Changing the Conversation

An interview with Gervase Bushe and Bob Marshak about what is dialogic in Dialogic OD?

Dialogic OD is a label to distinguish a mindset about organizations, leadership and change that is different from foundational Diagnostic OD. Gervase Bushe and Bob Marshak introduced the concept in 2009 to show that new forms of organization development had emerged since the mid 1980s that did not conform with central principles of OD found in textbooks and taught in graduate programs. Since then, theory and research on Dialogic OD has expanded rapidly. Our editor Thomas Schumacher talked to them about the concept and its impact on leaders and consultants in their daily practice.

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ZOE: *You are publishing and talking about diagnostic and dialogic OD. What is the key difference between these two approaches to organizational development?*

Bushe: Well, I have a similar origin story to Bob, even though we didn't know each other. He and I became concerned that in North America the textbooks and organization development programs were trying to take a bunch of innovations that had emerged in the field and squeeze them into the traditional action research model. Where this really showed up for me was in a piece of research I did on appreciative inquiry around 2000. We did a meta-analysis of a number of different cases of appreciative inquiry and divided those that were transformational from those that were not and realized that in the transformational cases there were things going on that violated some of the key tenets of traditional OD. The number one thing in diagnostic OD is, that first you diagnose, then you prescribe. Prescribing a course of action before the diagnosis would be considered malpractice and in appreciative inquiry that doesn't happen. You don't do a diagnosis, right? You jump in and you start a conversation and I think what we started to realize was that there was a whole set of newer interventions that had emerged starting in the 80s that violated that key tenant of organizational development. And then the question was well, is it organization development or not?

ZOE: *And are there other differences?*

Bushe: I would say the other major difference that we initially picked up on was that traditionally organizational development emerged out of a shift from seeing organizations as if they are machines to seeing organizations as if they are organisms. A lot of systems theory is built on this sort of perception. What we saw happening now was another shift where instead of thinking primarily as organisms thinking of organizations as networks of meaning making and that's just a very different way. And when you think of organizations that way, it offers a whole different range of possibilities for how you lead and how you change them. After we started writing about it, we also became aware of a third difference, which is a much greater use of emergent processes than top down processes, right? So, in the diagnostic approach you first decide what you're going to change, and then you change it. In an emergent approach, first you decide what needs to change and then you create processes aimed at those things where changes will emerge, not knowing exactly what's going to change until it emerges. We like to say that dialogic OD rests on these two foundations of social constructionism and complexity science.

ZOE: *Dialogic organizational development does not refer to people like Boom, Buber, Isaac and so on. What is your understanding of dialogue?*

Marshak: A lot of people want to make dialogic just purely dialogue. Meaning if people have quality talks with each other, you will get change but dialogic is more than just good conversations that exchange information and describe situations. As Gervase just noted, Dialogic OD is based on the social constructionist premise that conversations create, maintain, or sometimes disrupt social reality. That means organizations are considered to be social networks of meaning-making where ongoing conversations and interactions frame people's experiences and create the possibilities and limitations that govern their daily behavior. Dialogic OD is also based on complexity science premises about continuous change and self-organization as opposed to premises about overcoming inertia and resistance with leader sanctioned planned change as is found in Foundational OD. In combination these premises describe dialogic meaning making systems where the narratives that define social reality are continually emerging based on who is communicating with who about what. Consequently, in Dialogic OD attention is paid to how dialogues and conversations amongst organizational participants contribute to understandings (and misunderstandings) and more importantly how those on-going interactions re-enforce, challenge, or change the core narratives that define the organization. For example, if people talk about something as «being impossible» it will remain impossible. If people talk about something as being difficult, but possible or worth trying to achieve, then search behavior might be initiated. Another example is the emergence of the terms Diagnostic OD and Dialogic OD and the impact those terms have had on the acceptance and development of the ideas that originally informed them.

