

4

LEADING TEAMS

Great or small, face-to-face, or on the web, the team is increasingly at the center of organizational life. From the Board Room and the functional team to the office staff, people together create the organization and determine its future. The essence of this process is dialogue. Is the team creative, resilient, productive, and harmonious, or does conflict, indecision, and lethargy prevail? The answer lies in the character of the dialogic process. Careful and caring leadership is essential in co-creating conversations. Not only must the leader be able to orchestrate and channel the conversation, the leader's actions should serve as a model for all team members—themselves leaders in other domains. Moreover, the group process will teach the participants about relating. If the process is smooth, harmonious, and productive, then the participants will take away a model for how to function in other groups. If the dialogue is divisive, antagonism may simply become a normal way of life in the organization.

The challenge of team leading is not an easy one. This is so because no conversation can be fully controlled. You may have the best intentions and make rich contributions to the group. However, people interpret your words in many ways; misunderstandings are common; and, the content of the conversation may shift unpredictably at any moment. Suddenly, and without warning, an inappropriate phrase, an irritated tone, a new idea, or an ironic joke may send the conversation in an unanticipated direction. Ideas so central at the beginning of the meeting may be lost or transformed by the end. Leading a team meeting can be like white water rafting. Dialogic skill is essential to staying afloat.

There is more: Participants in the group will come into the group as members of other relationships—not only within the organization, but outside as well. In a sense, they will “carry their colleagues, friends, and family on their shoulders”—alongside a chorus of other significant voices from the past—all whispering silently in their ears. Thus, in any team meeting there will be many different constructions of the world, different values, and different investments all in motion. Simultaneously, each team member will wish to be affirmed. Regardless of their differences, each wants to be recognized as valuable to the group and to the organization. Seldom will the challenge of dialogue be greater for the leader.

Yet, the potential of team meetings is also enormous. There is first the matter of motivation. Recalling the discussion of Chapter 1, the engine driving the sense of what is important in life is relational. That is, out of relationships we develop not only conceptions of what is real and rational, but what is worth doing. Isolated members of an organization can easily lose the sense of mission, and often begin to think only of their own gains

and losses. A central means for sustaining enthusiasm for the organization’s goals is through group interchange. Think here of the crowd delirium at sports contests! Team meetings also facilitate alignment among the participants. They can develop a common understanding of who is doing what, and how it all fits together. Or as commonly put, the group can all locate themselves “on the same page.” Given the differing constructions, motives, and skills that members bring to the organization, the importance of alignment cannot be overestimated.

Yet, there is a third potential for meeting in groups that is often overlooked and sometimes avoided. It can be called a *multi-vocal potential*. As pointed out in Chapter 2, we are all multi-beings. This is to say that every group member brings multiple voices, opinions, ideas, sentiments, hopes, and fears to the table. In effect, every team represents a cornucopia of possibilities. Leaders are seldom aware of these potentials, unless they make special attempts to bring about their expression. Some leaders may actively suppress these potentials, as they can make for chaos and conflict. However, in a world of multiple and ever shifting realities and values, the leader can scarcely afford the tunnel vision of tidy plans and solutions. Even if it is essential to organize around a single plan or decision, it is important to remain aware of unfolding events that challenge the plan. In other words, when the issues are significant, the wise leader should be continuously curious, show interest, and explore the rich resources of the group.

Another helpful metaphor in realizing the full potentials of the group is that of *orchestration*. Think of the different participants as each playing an instrument. One plays the piano, another the trumpet, the violin, the drum...and so on. It is essential for the

music of the orchestra that each instrument is heard. All musicians are expected to play. And, with the multiple constructions, values, and motives of the members all represented, the sound of the orchestra can be rich and powerful. At the same time, the beauty and drama of the music depends on how these instruments are coordinated. As leader, you become the conductor, bringing forth the sounds. At the same time, through careful and caring comments, you must find ways to bring about clarity and coherence. It is also at this point that you will realize that the metaphor of orchestration is limited. It is one thing to orchestrate when the musicians are playing from a musical score. However, in the case of team meetings, the score is always in motion. Thus, you are essentially orchestrating a jazz ensemble! As we continue to emphasize, effective dialogue depends on the art of improvisation.

