

## Dialoging: Exploring the Dialectics

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*Dialog is an important and often overlooked managerial tool. While little of the traditional organization science literature as yet delves into dialog, the same cannot be said for the more philosophical literature found in the humanities. This article intends to conduct a preliminary exploration of the constituents of dialog, described as the dialectics of content and process, each of which is constituted by two other, dialectically related elements, direction and space or silence and proximity. De Weerd uses the notion of dialog to mean a way of interacting that facilitates the construction of meaning. Such construction is a managerial tool that is presently attracting more attention in practice and from academics.*

**T**he first choice we have to make to delineate the concept "dialog" is that between our use of the word in a paradigmatic or in a pragmatic way. If we see dialog as a paradigm, it becomes a way of looking at human interaction in general. If we see it in a pragmatic way, it then becomes a distinct phenomenon, i.e. a specific form of human interaction.

The paradigmatic view on dialog is supported by Bakhtin (1984: 293) who claims: "life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue." This view is linked to the discussion on the "essence" of communication. Traditionally, communication is thought of as the conveyance of meaning. This transmission model stresses that effective communication successfully transfers the intended meaning of the sender to the receiver. This transport of meaning is problematic, as has been illustrated by the boom in communication training based on this transmission

model. But according to Bakhtin the model itself is questionable, because it assumes that the receiver passively extracts the meaning from the message (Steyaert and Janssens, 1996; Wertsch, 1991). For Bakhtin, understanding a message is not merely a matter of passive decoding. Understanding a message can, metaphorically, be taken to be reading-as-rewriting. The "receiver" actively constructs meaning. Here, communication stands for the creation of meaning.

The pragmatic view stresses that the transmission model and the meaning creation model each represent a basic function of communication (Lotman, 1988; in Wertsch, 1991). Communication therefore implies both functions, i.e. a functional dualism. Which function predominates depends on the specific sociocultural circumstances in which the interaction takes place (Wertsch, 1991).

Several examples can be given of the tensions that can arise when people start out from different assumptions of what communication "really" is. The Belgian surrealist Paul Delvaux wearied of his admirers asking him what "the" underlying message of his work was, instead of creating their own interpretations. Some scientists are unhappy about the misuse of their vocabulary—caused by lack of understanding the underlying theory—by scientists from other disciplines (e.g. the use of chaos theory in social sciences). Others, however, encourage interdisciplinary "cross-pollination," despite the fact that the exact—i.e. intended—meaning is not (and often cannot be) transferred. Other people's jargon can be used as a source of inspiration. In the first case, meaning is twisted; in the second case, meaning is created.

Similar distinctions have been made by several authors (see e.g. Shotter, 1993, distinguishing "representational-referential" from "rhetorical-responsive" forms of understanding; and see Latour's distinction between the "diffusion" and the "translation" model of scientific knowledge, 1988).

This article focuses on dialog as a way of interacting that facilitates the construction of meaning. Through dialog new "ways to mean" can unfold (Bakhtin, 1981: 346; quoted by Wertsch, 1991). Dialog, it would seem, contains a dimension of exploration. The intended meanings of the participants are multiplied: in the interaction with the other, one escapes from the vicious circle of understanding from what has already been understood (see Dixon, 1997). Words are used as levers, not as copying machines. The group—or the dyad—discovers the meaning that it creates by talking (see the Weickian notion of "retrospective sensemaking," Weick, 1995).

## CONTENT AND PROCESS: TWO DIMENSIONS

The transmission model of communication suits a modernist world view wherein people follow fixed directions that ought to be perused. People try to influence one another in a unilateral manner in order to guarantee their own aspirations. Resources are reduced to the means to meet the ends. The modern voice enunciates an obsessive urge for "direction," which it tries to satisfy by designing projects, making plans and engaging in rational problem solving.

Through dialog, people restore the balance between the need for projects, i.e. direction, and the trajectory that individuals plot together. In dialog, people set their goals "on the way." Here, the trajectory is delineated in terms of "space," "silence" and "proximity." The dialectics of dialog are mapped out with reference to these sensitizing concepts.

In dialog—as in any kind of interaction—two dimensions can be discerned: the *content* (what is the interaction about?) and the *process* (how do people deal with one another?), which are interwoven in on-going human interaction. First, people balance "direction" and "space" as two sides of the same coin called content. Second, they balance "silence" and "proximity" as the two sides of the same coin called process.

Goal-driven communication suffers from directional overdose and can be characterized by the following features: people engaged in this kind of interaction (1) run up against fixed, and often hidden, agendas, (2) have an urge to agree on "what's real," (3) appear to have cut and dried opinions, i.e. a fixed perspective on the subject, and (4) attempt to unilaterally control the communication from their fixed perspectives.

