

THE DIALOGIC FABRIC IN ORGANIZATIONS

Autonomous Professionals & Networks in the Lead

Most organizations, across businesses and industries, have become Knowledge Intensive and face a global & VUCA environment: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. They are challenged by complex technological, societal, economic, political and ecological changes and threats without obvious solutions at hand. It will inevitably shake up the way business is conducted, and the way organizations operate.

Therefore, the sustainable performance and development of those organizations depend on their capacity to change, innovate & learn. Producing cheap and good quality products and services no longer suffice. Their ingenuity to 'invent' new products and services and to address the complex needs of society will decide on their future. To grasp the enormity of the challenge ahead, think about our industry without oil, that being only one of the challenges for the coming decades.

And then, literally in the middle of writing this article, and as if we needed extra proof, Corona forces us into lockdown and social distancing. And that is not only an enormous challenge for public health and for business, it is also ruining the social fabric our organizations are made of. It is already obvious, that even when the worst will be behind us, it will not be 'business as usual'. We will have to 'heal' our organization and focus again on working together, connecting, develop our sense of belonging and our collective ambition as social system.

And suddenly, Corona becomes an OD process, putting our way of doing things upside down, and proving suddenly that certain things that a lot managers thought were impossible, actually are possible : trusting each other working at home, distributed leadership where everybody has to take the decision regardless of his 'position' or 'role' in the organization, stop doing what we did for years, trust without actually knowing what somebody really is doing at home and the acceptance that people flexibly combine their 'work from home', with their actual homework, homeschooling the kids, taking care of their sick partner or parent, etc...

Corona, together with already existing challenges not only push for product and service innovation and practical reorganization of the workplace enabling distancing, but also the organizational purpose, organizational design and the way people work and decide together, are equally 'under construction'.

Over the past century, we worked from a hierarchic, mechanistic, paradigm, based on specialization, clear definition of tasks of each individual and a clear, top-down, command and control leadership.

Most organizational thinkers, but also most managers realize that this organizational paradigm doesn't fit the need for innovation and invention in our VUCA era. Nevertheless, on most shop floors, this basic paradigm is still place (positional leadership, silos, hierarchy, job descriptions and classification, etc..) and hinders professionals to fully share their energy, talent and experience and hinders transversal collaboration so crucial for the creative solutions for the future.

It's still about an owner (mostly represented by managers) asking people to do what he wants them to do and in return to receive a salary. In a pretty stable and predictable environment, where 'the boss' can figure it out, this might work. But if nobody really knows what to do, what it will take to be successful, how things will evolve, then that 'visionary (but probably wrong), positional leadership' doesn't do the trick.

The alternative is to build a dialogic practice between professionals in organizations. The organization as a relational network, a social system, in which people come together to work towards their common ambition. People do things out of passion, act as autonomous professionals, share expertise and experience and co-create a way towards their ambition. It's all about generating new and exciting insights and solutions to further their ambition.

An organization needs to become a network of professionals and stakeholders who in permanent dialogue with other professionals and networks 'invent' the answers for the societal challenges at hand. The objective of an organization is not 'making money' but is inventing solutions and making them available to the people who need them. And yes, that has a price tag, the operations need funding and yes people who do that well should be

rewarded and make a decent living, but making money is by no means the objective of an organization. Examples such as Lehman Brothers, Enron, the Volkswagen diesel dupe, etc.... show how 'making money' as objective is preventing people of inventing solutions that would allow for their sustainable development. Instead of that, they dig their own grave by focusing on the short term and on shareholder value (and even that they fail at, in the end).

It seems odd: a plea for 'connection' in the age of 'social distancing'. And yet only that connection, that shared purpose and ambition, the sense of belonging and co-creative dialogue will enable organizations that are capable of 'reinventing themselves' in 'unprecedented, unexpected and very disruptive 'crises' such as the corona crisis now, but a lot of others that are actually already lining up : Brexit, climate change, energy transition, disruption of international collaboration through the European Union, WHO, WTO, etc...

