

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER OVER TIME



*“This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends.”*

—Edward R. Murrow  
*(about television, and true for dialogue)*

*“In the beginning, people were expressing fixed positions, which they were tending to defend, but later it became clear that to maintain the feeling of friendship in the group was much more important than to hold any position. Such friendship has an impersonal quality in the sense that its establishment does not depend on close personal relationships between participants. A new kind of mind thus begins to come into being, which is based on the development of common meaning that is constantly transforming the process of the dialogue.”*

—David Bohm  
*Unfolding Meaning*

All the skills and guides we’ve spoken about so far can be practiced singly or together, in one-on-one conversations and in groups. Engaging in dialogue once, twice, or a handful of times will yield more meaningful conversation around important questions. If practiced on a continuing basis, it can produce significant shifts in the culture of the group or organization.

In Part I, reference was made to two primary aspects of dialogue: 1) building our capacity for metacognition, or the witnessing of our thinking process and the way we create meaning, make decisions, and take action; and 2) coming to an impersonal fellowship or spirit of community through a focus on relationship and how we are together. Experience has shown us that these two are so closely interwoven that no matter which one you initially focus your attention on, you are likely to end up experiencing both. The skills and guides focus attention on both aspects simultaneously. As you learn to suspend judgment and inquire into your assumptions, you become more aware of your thinking process and cannot help but see better ways of relating and working together more effectively. As you listen deeply to one another and reflect on both the diversity and the shared meanings in the group, relationships improve. The value of speaking openly about what is important and meaningful to building shared understanding and alignment is reinforced.

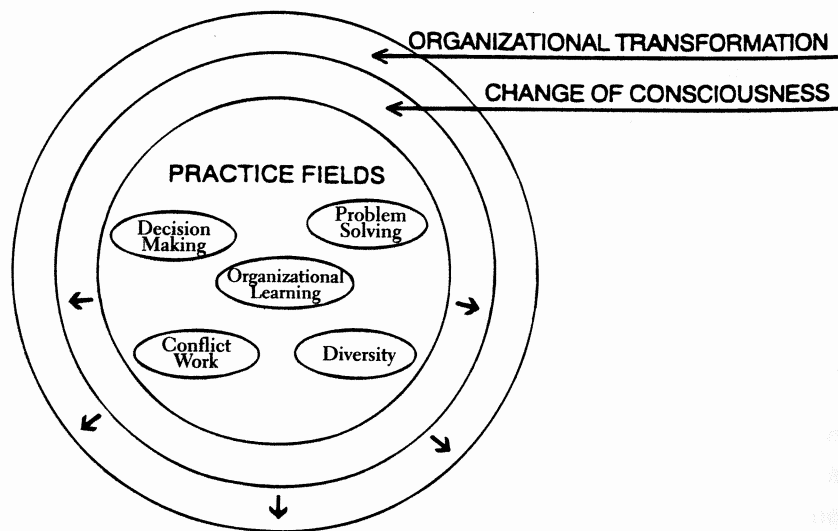
Through the practice of dialogue, the capacities for collective thinking and community develop side by side. As this occurs, it is common for both group and organizational culture to be affected in three noticeable and interrelated ways: 1) behaviorally, 2) experientially, and 3) attitudinally.

- *Behaviorally.* The practice of new skill sets directs attention to different ways of conversing and working with others, leading to new cultural norms.
- *Experientially.* The skills and guides set up conditions for experiencing metacognition and community. These experiences reinforce shifts in behavior and thinking. For example, as a new group you may find yourself in an atmosphere that has the feel and many of the characteristics of community early on, before you have had the time to get to know one another well. This experience gives a taste of what is possible and is a strong motivation for continuing the exploration. You may also find the experience of witnessing your thinking and the patterns of thought that influence your decisions and actions creates a powerful shift in how your group approaches issues. You will find

yourselves more apt to inquire into your thinking in search of more comprehensive understanding and better decisions. You may also find you are more open to challenging your own certainties and seeing diverse alternatives.

- *Attitudinally.* As you experience shifting behaviors and ways of thinking, a profound change begins to take place in the group's worldview. Attitudes of competition and individualism begin to give way to a focus on collaboration, partnership, and shared responsibility. People begin to seek out diversity in order to increase the quality of decisions. Beliefs around the value of the collective strengthen.

