

---

# Anxiety and Change in Contemporary Organization Development

By Robert J. Marshak

For some time now I have been anxious about anxiety. My anxiety is not vague or unspecified, but directly related to advances in organization development (OD) theory and practice and the challenges facing organizations and their leaders over the past twenty-five years. While the anxiety that change and uncertainty can trigger is acknowledged by change practitioners, I am less sanguine about how seriously it is considered in contemporary change efforts. My recent work with Gervase Bushe to understand and conceptualize the change mindset and associated processes in Dialogic Organization Development (Bushe & Marshak, 2015) has furthered my interest in bringing thoughts about anxiety and contemporary change to the attention of change leaders and consultants.

The discussion will first briefly remind readers about what we know about the relationship of anxiety and change. Next, some of the defenses when too much anxiety is triggered by change and uncertainty will be described and a model of different types of anxiety inducing stimuli based in neuroscience will be introduced. The nature of, and increase in, anxiety in contemporary organizational change will then be elaborated. The discussion then introduces Dialogic Organization Development and some of the ideas and insights its proponents suggest to help contain anxiety during transformational change. Although presented in the context of Dialogic OD most or all of the key considerations should also apply to other forms of OD practice.

## What Do We Know About Anxiety and Change?

One dictionary definition of anxiety is: “Distress or uneasiness caused by fear of danger or misfortune.” Importantly the danger or misfortune can be real or imagined; clear and present or vague and anticipated; and threatening physically, emotionally or psychologically. In terms of change it is generally accepted that “psychological safety” is needed for people to engage in what an individual or group might consider “risky behavior” such as a new way of working or interfacing with another.

## *Goldilocks and Anxiety*

Anxiety and change are also considered to have a “Goldilocks” relationship. If a person or group experiences too little anxiety there is no motivation to change. If they experience too much anxiety they will deny, deflect, distort, defend or be otherwise too fearful to change. Only when there is enough anxiety to motivate a search for new thoughts and behaviors, but not so much as to lead to fearful debilitation, will change occur. Conceptually that sounds logical and is a useful maxim to keep in mind when dealing with change efforts. In practice, however, it becomes difficult to manage. How do we know when there is too little, too much, or just the right amount of anxiety to motivate change? Furthermore, what is too little for me might be too much for you. What is threatening to one group might be motivating to another.

Table 1. *Psychological Threats and Rewards*

SCARF MODEL	DEFINITION	THREAT EXAMPLE	REWARD EXAMPLE
Status:	One's relative importance	Lowering one's place or how one is treated in the group	Treating someone as valued and important
Certainty:	Ability to predict the future	Dealing with a situation beyond one's ability to plan or anticipate what will happen next	Providing a way to plan for processes to deal with the unknown
Autonomy:	Sense of control over events	Being in a situation beyond one's ability to control what happens	Providing ways to manage processes, if not outcomes
Relatedness:	Sense of safety: Are others friend or foe?	Being confronted by hostile or demeaning interactions	Providing "rules of engagement" that offer enough psychological safety
Fairness:	Fair exchanges and interactions	Perception of bias or powerlessness in a situation or in general	Engaging previously marginalized voices

**What Happens When There is Too Much Anxiety?**

Of particular concern in this discussion is what happens when there is too much anxiety, especially resulting in unconscious processes and reactions. In individual psychology we are familiar with such unconscious defenses against anxiety as: denial, repression, projection, transference, compensation, and so forth. In the Tavistock approach to group dynamics it is asserted that there are unconscious group reactions to anxiety that include: (a) fight or flight where group members physically or psychologically flee the situation or fight the bearer of bad news or an authority figure; (b) dependency on the leader where people act as if they know nothing and only the fantasized omnipotent leader can save them; and (c) pairing where two individuals (or sub-groups) are left to interact in the hopes they will give birth to a saving idea or plan. These reactions are all instead of more consciously rational, problem-solving behaviors and are triggered when there is too much felt anxiety (for whatever reasons) in the group (Bion, 1959).

In my work over the years with covert processes in individuals, groups, and organizations these kinds of responses were not unusual when individuals and groups were confronted with change and/or uncertainty (Marshak, 2006). How much, how widespread, and to what degree varied greatly, but all were more usual than unusual. In fact, I developed a mental rubric when I witnessed such reactions to help me figure out what I might do. I would ask myself: "I wonder what is

so fearful from this person's or group's perspective to lead to these reactions? And, what might be done to make things 'safe enough' from their perspective to proceed in a less reactive and more engaged manner?"

