



Dialogic Dysfunction

I wrote the paper below for my final project in Dialogic Decision-Making with Randy Iden, Ph.D. The prompt for this paper was to discuss the most critical sources of dialogic dysfunction within an organization I know well and then make suggestions for how to model dialogues that address the problems and contribute to an improved organizational culture. This paper provided me with an opportunity to closely examine several philosophical approaches to the study of dialogue, identify key imperatives of dialogue, interpret real-world communications along a spectrum from monologic to dialogic, and craft real-world strategies that resolve unhealthy conflict and promote dialogue.

Physician, Heal Thyself: An Analysis of Dialogic Dysfunction within Professional Development Program

Theorists and philosophers have long considered the role of dialogue in human communication. From Plato in Ancient Greece to Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin, and David Bohm in the 20th and 21st centuries, there has been no shortage of ideas published about what constitutes dialogue, who may engage in it, and how or why it may be useful. American social scientist Daniel Yankelovich offers one of its most practical applications for the world of work in his book *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation*. In it, Yankelovich presents three distinctive features of dialogue: equality, the surfacing and suspension of assumptions, and empathic listening (2001, pp. 41-46). Together, he says, individuals who make use of these three practices can achieve mutual understanding and sometimes even harmony. It sounds easier said than done, to be sure. But Yankelovich (2001) makes a strong case for nurturing the skill – because when dialogue is done well:

“the results can be extraordinary: long-standing stereotypes dissolved, mistrust overcome, mutual understanding achieved, visions shaped and grounded in shared purpose, people previously at odds with one another aligned on objectives and strategies, new common ground discovered, new perspectives and insights gained, new levels of creativity stimulated, and bonds of community strengthened.” (p. 16)

Yankelovich’s “dialogic imperatives” – along with insights from Buber, Bohm, and others – will serve as theoretical underpinnings in the case of Anonymous Organization’s Professional Development Program. Specific analysis will be applied to the Professional Development Program’s Special Track, which has brought together mid- and late-stage professionals for one year. By examining the experiences of one particular Professional Development Program cohort, the value of dialogue will be made clear: Without it, trust can be lost, stalemates can ensue, and relationships can break down. Recommendations will then be offered to address specific dialogic dysfunctions and improve the culture within Professional Development Program, both for the current cohort and cohorts to come.

Dialogic Imperative #1: Equality

First among Yankelovich’s three features of dialogue is equality. Writing in 2001, Yankelovich had already recognized that individuals have come to “expect and demand a voice in decisions that affect their lives” (p. 18). This cultural norm can appear threatening to traditional hierarchies wherein “those at the top of the pecking order can afford to be casual about how well they understand those at lower levels. But when people are more equal, they are obliged to make a greater effort to understand each other” (Yankelovich, 2001, pp. 17-18). Thus, dialogue requires higher-ranking people to “[remove] their badges of authority and ... [participate] as true equals” (Yankelovich, 2001, p. 42). David Bohm agreed, asserting that power differentials – e.g., between “the dominant role” and “the role of the weak, powerless person” (1996, pp. 29-30) – will interfere with dialogue. It seems critical, then, to adopt neutral positions vis-à-vis power and relate instead as equals.

Yankelovich's vision for equality in dialogue is present to only a limited degree in the view of the Professional Development Program cohort. This should come as no surprise given that most professional development organizations still take the form of strict hierarchies. However, students in the Special Track are typically older, more educated, and more advanced in their careers than students in the traditional track. This standing makes them more likely to: 1) speak up when something is amiss, and 2) expect to be heard. As Professional Development Program students have moved through the program and experienced patterns of poor communication, limited engagement from instructors, and changes to curriculum, there have been few opportunities to dialogue with program leadership about said concerns. The opportunities that do exist – namely, through course evaluations – have typically been one-way interactions that require no accountability or even responses from those in power. Professional Development Program students have had opportunities to meet one-on-one with the curriculum director, though this option disadvantages individual students who must then speak on behalf of the entire cohort. In the one meeting that has taken place between the Professional Development Program cohort and the curriculum director, there appeared little effort on behalf of those “at the top” to deeply value, understand, or legitimize students' experiences. The opposite was true, demonstrating a significant lack of equality in the interaction. Significant trust has been lost as a result.

To instill greater equality in dialogues between the Professional Development Program cohort and program leadership, it would be critical for those in positions of greater power, status, and/or control to set aside the hierarchy of professional development – at least as long as dialogue is taking place. Program leadership should take care to engage in live, interactive dialogues with the Professional Development Program cohort as a whole in an effort to address widespread concerns as they arise. Priority would be placed on valuing, understanding, and legitimizing students' voices rather than dismissing them. These dialogues would be most valuable if they include all relevant voices, thus it would be ideal for the program director and/or their supervisor to participate alongside the curriculum director. There should also be great care taken in demonstrating to students how their voices will influence the decisions that affect them. The onus here is on program leadership to adopt a neutral position and participate as equals rather than as those who sit atop the hierarchy of professional development.

Dialogic Imperative #2: Surfacing & Suspension of Assumptions

Yankelovich's second feature of dialogue is the surfacing and suspension of assumptions – i.e., preconceived notions and tacit beliefs. Suspending and closely examining each participant's assumptions (ideally focusing on one's own before another's) is the key, he says, to preventing “misunderstandings and errors of judgement” that otherwise “isolate us from one another” (Yankelovich, 2001, pp. 46, 45). The impact of handling assumptions in this manner cannot be underestimated, and it is easy to see why Yankelovich believed dialogue to be a “highly efficient way” to achieve shared understanding, “especially if a reservoir of goodwill exists on both sides” (Yankelovich, 2001, p. 64). Bohm, too, recognized the power of surfacing and suspending assumptions: He believed it could increase openness and trust, create shared meaning, and result in a more expansive “intelligence” (1996, p. 34) that may very well allow something new and better to come about.