Those complex challenges need us to trust in complex dialogical and generative organizations in order to cope. Such a complex dialogic system is exactly that: complex, with emerging dynamics and multiple initiatives that could seem to go in any possible direction. And that fear for chaos is also the most heard objection to the such a dialogic organization.

Therefore I would like to share a few 'handles' that might provide you with some guidance to develop the dialogic nature of your organization, and to define how co-creative processes and distributed leadership could be part of that. How coping with challenges such as Corona, is not a military style operation, but a very participative, dialogic exercise.

■ ■ BUILD A 'GENERATIVE IMAGE' THAT EXPRESSES A TRULY SHARED AMBITION

A co-creatively developed, shared ambition is the pillar of a dialogic organization, because it installs an 'ethic of contribution' and a culture of collaborative learning. Not to confound with the traditional idea of a corporate vision, which is fundamentally different for two reasons:

- A vision is not the outcome of a dialogue among stakeholders, but mainly the way forward conceived by the owner or the board of directors, representing the shareholders.
- A vision is built on the assumption that the future is predictable, and that the right choices will lead to the envisaged results. But, "...in a complex situation, where there are so many variables simultaneously influencing each other that it's impossible to know what the impact of decisions and actions will be until after the fact, the gather data-analyze-problem solve- implement change approach doesn't work very well. Some argue that it actually gets in the way of effective change practice (...) by supporting an illusion that all that's needed to make the right decision is the right data and smart people. (Bushe G. , 2012)

(Bushe & Marshak, 2016) conclude "When dealing with a complex, multi-dimensional world, **expecting a leader to be able to see the future and show the way may cause more problems than it solves**. One of the most common findings of studies of companies managing complexity and innovation is that **trying to figure out the right answer before you engage the people who will have to implement that answer is the road to ruin**". The 'generative image' is the alternative put forward from a dialogic organizational mindset. It is a general frame that enables divergent thinking without losing coherence.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

A powerful Generative Image

In 1987 the Brundtland Report proposed 'sustainable development' as the generative image of our common future. "Before that phrase showed up, environmental activists and business leaders had little to say to each other. Yet consider how much change this generative image created, and continues to create, even though there is no accepted definition of what sustainable development means. (...), ambiguity is a necessary quality of a generative image" (Bushe & Storch, 2015).

It includes all stakeholders, enables their contribution to the solutions and leads to divergent thinking and professional autonomy.

Source: Gervase Bushe at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uklBbjYo4ME>

“To be generative (...), it has to have two qualities. First, it allows people to look at old problems in new ways. The image, metaphor, idea allows people to see new opportunities for actions and decisions they had not considered before. Second, it is a compelling image, that is, people want to act on the new ideas the image generates.” (Bushe & Storch, 2015)

(Snippe, 2014) points out the difference between ‘static’ and ‘dynamic’ function definitions of organizations. Vision and mission statements are usually formulated as static function definitions, indicating 'who or what they are' or 'what products or services they produce'. Alternatively, you can also create a dynamic function definition. Then you focus on the ‘impact’ you want to have, the effect your activities should have on your customers, society or other stakeholders. It is dynamic, because it doesn’t say how to do it, thus leaving a lot of room for professionals’ imagination and initiatives. It allows also for all stakeholders to adhere to the same ‘flag’, and still contribute in very different ways. It creates enthusiasm for all and leaves a lot of room for all kinds of independent, autonomous initiatives, in which many people can do their thing but still contribute to the ‘shared ambition’.

And (as is shown in the EMI example) it avoids resistance to ‘new developments’ that are no longer seen as ‘competition’ of what you are doing at present, but as an additional option to contribute to the desired effect.

DYNAMIC FUNCTION DESCRIPTION: THE E.M.I. EXAMPLE

EMI, a successful record label, defined itself as an organization that produced and sold vinyl records. When the CD appeared on the market in the early eighties, the entire organization resisted, because the CD was the enemy of the vinyl record and would destroy their business. They spent a lot of energy fighting off the CD and defending the vinyl record (which was a struggle lost in advance) and they could conceptually not buy in to the idea ‘CD’.

