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Entering, Readiness, and Contracting for Dialogic Organization Development

This chapter offers models distilled from two decades of practice about entry, readiness, and contracting for Dialogic OD, the initial stages of relationship between client and consultant.[1] It begins with the question of why and when to contract for Dialogic OD work, continues with a definition of "readiness," and discusses how to assess initial readiness and build readiness for Dialogic OD. Next the consultant's "entering" into the organization is described as a process of crossing multiple thresholds while widening the circles of stakeholders' engagement. The final part of this chapter defines "contracting," elaborates on its innate challenges, and gives concrete ideas on how to contract for Dialogic OD work. Citations offer sources for further depth on a topic.

A Foundational Question: Why and When to Contract for Dialogic OD

We assume that most leaders in organizations are results driven and have controlling leadership habits, how do we contract for self-organization? If managers and workers are primarily evaluated according to their personal contribution to known deliverables, when does it make sense to offer an unknown and emergent process, to start down a path without a clear destination in view, and contract for Dialogic OD?

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Here is a story about a company facing a global dot-com industry crisis that illustrates both why we need to contract for Dialogic OD and when it can be very beneficial (Averbuch, 2011).

> "INN," a communication-infrastructure company selling to governments all over the world, was struck severely. In its third round of layoffs and desperate for cash, Harriet, a trusted managerial consultant working there, was asked to recommend a creative marketing specialist to help INN sell more ASAP. Harriet reasoned that if the market was "dead" even the most creative person would not help sales. Instead, she offered the following: greater internal alignment would be their best strategy so that when markets returned, they'd be ready and right on target. Harriet suggested hiring me.
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> I met with management (and Harriet), learned their struggles and desires. Looking for a methodology to quickly create alignment I suggested Open Space Technology (OST; Owen, 1997). OST mobilizes self-organization among people who want to take responsibility for the issues at hand, creating meaning and wise action together. The issue at hand was the survival of INN. We created a diverse preparatory committee of people who answered a call to design a process that invited all stakeholders to create direction and wise action. The preparatory team experimented with OST and agreed it seemed a good way to go. They invited a diverse group of people from inside (any who cared to come) and outside the organization (from their consultants to their yoga teacher). The focus for the gathering was: *"How do we make One Million Dollars this year?"*
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> The 140 people who made the choice to come worked for two days and a night. Harriet and I co-facilitated the event. It was a very unique situation since the CEO announced planned layoffs at the beginning of the gathering; 100 of the remaining 420 employees would have to leave the organization in the near future. He explained the decision not to postpone the gathering since the organization was bleeding and every day counted in the collective effort to return to vitality. He also said he did not know who would have to leave, and exactly when, yet he invited everyone in the room to work together for a better future. While painful, those gathered decided to help the organization stay alive not knowing if they'd be laid off tomorrow. During the first hour people created an agenda for two days. Everyone had a voice, and there was a palpable sense of a proud community. By the end of the second day members initiated implementation groups that detected and addressed issues of misalignment all over the organization. The organization as a community came to life working to revive the business.
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> After the gathering was over I called Harriet every month to inquire how things were. There were no sales but she was content that people felt pride to be part of this community of wonderful people. The 100 people who were laid off the month after the gathering found jobs because the remaining 320 people were very active in finding opportunities for them. Since it was one of my first OST clients I felt shame and guilt for not helping them increase revenue and was not yet able to see the beauty of their emergent wisdom.

> Over the next six months they tried to sell their products with no immediate success (country wide infrastructure projects usually take a year for a sale to mature). Yet there had been meaningful results in better alignment, cohesiveness, and energy level in a difficult time of struggle that resulted in a determination not to give up. The cohesiveness of this large group of employees enabled the owners to negotiate selling the firm as "one working enterprise" and not in bits and pieces. Eleven months after our gathering the remaining 320 employees were bought by another firm. A month after the acquisition the stock price of the acquiring firm rose dramatically. A major sale of INN communication infrastructures, that started a year earlier, materialized that month.

The first part of this story illustrates one of the most appropriate occasions *when* to use Dialogic OD. Dialogic work, especially whole-system–large-group interventions, is most needed when there is urgency, a complex problem without easy answers, and the need for whole-system alignment. The issue has to be meaningful to provoke self-organization, collective meaning making, and wise action.

This story also sheds some light on *how* the transition from content to "emergent-process" specialist can take place in real-life situations; Harriet, a trusted consultant, plays a critical role. She helps the management team reframe the type of help they are looking for from "marketing and sales specialist" to "alignment specialist" and the whole perception of their role in the making and mending of their lives changes from passive to cocreative.

In the second part of the story we witness *why* we need Dialogic OD processes, especially in complex situations of crisis and uncertainty. We see the unforeseen possibilities that can emerge when people who care dare to take responsibility and not delegate it to an expert. We see how the whole system managed to save both the people and the business, allowing for considerable gain for all stakeholders. This was quite a remarkable achievement under the unpredictable circumstances. In my opinion this achievement could not wait for a profound diagnosis of the rapidly changing situation and could not be planned and led top down according to premeditated targets and milestones.

Leaders are facing more and more complex and rapidly changing environments, and many of them know they do not know. Or in Heifetz and Laurie's (1997) words, they face adaptive challenges, not technical problems (adaptive challenges are described in Chapter 6). Adaptive challenges have no previous history of "solutions" (i.e., they have not been tested in the past). We do not know what is needed for what we are experiencing now and we are in the process of exploring and figuring it out. When faced with adaptive challenges Dialogic OD proposes that leaders engage all stakeholders, who construct the "whole system" and hold diverse interests and agendas, to embrace intentions no one yet knows how to fulfill. Because of rapid change and globally interconnected processes, leaders need to understand that no authority or expert is wise enough to know what to do. Instead, they must host conversations that matter and create opportunities for the emergence of new, better relationships and patterns of organizing.

