The practice of communicative alchemy.

How dialogue can make sense of the chaos.

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**Summary**

Dialogue enables those involved to transcend a contentious exchange of views and instead is a practice of communicative alchemy that can improve a situation.

- Dialogue allows individuals to be in service to each other in a collective pursuit of creating something new in response to chaos.
- In a difficult leadership space, dialogue might be the only advantage that an organisation can draw upon. Helping to navigate unchartered waters and increase capacity and capability to think outside the box.
- Exploring the questions rather than seeking solutions opens up opportunities for radical thinking, going beyond what is known to construct new understanding and meaning.
- Dialogue with individuals across the organisational hierarchy can break down institution barriers, reshape social identities and increase accountability and responsibility.
• Dialogue can help to organise people and create common purpose, reduce group boundaries, open up ideation and breakdown barriers to create momentum on even the most difficult of subjects.

Introduction

Business has never seemed so uncertain. Despite over a century of management thinking, research and thought leadership, nothing could have prepared business leaders for a global pandemic which would result in the global economy being forced into lockdown and vast numbers of the workforce prevented from going to work. For the last one hundred years, business leadership has focused on value creation and management models were based on three core truths; a robust business model, clarity about the market and a responsive organisational design. These enduring themes forged in the furnace of the industrial revolution relied on leaders to deliver strategy, efficiency and a motivated workforce. At the end of 2019, the changes that thought leaders were focused on was that promised by industrial revolution 4.0; digital transformation, artificial intelligence and machine learning. These changes remain on the horizon but have been joined by a societal level threat – Covid-19. Industrial revolution 4.0 has been superseded by an era that has no name. Just as the Cenozoic era and the breaking apart of Pangea began when an asteroid hit the earth, this period will lead to a major extinction event. Only this time it will be societal constructs, models, theories and understanding that are broken apart. What follows next will transform what is known about business and work going forward.

Digital transformation was already challenging established business models, and perhaps some of the consequences caused by CoVid-19 is simply an acceleration of changes that was happening anyway. What is clear is that the reliance on management models that were written last century, and Tayloristic principles of efficiency which emerged in the year of the last global pandemic, are no longer fit for purpose. Instead it is time for new thinking about models of organisation, management, business and work. New thinking that is long overdue.

Just as the world has experienced the pandemic collectively, the issues that we face require a collective movement toward a new way of operating. Dialogue was beginning to emerge in organisation development practices and as a result of the networked economy and reliable communication capacity. Spaces already exist where people could come together to think and share points of view; leadership roundtables, adult education projects and technological platforms. The hubris, inconsistencies and cultural challenges delivered by the industrial revolution 3.0 were already being confronted. The response from platform owners to the spreading of dangerous misinformation regarding CoVid-19 has added urgency to a process of shifting attitudes toward personal responsibility and accountability in shared spaces which facilitate interaction and participation.

The problems the world faces cannot be solved by one person, a few thought leaders, or by someone with an expertise in one discipline. To respond appropriately to the crisis that the world finds itself, there needs to be wider, less esoteric, more balanced modus operandi. No one can know what is coming next, even trying to work out where the world will be in three months’ time is difficult to fathom and is no more than hope and conjecture.

Dialogue offers an opportunity to create a response that can deliver momentum through the chaos. It enables those involved to transcend a contentious exchange of views and instead is a practice of communicative alchemy that can improve a situation. In a turbulent landscape, where communication is considered as a permanent problem and where a breakdown in
information exchange leads to dysfunction, dialogue offers a way forward towards insight and making sense of whatever comes next.

The power of thinking collectively

Dialogue comes from the Greek word dialogos. Dia means “through” and Logos means “meaning.” An individual can have an internal dialogue with themselves, with one other or with many in a group dialogue. The purpose is to create a flow of meaning through our exploration, so that something new can be created.

“Involvement in the talk gives the person the chance to meet something different – something that goes beyond our hitherto cognitive horizon and forces us to think (Serkowska-Maka, 2019: Pg 63).

