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# DIALOGIC OD: A THEORY OF PRACTICE

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A couple of years ago Bob Marshak and I defined a bifurcation in OD practice and we called these two strands Diagnostic and Dialogic OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). While we identified the underlying philosophical differences and similarities to these two types of organization development, we didn't offer much clarity about the Dialogic OD change process other than it is based in social constructionism and involves changing narratives that underpin social reality. In this paper, I am going to describe my generic Dialogic OD change process. I'm going to invite you to look under the hood at practices as disparate as Open Space, Visual Explorer, and World Café with me, and describe the engine I see behind transformational change

Why is it useful to have a generic model of Dialogic OD? Two reasons. One is that an increasing number of practitioners are identified by the technique(s) they specialize in and therefore employed by organizations in fragmented ways (Gilpin-Jackson, 2013). Rather than hiring an OD consultant to aid in long term change processes, they hire Open Space practitioners, or World Café facilitators, and so on, for specific events of limited duration. Practitioners become less able to influence the overall design and execution of an organization's change strategy. Having an overarching theory of change, like this model, positions us differently with leaders and clients.

The second is that without underlying theory, it's hard to learn why dialogic interventions succeed or fail, and as a consequence no way to accumulate a body of knowledge. Thomas Kuhn (1962) pointed this out in his landmark book, "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions." A body of knowledge only develops by being able to see unexpected things show up against a background of expectations.

Unless you have a clear set of expectations (and this is what a good theory gives you) you cannot notice anomalies or surprises – the very things that force a body of knowledge to evolve. An adequate theory of Dialogic OD practice will give us an organizing framework for all the dialogical change approaches of the past 25 or so years, and it will enable us as individuals, and as a profession, to learn and grow.

I will start by outlining my model of Dialogical OD practice and the underlying theory of how social reality is transformed. Then I will discuss two key parts of it – the nature of generative images and the context of transformational change. Finally I will list 27 Dialogic OD techniques that can each be used within this model, and describe what I have found are the key conditions, during the Dialogic OD process, for transformation to occur.

## THE GENERIC MODEL

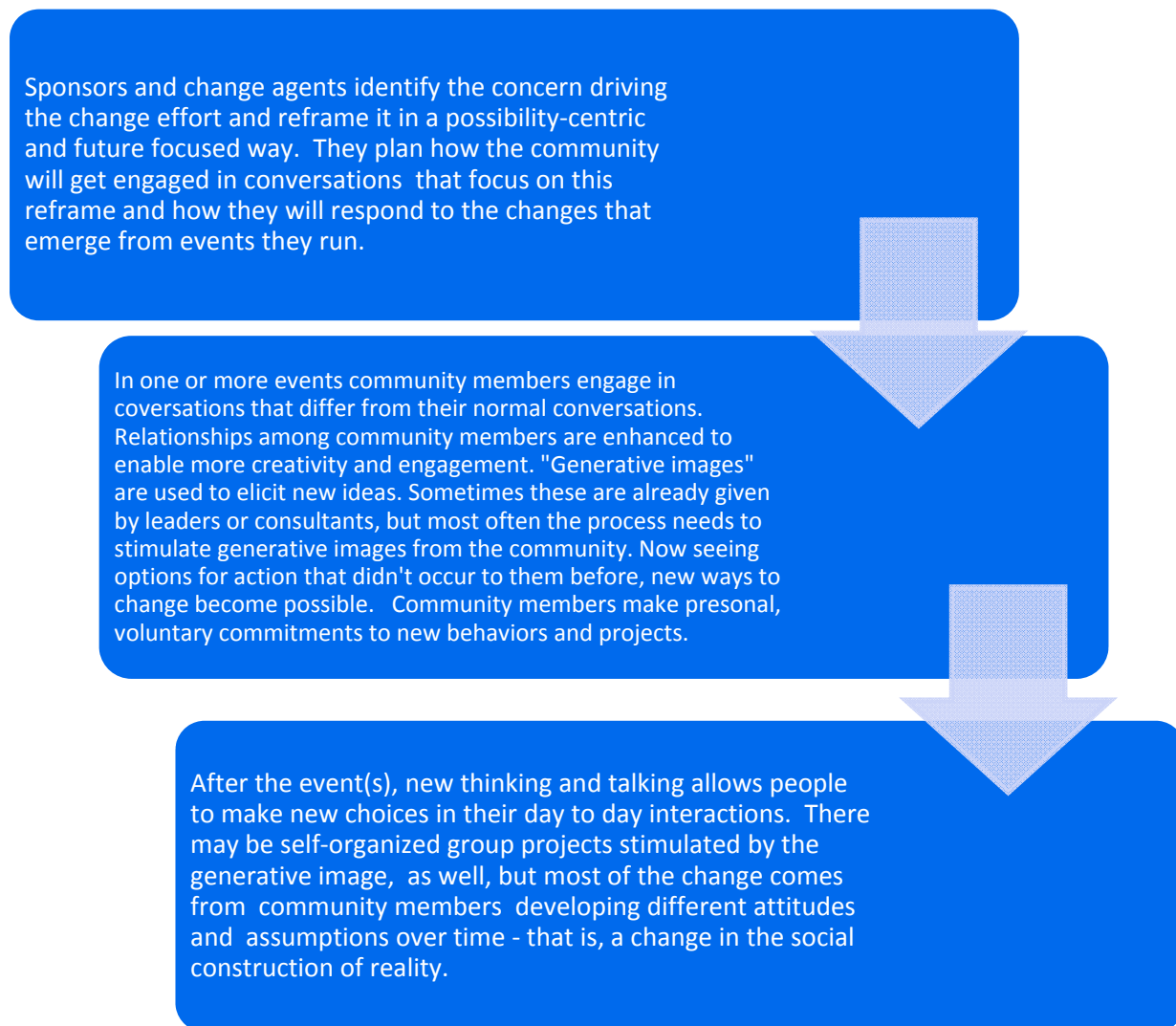
In this article I will use the word "community" to describe any size group of people that does not exist to accomplish specific, interdependent tasks. Teams, by definition, have inter-dependent tasks and "win or lose" together. Communities and teams are different, and most groups in organizations are not teams (Bushe, 2004), even though that's what they are usually called. This model may also work with teams but teams are in some ways simpler and offer a variety of other dialogical possibilities for OD.

