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1

RELATIONAL LEADING AND THE CHALLENGE OF DIALOGUE

Consider your typical day at work. What are you doing? How are you spending your time? Chances are very good that most of the time you are engaged in communicating. You are on the phone, in a meeting, on a conference call, chatting with colleagues, writing a letter, reading or sending email, composing or reading a report, and so on. In effect, you are participating in dialogue. Such dialogue is scarcely trivial; it is not "merely talking," "keeping up to date," or "disseminating information." You are participating in a complex process of relating, in words and deeds. On this process depends the future of the organization—its life or death.

Yet, you may say, "isn't dialogue just natural?" It's only making conversation, isn't it, just normal talk? And doesn't everyone know that it pays to be clear, and we should be sure others understand our ideas—and vice versa? But beyond that, no big deal! But consider again: aren't there some people with whom you really love to talk; being with them is a pleasure; work is easily accomplished? And aren't there others who are, well, a

bit difficult? Things never seem to go very smoothly. Where some of your colleagues fire your enthusiasm, others take the wind from your sails. Some are a bit unpolished in their dealings, even clumsy; others are shy and not very forthcoming; Still others seem altogether stuck on themselves—me, me, me—while their colleagues remain cool and distant. We all recognize these variations in how people engage in dialogue. And to be sure, your style will be judged by your colleagues—for good or ill. In this little book we hope to bring dialogue to life in a new way. We want to take a close look at the dynamics of everyday talk, and notice how small shifts in wording can often make huge differences in outcome. We want to bring into focus the ways in which we depend on each other for what it is we say and how effective we are. We wish to show how respect and distance, trust and alienation, feelings of well-being and of stress, friendship and enmity, concern and callousness are all achieved in the twists and turns of dialogue. The book is designed to engage you in series of dialogic challenges, inviting you to read, think, imagine, and create. If successful, you should emerge at the end as a different kind of leader, more skilled than ever in the daily demands of relating.

The book is composed of nine chapters. To begin we explore why dialogue is so essential to the success of an organization. As we will explore, it is within dialogue that the basic understandings—the logics and the values—that are essential to the functioning of the organization depend. We will also take a look at the conditions faced by organizations today, conditions that demand a re-thinking of the organization and the crucial place of dialogue within it. With these ideas in place, you will also begin to see the practice of leading in entirely new ways. We call this new

approach *relational leading*. It is important to explore its dimensions. What new skills are required for the leader today, what are the potentials, what are the hurdles? This new understanding of leadership coexists with major shifts in world conditions. In this context we shall explore why, in the present day global context, the demands for effective dialogue are greatly intensified.

In the next chapter we shall further develop the background for the dialogic challenges. Here we introduce concepts that will prove invaluable in thinking about the dialogic process and will prepare you for the learning experiences ahead. In the seven chapters that follow we will thrust you headlong into some of the major dialogic challenges confronted in today's organization. We focus, for example, on the challenges of creating organizational culture, leading teams, handling change, reducing conflict, grappling with emotions, stimulating creativity, combating organizational stasis, and coaching your employees. These challenges all require sensitive, flexible, and creative movements in dialogue. And, through reflective immersion in actual cases, your skills of relational leading are sharpened.

The book is written for leaders, change agents and other practitioners wishing to learn and develop their relational and dialogical skills, and thus contribute to the larger missions in which they are engaged.

Dialogue and World Construction

Why do we place such great importance on dialogue? After all, business schools rarely take up the topic. They don't spend much time on dialogue because, as it is traditionally held, it is reasoning and facts that count. After all, if we observe closely and think

carefully about what is before us, isn't this the basis for organizational success? If we take careful account of things like markets, products, profits, personnel, research, outcomes, and the like, we can develop rational plans. And with rational plans in place, we can assess our success in achieving our goals. If we are failing to achieve our goals, we may examine what we are doing wrong, and make corrections. On this account, dialogue may be important, but only as a way of communicating about our thinking and the relevant facts.

To be sure, this is the traditional wisdom for achieving organizational success. However, developments of recent decades not only demonstrate the flaws in such assumptions, they suggest that the continuing application of such assumptions may actually be harmful to the organization. Most important, these developments indicate that dialogue is not simply an after-the-fact process for sharing information; it is a process on which the very life of the organization depends. How is this so? Let's take what seems to be an ordinary fact: One of your employees, Thomas, is not doing his job. He has little to say at team meetings, and he seems lethargic in carrying out his assignments. If the organization is to function successfully, it makes sense to replace Thomas with someone else. But consider again: You talk to one of Thomas' colleagues and he tells you that he is a great friend to his team-mates. He comes by their offices, gives them support, and talks with them about the organization and their private lives. He is a valuable asset. Then you talk to an employee who works for Thomas, and she tells you that he is really a dedicated worker, so much so that he has a hard time meeting the deadlines that he sets up. You also talk to Thomas, and find that he has real doubts in the way top

management has defined the job of the team, but that he doesn't speak his mind for fear of seeming negative. So, now you find that your so-called "fact" is better viewed as an "interpretation;" it is just one point of view among many.

"OK," you say, "but human behavior is often ambiguous. We often have to fall back on interpretations. Let's take economics. Here we have 'hard facts!'" Or do we? When the former Soviet Union was dismantled, and Russia became a nation state, top economists were called in to help plan the economic policies that would yield a successful future. They examined reams of evidence, applied the latest economic theories, and used highly sophisticated mathematical models to chart the future. However, two characteristics of the process became paramount: first, there was enormous disagreement among economists as to the most promising policies; and second, the policies that were finally put into place were major failures. In effect, economic facts are no less based on interpretations than facts about human behavior.