**Neuroscience and the SCARF Model**

Another way of thinking about subconscious reactions to perceived threats and too much anxiety is provided by findings from neuroscience. In brief, the mind does not discriminate between physical and psychological threats and motivators. People will subconsciously and automatically react to the psychological threat of losing face similarly to how they might respond to the physical threat of a charging bull. Likewise, a psychologically affirming comment might elicit the same kind of subconscious motivating responses as a tangible reward of one kind or another. In one helpful discussion of this phenomenon, David Rock developed the SCARF Model to explain the main categories of psychological threats and rewards (Rock, 2008). These include: Status or one's relative importance to others; Certainty or being able to predict the future; Autonomy or one's sense of control over events; Relatedness or one's sense of safety with others; and Fairness or to what degree there are fair exchanges between people. When any of these dimensions are enhanced whether psychologically or materially, motivation and positive responses are elicited. When any of these are threatened or decreased, anxiety increases and fear and threat

responses, such as those described above, are "automatically" triggered. So, for example, anxiety, fear, and threat reactions might be psychologically elicited if a proposed change is perceived as reducing one's relative status in the organizational pecking order as might be the case in a reorganization of positions. Fear of not being able to accurately predict or plan the "right" response to a competitive challenge could threaten psychological needs for certainty. Not being involved in or having opportunity for some choice in a pending change could threaten psychological needs for autonomy. Being involved in a change engagement process where people might be asked to confront each other's ideas without any perceived "safeguards" could threaten psychological relatedness needs. And, engagements and interactions that seem one-sided or biased towards others or those in power could threaten one's sense of psychological or social fairness. Conversely, of course, increasing a person's social or psychological status, certainty, autonomy, relationship, or fairness could be motivational or might help ameliorate the degree of perceived threat presented by the change situation. See *Table 1* for a summary of these ideas.

**Anxiety and Contemporary Organizational Change**

There are a multitude of sources of anxiety for leaders and managers in today's organizational world. These include the complexity of contemporary organizational life; the need to let go of trying to control

the uncontrollable; letting go of the desire for assured solutions when innovation is needed; and changing ideas about leadership and organizational change in a world filled with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA).

### **Complexity of Today's Organizations**

The world that contemporary organizations operate in is full of anxiety laden triggers for leaders and managers. As James Thompson noted in his seminal discussion of organizational behavior almost 50 years ago: "... the central problem for complex organizations is one of coping with uncertainty" (1967, p. 13). Thompson argued that managers worry about meeting performance standards and therefore seek ways to insure predictability and certainty in order to successfully accomplish their responsibilities. Those ideas were written in response to the early thinking about organizations as open systems subject to environmental forces that were outside of a leader's control and ability to command desired outcomes. Since that time the emergence of a global economy, increased competitive forces, advances in information technology, more diversity

certainty, more predictable answers, in short, more control.

### **Letting Go of Needs for Control**

Tendencies towards desires for greater predictability and control in the face of uncertainty is further compounded, at least in the United States, by what Ed Schein calls a culture of "Do and Tell." "In the United States, status and prestige are gained by task accomplishment and once you are above someone else, you are licensed to tell them what to do" (Schein, 2013, p. 57). In brief, one gains status by getting things done and telling people what to do is more valued than asking questions. If Schein is correct, then greater complexity and uncertainty would be potentially anxiety laden threats to a leader's sense of perceived status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness. If the anxiety level becomes high enough, predictable reactions could include denial, inability to act decisively, searches for assured answers, or increases in attempts to control the situation. Schein considers the culture of "Do and Tell" especially threatening to organizational performance as we face an organizational future filled with more

posits that it is an imperative for future organizational success.

Of course asking a leader or manager to operate with Humble Inquiry in a world of "Do and Tell" will invoke its own fears and anxieties even when a compelling necessity. Schein posits that there are two types of anxiety that will come into play. One is *survival anxiety* which can be useful as a motivation to change. The other is *learning anxiety* triggered by fears and concerns about how hard it might be to learn something new, whether or not others will value the new behavior, or having to go through a period of reduced competence. Reminiscent of Lewin's advice to reduce restraining forces rather than increase driving forces, Schein recommends doing things to reduce learning anxiety, for example, providing leaders with guidance, coaching, practice opportunities, and support, instead of doing or saying things to increase survival anxiety, which could increase it to too high a level.