The dialogic forum creates an ecosystem where transformative meaning making can take place. If an idea is shared in dialogue it contributes to insight because it is not presented as a point of view but from the position of contemplation and inquiry with collective. The use of examining questions coupled with non-judgemental confronting of assumptions can provide participants with the depth and nuance to determine whether the very questions that are being asked have value. Dialogue moves away from sharing differences of opinion to individuals being in service to each other in a collective pursuit of creating something new in response to chaos. This empowerment of collective intelligence is essential if organisations are to reinvent themselves and the workplace in an era of unknowns.

Isaacs (1999: Pg. 9) defines dialogue as “a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together. It is not something you do to another person. It is something you do with people.” In this regard, dialogue differs from other forms of discussion or problem solving. Dialogue begins by being developed within the individual who notices their own feelings, motivations and reactions to what is being said, not with certitude but with curiosity. The intensity to pursuing knowing and understanding is modelled within the dialogic space for others in join inquiry and applied to the group environment where norms of hierarchy are removed.

Asking questions can lead to tension in a group environment but dialogue creates a space where individuals can be subject to that tension. This in itself can be more significant than spending time attempting to problem solve while understanding only a small piece of the overall context and issue at hand. Dialogue requires the individual to shift their frame of who they are, and their attitude about their relationships with others to move toward a place of creating a greater understanding of self and others. Thinking collectively is both personal and something outside of the person. It is a practice that can help business leaders develop self-awareness as well as develop next level practice in their professional lives.

Dialogue is fundamentally a form of communication designed for a harmonious pursuit of shared meaning. Garcia-Carrion et al (2020: Pg 5) argue that “human thinking is essentially dialogic… we are constantly sharing thoughts, knowledge, different viewpoints which, in dialogue, can serve us to develop our own – and our communities’ – arguments and ideas and to advance in the construction of new knowledge.” This begins with inquiry into the very language that is used to express ideas, exploring what meaning is conveyed by a word or a phrase. In a dialogic space, words are like magic. They are transformative when approached
with mental inquisitiveness. They increase a search for shared understanding between individuals as they reflect back on what they understood by what was said, how they felt and what they notice about their reaction to the way ideas were expressed. Dialogue is not merely about talking, it is realising that in the dialogic process the language used, the thoughts shared and the insights generated create something new. Words have always conveyed emotion, amplified ideas and created the world that individuals experience. By becoming conscious of the meddlesomeness of the words utilised in the dialogic space, words have a power and birth possibility in a way not possible in normal discursive context. In dialogue words have the power to mould the wisdom of ideas.

The structure of a dialogic space creates an opportunity for leaders to pause, gathering understanding as much from the silences generated by the questions than from the answers to the questions themselves. The irony of silence in dialogue is in fact an “an enabling tool to create ‘intermissions’ for other voices to begin rising up. (Andal, 2019: C2). The equity offered by dialogue, for all to be heard can enable those used to being the dominant voice to engage in the examination of different perspectives, whilst challenging their own understanding of what they think they know. The dialogic framework is designed to engage individuals in a process that enables them to analyse why they think what they think, rather than inviting habitual opinion sharing on tried and tested solutions to known problems. The opportunity to control is neutered in dialogic practice, which mutes dominant voices and engages the individual with the insight offered by others that they are in dialogue with. By drawing focus away from what an individual says and how they say it, dialogue removes political motivation from the field of inquiry. What is said in a dialogic setting becomes an object of learning instead of simply the medium by which individuals learn.

“Meeting another person is, at the same time, meeting a different image of the world, which gives us the opportunity to open to otherness. Such openness and adoption of the unknown becomes the chance to undergo a change” (Serkowska-Maka, 2019: Pg 63).

The disruption that is being experienced in the business environment has created a portal into spaces of chaos and this has produced a need for a different approach to understanding challenges that organisations are facing. Dialogue offers a method where thinking about what should be can be examined holistically. For business leaders who are used to knowing the answers it offers the opportunity to cultivate the art of listening and in an environment, which is demanding fast responses, freedom to slow down and engage in critical thinking unimpeded by frameworks that dictate how things should be done.

