people, but to go further—to grant them what they claim unless it makes us too uncomfortable. Thus, when someone tells us a joke, we laugh even when we don’t think it is funny. If someone says, “Don’t I look nice in this outfit?” we tend to be complimentary even if we don’t like what we see. And so on. What we call *tact*, *good manners*, *savoir faire*, and *poise* usually refers to a person’s ability to respond in such a way as to enhance everyone’s self-worth, rather than tear it down.

Mutual face saving thus makes normal social relations possible. But in that very process, we operate by cultural rules that undermine valid communication and create what Chris Argyris calls “defensive routines.” To be polite, to protect everyone’s face, especially our own, we tend to say what we feel is most appropriate and least hurtful. It becomes a cultural rule to “say something nice if you say anything at all, and if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything.” All cultures teach such rules, but Asian cultures probably adhere to them even more than Western cultures. Whereas a confrontational remark in US culture may be seen only as rude and offensive, other cultures may view the same remark as a serious affront and insult, leading to an immediate breakdown of the relationship.

Time pressures create a real dilemma for problem-solving groups: voicing the truth might lead to a quicker solution, but undermine the relationship-building process. In a discussion or debate, various parties may see a factual disagreement as a personal attack or affront. This causes a defensive response that further interferes with communication and task accomplishment. To avoid such possibilities, we often formalize debate around common rules such as Robert’s Rules of Order, sacrificing communication and understanding to the preservation of face. This scenario is so typical in decision-making groups that one can state the following proposition:



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All problem-solving groups should begin in a dialogue format to facilitate the building of sufficient common ground and mutual trust, and to make it possible to tell what is really on one's mind.

Seen from this point of view, dialogue is a necessary condition for effective group action, because only with a period of dialogue is it possible to determine whether or not the communication that is going on is valid. If it is not valid, in the sense that different members are using words differently or have different mental models without realizing it, the possibilities of solving problems or making effective decisions are markedly reduced. Dialogue, then, is at the root of *all* effective group action.

If cross-cultural issues are involved as well, the development of shared mental models will require more lengthy and elaborate periods of dialogue. As organizations differentiate themselves in terms of programs, projects, functional groups, geographical units, hierarchical strata, or competency-based units (what John Seely Brown and others have called “communities of practice”), we will find that each of these units inevitably creates common frames of reference, common languages, and, ultimately, common assumptions, thus forming genuine subcultures that will have to be integrated if the organization is to work effectively. Once we recognize that the problem of coordination and integration in an organization is ultimately a problem of meshing subcultures, we will also realize that our normal coordination mechanisms are not up to the task. We will need technologies and mechanisms that make it possible for people to discover that they use language differently, that they operate from different mental models, and that the categories we employ are ultimately learned social constructions of reality and thus arbitrary. Dialogue is one such technology.

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Dialogue versus Sensitivity Training

To elucidate this argument, let me provide a very personal account of how I analyzed my own experiences with dialogue. My purpose in giving a detailed account is to demystify dialogue. Some proponents have made it sound like a most esoteric experience. If dialogue is to become helpful to organizational processes, it must be seen as accessible to all of us. Unfortunately, an abstract description does not help accessibility. As we all know, “the devil is in the details.”

I became specifically preoccupied with the question of how dialogue was different from good face-to-face communication of the sort we learn about in group dynamics and human relations workshops. The difference does not become clear until one actually experiences the dialogue setting. Then, however, the difference is obvious and can be described unambiguously.

Most communication and human relations workshops emphasize active listening, by which is meant that one should pay attention to all the communication channels—the spoken words, the body language, tone of voice, and emotional content. One should learn to focus initially on what the other person is saying rather than on one's own intended response. In contrast, dialogue focuses on getting in touch with underlying assumptions (especially our own assumptions) that automatically determine when we choose to speak and what we choose to say. Dialogue is focused more on the thinking process and how our perceptions and cognitions are preformed by our past experiences. The assumption here is that if we become more conscious of how our *thought process* works, we will think better collectively and communicate better. An important goal of dialogue is to enable *the group* to reach a higher level of consciousness and creativity through the gradual creation of a shared set of meanings and a “common” thinking process.

