

The important roles of Professional Dialogue™ and Dialogic Leadership



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Background

The field of Professional Dialogue™ has been developing since the late 1980s arising from the ontology of theoretical physicist David Bohm^{1,2} and the emergence of the practice recorded by Bohm, Factor and Garrett³. Dialogue was popularised through Peter Senge⁴, William Isaacs⁵ and MIT and picked up across management schools from the late 1990s. The most recent publication in the field A New Kind of Dialogue⁶ by Peter Garrett (my business partner) is something of an encyclopaedia of Professional Dialogue, charting the development of the practice model through his work with me and others.

Whilst it's been the subject of extensive research, the discipline and application of Professional Dialogue™ is every bit as practical and pragmatic as it is academic. It is a powerful approach for transformative change, proven across sectors and in different parts of the globe. We're excited to bring it to @SUMS Consulting members as yet another string in the bow of the services you can access through your membership.

As one of the leading practitioners in the field for 24 years I've played a significant part in the development of the profession. I have worked in sectors as diverse as international development⁷, prisons⁸, and the energy sector⁹, with organisations as varied as local civil society, government departments and multi-national corporations. They have different organisational structures and cultures and require different outcomes, and Professional Dialogue™ has made a difference to all of them. This narrative draws on the understanding I have built through those years of first-hand experience.

Professional Dialogue™ provides an effective and at times profound way of talking and thinking together that gives groups of people access to the quality of engagement usually only achieved in one-to-one or small group conversations. This leads to a shared understanding across the group – not a consensus where everyone agrees to a single answer, but a common sense which means people act knowing how they will affect others. Dialogue also leads to a sense of relatedness and care for other people, koinonia or impersonal fellowship, so how I affect you matters to me. As a result, Professional Dialogue is a powerful way to intervene in organisational and social breakdown, providing practical solutions and a restoration of relationships.

¹ Bohm D, On Dialogue, Routledge, 1996

² Bohm D, Unfolding Meaning, Routledge, 1987

³ Bohm D, Factor D, Garrett P, Dialogue: A Proposal, 1991

⁴ Senge P, The Fifth Discipline, Currency, 1990

⁵ Isaacs W B, Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together, Doubleday, 1999

⁶ Garrett P, A New Kind of Dialogue, Dialogue Publications, 2021

⁷ E.g. GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH) the main German development agency, GFMD (Global Forum on Migration and Development)

⁸ E.g. HMPPS, G4S, Virginia Department of Corrections

⁹ E.g. BP, BG

The practice of Dialogue also lends itself to everyday organisational meetings. Groups can be brought together with representation of different organisational and social subgroups and subcultures, constructing a microcosm of the whole system and enabling it to think together. The result of establishing Dialogue and shared understanding in organisational culture is that people stop tripping each other up, they no longer frustrate or anger each other, opportunities to collaborate arise naturally and there is an ease of working together. Leadership sets this way of working from the top of the organisation, decisions are made with the involvement of those who are affected by the decisions, and people participate in designing change.

Why does Dialogue need to be introduced consciously?

This sounds straightforward, so why do we need to make deliberate efforts to introduce Dialogue into organisations?

The problem lies in the way we think. People think from a local and disconnected standpoint, not from the perspective of the whole, and often the thinking is based on fixed ideas and attitudes. This fragmentation of human consciousness was described by Bohm^{1,2} and has been accelerated by the age of the organisation (Garrett⁶). Our much talked about individualistic culture, polarisation and culture wars are narratives that describe and deepen this at a societal level.

Localised fragmented thinking does not see the rest of the system, it does not believe the rest of the system has a valid view, or it does not recognise that it is connected to the rest of the system – *I don't acknowledge them, they don't know what they are talking about (I am right and they are wrong), or it's got nothing to do with them.*

Things that happen in one part of an organisation affect another – a decision made by a manager changes what staff do, a funding cut disturbs everyone and leads to a loss of staff in a single department, a complaint from a customer because of the behaviour of one person leads to a change in policy that affects everyone, and so on. We see chains of events that have major consequences (public sector organisations are privatised; people lose their jobs) and the impact of the minor decisions other people make every day (an unconfirmed meeting, information not shared). We feel the consequences of how connected we are but continue to think and act as if we are separate. Individuals, departments, divisions pursue their own accountabilities and interests without consideration of their impact on the wider system.

