

Dialogic OD Mindset:

Our old-new companion perspective for OD practice

by Cherielyn Leong



"Do you think you can spare some time to help our team figure how to re-design our comms strategy to support Transformation?" This request came through from one of the stakeholder groups in my Ministry Family. My instant reaction was "Wow! What a privilege to be able to help". However, for all self-respecting OD practitioners, one can immediately see how problematic this work request is.

Firstly, Transformation is a big topic. Transformation requires contextual explanations of why it is needed. It also need supportive structures and processes to help it along. However,

for large complex organisations, these provisions and processes are hardly clearly defined or implemented well. As a result, Transformation has been pegged by some in the organisation as an important but somewhat abstract project and not particularly urgent. To change the way the organization system thinks and talks about Transformation, it can hardly be done in a half day workshop design.

Secondly, the client team shared that there is low acceptance of Transformation efforts. This implied that there is something not working as well in their current approach

Indeed, the Agency shared that for years, Transformation has been on the agenda, but the excitement and energies have been confined to Headquarters. The employees on the ground, with public facing duties, were not aware (based on perception polls) and not interested in Transformation efforts (based on "ground sensing chats"). Where does this leave the client team? They were pretty much stuck in a "middling¹" position, where their leaders on top wanted to see results of their Transformation engagement efforts, while their stakeholders remain cynical and apathetic. What a challenging space to be at.



To help the client team, so that they can help their system, I took on a Diagnostic lens, to examine what models, frameworks or even tools would be relevant to them. There were at once many and yet none were suitable. I needed more data, as with the Diagnostic frame. I need the data to quantify what the system was telling me via observations and references to polls and ground sensing information the client team already collected. Then there was the usual challenge of "there is no time" to collect more data. Not to be deterred, I found a Transformation methodology that could serve as a reference framework. There were some nine or 10 steps in the methodology for Agencies working on Transformation to follow through. Step Five touched on designing narratives for change. The client and I figured we could give it a shot to take Step Five and expand it into a workshop to explore designing change narratives. That could give them something to work with.

Still holding to the Diagnostic lens, my internal practitioner consulting team and I set to work, creating a half-day workshop for the client team to explore ways to change the narratives they were currently using through the use of metaphors, language, and creative communications initiatives etc. Basically, it was a blend of OD tools with internal comms design strategies. From a Diagnostic frame, this would be helpful as the client team can benefit from our "Diagnostic OD mindset that views the ability to predict and control as the aim of good change practice, bringing the organization from one level of stability to another.²" The assumption of stability was a good "selling point" though it may not³ be most helpful, for complex adaptive systems that are constantly in a state of change and movement. Nevertheless, the client team could follow or reference a framework and this provided some form of structure in that moment of time, enabling them to re-jig their comms and engagement designs.

1 Oshry, B (2007), "Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organisational Life"; Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, San Francisco, USA.

2 Storch, J. (2015); "Enabling Change: The Skills of Dialogic OD"; Chapter 9 in Dialogic Organisation Development, Berrett – Koehler Publishers, Inc., Oakland, California, USA, pp 197- 217.

3 "A complex adaptive system has 3 characteristics. The first is that the system consists of a number of heterogeneous agents and each of these agents makes decisions about how to behave. The most important dimension here is that those decisions will evolve over time. The second characteristic is that the agents interact with one another. That interaction leads to the third – something scientists call emergence: In a very real way, the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts. The key issue is that you can't really understand the whole system by simply looking at its individual parts." (Sullivan, T. (2011); "Embracing Complexity", HBR magazine, Embracing Complexity (hbr.org)

Despite holding a more Diagnostic frame in the design, things can and will get organic along the way. During the workshop, the client team was surprisingly open to speaking and sharing their impressions of the Transformation messages thus far and examining what was missing. Sensing this was helpful for the client team to “process their current reality”, my co-facilitator and I intentionally held the space for the sharing. We also got the client team to share what Transformation meant to each of them, drawing out perceptions of experiencing Transformation related communications when they “wear different hats” as employees on the ground, from HQ, as leaders etc. From here, the client team identified three key messages or areas that were not covered in earlier comms efforts. That gave them new content and sparked new ideas on how to shape the key messages for more reliability.

In retrospect, was it sufficient to use the existing Transformation framework to help the client team? Yes and no. Yes, it was helpful in identifying a topic area for the client team to focus on within a limited window of time. Was it what they truly needed to change and jumpstart their Transformation engagement efforts? No. What they truly needed was a review of their Transformation strategy as a whole organisation system.