Readiness

How do we know if the client system is ready for dialogic work? When are the conditions suitable and when are they not? The distinction between "initial readiness" and "building readiness" as we go along will be useful, and aided by looking at two points in time: preentry and entry.

Preentry: Initial Assessment of Readiness for Dialogic OD

At the preentry point I always have an initial conversation with the person who contacts me (the "caller") and if we mutually decide to proceed I also have one with the person in charge of the relevant unit/organization (the "sponsor") for checking out the possibility of working together (Weisbord, 2012). In this preentry conversation (and sometimes this is also carried into the initial stages of entering and contracting), I am doing an initial assessment of readiness, a very short screening to consider working with this client in general and dialogic work with the client in particular. This usually includes the following questions:

- *Past.* Why are you looking for assistance? Why now? What is it that is bothering you? What have you tried and how has it worked? And so on.
- *Present.* If I were all-knowing and promised you an answer to one question only, what would that question be?
- *Future.* Imagine that the process worked very well. We are done and you are very satisfied with everything. What has happened?

When using these questions, as you are listening to the answers, screen for the following concerns.

Is the situation ready/suitable? Is there a real burning question to which no one has a good enough answer? Is this a situation that calls for a new and unknown path? This will give an indication of both the *urgency and complexity* of the situation, which are indicators for the appropriateness of Dialogic OD. My experience shows that touching a *real issue* infuses people with life, moves something in them so that personal aliveness and organizational vitality show up. Aliveness and vitality are energetic engines of novelty and improvement.

Are the people in the client system ready? The minimal readiness you are looking for in people is the *authentic willingness* to engage in dialogue over what they care about. It is enough that they genuinely want it. I do not care if they are passionate for it out of distress, curiosity, or because it is their nature. Their choice is what gives them *agency*, a necessary energy for self-organization. Based on authentic willingness we can start the four entries and work with the client system while building readiness, relationships, and capacities along the way as the opportunities emerge.

Is the consultant ready? Am I available and willing, as an OD consultant, to engage in working with this client system? Do I have what they need? Can we establish a beneficial partnership? If the answer is yes we continue; if the answer is no I will either counsel my way out of the situation politely or state my concerns and dialogue about it. The dialogue may result in saying "yes" to this engagement or pointing the client to other possibilities.

"Dialogic negative." What happens when the client is not ready for dialogic work? If in the initial screening you see that Dialogic OD does not fit the situation or the people, offer more suitable OD processes that are not within your field of expertise, or if there is no suitable match between you and the client, recommend others.

Entering: Crossing Multiple Thresholds in the Client System—Engaging Ever-Widening Circles

"Entering" means coming from outside in, crossing a threshold, a boundary. Entering is a sequence of crossing thresholds into the organization and making decisions. Entering is a developmental process; crossing each threshold will require readiness (maturity) along with some successful resolution of the main task of the previous entry. Each circle of entry in the sequence includes and transcends the previous ones, engaging more people, deepening engagement, and accelerating the ripple effect throughout the client system.

Each circle of entry has a choice point, a decision to be made by both the client system and the consultant. This chapter will also refer to readiness building and assessment that takes place in each circle of entry.

The number of entries required will differ depending on circumstances. Here I elaborate on the four most common:

1. *Aligning* with the "caller." The "caller" is the first person who approaches us in the name of the organization asking for our professional assistance.

2. *Partnering* with the "sponsor." The "sponsor" is the person in charge with formal authority over the issue at hand.
3. *Engaging* the "management team." The "management team" are the people who usually work with or report to the sponsor.
4. *Cocreating* with a diverse "steering committee." The "steering committee" is a diverse, multistakeholder group created to help design, lead, and host the decision-making, invitation, and intervention process.[2]

The First Entry: Aligning with the Caller

There is usually an initial call from someone in the organization who believes that their system needs help. Sometimes the caller has a passion for a specific methodology, sometimes a general notion that engaging people or using an emergent process is needed. In the initial call, learn about the organization, its needs and expectations as understood by the caller. During the call, screen for possibilities, listen for the client's needs, see if there are any "givens" (nonnegotiable conditions) (Williams, 2007) regarding dates or budget and consider their reasonability. Listen for matches with your competencies, preferences, and availability. Find out why the caller picked you to call. Learn what are the pains and promises the caller carries and what are the expectations from a consultant and the OD process. All this information will guide you to stop right there, if there is no match, or how to go on to the next step.

Given the caller's vital role throughout the process, one who really cares and is engaged has great value. This contact must be willing to serve as a bridge to the new. When the caller strongly believes the system needs the help that the consultant can provide, the caller often holds the belief on behalf of the organization that even though the road ahead is not clear we are on the right track. The caller may represent faith in the consultant, in a certain methodology, or in the dialogic stance.

There are times the caller is our most natural and faithful ally, yet there are times the caller serves only as a gateway, perhaps trying to generate three proposals for the project at hand. These situations can develop into one of three scenarios:

2. I view dialogic work as a sequential and spiral process of entering–inviting–including. From this point of view there are three more common entries:

1. The whole system at one or more events—working with the system at large
2. Widening and amplifying the ripple effect of change in many ways
3. Embodying the dialogic pattern as a way of being and doing in the client system.

1. The caller becomes engaged and takes a leading role.
2. The caller serves only as a "matchmaker" and helps sponsor and consultant meet. In this case both sponsor and caller roles will be performed by the sponsor.
3. The caller is a "blockage" and will not let the consultant talk to the sponsor. Usually the caller wants a written document to present to the boss. If they do not embody a dialogic way of being and doing, the chances of getting in are very slim.

In my career, time and again, it was a passionate caller who created initial conditions in the system to consider emergent, engaging, whole-system processes, or a caller who was open enough to let the consultant and sponsor meet.

The individual who assumes the caller role must be ready to take some risks. That person is taking a personal risk in offering the organization a chance to embark on a new adventure. The caller must have knowledge and a strong conviction that Dialogic OD is not only feasible but highly beneficial or even necessary. Usually callers feel they run the risk of either being seen as a "savior" who can rescue the situation or as being blamed and shunned if the whole thing fails. I often find that the effective caller is an entrepreneurial manager, usually with personal power and influence, who can stay grounded in chaotic situations.