Before exploring specific cases, it is useful to consider some general orientations to team meetings. Team leaders must be on their toes every moment as the conversation unfolds. However, the skill of rapid movement in conversation depends vitally on preparation. Is the leader prepared for the shifts in direction, the team dynamics, and so on? Has the leader given sufficient attention to the context and the preparation of the participants? In the following section we focus on these vital issues.

Preparing for Dialogical Teamwork

In our experience, there are a number of important steps in preparing for group dialogue. Some preparations are obvious and we won't expand on them here. It's easy enough, for example, to recognize the importance of being knowledgeable about the topics to be discussed. Other forms of preparation are subtler, and

especially relevant to the quality of the forthcoming dialogue. We now touch on four of these:

1. Hard and Soft Agendas: Group meetings are often called in order to accomplish some goal, to make a plan, to solve a problem, to reach a decision, and so on. Agendas must be prepared. However, agendas differ in the way they will affect the dialogues that follow. It is useful to consider the possibilities.

There are first the hard agendas in which the precise problems or questions are specified in advance. Hard agendas are designed for efficient productivity. The group is to tackle the problem without a lot of chit-chat. However, hard agendas also come at a cost. They can severely limit what kinds of opinions can be shared, thus inhibiting team members from speaking out on issues important to them. They also give little time to expanding on visions or conjecturing about alternatives. The problem is solved and the group has fulfilled its function. Further, the hard agenda inhibits informal interchange, the kind of banter about weather, health, sports, and so on that invite friendly relations and high morale. What seems to be time-wasting chit-chat may be the glue that holds the group together.

Hard agendas are often received from a higher echelon in the chain of command, or from the government or the courts. These cases can be especially difficult for the leader. When decisions are simply deposited on the team from outside, they may seem alien and wrong-headed. Often they seem insensitive to the particular conditions faced by the group, a square peg that they must drive into a round hole. And, because they were never consulted, their own adequacy is threatened. They are positioned as "mere pawns" in the hands of the governing body. So, as leader you may be torn.

On the one hand you must show solidarity to the decision making group, and on the other, to your team. Erring too far in one direction or the other will mean trouble...either with the upper management or with the team. This is a challenge for almost all team leaders.

Then there are soft agendas, by which we mean cases in which the group has a high degree of latitude for determining topics and outcomes. In such cases, the problem often faced by the leader is that he or she has advance information on the case, time to think about it, and a pre-conceived idea of what should be done. The leader thus enters the discussion with specific hopes for the outcome, often called a *hidden agenda*. There is nothing wrong in principle about a hidden agenda; it is nothing more than having an opinion or idea of what would be worth doing. However, it becomes dangerous when the leader is seen as manipulating the conversation to insure his or her idea prevails. Not only does the leader risk his/her reputation, now seen as sneaky, bossy, or narrow-minded, but the group members may feel that they have not been respected. They are positioned as inferiors, not worth listening to; in such situations, the seeds of alienation are now planted.

In the case of soft agendas, it is our experience that the leader should be silent about his or her initial preferences. Nor should he or she enter the group with a high degree of commitment to the outcome. The group should be given complete latitude to speak their minds, and the leader should listen attentively and appreciatively to all sides of the issue. Even if an opinion is not favorable to the leader's initial preference, the leader will learn through appreciative listening that there are plausible alternatives that might be considered. After a thorough discussion of possibilities, the leader may

then wish to introduce his or her idea. However, if listening has been thorough, it is likely that the initial idea will have changed. It will take into account far more details or shortcomings; it will build on the opinions of group members. Perhaps the leader's initial preference will now be discarded for another option.