Now consider the big picture: Whatever exists does not require any particular label. What you call the "door" to your room could also be called a "hole" or an "escape." You could even call it "William" or "Sarah." All the names are optional. Of course you are comfortable calling it a door because you have done so for years and everyone agrees with you. But what if they did not agree with you; what if there were many different groups, and each had its own way of talking about what you call a door. At this point you would have to conclude that your "door" is not a fact in the world, but a conventional form of description. It is one way of talking about the world among many, and it makes sense to you because most of your acquaintances share your conventions.

More generally, this is to say that we *socially construct* our worlds—together we come to describe, explain, and to know the world as this as opposed to that. This view of socially constructed worlds represents a major transformation in contemporary understanding. Traditionally we have placed a premium on *the truth*, as if there is some set of words that is uniquely suited to represent the world as it is. This view continues to be shared in both science and society. From a constructionist perspective, however, the world comes to be what it is for us by virtue of our relationships. Whatever exists, simply exists. But the moment we begin to describe or explain, we are taking part in a cultural tradition—one tradition among many. Or more to the point: Our words are products of preceding dialogues now offered up to the unfolding dialogue of the moment.

As social constructionist scholarship also makes clear, we do more than socially construct the world of facts—or what we take to be real. We also come to understandings about what is rational and what is valuable or moral. Most of us find it both reasonable and moral, for example, that people can lay claim to private ownership. We think it is a good idea if people can own their places of living; we believe they will take pride in their living spaces and contribute to stable communities as a result. And, we believe it is morally wrong to steal another's possessions. Yet, there are very elaborated philosophies that do not believe private ownership contributes to the common good, and there are many people who find it totally agreeable to make a living through robbery. It all depends on the company you keep. As we see, from a social constructionist view, dialogue about what is real, rational, and good is essential in creating those common understandings

by which we lead our lives. Without dialogue we have nothing to rely on in the way of understanding, we have no reasons for our actions, and there is little in the sense of right and wrong, good and bad. In effect, to be organized at all depends on collectively coordinating words and actions. If participants are not roughly “on the same page” in terms of their fundamental understandings of the real, rational, and good, then there is no organization.

Creating organization is one thing, but the pivotal significance of dialogue does not end there. Consider some additional challenges that confront almost every organization:

- There are disagreements that lie unspoken. Members of an organization may demonstrate public agreement when they are together. However, many are skeptical of what is said in public; they have private ideas, special motives, and values that run counter to the public agreements. These hidden views and values may subtly undermine organizational functioning.
- Agreements are seldom shared all the way across an organization. The kinds of agreements that may seem reasonable at the highest levels of the organization may not be shared throughout the ranks. Those hired for research and development may have quite different ideas about the organization than those in marketing, human resources, or operations. If the organization is distributed geographically, those in one region may have quite different views of reality and quite different values from those in other regions.
- If participants have strong and enthusiastic agreements, the organization may be strangled. There is little room for new insights, shifts in perspective, and appreciation of information that unsettles these agreements.

Further, endless periods of “business as usual” rob the organization of excitement and the thrill of new ideas and challenges. When organizational change is essential, entirely new demands for dialogue must be confronted. For one, there may be a high demand for new and creative ideas. And, as we shall later see, creativity is primarily the outcome of relational process. Further, when new plans are in motion, it is essential to generate “buy-in” throughout the organization. However, commitment to the realities, rationalities, and values of the past may stand in the way.

- Organizations exist within larger social environments, and synchrony with these environments is essential to the wellbeing of the organization. Failing to take into consideration the views and values of the world outside, and failing to generate outside esteem for what the organization is doing, will ultimately mean hard knocks for the organization.

As you can see, the challenge of dialogue is continuous, and skills in coordination are critical to the organization’s future. Further, the demand for these skills is more acute today than ever before. Let’s explore:

Dialogue and the Communication Explosion

The challenges of dialogue have always been present in organizational life. However, only recently have we become aware of the complexity and importance of these challenges. This new consciousness is not only due to the emergence of social construction. Rather, for most leaders the origins lie in the experiences of daily life, and most particularly, experiences resulting from the explosion in communication. In the past century we have witnessed a

major transformation in communication technologies. In earlier decades we greeted the arrival of the automobile, telephone, radio, and mass publishing. Then came television and jet transportation, which subsequently gave way to the arrival of the Internet, email, sophisticated search engines, mobile phones, and more. In effect, today’s world is characterized by a massive, global-wide movement of people, ideas, information, incitements, warnings, and expressions of value. This means that in today’s organizations we are increasingly influenced by:

- Diversity in gender, religion, and ethnicity of the workforce, all of which gives rise to differences in constructed worlds.
- The increasing amount of information and the development of interactive digital communication forms (for instance blogs), rapid sharing of information from many sources, and often with differing implications for action.
- The quicksilver development of products or services that may threaten or challenge one’s organization.
- The global expansion of organizational functioning, opening new markets or venues of application.
- The awareness of opportunities for creating useful or profitable alliances.
- The rise in educational level of the populations.
- The spreading value of democracy in the workplace, which favors workforce input into organizational decisions.
- The public’s increased knowledge of the organization’s activities, and the resulting vulnerability of the organization to public opinion.

- The potential for rapid development of grass-roots movements that may oppose the organization's activities.
- The government's increased knowledge of the organization's activities, and the resulting potential for interference.
- The increasing use of electronic control systems within the organization.

