LEVERAGE®

PEGASUS
COMMUNICATIONS

NEWS AND IDEAS FOR THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNER

Dynamic Dialogue: Practices for Learning from Experience

BY MITCH SAUNDERS AND TOM DALY

"There are only two sources of learning: others and experience," writes Russell Ackoff in a recent commentary in *Reflections: The SoL Journal.* He continues, "All learning originally derives from experience." However, "[t]here is relatively little literature about learning from experience and making it available to others in and out of an organization." The overemphasis on learning from others worries Ackoff because "no amount of sharing of ignorance can produce knowledge."

To address this concern, with our colleagues Barbara Coffman, Maryliz Smith, and Jude Blitz, we have explored flexible processes for teams, organizations, and communities to learn from experience via experiential simulation and modeling. We have found that groups can get beyond sharing opinions and actually test and observe the likely consequences of proposed ideas, decisions, and actions without the use of computers or proficiency with systems thinking. We call this kind of experiential learning practice "dynamic dialogue."

The dictionary defines *dynamics* as the physical, intellectual, and moral forces that produce motion, activity, and change in a given sphere. It is in the full sense of the term that we define dynamic dialogue. In dynamic dialogue, participants don't just *talk* about the patterns and energies present in the organization—they *enact* and *experiment* with them, using a wide range of methods, activities, and tools. Using dynamic dialogue, teams:

- Define, reframe, and resolve complex issues and conflicts
- Design and build breakthrough models, products, and services
- Surface underlying assumptions and hidden agendas for greater clarity
- Appreciate different and even competing perspectives
- Satisfy the longing for meaning and connection to greater wholes
- Move to deeper levels of understanding and collaboration
- Test new ideas to explore the consequences.

For instance, group members may act out the various voices in a situation to demonstrate people's diverse perspectives without becoming overwhelmed by intense emotions. Or they may use mapping tools, such as simple causal loop diagrams or three-dimensional representations of their business unit, to help them recognize the underlying structures and mindsets that keep them stuck in old habits. Through these techniques, teams experiment with innovative approaches or practice new behaviors and see the implications of these actions for the larger system.

The Processes

The principles of dynamic dialogue are readily learned and reproduced in many settings. Essential practices include:

Setting the Group Field. We begin by creating a common purpose, establishing simple ground rules, and emphasizing the importance of suspending individual and collective beliefs.

Drawing out the Voices. In this step, participants take on the roles of the key stakeholders in the system. Group members also listen for "ghost voices"—perspectives held by contributors who are not present, or voices that are not recognized by the mainstream within the system. Ghosts can also be issues that no one is comfortable bringing up. These voices are often central to resolving difficult issues.

Simulating Interactions Among the Parts. Role-playing is a powerful tool for exploring the dynamics in a human system. Reenactments or dramatizations allow the group to see how the organization's parts interact and shed light on the functioning of the system as a whole.

Tapping the Vantage Points of the Four Quarters. To help the group identify key features of the system, we encourage participants to view the organization from four different vantage points:

- **Perspective:** What are the different beliefs and dynamics at work in the group? What cycles or patterns do you see?
- **Affect:** How does this process feel? What is the essence or gift of each voice or part? What feeling

do you get when you look at the whole?

- **Boundaries:** What is included and excluded by this system? What is the system protecting? What hard truths must be spoken?
- **Purpose:** What is this system designed to learn? What seems to be its purpose? What new capacity is trying to emerge?

By inquiring from these distinct vantage points, participants begin to notice the impact of the assumptions that drive their actions. In surfacing these previously unexamined assumptions, group members see how they themselves have helped perpetuate patterns of misunderstanding and ineffectiveness.

Testing New Ideas for Ripple Effects. Most methods for working with complex systems break the issues or system into smaller parts and attempt to optimize the individual pieces. The practice of dynamic dialogue focuses on illuminating the increasing levels of complexity in the system and on examining how local actions can have unanticipated consequences for the organization as a whole.

Translating Lessons Learned. As the group members test new ways of being together, they make plans for how to avoid reiterating previous habits and to sustain this altered method of working. Key to success is establishing an ongoing forum for reflection and continued learning. Another important aspect of this process includes sharing learnings with others.

The ultimate objective in working with these processes is to enable groups to deal with complex systemic issues and generate structures for achieving their goals. Indicators of success include signs of collabora-

tion, the capacity to co-create, and adaptability. Big breakthroughs are less important than evidence of increased resilience and creativity.

Distinguishing Features

Dynamic dialogue employs many of the concepts commonly used in organizational development approaches. But typical OD interventions focus primarily on remediation of current problems. In addition to addressing immediate challenges, dynamic dialogue offers an opportunity to:

- explore all parts of an existing system;
- examine the functioning and emergent nature of the system as a whole; and
- generate and experiment with something entirely new.

For instance, a management team found itself struggling when the charismatic founder announced that he was stepping down from his position as CEO. The organization would have to design and implement a new management structure. The change from a system driven by one person to one managed by a team disrupted relationships among staff members throughout the organization. Conflicting priorities, personality conflicts, and turf-building moves wreaked havoc on morale and productivity.

The management team used role plays and built physical models of their organization using art supplies to examine the issues involved in making this transition. They found that their old patterns of interaction—with the executive team designed to check the authority of the founder—would not serve them in the future. They realized that their struggles went deeper than personality conflicts or the wrong people in

the wrong roles—their problems resulted from trying to conform to a poorly designed organizational structure. This understanding helped them to reframe the problem and heal the rifts that had been dividing them. They then focused on creating the kind of management system that would position them for future success.

When team dynamics are illuminated, the process often triggers deep emotional responses in participants. Many OD interventions bypass these dynamics. Alternatively, some facilitators steer the group into psychotherapeutic interventions. Either way, many group processes fail to deal productively with the intensity of emotional energy often present.

Giving people a time and place and tools for working with the powerful systemic forces *and* emotions that exist allows them to simultaneously resolve current issues and learn new practices for integrating emotional energy in healthy ways. These distinctive capabilities—to both heal and create anew, and to channel energy productively—make it more likely that teams will generate and share true knowledge instead of recycling ignorance. ◣

Mitch Saunders works as a coach with individuals and groups dedicated to making a positive difference in the world. He is also an innovator in the domains of leadership, community building, and cross-organizational learning. Tom Daly, PhD, is a coach for leaders and facilitators, and has a passion for guiding individuals and groups through transitions of all kinds.