ZOE: *And what is that exactly?*

Marshak: When Gervase and I started working together we began describing to each other how many of the OD-practices advanced since the 1980s, for example, Open Space Technology and Appreciative Inquiry, were based at least in important part on underlying premises and practices that differed from some of the original premises and practices of what we considered to be Foundational OD. As we began conceptualizing and trying to describe what we considered to be the important differences between these forms of OD we confronted the need to somehow «name» the two types in order to present and explain them to others. Unexpectedly, one of the early challenges to our ideas was the labels we put on these two forms of OD. For example, early on I had referred to an early version of the «variant» form of OD as «the new OD.» This led to rejection of the concepts out of hand because if the variant was the «new» OD then everyhing else was the «old» OD and if old, then out of date and needing to be rejected.

As Gervase will note this became a major block to getting our ideas out there and even considered. So, when we were trying to get our ideas published for the first time in an important OD journal, we ended up spending a lot of time on what to name each of the two forms. Eventually we decided instead of naming them something like OD Type I and OD Type II or OD Type X and

Gervase Bushe – biography

Gervase (pronounced Jervis) Bushe is the Professor of Leadership and Organization Development at the Beedie School of Business at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, one of the top 100 management research schools in the world. Gervase's career spans over four decades of transforming organizational structures, culture and processes away from command and control toward more collaborative work systems. He is an award-winning author of over 100 papers and three books on organizational change, leadership, teams and teamwork and he has won the prestigious Douglas McGregor award twice for his research papers. Clear Leadership (2009) has been translated into 8 languages and tens of thousands of managers have taken the Clear Leadership course, with certified instructors on every continent. In 2016 the UK-based HR Magazine added him to their list of the 30 most influential HR thinkers in the world. Gervase has consulted to blue chip corporations and start-ups, public sector and business corporations, in a variety of sectors.

OD Type Y we would try to develop a short name for each that captured some aspect of the important differences between the two. A descriptive term that immediately came to mind for the foundational form of OD was «Diagnostic OD» because for many foundational theories, methods and textbooks, OD required data-collection, diagnosis, and action planning and taking. In fact, several now accepted theories and methods of OD were not considered to be OD when they originated in the 1980s because they rejected «problem-centric diagnosis» or needed a data-based diagnosis before doing an «intervention.»

The second term was more difficult. I have a background in what has become known as organizational discourse studies which embraces the linguist turn in the social sciences. My mind went there, but I never articulated it because various forms of the term «discourse» just didn't seem initially understandable or suggestive of what that variant entailed. Eventually we landed on the term «Dialogic OD» and immediately felt it was suggestive enough especially in contrast to Diagnostic OD. Dialogic was meant in the sense of social construction and talking something into existence and not just exchanges of information. In brief, a central premise of Dialogic OD being that organizations are social networks of meaning-making that continually create and recreate themselves in ongoing conversations and social interactions.

ZOE: *So you published a paper on the differences between the two approaches?*
Bushe: Yes, and when we called it modern versus postmodern, the paper got rejected. But we then called it diagnostic and dialogic, and the exact same paper got not only accepted but won awards. This kind of proved our point, which is that language matters and that how you use language matters. The other thing about the term dialogic is this idea that we're not independent autonomous beings. We are in relationships and organizations are relational phenomena.

ZOE: *So you were happy with the term dialogic OD?*
Bushe: The problem is, once you name something, you gain something, and you lose something. One of the problems with the phrase dialogic is that people who have never read the work assume we're talking about good dialogue, which we're not. We are not talking about a specific way of talking. We're just saying that talking is important and how you talk is important. The other thing we say is that all the people, all the different methodologies that we were lumping together as dialogic OD, all agree that the way you change an organization is by changing the conversation.

ZOE: *What role does dialogue play in your understanding of OD?*
Marshak: Dialogue as an OD method or intervention has proven to be an effective practice in many situations. It was never the method of dialogue as an intervention, however, that was in the forefront of my mind in terms of what we were trying to conceptualize and convey by trying to articulate Dialogic OD. It was more about recognizing and legitimating a form of OD-oriented change practices that were being explained, and practiced to some degree, in ways to fit diagnostic premises and not in their own right. In brief, a form of OD approaches that assume social reality continually emerges out of social interaction that is primarily done through conversations and that you talk something into existence rather than searching for something that already objectively exists so that you can describe it more accurately. Again, the difference between a diagnostic process and the dialogic process is that it is a generative process rather than a descriptive process.
Bushe: We've become much more attuned to the notion of generativity. I think if we were writing what we'd written ten years ago now, you'd see the word generativity a lot more. One of the ways I've come to think of the difference between discussion and dialogue is that a discussion generally intends to whittle something down to some kind of agreement, whereas a dialogue is intended to generate new opportunities and possibilities. Dialogic OD is very much about that. It's about how we generate new ways of thinking and seeing things that people couldn't see before so that something different can emerge.