What can be adjusted in this project? Therein lies an opportunity to use a different lens to look at change work in organisations. Dialogic OD is the “old-new” lens in question. Dialogic OD can be described as a response to prevalent ways of doing OD work and giving a jolt to these existing ways so that they can address new or emerging challenges. Dialogic OD practitioners espoused a mindset where we reduce the reliance on existing models, templates and frameworks, and invite more of the in-the-moment, emergent energies in the organisation system to show up. After all, an organisation holds its own keys to success. By giving the creative power back to the members of the organisation,

they can formulate a change approach that fits their unique contexts and aspirations. For us who are helpers of change, holding the Dialogic OD mindset is a good way to raise consciousness of the organisation system's own strengths and capabilities to facilitate the change they need.



Dialogic OD is technically not new, as the tools, techniques and OD concepts are the same. The difference lies in how to apply the Dialogic OD mindset to the work. Holding a Dialogic OD mindset meant focusing on helping leaders, teams and organisations to meet "adaptive challenges"⁴. Adaptive challenges arise when people need to change their behaviours and mindsets to adapt to or bring about changes in the organisational system in order to progress forward. Holding a Dialogic OD mindset is about intentionally facilitating dialogues among members of the system to share their realities, their ideas and

proposed solutions. This way, the system can lower barriers between its groups and create transformational change through partnering up and owning their follow up actions that are unique and customised to their system.

How would we know when a Dialogic OD mindset is helpful? Specifically, the Dialogic OD mindset and the methods are tuned toward "two types of contemporary issues. One is when the prevailing ways of thinking, talking about and addressing organisational dilemmas traps an organisation and its leaders in repetitive and futile responses. The other is when facing wicked problems, paradoxical issues and adaptive challenges, where there is little agreement about what is happening and where there are no known solutions or remedies available to address the situation."⁵ Furthermore, the dialogic approaches are aimed at "fostering generativity to develop new possibilities rather than problem-solving, altering the narratives and stories that limit new thinking and working with the self-organizing, emergent properties of complex systems."⁶ When we hold the Dialogic OD mindset, we partner with the client team to explore and create meaning through communication, exchange, dialogue etc before funnelling down to convergence on the collective way forward. It takes the pressure off on solutioning, but instead, opens up opportunities for relationship building and responsive adaptability. This sense of adaptability is important when who knows what new adaptive challenges will surface in a fast-paced environment?

⁴ Heifetz, R. and Linsky, M. (2002), "A Survival Guide for Leaders"; HBR Magazine; A Survival Guide for Leaders (hbr.org)

⁵ Bushe, Gervase, R. and Marshak, Robert, J. (2016), "The Dialogic Organisation Development Approach to Transformation and Change", Chapter 31 in *Practicing Organisation Development: Leading Transformation and Change*, 4th edition, Rothwell, Starvos and Sullivan (eds), John Wiley and Sons. Inc. New Jersey, USA.

⁶ Ibid 4.



Practitioners like me will find that holding the Dialogic OD mindset enhances our own skills as a helper for change. For an internal practitioner, the Dialogic OD mindset posits that the “consultants are a part of the process, not apart from the process”⁷. This meant that our mere presence in any organisational system is not a neutral intervention, but rather, we are intentional actors working to enable or facilitate transformational change. This perspective changes things. We become more aware of our presence, our actions and our mental models when facilitating the change work. We are not passive observers, but people whose words carry impact and can potentially facilitate and champion the birth of meaningful change for our stakeholders. As external practitioners, we find opportunities to encourage relationship building within the client system. Simply by mindfully pointing out “hey, whose voices need to be included in the discussion?”, is a way to disrupt existing approaches that could be adjusted for future impact work. We are not just neutral parties, but we are consciously applying ourselves, our skills and our presence to the organisation system to support its members in their change work.

Could I have designed the half-day Change Narratives workshop better? Of course. Would I do it again if I have the chance to reconnect with this client team? Definitely. I will be excited to see how the Dialogic OD mindset would land for the client in the contracting phase, and how to partner with the planning team to host their narrative change session with their own system. Consciously drawing on the Dialogic OD mindset to complement the diagnosis, interpretation of data and intervention design can help the client team go further and broader in their endeavors. It is worth a shot.

To learn more about Dialogic OD, you can access our Dialogic OD self-paced learning programme from May 2022 onwards. In the meantime, share your thoughts about this article with us!

⁷ Ibid 5.