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Learning Organizations Part 8: Team Learning and the Power of Dialogue

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“Conversations don’t have memories; only their participants do. ... In most conversations, people take turns exchanging information, not sharing it. In most conversations, the absence of memory means a useful phrase or expression can be distorted or lost. ... It takes shared space to create understandings. Conversation is vital, but it isn’t enough.”
— Michael Schrage, **No More Teams!** (1989, 1995)

One of the most critical aspects in team learning is the ability to create what Michael Schrage calls *shared understanding*. Schrage states that shared understanding is the outcome of a collaborative process. “Collaboration creates a shared meaning about a process, a product, or an event. In this sense, there is nothing routine about it. Something is there that wasn’t there before”

(p. 33). What I believe Schrage is talking about is the power of *dialogue*.

What might it look like when a team is beginning to develop dialogue?

Six people are meeting over lunch to discuss a project. The leader asks for ideas. Someone raises an idea that causes a shift in the leader’s body language. She sits back; her face becomes drawn. Her breathing is more shallow. One of the women asks the leader, “Do you really agree with this idea? You look uncomfortable.” The leader shifts in her chair. The silence and discomfort are overwhelming. The woman asks the leader, “What is *your* vision? What do *you* want?” It seems that the leader is struggling with the questions. She says, “No, that’s not what I had in mind. Actually, I really want to focus on the original plan.”

Several days later, the woman and the leader meet. The leader tells the woman about her thoughts and feelings during the encounter. “At

first I was angry with you for confronting me by asking me to articulate my vision. I felt that you were pushing me in a direction I didn’t want to go. However, once I got past that feeling, I was able to write down my vision. Now, I’m clear about what I want and how the rest of the group can help me.”

What are the features of dialogue that were present in these conversations?

- **Inquiry:** The woman asked questions that were non-judgemental, and that helped the leader to find her own answers.
- **Risk:** The woman took the initiative to confront the leader.
- **Openness:** The leader was willing to suspend her judgements.
- **Passion:** Both the leader and the woman were displaying their passion. Passion is shown through our emotions. The woman was *uncomfortable* with what she perceived as the leader’s discomfort with the idea. The leader was *uncomfortable* with

being confronted. She felt anger.

- **Honesty:** At the second meeting, several days later, the leader was able to talk about what had happened to her. She was able to tell the woman how angry she was about being confronted. She was also able to admit that she had gained clarity on her vision as a result of the confrontation.
- **Deep listening:** The woman listened deeply to the leader's perspective and answers. She listened to the silences, as well as to the words and phrases. In dialogue, silence carries as much meaning as the words; a conversation is made up of silence and the lack of silence.
- **Tension:** The confrontation led to a great deal of tension. Tension is vital for creativity, shared understanding, and growth to occur.
- **Shared understanding:** The two women created a space in which they could talk honestly about their ideas, perceptions, emotions, and needs. In this shared space, there is no guilt, no shame, and no judgement. There is only *shared meaning*.

What does dialogue create?

- **Trust:** Trust arises once people recognize that, because the environment is safe, they can take risks.
- **A learning community:** We work and learn best in groups that practice dialogue. A learning community must go

through uneasy growing pains as it forms. Practicing dialogue can harness the uneasiness of the group process by making it safe to be uneasy and to talk about it. Once a community is formed, dialogue becomes more important than the uneasiness.

- **New perspectives:** In this time of increasing uncertainty and complexity, new ways of thinking are vital to the success of people and organizations.
- **Democracy:** When people can use their voices to confront, to contribute, and to develop a shared understanding, they are practicing democracy.

In dialogue, critical thinking and reflection are essential processes. The ability to confront effectively is found in the critical thinking process (InfoMine, Vol. 2, No. 1). A vital component of critical thinking is the ability to listen deeply to what someone is saying, to put aside your own thoughts and ideas, to wait for all of the information to be presented, and to ask non-judgemental questions. **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook** has several exercises on developing dialogue. In the exercise *Blindfolds* (p. 384), the group talks while wearing blindfolds. The purpose of the blindfolds is to help people experience deep listening. This can be a very powerful exercise to demonstrate to people what it really means to listen deeply to someone.

How difficult is it to develop an atmosphere of dialogue?

I believe that dialogue is possible only if people are willing to confront each other respectfully, in ways that help others to understand how they feel. Acknowledging emotions is an integral part of dialogue.

Both Peter Senge, in **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook**, and Michael Schrage, in **No More Teams!**, cite many examples that are fraught with emotion: conflict, anger, pain, and elation. Schrage states that "... there are tensions between the needs of the group to govern the shared space and the needs of the individual to express himself [or herself], creating occasional contention for ... space" (p. 105).

In order to develop and to use the power of dialogue, people must be willing to undergo transformational change. To introduce the concept of dialogue, you must be willing to take the risk, and to have the patience to wait for dialogue to evolve. Think about it: what do you have to lose?

"A dialogue group is always on the lookout for those moments when an almost imperceptible disagreement rises to the surface. ... The moment of disagreement is cause for celebration. ... In fact, if there is no disagreement, that can often be a sign that the group is moving too quickly."

— Peter Senge et al., **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook** (1994)

Further Reading:

There are numerous examples of dialogue, as well as exercises that help you to develop dialogue, in **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook**, on pages 357-385.

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