«Organizations continually create and recreate themselves in ongoing conversations and social interactions.»

ZOE: *Could you describe a dialogic OD project? Or tell us what makes a method, a dialogic method in your understanding.*
Bushe: It's not about the method, it's about the mindset. What is the set of assumptions about organizing and change that the person using the method is operating from? You can use the exact same method with very different change strategies. So, someone operating from a dialogic mindset pays attention to three things: emergence, narrative, generativity. A dialogic OD process will be attempting to enhance those three things. I've even seen people using like lean and House of quality methods, but in a dialogic way. It's not the method as such rather it's how that method is being used. In dialogical OD, we are trying to help people find new opportunities and new possibilities that they hadn't seen before. And doing that in a way that emerges from the group and that the group will be invested in and own and want to act on.

ZOE: *You speak of three propositions in dialogic OD – disruption of the ongoing social construction, the change in core narratives, and generativity. Could you elaborate on these three central pillars for the understanding of dialogic OD?*

Marshak: Dialogic OD assumes that the day-to-day interactions people engage in to do the work of the organization are framed by the prevailing narrative(s) about what success is, how to work, who the boss is, what customers want, etc.. Those are all stories that are constantly being told and retold in an organization. If something needs to be changed because you're not getting the results that you want, unless the relevant framing stor(ies) are somehow disrupted, changed or challenged in some way, you can't do something innovative. You are locked into a frame that implicitly keeps you generating the same answers that have not been successful. So there needs to be something that shifts the story. It needs to become a new narrative, a new way of talking about things, a new understanding of things.

ZOE: *So how can change take place?*
Marshak: You must have some generativity, some creativity, something that generates new ways of thinking. Whether that emerges by a step change in the prevailing story or a generative image or a new metaphor or an inviting slogan or whatever, it needs to be something that energizes and invites people to frame current experiences in new ways. Something in a new enough way that they can step into it and begin to see and talk about things in ways they had not previously done and that leads to a new way of the organization to operate and work.

«Successful transformational changes start with a generative image of some sort.»

Bushe: One of the things I've seen over and over again is trying to force behavioral change without changing the narrative – the underlying storyline that people are using to make sense of the organization. As soon as the force for change goes away, the system reverts back. Because unless some basic shared beliefs change you can't sustain any other change that doesn't align with the core narratives at play. The idea of generativity, and generative image in particular, emerged for me from the studies on appreciative inquiry and when they were transformational and when they weren't. One of the things I've seen over and over is that successful transformational changes start with a generative image of some sort. I describe a generative image as an ambiguous set of words that are attractive, but no one is quite sure what it means. But it brings people into a conversation and allows for new ways of thinking about things. If you look at any dialogic practitioner, they're moving away from problem solving, which is of course a focus on the past and taking things apart and trying to put them back together and more a focus on the future. What is it we want more of? Where do we want to go? What inspires us? That's a much more generative set of questions.

ZOE: *And what does that mean for leaders?*
Bushe: The thing that's hardest for leaders to embrace is emergence. This willingness to let go in order to let come, to use Otto Scharmer's phrase. That's where they run up against the need to feel more in control which comes from a whole set of forces that they're embedded in. Yet most successful dialogic OD processes require a period of not knowing and kind of wandering about and being willing to be in that space of not knowing. In that space, the leader's job isn't to have the answer right. The leader's job is to hold that space of not knowing and to ground the anxiety it generates. That's calling for a very different kind of leadership. Different people have been talking about this, and even the large consulting firms like Bain are talking about this sort of thing. Emotionally, psychologically, it's very difficult for leaders and I think also to some extent for consultants as well – to hold the space of not knowing and not facilitating. This is another shift that's happening in Dialogic OD language, from facilitating to hosting. This idea that a host holds a space where the guests are able to interact in an enjoyable and productive way as opposed to facilitating where you're in front of the room and you're directing the conversation towards, usually some kind of thing that you as a facilitator think you need the group to get to.