In dialog, people offset their need for direction with what might be called "space." In a sense, the notion of space is related to a deconstructionist way of handling things. Deconstructionism (see also the principle of analytic symmetry formulated by Cooper and Law, 1995; in Chia, 1995) hinges on three insights: (1) all sense-making is connected with a rhetorical dimension (Steele, 1989); (2) as a result, people build common certainties (Kilduff, 1993); and (3) they consequently deny dissensus as a continuous generative principle within a community. However, deconstructionism rejects the idea that texts can ever be interpreted in a single, solid, correct, rational, univocal way. It tries to bypass the obvious. A deconstructionist reading refuses to submit to the reader's mindset or to the rigidity of the text. Therefore it is able to shed light on interpretations that otherwise remain hidden.

Revaluing space within human interaction shows people (1) meeting each other with a certain unpreparedness, being willing to chance the unforeseen, the unknown; (2) focusing on the possible, i.e. "what can be," postponing the "ultimate" interpretation and loosening the grip of certainty (Bohm and Briggs, 1992; Isaacs, 1993; Schein, 1993); and (3) recognizing the generativity of dissensus.

Space stands for divergence, multiplicity and possibility; while direction stands for convergence, uni(form)ity and certainty. Direction is needed, otherwise people will adopt an "anything goes" attitude. After all, an overdose of space will lead to nihilism and relativism. In dialog goals neither precede nor dominate the interaction. They are construed, and continuously modified, along the way. This is made possible when people can create space, which enables interaction of an open-ended kind (Bohm and Briggs, 1992) through which new viewpoints are generated. In a sense, multiplicity is not merely a means, an impulse, but also an end, a goal worth pursuing.

Dialog stands for a way of interacting that contrasts with our dominant, one-sided way of interaction that mortgages other possibilities of meeting. A great deal of formal and informal interaction in our culture is implicitly dominated by the war and conquest metaphor (Bouwen and Steyaert, 1995; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). There seems to be a continual struggle for dominance and the ownership of meaning. This issue of power leads us to the relational dimension of human interaction, that can be described as "silence" and "proximity."

Lyotard (in Delruelle, 1994) denies the possibility of eliminating power. We must therefore continuously be concerned by the question of violence. Relationships suffer from an overdose of silence and/or proximity. In silence, the parties isolate—i.e. alienate—themselves from one another. In silence people reject one another. In proximity people fall in line with the practices of either the conquering or beaten community. Engaged in groupthink, they bathe in the safe, warm womb of "truth."

In dialog, people balance silence and proximity, i.e. strangeness and familiarity towards the Other. The destructive side of silence is turned into a constructive element of both passiveness and receptivity to the other (Lyotard, in Delruelle, 1994). A non-judgmental attitude by means of which one abstains from evaluative reactions prevails (Bohm and Briggs, 1992; Isaacs, 1993; Schein, 1993). In proximity, people interact in mutual involvement. They construct shared identity, build on shared responsibility for their projects and act from shared ownership of the situation in which they are engaged.

Dialog cannot exist without an equality realized by means of the dissolution of power or the restoration of its balance between the parties involved. The generativity of diversity (silence) is realized through a degree of sharedness (proximity) and vice versa. Shotter has introduced the notion of "community of difference," an idea strongly related to the dialectics of silence and proximity. In a community of difference people identify with one another and create room for "a genuine recognition of the importance of differences rather than similarities" (Shotter, 1993: 63-4).

The content and relational dimensions—emerging from the interplay between direction and space or silence and proximity—turn out to be intertwined. In trying to establish dialog the relational question parallels the question of content. Balancing direction and space requires balancing silence and proximity, and vice versa.

The idea of "community of difference" represents a shift from a politics of power towards a politics of identity, through which the other—i.e. different, suppressed, minor—voices are also included (Shotter, 1993). People are recognized as being part of a group in which difference is tolerated and even encouraged, rather than recognition being conditioned by stereotypes. Within a community of difference *belonging* does not imply *agreeing*. By enlarging the scope of identity, the individual can participate in a common pool of meaning (Isaacs, 1993). Individual contributions are valued as part of the whole (Bohm and Briggs, 1992). Shared identity is balanced by silence and openness towards other members of the community, in other words there is a "strangeness" that enables a listener to "misread" the other. This makes it possible to relate something different and to listen in a different way.

A constructive combination of involvement and detachment, contained in the proximity/silence dialectic, facilitates a space of belonging, and acknowledges the possibility of sensitivity towards the otherness of others.

The rites of organizing are often hampered by the fog of complexity. Organizational members who are trying to stay on the "right road" leading in the desired direction deal with this issue by trying to avoid it. Organizing requires a great deal of belligerent communication; decisions have to be made quickly and it can often be necessary to deal with ambiguity. Such interactions often repress dialog. It is such conflict that gives rise to the exploratory and innovative dimension of organizational life. Managers need to translate "environmental uncertainty" into concrete human action and interaction. Proximity and silence matter. Dialog

requires a fruitful interplay between direction and space within a community of difference.

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