Sigal Moran, a former client and a strategic planner in a regional municipality, beautifully expressed at a Human Resources Magazine Annual Conference in 2004 what the caller goes through:

> In 2002, after two years as governor of Bney Shimom *regional municipality, my boss had completed all the objectives for which he was elected. Other politicians offered the advice: "just do nothing and get re-elected!" That did not suit him or me. It took some effort to persuade the governor to sponsor a dialogic process to ask our constituents what to do next. I took it upon myself to make it happen, to handle all the practicalities. The most difficult thing was the uncertainty, to let myself be in a space of "not knowing." To release and let things happen, emerge. That was extremely difficult for me as a person and as a professional used to planning many steps ahead. . . . A specific illustration is encapsulated in the moment when I was sitting in the basketball stadium. The large event was to start any minute and I did not know how many people would show up, or whether anyone would. The governor came to me and said: "Sigal, it is a waste of time, people are not coming." Even when 250 people showed up I was still very worried: what if no one will engage or initiate topics? This is not an easy place for someone who feels responsible for all that.*

Six years later, when the governor resigned, Sigal Moran ran for office and was elected as governor of Bney Shimon, a position she still holds today, serving a second term and still using dialogic processes with citizens and employees.

A caller must be ready to work against the wind, to be a connecting point or a translator between the system and the consultant. The caller is also very instrumental as an inside resource, performing a supportive and containing role when the anxiety of the sponsor or others in the system rises. The consultant should be aware of the caller's intentions, risks, and needs and work with him or her as road companion. It is important not to confuse anxiety or fear of the process with unwillingness to dialogue or be actively engaged. Anxiety, a need to control, and ego are all part of the journey of dialogic work and are important sources of information. We discuss and tend to them as we go along.

At the caller entry point either the consultant or the caller can decide there is not a match and go their own way.

Transitional questions to the next stage

- Is the caller ready to be emergent, curious, and willing to explore the unknown?
- Will the caller enable/support a meeting between the sponsor and the consultant?

The Second Entry: Partnering with the Sponsor

The sponsor (Owen, 1997, pp18–22) is the person or persons in charge, with formal authority over the relevant organizational system (or with well-accepted leadership if it is a temporary or informal system). Preferably one should have the initial conversation in a place that feels comfortable for the sponsor and free from disturbances. Learn about what is bothering the sponsor, the sponsor's image of the desired future, expectations for you and the process, and perceptions of his or her role. This entry process serves as a concrete example for the sponsor of the dialogic stance and conduct. We can use appreciative interviews (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros, 2008), generative questions (Chapter 5), and imagery to focus on the desired future. Look also at "co-missioning" in Chapter 8, Framing Inquiry in Chapter 12, and Transformative Learning in Chapter 11 for ideas on useful questions for this conversation.

If you cannot get time on the sponsor's calendar, the chances of transformative change are very low. Sometimes you have to put up clear boundaries and not be willing to proceed without such a meeting. Sponsors, who are not familiar with Dialogic OD, will often want to treat the dialogic work as a "project" that does not need their direct or intense engagement. But since we are talking about transforming an organization, the objective cannot happen without the full engagement of those who lead and control it.

This entry is about finding out if you can work together. Find out if the sponsor is willing to treat you, other people, and the process in whatever way you think is required for success. Say explicitly what you need from the sponsor to be able to accept the contract. Do not shy away from making specific, concrete requests, such as being open, returning your phone calls, personally participating in the steering committee, and giving it authority to cocreate processes, being transparent, and so on.

During this conversation, the consultant and sponsor mutually assess the sponsor's readiness to be open to outcomes, to invite engagement and shared leadership with a circle of diverse stakeholders who care about the issue. The consultant must describe what a dialogic process will require from the sponsor, yet stay curious as to what the sponsor hopes to gain from a dialogic process (or specific methodology). Allow time and space to discuss fears and apprehensions. Invite the sponsor to imagine letting go of control and enabling dialogue without giving up responsibility as a leader and manager and inquire what the sponsor needs from the consultant.

In this stage, some sponsors will state their "nonnegotiables" as boundaries: things they will not consider and will not support, referring to specific issues (e.g., "we will not talk about salaries when talking about employee satisfaction") or specific process dynamics (e.g., "what if they self-organize to take no responsibility—we cannot enable that"). This is usually due to apprehension and anxiety about losing control over the process and outcome while not being familiar with the dynamics of whole-system dialogic processes and their course.

It is important to make clear that a dialogic process is an emergent one that sponsors influence by being present and by stating their intention. While no one will have full control over what people say or do, we believe that collectives that care about an issue are intelligent creatures and they self-correct if we do not try to control them. I advise sponsors not to be preoccupied with setting nonnegotiable boundaries and "givens" but instead to be open and see what they can support as it emerges. Sponsors are often relieved to discover the sanity and wisdom of community, to learn that people in the organization will find ways to lead and create resources when they are passionate about an issue.

The transition required of a sponsor is not a trivial one, so if possible, a short-term personal consultation process is recommended. Focusing on the sponsor's purpose and self-perception as a dialogic leader can anchor and accelerate the OD process. Chapter 11 provides guidance in facilitating the sponsor's transformative learning journey so that the sponsor is ready to lead Dialogic OD. This may enable and promote the sponsor's ability to welcome surprise without being shaken, and to personally experience dialogic work, as described in the following story from one of my consulting experiences:

"N" was a 10-year-old start-up in the high-tech industry run by two founders. For about a year they looked for a consultant to help them redesign their organization for growth. Though they believed a redesign was necessary, they did not want to offend any of their devoted 400 employees. In an attempt to assess how personally ready he was to enter the unknown, I challenged one of the cofounders, saying, "Before we commit to an organization-wide process, I suggest it is a good idea to explore the next stage for you personally, if during the process you see your job is no longer needed in the same way." He looked surprised and quite shocked. I continued: "As you look for a process that will respect and be kind to your people, this is a way to be kind to yourself and prepare for the unknown. You may or may not need it, yet it is essential as preparation." A short-term personal exploration took place and when he was ready we moved ahead. From his point of view it enabled him to be more open, calm, and "clean" in this complex and challenging situation.