### **Needing Innovations Not Assured Solutions**

Related to letting go of needs for control have been recent typologies of decision situations facing leaders. In one model there are four types of decision situations: Simple, Complicated, Complex, and Chaotic (Snowden & Boone, 2007). In simple and complicated situations, leaders can assess and analyze what needs to be done based on known cause-effect relationships, whereas in more complex and chaotic situations cause-effect relationships are not apparent or known, and leaders need to try more innovative actions based on experiments and novel approaches. In another typology (Heifetz, 1998), leaders of today's organizations face two different decision situations that call for different responses: Technical Problems and Adaptive Challenges. Technical problems are considered to be easy to define, amenable to clear cut solutions, require changes to one or a few variables, are usually accepted by those impacted, and solutions can be quickly implemented based on the authority of the leader or a recognized expert.

**Schein posits that there are two types of anxiety that will come into play. One is *survival anxiety* which can be useful as a motivation to change. The other is *learning anxiety* triggered by fears and concerns about how hard it might be to learn something new, whether or not others will value the new behavior, or having to go through a period of reduced competence.**

in all dimensions, faster cycle times on a 24 /7 schedule, and so on, has created a VUCA world full of threats to a leader's SCARF. Add to this the admonitions from consultants and other business pundits that change is continuous and not episodic; that adapting to new conditions and changing the organization, and perhaps oneself, is never "over." In the face of such turbulence and uncertainty it is not hard to imagine the levels of anxiety that might be triggered and the resulting desire for more

and more complexity and uncertainty and where attempts to accomplish performance by planning, controlling, and telling others what to do will not succeed. Schein's answer is to develop a counterculture of *Humble Inquiry* where managers and leaders build relationships with subordinates and others to help set a climate where they can draw out new ideas by asking questions for which they have no answers. While Humble Inquiry is counter-cultural to "Do and Tell," Schein also

Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are difficult to clearly define, require changes to multiple variables in multiple parts of the organization possibly including with outside stakeholders, are frequently denied or resisted, and solutions or courses of action come from experiments and new discoveries suggested by the people impacted by the situation and cannot be implemented quickly or by command.

These two models suggest that leaders and managers in contemporary organizations are increasingly facing situations calling for letting go of command and control solutions in favor of empowering a diversity of stakeholders to suggest new and novel solutions not previously considered or tested. Needless to say, given the discussion so far, this is a situation ripe for increased anxiety as leaders are asked to abandon their needs for certainty and control in favor of letting go and trusting what will emerge. Presumably if the levels of anxiety this triggers are too high then leaders may continue to try to address adaptive challenges in the same way they address technical problems, or address complex and more chaotic situations using the same methods that they have used to address

simple and complicated situations. Even if those approaches don't produce the desired results they may serve to provide the psychological sense of control needed to manage anxiety. Much like the old joke: It may be "safer" to search for the lost keys under the street light than down the dark alleyway where they were actually lost. Nonetheless, today's organizations are facing more adaptive challenges in increasingly complex and chaotic situations that are potentially elevating the anxiety levels amongst leaders and managers working in mostly "Do and Tell" organizational cultures.

**Changing Ideas about Organizations, Leadership, and Change**

In parallel with the increasingly complex and uncertain organizational contexts and challenges since perhaps the 1980s have been new ideas introduced from the social and physical sciences. While offering new insights and approaches to organizational change, they also suggest a less controllable, more ambiguous, world of work calling again for letting go of long established and culturally reinforced notions of command and control leadership. *Table 2* conveys the broad dimensions of the shift in ideas

influencing OD theory and practice over the past century.

The dominant theories about organizations and change for most of the last century imagined organizations as machines or living organisms where leaders diagnosed problems and maladies (and sometimes opportunities) and prescribed remedies. This helped create and re-enforced the "Do and Tell" culture of heroic leadership where leaders were implicitly or explicitly responsible for addressing and fixing problematic situations. The change theories of the time at first emphasized expert approaches to change, but in mid-century added "organization development" as an alternative approach that viewed organizations as open systems where leaders could define what was needed and then involve organizational members in addressing the situation through episodic, planned change methods: Diagnose–Envision–Plan–Implement–Stabilize.