Active listening plays a role in this process, but is not the central focus or purpose. In fact, I discovered that I spent a lot more time in *self-analysis*, attempting to understand what *my own assumptions* were, and was relatively less focused on actively listening to others. Feelings and all of the other dimensions of communication are important. Eventually, dialogue participants do “listen actively” to each other, but the path for getting there is quite different.

In the typical sensitivity training workshop, we explore relationships through “opening up” and sharing, through giving and receiving feedback, and through examining all of the *emotional* problems of communication. In dialogue, however, we explore all the complexities of *thinking and language*. We discover how arbitrary our basic categories of thought and perception are and thereby become conscious of imperfections or biases in our basic *cognitive* processes.

An MIT colleague, Fred Kofman, provides an example of such bias by telling about the platypus. When this animal was first discovered, scientists found themselves in a major controversy. Was it really a mammal, a bird, or a reptile? The automatic assumption was that mammals, birds, and reptiles are the reality into which vertebrates had to be fitted, rather than categories for representing reality. Fred reminded us that the platypus was a platypus.

It is not necessary to force the platypus into any category, except as a matter of convenience. And when we do force the fit, we reduce opportunities for learning about the reality that is actually there.

Whereas, in sensitivity training, the goal is to use the group process to develop our individual interpersonal skills, dialogue aims to build a group that can think generatively, creatively, and, most important *together*. When dialogue works, the group can surmount the creative abilities of its individual members and can achieve levels of creative thought that no one would have initially imagined. Dialogue is thus a vehicle for creative problem identification and problem solving.

In sensitivity training, the learning emphasis falls heavily on learning how to give and receive feedback, a process that is countercultural because of our need to maintain face. Therefore, it elicits high levels of emotionality and anxiety. The process promises to give us new insights, to reveal our blind sides to us, and to provide opportunity to see ourselves as others see us. For many, this is not only novel, but potentially devastating—even though it may be ultimately necessary for self-improvement. To receive feedback is to put our illusions about ourselves on the line; to give feedback is to risk offending and unleashing hostility in the receiver.

In contrast, dialogue emphasizes the natural flow of conversation. It actually (though somewhat implicitly in my experience) discourages feedback and direct interpersonal encounters. In dialogue, the whole group is the object of learning, and the members share the potential excitement of discovering, collectively, ideas that individually none of them might have ever thought of. Feedback may occur, especially in relation to individual

behavior that undermines the natural flow of conversation, but it is not encouraged as a goal of the group process.

One of the most important differences between dialogue and other communication enhancers is that the group size is not arbitrarily limited. Whereas sensitivity training works best with groups of 10 to 15, I have been in dialogue groups as large as 60. I have been told that dialogue has been tried successfully with as many as 100 or more. The notion that such large groups can accomplish anything is counterintuitive. We must understand, however, that larger groups are often composed of individuals who have had prior small-group experience with dialogue. In the larger groups, these people have lower initial expectations and assumptions about the need for everyone to have significant “air time.”

In sensitivity training, everyone is expected to learn and to participate in the learning process. In dialogue, the role of individual contribution is blunted somewhat by the goal of reaching a higher level of communication as a group. Much of the individual work is internal, examining one’s own assumptions, which somewhat reduces the need to be competitive in terms of “getting one’s share of the air time.” In terms of length and frequency of meetings, dialogue appears to be more flexible, variable, and less intense.

How Does Dialogue Get Started?

In all of the groups that I have observed, initiated by William Isaacs, Peter Senge, or myself, the facilitator started by arranging the setting and then describing the concept. In each case, the group could understand the essence sufficiently to begin the conversation. The key to this understanding is to link dialogue to other experiences we have had that felt like real communication.