In this story the sponsor developed a personal answer to the following question: "How do I radically open myself and the system to bottom-up influence without personally feeling threatened and without losing my authority?" This is not an easy leap of faith, skill, or practice. It is important to appreciate the leap of faith required of the sponsor because dialogic work is not only interactive; it also involves the unexpected and carries potentially insidious and risky elements, such as accelerated personal exposure and challenging of authority.

When Dialogic OD process makes use of large-group (Bunker and Alban, 2006) and whole-system methodologies (e.g., Weisbord and Janoff, 2010) over a burning issue, there are some risks to weigh against the potential rewards. The large number of people and the diverse participants amplify the expectations and visibility of every move. The commitment to transparency, truth telling, and shared leadership makes it impossible to cover things up and release information only where and when suitable to the sponsor. This may increase the sponsor's anxiety over personal exposure and create a sense of vulnerability. We may be very surprised both for better and for worse. For example, we may find out that there is very little energy for and commitment to an issue the sponsor regards strongly, leaving authority "shamed." This must be weighed against the "high gain" potential: clarity, alignment, full engagement, rich networks, self-initiated change.

Intention is a crucial component in the sponsor's leadership: If the sponsor is authentic, open to outcomes, ready to welcome diverse points of view and cocreate with others, all this promotes engagement and initiative in passionate people. If the sponsor is cynical in the use of participatory processes it can have a heavy cost on relationships, trust, morale, and the potential for working together in the future. *If the commitment is not authentic, the work will backfire.* Be sure that the sponsor makes the effort to really understand and make a conscious choice from a few good alternatives—dialogic and others—to address the situation.

Assessing the readiness of sponsors can have a straightforward answer and can also present the following challenges:

- The sponsor uses cynical language but is genuinely open to trying this new way of work, believing it can be suitable for the challenge at hand.
  Rule of thumb: If the intention is genuine, the readiness and "new language" will be acquired along the way.
- The sponsor is very enthusiastic about dialogic process, but cannot let go of control (even though believing he or she can). Here the potential for failure is high, since we run the risk that when the process reaches a point of collective empowerment that the sponsor cannot tolerate any more, the sponsor takes back control and starts giving orders. People will feel deceived and betrayed and the process may make things worse than if no OD project had been started.
  Rule of thumb: If the sponsor is too enthusiastic and is totally blind to or in denial of any personal challenges he or she may encounter in this process, carefully observe the way the sponsor interacts with management and the steering committee and see if there is an open and challenging dialogue there. If there is none, get suspicious and take more time to prepare the sponsor to be successful. If that is not possible try to involve his or her boss as well, so in case the process backfires there will be a relevant leadership to support, witness, and help make meaning.

For more advice on entry with sponsors see Block (2011) and Weisbord (2012). When all issues with the sponsor are resolved this is the point in time when a formal contract may be signed; that process is discussed in a later section on contracting.

Transitional question to the next stage

- Is the sponsor ready to let go of control over outcomes, and share leadership in an emergent cocreative space, at least for a short while?

The Third Entry: Engaging the Management Group

Some senior managers do not have a sponsorship role but will often have a natural and vital influence on the OD process. Meet them as a group and provide all the information they need, such as stories from experience, demonstrations, or short workshops, to educate them about Dialogic OD and enable direct experience with your specific methodology. Direct experience elicits a conversation about their likes and apprehensions and can also lead to an inquiry into the role and nature of dialogic processes and shared leadership.

This is an opportunity to explore how Dialogic OD differs from the usual top-down approach. Go over issues of "boundaries" and "givens" and try to understand what the burning issues are. Sponsor, caller, and management team together map the stakeholders who belong to the "whole system" and make plans to create a steering committee that reflects its composition and can work as an authorized body for leading the process.

Do not skip meeting with management as a team. Dialogic work flattens the organization by treating all who attend events as equally important for dialogue. All stakeholders are perceived as people holding different yet valuable perspectives on the whole situation. Crossing boundaries of hierarchy must be encouraged, and management must make it legitimate for everyone to speak up and interact with anyone they want to. Moreover, everyone must be encouraged to initiate anything they see value in and are passionate about, regardless of rank and expertise. This can and often does confuse and threaten people holding formal authority positions. Conversations about management's role in different stages of work ought to be invited, addressed, and tended to. Building readiness in this stage is helping management or any group that needs to give up some of its control and power believe it can gain a new and more adaptive way of managing and organizing. This group also needs to be aware of and prepare for its role after large group events take place, as discussed in Chapter 15.

To illustrate the issues and challenges management faces I will describe a story that illustrates the dynamics of a group of people with the power to manage and execute who need to give some of their power away in the hope of gaining a wider view and a more adaptive pattern of coping (the full story is in Averbuch, 2013; quotes from p. 336).

> In July 2013 I was called to a client organization with the challenge to "create a viable strategic process and focus for the unit" pertaining to Jewish identity and renewal in a large national NGO; and moreover "take this unit from a defensive survival mode to an initiating and planning one." The manager also described the process as "a kickoff to . . . birthing a long-term effort, which I hope will be an engine to community development for the Israeli society." When I first met the entire unit's staff I found out that the goals were clear. The question was, How? The answer to "how" also seemed clear to me: invite all stakeholders and main players in the field to work together transparently and engage in mapping the field, discussing the unique threats and opportunities of this unit, and initiating strategic alliances with one another. But were they ready for this kind of process?
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> The challenge was to use massive stakeholder participation with a management team that was very small (4 people), not much of a team, and quite skeptical of self-organizing and emergent processes done in a large group, even though they had an enthusiastic sponsor (the department manager).