Many organisations naturally reinforce fragmentation through their structures and processes, specialisation, expertise, and hierarchy, without providing the means for people to build and maintain their understanding of the whole system and their part in it. The solutions people devise that arise from their fragmented perspective may only make things worse – a policy has to be rolled out, monitored, enforced...

Does this happen in universities?

Like any other organisation universities allocate resource, authority, accountability to different departments, teams, and individuals. Those individuals, teams and departments have different expertise, interests, and ambitions. Students and external partners bring yet another set of needs and interests, complicated further by the fact that these needs can vary substantially even from course to course. How do all these parts of the university progress in an integrated way that makes sense to everyone, and is of benefit to the whole, rather for the benefit of one and the cost of another? Some of this is about the very mechanics of the operating model itself – the business processes, systems and supporting infrastructure. You may want to read more about the benefit of target operating models in higher education in the two-part article [here](#) and [here](#).

In addition to these potential structural conflicts, however, universities must also balance the competing demands of financial control and staff growth and wellbeing, the desire to offer local autonomy and the instinct to maintain central control in difficult times, environmental adaptation or mitigation, etc. How are these competing interests considered, and how do the different departments within the university manage these tensions?

The unique role of leadership – the perspective of the whole organisation

It is generally accepted that the leadership team should have the authority, accountability, experience, and expertise required to set the direction and organise the resources of the university to deliver requirements and ambitions.

The leadership team is also the only place from which the whole organisation can be seen, rather than a single part. This whole-organisation perspective will only be evident if the successful individuals in leadership roles can talk and think together effectively and reveal the collective view – usually this requires some additional capabilities – these are the communication skills of Professional Dialogue™.

Collective Leadership and a different way of working

All teams of highly effective individuals have repeated patterns in the way they communicate and work together. These habitual ways of working together will be the basis of their successes and their problems. Professional Dialogue™ includes a range of skills that allow the team to be consciously engaged with each other in the way they need to be. This includes basic functionality and the ability to make decisions together, enquiry and seeking to understand others as well as explaining their own thinking thoroughly, and the ability to be collectively focussed on the work they need to be doing.

This sounds simple but think of the leadership teams you have been part of or led by. A handful of people may dominate, everyone gets on when they agree but disagreement is equated with conflict and division.

There may be a history that has soured relationships between some, or people act independently and are opaque about what they are doing and why.

If the leadership team establish a common understanding about the situation, decisions can be made with awareness of the needs of and impact on the whole organisation rather than one or another department.

Figure 1



Fig 1. Examples of Professional Dialogue™ skills. Do people have the skill to use all the modes of discourse and foci of attention to work together and provide the leadership that is required?

Effective collective leadership requires ‘double-hatting’, the capability of individual leaders to think from the perspective of both their department or division and the whole organisation, and to recognise and say when they find they are favouring one above the other. Done well this leads to a healthy tension between the two to maximise the opportunity for both to benefit.

On this foundation, the leadership can begin to establish a collective vision that makes sense to the whole organisation, rather than to one part but not another, a strategy and plan to deliver the vision that every department believes will work, including every part of the organisation contributes, and awareness of the prioritisation and risk mitigation that will be required.

The leadership team's ability to sustain a high-quality way of talking and thinking together will enable them to be flexible and adaptive in the face of complex issues with healthy disagreement but not conflict. It will also build collective resilience as the team work together for the benefit of all, rather than pursuing or giving up on their individual departmental goals or interests.

While this starts in the leadership team, it soon extends to including other levels of staff and stakeholders into considerations and decisions that affect them. Leadership offers a role model to staff and students alike for a different way of working.

Generative thinking

A leadership team working together in this way will be drawn into Generative Dialogue, where the collective potential of the organisation can be discovered – this requires the time and space for the team not to be driven by their short or even medium-term agenda, the ability to let go of what you already know and reach beneath the immediate answers that come from memory and think live together. Continuous improvement builds on what has happened before. Generative Dialogue conceives of new ideas.

How might dialogic leadership benefit your university?

- Better collective understanding, adaptive thinking, and decision-making by senior leaders.
- Resilient relationships to deal with high stakes situations, competing interests, and dilemmas.
- A conscious focus on collective vision and strategy, as well as planning and delivery.
- Heightened organisational awareness and insight, and an interest in including other perspectives to build continuous improvement.
- A foundation for extending Dialogue across the university by including other people beyond the leadership team in decisions that affect them, in co-development and leadership of change.

If this strikes a chord and you're interested in using dialogic leadership to enhance the performance of your own institution or function, then please contact us at sums@reading.ac.uk