The initial role of the facilitator can be characterized in terms of the following kinds of activities:

- Organize the physical space to be as nearly a circle as possible. Whether or not people are seated at a table or tables is not as important as the sense of equality that comes from sitting in a circle.
- Introduce the general concept, then ask everyone to think about an experience of dialogue in the sense of “good communication” in their past.
- Ask people to share with their neighbor what the experience was and to think about the characteristics of that experience (this works because people are relating very concrete experiences, not abstract concepts).
- Ask group members to share what it was in such past experiences that made for good communication and write these characteristics on a flip chart.
- Ask the group to reflect on these characteristics by having each person in turn talk about his or her reactions.
- Let the conversation flow naturally once everyone has commented (this requires one and half to two hours or more).
- Intervene as necessary to clarify or elucidate, using concepts and data that illustrate the problems of communication (some of these concepts are spelled out below).
- Close the session by asking everyone to comment in whatever way he or she may choose.

The theory that lies behind such a startup is entirely consistent with what we know about group dynamics and involves several important assumptions about new groups:

1. Members should feel as equal as possible. (Even if there are actual rank or status differences in the group, everyone should sit in a circle.)
2. Everyone should feel a sense of guaranteed “air time” to establish their identity in the group. (Therefore, asking everyone to comment guarantees that everyone will have their turn and their space. In the larger groups, not everyone might speak, but the norm is that everyone has an opportunity to speak if they want to, and that the group will take whatever time is necessary for that to happen.)
3. The task of the group should be to explore the dialogue process, and to gain some understanding of it, rather than make a decision or solve some external problem.

4. Early in the group's life, members will be concerned primarily about themselves and their own feelings; hence, legitimizing personal experiences and drawing on these experiences is a good way to begin.

The length and frequency of meetings depend upon the size of the group, the reasons for getting together, and the constraints operating on members. The meetings held at MIT were generally one and a half to two hours long and occurred at roughly two- to three-week intervals. After watching various groups go through a first meeting, I found myself wondering how the second meeting of the group would get going. I found that the best method was to start by asking *everyone* to comment on "where they were at" at that moment and going around the circle with the expectation that everyone would make some comment. Again, what seems to be important is to legitimize air time for everyone and to tacitly imply that everyone should make a contribution to starting the meeting, even though the content of that contribution can be virtually anything. Obviously, this process would vary according to the size of the group, but the principle that "we are all in this together on an equal basis" is important to communicate.

The facilitator has a choice of how much theoretical input to provide, either at the beginning or as the process gets going. Concepts should be provided if the group really needs them. If the presentation is incorrectly timed, it can disrupt the group process.

Helpful Concepts to Facilitate Dialogue

To determine what concepts to introduce when, I have found it helpful to draw a roadmap based on Isaacs's basic model (figure 1). By mapping forms of conversation in terms of two basic paths, the model highlights what I think is the essential concept underlying dialogue—the discovery of one's own internal choice process regarding when to speak and what to say.

Suspension. As a conversation develops, there inevitably comes a point where we sense some form of disconfirmation. We perceive that our point was not understood, or we elicit disagreement, challenge, or attack. At that moment, we usually respond with anxiety or anger, though we may be barely aware of it. The first issue of choice, then, is whether or not to allow the feeling to surface and whether or not to trust the feeling. We