2. Consciousness of Dynamics. It is nice to think that members of a team all enter the conversation as independent thinkers, all trying to do their best for the organization. But this is an idealistic myth, and the wise leader will be more effective by paying attention to "the dark side" of group life. In large part, this dark side is a byproduct of organizational structure. When the organization is structured as a pyramid, only a small fraction of the participants will make it to the top. One result can be fierce competition within the ranks. This means that when competitors participate in groups, the competition may drive the discussion as opposed to the important issues. Participants may undermine each other's opinions in subtle ways, or agree with the leader to secure his or her favor. Closely related to the competition is the performance review. Such reviews have the general effect of informing the individual that he or she is basically alone and expendable. It is not simply that the fires of competition are stoked by these threats. As well, the ground is prepared for jealousies, resentment, and hatred. Finally, the performance review is an engine for joining small cliques where gossip is used to harm the reputation of one's competitors. All these dynamics may infect team dialogue. Preliminary thought to the relation among team members—both positive and negative—can have a significant pay-off in terms of orchestrating the meeting to follow.

3. Representation and Ripple Effects. We have just focused on relations among team members. However, a member's

performance is also influenced by relationships outside the team. Most obviously, are the relations with other members of the organization. For example, many team members may have their own team for which they are responsible. They may also have close friends and colleagues whose opinions they value, along with office workers of importance to them. This network of relations is vastly expanded when you consider life outside the organization. Team members carry the opinions and values of their spouses, close friends, and extended family members, among others.

In preparing for a meeting, attention to this network can be useful in two important ways. First, consider the strong tendency we have of putting others into categories. He is a technical expert, she represents human resources, he is a practitioner, she's an academic, and so on. Reducing others to a single dimension in this way is unfortunate. Each team member is a multi-being, and carries into the group an enormous repertoire of opinions, skills, and knowledge from outside relationships. If ways of tapping into these opinions, skills, and insights can be found, group decisions may often be improved. Decisions will take more into account, and resolve many problems before they occur.

Second, it is also important to consider in advance what may be called ripple effects, that is the potential effects of a group decision on those outside the group. What difference, for example, will group decisions make on the lives of colleagues, friends, and family? Will a decision mean increasing the strain on a group that a team member represents; will it mean less time at home; will the team member's customers gain or lose? Again, it is important to think about ways of tapping team members' opinions about these ripple effects. Sometimes team members will take positions that

don't seem logical in terms of what has been said at a meeting, primarily because they are advancing or protecting people outside the setting. How can these investments be made transparent? If they can be voiced, team decisions can again be enriched in terms of their ultimate workability. For example, a team member in a high-powered industry may be reticent to criticize a plan that he or she knows will be bad news for environmentalist friends. But creating a secure atmosphere for voicing such an opinion may actually make it possible to modify the plan in such a way that it will not produce outside hostility.

4. Physical Environment. The atmosphere or aesthetics of the physical location of a meeting can make a real difference in the quality of the dialogue. If there is a choice of spaces, it will pay to think carefully about the location. We have both participated in meetings, for example, in which the temperature in the room has been too high or too low for comfort. In both cases there is restlessness, irritation, and often an early closure to discussion. Tables that place the participants at great distances from each other can also reduce the sense of team solidarity; each participant is positioned as a separate island. When meetings are designed in highly comfortable spaces there are also potential costs. While the morale may be high, very comfortable chairs invite participants to lean back in comfort, thus reducing their active participation. Intensely bright lights may generate the ambience of a laboratory; insufficient light can create an atmosphere of gloom and lethargy. And of course, interrupting noise can bring frustration. Architecture also carries with it subtle invitations to speak in differing ways. The kinds of dialogues invited by an ancient university library are different from those taking place in sleek, new office buildings.

In short, when a leader has the choice of meeting spaces, it pays to consider the qualities of the environment.