In each of these eleven cases, the need for skilled dialogue is urgent. How is the diverse workforce to be united, for example, or, how can the organization make decisions in ambiguous and ever changing circumstances, maximize creative responses to changing demands, deal with public criticism, respond to workers' demands for rights, and so on? Navigating in this hyper complex society and these ever changing conditions is challenging. Required are capacities for generating and engaging in multi-perspective reflection, dialogue that is at once open and focused, improvised and organized, creative and conserving. But how is one to speak, what is to be said, what if there are disagreements, and what if the answer to such questions is not the same from one moment to the next? It is to just such issues that this book attends.

Organizing: From Mechanics to Confluence

We inherit from the past many traditions, and we rely on these traditions to guide our way through life. The same may be said of our organizations. We inherit ideas about how organizations ideally function, along with visions of good leadership. However, the question we must now confront is whether our traditional understandings of the well-functioning organization and the effective leader are wise guides for the future. As we have just seen, the

emerging challenges to the traditional organization are enormous. The demands they make on dialogic skills are multiple. Can our major traditions adequately deal with these challenges? We don't think so. As we see it, some of the major traditions that currently guide organizational life are not only counter-productive; in the long run they may even be fatal. Let us first re-consider some central assumptions about well-functioning organizations. Then we turn to our traditional views of leadership.

The primary conception of the organization to emerge in the 20th century was that of the machine. That is, like a machine the well-functioning organization:

- is composed of separate parts, each of which has a specific function (e.g. operations, marketing, finance, human resources).
- employs individuals to fulfill specific requirements in these functional domains.
- attempts to maximize the relationship between inputs and outputs (i.e. to achieve profit, efficiency, economy, etc.)
- is subject to rational and empirical assessment to insure optimal functioning.

Under certain conditions this mechanical view of the organization can function very well. This is especially so if environmental conditions are stable, and the workforce homogeneous. Life is predictable, and rational planning can be effective. But now consider the emerging conditions of the 21st century: Increasing diversity of work forces, ever expanding loads of mixed information, innovations burgeoning from all corners of the globe, environmental demands in flux, and so on. Under these conditions the mechanical organization is severely compromised. The

functional divisions are continuously challenged by ever shifting demands and opportunities; employees must rapidly integrate new functions into their workload, competing views of what is rational and optimal are continuously challenged, and so on.

The potentials for effective dialogue are also reduced by the traditional organization. Division into separate parts favors communication within functional areas, but discourages cross-functional knowledge exchange. Because they are individually assessed, employees may be highly guarded in terms of what information and opinions they are willing to share. The centering of decision-making in upper management generates ignorance, alienation, and suspicion within the lower ranks.

Required, then, is a new vision of the organization, one that is maximally geared to the contemporary global context, and maximally sensitive to the challenges of effective dialogue. In our view, it is helpful here to shift from a mechanical metaphor—with its emphasis on fixed parts—to a more hydraulic view of the organization, one that emphasizes continuous movement or flow. We are particularly attracted to the concept of *confluence*, that is, of a *flowing with*. It is essential that the organization flow with the currents of its surrounds; it is essential that those within the organization flow with each other. On this view we don't emphasize separations—the organization as opposed to its environment, this functional group as separated from that, or this employee as independent of another. Rather, we are drawn to confluences, to relational coordination, to conjoining, and the resulting movement in the currents of which the organization is a part. Successful dialogue—the flowing together of multiple voices—is the essence of confluence.

Let us be a little more concrete: If the contemporary organization is to thrive, it is essential that information, ideas, opinions, and values move freely across the borders that otherwise separates the organization from its context. At all levels and in all areas of the organization, there must be open dialogue with those outside. This same freedom of movement should characterize relationships within the organization. It is essential that there are opportunities and contexts for open dialogue on a 360-degree basis. And in providing goods or services to the broader world, it is essential that the same kinds of dialogue are sustained. With a continuous flow of information, ideas, opinions and values the organization becomes flexible in its capabilities, able to adjust and re-adjust as conditions change, open to new ideas, and effective in the collaborative process of creating. The participants move dialogically *with* each other and move *with* the broader world.

Relational Leading

The vital organization today is one in which continuous coordination—both internally and with the world outside is essential. Or more pointedly, it is an organization in which dialogues run smoothly, information and opinions are freely exchanged, there is mutual respect and appreciation, and the outcomes are satisfying. Yet, when the goal of confluence is uppermost, we must also rethink the process of leadership. Here, too, our old traditions are declining in usefulness, and new visions are needed. Our major tradition of leadership has ancient origins. Perhaps the earliest form of large-scale organization was military in nature; large numbers of men were mobilized under conditions of do or die. We commonly view this form of organization as a pyramid. The plans

of action are developed at the pinnacle of the structure, orders are passed downward through the various functional units (e.g. infantry, supplies, medical), and large numbers of people execute the orders. Failure to follow orders can yield execution. Information relevant to the success of the plans is conveyed upward through the pyramid.

The metaphor of the pyramid continues to inform much organizational practice today. Often referred to as “command and control,” the view dominated the organizational sphere for much of the 20th century. In its worst form, the “do as I say, or else...” mentality approximates management by terror. However, recent decades have been marked by growing discontent with this structure. And this is not only because the structure is inflexible, as just discussed. Problems were increasingly noticeable in the form of leadership that it invited. Regardless of the level of the organization a leader occupied, the command and control organization encourages:

- *Impersonal relations.* Command and control structures create a population of the obedient. For the leader in such organizations, this population is distanced. The leader thinks about “what *they* should do,” as opposed, for example, to “what *we* should do.” To remove this distance—in the form of friendship—is to reduce one’s capacity to give orders. Empathy with those under one’s control is limited; they live and work at a distance.
- *Limited communication.* With impersonal relations prevailing, there are also limits on communication. Each individual in the hierarchy has certain functions to perform, and communication tends to be limited to these functions. One receives directives from above, and provides them feedback. Other communication is often

viewed as a “process cost” to the organization. It just takes time and attention away from what really matters.