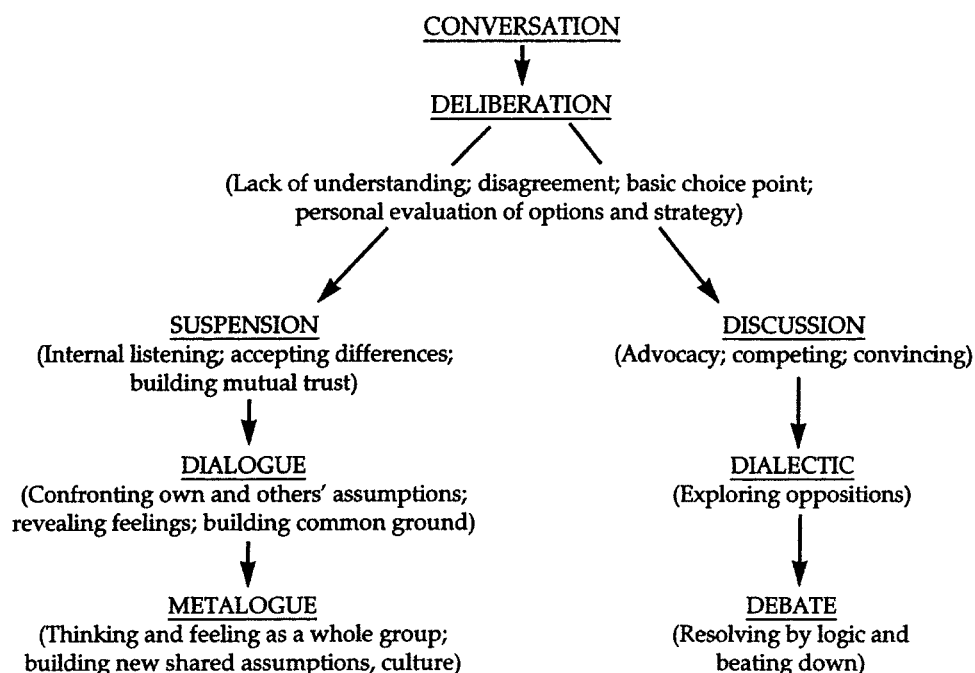


Figure 1

typically do not experience these as choices until we have become more reflective and conscious of our own emotions. But we clearly have a choice of whether or not to express the feeling overtly in some form or another.

As we become more aware of these choices, we also become aware of the possibility that the feeling was triggered by our *perception* of what the others in the group did, and *that these perceptions themselves could be incorrect*. Before we give in to anxiety and/or anger, we must determine whether or not the data were accurately interpreted. Were we, in point of fact, being challenged or attacked or whatever?

This moment is critical. As we become more reflective, we begin to realize how much our initial perceptions can be colored by expectations based on our cultural learning and our past experiences. We do not always perceive what is “accurately” out there. What we perceive is often based on our needs, our expectations, our projections, and, most of all, our culturally learned assumptions and categories of thought. It is this process of becoming reflective that makes us realize that the first problem of listening to others is to identify the distortions and biases that filter our own cognitive processes. *We have to learn to listen to ourselves before we can really understand others*, and such internal listening is, of course, especially difficult if one is in the midst of an active task-oriented discussion. Furthermore, there may be nothing in our cultural learning to support such introspection.

Once we have identified the basic issue that our perception itself may not be accurate, we face a second, more fundamental choice—whether or not to actively check the perception by taking up the point, asking what the person really meant, explaining ourselves further, or in some other way focusing specifically on the person who produced the disconfirming event. As we know from observing group processes, choosing to confront the situation immediately (for example, asking someone to explain what he or she meant with a specific remark) can quickly polarize the conversation around a few people and a few issues.

An alternative choice is to “suspend.” What Isaacs means by suspension is to let the issue—our perceptions, our feelings, our judgments, and our impulses—rest for a while in a state of suspension to see what more will come up from ourselves and from others. What this means operationally in the group (and what I have experienced over and over) is that when I am upset by what someone else says, I have a genuine choice between (1) voicing my reaction and (2) letting the matter go (thereby suspending my own reaction). Suspending is particularly difficult if I perceive that my prior point has been misunderstood or misinterpreted. Nevertheless, I have found repeatedly that if I suspend, I find that further conversation clarifies the issue and that my own interpretation of what may have been going on is validated or changed without my having to actively intervene.

It is when a number of members of the group discover some value in suspending their own reactions that the group begins to go down the path shown in figure 1. In contrast, when a number of members choose to react by immediately disagreeing, elaborating, questioning, and in other ways focusing on a particular trigger that set them off, the group goes down the path of discussion and ultimately mires in unproductive debate. Suspension allows reflection, which is very similar to the emphasis, in group dynamics training, on observing the “here and now.” Isaacs correctly notes, however, that reflective attention is looking at the past. Instead, he suggests that what we need is “proprioception”—attention to and living in the moment. Ultimately, dialogue tries to achieve a state of knowing one’s thought as one is having it. Whether proprioception in this sense is psychologically possible is debatable, but the basic idea is to shorten the internal feedback loop as much as possible. As a result, we can get in touch with what is going on in the here and now, and become conscious of how much our thought and perception are both a function of our past learning and the immediate events that trigger it. This learning is difficult at best, yet lies at the heart of the ability to enter dialogue.

