

## **Dilemmas and Dialogue in Organisational Settings**

*by Teresa von Sommaruga Howard, September 2007*

*Dialogue is invariably thought of as a conversation between two people. But as it is much more than that. This article shows how providing a space for dialogue encourages collaborative enquiry in groups of all sizes with beneficial consequences for organisational effectiveness as well as personal wellbeing.*

Key words: Dialogue, Culture, Large Group dynamics

### **Organisations do strange things to people**

Most organisations are full of thoughtful people yet despite their best intentions these same thoughtful people may find themselves responsible for terrible catastrophes. Reports written after the Challenger accident describe the way individuals who knew that such a calamity was almost inevitable were unable to make their voices heard (Morgan, 1989: 112). Reactions to the Laming Report on the Victoria Climbié case demonstrate how easily the importance of a supportive and communicative atmosphere in the workplace is overlooked. Everyone seemed to agree that individuals should be made responsible for preventing such tragedies from ever happening again, but the evident repeated failures in communication that led to the tragedy of her death did not figure (The Guardian 2003). When individuals join large organisational contexts, something strange seems to happen. They appear to stop talking and thinking together. “Why is it that intelligent people perpetuate cultures that are so self-destructive?” (de Maré 1991:87).

Although there is a wish to make people accountable for their actions, there is an accompanying tendency to treat them as little more than counters on a board game. Every time there is organisational reshaping people are moved about with little time given to mourning the loss of colleagues or familiar places. With no formal structures to assimilate and make sense of such new realities, staff and managers will instead ‘mutter in corridors’. Many people I meet are in a state of despair. They feel unvalued and replaceable as if they were just another disposable commodity. Although initiatives to improve ‘synergy’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘attunement’ abound, staff tend to feel that these are often little more than window dressing leaving them feeling even more discouraged. It is difficult to know what to do about unhappy staff but in this state they are unlikely to give of their best.

### **Trying to understand what is happening**

When failed relationship processes are described in organisations psychoanalytic theories are often employed. Although psychoanalysis does shed light on the behaviour of individuals, it does not adequately explain the complexity of group process. Describing the group as if it were one merged individual leaves out how individuals are able to influence each other. By taking a group perspective, the origins of what many of us experience in our working lives but find difficult to describe or make sense of can be explained.

Bion's descriptions of group process are most often referred to. He drew attention to the innate anxieties that individuals inevitably suffer in groups and described three universal 'basic assumptions'. 'Fight/flight', 'dependency' and 'pairing' that are employed to defend against the fear of just being in the group. These give rise to two simultaneous processes: the 'work group' and the 'basic assumption group'. If left unattended these basic assumption forces will undermine the 'work group' (Bion 1961: 98) preventing it from completing its 'primary task' (Rice 1963 cited in Trist and Murray 1990:172). It is in this fuzzy area of unseen feelings that managers' best intentions are most often undermined.

#### **More ways to understand**

Foulkes (1964: 292) developed a more multidimensional view of groups. He believed that human beings have more autonomous possibilities to form relationships and developed the concept of the 'matrix' (ibid: 118) to describe the complex network of relationships that exist in any group. As each individual brings unconscious assumptions and expectations, based on their past experiences, to their work situation they contribute to the formation of a 'foundation matrix' (Foulkes: 1974:131). By seeking to understand how this matrix interacts with the organisation's 'dynamic matrix' (ibid:132), it is possible to understand how and why there might be difficulties in messages being heard and understood. Not only are organisations groups but they are essentially large groups. Small and large groups have very different dynamics and it is in these differences that many organisational difficulties exist.

Most people find large groups so difficult to navigate that they avoid them. de Maré (1991: 18), on whom Bohm's (1985) work is predicated, drew attention to the difficulty that almost everybody has just thinking clearly and speaking articulately in large group settings. Although some people can make prepared speeches, speaking personally is mostly out of the question. Just calming one's nerves sufficiently to take the risk of saying something can take an almost superhuman effort. This temporary autism applies to almost anybody irrespective of their intelligence or ability. Consequently open communication in organisations is problematical just because they are large groups.