Three fears were brought up (Ibid., p. 337):

1. A "fear of drowning" in the process, afraid to lose control totally over their unit.
2. A "fear of alienation," afraid that the process will point out directions they are not interested in or know how to do.
3. A "fear of abandonment," afraid that stakeholders will not come, and if they do they'll never stay the whole day.

Working with this group of people taught me two important lessons about the fears of people in charge and how to work with them:

1. By listening to the three fears as guidance, what managers voiced was relabeled from "resistance to change" to "valuable informants" (see Chapter 15 for more on this). We let the fears guide us to a much more complex and wiser process that was a combination of highly managed and structured ways of data gathering followed by creation of new directions with a loosely managed emergent process of meaning making, resulting in alliances and joint initiatives.
2. Working step by step with "what is" created readiness for the next step. The skepticism of the team changed into expressed fear. By encouraging authentic dialogue, trust and courage were gradually built. Many factors served to create readiness for each next step: experiencing dialogic conduct with me and with their boss, getting an enthusiastic "yes" when inviting stakeholders, getting appreciation from other players in the field, planning, integrating, thinking together, collecting more information through phone interviews, and so on.

This story illustrates that if the consultant and sponsor work together using dialogic processes and holding a dialogic stance, it can be enough to prepare the interested manager and other supporting sponsors for working dialogically with management and the larger stakeholder community.

Transitional question to the next stage

- Are senior managers ready to see other people affected by the same issues as equally important, as partners in a journey?

The Fourth Entry: Co-creating with the Design Team or Steering Committee

There are many different names for this body of diverse people: "design team," "planning group," "preparatory committee," and "steering committee" are common (Averbuch, 2006). This is an authorized body set up to support Dialogic OD in a large organization or system. If it has too limited power, it slows down the process considerably. Steering committees should include the sponsor, some senior managers, and a mix of maximum diversity (in age, sex, location, rank, role, expertise, etc.) to mirror the diversity of stakeholders. Why? Because it needs to exemplify the organization and because it is where the organization, as microcosm, first learns how to work in dialogic ways, creating ripple effects when this knowledge is carried into the organization at large.

The steering committee creates the strategic process design (Chapter 9). It must

- clarify the purpose of the process,
- formulate the focal theme and questions of inquiry (Chapter 12),
- choose methodology and approve overall design, and
- create conditions for success (Chapters 9, 13, 14, 15).

If the process includes one or more large-group gatherings, the steering committee is responsible for preparations for the event or events and makes the following decisions:

- Who will take part?
- How to invite them (this covers the invitation and venues of promoting the process and making it accessible)?
- How will information be generated to ensure transparency?
- What will the logistics be, including space, food, and extracurricular activities?
- What will the documentation process be?
- How will the organization "plan for the day after" for sustaining and amplifying change (Chapter 15)?
  - What will be done with products of the process?
  - Who will support initiatives and desired change, and how?

These decisions, structures, and infrastructures are presented, transparently, at the beginning of any large-group gathering, so people can make informed choices as to how much effort they want to engage in and how to navigate in this self-organizing field of opportunities.

The steering committee serves as experimental ground for testing and validating ideas; its members cocreate the process with one another and the consultant. It is a conduit of the spirit, builder of infrastructure, and creator of conditions necessary for success of the Dialogic OD process. These meetings enable essential exploration and confrontations between parts of the system that are ordinarily foreign, suspicious, or blind to one another. Committee meetings facilitated by the consultant help members have firsthand experience of dialogic processes and hopefully increase their enthusiasm as they spread the word and invite others to join the process. Through this work, dialogic skills are built and bonding, trust, and partnership are created.

Here is an illustration from my experience about how a steering committee challenged the sponsor and designed a process to build trust:

> "OP," a relatively independent division in an organization, was facing a palpable issue of distrust and wanted to work on the theme: "How can we make our division a place that we are proud and happy to belong to?" The steering committee, which formulated this theme, wanted to make sure no one would be hurt as a result of speaking up so they challenged the CEO many times about the dialogic process: "What if people say things you do not like? What if they initiate actions you do not care for?" They were not willing to proceed until they were convinced he was sincere in his dialogic stance. When they were sufficiently convinced they created a presentation and delivered it personally to everyone in the organization, explaining the upcoming event and its opportunities in groups of 20–70 employees at a time. They decided committee members would only present to people outside their reporting line, so participants would feel freer to ask questions and say what they really think and feel. They met all 750 people, and 180 chose to come (no one had to). They also made sure to create venues after the event to connect to those who had not come and help them engage in the process if they now wanted.

This story shows the way a steering committee is a sensing entity, a challenging partner in decision making, and how it provides quality assurance for dialogic processes. In order to perform their role well, steering committees usually go through two common shifts:

1. *A shift from being "representatives" to being "members of a group" that reflect the whole.* This shift requires that members, who come from diverse stakeholder groups likely to initially treat themselves and each other as representatives of these different subgroups, become a team (Bushe and Shani, 1990). Often, early meetings of steering committees display whatever intergroup tensions and conflicts exist in the organization. To build the team, it is important that members do not think of themselves as representing any group—they are there as individuals. It takes a while until all understand we need the diversity so that our inquiry of the whole and our access to the whole are palpable and valid, yet they are not representatives, just reflections. If each one is fully themselves—that is enough.

2. *A shift in inclination to make boundaries more permeable.* We very often witness that a steering committee starts by excluding subgroups of interested stakeholders and gradually opens up to inviting people they do not normally consider part of their organization, such as clients, end users, regulators, strategic allies, or even competitors. As they work together in dialogue they realize the wonders and treasures of diversity and want more of it.

If the dialogic process of building a steering committee is successful, more initiative and more self-organization will emerge. Leadership will be shared by many, we will witness everyone providing their best ideas, information, assessments, and advice about what is happening and what should be done over different issues as needed.

