

Chapter One: Why Dialogue?

“Between falsehood and useless truth there is little difference. As gold which he cannot spend will make no man rich, so knowledge which he cannot apply will make no man wise.”

Samuel Johnson

Shooting In the Dark

In a recent survey, 93% of people admitted to lying regularly at work.

Ninety Three Percent!?!?

If we want better communication, don't you think this is a good place to start?

We don't simply need to improve the flow of information at work. We need to improve the quality of the information that is flowing! People aren't telling the truth. And it corrupts our systems. It distorts feedback loops. Low quality information breeds low quality relationships, low quality processes, and surprise, surprise: low quality products and services.

How often do *you* tell the truth at work? A better question might be, how often do you believe what you hear? Most people are not out-and-out lying. We simply hide behind partial truths, pre-polished politically correct routines or sins of omission that distort perceptions and fracture our organization's ability to adapt.

We end up basing important decisions on a series of doctored opinions, data and information – each delivered with missing piece or an accumulating “spin.” How can we expect to meet our deadlines, keep our customers happy or ensure quality with bad data?! Engineers call it stacked tolerance. When a tiny tolerance of plus or minus some thousandth of an inch stacks up, the combined effect can destroy the integrity of a system. Every piece is just a little off “true” and the result is that the group of pieces, as a whole, ends up a *lot* off “true.” In terms of communication we might even say the group ends up discussing the false instead of the truth. We run the risk of building our strategic plan, allocating our resources, and making other big decisions based on faulty information. Sounds like a recipe for failure, doesn't it? We *can't* make good decisions if we aren't telling each other the truth. And how in the world can we build a team that works well together when they can't even talk to each other?

Too many people think it is futile to speak the truth at work. They think that to be honest and authentic is to commit career suicide. They believe that only a fool would “call it like

it is.” And so they compromise. They keep quiet about ‘delicate’ issues. They avoid the touchy points. And soon enough, that which is undiscussable exceeds the discussable. All that is left is the inane, superficial, and repetitious details that occupy most of our meetings. If you ever sat in a meeting that was a complete waste of time you were probably surrounded by people unwilling to speak the truth.

Thinking New Thoughts

It is time to re-write old rules that filter out the disturbing, yet *vital*, truths. What a wasted resource! Those truths, considered dangerous, actually have the power to challenge our work groups to think new thoughts and generate new ideas. We need to build a safe place where these dangerous truths can surface. We need to make it O.K. to question, wonder, and reflect. Only then can our organizations begin to achieve the level of responsiveness and foresight necessary for long-term success in today’s business environment. Our mills of creativity require the grist of truth-telling to produce new ideas, innovative products and ingenious short-cuts to accelerated delivery times. Half-truths only inspire half-hearted efforts and mediocre results. It is the genuine exchange of meaningful truth that gives birth to enthusiasm and excellence. It is the experience of genuine dialogue that can transform and develop the full extent of a group’s potential into reality.

Dialogue has the power to change a group of strangers into friends, a collection of individuals into a team, to build coherence around diversity, and to build trust where suspicion and cynicism threaten to fragment an organization. The process of dialogue is the vehicle through which knowledge is shared. It is how an organization “thinks.” Dialogue is the observable neural networking of organizational mind. And it is sorely lacking in our organizations. Why? Dialogue demands of participants a willingness to tell the truth and, just as difficult, a willingness to listen to the truth (or someone’s version of it).

How can you make it safe to tell the truth? Turning dialogue into a formal process is one way you can help a group re-write their communication norms. When given a time and a place to practice, people have an opportunity to experiment and test new communication protocols that would remain little more than good intentions in the rush of daily activity. If you feel called to take a group beyond current levels of performance, then the process of dialogue presented in this book articulates a path you can adapt and replicate with any group. Dialogue is not a magic

bullet. It takes time. It involves risk. And sometimes you will wonder if it is worth it. But it sure beats the heck out of looping back through the same old conversations that doom us to make the same mistakes and limit us to achieve only marginal improvements.