- *Distrust.* With impersonal, non-empathic, and limited communication, the seeds are planted for distrust. Members of the organization significantly limit their relationship with each other. Such distrust is accelerated by the competitive nature of the hierarchy. Everyone is out for him or herself, and understands that fundamentally, all one’s colleagues are potential threats to one’s wellbeing. No one can be trusted.
- *Lack of creative engagement.* If one is primarily taking orders from above, and his or her work will be used to improve the status of those above, there is little incentive for active and creative participation in the organization. It is much less threatening to one’s future simply to perform as required.

As many believe, the command and control organization is a thing of the past, and along with it, the conception of the leader as one who commands, controls and decides for all. And, to rephrase the above, the vital organization today is dependent on continuous coordination—both internally and with the world outside. When dialogues run smoothly, information and opinions are freely exchanged, and there is mutual respect and appreciation, effective action is facilitated.

What sort of leadership is envisioned here? Nothing less than a radical conception is demanded. For centuries we have viewed leadership as a quality or characteristic of the individual. There are good leaders and bad leaders, and we can distinguish the qualities that separate the former from the latter. In earlier centuries there was a tendency to view leaders in terms of charismatic personality;

there remain echoes of this concept even today. In the 20th century the focus shifted to qualities of good managers. And today, literally thousands of books on leadership list the characteristics of the good leader.

However, in light of all that we have said, it is clear that in the emerging era we must replace the concept of individual leadership with that of *relational leading*. The term “leadership” is largely tied to the view of the individual leader, while “relational leading” refers to the ability of persons in relationship to move with engagement and efficacy into the future. In this sense, relational leading is an activity, not a personal attribute. It is within relational processes that meaning is born, sustained, and transformed. And it is also the impoverished relational process that brings about conflict, alienation, and dysfunctional organizations. The challenge, then, is to enrich and enhance relational process. Increasingly, we find scholars and practitioners championing more relational conceptions of leadership. In these writings the emphases are clear. Needed are effective practices of collaboration, empowerment, horizontal decision-making, information sharing, networking, continuous learning, appreciation, and connectivity. The successful organization of the future must embrace processes of productive and animated interchange among the participants. Ideally, relational leading should take place throughout an organization. In this sense, leading is not a matter only for those in the top echelons. Effective participation in practices of sharing, supporting, appreciating, and so on should take place at all levels of the organization. However, individuals occupying positions of authority do have a heightened responsibility. This is true not only because they serve as models for those in the lower ranks of the

organization, but because they can often set in motion the kinds of relational practices most needed. They can teach and invite forms of interchange from which the organization is nourished and from which new potentials are created.

Let us return finally and more directly to the issue of dialogue. As we proposed, dialogue is at the center of organizational life. Depending on the quality of dialogue, the organization lives or dies. And, the significance and challenge of smooth and open dialogue is more important today than ever before. In relational leading the dialogic process is the central concern. Relational leading first involves a consciousness of the relational process and how it functions. Here it is useful to have a grasp of current concepts and theoretical ideas. Of equal importance, however, is know-how, the skill of relating from moment to moment in on-going and ever changing dialogue. Understanding without practical ability is empty; practical ability without conceptual understanding is limited. With these thoughts in mind, let us lay out the structure of the book.

The Coming Chapters

Throughout this book, we shall be working on two related levels, the one theoretical and the other practical. Grasping key concepts in understanding the nature of dialogue is essential for insightful reflection on the process. However, just as reading a book on how to play golf or tennis doesn't make you a skilled player, reflection on dialogue is insufficient for relational leadership in action. Thus, in the spirit of innovation, we devote major space to practical participation. Specifically, we present dialogic scenarios in which the reader is invited to play out the role of a participant—typically

the leader. After immersion in these conversations, the reader is invited into reflection. Where did the conversation go well, or go wrong; what words or phrases were effective, and what could have been said differently? These deliberations will be vitally enriched by the reader's grasp of the conceptual resources. In effect, the concepts and practices will work in tandem, with the hope that it is precisely this movement from action to reflection and return that prepares the way for skilled leadership.

In the next chapter we will have much more to say about the nature of dialogue. This chapter is most important in terms of conceptual understanding. Then, each chapter will focus in turn on specific areas in which dialogue is crucial -including the building of organizational culture, leading teams, organizational change, dealing with conflict, emotional relationships, creativity in groups, and coaching. Our hope is that the voyage to follow will be enlightening, engaging, and even fun.

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2

UNDERSTANDING DIALOGUE

To develop an understanding of dialogic process, let's first consider some common organizational occurrences:

- Two associates in your group have not spoken with each other in three months, except at meetings of the team.
- The work of a subordinate is not up to par, but you are also aware that his home life is in turmoil.
- Your team lacks enthusiasm, in spite of your words of encouragement.
- Your authority in a policy matter is challenged by someone working beneath you.

These are all difficult situations; all require your close attention; and they will inevitably draw you into dialogue. The question, however, is what exactly will you say; how will you say it; what conditions will be favorable to a good outcome; what forces may work against you? These are all questions of skill—what do you

know and how can you put it into practice? It is to the honing of these skills that this book is dedicated. However, before engaging directly with the challenges of practice, there are two preliminary discussions that you will find most helpful. First, there is the process of dialogue itself. How are we to understand this process? As it happens, there are important new developments in thinking about dialogue, developments that challenge centuries old assumptions. To appreciate these developments invites entirely new ways of approaching difficult conversations. Second, in entering into dialogic relations, it is very useful to have a number of key concepts in hand. Drawing from our account of dialogic process, we will introduce concepts we have found particularly relevant to moving skillfully in dialogue. In later chapters, these concepts will play an important role as we confront the actual cases.