Here is a short illustration of a steering committee that found a way to create a sense of choice during "invitation" in a military organization. We see in this story how cocreating makes the process better:

> While working with the steering committee, I insisted that people's engagement required they have real choice to participate or not. People should be invited, not commanded, to attend. Yet in the military, I was told, "any invitation that bears the signature of the chief commanding officer of the Air Force is an order!!!" We clearly needed one another; they knew the culture of the organization and I knew what it takes for a person and a system to be open to emergence.
>
> As they began to be aware of the human connection between choice and engagement, they came up with a brilliant idea: a colorful invitation that was cut into the shape of a "phantom" aircraft with text that was informal and cheerful, very different than usual. While still signed by the chief commander, and probably perceived as an order, it carried the message that it would be a different type of conversation.

Throughout the steering committee decision-making process I urge them to hold their decisions as a "work in progress," without too much attachment. Seeing everything we do as a "draft of today" makes it easier to build on other people's ideas and constantly improve our collective product. Holding whatever happens lightly leaves room for reflection, learning, and emergent processes that are not blocked by too much willful, rather than curious and explorative, engagement energies.

Transitional questions to next stage:

- Is the steering committee owning the process?
- Are they engaged in inviting others and actually co-leading in dialogic spirit?

More Thoughts on Entry

The sequence of entry circles is a pattern that may be used again and again, tailored to every new organizational challenge. It is a dialogic way of dealing with an issue of concern by using inquiry, learning, reflection, and getting things done through engagement of the whole "community of care" on this issue, and can be done with or without a consultant. The repetition, the owned experience, the constant reflection and the ripples it creates offer the choice of a dialogic way of being and acting in an organization, and in life itself.

If you are fascinated with dialogic work remember to watch out; do not fall into the missionary trap and become a preacher and advocate for a dialogic stance and methodologies as the answer to every question. Even the "ideologically dialogic" should make it part of their practice to give way and experiment with other possibilities, knowing that by definition in a dialogic stance, we can always have only temporary and partial understanding.

One last note about the entry process: many times we do not work on our own. When we are working as a team of consultants I strongly recommend they all take part in the entry with the client system, offer possibilities to meet the system's needs (including those ways we do not practice), and see what resonates with the client. Many times, consultants' dialogue between and among themselves in front of the client and with the client becomes an inspiration and role model of what cocreative flow can look like. To be successful it may require knowing the other consultant or consultants you are working with well enough to have respect and appreciation for each other as people and professionals.

Contracting

To establish the dialogic consulting relationship we need a suitable and enabling contract that addresses the needs of the consulting relationship more so than a legally binding contract as is often found in project work for hire (Block, 2011; Cummings and Worley, 2009). After offering a general concept and definition of a "contract," I will use stories to illustrate the intricacy and unique challenges of contracting for Dialogic OD work.

A contract is an agreement between two or more parties that serves as a guide to what to expect and how to behave in the relationship. It clarifies what is asked for and what is promised by all parties. An agreed-upon contract serves as a frame of reference to come back to when any of the parties wants to. There is always an informal "psychological contract" that comes from conversations in which mutual expectations are stated, discussed, and agreed upon. There may be a "formal contract," a written document signed by both client and consultant. Typically it includes only parts of what was agreed upon in the psychological contract, usually the purpose, stages, dates, and fees for service. Sometimes the client organization will have its own form of formal contract with its suppliers that specifies the organization's requirements and obligations from and to the consultant. The purpose of highly formal contracts is to clarify what will happen in worst-case scenarios. While that is useful to keep in mind, rarely is that (or any formal contract) needed in OD work, but sometimes it is. It is important to remember that a consulting contract includes both the psychological and the formal contract parts (signed or not) and, after all, is only good as long as the client wants the work; it should only be good as long as the consultant wants it as well.

Essential Challenges of the Dialogic Contract

Embracing the unknown and cocreating at the edge of chaos are necessary for new patterns to emerge, yet are hard to accept in a world that works with measurable, predictable results, in a culture that values control. While we need a contract that reflects agreed-upon intentions, goals, and work plans with estimates of the cost, at the same time, and paradoxically, the contract needs to welcome disruption, promote change, and invite emergence. This makes it essential for a dialogic contract to contain and work well with multiple and opposing forces, to be able to hold and align creative tensions between opposing poles.

The polarities (seemingly contradictory forces that pull in opposite directions) and paradoxes we often meet with while contracting for Dialogic OD work derive from a desire for:

- certainty in unclear and unpredictable situations
- measurable results to unknown answers
- simplicity to meet complexity
- planned processes to promote emergent results
- predetermined options to remain open to choice at all times

The way I see it is that we look for a process that has a form (structure, stability, control), that promotes flow (creativity, surprise, influence), and enables the system to transform (by moving from coherence through disruption to a new form of coherence). We want to meet the challenge of embracing creative tension in a way that turns polarities into opportunities for generativity and creativity. Bear in mind that the contracting stage is the point at which the consultant has maximum leverage and power to negotiate with the client, and use this power to enable and support the work.

Contract Basics

Contracts in general are composed of the following elements: (1) purpose, (2) deliverables, (3) roles and expectations, (4) consultant's fee, and (5) boundaries. These five elements are relevant in every OD contracting process (Weisbord, 2012). I'll walk through these elements, pointing out what is unique and crucial to Dialogic OD work.

Purpose: our shared goals and intentions. The purpose of Dialogic OD work is to create conditions for a collective quest, through which a picture of a desired future will emerge, be discussed, explored, and feed new consciousness and wise action.

This is different from contracting for "change management" and implementation of some already defined, desired change. It calls, I believe, for four unique requirements:

- a basic attitude of *not knowing,* nonattachment to the knowing we do have, and inviting a process of collective discovery that is very different from a "knowing" and harnessing stance.
- engaging *diverse players* in dialogic, nonhierarchical conversations, not top-down communication and one line of command.
- ensuring that both the results and the process are *emergent* and cocreated.
- focusing on the *future,* on a possibility-driven definition of what is desired or intended, not on what went wrong in the past that we are now trying to eliminate or fix.