Dialogue versus Discussion. How do we know whether discussion and/or debate is more or less desirable than dialogue? Should we always go down the dialogue path? I would argue that discussion or debate is a valid problem-solving and decision-making

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process only if one can assume that the group members understand each other well enough to be “talking the same language.” Paradoxically, such a state of sharing categories probably cannot be achieved unless somewhere in the group’s history some form of dialogue has taken place. Alternatively, the danger in premature discussion is that the group reaches a “false consensus”—members assume that they mean the same thing by certain terms. Only later do they discover that subtle differences in meaning have major consequences for implied action and implementation.

Dialogue, on the other hand, 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. As we listen to ourselves and others in what may appear often to be a disjointed, rather random conversation, we begin to see the bias and subtleties of how each member thinks and expresses meanings. In this process, we do not convince each other, but build a common experience base that allows us to learn collectively. The more the group has achieved such collective understanding, the easier it becomes to reach decisions, and the more likely it will be that the decision will be implemented in the way that the group meant it.

Group Dynamics. The dynamics of “building the group” occur in parallel with the process of conducting the dialogue. Issues of identity, role, influence, group goals, norms of openness and intimacy, and questions of

authority all have to be worked on, though much of this occurs implicitly rather than explicitly, as would be the case in a human relations or group dynamics workshop. The group will display all of the classical issues that occur around authority vis-à-vis the facilitator: Will the facilitator tell us what to do? Will we do it, even if we are told? Does the facilitator have the answers and is withholding them, or is he or she exploring along with the rest of us? At what point can we function without the facilitator? And so on.

As issues of group growth and development arise, they have to be dealt with if they interfere with or confuse the dialogue process. The facilitator should, therefore, be skilled in group facilitation as well, so that the issues that arise in the group can be properly sorted into two categories: issues that have to do with the development of the dialogue, and those that have to do with the development of the group as a group. In my own experience, the dialogue process speeds up the development of the group and should therefore be the primary driving process in each meeting. A major reason for this “speed up” is that dialogue creates psychological safety and thus allows individual and group change to occur, assuming that there is some motivation to change present already. Dialogue cannot create the need to change, but it certainly facilitates the process of change.

Some initial motivation to engage in a dialogue must be present. Because the process appears initially to be very “inefficient,” a group will not readily volunteer to engage in dialogue unless it is unfrozen in some other respects, i.e., unless group members feel disconfirmed (are hurting), are feeling some guilt or anxiety, and need to overcome such feelings in order to get on with a task. The core task or ultimate problem, then, is likely to be the longer run reason why the group will meet in the first place.

The group may initially experience dialogue as a detour or a slowing down of problem solving. But real change does not happen until people feel psychologically safe, and the implicit or explicit norms that are articulated in a dialogue session provide that safety by giving people both a sense of direction and a sense that the dangerous aspects of

interaction will be contained. If the group can work on the task or problem using the dialogue format, it should be able to reach a valid level of communication much faster.

Containment. Isaacs speaks articulately of the need to build a *container* for dialogue, to create a climate and a set of explicit or implicit norms that permits people to handle “hot issues” without getting burned. For example, the steelworkers participating in a recent labor/management dialogue likened dialogue to the mill in which molten metal was poured from a container into various molds safely, while human operators were close by. The container is jointly created and then permits high levels of emotionality and tension without anyone getting burned or burning up.

The facilitator contributes to all of this by modeling the behavior, by being nonjudgmental, and by displaying the ability to suspend his or her own categories and judgments. This skill becomes especially relevant in group situations where conflict heats up to the point that it threatens to spill over or out of the container. At that point, the facilitator can simply legitimize the situation, acknowledging the conflict as real and as something to be viewed by all the members in the here and now without judgment or recrimination, or even without the felt need to do anything about it.

Task versus Process. Once a group experiences dialogue, the process tends to feed on itself. In several cases, I have been in groups that chose to stay in a circle and continue in a dialogue mode even as they tackled other work—concrete tasks with time limits. I would hypothesize, however, that unless a group is formed specifically for the purpose of learning about itself, it eventually needs some other larger purpose to sustain itself. Continuing to meet in a dialogue format probably does not work once members have mastered the basic skills.