The “Real Problem”

When a group fails to address difficult issues, something has affected their willingness to see and tell the truth—it could be a turf war, an ego battle, a tyrannical hierarchy, old fears of retribution, or learned helplessness translated into apathy. At one level it doesn't matter. When co-workers will only speak privately about the “real problem” then dialogue has become taboo in the larger group. The “real problem” is code speak for the one thing that needs to be fixed but everyone is too scared to mention for fear of retribution, losing personal ground, or being shot as the messenger of bad news. It may concern an individual's performance, a system that isn't working, the boss' pet project/department that is totally dysfunctional, a deep injustice in allocation of rewards or resources, or some other tough issue. The “real problem” is the one that everyone either pretends isn't there or impotently addresses with the same old solutions that didn't work last time.

We have to stop avoiding the real problems. They either contain the seeds of unique opportunity or the seeds of our demise -- regardless, we want the capacity to talk about them before the opportunities wither and die or these little seeds grow into Godzilla-like failures. Part of our problem is that as it has become more necessary, it has also become more difficult to “face the facts.” Our more decentralized levels of authority demand new skills that enable whole groups to address what used to be difficult enough for a lone decision-making leader to face. The business of business requires us to continually address and resolve conflicts. It was hard enough when our leaders had responsibility to make the “tough decisions” – but now that we have to do it *as a group* – well, no wonder people avoid the “real problems.”

Traditional hierarchy protected us from this dilemma. In the old hierarchy days, we could look to a leader to make the tough decisions. Even now, some of us still blame “leadership” for our inability to face the real problems – but the truth is, we are *all* to blame. Anytime we skirt around an issue, pretend we didn't hear, or engage in an adversarial win/lose debate we avoid the hard work of a genuine dialogue about the real issues. Today, we find ourselves facing enough complexity, moral dilemmas, and stressful time constraints to make

“taking sides” a losing strategy. We scream that we need better leadership but leaders can’t save us now. We are going to have to learn how to lead ourselves. And to do that we have to know how to dialogue.

We need skills that help us resolve paradoxical conflicts as a group. For instance, is the customer still king when he treats an employee (your greatest asset) unfairly? Who is most important? It is no longer either/or, but both/and. We have to learn how to stop “taking sides” and make decisions together, to piece together a bigger picture from apparently contradictory input, and to resolve seemingly unsolvable dilemmas as a group. For our organization to “think” we first have to learn how to think and reason together in groups. Tough order when you’ve got a group that finds it hard to agree on what to have for lunch.

Dialogue Skills for Dangerous Truths

We need new skills to help groups talk through tough issues without escalating into arguments, declining into debilitated silence, or mindlessly deferring to a “leader” they can later subvert. Decentralized leadership means sharing the difficult issues as well as the easy ones. What used to be one person’s inner conflict now exponentially increases in complexity by the number of people involved, their values, beliefs and opinions. Sure, with more input we have the potential to make much better decisions, but not if we kill each other in the process ... or give up and take a vote. No wonder leaders don’t walk their talk and share the big decisions – without the skills of dialogue and collective thinking the risk of a free-for-all or a second-rate decision is ever present.

When you introduce Dialogue as a formal process you have an opportunity to develop your group’s skill in dealing with dangerous truths *as a group*. Because right now, most groups don’t know how to talk to each other – much less tell each other the truth. We find it hard to have a productive dialogue with our spouse – forget the bozos in R&D or the Gen-X freak with the T-Shirt that says “Ignore Authority.” Sure, we can talk to people like *us* – people who understand the importance of what we think is important, those are people we can have a conversation with. But these other people –why, they don’t have a clue what is going on, and they aren’t listening to us so why should we listen to them?

I’ll tell you why. First of all, they know something you don’t know. Simply because they are in a position to see what you can’t see. And second, you can’t do your job without

them. If you don't figure out some way to talk with these people, you can't get their cooperation, can't achieve your objectives, and you won't reach your goals – which is totally unacceptable.