To illustrate these differences in contracting we go back to the story of the OP company:

> In 2004 I got a phone call; the caller (the vice president for human resources) said he was referred to me as someone who specializes in "motivation." The presenting issue was a fear that with an improving economy they could lose key employees to other, more attractive organizations. They feared that employees "felt a sense of betrayal" because of past layoffs and cutbacks in salaries. I asked what their vision of a desired future was and understood that, in my language, they wanted to move from an adversarial relationship to partnership with their key employees. I told them I am not a "motivation specialist" but I can help create favorable conditions for genuine conversation with their key people, who will teach them all they need to know about their employees' motivations, thoughts, and feelings and enable new grounds for partnership in the future.
>
> After more meetings with the HR people, the CEO, the management, and a diverse steering committee, the theme shifted from "promoting motivation" to

"How can we make our division a place where we are proud and happy to belong?" and all employees were invited.

In this story the client started with fears, focused on what management did not want—"key employees will not leave"—but through the process of entry and contracting they shifted to a wider possibility focused by the image of a desired future—"all employees will be proud and happy to belong to the division." They made an effort to become curious and open, inviting nonhierarchical dialogue with whoever chose to engage, adopting a "not knowing" stance, inviting self-organization, and calling forth the emergence of new and more adaptive patterns.

Deliverables: The service/merchandise we sell. We are selling a *process* in which the deliverables are cocreated and emergent. So what are we contracting for? What are we "selling"? What is the client "buying"?

In structured Dialogic OD I usually speak of deliverables in four phases:

Phase 1: Initial path finding—we deliver clarity

This involves working with the sponsor, and perhaps the management team, to clarify the following questions:

- What is the *problem* or the *challenge*?
- What is our *intention*?
- What is the current *image of a desired future*?
- What are the *methodologies* that provide the *means to get there* and a decision to proceed with the consultant.

Phase 2: Preparing—we cultivate a spirit of dialogue and deliver infrastructures that reflect it and build initial conditions for success

Our deliverables are the structure and process for high-engagement generative dialogues, such as:

- *inquiry* questions concerning a real burning issue, stated in a way that is generative, compelling, and starts movement toward a desired future
- informed and enthusiastic *choice* of the Dialogic OD approach
- creative *engagement* with a diverse stakeholder community
- detailed *planning* for logistics, documentation, after-the-event support for initiatives, and so on
- the *spirit* of these dialogue deliverables, which includes elements such as:
    - People will self-select and actively engage in preparatory tasks and processes.

- They will be ready to open boundaries and include important stakeholders from outside the group or organization.
- Leaders will have an explorative stance, shared leadership, and will invite members from all ranks.

Phase 3: Facilitating/hosting conversations that matter

The specific deliverables will differ from one Dialogic OD approach to another but all of them will probably provide:

- liveliness and release of *vital energy* that was previously locked up
- engagement and *sense of community* in the individuals involved
- better and more *visceral understanding of the whole* and of *each individual's part* in it
- *alignment and attunement* to what is needed for the future
- increased *sense of possibility and hope*
- shedding old patterns and formulating *new and more adaptive* patterns
- new ideas and *mobilization for action*

Most essentially, we have to provide at least one of the three core change processes: *enough disturbance* to the system coupled with conditions that support new patterns to emerge, a *change to the core narratives and questions* that guide the system, and the *use or emergence of a new generative image*—any of which can lead to the ultimate goal of *more adaptive patterns* of being and doing.

Phase 4: Anchoring and accelerating change

This is probably the least-contracted-for part of a Dialogic OD process, but as described in Chapter 15, it is essential to ensure that the ideas and motivations good dialogic events generate become sustained changes if and when the organization chooses so. Deliverables could include:

- *wrap-up meetings* to learn what was in this process that gave us life, meaning and good results, what we want to remember
- *infrastructure to support new ideas and initiatives* that emerged in the process
- *screening of organizational mechanisms and institutions to detect congruence with values, methodologies, and ways of conduct* the event evoked and that the organization wants to enhance (e.g., change organizational assessments to more appreciative approaches, hold monthly open space forums, utilize cafés for problem solving)

Roles and expectations: clarification and agreement. The client's assumptions about the nature of OD services often parallel the Western medicine metaphor; you come to the doctor with a problem and the doctor's role is to go through diagnosis and prognosis, develop a treatment plan, and implement it. The patient can be passive, compliant, or inquisitive. Bluntly put, you hire the doctor to kill the disease while you go on with your life. These expectations are challenged in all types of OD but more so in Dialogic OD.

Expectations for the sponsor's role: Leaders are challenged to be engaged in preparation; to invite, ignite, and let go. They will probably have to move out of their comfort zone, to a place of not knowing, long enough for good enough options to appear.

Expectations for the consultant-client relationship: The nature of the "partnership relationship" in Dialogic OD moves from "contract-based" partnership to "covenant-based" partnership. In a covenant the parties not only commit to work with one another in an equal and complementary relationship, but also commit to work together for a "higher good" (a commitment to oneself that is valid even if the partnership is challenged). A covenant carries the promise to take care of whatever will emerge. When going into the unknown, people need more than a legal or "quid pro quo" contract, they need a covenant type of commitment because logic alone does not answer when a leap of faith is needed. I believe Dialogic OD carries an obligation of awareness to a wider ecosystem and to working transparently with the "whole system in the room" (Bunker and Alban, 1997, p. 44).

As to the consultant's expectations from the consulting relationship, a dialogic partnership consists of engaged and active associates who strive to embody and conduct themselves according to some shared principles. Here are some I favor: *freedom* of choice at every stage, *care for the whole* system as well as its *parts, commitment* to learn and make better without shame or blame. Chapter 8 offers some others to consider. Every OD consultant has to decide what we want and what we need from a consulting relationship. It is important to be aware of one's own boundaries and favorable conditions and to communicate this to potential clients. Real bonding and alliance that come from authenticity and mutual respect enable the relative safety that is needed to invite the new and unknown into being. These characteristics may not exist at this stage of initial contacting but this is where the intention to cultivate them has to be present.