The diagram below depicts how the practice of dialogue creates changes in awareness and behavior that ripple out from individuals and groups to impact organizational culture. The ovals in the center represent possible applications, or practice fields, for dialogue that bring value to day-to-day activities. We will consider these more in depth when we speak about strategies for bringing dialogue into your work environment in Part III.



## The Practice of Dialogue and Group Life

People often ask us if there is a pattern that groups follow as they learn and practice dialogue. We find both similarities and distinctions between the dynamics experienced in other group processes and dialogue. It is the distinctions that are more interesting to us. We'll return to these after a brief description of where the similarities lie.

Group process research and theory assures us that all groups move through a basic development sequence over time if they remain together. We outline this briefly below.

### *Stages of group development*

#### **Forming, inclusion, or pseudocommunity.<sup>17</sup>**

You are getting to know one another. More attention is paid to similarities than to differences. You are discovering what fitting in means and making decisions about how "in" or "out" you want to be. One word characterizing behavior during this stage might be *cautious*.

#### **Storming, control, or chaos.**

You begin to explore your differences—styles, opinions, pacing. You are no longer content to agree with one another. You are discovering how control is exercised, by whom, where you fit in the control and influence circles and what will be needed to advance yourself and your ideas. One word characterizing behavior might be *challenging*.

#### **Norming, or emptying.**

You begin to look for the group's collective identity, determining what norms will work for everyone. The emphasis is shifting from individuals knowing what is best and being in control towards a realization that collaboration might be beneficial. One word characterizing behavior might be *inquiring*.

#### **Performing, openness, or community.**

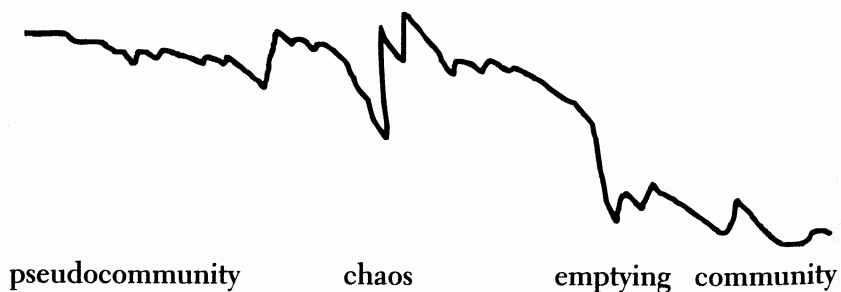
You have found your collective identity, at least for the moment. There is agreement on norms that work for you as a group. A level of trust has

developed such that you feel comfortable speaking freely with one another and can work with any conflict that may surface without withdrawing. You are able to benefit from your diversity. One word characterizing behavior might be *collaborative*.

The above stages may overlap from model to model. Groups practicing dialogue will, in general, experience similar dynamics. One description has been offered by Bill Isaacs of MIT based on his work with the Dialogue Project. He describes the four stages as they relate to the development of dialogue and what he calls “cool inquiry.”<sup>18</sup> The stages are: 1) instability of the container, 2) instability in the container, 3) inquiry in the container, and 4) creativity in the container. The container is similar to the basket we’ve described as holding and facilitating the conversation. Stages one and two correspond with what we describe above as the appearance of chaos and differences and the move to working with them, using the skills that support dialogue. Stage three corresponds to the time when certainties are released and inquiry takes hold. Stage four, if it is attained, is where the capacity for collective thinking and creativity emerges. This model fits most observations from our work as well. However, as we said earlier, it is the distinctions that we’ve noticed with the practice of dialogue that are of most interest to us. We move now to a description of the primary ones we’ve experienced.

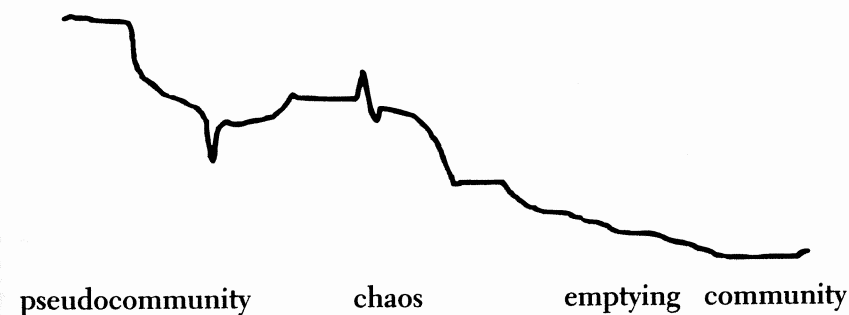
### Going for Depth

To what depths are people willing to go? How much will they open up and speak what is on their minds? And in what time frame? If we were to draw a curve that represents roughly how groups commonly move into deeper conversation, it might look like this.