Learning Schmearning

All of this garbage about a learning organization will remain just that – garbage – if we don't grasp the fact that learning is a social process and what we really need to learn comes from the people we work with. They hold our missing pieces and we hold the key for their understanding and unless we get better at swapping what we know for what they know we will find ourselves continuing to make avoidable mistakes, missing market opportunities, and responding too late to threats.

If it were easy we wouldn't still be griping about needing better communication – we would be doing it. So why not start by stepping back and taking some time to re-think how we talk to each other? When people don't do what they agreed to do, when someone tells you one thing and your co-worker something else, when the truthful talk occurs in the bathroom, *after* the meeting – we have to admit our current theories about communication are failing us. Ten, twenty years ago, there was time to set people straight after a misunderstanding. That was when we had lag time between communication and its impact. We don't have lag time anymore. Today, we have to communicate in real time, speedily passing on knowledge from one remote arm of the organization to another because the world just changed and people need to know what happened. Knowledge needs to move fast enough to re-calibrate people's thinking so our organization can respond to change as fast as it happens. Learning is completely dependent on the organization's ability to communicate.

Re-Engineering Communication

The level of communication in your organization is the result of the combined norms, habits, and protocols that have evolved over time. For what once may have been a very good reason, there are certain issues that your communication norms have labeled undiscussable. Forbidden subjects may include admitting ignorance, fundamental disagreements with the boss, or bad news about low quality or slipping deadlines – the very issues that beg for open communication and a learning environment.

Other norms encourage avoidance by passing the buck, blaming, flying into crisis mode or simply hoping that the problem will go away by itself. These habits provide the welcome distraction of activity, even if it is wheels spinning away from the hard work of talking about tough issues. If making a decision about a \$600 Million environmental clean-up program seems impossible, the team can simply move on to say, restructuring the division. A new “re-org” offers immediate satisfaction –clean lines, nice square boxes, and maybe even the opportunity to re-allocate environmental issues into someone else’s area. Problem solved, right? Wrong.

If we need to restructure anything it is our communication habits. Facilitating the process of Dialogue will help you “re-engineer” the norms, habits, and conversation protocols your group employs to avoid or block free access to information feedback loops. Solutions, indeed your workgroup’s *success*, depend on the free flow of knowledge between individuals unencumbered by old norms that prevent honest dialogue. Old habits need to be replaced with new habits that facilitate communication. We need habits that build links between people’s hearts and minds through which knowledge and information can freely travel.

Real communication (dialogue) changes people. It changes our beliefs, changes our minds, and ultimately changes our actions. This is the essence of learning. Taking in the new and swapping it for the old. We can’t afford to allow outdated norms to prevent our access to the tough issues and to the knowledge of others. We need to learn how to dialogue – to talk to each other in a way that ties us together and links our minds and hearts so we can learn, think and act as a cohesive system rather than a big pile of people, computers, and products dumped into a building.

If people were cows

If people were cows, traditional group process methods could do the trick. We could use these processes to negotiate mutually exclusive goals, merge conflicting opinions, and force people to face the scary stuff by herding them with structure or a facilitator/shepherd. The facilitator or the structure of the process would cut off wanderers, barricade ‘irrelevant’ issues, and conform certain individual behaviors (dominators, hecklers, untrackers, etc.) as they herd the group members into a big corral called: Agreement. But... people are *not* cattle and while they may follow along a group process cattle chute to some pre-fab corral, the minute the meeting is

over they will walk to the gate, let themselves out and go right back to the patch of pasture they prefer.

The price of using these kinds of group processes to “facilitate” communication is that people don’t really communicate. They may think that they are communicating but no one emerges changed from the experience. They just pretend to be changed long enough to get out the door. The resulting difference between what is *agreed* through these sorts of processes and what is actually implemented breeds distrust and causes people to label “communication” in meetings as a waste of time. In fact, much of what we have been taught about facilitating communication is a waste of time and some of it is even counter-productive.

It is time that we stopped blaming people for not “getting” what we try to teach them about communication and started using processes that make sense and offer visible improvements. Dialogue is such a process. It offers new skills so a group can design and build their own corral of agreement -- a place so suitable to the group that they enter willingly and enthusiastically –without sacrificing creativity and risk taking. Rather than depend on the cattle chute of structured process, today’s work group needs to know how to genuinely communicate.