Dialogue as Collaborative Action

Most writing on the subject of dialogue is idealistic. That is, the author wants to say that dialogue is a special kind of conversation, one that is superior to common talk. Of course, no one owns the concept of dialogue, and authors are free to write as they wish. However, the problem with these writings is that the authors vary radically on the ideals they cherish. One will emphasize mutual understanding, another the creation of new ideas, and still another the liberation from preconceptions. To be sure, all these can be valuable goals. But it is difficult for any kind of conversation to accomplish them all at the same time. Thus, rather than defining dialogue in a narrow way, let us use a very broad definition. Dialogue includes *all forms of communicative interchange*, or more practically, conversation of any kind—verbal and otherwise.

By using a broad definition, we can be more careful in asking about *what kinds of conversations* will achieve specific ends.

With this said, we are still left with the question of what is “communicative interchange?” How are we to understand what it is we do when we are conversing? This is no small matter. For several hundred years Western culture shared a common answer to this question. Formally this answer is termed *inter-subjectivity*. We also might say “understanding what’s on each other’s minds.” According to this common sense view, we carry thoughts, feelings, ideas, and so on “in our heads” and then try to put these into words. When we speak these words to others, they must decode them. That is, they must try to grasp what it is in our minds they represent. In terms of dialogue, we are thus advised, for example, to “be clear”—so that the other can understand exactly what we mean. We are also advised to “listen carefully,” as meanings are often ambiguous, and it is important to know exactly what the other intends. However, as recent scholarship demonstrates this is an impossible conception of communication. We cannot know what is in someone else’s head! Instead, new and significant practices are invited.

First, let’s see what’s wrong with the traditional view. There is much to be said here, but to appreciate what’s at stake, consider some of these pesky philosophical riddles:

- What exactly is a thought before it is put into words?
- How do “thoughts” get translated into words?
- If your colleague Martin speaks to you, how can you figure out what Martin’s words stand for in his head? If he tells you that he feels “really good,” how do you know what “really good” stands for in his mind? Maybe what

he means by “really good” is what you mean by “just ok,” or “I don’t really want to talk about it.”

- If you are not sure what Martin means, how could you ever sort it out so there was clarity? For example, how could you ever find out what exactly Martin means by “really good?” If he gave you other words (e.g. “it means I am happy.”), how do you know what these words mean to him?

None of these philosophical problems has ever been solved. Given these problems with inter-subjectivity, we recommend dropping this approach and looking for a new view of dialogue. What if the meaning of dialogue is not located within each person, but as part of their coordinated action? Consider this: Your colleague Martin tells you one morning, “I feel really good.” Chances are you will reply with something like, “I’m glad to hear it.” Your reply is no small matter because by expressing pleasure *you have defined* what Martin said as a positive report on himself. Does this sound strange? Consider the meaning of Martin’s words if you responded with, “Yeah, you jerk, you left me with all the work to do yesterday. I stayed up past mid-night making up for your leaving early.” With this reply you have framed Martin’s words as a callous and insensitive remark. Or, let’s say you are a female colleague and you responded to Martin with, “I think you just like this new dress I am wearing.” Now it seems that Martin’s words may have been a bit flirtatious. So, what did Martin mean by his words? Let’s not look inside Martin’s head. Rather, the meaning of Martin’s words mainly depends on another’s response. In other’s replies he is variously defined as giving a positive report, insensitivity, and flirtatious.

But let’s not stop here. After all, these replies are only temporary in how they define Martin’s words. Let’s take the case of the colleague whose reply defines Martin as an insensitive jerk. Martin now replies, “Oh, I am so sorry. I was just making a joke. I knew you had been working while I was playing, but I didn’t realize I had left you with my share.” In these words Martin reconstructs his positive report as a joke, and simultaneously reduces the rationale for his partner’s blame. Of course, his colleague now has the next word, but we don’t have to wait for it to see what this new conception of dialogue involves. What we see here is that meaning does not lie in the words of any individual alone. Rather, meaning is generated in *coordinated action (co-action)—the pattern created by the persons together*. Martin’s words become what they are through the coordinated actions of another. His words alone are incomplete; they become meaningful through the other’s actions. But without his words, the other’s response is also senseless. Their meanings are *co-constituted*. It takes two to tango.

In principle, *meaning* is never fixed. Whatever participants mean is open to continuous change as the conversation unfolds. At any time one may return to an earlier point in the conversation and react to it in a different way, thus potentially changing its meaning...at least temporarily. For example:

A: You know, that nasty remark I made a few minutes ago, well, I didn’t really mean it. I was just tired and cranky.

B: I’m so happy you say this. I really was crushed by your comment.

A: I’m sorry. I’ll try to make it up to you.

This view of dialogue as coordinated action has profound implications for mastering dialogic skills. For example, if a conversation goes badly its failure is a *joint achievement*. Your friendly remark is only friendly if another grants it such meaning. What may seem like a rude comment is not rude unless you treat it that way. And you do have choices. By the same token, a conversation is only successful if both participants join in making it so. In terms of leadership, you also realize that there is nothing you alone can do to be a leader. Your advice to subordinates will not count as advice if they do not treat it as such. Leadership in this sense is a joint achievement. This does not mean, however, that you alone cannot be skilled. As in a tango, you cannot dance alone; but once the dance is under way, you may or may not have the skills to make the dance a success.

Dialogue: Key Concepts

We could go on at great length about the theory of dialogue as collaborative action. However, this book is primarily about practice, not the complexities of theory. Thus, rather than expanding further on the theory, we would like to draw out a number of major concepts that we find especially useful in thinking about practice. Here we single out seven key concepts that will be important as we confront actual dialogues in the remaining chapters of this book.