This generic model of Dialogic OD rests on the assumption that change occurs when the day to day thinking of community members has altered their day to day decisions and actions, which leads to a change in the "culture" of the community that entrenches those new ways of thinking. Their

thinking is changed when the language, stories, and narratives the community uses is altered in a profound way. (Barrett, Thomas & Hocevar, 1995; Grant & Marshak, 2011). This alteration occurs from

a “generative image.” Figure 1 outlines the consulting process that I will elaborate in the rest of the article.

**Figure 1: A Dialogic OD Consulting Model**



I advise using Dialogic OD when leaders want to transform a social system, be it group, organization, network of stakeholders, or society. This is not about incremental change, which is how to make the current system better at what it already is and does. Transformation changes the very nature of the

community to be better at what it aspires to be and do. There has to be a big problem, issue, concern, or challenge for leaders and community members to bring the energy and provide the resources real “planned” transformation requires. You cannot plan transformational change like you can plan a project.

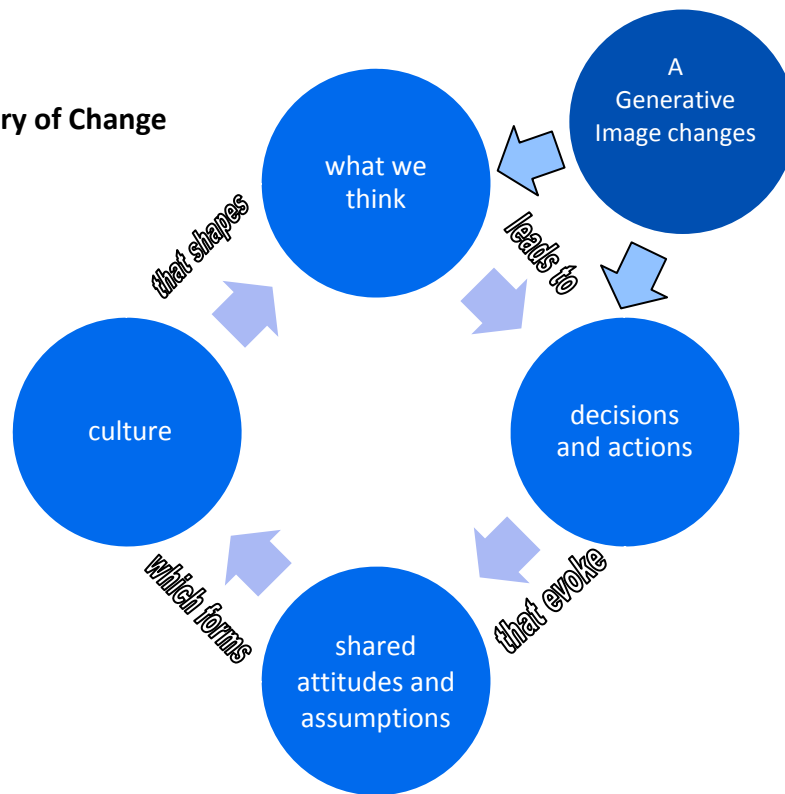
When you begin you do not know exactly where you want to end up and you can be assured that unexpected things will happen. I find attempts to transform to some predetermined end almost never work and most often result in negative, unforeseen consequences (cf. Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). You can, however, identify the challenge you want to address and you can plan how to address it. Normally, the problem, issue, or concern motivating the change effort gets reframed in a future-focused, possibility-centric way. While Dialogic OD is concerned with problems, it doesn't deal with them through "problem-solving."

## THE NATURE OF GENERATIVE IMAGES

I think Dialogic OD addresses problems and produces change through "generative images". I define generative images (Bushe, 2007) as ideas, phrases, objects, pictures, manifestos, stories, or new words with two properties:

1. Generative images allow us to see new alternatives for decisions and actions. They have the "...capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is 'taken for granted' and thereby furnish new alternatives for social actions" (Gergen, 1978, p.1346).

Figure 2: The Theory of Change



2. Generative images are compelling images – they generate change because people like the new options in front of them and want to use them.

Generative images are usually fuzzy, ambiguous, and sometimes combine what seem like opposites. Attempts to precisely define them miss the whole point. They are generative because they evoke so

many different meanings. Perhaps the most powerful generative image of the past 30 years is “sustainable development.” Recall that before that image emerged, ecologists and business people were at war and had nothing to say to each other. In 1986 the VP of future planning of a major forest products company in British Columbia was overhead opining in a ski line that “this environmental stuff will just blow over.” When the image of sustainable development surfaced in the Brundtland Report in 1987, it transformed relationships throughout the world community so profoundly that Green Peace Canada was suddenly being invited to advise business and government. It found itself with unprecedented influence, yet some members were afraid of being co-opted. It almost dissolved from the internal conflicts over what direction to take in a transformed world.

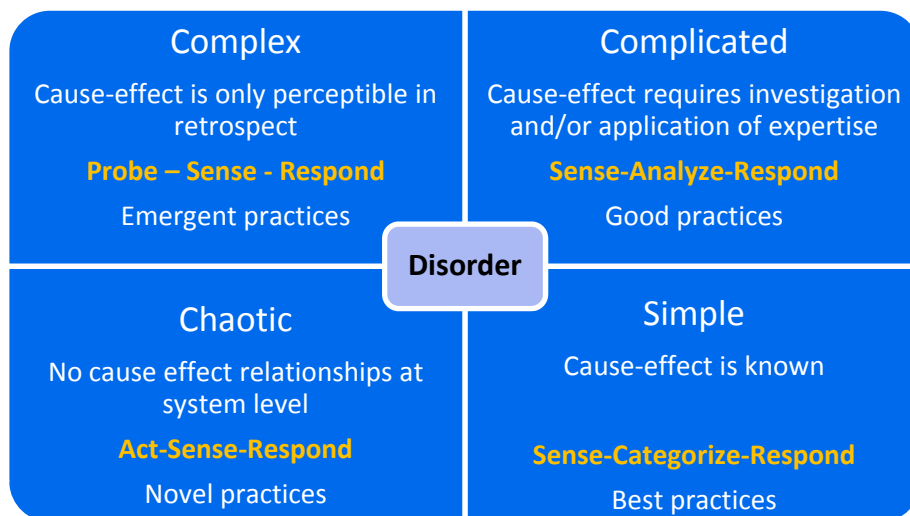
Think of all the new choices, decisions and actions that came (and continue to be stimulated) by the words “sustainable development.” That’s generativity. Between 1975 and 1985 “Quality of Work Life” transformed unionized workplaces in America. At British Airways “exceptional arrival experiences” was the generative image used to work on the problem of lost passenger luggage. (Whitney

& Trosten-Bloom, 2003) In one semi-autonomous work team of business analysts, “trust costs less” allowed them to get unstuck and function autonomously (Bushe, 1998). The most powerful generative images change the core narratives in the community – the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, what we care about, and how the world is.