Consulting fees. When the outcomes are unknown and the work emergent, how do you set your fee? The following story from my early years illustrates some of the challenges in establishing the Dialogic OD consultant's fee:

In the year 2000, the Israeli Air Force was looking for a participatory planning process for the year 2020. The Chief Commander and others were impressed with Open Space Technology and felt they had found the participatory methodology they desired. My business partner, Avner Haramati, and I were thrilled to do the work, yet soon discovered that we did not have the slightest idea how to contract for our fee.

As we struggled to describe and budget the work process, we encountered two problems:

1. The budget seemed to have too many hours and be too costly.
2. The client wanted to know precisely what the process would look like and its total cost.

The client system did not have the patience to cultivate the conditions and ripeness for Dialogic OD. We knew if we charged by the hour, we were doomed; the client would choose minimal preparation, regardless of what we felt was necessary. We risked setting ourselves up for failure and positioning ourselves in an adversarial relationship instead of a partnership with the client system.

We decided to offer the client a choice between two possibilities: an hourly rate or a fixed price for the whole contract. Avner and I preferred the fixed price since we wanted the liberty to do whatever we thought necessary. We said, "Throughout the engagement, we will urge you, and us, to do all that is needed to create conditions for the success of this process." By working in a fixed-price mode we took the financial risk upon ourselves; every hour we spent was taken from our pocket. This created the trust and alignment of interest and intention between client and consultant systems and generated a sound ground for partnership. We could decide when and where we would show up without the client worrying if the "meter was running."

During the next half a year, Avner and I worked dozens of hours with various organizations, helping them explore their purpose definition and educating them about different dialogic possibilities (presenting methodologies such as Appreciative Inquiry, World Café, Future Search, and others) only to recommend that they should not work with us. We found out this was not a way to make a living. We held the position that a client's decision making must be conscious and full of choice at all times. It felt absolutely possible and legitimate that, after educating them, they would choose not to proceed . . . some did and some did not. The problem was that if we wanted to keep the process emergent and full of choice, it was impossible to know what a fair price was.

It took a few months to see that in the initial process with the organization we were not in "presale." We were doing a short-term OD consultation, focused on assisting the organization to do the initial pathfinding. We helped them develop clarity concerning their main challenges, intentions, and a picture of their desired future. We showed them a variety of approaches that could get them there. Our conclusion was that for the dialogic stance to be genuine, we needed to create covenant-type partnerships for facing uncertainty. And our interests as consultants, such as the fee structure, needed to align with the client's purpose and interests. Later on in our practice we developed the following two compensation models.

Fixed-rate model: Clients who pursue a full consulting engagement pay a fixed price, inclusive of all the consultants' work. If after phase one (initial pathfinding) consultants and client decide to walk different ways, the consultant is retroactively compensated according to a predetermined hourly rate. The fixed-price quote no longer applies.

This is by far my preferred model when working with an emergent dialogic process in which large-group interventions will likely take place. As I mentioned before, it best aligns all interests, enables a covenant relationship, and supports collectively emergent work.

I calculate how much to charge when asking for a fixed price by estimating how much time it will take and then apply the following multipliers:

- preparation process: a regular consultant's rate (X) plus about a 10 percent buffer
- large-group facilitation: double my consultant's rate (2X)

By-the-hour model: Some organizations will only contract for a consultant to be paid an hourly rate. When asked how many hours I think it will take I use the same calculation as above but without the buffer. Many times I am asked why I double the rate when working with a large group; from my experience the answer is clear that due to the intensity of large-group dialogic work, one needs at least half a day to empty and recharge before and after the event (especially when working alone or as the leading consultant).

Boundaries. We can teach a powerful dialogic conduct and contracting lesson by not accepting anything less than a clear contract and not giving in to lesser conditions than necessary. By negotiating for more authenticity and truth in the relationship and the process, or by walking away, terminating the contract, if essential values are violated, we demonstrate what a real partnership conversation is. The contracting conversation may be the first opportunity for the client to see a dialogic process at work when there are a variety of interests and motivations and the possibility of conflict. Regard it as an opportunity to teach about relationship and partnering. Such experiences show

how parties can begin, alter, and end their agreements using dialogic values and practices.

Some of the important questions in the process of contracting have to do with its termination: when do you walk out of a Dialogic OD contract? Why? How? I have confronted these questions quite a few times. The "INN" story I discussed earlier is one of the times I was ready to walk away.

> At "INN," the organization that wanted to make "one million this year," everything was prepared in a dialogic spirit when, days before the event, the CEO approached me saying, "We are bleeding. We need to lay off another 100 people before the end of the month, but I am not going to say anything until after the event because it will ruin everything." I was shocked, confused, and angry. I started explaining to the CEO and the HR manager why it was critically important to be transparent and truthful in our intention, communication, and conduct. For some long minutes I felt it was me against them. Eventually I said, "I do not have an idea how we should tell them, and exactly when, but I know there is no way for me to facilitate this event without them knowing the real situation." I knew this was my boundary; I could and would not. The dialogue between us continued as we were engaged in finding a way through. On the day of the event, the CEO announced, "I would rather promise there will be no more layoffs but this is not possible."

Concluding Note

As a concluding note I advise us to pay especially careful attention to the beginning. Our initial way of being and doing serves as a tuning fork for the whole process. If we enter and contract from a dialogic, equal, and cocreative stance, this unique tone will be challenged yet identified easily and bring fresh air to the work process. I urge you to treat readiness assessment and building, entering, and contracting not only as "prework" but also, and more so, as the birthplace of the dialogic work that has a critical influence on everything that follows. Use it for modeling without lengthy explanations, exemplify by simply being who you are as a Dialogic OD person–practitioner, and use new language that reflects the work we are doing together.

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