Creating space to think

Dialogic forums which seek to celebrate the pursuit of truth, create a safe space where members can negotiate “knowledge claims and… express truth in various ways” (Andal, 2019: C3). Within the dialogic setting individuals will be encouraged to reflect critically on their thinking, seeing an issue from many different perspectives, suspending judgment and instead noticing their response and the effect of their reaction on their thinking. In this sense leaders become protagonists of their own learning process, moving away from discussion focused on agreement and consensus and instead proactively engaging in areas where they lack understanding, engage with perspectives with which they ordinarily disagree and replacing certainty with puzzlement.
“Their thinking and reasoning skills are expanded when, in engaging in this kind of dialogue, they challenge each other’s ideas at the same time that they provide arguments to support theirs” (Garcia-Carrion et al, 2020: Pg 4)

Schön (1983) suggests that much of management practice is based on action patterns and tacit knowledge. A lack of criticality in reflecting on routinized actions can ‘reinforce prejudices and bad practice’ and collusion with cultural assumptions within the workplace (Finlay, 2008). Learning how to effectively use dialogic practices can help leaders to participate in exploratory talk during business meetings, learning how to use language in an effective way which results in increases in successful collaboration and participatory learning.

Dialogue is focused on meaning-making which is difficult to account for using normal business measures. It is a cultural resource that can be utilised to create innovation, better decision making and creativity. Dialogue is inclusive and promotes exploration of diverse points of view, allowing minority opinion and experiences to be surfaced. Engaging in dialogue can produce iterative thinking, that goes beyond the obvious surface issues and delves deeper into the systematic and institutionalised thinking that drives many business decisions. It offers the opportunity to challenge cultural norms and question assumptions made about groups of individuals.

Not everyone has the opportunity to develop their capacity to engage in dialogue. They may struggle to express themselves or have not had the opportunity to think more broadly or engage with inquiry. However, practiced regularly, dialogue is a skill than can be developed since all humans possess it as a fundamental aspect of human nature. Unlike education which forces humans to engage unnaturally with tools we have developed that squeeze different intelligences into the box, humans are born with the ability to engage in voicing their thoughts. It is a foundational aspect of our learning and growth, asking questions to make sense of the world around us.

Dialogic processes demand the use of higher-order critical thinking skills (Farooq and Benade, 2019: Pg. 9). In a difficult leadership space, dialogue might be the only advantage that an organisation can draw upon. Helping to navigate unchartered waters and increase capacity and capability to think outside the box. It encourages participants “to think and question ideas, to explore new points of view, and to construct knowledge in dialogue with their peers” (Garcia-Carrion et al, 2020: Pg 3). Recognising the importance of dialogic practice and the accompanying critical thinking that is drawn out of dialogic processes is imperative if organisations are to survive this period in history.

Insights and decision-making

Wilkinson (2006) explored problem-solving success by leaders concluding that leaders create more problems than they solve. The study finding that 81% of solutions failed, were abandoned or led to severe consequences supports the phenomenon explored by Dubs (1935) as the paradox of certainty. Managers have confidence in their decision making because of the mistaken belief that they have clarity about the nature of the problem being tackled. This results in inappropriate dismissal of certain information and over reliance on obsolete patterns of thinking, entrenched control mechanisms and reliance on existing paradigms regarding cause and effect leading to failure. Management decision-making can be explained using neo-classic economic assumptions based upon the rational actor model. This supposes an objective process of problem identification, information gathering, the generation of potential solutions and the
making of an objective optimizing choice (Clegg et al, 1999). Criticisms of the rational model highlight organizational complexity, incomplete information, imperfect knowledge and lack of time available, resulting in bounded rationality, leading to decisions often based on satisficing (Clegg et al, 1999; Rizun and Taranenko, 2014).