In the latter part of the last century new theories began to emerge that offered new ways of thinking about organizations and change and which led to new recommendations for change practices and leader behavior. One set of ideas

Table 2. *Changing Ideas about Organizations and Change*

<b>SOURCE OF IDEAS:</b>	Mechanical Sciences e.g., scientific management (1900s on)	Biological Sciences, e.g., open systems theory (1960s on)	Interpretive Sciences, e.g., social constructionism (1980s on)	Complexity Sciences, e.g., self-organization (1990s on)
<b>ORGANIZATIONS ARE:</b>	Determinate, closed systems	Contingent, open systems	Generative, meaning making systems	Complex adaptive systems
<b>FOCUS ON:</b>	Efficiency, plans, productivity, control	Alignment, congruence, fit, adaptation	Meaning making, conversations and narratives, social agreement	Self organization, emergent design, absence of planning and control
<b>CHANGE BY:</b>	Fix & Re-engineer	Adapt & Re-position	Reframe & Rename	Flux & Emergence
<b>DEGREE OF CONTROL:</b>	High.....Low			
<b>REQUIRED DEGREE OF INVOLVEMENT :</b>	Low ..... High			

Adapted from Marshak, 2010

referred to here as the Interpretive Sciences (e.g., Barrett, 2015; Marshak, Grant, & Floris, 2015) questioned if there was any objective reality independent of how people interacted and made meaning about their experiences. Human interactions and conversations led to social agreements and story-lines which in turn defined what was possible and proper. Leaders were important participants in the processes of meaning making by their ability to influence social agreements and convey a preferred story or narrative, but not through their superior ability to analyze

**By the beginning of this century organizational consultants were suggesting that by allowing or encouraging an organization to move to the edge of chaos it would then self-organize to a more effective level of performance. This of course is a radical change from the command and control orientation of many leaders and asks them to not intervene to fix the situation, but stand aside at the edge of chaos while emergent processes lead to new solutions requiring their active support, but outside of their control.**

and convey objective facts. In essence the world was more subjective than previously considered and leaders had less objectively defined and certain ways of addressing situations.

Almost in parallel new theories in the physical sciences challenged the long held cause and effect ideas of Newtonian physics. The universe was not a giant machine; change did not require forces acting on objects nor outside interventions to cause or direct change. Instead chaotic systems could self-organize without outside involvement. By the beginning of this century organizational consultants were suggesting that by allowing or encouraging an organization to move to the edge of chaos it would then self-organize to a more effective level of performance. This of course is a radical change from the command and control orientation of many leaders and asks them to not intervene to fix the situation, but stand aside at the edge of chaos while emergent processes

lead to new solutions requiring their active support, but outside of their control.

These newer ideas about social construction and emergent change have been incorporated into or have led to newer change methodologies in organization development and allied approaches, including for example, Appreciative Inquiry and Open Space Technology. These are exciting developments that hold great promise for the challenges of contemporary organizations. What I am concerned about, however, is that the degree to which they are likely to induce anxiety for leaders (if

not organizational members) does not seem to get the attention it deserves. Yes, particles may self-organize at the edge of chaos but they are not human beings with consciousness, emotions, and egos. Particles have no fear; humans fear chaos and being held accountable for things out of their control. Recognizing that there may be multiple subjective realities trying to define a situation may provide insights into organizational dynamics, but little help to a leader thinking he or she needs to be in control and filled with anxiety at the SCARF threatening thought of “letting go.”

#### **Anxiety in Sum**

Whether one agrees with everything described so far or not it is hard to ignore the main message. In today’s VUCA organizations there is a great deal of uncertainty about what leaders should do and how they should do it to fulfill their responsibilities as leaders. Organizational situations in many cases

require adaptive solutions to complex and chaotic challenges. The command and control, “Do and Tell” culture of leadership orients leaders to try to plan and control solutions (even if they involve others in the planning and controlling work) at a time when some situations call for “letting go,” having greater comfort with ambiguity, and a willingness to launch experiments with no assured results.

Presumably “letting go” plus all of these dynamics separately and in total can be challenging to a leader’s and organizational members’ SCARFs. If so, then they could raise anxiety to levels that lead to denial, immobilization, defensiveness, and so forth. Pragmatically, this has convinced me that greater attention to anxiety and its potential debilitating impacts is needed by those who work with and support leaders and organizational change.

The discussion now turns to a recent conceptualization of a form of OD called Dialogic Organization Development and some of the ways its proponents seek to contain the anxiety of leaders, members, and stakeholders of the organization when facing complex, adaptive challenges. Some key considerations that may be useful for all types of OD practitioners are also presented.