Team Leading

The ability to lead teams is an acquired skill. For some the skill may require years of hit and miss learning; for others it may be a natural outgrowth of long experiences in groups. In the service of developing and sharpening dialogic skills, we offer the following as some of the focal challenges for well functioning team leading:

- Clarify the goal for the team's work, what you expect, and your role in the process.
- Enhance collaboration and coordination in communication.
- Stimulate positive relationships within the team, and between the team and others outside.
- Pay attention to the dominant patterns of communication, and if needed, disturb and challenge these patterns in productive ways.
- Remember to invite the "silent" voices into the dialogue at team meetings.
- Keep your promises. Reliability and trust are some of the most important factors in leadership today.
- Be appreciative of new ideas and initiatives from the team.
- Give the team members space for open expression.

Dialogue in Action

With these ideas in mind, let's focus on several cases of ongoing dialogue. Here we present three dialogical challenges, the

first concerned with opening meetings, the second with a team in tension, and finally a case concerned with the coordination of multiple voices. In each case we invite reflection on the specific conversational moves that can invite the group either toward productive outcomes or to failure.

Options for Opening Meetings

There are many ways a team meeting can be opened, and the choice of words and actions can be crucial to all that follows. It is not simply that the leader must communicate the agenda, but he or she will also establish the conversational realities that are likely to occupy the group's attention. For example, whether a problem is called "small" or "large," "simple" or "complex," a "nuisance" or "of crucial importance" will make a big difference in what follows. Further, the leader will set the tone of the meeting, whether light or heavy, for example, judgmental or convivial. And the leader will position group members in various ways. Whether there is a good outcome to the meeting may often be determined in the first five minutes. With these ideas at hand, consider the following situation:

You are the head of a small research and development group in the Department of Education at a university. Today five of you are having a meeting about a new idea presented by Alex and Ben, two members of the group. They have presented a draft proposal for a new degree program on innovation. One member of the group (Caroline) doesn't support the new proposal. Another member (Dorothy) is uncertain about its merits. How would you handle this situation as a group leader?

Option 1

Sara (*group leader*): Thanks, Alex and Ben, for presenting your ideas concerning the new degree program. To me it sounds interesting, and it's great that we're able to develop new initiatives in this group. Now let's open for feedback from the rest of the group. Caroline would you like to start?

Caroline: Well...I can't really see the point of making a new program. We already have programs covering this issue, for instance the Master's program in leadership, which I'm in charge of. Maybe none of you have noticed it, but our program already includes a whole semester dealing with innovation as the central theme. Therefore I don't think we need a program specifically on innovation.

Sara: Hmm... (*silent for a while*). What about you, Dorothy?
(*Caroline looks intently at Dorothy*)

Dorothy (*looks at Caroline and then at the table*): Well, I don't know really, hmm... it sounds interesting to me, but... maybe Caroline is right by saying that we are already covering this issue in the existing leadership program.

Alex: I totally disagree! Our program of innovation is unique, never seen before in this part of the country! You can't compare our program with the master's on leadership! The master's on leadership is much more general and traditional, while our program is something new, specific and future oriented. I'm sure this program will be a huge success, and we'll attract students from all over the country.

Caroline: I really don't see how you can say that the master's program on leadership is traditional! Our master's program is very special, and it includes the newest theories on leadership!

Ben: I'm sorry, Caroline, but the theories represented in your program seem quite old fashioned to me. I really think students and the leaders of the future need a cutting edge education!

What would happen if the team leader attempted to be more aware of the different interests in the group and at the same time tried to lead the dialogue in a more positive direction? For instance the following version:

Option 2

Sara: Thanks, Alex and Ben, for presenting your ideas concerning the new degree program. To me it sounds interesting, and I really appreciate the new initiatives. Now let's talk about how this new program might be implemented in our department, and who would be responsible for what. We also need to be aware of the fact that we already have a successful leadership program in our department, and we don't want to create a negative situation of competition between the two programs. Actually, I can see the possibility of their complementing each other.

Now, I would like to hear more from you. Who would like to start?

Caroline: Well, I think the idea is interesting, but on the other hand I must admit that I'm worried about our already existing leadership program...how can we ensure space for two programs on leadership? And...I also worry...what would happen if your program on innovation became more popular among the students?