Unfortunately, in the case of the Professional Development Program cohort, assumptions have so dominated interactions thus far that they cannot reasonably be considered dialogue. For months, the cohort assumed that program leadership would not be open or responsive to hearing about students' experiences. This led the cohort to delay any attempts at dialogue until the situation had reached an inflamed breaking point. Once the cohort finally initiated a meeting to voice their concerns, students assumed the curriculum director would respond best to a solution-focused approach and presented a prepared list of ideas and requests – bypassing a significant opportunity to become curious and ask questions. Meanwhile, one can imagine that assumptions have been at play among program leadership, as well. For example, the curriculum director shared an assumption that the Professional Development Program cohort would trust program leadership to make decisions in the best interest of students. Another assumption held that Professional Development Program students did not need or want to know the “drama” behind the scenes of the program, even when it affected the students' experience. All these assumptions combined to result – just as Yankelovich predicted – in a great many misunderstandings that have stoked tensions and resentment. Because assumptions have not been surfaced and

suspended, Professional Development Program students and program leadership have reached something of a stalemate instead of shared understanding.

There are several opportunities to surface and suspend assumptions as the Professional Development Program cohort and program leadership move forward. To start, Professional Development Program students should follow the recommendations presented by experts with Harvard ManageMentor and be willing to acknowledge their assumptions that critiquing the program will produce a negative result, that program leadership will not be open or responsive to concerns, or that problems will magically resolve themselves (n.d., Lesson 1). Professional Development Program students should also take care not to assume how program leadership or anyone else would like to receive criticism; it would be more appropriate to ask if the other party is open to dialogue or would rather focus on solutions. Similarly, it would be worthwhile for program leadership to surface and suspend their own assumptions, starting with the assumption that it is better to limit the information provided to students. This assumption nurtures an “us versus them” mentality that is only heightened by the power differentials in professional development. Addressing these two challenges by way of dialogue could go a long way in helping the Professional Development Program cohort and program leadership cultivate shared understanding and even co-create solutions when appropriate.

Dialogic Imperative #3: Empathic Listening

Yankelovich's final feature of dialogue is empathic listening. Put simply, empathy is “the ability to think someone else's thoughts and feel someone else's feelings” (Yankelovich, 2001, p. 43), and philosopher Martin Buber considered it essential to the relational process of dialogue. Listening in this way requires a great deal of motivation and patience (Yankelovich, 2001, p. 44) as well as something one expert on dialogue calls “inner silence” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 84). Isaacs encourages participants in a dialogue to “create a space in which listening can occur” and then focus on “how [things] look and feel from the perspective of the whole web of relationships among the people concerned” (1999, pp. 84, 103). Empathic listening stands in stark contrast to a more intellectual or manipulative form of listening; it recognizes the full humanity of the other participant – “a being with whom we can create new possibilities” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 108). After all, if “we have an ax to grind with someone, we tend to hear the grinding of the axes, not what the other person has to say” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 108).

It seems fair to conclude that little empathic listening took place during the Professional Development Program cohort's meeting with the curriculum director. Students failed to listen well because the volume of concerns had become so significant that it became difficult to regulate emotions. As a result, Professional Development Program students lost access to much of their motivation and patience to listen. They were intent on being heard after a long period of not voicing their frustration and disappointment. Granted, some room was made for listening; the meeting would not have been requested if there was not some hope of resolution. It was difficult, though, to empathize with program leadership because students felt they were being kept at a distance. (A lack of equality and reliance on assumptions likely contributed to this feeling.) The curriculum director seemed not to listen empathically, either, for reasons that cannot be known for sure. Students left feeling unseen and unheard – like no one had grasped the heart of what they had hoped to communicate. It is likely the curriculum director felt similarly. In the end, the meeting caused an even deeper relational breakdown that has yet to be repaired.

Increasing the amount of empathic listening that takes place between students and program leadership has the potential to drastically improve the culture of the Professional Development Program. The Professional Development Program cohort should begin by addressing emotions as advised by experts with Harvard ManageMentor: identify and articulate the emotions felt in a difficult interaction like this one so they do not negatively impact one's ability to listen and reach shared understanding (n.d., Lesson 3). This would create sufficient silence and space for listening. Students should proceed by seeking out other opportunities to engage in dialogue with program leadership. When these opportunities emerge, it would be important to ask open-ended questions that will provide a clearer picture of leadership's thoughts and feelings related to the concerns at hand. Students would also be wise to periodically paraphrase what they are hearing to ensure they are listening well and not getting distracted by a compulsion to convince or persuade. Program

leadership can utilize these same tools in future interactions, though it may be more challenging given the criticism they are facing. Nonetheless, they should focus on listening to gather data and learn, not to immediately respond. By letting go of the need to agree or disagree – to find solutions or present rebuttals – program leadership can defuse some of the emotional energy “in the room” and facilitate the creation of new possibilities moving forward.

Conclusion

In his book, Yankelovich (2001) poignantly summarizes Buber’s philosophy on dialogue – a philosophy he no doubt affirms:

“life itself is a form of meeting and dialogue is the ‘ridge’ on which we meet. In dialogue, we penetrate behind the polite superficialities and defenses in which we habitually armor ourselves. We listen and respond to one another with an authenticity that forges a bond between us.” (p. 15)

It seems ironic and fitting that the difficulties of dialogue would become apparent within a professional development program dedicated to the study of communication, and this case analysis reveals the dangers that can materialize when dialogue is neglected: trust can be lost, stalemates can ensue, and relationships can breakdown. But for those who aspire for more fulfilling “meetings” and closer bonds – whether at home, work, or school – the art and skill of dialogue holds tremendous promise.

References

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