#### **Dialogic Organization Development and Anxiety**

Dialogic Organization Development is a still developing mindset (rather than a set of specific methods) that reflects the convergence of interpretivist thinking about how language creates social reality combined with concepts of emergence and self organizing from the complexity sciences applied to organizational change (Bushe & Marshak, 2014; 2015). Organizations are conceived to be complex adaptive, meaning-making systems, wherein narratives, stories, metaphors, and conversations continually construct social reality through the day-to-day interactions of organizational members. Diagnosis of problems or opportunities is eschewed in favor of inquiry and generative processes that help stimulate the emergence of

new and potentially transformational insights and possibilities that are especially needed when facing highly complex, novel organizational challenges. Leaders and consultants can help foster, support, and/or accelerate the emergence of transformational possibilities by encouraging disruptions to taken for granted ways of thinking and acting and the use of generative images to stimulate new organizational conversations and narratives (see Bushe & Marshak, 2015, pp.20-25). Resulting ideas can contribute to innovations and experiments that leaders can support, but cannot plan in advance.

Furthermore, it is assumed by Dialogic OD proponents that dialogic processes are a more effective way to deal with highly complex, novel organizational challenges requiring transformational change than traditional planned change approaches. They suggest that when the complexity of the issues leaders and organizations are facing is very high, the application of diagnostic protocols and pre-existing knowledge to identify and then implement change is unlikely to be successful. As noted above this is the difference between technical problems and adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1998) or between complicated and complex decision situations (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Heifetz even asserts that the greatest single failure of leadership is to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems. Dialogic OD practitioners believe that dialogic processes are the most effective way to deal with complex, adaptive challenges requiring transformational change.

While Dialogic OD incorporates recent developments in the theory and change practices of the last twenty-five to thirty years in order to better address the complex challenges of contemporary organizations, it also encapsulates many or all of the previously described anxiety triggers. A leader's role is to foster inquiry by a diverse set of actors to stimulate the emergence of new ideas and experiments and then to support those innovations that hold the greatest likelihood of success, however that is defined. The leader is asked to give up the idea of top-down planned and

controlled change in favor of participative inquiry and experimentation that is intended to lead to transformational, but unspecified in advance, outcomes.

### *How is Anxiety Contained in Dialogic Organization Development?*

Given that Dialogic OD has many or all of the same anxiety inducing triggers as other forms of OD and change management, the remaining questions are: (a) how is the potential for high levels of anxiety contained enough in Dialogic OD to foster behaviors that lead to transformational change and not denial, immobilization, or reassuring but ritualistic activities, and (b) what ideas or insights does this provide for all OD practitioners? Principally there are five aspects that help:

1. a coherent concept of organizations and change that encompasses what today's leaders and organizations face;
2. an explainable role for the leader(s) that differs from command and control, including how to support others and the change process;
3. explicit coaching to support leaders letting go of old models of leadership and learning new ways of stimulating inquiry and innovation;
4. explicit recognition of the need to create containers during dialogic processes that will foster enough psychological and emotional safety to permit prudent risk-taking, challenges to established wisdom, as well as innovation and experimentation; and
5. recognition by Dialogic OD consultants of how through their actions and ways of being they themselves need to become containers for the anxieties that transformational change will trigger in others.

### *A Coherent Concept of Organizations and Change*

One of the sources of anxiety for leaders, and others, during organizational change is the absence of certainty or assurances about what will happen and why. Consultants are routinely asked if their approach will lead to envisioned outcomes. One of the attractions to all "planned change" approaches, whether

in OD or change management, is the proffer of assured ways to achieve desired future states through socially engineered and managed activities with various levels of involvement by affected stakeholders and experts. Planned change approaches also implicitly allow leaders to stay within at least some version of their familiar command and control role and position in the organization. The dilemma is when the nature of the challenge calls for an adaptive response to VUCA conditions, Leaders might still prefer planned change approaches, denying the true complexity of the situation they face and/or be unwilling to give up the illusion of control.