In OD efforts, generative images are usually new words, phrases or longer texts, but pictures and objects can be generative too. Consider the generative power of the first images of the earth taken from outer space. Is there any doubt that seeing that blue and white jewel with its tiny, fragile ecosystem, embedded in a cold, black void, catalyzed the outpouring of ecological research, writing and activism that soon followed?

The change sequence, shown in Figure 2, assumes that the decisions and actions we take are based on what we think. Over time as we witness our own and other’s decisions and actions, we develop shared attitudes and assumptions. These become taken for granted and form the culture, which in turn shapes what we think. A generative image disrupts this pattern both by altering what we think, and by motivating new decisions and actions.

Figure 3: Snowden & Boone’s Cynefin Model



## THE CONTEXT OF DIALOGIC OD

Transforming a community of any size, even a dyad, is a complex situation. You cannot predict how everyone in the community will think, you cannot predict what ideas will get generated, and you cannot predict what new actions people will want to take. There are so many variables influencing each other simultaneously (the context, other groups, the sense-making going on in people, the variety of motives and interests in the community) that it is impossible to know what caused what until after the fact. This is what defines the difference between a complicated situation and a complex one, as shown in the Cynefin model in Figure 3 (Snowden & Boone, 2007).

The Cynefin Model, developed at IBM's Institute for Knowledge Management, says that the appropriate decision-making process depends on the how well cause-effect relationships are understood. In a complicated situation (upper right quadrant) what causes what can be figured out, ahead of time, so collecting data to analyze before making decisions is appropriate. But in a complex situation (upper left), Snowden and Boone advise to first experiment with possible changes (probes) and then select the ones that accomplish the objective. Stimulate the emergence of multiple options for new actions, pay attention to the consequences of those actions, and respond in ways that further enable those new actions that accomplish the desired results.

I think what is needed in complex change situations are new ideas (as the old ones aren't working anymore) that community members will embrace and act on. My ultimate purpose when using Dialogic OD is to create conditions inside the community that stimulate emergent practices (probes) and ensure the effective ones get recognized and incorporated into the community. This is done by working through generative images that stimulate new ideas which in turn lead to emergent practices.

## THE USUAL SEQUENCE OF KEY CONDITIONS

The model in Figure 1 shows three steps; getting ready to launch events, holding events, and incorporating emergent change that comes out of the events. An event is a choreographed interaction among community members. In this section I highlight some key conditions I think have led to success (or failure from their lack of) in Dialogic OD projects I have been in and others I've studied.

### GETTING READY

Dialogic OD requires the full engagement of at least one leader with enough authority to support systemic changes that emerge from the change process. This person needs to act like a "sponsor," working effectively with internal or external "change agents" (Conner, 1993) from the beginning in defining the issues to be addressed and in convening the community. One of the early issues that must be addressed is who is the community and how will we get them to come to our events? In defining the community you can ask, "If we came up with changes that really addressed the issues, who would likely have to support those changes being implemented?" Often, but not always, the right community for the change includes people inside and outside any particular group.

I have seen a few attempts to use Dialogic OD in communities where there are no obvious sponsors. These have all involved social issues, like poverty. They can be highly innovative in how they engage communities in events. Their processes all brought a variety of stakeholders into meaningful conversations, but I have not seen much sustained change come from them. In one path to failure, they produce lists of great ideas no one can do anything about. In another, there is no one to track and amplify desired changes, no resources to support motivated people, and the momentum for self-generated change fades. Of course, that can happen in organizations too, when sponsorship is not right.