There is an assumption by business leaders that decision making in the organisation utilises the advantages of the collective wisdom rather than in the narrow understanding of the perspective of a limited number of individuals, many of who suffer from group think (Janis, 1971). In truth, most decisions made in organisational settings are based on a rational-logic process aimed at determining “the truth or falseness of a proposition” (Kim et al, 2014, Pg. 903). Decision making skills in organisational life have become focused on leaders developing the required negotiation or persuasion skills. The notions that it is possible to lead people to a particular point of view or opinion means decisions making is little more than a series of judgements about whether a proposal is good, bad or indifferent and a push toward agreement. This manifests in behaviours where leaders will call people to attend a meeting to discuss a particular agenda item, which is really a rubber stamp for the decision they have already made. This certainty of rightness of a proposed solution has perpetuated a state of affairs where the ability to think will determine whether organisations will thrive or fail in the turbulent times, we find ourselves.

In times of certainty, where solutions to problems are enduring, this framework of decision making is focused on advocacy for a particular solution rather than inquiry that leads to new insight and increased understanding.

“Advocacy means speaking what you think, speaking for a point of view. Inquiry means looking into what you do not yet know, what you do not yet understand, or seeking to discover what others see and understand that may differ from your point of view. It is the art of asking genuine questions” (Isaacs, 1999: Pg. 188)

Transformation of the organisation can stall if leaders are not asking the right questions. If the focus remains on the rush to solve problems and creating time and space to think is not prioritised. The sustainability of any solution will only be as good as the question that the problem seeks to solve, and if that problem remains relevant to the situation in which the organisation finds itself. If the question is irrelevant or addresses the wrong problem, then any progress that may be made will be short lived. Poor decision-making and judgements can be as a result of managers asking the wrong questions in a demanding environment (Warr, 2002; Staw, 1995). Therefore, normal decision-making processes may result in managers seeking solutions to the wrong problem. By not asking the systemic questions, managers may be fixing symptoms rather than core problems.

Inquiry supports and fosters a critical examination of underlying assumptions, giving space for undiscovered alternatives to surface. More democratic decisions and actions become possible as a result of slowing down the rush to finding a solution based on fragments of information. Instead dialogue provides a platform for spending time developing a fuller understanding of the context of the problem. Not only does this process improves collective knowledge of the participants, it creates the opportunity for uncovering the unknown. Rather than promoting divisions and disintegration coalitions, by adding in new perspectives a coherence forms around the context of the issue that needs to be resolved. In a business environment where so many unknowns exist, it is essential that organisation’s build a clearer picture of what is happening and, in doing so, create the impetus for change, which can be clearly explained so everyone can move forward.
“Dialogue is characterized by people who surprise themselves by what they say. They do not have to have all their thoughts worked out in advance but are willing to be influenced by the conversation itself. They come with questions to which they do not yet have answers. And they do not demand answers of others” (Issacs, 1999, Pg. 136)

Exploring the questions rather than seeking solutions opens up opportunities for radical thinking, going beyond what is known to construct new understanding and meaning. The examination of what is unknown, and areas of ignorance creates a disturbance to normal modes of thinking. By its very nature, the dialogic space is more democratic because all can share in the uncertainty about the validity of possible decisions and actions. Issacs (1999: Pg. 18) calls dialogue “a conversation with a center, not sides” because the outcome of a dialogue is not about reaching agreement, it is about generating understanding, insight and new meaning.

Dialogic practice helps organisations to develop change-readiness and increases the ability of people in the organisation to adapt quickly enough to market needs to deliver enduring competitive advantage.

**Group and team cohesion**

Being in dialogue together means that all participants grow and learn together. A healthy dialogue will lead to each person going through a productive and reflective process that allows them to amend and revise their opinions and views about a particular subject. It reveals tensions in thinking, resolves conflict between seemingly competing ideas and helps to unfold the unimaginable in respect to a particular context. It brings together individuals who have distinct ideas and combines these ideas and thoughts to develop novel ideas and collective growth in ideation.