Sara: Yes, I can understand your worries and it's okay to be critical, but let's also try to see the possibilities. I would like to hear some ideas from all of you. How can we ensure that the two programs won't compete with each other in a negative way?

Ben: Hm... maybe we could design the program on innovation for a younger segment of students? The program and the PR material could be designed in such a way that it would appeal more to young leaders...maybe leaders within design, architecture, fashion, computer game development etc. Just an idea...

A third version could be as follows where the leader takes a position more similar to a consultant:

Option 3

Sara: Thanks, Alex and Ben, for presenting your ideas concerning the new degree program. To me it sounds interesting, and it's great that we're able to develop new initiatives in this group. Of course, we need to be aware of the fact that we already have a successful leadership program in our department, and we have to take this in consideration so we don't create a negative situation of competition between the two programs. Actually, I can see a possibility of the programs complementing each other.

Now, I would like to open for further reflection from all of you, sitting in this room, including myself. I would like us to start by making a little analysis together focusing on the following five questions:

1. Strengths of the program?
2. What needs in society does this program respond to?
3. How can the two programs co-exist and complement each other?
4. Elements to be aware of and perspectives we haven't taken into consideration yet—for instance perspectives from other colleagues or other institutes?
5. Future potentials of the program?

Let's take 20 minutes individually in order to reflect on these questions and write down our answers and ideas on five pieces of paper—one piece for each question. Then each of us will present our thoughts, and afterwards we'll have a more detailed conversation about it. Okay, do you have any questions before we start the process?

Then everybody began to reflect on these questions and wrote their notes. After sharing their ideas with the others, the team leader led a conversation in which they began planning the program together.

Reflecting on the episode:

- Compare the three different versions. How do they differ in their outcomes?
- How do they compare in the way they invite open sharing and productive dialogue?
- Do the leaders differ in their expressions of appreciation, or the way they favor one team member over another?
- Take a specific look at the third version and how the leader facilitates collaboration? In what ways is this desirable or not?
- Which version do you find most productive and why?

Implementing Policies from Above

So far in this chapter we have focused principally on meetings in which there are soft agendas, that is, where there is room for the group to direct actions or policies. Especially in strongly hierarchical organizations, however, policies and practices are dictated from above. It is typically the group's function simply to discuss how to implement the demands. Such situations can be

singularly challenging for the leader. Policies from on high are not necessarily sensitive to the constructed worlds of those who must acquiesce. Organizational policy makers may not understand or appreciate the realities and values of those who must take orders. Thus, when the policy arrives on the doorstep of the group, there may be strong resistance. It is not only a matter of the top-down policies being insensitive to their worlds, but the fact that they were never consulted may seem insulting. After all, they feel, they are the experts in the situations they confront. The problem is especially acute for the leader because he or she must represent the policy makers. The leader is responsible for getting the job done in their terms. In positioning oneself as “one of them” (the policy makers), he or she is distanced from the group. Allegiances and even respect may wither. With these ideas in mind, let’s consider an actual case in which the leader attempts to implement policy from on high:

The team leader, Cynthia, has called the team into a short meeting to talk about the working environment in a municipally funded community support center. In the team there are 7 social workers and one team leader. There is also a manager of the entire center who isn’t present at the meeting. Some days before this meeting the team heard that major policy decisions from the government had been made. The program they had developed was to be abandoned, and a new set of practices and organizational structures installed. Personnel changes were also to follow. A secretary has recently been fired (the team members didn’t know exactly why, and they found this firing unjust), and soon each team member would be required to enter negotiations with the team leader, the manager and a representative from the union. Here each was to discuss his or her future with the organization. Possible firings (or

replacements) had been announced six weeks before this meeting. In effect, the team is going through a vulnerable change process, with the possibility that there might be more firings in the near future.