When trying to change organizations, there are likely to be people inside the company tasked with driving the change – they are the “change agents” (Conner, 1993). Usually, leaders want to treat change as a project and treat these people like project managers. There are project skills involved, but change agents need to act differently than project managers, and their relationship to the boss has to be quite different. Dialogic OD cannot be run like a project because of its emergent properties and because of the need for different power relations than is typical between “senior managers” and “project leaders.” General Electric, among others, adapted Conner’s “Sponsor-Change Agent-Target model successfully, articulating the requirements for each role, which is nicely described in Nilikant and Ramnaryan (1998).

You can do Dialogic OD in small groups, with middle management leaders as sponsors and the consultant as change agent. But when the community is a large organization it requires lots of people to be significantly engaged, maybe simultaneously or maybe in a sequence of smaller events. In any case, it is time and human resource intensive, so not much happens without very senior sponsorship. Compared to being an executive running a business, a Change Sponsor needs to be more personally connected to front line change activity, and less controlling. Sponsors do not have much time so they rely on the change agents, who typically come from the middle of the organization, to keep them informed and connected. Executives need to understand a sponsor’s role is not to tell the change agent what to do. It is the opposite. Dialogic OD cannot occur unless sponsors take the advice of their change agents, particularly on what the sponsor needs to do as the process unfolds. As an external consultant in a dialogic OD process one of my main jobs is to build the sponsor – change agent relationship in the organization. I usually need to teach them the change roles and coach them in how to work together, so I need to have a good relationship with both sponsors and change agents (or be the change agent).

From the outset, Sponsors need to understand that the point of these events is not to identify, agree upon, and then implement THE change. It’s to unearth, catalyze and support the multitude of motivations and ideas that already exist in the community, in the service of transforming the community in the desired direction. The design of the change process has to ensure that two key things happen:

1. The people who will ultimately embody and carry out the change are engaged, along with leaders and other stakeholders, in discussing what changes ought to occur.
2. Members self identify, individually and in groups, the changes they want to take responsibility for.

In all the Dialogic OD projects I know of the initial issue has been reframed in possibility centric and future focused ways. For example, instead of working on the “problem” of dissatisfied customers by analyzing what went wrong in the past, we work on the possibilities for creating “raving fans” by focusing on what they want in the future. This is one area where Appreciative Inquiry and Future Search have had a big impact on change practitioners. There are good reasons why possibility centric framings of issues are more likely to engage community members and lead to more generative outcomes, well described by Boyd and Bright (2007). I am of the opinion that this initial framing is crucial to the success of the entire effort. One, it needs to focus the community on what the sponsors really care about. If the framing takes community members off into conversations that sponsors do not care about, nothing much will come of the effort. Two, it needs to emotionally engage and inspire the community. I try to hold out until we have framed the issue in a way that community members will be “willing to crawl over glass” to attend events where that is what is being talked about. Three, the framing of the issue has to be open enough to allow unexpected, surprising ideas to surface.

The readiness phase is over when the sponsors and change agents have reframed the problem or challenge in a possibility centric, future focused way. They have a plan for how to engage the community (whether small group or large system) in working with or surfacing generative images and for how to work with emergent changes, and the understanding that the plan will probably need to adapt and evolve as the process unfolds.

### CONVENING EVENTS

Dialogic OD can utilize any number of “techniques” during “events” that engage as many members of the community as possible, rapidly, in one or more

new conversations. For a small group this might be one meeting or a series of meetings. For a large community it might also be one or a series of large group meetings. Table 1 lists 27 Dialogic OD techniques. Each offers variations in how to structure and host events. These practices can be used in ways other than the theory of practice I am offering here. However, I think that whenever one of my clients has failed to transform it’s because we were missing one of these key conditions. While dialogic OD doesn’t use diagnosis, it does ask questions and engage people in inquiry. But it’s not empirical inquiry and the point isn’t to find “the truth.”