The best way to think about dialogue is as a group process that arises initially out of the individual participants’ personal skills or attitudes. Dialogue is, by definition, a process that has meaning only in a group. Several people have to collaborate with each other for dialogue to occur. But this collaboration rests on an individual choice, based on a certain attitude toward how to get the most out of a conversation and on certain skills of reflection and suspension. Once the group has those attitudes and skills collectively, it is possible to have even highly time-sensitive problem-solving meetings in a dialogue format.

I have also observed that most people have a general sense of what dialogue is about and have experienced versions of it in their past relationships. Thus, even in a problem-solving meeting, a facilitator may suggest that the group experiment with dialogue. In my own experience, I have found it best to introduce the idea, early on, that, behind our comments and perceptions, there are always assumptions, and that our problem-solving process will be improved if we get in touch with our own and each other’s assumptions. Consequently, if the conversation turns into too much of a discussion or debate, I can legitimately raise the question of whether or not the disagreement is based on different assumptions, and explore those assumptions explicitly. Continually focusing the group on the cognitive categories and assumptions that underlie conversation is, from this point of view, the central role of the facilitator.

One of the ultimate tests of the importance of dialogue will be to find out whether or not difficult, conflict-ridden problems can be handled better in groups that have learned to function in a dialogue mode, and that have agreed to seek a “win-win” outcome. However, learning to hold a dialogue requires initial motivation to work together. There is nothing in the dialogue process itself that would overcome the desire of group members to win out over other group members, if that is their initial motivation.

On Culture and Subcultures

The role of dialogue in relation to culture is of especial significance. When we operate as culture carriers and are conscious of our cultural membership, we are emotionally attached to our culturally learned categories of thought; we value them and protect them as an aspect of our group identity. One of the ways that groups, communities, organizations, or other units that develop subcultures define themselves and set their psychological boundaries is by developing a language. In occupational communities, we call this language “jargon.” Using that language expresses membership and belonging, and that, in turn, provides status and identity.

Groups made up of members from different cultures or subcultures have difficulty communicating with each other, even if they speak the same native language.

In other words, powerful motivational forces are at work, and these forces make us cling to our language and our thought processes even if we recognize that they are biased and block communication. We often feel that our biases are the correct ones and thus make ourselves impervious to other views. And if we value our group, we feel that others should learn our language, as is sometimes the case with information technology professionals who insist that users learn their terminology.

In addition, the familiar categories of thought provide meaning, comfort, and predictability—things we all seek. Given these forces, we should not be surprised if groups made up of members from different cultures or subcultures have difficulty communicating with each other, even if they speak the same native language, and even if they are motivated to try to understand each other. In fact, using the same language, such as English, creates a greater risk that people will overlook the actual differences in categories of thought that reflect functional subcultures such as sales, production, or finance. Only when decisions fail to be implemented correctly, do we begin to realize that what people heard as the decision differed according to their membership in different subcultures.

The subculture problem can be stated in terms of the following propositions:

- Subcultures tend to form around any stable social unit, where stability is a function of:
 - Relative stability of membership
 - How long the founders of the group have been in leadership roles
 - The vividness and potency of leadership
 - The number and intensity of common coping experiences
 - The absolute length of time the group has existed
 - The “smallness” of the group, in the sense of permitting high levels of mutual acquaintance and trust
- Functional and geographical subcultures are highly visible and, therefore, easily noticed; hierarchical subcultures are harder to detect but very active because many of the conditions for subculture formation mentioned above apply to hierarchical strata: the board subculture, the executive subculture (CEO, office of the president, key board committees, executive committee, president’s council, senior political appointees in the government, etc.) and so on down the hierarchy.
- Organizational integration, coordination, and learning is hindered most by variations in the *hierarchical* subcultures because of the myth that “all management speaks the same language.”

It is this last point that requires most elaboration because hierarchy-based subcultures not only are harder to detect but their effect is more devastating. For example, when one invites CEOs to a seminar, they invariably want to know who else is attending. If the other attendees are not equivalent-level executives, they are reluctant to attend. This response is partly a matter of protecting status. But at a deeper level, it reflects the executives’ assumption that they live in a special world and that only others who live in that world can really understand it and, therefore, be useful sources of learning. When multiple ranks are represented in a seminar, it is often very evident that managers at different levels speak different languages. Words such as *empowerment* or *delegation*, for example, have subtly different meanings depending on whether one is a CEO (with “absolute” power) or a vice president who is constrained by various policies. In other words, how much power and autonomy one has in one’s organizational “space” colors very much what things mean.