Cynthia (the team leader): Today at this meeting we’ll talk about our working environment. As you all know we’re obliged to talk about this theme because the municipality expects us to do so. The municipality has a goal for us: they want us to achieve a certification in “good working environment”—a certification, which lasts for two years. In order to obtain this certification, all the institutions in our municipality need to be approved as “good working places.” If one institution is declared to be, “not good” then the municipality won’t obtain the certification. This is why, today, we are going to talk about our working environment here in our center. We’ll dedicate 45 minutes to this theme. So, does anybody have anything to say?

Jack: Hmm... I just wonder... What will our statements be used for? Who is going to read our statements?

Cynthia: Why are you asking about this?

Jack: I just don’t understand enough about the context: could you please explain the context a little more for me?

Cynthia: I just did. It is decided that we shall achieve certification. This is the goal.

Jack: But what is it then, you want us to reflect upon and talk about?

Cynthia: Tell me, Jack...why are you showing resistance to me?

Jack: I’m not trying to resist, I don’t understand. I am just asking some questions because I don’t feel secure about what this is all about... I just feel some kind of insecurity...

Cynthia: I don't understand why you're always showing resistance, Jack. I take this as RESISTANCE against me!

Jack: So you want to write down in your black book that I'm showing resistance just because I'm asking you some questions to clarify the context? This can't be true. What do you, my colleagues, think about this? (*now turning his head around to the colleagues*).

Carol: I think that Jack is not the only one here who feels insecure about this.... And I think that "feeling insecure" doesn't have anything to do with "resistance." Many of us are feeling insecure due the change process we're going through.

Barbara: I wonder who is going to read the report from this meeting? One of the main actors in our organization isn't physically present at this meeting but nevertheless Bettina has quite a big influence on our working environment. Furthermore, I think that right now the team is quite vulnerable due to the fact that we're in the middle of a change process. I think that feeling insecure is quite normal given that our secretary was fired, and two colleagues were told they would be fired. And that next week each of us will be called in to have serious negotiations about our jobs. In this context, the theme "good working environment" is a delicate question. Maybe it isn't the right moment, and maybe it isn't possible to talk seriously about this theme...

Cynthia: Well, I don't see at all why you can't discuss this theme without the director being present! I really think that all of you are showing resistance to me; you're devaluing my leadership, and this I won't accept! This will have consequences! The meeting is closed for now!

A few days after the meeting, Jack received a letter, signed by the team leader and the director, which warned him to behave in

an appropriate manner in team meetings or risk being regarded as insubordinate. Carol was called into the team leader's office and told not to speak from a meta level anymore. Barbara was also called in and told not to devalue the leadership of her team leader. In effect, each of the individual participants was isolated from the others, reprimanded, and "set straight" on their future actions. In subsequent weeks the relationship between team leader and the group became more alienated, and quietly the group attempted in various ways to undermine the new plan for the organization.

Reflecting on the episode:

By this time in your reading—and in your personal experience—you are surely aware that this meeting was a miserable failure, with negative repercussions that might go on for months. Here we find that with a single dialogue—less than 10 minutes—the organization was deeply wounded. How would you describe the major problems? Perhaps, for example, you noticed the following ingredients for disaster:

1. The team was in a negative condition at the very beginning. Policies had been put in place without their input, policies that would upset their activities, and threaten their continued employment. The group was irritated and fearful. The leader did nothing to improve their condition prior to introducing the new topic.
2. The dialogue was not conducted as collaboration, but as a process of command and control. Team members were positioned as objects whose only role was that of responding to the team leader's request.
3. This latter problem was intensified because it wasn't clear what the team's statements might be used for (for instance as a document to support future firings).

4. The team members were put into a double-bind situation: On the one hand they were expected to talk about the working environment, and simultaneously they were not allowed to express themselves.