**Table 1: Dialogic OD Techniques (for a bibliography contact the author)**

1. Art of Convening (Neal and Neal)	14. Reflexive Inquiry (Oliver)
2. Art of Hosting (artofhosting.org)	15. Real Time Strategic Change (Jacobs)
3. Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider)	16. Re-Description (Storch)
4. Complex Responsive Processes (Stacey, Shaw)	17. Search Conference (Emery)
5. Conference Model (Axelrod)	18. Solution Focused Dialogue (Jackson & McKergow)
6. Coordinated Management of Meaning (Pearce & Cronen)	19. Structure of Belonging (Block)
7. Cycle of Resolution (Levine)	20. Syntegration (Beer)
8. Dynamic Facilitation (Rough)	21. Systemic Sustainability (Amadeo & Cox)
9. Engaging Emergence (Holman)	22. Talking stick (pre-industrial)
10. Future Search (Weisbord)	23. Technology of Participation (Spencer)
11. Narrative Mediation (Winslade & Monk)	24. The Circle Way (Baldwin)
12. Open Space Technology (Owen)	25. Visual Explorer (Palus & Horth)
13. Organizational Learning Conversations (Bushe)	26. Work Out (Ashkenas)
	27. World Café (Brown & Issacs)

Only inquiry that is linked to things that fully engage members, and addresses a widely shared challenge, has a chance of being transformational. The more emotionally engaged members are, the more energy will be put toward change. Any of the techniques listed in Table 1 has the potential to be used during events, though they each probably work best under different circumstances. The Dialogic OD practitioner's skill is in knowing which is most likely, in that specific situation, to achieve the ultimate purpose of these events: 1) uncover generative images and stimulate new ideas; and 2) make it more likely that people will voluntarily change their behavior/choices, without direction or orders.

However, sometimes you first need to use the dialogic techniques listed in Table 1 to generate new conversations about issues in the community itself. This is when unacknowledged resentments, frustrations, and sources of conflict need airing before people can emotionally engage with the change issue. In Dialogic OD practice, the purpose of this inquiry is not to decide what exactly the issue is, who is right or wrong, or try to resolve the past. Frustrations and resentments do not need to be resolved for successful events to take place; what makes them a barrier is if community members feel these have not been heard. In such situations, I work to surface and acknowledge the wide variety of experiences in the community about the heretofore undiscussed issue(s). These conversations are geared to bringing as many different and repressed voices into the room, eliminate inaccurate stories people have of each other, listen to what people want differently in the future and perhaps do some interpersonal healing.

#### CONTAINERS

A common image used to describe Dialogic OD events is the creation of a "container"; a time and space where normal, business as usual ways of interacting are suspended so that different, generative conversations can take place. I think what most differentiates dialogic OD techniques are their guidelines for how to create and facilitate those containers. The image of facilitation in

conventional OD, grounded in social psychology and small group dynamics, does not fit with the image of facilitation in dialogic change practice as "convening" or "hosting". Often, the work is done in groups too large to facilitate. The design of the event needs to set the conditions for self-generated and self-regulated conversations to take place; conversations that will be productive and useful. The consultant is more of a planner and designer than a facilitator and the process is less controlled and more emergent.

Containers need to focus attention and interaction in predictable enough ways that leaders can feel secure enough to let go. One aspect of good containers that has been widely discussed is the quality of questions used to focus attention and interaction (Vogt, Brown & Issacs, 2003). The right question, worded the right way, can make all the difference in the success or failure of a dialogic change process. Another widely discussed attribute is the mix of people engaged in those conversations. Whether it is the need for multiple organizational levels, multiple stakeholders, or people inside and outside of the target system, the emerging consensus is that the more diversity in the group the more generative the outcomes are likely to be.

The metaphor of container evokes in many people concrete issues of place, time, how a room is set up, how removed people are from their normal routines, that sort of thing. And I still think that can make a difference to what happens among a group of people. But I am now convinced that the really important qualities of containers arise from the qualities and character of the leader in relation to the group being contained. By "leader" I am referring to the person or group that is convening and leading the dialogic change event. This could be a consultant, internal facilitator or the actual leader of the group – it is the person who is holding the space or hosting the event. We could probably list skills of people who are good at creating effective containers – things like knowing when to hold on to an agenda or topic and when to let go, knowing how to read and move with the energy of a group, being



a non-anxious presence. But it probably also has a lot to do with the character or psychological maturity of the person co-creating the container with the community. Elsewhere I have discussed this aspect of containers in more detail (Bushe, 2010).

During events it is important to balance holding off action to ensure the best ideas surface, with going with momentum and energy. Too much focus on the former can reduce the latter. Transformational change needs good ideas coupled with energy. I think Dialogic OD helps communities surface and create good-enough ideas with energy behind them.