Dialogic Organization Development does not lessen the complexity and uncertainty of VUCA organizational change situations. Nor does it offer a new way to maintain command and control. Instead it offers a coherent explanation of why the complexities of some situations in today's organizations exceed the ability and capacity of anyone to plan, manage, and control change. In the face of that complexity it also offers an alternative approach to seeking new ideas and possibilities to address pressing concerns. In essence it explains the need to adopt less of a planning and engineering approach to change in favor of one that relies more on open inquiry leading to new possibilities and the endorsement of desirable, but unplanned for outcomes. Paradoxically, while Dialogic OD does not lessen in itself the inherent uncertainties of the situation, it does provide a coherent explanation of what is going on and what to expect. Instead of increasing anxiety when frameworks that appear to promise the ability to plan and control change fail to do so, Dialogic OD lessens anxiety by explaining what is actually being experienced and why. The leader may not be able to control change, but has more certainty about what is needed and the roles and processes that are more likely to lead to innovation and true transformation. Knowing what is truly involved in the journey and what lies ahead is less fearful and anxiety inducing than starting out expecting one journey and experiencing another.

**Key Consideration:** If, as some assert, planning change towards pre-determined goals may not be possible when facing complex, adaptive challenges, then practitioners need to avoid enabling leaders' desires for certainty and assured solutions. Be clear about what to realistically expect including that experimentation and innovation can be intended, but rarely controlled or assured. In terms of the SCARF model, this may help address needs for Certainty by providing more realistic expectations and a better understanding of change in a VUCA world.

**Instead of increasing anxiety when frameworks that appear to promise the ability to plan and control change fail to do so, Dialogic OD lessens anxiety by explaining what is actually being experienced and why. The leader may not be able to control change, but has more certainty about what is needed and the roles and processes that are more likely to lead to innovation and true transformation. Knowing what is truly involved in the journey and what lies ahead is less fearful and anxiety inducing than starting out expecting one journey and experiencing another.**

#### **Explainable Role for Leaders**

Following from the Dialogic OD concept of organizations and change is a different role and set of behaviors for leaders to consider. Rather than "Do and Tell" leadership they are invited to become "Inquire and Learn" leaders of change. Instead of focusing on what they should stop doing from a command and control perspective, they are asked to start doing a different set of behaviors. These include fostering a climate of reflection and inquiry throughout the organization; seeking to include a broader range of voices in day-to-day and special event conversations, especially previously excluded or marginalized ones; endorsing and re-enforcing new narratives and generative images that offer new ways to think about complex, adaptive challenges; encouraging people throughout the organization to think anew and try new experiments while

providing resources to expand the most promising ones; and seeking ways to reinforce and embed new narratives and practices into the day-to-day patterns of the organization and its members. These and many other behaviors are tangible actions that make sense within the Dialogic OD approach to transformational change. This is important because when operating from a "Do and Tell" mindset these same actions would likely be interpreted as an abdication of leadership responsibilities. From the Dialogic OD mindset, however, they are visible acts of the kinds of responsible, powerful leadership

needed to address complex, adaptive organizational challenges.

It also needs to be noted that inevitably part of any discussion of Dialogic OD approaches to complex, adaptive change will include interactions with leaders who are not yet ready or willing to recognize the true complexity of the challenges they face or the need to let go of hopes for a planned and engineered change solution. Gilpin-Jackson (2013) provides some useful guidance on how to think about and deal with such situations. She believes two things are essential for successful Dialogic OD approaches: (a) recognition of the true complexity of the situation, and (b) leader/sponsor readiness to let go of command and control approaches and engage in an unfolding inquiry. She also suggests that sometimes it may be appropriate to conduct planned change activities that are known and acceptable to the client in order

to gain credibility and confidence before suggesting a more dialogic, unfolding approach,

**Key Consideration:** Too frequently, to my way of thinking, some OD practitioners focus mainly on negating the command and control behaviors of leaders. The concern is on what leaders should stop doing and less on what they should start or continue doing. If, as is often said, leaders are "doers" then they will need new things "to do" - new behaviors to enact. Doing "nothing" will only increase their anxiety. What can this specific leader start doing that would empower, nurture, and support experiments in new ways of thinking and doing throughout the organization and in his or her self? What can this specific leader continue doing that is congruent with leading complex, adaptive change in a VUCA world? Providing the outline of a different leadership role and behaviors may help with possible fears of loss of Status.