ZOE: *What are new developments in organizational development that you foresee?*
Bushe: Bob's book on Dialogic Process Consulting is a very new development. I'm not sure people have really wrapped their heads around what he's talking about because most people in OD get trained to focus on behavior and process. I walk into a group, I watch how people are interacting, who's talking to who, who doesn't get time to talk, all that sort of stuff. Bob is showing up to listen to the language, to the words, to the metaphor, to what's not being said with a much greater focus on the content than we've seen before. I know as we're training people in this stuff, it's very difficult for them because that's not what they've been trained to do. It's more like English literature. Bob is a master at it and he always surprises me with the things he picks up and notices. I tried to do it, but I'm not very good at it.
Marshak: Well, I think there are two kinds of things. It goes a little bit in the direction of whether something is a new method or a new mindset. Many people want dialogic OD to be a new method as opposed to a more clearly articulated mindset about organizations and change that has been emerging in OD for more than 30 years. I'll give a quick example of the difference between understanding a method alone and understanding the mindset that informs the method. I was teaching a course in a master's degree in organization development program. Somewhere towards the end of the course, people began talking about appreciative inquiry, which had been around at that point about ten to 15 years.

What they had learned previously about (foundational) OD was that they should go in and first find out what the problem

was. Once they had diagnosed what was causing the problem, they should then develop an intervention. So, in discussing appreciative inquiry they said first you diagnose the problem and then you can do an Appreciative Inquiry Intervention. And I went nuts. Because it's a whole violation of appreciative inquiry – diagnosing a problem and problem centricity. I began to realize that the people who were teaching them and the books that they were using had framed appreciative inquiry into the problem-solving action research model and turned AI into an intervention and not a Mindset or Model that included a set of methods. Dialogic OD is almost like asking people to look at what they've been doing through a different frame, a different set of lenses. A lens of narrative disruption and generativity, that then leads to new behavioral actions. And I would suggest Gervase's book on the generative change model and how that might be carried out in an organization.

ZOE: *And the second aspect?*

Marshak: The other thing that's going on is if you go back into almost everything that was written and talked about in organization development up until the 1980s implies organizational change is a form of planned social engineering. This terminology is very appealing to most managers. Dialogic OD is more like collective artistic expression and discerning the underlying theme(s) or leitmotif(s) in the narratives that are shaping organizational thinking and actions. It's about composition and crafting. It's artistic and creates a different way of thinking about things. Let's do artistic interventions, not engineering interventions. Artistic interventions will lead people down a path that might be very uncomfortable for most managers who want to have a very specific set of analytic tools and technologies that will inevitably lead to the outcome that they think is best as opposed to the approach of let's get a bunch of people in the room and see if they can come up with a new Symphony or a new way of crafting their collective action(s) they will then step into and live.

Bushe: I think what we're finding in practice is that it's not a pure thing. It appears most successful change projects involve some of both. The difference is this idea of a technical problem versus an adaptive challenge. If you're dealing with technical problems, that diagnostic approach is probably the best. Or when you're dealing with things where there's high interdependence, or large capital outlays required, you've got to get the right answer, and you want to get it right the first time. The dialogic strategy is probably more appropriate when you're dealing with very complex situations. No one really knows what the right answer is. Successful change depends a lot more on whether people are bought in and have commitment, not just compliance.

When you look at any large change process, there are going to be times and places where one or the other better fits the situation. It's probably that ability to be fluid and work with either way of thinking about things that's going to lead to the most effec-

tive, most successful change projects. It's not like we invented dialogic. We just labeled a bunch of stuff that had already been happening, but people weren't paying attention to. Now we've got this thing we call the generative change model.

I just published a paper that differentiates that from what I would call a high engagement change strategy, which can also utilize the same dialogic approaches. In a high engagement strategy, you bring a lot of people together, you develop a bunch of ideas, and then you hand those proposals to the leadership, and they decide what to do with them. Whereas in a generative change strategy, you bring a bunch of people together, you generate a bunch of ideas and then you tell them to go and do it. Don't wait for us, we just want to try a lot of things and see what works and learn as we go.