These are scarcely the only factors contributing to this failed dialogue. Hopefully they will trigger some additional thoughts about what went wrong. However, it is one thing to locate the problems, and another to create alternatives. The question we now confront is how could this dialogue be crafted otherwise? For example, who could have said what and when? To sharpen discussion, how would you answer the following questions about the dialogue:

- In your view, where are the crucial moments in the conversation at which the team leader might have responded in such a way that tensions would be reduced? For example, how would you as a leader respond to Jack's question: "... Hmm... I just wonder... What will our statements be used for? Who is going to read our statements?"
- At critical choice points in the dialogue, describe what you believe would be a better response. What would be a more promising thing for the leader to say?
- There is a strong temptation in all this to view the leader as singularly lacking in skill. However, going back to our early concern with co-action, a failed meeting is always the result of a relational process. For example, the team members also position the team leader as an untrustworthy "tyrant." They do not take into account the context of demands under which she is functioning. They display an in-group solidarity that defines the team leader as a potential enemy. Now return to the dialogue and ask yourself about the choice points in the conversation

at which one or more of the group members might have responded in a more generative way.

As described in Chapter 2, preparation for dialogue can be essential to its success. In this light, how would you respond to the following questions:

- What preparation might have been made to create a more promising interchange?
- Should anybody else have been invited to this meeting? And if so, with what purpose?
- What else could the team leader have done—seen from a relational leading perspective—concerning the set-up, the frame, the context, the timing, the communication, and the reactions?

On the positive side, the dialogic process is never in principle completed. There is always the next word, the next interchange, the next turn in the relationship. At such moments the course can be changed, the past reinterpreted, and a new future developed. In this light, return to the case and ask yourself, what would you do afterwards—as a team leader—if you've been through an episode like this? How could you change the course and create a basis for mutual trust?

Coordinating the Team

Once in motion, group discussions can move in many directions—often shifting course chaotically and without warning. For the group leader these are significant challenges. There are many common ways in which the leader can reduce the chaos and keep the group on track. Most seasoned group leaders, for example, have learned the art of conversational *punctuation*, that

is periodically commenting on what has been accomplished so far in the meeting, and reminding the group of unfinished business. Most will also understand the importance of the well-phrased and well-timed question. By using such questions the leader can not only direct and re-direct conversation, but can encourage the open expression of opinion. This is especially important in terms of avoiding the chronic problem of reticence, that is, group members' hesitation to risk a comment that might be disagreeable to their seniors. Silence can smother untold potentials.

We're in a team of four medical doctors from the cardiology unit at a large public hospital. The unit consists of around 60 employees, including medical doctors, nurses, secretaries, and other staff. The unit is a new one, representing the integration of two hospitals—one an old and esteemed hospital and the other a new and enlarged facility. Every week this leading team has a small meeting in order to coordinate the work. Ann is the leader of the team, as she has the most professional experience. At this meeting she invites the other three doctors (Thomas, Peter, and Liping) to talk about their challenges in the unit, and to find solutions together. We're now in the middle of the meeting. Many issues have been taken up, and Liping introduces a new topic.

Liping: We have a huge problem with the new data system. It's been really difficult to synchronize the patients' records from our old hospital with the new system. It seems like the old and new systems don't work together. This actually means that we're right now doing double work, going back to the old records to find the relevant data and then trying to insert these into the new system. It's a miserable job, and I don't understand why we and our staff should be wasting our time doing this. It's not effective at all.

Peter: Yes, and think of all the patients who're on the waiting list. This list is getting larger and larger, and we'll get blamed for that! We should be using our skills on cardiology problems, not on double data work!

Liping: Actually it stresses our people a lot too, because they can't meet the administration's goals. It seems like we are putting too much pressure on them. They have to run faster all the time. And how are we supposed to report to the administration that we can't reach their goals? I think it's a mess! This is simply amateurism, and it would never have happened in the old days!

Ann: So what you are saying is that we want to work at a more professional level, and that we're wasting time in doing double work, right? Seems to me, that we need some support from the IT department along with the administration. Is this the way to go? Thomas, what do you think?