1. *Constructing Realities*

As proposed in Chapter 1, dialogue is the chief means of creating what we take to be real, rational, and good. As a leader, you often have the first word in a conversation. Those around you will often wait for you to initiate the topic. Such moments may sometimes seem trivial (e.g. greeting people in the hallway), and

at other times especially important (e.g. introducing a new plan of action). In neither case, however, can you necessarily trust “just being natural.” Is your hallway greeting muffled and monotone, or is it brimming with positive energy; is your plan of action a flat, power-point report, or a lively probing of possibilities? Such choices can make an enormous difference to what follows. Much is already available on how to make good speeches, and we won’t review such advisories here. However, there is one important lesson to be drawn from the orientation developed in this book: *your actions as speaker are invitations into a reality and way of life.*

To illustrate, you approach a subordinate, Erik, and say: “Hey, I understand you have the shipping report for last month. What did you think of it?”

On the simplest level, the comment creates the reality of the “shipping report” and establishes its importance in the organization. But consider some more subtle implications: at the outset, Erik is treated impersonally; there is little warmth or recognition of Erik as a full person, just “Hey.” Here you contribute to an impersonal way of organizational life. Erik is also informed that he should have an opinion about the report. He may never have considered this possibility; the question creates this as a *should*. Further, the fact that you can ask a question in this way constructs your relationship as one in which you are senior to him. Finally, the question leaves open exactly what kind of answer is wanted. Erik is left in the threatening position of having to guess, and he could be wrong. As a contrast, consider an alternative approach:

“Good morning Erik; hope your day is going well. I understand you have the shipping report for last month. It would really help me out if I had your ideas on how we can improve the export figures.”

In a simple request, you may have helped Erik experience the organization as a place that values his input. Of course, much depends upon Erik's reply as to whether this meaning is affirmed.

2. *Relational Scenarios*

Every conversation is at once familiar and unique. It is familiar because it will borrow from past traditions. Indeed, if participants did not share a tradition it would be difficult to communicate at all. At the same time, every conversation is unique, as history and context are always changing. For example, the same words spoken a second time will not have the same significance as the first time, simply because they are a repetition. Let us focus here, however, on traditions. Take a simple case: you complement a colleague on his performance. He replies with a "thank you." The pattern is familiar; following a complement with gratitude is a cultural tradition. If someone responded to your complement with silence, you would be surprised, and possibly offended. Let us define such conventional patterns as *relational scenarios*. Each participant contributes to the pattern of coordination, and indeed the complement becomes a complement because of the appreciative reply, and the appreciative reply becomes defined as such by virtue of its following a complement. Here are other familiar scenarios:

A: Asks a question

B: Answers the question

A: Makes a proposal

B: Argues against the proposal/ agrees with the proposal

A: Asks for help

B: Provides help

A: Reports on a positive event

B: Expresses pleasure

You could also look at these scenarios as little dramas. One action anticipates the next. You can also gain some sense of the power of such simple scenarios by imagining what life would be like if Person B, in any of these cases, responded by telling an off-colored joke, describing his childhood, or reporting on the weather conditions in Lapland. Daily life proceeds as smoothly as it does primarily because we simply repeat the familiar sequences.

For the relational leader, however, it is important to recognize these patterns. The relational leader does not simply live life as it comes, but he/she is aware of what kind of life is being lived. We say this because scenarios vary greatly in where they lead. In particular, it is useful to distinguish among *generative*, *sustaining*, and *degenerative* scenarios. In a generative scenario the participants build on each other's contributions. As one might say, the conversation "goes somewhere." There is learning, creativity, and often a sense of delight. An example of a generative scenario follows:

Samantha: I think it would be a good idea if all three of us interviewed this guy.

Gus: Yeah...but I think it would be good if we did it separately.

Robert: Maybe I will take him to lunch; that way we will have a sense of what he's like in an informal setting.

Samantha: So are you saying I should take him out for drinks? *(All laugh)*

Sustaining scenarios are the common, everyday interchanges that keep organizational life going on in a conventional way. Simple greetings, "Hi, how are you doing today?" followed by "Oh, fine, how 'bout yourself?" are sustaining scenarios, as are exchanges of "good-bye" at the end of the day, or "please-and-thank you,"

and simple requests and fulfillment. What we call “small talk” is similar. It doesn’t have to go anywhere; the light and polite banter is sufficient to itself. But it is easy to underestimate the importance of sustaining scenarios. They seem quite insignificant, just the background for the “important stuff.” But in many ways they are the relational glue holding the organization together.

The degenerative scenarios are the most disruptive in terms of organizational life. These are scenarios that move toward animosity, silence, or the breaking of a relationship altogether. They may begin subtly, but unless they are terminated at some point, relations will suffer significantly. So will the organization. Here are some examples:

A: Offers a proposal

B: Attacks the proposal

A: Gives an order

B: Is sullen or resistant

A: Wants a position for himself

B: Wants the same position

A: Blames B for a negative outcome

B: Blames A for the outcome

So common are these mutual interchanges that we could even give them names. We have, then, the games of argument, order and resistance, competition, and blame. Such degenerative scenarios will occupy major attention in later chapters.

3. *Conversational Choice Points*

Most dialogic exchange plays out longstanding traditions or scenarios. Again it is important to note that a certain amount of repetition is essential to being able to communicate at all. However, difficulties emerge when the common scenarios come

to be “just natural.” That is, there just doesn’t seem to be any other way to go on. This naturalization of our conventions is especially important in the case of degenerative scenarios. If someone attacks your position, for example, isn’t it *just human nature* to defend and counter-attack? No, it is not human nature, but cultural nature.