«Most successful dialogic OD processes require a period of not knowing and kind of wandering about.»

Those are two very different strategies. But you use exactly the same processes up until the point where you get to action. I think it's this generative strategy that fits with agile. It fits with self-organizing systems, these newer more fluid forms of organizing that many companies are trying to get to. I think the place where it gets blocked is our expectations of leaders. Our expectations of leaders are that they have a vision, that they have an answer. If they don't, why are they the leader? We need a new narrative of leadership that is much more congruent with this

Robert Marshak – biography

Robert J. Marshak is Distinguished Scholar in Residence Emeritus, School of Public Affairs, American University, Washington, DC and has consulted with public and private organizations around the world for more than 40 years. His areas of expertise include: organization development, metaphor and language-based change methods, and covert change processes. Dr. Marshak has served on the Boards of NTL Institute and the Organization Development Network, and was Acting Editor of the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science. He received the OD Network's Lifetime Achievement Award, the Organization Development and Change Division of the Academy of Management's inaugural Distinguished Educator Award, and is the author or co-editor of four books and more than 100 publications on consulting and change. Dr. Marshak also held senior executive level positions in policy and management analysis in a US Government scientific agency.

far more complex ambiguous and fast changing world we're living in where nobody's got the answer. It's much more effective to try stuff out and learn as you go, fail fast, like that.

Marshak: Going back to the notion of disruption, narrative, and generativity. One of the things that happened when Gervase and I published our article in a respected OD journal that named something Diagnostic OD and something else Dialogic OD was disruption. It created a disruption in the field where the monolithic prevailing narrative about OD had never really been questioned before and invited ensuing agreements and disagreements amongst academics and practitioners about OD as a field mindsets and not just methods.

> ### «It's much more effective to try stuff out and learn as you go, fail fast, like that.»

Those discussions began to lead to generativity and new narratives which helped to further elaborate what Dialogic OD was and how it related to Dialogic OD. And one of the places where generativity happened was with Gervase and me. Now that we had this thing called Dialogic OD, we began to think about things differently and we began to try and articulate more. People would throw something at us and say what does this mean for leadership? We would talk and we had a whole new space to channel our constructive thinking, our theoretical thinking to try and label things. This all comes out of the generative image of dialogic, OD follows it through in all its dimensions and ramifications. So we live the very process we're talking about.

ZOE: *What does that mean for leaders and consultants?*

Marshak: One of the things also happening is the beginning of a redefinition of the process of leader and consultant. Who they are and how they operate. Once upon a time, leaders were their own consultants and their own analysts. The leader was at the center of both defining a problem or issue and managing a process to do it. OD began to differentiate between what a leader and what a consultant would do, and the consultant would manage the process. But consultants, at the least in early OD, were at the center of everything. They came in as scientists, they studied the organization, they collected information, and that was shared. They were at the center of what was going on. Dialogic has moved the consultant from the center to the periphery. From being in in charge of it to being the host of it.

Back in the early 1970s when I was first exposed to organizational change people would go around saying we don't know what to do, how do we do it, they don't understand what OD consultants do. I find the same questions come up about dialogic OD: What is it? Potential clients don't understand it. Consultants worry that managers don't understand and won't recognize what they are doing because we're not facilitating from the center so much as hosting from the periphery. So, it seems like almost the same questions are coming up about what dialogic OD is as what came up 30 to 40 years ago about what OD is.

It's another example where we're looking at the same phenomena through different mindsets. Organizations, leaders and consultants are being conceptualized differently and that leads to different sets of behaviors that follow from the different mindsets, not the same mindset refined into a different set of behaviors.

Bushe: What Bob's describing is much truer in the US than it is in Europe. I think, European leaders, businesses, and consultants have been more dialogically oriented for a longer period of time than in the United States. The US is much more attuned to hard numbers, they tend to have a more mechanistic conception of organizing, whereas Europeans tend to have a more social constructionist approach. I think it's because European managers work in many different countries with different cultures, whereas the US is a much more homogeneous place to manage. It's just not so top of mind for Americans. There's also a great tradition in Europe of organization development programs that have been far more social constructionist, postmodernist – even in business schools.

ZOE: *Thank you very much for the interesting interview Gervase and Bob.*

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