### INCORPORATING EMERGENT CHANGES

At some point the Dialogic OD process shifts from stimulating ideas through generative images to launching action (probes). In a small group this might look like agreements among members to act differently, along with different things people say and do back on the job in the following days. Generally, when I use Dialogic OD I am not trying to facilitate convergence, or collective decisions, about which ideas or projects ought to be chosen or implemented. Instead, I want people to discuss how they might act differently because of the generative image, and then feel encouraged to act on what they find most personally relevant and meaningful.

Enough individuals have to accept personal accountability for change – or it will not be transformational. Enough people must put energy into change and the impact of their efforts have to be satisfying enough that they want to keep putting energy in, for transformation to occur. The energy for acting on generative ideas comes from 1) the amount of inspiration people feel, 2) the quality of relationships in the community, and 3) clarity about what to do next. Events are structured to optimize those three outcomes.

After the events, change is facilitated by people in the community tracking the actual changes taking place and supporting sponsors in recognizing and amplifying desired changes (sensing and responding to successful probes). The amount of

transformational change depends on unsupervised, self selected individuals and groups just acting differently, on their own. They make different choices daily at work. Specific projects might require more coordinated action among community members, but most change does not come from a “project” as much as it comes from talking and thinking differently daily. For the change to lock in, sponsors need to pay attention to what is working, and make changes to the community’s infrastructure and operational processes required to fully embed those changes.

Plan to have unassigned resources (like money, time, space) available so that people can be supported taking action. Sponsors need to imagine what kind of resources are likely to be needed by those pursuing worthwhile change and be ready and able to supply those when momentum and energy is high.

### SUMMARY

Table 2 summarizes the conditions I have found need to be in place for my Dialogic OD projects to be successful. A sponsor with the authority to support emergent change is required; someone or group who has their hands on enough levers that at the end of the process people will not be left with a lot of good ideas they cannot do anything with. Whether I am the sole change agent or the project includes an internal group of change facilitators, the relationship between sponsors and change agents has to be right. Sponsors need to treat change agents like trusted allies that they make plans with, not subordinates or suppliers carrying out orders. Change agents need to be ready to tell sponsors what they really think, particularly about the sponsor’s actions, and provide useful advice to the sponsor as the change unfolds. The issue they will work on has to be important to the community and they need to create a frame that will be used to engage the community in new conversations – typically a frame that looks at future possibilities, not the past, and that captures people’s hearts and imagination. They need to identify the community

**Table 2: Key Conditions for Successful Dialogic OD**

- **A sponsor with the authority to commandeer necessary resources and support emergent change.**
- **An effective sponsor-change agent working relationship.**
- **Reframed problem/challenge into possibility centric, future focused issue that is personally meaningful to community members.**
- **Identification of the appropriate community for addressing the issue and a way to get them to come to the event(s).**
- **Convening events that build the relationships among community members so that readiness to engage in the change issue is heightened.**
- **Convening events that create and/or utilize generative images to provoke new thinking and catalyze self-generated change proposals from the community.**
- **Slack resources are available to support emergent changes.**
- **Processes for sponsors to “track and fan” emergent changes.**

best suited for implementing the changes, consider how they will be able to convene that community for one or more events, and how much community building will be required before it is ready to really focus on the change issue.

Events need to be convened that build the community and engage that community in uncovering some new possibilities for decisions and actions created by one or more generative images. Sometimes, the events need to begin with community building. Sometimes they need to create the generative image, and sometimes that already exists prior to the event. The events provide people the opportunity to consider the new possibilities evoked by the generative image, and the chance to find like-minded others who self-organize around change proposals (probes). Little effort is put into assessing or choosing amongst these proposals. Instead, everyone is authorized to do whatever they think best to make the changes occur. Processes are put in place to help sponsors to “track and fan” desired changes – identifying emergent practices

they want to keep and finding ways to support and amplify them (Bushe & Pitman, 1991; Bushe 2009).

By working with the self-organizing, emergent qualities of human communities, Dialogic OD works around the obstacles that make controlled, orderly change difficult in complex situations and side steps the problems of resistance to change and unintended consequences that often accompany attempts to “implement solutions.” Surfacing and creating generative images, however, is easier said than done.

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