Given the reliance of scenarios on cultural tradition, we must introduce another crucial concept, that of *conversational choice points*. Broadly speaking, this means that whatever is said makes no requirements on what follows. You always have a choice, even if it is difficult to do. However, because relational scenarios are often of long duration, they also generated variations. The more familiar you are with the variations, the more options you have for moving in the conversation. Take, for example, the “blame game” mentioned above. Person A blames Person B for a failure, and B replies by blaming A. Very familiar, almost natural. And in principle, there is no end to the blame game; A and B can continue indefinitely to find ways in which it is always the other’s fault. And all the while, their animosity grows. But consider:

Person A blames B for a failure.

Person B responds by:

- Apologizing
- Accepting partial blame
- Showing how the blame is not warranted
- Asking A why it is necessary to blame someone
- Making light of the situation
- Silence

Perhaps you as reader can add still other possible responses. With a little brainstorming, we might be able to create wholly new

possibilities. For example, B might point out the danger of their playing the blame game, and ask if there is some other way to handle the situation. The important point is that mutual blame is not a fixed scenario; you always have a choice of whether and how to play. And some *conversational choice points* will be far more beneficial to an organization than others.

The potentials for shaping and reshaping the direction of conversation are also amplified by fundamental *ambiguities in meaning*. If carefully examined, the meaning of any utterance is always ambiguous, not fully clear in its implications. This is primarily so because every word in our language is used in many different situations, to make reference to different things, or to achieve different outcomes. Consider the simple word “dog.” Every dog owner will use the word to refer to his or her own dog, as will other people when describing a certain type of animal. But, you have other types of phrases as well, which have nothing to do with a canine:

- Can you buy me a hot dog?
- He is going to the dogs.
- These are dog days.
- She is a dog.
- I’m tired. Been on my dogs all day.

So, what does the word dog mean? Well it all depends on the circumstances, and the circumstances are always in motion. This ambiguity is enormously important in ongoing dialogue because it always 1) lays the groundwork for misunderstanding, and 2) leaves room for flexibility. In this book we will primarily focus on the second issue because skilled dialogue may often depend

on taking advantage of the ambiguity. Whenever anyone says something that might seem harsh, cruel, unfair, or alienating, for example, its meaning is open to change. Recall that the outcome of dialogue is always the result of collaboration. Spoken words acquire their meaning from the way others respond. Thus, for example, the words “You have failed” have no clear meaning. To take advantage of the ambiguity, one could also define it as:

- You have not done well.
- You have not done as well as usual.
- There is room here for improvement.

And these latter meanings may hold far more promise for the future of the organization (not to mention the individual).

4. Positioning

A central idea in contemporary communication scholarship is that of *positioning*. The basic idea here is that whenever we speak, we are subtly doing two things: defining ourselves and defining the other. Consider the colleague who says to you:

“If you have a moment, could you answer a question for me?”

Simple enough, but look again and you will see that the statement defines your colleague as someone who has the right or permission to ask you a question, and defines you as someone who can and should provide an answer. More subtly, by asking if “you have a moment,” your colleague indicates that you are a busy person who also has the right to decline

To further appreciate the concept of positioning, consider the difference between these two statements:

“I would like this completed by tomorrow.”

Or:

“It would be good if this were completed by tomorrow.”

The first statement defines the speaker as one who has the right to command and to judge the person he/she is speaking to; the second suggests that the speaker is more an equal, and not a judge. What is being requested is in the organization’s interest as a whole. Here is another contrast:

“I am asking you because you are the expert here.”

Or:

“I am asking you because you are responsible for the information.”

Where the first statement defines you as an esteemed person, one who has a good track record, the second places your knowledge in doubt. You have yet to prove yourself.

Recalling our discussion of dialogue as collaborative action, you will also realize that while our utterances may define both us, and those, to whom we speak, they only do so with the other’s cooperation. That is, whether one succeeds in positioning self and other depends greatly on how the other replies. To illustrate, reconsider the case in which a colleague has said to you: “I would like this completed by tomorrow.” This may seem to position the speaker as a commander and you as a subordinate. But how would it position you and him if you responded with:

“That’s impossible. There are too many other demands on my time just now.”

“You must be kidding; we aren’t robots.”

“I think you really need to check that out with the boss; he’d really be irritated if we changed course to get this done.”

In each response you deny the speaker his/her original claim to authority. Your utterance indicates “I am not one who takes orders from you.” But again, this is not the last word in the conversation. As you can see, conversations may contain within them continuous jockeying for position. “Who are you” and “who am I” may be subject to continuous negotiation.

5. Double Engagement

If you can appreciate the importance of these various concepts so far, you will be prepared for the pivotal idea of *double engagement*. To explain, first consider the way we listen to others. Normally, when we pay attention to each other, we are engaged in only a single way. That is, we pay attention to the content. If someone wants to give us instructions, we listen so that we may understand how to proceed; if someone wants to tell us what happened at a conference, we prepare ourselves for a description. In effect, we try to understand the words in terms of what they tell us about the world. It is the concern with singular listening that leads traditional communication specialists to emphasize clarity, simplicity, and coherence.

From the relational perspective developed here, however, we must add a second dimension to the challenge of listening. As the philosopher J.L. Austin (1975) put it, “we do things with words.” That is, we accomplish—or fail to accomplish—something with others. To illustrate, recall our account of relational scenarios, or conventional sequences of conversation across time. If someone asks you a question, he or she is not simply conveying to you the content of the question. You are also being invited to give an answer. In a certain sense, the question “does something to you;” it places a demand on you for a certain kind of action. And if you

give an answer the two of you have successfully accomplished a question/answer scenario. Double engagement means not only listening for content, but for the subtle but unspoken sequences that are invited.