“Inquiry dialogue is not about determining who is right, but about collaboratively deciding on what is right, or the most reasonable. So, inquiry dialogue entails a systematic movement towards the truth (even if truth remains an unreachable ideal)”

Asterhan et al (2020: S4)

Power relationships exists between organisational leaders and employees and this can have a negative impact during a period where radical transformation is required. Although power relations and politics that exist in every organisation it’s prevalence can have a major impact in normal discourse and social interaction between people in organisational decision making. In a change programme people in positions of low power will hesitate to point out that the leader might be asking the wrong question increasing the likelihood of important decisions being made based on the wrong premise. Dialogic processes create the opportunity to equalise political power and increase social cohesion in the organisational setting. Garcia-Carrion et al, (2020: Pg. 3) argue that “grounding human relationships and actions on dialogue and interaction gives more agency to all individuals, instead of only to the ones who are in a power position, as it questions traditional hierarchies of power”. Instead, the dialogic space promotes solidarity, peer support and friendship. It’s effect on group dynamics can lead to reductions in inter-organisational conflict, promoting respect, tolerance and empathy toward colleagues.

Dialogue with individuals across the organisational hierarchy can break down institution barriers, reshape social identities and increase accountability and responsibility. Passetti et al, (2017: Pg. 176) suggested that “the promotion of different perspectives and languages may
expand the understanding of a certain topic, prevent particular discourses and perspectives from being dominant and, in the best cases, promote social change”. In this way dialogue can impact how people are with each other, not just within the dialogic space, but back in the workplace. This will include how they act, and how they think together and what they think about one another. Bringing people into a space where all views are respected equally and collectively seeking a new understanding, removes fragmentation and separation and prevents retrenchment to old ways of thinking once the dialogue finishes.

Within a team setting, it can reduce dysfunction and a feeling of stuckness that comes with a lack of trust. Dialogue creates freer interaction between members of a group and encourages participatory decision making. This results in a positive exchange of team spirit and improves cognitive energy. People can let go of their entrenched positions and points of view to embrace the unknown, explore different perspectives and examine certainties. The effect is to reduce defensiveness and increases openness to sharing vulnerabilities leading to an increase in trust enhanced learning experiences and performance, all essential elements for enhancing team interdependence world, and the values that they hold to be important. This can accelerate personal growth.

Self-awareness of an individual’s own thoughts and feelings within the dialogic setting can also help them to gain perspective and notice the habits of judgement that they regularly engage in. Who a person is, will contribute directly to the life and understanding of another person both in the dialogic setting and in the workplace. Individuals can personally, inspire others and have an positive impact by forming a partnership approach to collective thinking. Opening themselves up to ‘feel’ how the other person ‘feels’ about a situation will lead to empathising rather than judging. Dialogue therefore creates the space where group members are able to give their full attention and time to another person’s perspective of the situation or issue at hand.

Dialogue cannot be fabricated in the same way as agreement in a discussion can be, where an individual can say they agree in at a point in time, but not mean it. Dialogue is something that an individual participates in, in the moment. If they are not present, they are not participating. However, dialogue can continue to reverberate in later conversations, text messages or telephone calls. Individually and collectively the dialogue will continue to play out, like organic matter composting producing rich soil in which ideas can be planted and take root. Although dialogue is not designed for problem solving it will have an extended impact on reasoning and problem solving within the business outside the dialogic space. Within the organisational setting this can lead to increased collaboration and cooperation both in the team setting and between teams. For individuals it can results in the pursuit of self-help and self-responsibility. In this way exploring issues together in a dialogic setting enhances social cohesion and propels organisations toward reciprocal knowledge sharing relationships, facilitating social transformation.

The wider social benefits

Mastering the practice of dialogue needs support from a community in which you can engage in provocative thinking. Dialogue is a not a panacea for future thinking, but it is process that can be utilised alongside other developmental tools. Properly supported it can create an environment for more ethical and human approach to organisational life and the changes that are being sought. Since most organisations do not engage in the practice of dialogue, it requires a deliberate focus on building the infrastructure and expertise that are typically lacking in supporting thinking in organisational life. Dialogic practices place social interaction at the
centre of learning and development, aiding cognitive development, thinking and creating meaning together and promoting higher levels of thinking and understanding.