In contrast, most people feel comfortable in a small group. They are accustomed to it. When pressures become too great in the large group of the organisational community, many people retreat into the small group of the team. Just when they need to confront the social situation of the large group they revert to defensive behaviours learnt early in life. Although helping them survive childhood, these behaviours do not usually serve them well in adult working life. When faced with conflict, many people find themselves stuck in self-destructive and group destructive behaviours just because their repertoire of possibilities is limited.

For most of us our first experience of larger groups occurred when we went to school. The classroom and morning assembly, usually set in a hierarchical framework, provided little opportunity for learning to speak one's mind. Apart from answering adults' questions, most were trained to rely on being told what to do often by teachers who were terrifying. This history is not good preparation for taking on autonomous responsibilities required for organisational life.

Recent research describes the way leaders in some of Europe's best known companies feel pressured to remain detached from their staff tending to behave like school masters [or mistresses] handing out tasks and 'marking' work" (Binney, Wilke and Williams 2004: 29) mirroring the very history that was so humiliating for so many. As "thinking itself is born out of interpersonal relationships" (Hobson 2003: 5) the ubiquitous model of the distant manager is not encouraging.

Argyris' experience is that very few managers are prepared to deal with the interpersonal encounter. Instead they employ behaviours that are "anti-learning and overprotective" to avoid "experiencing negative surprises, embarrassment, or threat" and develop "skilled incompetence" to apparently attend to difficult issues without really confronting them. The tendency is to retreat to a place of interpersonal disengagement in organisational structures (Argyris 1987: 5 and 1994: ).

Coupled with this avoidance of engaging in relationships is the notion that there are faulty individuals who can be blamed when things go wrong. Locating failures within people means that the focus can go on disciplining, punishing or removing them to solve problems. Although appearing to improve things in the short term, such moves are reminiscent of the old idea of leaving a scapegoat outside the city walls to ward off possible danger. 'Letting staff go' is also likely to contribute to an atmosphere full of unnecessary anxiety as those left begin to wonder 'Will I be next?' Placing staff in such situations creates a fertile soil for conflict. When conflict does arise, as it inevitably will, the focus will be on two people, with resolution sought through mediation, physical separation, limited interaction and so on (Morgan: 102). Others in the team either distance themselves or take sides and are rarely if ever asked to contribute to working through the conflict.

#### **Another perspective on conflict**

When I am invited to work with conflict in organisations, there is nearly always an expectation that I will adjudicate, find a consensus or compromise and at worst, instigate a sacking. This adversarial approach is expected and reinforced in many of our civic institutions such as industrial relations, the law and parliament. There is an assumption that by two sides arguing a case while a third listens and decides whose view is correct, a just solution will be found.

When working with a large group experientially it is possible to see that an overt conflict between two people is an expression of a hidden anxiety that cannot be directly articulated by the group. Likewise in organisations when conflict emerges 'out of the blue', it is quite usual to discover that something catastrophic has happened that cannot be consciously registered. The conflict acts as a diversion by absorbing everybody away from feeling the consequences of the unacknowledged catastrophe.

Conflict often arises after a period when what feels most important cannot be expressed. In a large group as a conflict takes hold, a mesmerised audience tends to form that sits and watches silently. If allowed to continue, the atmosphere will become more and more frightening. Resolution only emerges when this mutually reinforcing cycle is interrupted by a meta-level intervention that invites those who are silent and watching to talk about what they are feeling and thinking. Such an intervention acknowledges that the fundamental dispute is about whose view of reality will take

precedence. It moves the focus away from the battling pair to an on-the-level multi-faceted state of enquiry. Individuals are encouraged to step out of their autistic silence and to relate to others in the group. Even when their thinking and feeling is apparently quite unconnected, the contribution of the silent majority is what makes the difference.