Collective Learning Disabilities

The advantages of learning as a collective includes the attractive notion of not making the same mistake twice, or not making a mistake at all if you can learn from other’s experience. A group that can learn easily has a greater potential for creative solutions to problems and the opportunity to leap forward and grab opportunities before the slower-witted and less organized think to act.

However, learning as a group is hard. Research demonstrates that groups suffer “process losses” when performing collectively. Ten smart people in a group don’t necessarily translate into a group that is ten times as smart as the individuals in it. Untended, groups usually waste available intellectual resources. Most groups perform well below the capacity of the smartest member. If you ever felt you might have done better on your own rather than with a group, you may have been right. Even if you aren’t the smartest member of the group, at least some of your IQ is probably wasted due to “process losses.”

Without any intervention, group performance almost always falls below the collective intelligence of the combined group members (forget synergy). It is not quite so bad as the lowest

common denominator –groups usually perform above the mean intellect – but let’s just say most groups could be doing a *much* better job of using their available intellectual resources.

There are two reasons for these process losses. First, groups usually have a low tolerance for the frustration of uncertainty. And the one thing that is *required* in order to learn is to consider what you don’t know, i.e. to embrace uncertainty. When a group’s tolerance for frustration is low then learning is going to be low as well. Learning can be frustrating. If a group won’t tolerate frustration, they limit their ability to learn. Likewise, facilitation tactics that seek to remove frustration – failing to distinguish between necessary and unnecessary frustration – will diminish a group’s capacity to learn. In order to learn together, a group needs to be willing to, at times, practically wallow in uncertainty.

Along with this unwillingness to face the frustration of uncertainty, most groups suffer from a tendency to rush to consensus. This is the second cause of process losses. The “let’s do something even if it’s wrong” impulse cuts short the process of reflection and introspection necessary for learning to occur. In order to learn, groups need time to think. When a group is impulsive and rushes to agree/act, they risk avoidable errors and predictable consequences. The speed of our workplace has accelerated to the point where perceptions of urgency tyrannize groups into treating all decisions as urgent. When that happens, groups risk bad decisions and fail to learn from past experience.

Dialogue addresses both causes of process loss. Groups develop tolerance for increased levels of frustration *and* learn to suspend their rush to consensus long enough to fully explore unexamined options and issues. They learn to hold the ambiguity and risk a few extra minutes of inaction in return for a more creative thought process and more thorough consideration. The primary dynamic that supports a group in developing this higher state of collective thought is an increase in coherence.

Coherence

David Bohm, a quantum physicist, has been credited with reviving our interest in Dialogue as a learning tool. He used the metaphor of coherent and incoherent light to describe the effects of dialogue. Incoherent light is the light coming from an ordinary light bulb. Diffused, the light is without shape or focused direction. It just goes everywhere at once (sound familiar?) A laser is coherent light – wavelengths in sync to the point that a small amount of

light can cut through steel or hit a microscopically small target. Dialogue is the process by which we, as members of a work group, get in sync. It is how we develop coherence.

With coherence, a system can maintain integrity at the same time it flexibly responds to threats and addresses opportunities. Old thinking sought to mandate coherence via a demand for obedience or consistency. In a traditional hierarchy, if everyone does as they are told, the system's integrity is assured. But the system can only be as smart as its leader. The quality movement touted consistent process as the way to tighten variance and reduce deviation. Yet in the bargain, it runs the risk of limiting itself to incremental rather than breakthrough improvements.

In order for a system to have both alignment *and* the capacity for breakthrough learning/creativity, it needs a more flexible source of coherence than obedience or consistent process. Since creativity is, by definition, "out of control" and learning is unpredictable (if you could predict it, it wouldn't be learning) we need to develop a new source of coherence that operates outside the old limitations of obedience or consistency.