Thomas: Hmm...well...I think Liping is right about the seriousness of the problem, and actually I think this isn't only a local problem because all the units that have been part of the integration have similar problems. A few days ago in the restaurant I talked to some doctors from anesthesia and they talked about the same challenge.

Peter (interrupting): And we've been talking to the IT department several times, but nothing happens! They simply don't listen to us. I think this is completely scandalous. The administration of the hospital should find a solution! It's their responsibility. This is just bad management!

Liping: Imagine what a scandal it would be if this came out in the news? People paying taxes so that highly skilled professionals waste their time on secretarial work, while patients are dying

because of the waiting lists! Shall I report this to the news? Maybe we should all put our names on the report.

Peter: Then all we'll need is to find good lawyers (*smiles ironically*).

Ann: Well, I recognize your frustrations, and I think we should recognize the seriousness of this challenge. But we should also avoid going to extremes. Let me go back a little to one of Thomas' comments. I think you're right, Thomas, about the fact that this isn't only a local problem, but a problem that concerns the whole hospital. And you're right in saying that something must be done, and that we can't wait any longer. So, as the head of this group, I'll contact the director of the hospital right after this meeting about this problem. If nothing happens I think we should write a letter to the Board of Directors expressing our concerns. We need to make our position clear to them, and they should listen to us. But I also imagine that the director can't find a solution alone, and that there might be a need for a dialogue between the IT department and the director. I do think it's important that we don't blow the story up in front of our colleagues and patients. We have to be a little patient with the transition.

Peter: Yeah, it takes time, and it's hard to accept, but something's got to be done! And I'm ready to do whatever is needed.

Thomas: Yes, this situation is not sustainable, but I'm glad that you'll talk to the director. I'm also ready to join together with others to write a letter, if it comes to that point.

Liping: Yes, I'm ready too, and I'm glad we can talk about these issues together. Maybe we could even invite the director and the manager of the IT department to a meeting where we explain the situation to them.

Thomas: Yes, that would be a good idea!

Ann: All right, that sounds like a good option. We all agree that the first step will be that I talk to the director, and if nothing happens we'll take action by writing a letter from all of us. This letter could include an invitation for a meeting with both the director and the IT manager. Do we all agree on that?

(they all nod in agreement)

Ann: Okay, let's go to the next theme on the agenda...

Reflecting on the episode:

- How does Ann orchestrate the voices in the leading team?
- How does Ann use punctuation?
- What does she do to reduce chaos and promote coordination in the team?
- How does it work, do you think?
- What else could Ann have done, from your perspective?

For Further Reading

Ford, J.D., & Ford, L.W. (1995). The role of conversations in producing intentional change in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 20, 541-570.

Herring, C. (2009). Does diversity pay? Race, gender and the business case for diversity. *American Sociological Review*, 74, 208-224.

Kaner, S., et al. (2007). *A facilitator's guide to participatory decision making*. (2nd ed.). New York: Jossey Bass.

Steyaert, C., & Van Looy, B. (Eds.) (2010). *Relational practices, participative organizing*. Bingley, U.K.: Emerald Group Publishing.

Straus, D. (2002). *How to make collaboration work*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Tannen, D. (1995). *Talking 9 to 5: How women's and men's conversational styles affects who gets heard, who gets credit, and what gets done*. New York: William Morrow.

5

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

All leaders dream of living in an organization where everywhere there are smooth-flowing and productive relations. Everyone knows what to do, they do it well, they work together with harmony, they're mutually supportive and creative. Ah, such dreams! And yet, it is just such dreams on which much organizational theory and consulting practice is based. As pointed out in Chapter 1, the traditional metaphor of the organization is that of the machine. It is designed for perfect functioning, and it only needs attention if things go wrong. This metaphor is misleading. Organizations are created and sustained—or not—by people in continuous relationship. So much depends on how their actions are coordinated, how they treat each other, how they generate realities together. In essence, the organization is a living thing—not so much a machine as a sea of continuous conversation—and its flourishing depends on our coordinating actions together, from moment to moment. Dialogue is the pivotal process.