#### **Coaching to Deal with Anxiety about Learning**

As mentioned earlier, Schein suggests there are two forms of anxiety leaders considering a shift in their leadership orientation will encounter. One is survival anxiety, fears about what will happen if the leader does not change their thinking and doing. This can be motivational and is, in fact, one of the principle ways leaders are currently encouraged to change themselves and their organizations. Burning platforms, data suggesting increased urgency, and compelling business cases that outline the dire consequences of not changing are some of the ways survival anxiety is invoked when trying to induce new behaviors and approaches by leaders. The other form of anxiety, in my experience, receives much less tangible attention in transformational change efforts. *Learning anxiety*, fears about being able to change or being vulnerable while in the process of learning something new is also invoked and if too strong can overwhelm even the most rational and compelling case for change (Marshak, 2006). Studies of transformative learning, for example, suggest that leaders

may have to go through several stages of transformation, including a stage of “self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame” (Gilpin-Jackson, 2015, p.247). Helping leaders deal with anxiety associated with thinking and behaving in new ways therefore becomes one of the tasks of the Dialogic OD consultant. This could include formal or informal “teaching” or guidance about the Dialogic OD mindset and approach; direct coaching with opportunities to practice in non- or less- threatening settings; and any other means of supporting the leader and thereby lessening the potential impacts of too much anxiety about trying new ways of thinking and acting.

**Key Consideration:** In my view the learning anxiety leaders (and everyone for that matter) face when attempting new ways of thinking and doing in today’s organizations is underappreciated and often neglected. Leaders are usually implicitly, and in some cases explicitly, assumed to be powerful, accomplished, and near omnipotent figures. And, some certainly attempt to cultivate that image and set of assumptions. Nonetheless, leaders can also be vulnerable, unsure, confused, and even afraid, although few would openly admit to that. OD practitioners need to be ready and able to provide coaching support for learning anxiety whether requested or not. Supporting leaders in exploring and learning a broader range of behavioral options could expand their choices about how to influence and thereby their sense of “control” and needs for Autonomy.

### **Creating Containers**

“The ability to create, host, and maintain containers is essential to the practice of Dialogic Organization Development” (Corrigan, 2015, p. 304). The concept of a “container” to help manage anxiety and enable change is, of course, not new to organization development practitioners. The need to establish settings that are, for example, “cultural islands” (Schein, 2013) or otherwise psychologically “safe enough” (Marshak, 2006) to reduce fear and anxiety in order to enable new, different, and potentially difficult conversations is a

well established principle. In Dialogic OD with its emphasis on including diverse perspectives to encourage the emergence of new narratives and possibilities that challenge established organizational patterns the need for creating containers becomes even more important. In virtually all Dialogic OD methods and approaches the central importance of creating the physical and psychological context and conditions for engagements that will encourage transformational change are outlined in one way or another, and practitioners are expected to bring competencies in doing so to their work. What is involved in creating and sustaining containers for dialogic work has received increased attention from within and outside the OD community in recent years and more detailed principles and practices are now available. For example, the Art of Hosting Community of Practice has distilled and posted on the internet learnings about what makes dialogues generative (Art of Hosting Community of Practice, n.d.).

**Key Consideration:** The concept of creating safe spaces for transformation and change work is, as previously noted, well recognized in most OD practices. Even though recognized, however, attention to its importance, especially in transformational change, might benefit from greater emphasis and thoughtfulness. In the absence of certainty and with one’s SCARF being challenged people need psychological and emotional safety. Not complete safety or total emotional support, but enough to step into the unknown and participate in an inquiry process rather than a top-down “roll-out.” Providing safe containers for leaders, members, and stakeholders may help alleviate fears of possible loss of both Relatedness and Fairness.

### **Becoming a Container**

Given the comments above about dealing with anxiety in Dialogic OD there is one last aspect to explicitly discuss. That is the importance of the Dialogic OD consultant being able to be, in essence, a container for the anxieties of leader(s), organization

members, and the total system. This is a form of “Use of Self” that explicitly recognizes that containing anxiety is an important part of transformational Dialogic OD work. Bushe (2010) provides seven insights into what is involved:

1. Make it safe by being a “non-anxious presence” (look like you have your act together).
2. Provide a sense of continuity by helping people know where they are in whatever processes they are working on.
3. Enable authenticity in others by being authentic yourself.
4. Manifest clear intentions in order to motivate positive energy.
5. Reduce and absorb anxiety in others by containing your own anxiety.
6. Free up and channel the energy of others.
7. Create transformative space through rituals that activate latent readiness to change.