“It is through dialogue that critical reflection and action are made possible and this eventually leads to lives being empowered. When more people are empowered to act upon their circumstances and make positive changes to their lives and the world around them, a greater measure of social justice is achieved” (Jeryaraj and Gandolfi, 2019: Pg. 285).

Engaging in dialogic processes challenges individuals to begin to see people in the wholeness of who they are. It increases respect for other people and prevents the push to try and change other people to be something they are not. It will help those involved to develop awareness of thought, the examination of the language that is used, and the impact that what is said and thought has on those around us. Dialogic practice legitimises everyone involved, reducing othering. Through the sharing of ideas and opportunities to exchange perspective, dialogue aids the development of community and identity, creating common purpose and “the natural glue between the individual and the collective” (Passetti et al, 2017: Pg 175). By its very nature dialogue leads to a merging of ideas and knowledge to create a new shared collective thought.

Dialogue is a gift to the human collective. It has extraordinary power to bring together disparate groups in a spaced enveloped in truth, honesty and empowerment. It can help to organise people and create common purpose, reduce group boundaries, open up ideation and breakdown barriers to create momentum on even the most difficult of subjects. In joining dialogue, the individual delivers an act of service to others, equalising power and giving everyone the chance to speak and be heard.

Placing Dialogue at the heart of business

In the midst of the chaos created by the pandemic, dialogue needs to be a core business capability to harness the collective wisdom that resides in the organisation. Leaders should be aware of the capability of their team to have the skill to ask the right questions, to assess their own understanding and to question their own knowledge and experience to ensure good quality thinking. Leaders can swiftly increase the quality of the thinking in the organisation by concentrating effort on elevating the capability of everyone to be in dialogue and enable it to thrive as a core strategic capability.

To increase the dialogic capacity of an organisation requires leaders to:

Access organisation ignorance - By reducing the obsession with discussion in meetings, and instead making time in the corporate schedule for meaningful dialogue it is possible to avoid making decisions based on what is known and instead devote energy to exploring ignorance about the organisation’s most pressing issues. Proactively exploring complex business problems with no clear answer using dialogic processes will require everyone in the organisation to get comfortable with not knowing what they don’t know. Rather than managing knowledge about what is known, proactively embracing areas of organisational ignorance, can enhance the capability of the organisation to operate while surfing the edge of chaos.

Champion and elevate dialogic capabilities – Ensure that senior leaders and the rest of the business have a clear understanding of what dialogue can offer and provide opportunities for dialogic skills to be developed and utilised. Seek out and support the creation of dialogic
spaces with practitioners who offer distinct capabilities to allow individuals to practice the art of thinking together. All business disciplines will benefit from embracing dialogic practice and understanding the difference between solving problems and thinking collectively.

**Create space for regular dialogues, repeatedly** – Dialogic practice is not a programme with a finish date. It is an organisational practice that is enhanced and becomes more valuable the more skilled participants become. There will never be a time when leaders need to stop asking whether the question being address is the right question. Dialogue is crucial to navigating and increasing complex world and should be perceived as a necessary element of good organisational practice. Individuals must become as confident about engaging in dialogic inquiry as they are about advocating solutions to an operational process problem or debating the advantages and disadvantages of a particular initiative. They must have the confidence to initiate and facilitate a dialogue with other people in the organisation. Organisational leadership need to proactively raise awareness of the role and unique place that dialogue has in business today. It is the responsibility of the business leader to cultivate a capacity and infrastructure that supports dialogue and reward collective thinking.

**4iForum – Emergent thinking about enduring themes**

4iforum is a response to a business and leadership environment where no one in living memory will have experience of how to solve the problems that businesses are facing or have the answer to how to take advantage of the opportunities that are out there. Leaders are invited to experience dialogue in a virtual space where they can think about thinking together with others.
References


