Book Review

Dialogic Organization Development:
The Theory and Practice of Transformational Change

Edited by Gervase R. Bushe and Robert J. Marshak
Berrett-Koehler, Oakland, CA

Reviewed by
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 For the sake of full disclosure, Robert Marshak has been a friend and colleague for over 20 years. He and I worked closely on developing and facilitating the "Dealing with Covert Processes Workshop" training program from its inception. Gervase Bushe and I both sit on the editorial board of the *OD Practitioner*. So it was with both delight and some trepidation that I agreed to review their new book. I am glad I did.

Clocking in at almost 700 pages, this compendium of OD exposition can feel daunting. What Bushe and Marshak have compiled, however, is nothing short of groundbreaking and a critical contribution to the evolution of OD theory and practice. The book is intended for OD graduate and certificate programs, but from my point of view it should be recommended reading for all OD practitioners.

Building on their earlier work (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Marshak & Bushe, 2009) the authors provide a comprehensive overview of the developing theory of Dialogic OD: its antecedents; eight key premises that underlie its theoretical base; and three main underlying change processes they believe must be present for any Dialogic OD methodology. They then provide an overview of the theories of practice and the application of those change methodologies in implementing and using the Dialogic OD approach. The book includes perspectives and experiences from OD practitioners and scholars from around the globe.

So you may be asking, what exactly is Dialogic OD, and how does it differ from what we traditionally think about as OD?

Bushe and Marshak answer the question by contrasting the emerging Dialogic OD mindset with the traditional approach, which they define as Diagnostic OD. Both approaches share a common foundation in the humanistic and democratic values of OD, focused on promoting participative processes while developing and enhancing organizations and their broader social systems. Where they differ is in the basic paradigms they hold about systems and the change process itself.

Rooted in Lewin's model of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing, the Diagnostic approach begins from a basis of action research to create a common understanding of the existing situation and the forces that are maintaining the current state. This understanding becomes the basis for developing an action plan with the participation of individuals/groups from that system for a top-down planned change intervention. A key goal is to ensure that the system is in alignment and focused on creating organizational health.

Dialogic OD questions some of the basic premises of this approach:

» How can we apply a theory of unfreeze, change, refreeze in organizations that are in constant change?
» Are we focused on *developing* organizations, or *transforming* them?
» What do today's organizations *really* need?

Recognizing that social reality is created through human interaction and actively shapes the outcomes, Dialogic OD draws upon the science of complexity and interpretive social science. It recognizes systems as chaotic and producing their own order.

Dialogic OD addresses the postmodern challenge that faces theorists as well as practitioners: how to intervene in organizations that are constantly changing and trying to adapt to a complex, fluid, and dynamic environment. The problem is not how to effect change in organizations, because change is ongoing. The question is how to impact the process—whether by accelerating, deflecting, punctuating, or disrupting it—to enable the organization and its people to take a leap. This leap is what enables transformational change.

Key Premises of the Dialogic OD Mindset

1. **Reality and relationships are socially constructed:** With no single objective reality, the need to engage and recognize diverse voices is a key foundation.
2. **Organizations are meaning-making systems:** They are influenced and constructed by people's interactions.
3. **Language, broadly defined, matters:** Language creates meaning. Therefore, change is created by the words, symbols, and narratives groups use.
4. **Creating change requires changing conversations:** Changing the conversation (including the rules of engagement, the participants, and their interactional skills) changes people's experience and results.
5. **Structure participative inquiry and engagement to increase differentiation before seeking coherence:** Building upon Diagnostic OD, work first to understanding the broad spectrum of differences before moving to agreement and co-created solutions.
6. **Groups and organizations are continuously self-organizing:** Foundational to the Dialogic mindset is the understanding that systems are always changing. The role of the consultant is to disrupt, not to unfreeze and refreeze.

7. **Transformational change is more emergent than planned:** Transformational change is a dynamic process in which change can and does come from anywhere in the organization. It is not always "top-down."
8. **Consultants are part of the process, not apart from the process:** A consultant's mere presence impacts the narrative. As consultants, we need to be aware of how our actions and perspectives influence the process itself.

So What does the Dialogic Frame Mean for the Practice of OD?

The Dialogic approach acknowledges that in today's organizations there are many unknowns and unknowables, and that for transformational change to occur there must be disruptions to the on-going patterns that exist and persist.

The practitioner needs to help build trust, strengthen relationships, and help people in organizations make sense of the complex situations they collectively face. By spreading the recognition that we create meaning through our interactions with one another, richer communications and relationships will emerge that will foster new ways of talking and thinking. Creating a different narrative, including new stories, symbols, and conversations, can provide the potential to enable the "leap" into the unknown required to reconfigure into a better future.

At its core, the Dialogic approach recognizes the need for changing conversations and interactions to foster inclusion of greater diversity and creating safer environments for people to think and work together in new ways.

At recent ODN meetings there have been questions about whether OD is dead. Bushe and Marshak prove that, in fact, OD is very much alive, and is experiencing a resurrection. Dialogic OD is an approach that recognizes the context in which we live today and provides a powerful platform for OD practitioners and scholars to remain vibrant partners and advocates for change.

Judith H. Katz, Ed.D., is a dynamic speaker and internationally known author. The 25th anniversary of her landmark book, *White Awareness: Handbook for Anti-Racism Training* was celebrated with the publication of a revised edition. Her courageous autobiographical work, *No Fairy Godmothers, No Magic Wands: The Healing Process After Rape*, was one of the first of its kind to assist rape survivors in the recovery process. She is co-editor of *The Promise of Diversity* and co-author, with Frederick A. Miller, of *The Inclusion Breakthrough: Unleashing the Real Power of Diversity*; *Be BIG: Step Up, Step Out, Be Bold*; and *Opening Doors to Teamwork & Collaboration: 4 Keys That Change EVERYTHING*. Recipient of ODN's Lifetime Achievement Award and one of *Profiles in Diversity Journal*'s Pioneers of Diversity, Katz is a member of the Board of Trustees of Fielding Graduate University. She can be reached at *JudithKatz@kjcg.com*.

References

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