Further clinical evidence that different strata have different subcultures comes from the frequent complaint one hears from CEOs that, even though they have a lot of power and authority, they have great difficulty getting their programs implemented. They complain that things are not understood, that goals seem to change as they get communicated down the hierarchy, or that their subordinates “screw up” because they don’t really understand what is wanted. This often leads CEOs to mass communication, such as videotaped messages sent to everyone or mass meetings where visions are shared with

everyone simultaneously. In spite of these efforts, people still hear very different things “down the line.”

Taking these various points about subcultures together leads to the following conclusions: We must take the impact of subcultures on language and mental models seriously, and we must take the subcultural differences between hierarchical strata seriously, especially between the executive stratum and the rest of the organization.

The need for dialogue across subcultural boundaries, especially across hierarchical boundaries, is, therefore, one of the most pressing needs. Much of what we call *bureaucracy*, in the bad sense of that word, stems from misunderstanding across these kinds of boundaries.

Organizational Learning

What are the implications of dialogue and culture dynamics for organizational learning? Organizational learning is not possible unless some learning first takes place in the executive subculture. I do not see how learning at that or any other level of the organization can take place unless the executive subculture first recognizes itself as a subculture in need of analysis. Such self-analysis will inevitably involve periods of dialogue, first to help members of this group become conscious of their own cognitive bias, and later to become sympathetic to the problems of communicating to the rest of the organization whatever new insights they have gained. Yet, it is executive leaders who may be most reluctant to engage in this kind of self-reflective analysis. For leaders to reveal to others (and even to themselves) that they are not sure of themselves, that they do not understand all of the assumptions on which they base action, and that they make mistakes in their thinking can be profoundly threatening.

Dialogue at the executive level is not enough for organizational learning to occur. The process of communicating across the hierarchical levels of an organization will require further dialogue because of the likelihood that different strata operate with different assumptions. If the initial learning has occurred in groups below the executive level, as is often the case, the problem of creating a dialogue across hierarchical strata is even more essential because it is so easy for the higher level to undermine the learning of the lower levels.

In conclusion, learning across cultural boundaries cannot be created or sustained without initial and periodic dialogue. Dialogue in some form is therefore necessary and integral to any organizational learning that involves going beyond the cultural status quo. Organizations do learn within the set of assumptions that characterizes their present culture and subcultures. But if any new organizational responses are needed that involve changes in cultural assumptions or learning across subcultural boundaries, dialogue must be viewed as an essential component of such learning.

Further Reading

Some basic material on dialogue can be found in William Isaacs, “Dialogue: The Power of Collective Thinking,” *The Systems Thinker* 4 (1993): 1–4; in Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); and in David Bohm, *On Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1990).

Basic material on organizational culture and group dynamics is drawn from my own work. See, especially, *Process Consultation, Vol. 2* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1987); *Process Consultation, Vol. 1*, 2nd ed. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1988); *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992); and “How Can Organizations Learn Faster?” *Sloan Management Review* 34 (1993): 85–92.

The crucial analysis of cultural face work is drawn from the seminal work of Erving Goffman, best summarized in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959). Chris Argyris’s development of the concept of defensive routines can be found in his book, *Strategy, Change, and Defensive Routines* (Marshfield, MA: Pitman, 1985).

The process of communicating across the hierarchical levels . . . will require further dialogue because . . . different strata operate with different assumptions.

Communities of practice were described in J.S. Brown and P. Duguid, "Organizational Learning and Communities of Practice." *Organization Science* 2 (1991): 40–57.

The basic dilemmas of organizational learning are well captured in D.N. Michael, "Governing by Learning in an Information Society" in *Governing in an Information Society*, ed. S.A. Rosell (Montreal, Quebec: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1992).

More current references include my own work, *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), and *Process Consultation Revisited* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley/Prentice Hall, 1999). See, also, William Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

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