As another example, recall the preceding discussion of positioning. If you say to a colleague, “Fill out this form for me, will you?” you are also doing something with your words—in this case positioning yourself as someone who is in authority over your colleague. And you are inviting the colleague to collaborate with you by treating you as someone who has authority over him/her. In double engagement, then, you are tuning in to both *content* and *consequence*. You are listening not only to the content of what is said, but to the relational implications. “What scenario am I being invited into, and is this a good direction for our conversation?”

In listening for consequences it is not enough to focus on the moment at hand. There is also the long-term impact to consider. For example, if you have ever been the target of a blunt or brutal criticism by someone you work with, you know there are long-term consequences. Yes, you can “patch things up” at the time, and treat the event as unimportant. But the event is likely to linger for a very long time, placing a distance between you that will color your conversations. In double engagement, we not only call attention to a way of listening, but also to ways of acting. As a leader, then, what kinds of reactions do your words invite? What sorts of scenarios might be set in motion, and what are the consequences, both in the short and long term. What sort of relationships are you creating in your organization?

6. *Multi-Being*

Organizational scholars are fond of writing about *organizational culture*. Here they call attention to our common experience that organizations vary in the “ways of life” they promote. In some organizations there is intense competition among the employees, in others there is cooperation; in some organizations relationships among employees is distant and cool, in others it is warm and inviting, and so on. In terms of dialogue this means that each organization will develop preferred scenarios, that is, ways of talking that are common and conventional. To a point, these conventions are essential to the smooth running of the organization. At the same time, however, they tend to limit the imagination. We simply repeat the same scenarios, over and over, as if it were natural. This is so, even when the scenarios are degenerative. We argue, exchange blame, exclude each other in our silences, order each other about, knowing these are not optimal ways of going on. But we continue...

One concept that is very useful in avoiding these pitfalls is that of *multi-being*. This refers to the enormous repository of potentials that we bring to our relationships. We all know how to converse with friends, parents, children, romantic partners, highly respected people, waiters, and so on. If you were asked to role play, you might have little trouble mimicking a baby, acting like a small child, or using adolescent slang words. And if challenged, it might be easy enough for you to play the part of a devout priest, a visitor from Japan, a salesman, a beggar, a stuffy professor, a military officer, and so on. In effect, you bring with you into any relationship a vast set of potentials—a multi-being.

Of course, in most relationships you rely on only a handful of these potentials. With children you rely on a different set of

potentials than when talking with adults, and so on. But, it is important to recognize that such conventions are also limiting. When you are carrying out the conventional scenarios, you are scarcely aware that you could do otherwise. The concept of multi-being is designed to expand our consciousness about what is possible in relationships. Especially it is to invite creative moves that can change the course of degenerative scenarios. It is to help us think anew how to avoid cut-throat arguments, playing the “blame game,” mutual avoidance, and so on. At every choice point we have options for action, and if we are aware of our capacities as multi-beings we find the range of these options is enormous. We shall explore these potentials more fully in the coming chapters.

7. Embodiment: Language as Social Performance

Our major focus in this book is on what is said in dialogue. What we say is crucial to the survival of the organization, but *the way we say it* can also make an enormous difference. Think of all the ways you could say, “I apologize,” and the different consequences that would result. To utter those words in a bare whisper just doesn’t count as much of an apology. Shouting the words might seem to carry a hint of anger. Said with a sneering tone indicates that you don’t mean the apology at all. In short, this is to say that our language is embodied. When we speak to each other we are engaging in a full bodily performance. And, not unlike actors on a stage, we can do it well or poorly. Imagine for a moment the ways various actors might perform the following line:

“Carl, I don’t think that was a good idea.”

One actor might say it with a stern face and a harsh tone; another might utter the same lines with a smile and a light touch;

and still another might place the emphasis on “that.” Consider the scenario that each of these performances might invite, and the later consequences. The first actor positions Carl as an inferior, who should perhaps apologize and strive to do better. The second actor invites Carl into laughter at what has taken place, positioning Carl as possibly an equal who can join in a discussion about what has occurred. By placing the emphasis on the word “that,” the third performance suggests that Carl is generally admired, but this time has made a mistake. Mutual respect remains.

Yet, the concept of embodiment extends beyond facial expressions and tone of voice. You must also consider gestures and bodily movements more generally. For example, your posture can often speak louder than the message. Where you position your body can also play a role. Standing too distant or close to the person you are talking with can divert the recipient’s attention. Standing too close may create a sense of intimacy that is unwarranted and standing too far away may suggest rejection. Nor should clothing and grooming be neglected; these too carry implicit messages about your identity and what you expect from others.

These seven concepts will play an important part in the coming chapters. Our hope, however, is that they can be imported into the everyday life of the organization, and will facilitate the process of relational leading.

For Further Reading

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3

CREATING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

You can sometimes feel it when you enter the doors of an organization: the cool and possibly suspicious glances of the workers, the understated greeting, the formal directions to your destination. This is organizational culture at work. Organizational culture is the way of life shared by the members, and just like the many cultures of the world, organizations differ dramatically in their ways of life. So, among the questions all leaders should ask: what kind of culture am I a part of here? How am I contributing to it? Is this culture beneficial to the participants and to our mission? What is good about it? How might we improve it? If the organizational culture fosters frustration, suspicion, and anxiety, for example, members will make few sacrifices for its well-being and the turnover may be high. If the organization feels like a caring place, there will be dedication and real concern for the well-being of the organization. Organizational leaders are making small worlds, and the question of what that world is like is one of ultimate value to its members: to what kind of world do you want to contribute?