When each person begins to speak from their own unique experience something shifts. As the context around the disagreement changes, the battling pair with an audience becomes a group of individuals working together about a shared difficulty. How the shift will manifest is unknown in advance but in my experience, shift it does. That is one of those mysteries that life often gives us as a gift. Other writers have described this shift to a new state as Second Order Change (Watzlawick et al, 1974: 77) or transformation (Gutmann 2003: 133 - 140). The important thing is to develop the conditions in which such a shift can occur. By persisting with dialogue a new climate or atmosphere can be created where a new language emerges and new thoughts become possible. The new culture generated shapes a new reality that is definitely not consensus or compromise! It is a leap to a new previously unimagined state.

In an organisational context this mode is a bit like arriving in a new land. Initially such a problem definition seems unbelievable and many will find it extraordinarily difficult to think that no one person is to blame and that the way forward is to provide a place for dialogue to discover both what is going on and what to do about it.

#### **Is dialogue more than conversation?**

Dialogue is invariably thought of as a conversation between two people. It is much more than that. Buber used 'dialogue' to describe something much more profound than ordinary conversation (Glatzer and Mendes - Flohr 1991:41). "Dialogue has to be learnt like a language" (de Maré 1991:17) 'Dialogue' means 'through the word' and its purpose is to create a setting where a group of people can maintain conscious collective mindfulness where thoughts flow like water in a stream. This multifaceted atmosphere cannot emerge in a pair relationship. To be effective, a large group of everybody remotely involved will need to gather. Most people will feel anxious but attending to this anxiety will contribute to a helpful outcome.

Isaacs in describing his work with dialogue groups emphasises the importance of learning to listen to oneself. "Some of the most powerful contributions come from people who have begun to listen to themselves in the new context of the group" (Senge 1994:375).

Open Space Technology is another mode of working in large group settings where 'ordinary people work together to create extraordinary results with regularity' (Herman 2004:1). In Open Space events, participants create and manage their own agenda of parallel working sessions around a central theme of strategic importance but do not necessarily work in one large group together.

Both these models use dialogue groups to gather people as a creative resource to move the organisation in new directions. Although I use dialogue with this intention I also use it as a means of diagnosing problems while providing a forum for discovering new paths through them. To build trust and a safe enough place to work in, I

usually start with individuals and small groups as a way of slowly bringing everybody together in an organisational community that can recognise itself. By encouraging individuals to make this shift from the 'small group in the mind' to the 'large group in the mind' I am asking them to engage as a citizen of the entire organisation with the attendant expansion of responsibilities and possibilities.

Although people in these settings are usually unaccustomed to working without an agenda and a directive chair, I have discovered that by providing aids and being prepared to listen and take a lot of 'flack' a group will slowly move to the unfamiliar place of openly working together.

It takes time to establish dialogue. Generating a friendly, accepting atmosphere that acknowledges difference and does not try to mould everybody into one mind or allow people to form into opposing factions can be a slow grind. As dialogue develops, participants will notice that the 'climate' or 'atmosphere' is changing and gradually realise that it is their collective understanding that is changing it. Recognition of this dynamic is crucial because in it lies the ultimate power of dialogue transmitting the important idea that individuals have the power to change their situation if they speak.

#### **Is it conflict or something else?**

Much of my work involves moving individuals or teams out of destructive patterns that are either upsetting them or someone else. My task is to encourage them to see a bigger picture than they are accustomed to and to find new and perhaps more flexible ways of relating. The key is to establish a safe enough space to begin to explore what is going on and to give it words by building a narrative together. To illustrate is an example that describes a situation where a conflict was the reason for the commission but what emerged through the work was an imminent catastrophe that was only recognised by one person.

Since the early nineties, local authority 'contracting' departments have been threatened with closure as a result of increasing competition from private sector commercialisation. The usual response has been one of rushing to greater financial efficiency generating anxiety that often goes unacknowledged leaving managers, often with the best of intentions, struggling against a powerful negative backwash.

I was called in with a colleague to one such department to help with a difficult situation that the managers feared would 'cause bloodshed'. They didn't understand what had happened but were every preoccupied with the consequences of a destructive atmosphere that had developed.