Generally, people will reserve talk about what is most important to them until they have moved into the emptying and community stages described above. In those stages, it may be safe to risk deeper water. In most organizations, it is the exception for conversation to reach this degree of openness and depth. Most groups tend to cycle between the first two stages of group development—pseudocommunity and chaos. The exceptions to this pattern are groups that have made a commitment to work through their differences. Such groups have usually engaged in team-building activities or have been pushed into collaboration because of a crisis they have had to confront.

A group that is practicing dialogue often has a different experience. The curve might look more like this.



Agreement to use the guides and practice the skills for dialogue creates a significantly different environment than most groups experience when they first come together. While you may still deny major differences, there is usually some ability to raise diverse perspectives. There is an intuitive sense that more open conversation may indeed be possible with the skills and guides as aids. You will at times find yourselves going deeply into important issues early on. You may even be surprised by this and remark on it.

### Hanging In There and Moving Through

As with all groups, when strongly held differences begin to emerge, there is usually chaos and discomfort. These will cause many groups to delegate issues to committee, table them, spend hours or even

months cycling in the chaos, or even disband altogether. Occasionally, chaos may result in a leader deciding to push a group forward using more confrontative types of team-building activities designed to break down the barriers and create unity. When this path is taken, progress may be made but often it is only for the short term. The greater risk is that people may be injured emotionally and withdraw permanently.

It is here, in chaos, that the skills of dialogue can provide a way for you to work with what often seem to be irreconcilable differences. Suspending judgments, inquiring into the thinking behind assumptions, listening to all voices all combine to create the possibility for expanded understanding and alternative ways of moving forward. Because dialogue is about inviting, rather than pushing, and all members share responsibility for the pace, any progress made is usually built on solid ground. Dialogue helps make the inevitable chaos feel not quite so out-of-control. As you are able to work effectively with chaos and differences, these take on new meaning; they come to be seen as the seeds for creativity.

As your group deals with chaos and develops a capacity for valuing differences, you will find yourselves entering the norming/emptying stage. You will have begun to loosen your hold on hallowed certainties and move towards shared understandings and ways of working together. This process of letting go and moving on is often a time when old ways may need to be mourned. It can be a time of ambiguity and uncertainty as new, but not yet fully developed, ways of thinking and behaving emerge and grow stronger. This is a critical time to sustain the practice of dialogue. You need the ongoing support of a group working with the skills together to avoid reverting to old patterns. As you let go and move on, you will find yourselves in a field of impersonal fellowship, community, and openness. Performance and creativity usually reach new heights.

### ***Continuous Renewal***

At this point your group has fully developed both its metacognitive/learning and relationship/community abilities. You are flying high. Other people are asking you what you have been doing, how you can

be so energized and creative amidst all the chaos and stress. *Now is not the time to stop.* Now is the time to recommit to your practice. Too often we arrive at our destination only to find that our destination is continuously moving under our feet. This is particularly true in group life where people work and learn together. New issues will surface new assumptions, new hallowed certainties, new differences to be worked with and integrated. The maintenance and constant renewal needed by a group of people seeking to be fluid in their thinking and learning is significant. Taking your accomplishments for granted is one way to guarantee that you will soon be in search of them once more.

Dialogue is meant to be an ongoing practice. By integrating the skills into your day-to-day activities in ways that create value for the group, you ensure the opportunity to develop and renew your capacity for collaboration and shared leadership on an ongoing basis. This integration is key to seeding more widespread cultural change within the organization. Most interventions used to improve group effectiveness are just that, an intervening or interruption in the group's day-to-day functioning. They are events. Then you go back to work in the same environment and structures that contributed to the development of the problem or dysfunctional patterns of communication in the first place. To shift culture, day-to-day norms must begin to shift. This will occur when you see a payoff in your everyday activities and not before. Approaching the practice of dialogue strategically can help create this kind of movement. In Part III we'll explore the challenges and possible strategies for bringing the principles and skills of dialogue into the workplace. Hopefully, the discussion will permit you and those you work with to move steadily into collaborative partnerships and shared leadership.