The coherence developed through dialogue is a mutual attraction that connects diverse and unpredictable individuals together in a system. Coherence is evident in a group with high mutual respect, high levels of trust and the accompanying familiarity that goes along with trust and respect. A coherent group has established links of informal communication along which new information and vital feedback (positive *and* negative) flows. A coherent group doesn't need defensive routines that avoid dangerous truths. A coherent group welcomes new input, adapts quickly and re-designs itself without the bickering and/or apathy that may threaten to fracture an incoherent group.

Group Self Awareness

Dialogue builds coherence by assisting a group in becoming "self aware." Shakespeare's advice to "know thyself" is good for groups, too. Just as an individual who is self-aware exhibits a higher capacity for dealing with unpleasant realities or disorienting opportunity so does a group that is self-aware. Perhaps most importantly, a self-aware group knows their strengths. With self-awareness, a group becomes aware of their potential, taking advantage of and creating their own opportunities. High performing groups have developed a level of familiarity that speeds up reaction times, facilitates rapid communication, and accelerates implementation.

When a group is unaware, they don't see their weaknesses or their counter-productive communication norms. As you attempt to help a group build new norms one of the first steps will be increasing the group's self-awareness. Since *you* can't change their norms, the group must do that for themselves. Dialogue is a path whereby you can jumpstart a group through the process of collective introspection that leads to group self-awareness and ultimately change.

Collective Introspection

How do you get a group to see what they need to see? First they need to set some time aside for that purpose (don't underestimate the difficulty of that one! But let's come back to it). The second step will depend on their willingness and their ability to stimulate genuine dialogue. The rest of this book is dedicated to increasing your skills in creating that willingness and developing their ability. But first, it is important to consider what that will look like.

If we look at dialogue as a process of collective introspection, we begin to capture the nature and the power of the process. Introspection is a conscious unraveling of the tightly held beliefs that frame our reality. When we engage in introspection, we revisit our actions and our beliefs with the express purpose of discovering beliefs that no longer represent reality, that no longer help us get what we want. The time we grant ourselves to reflect and reconsider fuels our ability to leap into a higher level of understanding. For some of us, time in the shower is the only time we stop "doing" long enough to think. The shower is the only place where we have enough time to reflect. It is not coincidental that this is also the place where we have some of our best ideas.

Although it might inspire new heights of creativity, I don't recommend encouraging your workgroup to shower together (some truths *are* dangerous). But the concept is the same. Dialogue is a process for collective introspection that allows a group enough time to reflect as a unit. Individual insight is useless when you need collective action. Anyone still dripping from the shower, wondering how to get everyone else "on board" with his or her newest big idea, knows that. The trick is to generate insight at the group level. When you can stimulate shared insight, shared action flows as if by osmosis.

Shared Action

Ultimately shared action is the big payoff for true dialogue – working *with* each other instead of against each other in an unpredictable world. One historical example of dialogue can be found in an ancient tribal method for beginning a hunt. For two days the entire hunting party would come together to sit and talk. That’s it, no play diagrams of X’s and O’s, no strategic plans, or agendas, just talk. After two days they set out – no longer a fractured group of individuals– but a cohesive whole. When an animal was sighted, the members of the hunting party acted in symphony coordinating their efforts, not from a strict action plan but from a shared sense of understanding and deep familiarity.

A friend of mine had a chance to see this in action. She was asked to consult with a tribe in Alaska that was facing big decisions on self-government. She said they spent the entire first two days “just talking.” Not idle chit-chat but, at times, deep disagreements. Her traditionally trained consultant’s mind wondered, Where is the agenda? Who is the leader here? Where is the plan? Lucky for her, she kept those thoughts to herself. On the third day, they said they were ready for her to facilitate the decision making process. She was amazed at how smoothly the group reached agreement and concluded their business. They were in sync. The dialogue had sifted violently opposing opinions into bigger picture views that could co-exist. “Just talking” transformed either/or arguments into both/and possibilities.

If your goal is to take a diverse group of intelligent people and turn them into a cohesive, high-functioning group capable of rapidly responding to unpredictable threats and unforeseeable opportunities, then read on, the process of dialogue promises the magic you seek.