**Key Consideration.** Use of Self is another concept well established in all forms of OD. Here the aspect to emphasize is being conscious of and enacting ways of being that help contain the anxiety in the system. This may be done by acting in authentic ways that provide confidence and assurance. More importantly it is by manifesting a way of being that does not fuel fear but instead trusts and encourages people to draw on their resources, competencies, and desires to explore and learn. The OD practitioner needs to be one of the important poles holding up the tent of participation and inquiry, and not be just another performer or even ring master of change interventions. The ability to be a container increases one’s awareness of possible fear and anxiety in the system and will encourage attention to all dimensions of the SCARF model.

### **Concluding Comments**

People have psychological and emotional reactions to change and uncertainty. At the edge of chaos, staring into the abyss, they may fearfully cling to the certainties of the past rather than let go to step into

an unknown, emerging future (Stacey, 2001; 2015). Relying solely on the rationale of the business case for change, pushing systems to the edge of chaos with little supporting processes, providing compelling evidence of pressing urgency, without also acknowledging and dealing with the anxieties which may surface, are all unlikely to lead to adaptive change (Marshak, 2006). In a twenty-first century world of increased volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity renewed attention in the field of organization development to anxiety and its impacts on change is needed. The purpose of this discussion has been to highlight that need and some of the ways anxiety is addressed in Dialogic Organization Development.

## References

- Art of Hosting Community of Practice (n.d.). *The art of hosting – four fold practice* [video file]. Retrieved from <http://vimeo.com/69785461>
- Barrett, F. J. (2015). Social constructionist challenge to representational knowledge: Implications for understanding organization change. In G. R. Bushe & R. J. Marshak (Eds.), *Dialogic organization development: The theory and practice of transformational change* (pp. 59–76). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Bion, W. R. (1959). *Experiences in groups*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bushe, G. R. (2010). Being the container in dialogic OD. *Practising Social Change* (1)2, 10–15.
- Bushe, G. R., & Marshak, R. J. (2014). The dialogic mindset in organization development. In A. B. Shani & D. A. Noumair (Eds.), *Research in organization change and development*, 22 (pp. 55–97). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Bushe, G. R., & Marshak, R. J. (Eds.) (2015). *Dialogic organization development: The theory and practice of transformational change*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Corrigan, C. (2015). Hosting and holding containers. In G. R. Bushe & R. J. Marshak (Eds.), *Dialogic organization development: The theory and practice of transformational change* (pp. 291–304). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Gilpin-Jackson, Y. (2013). Practicing in the grey area between dialogic and diagnostic organization development. *OD Practitioner*, 45(1), 60–66.
- Gilpin-Jackson, Y. (2015). Transformative learning during dialogic OD. In G. R. Bushe & R. J. Marshak (Eds.), *Dialogic organization development: The theory and practice of transformational change* (pp. 245–267). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Heifetz, R. A. (1998). *Leadership without easy answers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.
- Marshak, R. J. (2006). *Covert processes at work: Managing the five hidden dimensions of organizational change*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Marshak, R. J. (2010). OD morphogenesis: The emerging dialogic platform of premises. *Practising Social Change*, 1(2), 4–9. [http://www.ntl-psc.org/downloads/PSC\\_Journal\\_Issue02.pdf](http://www.ntl-psc.org/downloads/PSC_Journal_Issue02.pdf)
- Marshak, R. J., Grant, D. S., & Floris, M. (2015). Discourse and dialogic organization development. In G. R. Bushe & R. J. Marshak (Eds.), *Dialogic organization development: The theory and practice of transformational change* (pp. 77–99). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Rock, D. (2008). SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others. *NeuroLeadership Journal*, 1(1), 44–52.
- Schein, E. H. (2013). *Humble Inquiry: The gentle art of asking instead of telling*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Snowden, D. J., & Boone, M. E. (2007). A leader's framework for decision making. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(11), 68–76.
- Stacey, R. (2001). *Complex responsive processes in organizations*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge
- Stacey, R. (2015). Understanding organizations as complex responsive processes of relating. In G. R. Bushe & R. J. Marshak (Eds.), *Dialogic organization development: The theory and practice of transformational change* (pp. 151–175). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Thompson, J. D. (1967). *Organizations in action*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Robert J. Marshak has been an organizational consultant for more than forty years and is one of the founding faculty members for the MSOD program at American University, Washington, DC where he is currently Distinguished Adjunct Professor of Organization Development. Marshak has written extensively on topics such as language and change, covert processes, and most recently Dialogic OD. He received the OD Network's Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions as a consultant, educator, and author. He can be contacted at [marshak@american.edu](mailto:marshak@american.edu).