Apparently the women had divided into two warring factions that were refusing to speak to each other. The personal assistant to the director, whom I'll call Sue, had built a wall around herself with filing cabinets. Another woman whom I'll call Jo, we were told unofficially was said to be having an 'affair' with her team leader. Believing that this relationship gave her special advantages, the remaining women had made an official complaint about the way she had been recruited. Managers told us that they thought these women were making a 'big fuss' but had no explanations for their behaviour.

My colleague and I divided the team workshops between us but worked together with the managers and on the whole department workshop. We met first with the management team. They suggested that we meet with the women or even with each woman alone to 'sort them out'. We asked about the history and future of the department but interestingly the 'affair' did not emerge.

We then devised a series of workshops with each of the four teams to explore their thoughts about what was contributing to the poor atmosphere. We asked each group what they thought were the most pressing issues facing them at work. Each was organised as informally as possible: chairs in a semi circle, no table and a flip chart to record what was said. 'Post-it' notes were used so that individuals could record their responses free from the agony of initially having to voice them out loud. The notes were then stuck to the wall for everybody to view together. As they discovered the commonality of the themes they began to talk to each other about their experiences.

The first team I worked with included the pair who were said to be having an 'affair'. I arrived to find that the room had not been prepared for the days work: no flip chart, no chairs to sit on and tables scattered about. The team was standing around smoking, chatting. Something in this welcome told me that they did not want to meet with me. The team leader whom I had already met with the management team collared me and said "I don't think we should do this. When I said that the day had been arranged with his previous agreement he continued with, "'Jo' is very vulnerable. I don't want her involved". I told them both that it was very important that she stayed and found a way of talking about what it was that was upsetting her and that I would do my best to support her. We found chairs, the flip chart stand, paper and pens and prepared to start.

In the event 'Jo' did talk about her experience of feeling pushed out and excluded by the other women. It also became clear that she had been constructively dismissed from her previous job and as a single Mum felt particularly vulnerable. As I was packing up afterwards other members of the team who were all men informed me 'confidentially' that the real issues had not emerged but they acknowledged they had begun to see another perspective. Afterwards I wondered why this clearly vulnerable woman was evoking so much jealous rage in the other women. Even if she were having an affair, why was it causing them so much distress? What was it that they felt she had that they were not getting? It took until the whole department workshop before the answer became clear.

In the meantime, I worked with another team. In this team there were several women who were also in distress. One theme that emerged was that women on the whole felt unvalued, unseen and unheard. Afterwards one of the women told me, "You are the first person who has really listened to me" and later another, "I felt as though a big load had been lifted off me. I felt so much better."

My colleague and I planned the whole departmental workshop to clarify what had been learnt in each of the team sessions and to help them learn from each other as a way of preparing the ground for a large group dialogue where we hoped they could talk to each other and come to their own conclusions about what had been happening and what they wanted to do about it.

To prepare for the whole departmental workshop we created an exhibition using all the 'Post-it' notes from the team workshops to give everybody the 'whole picture'. We asked each person to think about what had surprised them. In the group dialogue that followed, a new story emerged as we pieced together the previously hidden history and unknown future.

We learnt how innovative many people had been in creating the funding for the department in the beginning but that it was likely to run out within two years. Most importantly we learnt that the director was preparing to leave imminently. We also discovered that although he had brought Sue with him he was not taking her this time. Unlike Jo's team leader he did not appear to care about her future. This information was the crucial clue to understanding what had contributed to the situation we were brought in to resolve. Sue felt a deep sadness and feeling of abandonment that could not be acknowledged. Instead she became difficult to work with and a mutual pattern of retaliatory relating that kept reinforcing itself developed. It turned out that everybody felt anxious about the future without this director but the conflict between the women had distracted them from a deep, shared anxiety. Recognition of what had been happening brought with it enormous relief, thoughts about how to manage the future and not a drop of blood had been split!

### **Conclusion**

In the current environment of constant but unsupported change, conflict and lack of trust are likely to abound. Without a place to make sense of their experiences poor levels of communication are likely to become chronic resulting in inadequate shared information. By providing a space for dialogue, people tend to relax and a climate of collaborative enquiry encouraged. Previously inaccessible information is retrieved so that authentic decisions can be made that are coherent and appropriate.

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Word count: 3848 – 349

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