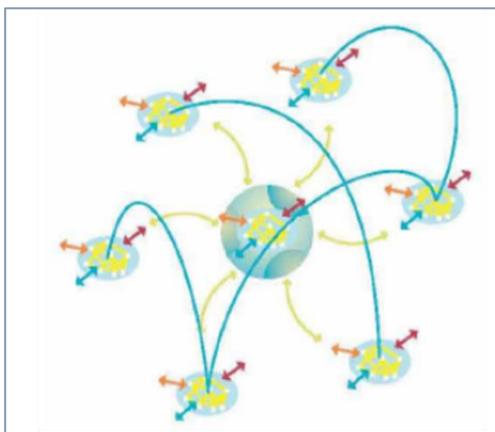
EMI struggled. Just suppose EMI’s function definition had been dynamic and something like: ‘we are here to make people enjoy very nice music’. Then there would have been much more room for acceptance of the CD, which would then not be an enemy but a new, additional means to realize the ambition of the organization (making people listen to beautiful music).

Source : Snippe, 2014, p. 67

Carefully planned and orderly executed and controlled processes (including strategy and vision) will simply no longer do the trick. The complexity of the challenge is the reason why an organization needs to be a network of professionals and teams, all taking initiatives (not executing orders) based on their sound judgement within a common generative image. People will construct from there, flexible and changing coalitions with other professionals to make things happen or in other words: dialogue.

Dialogue as the basic fabric of the organization where people are not 'working for an organization' but imagine and build the organization with others, sharing that same ambition.

INVITE ALL PROFESSIONALS TO LEAD THROUGH A NETWORK OF NETWORKS



Distributed Leadership in Nimble Networks

(Ancona & Backman, 2017)

Dialogue means co-creation, but also distributed leadership where autonomous professionals, lead the organization into a new dialogue around new issues. The mandate for that stems from their expertise, passion, energy and experience. Professionals are trusted to contribute to their common ambition. A dialogic culture is also a collaborative culture, which means that professionals develop their own thinking in dialogue with other professionals, in communities of practice and in the dialogue between professional networks. It’s about bridging expertise areas to trigger innovation.

And where ‘online’ is now in Coronatimes often see as a hinder for collaboration and dialogue, it could be also designed as a facilitating technology supporting dialogue in organizations. And the Corona crisis forces us to test that out and learn how to use it as an integral part of ‘relating’ to others.

Distributed Leadership is not so much about taking the lead alternatively or spreading leadership tasks over several individuals. In that case, it continues to be about individual people, their 'leadership abilities' and their behavior. In a dialogic culture, leadership is much more about participation and collective creation of shared direction and not so much about control or exercising authority or power. Individuals are actors in the leadership process, but they do not own the leadership. "Because leadership is always collectively enacted in situation, it becomes a consequence of actors' relations, an effect processually generated by a group of people, a product of their local interactions" (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012).

LOOK DIFFERENTLY AT ALLOCATING PROJECTS, ACCOUNTABILITY & FINANCING

Trusting professionals to take initiatives, doesn't mean that individuals simply 'do what they want'. Seek consulting and advice from others, involving other stakeholders to make the idea stronger is the 'soul of dialogue'. So, based on all those inputs, the professional defines the project and gathers other professionals around him or her in order to get the initiative going.

Dialogue and shared leadership don't of course mean that nobody is accountable or responsible for what is happening. But that accountability is organized as part of the networks and communities of practice. Who better than other professionals or networks from other professional areas can challenge initiatives taken, give feedback, provide support and create the framework to follow up on the results of all those initiatives and projects?

And how do we allocate budgets to all those initiatives? Also, here I would advocate for trusting professionals. The classical budget allocation procedures to projects, block real innovation since you will have to 'prove' that it works, before you can try it. Since analyzing data and trying to understand in order to change things, is no longer viable in a VUCA world we need to fund probing and experimenting.

You could stimulate 'experimenting' by granting experiment budgets to the professional networks, or something along the lines of 'me time' but then for networks or you professionals could get funding for experiments if they can get enough support from other professionals to do it. If in the spirit of a true dialogic organization the strategic and business information is fully shared with all professionals, they are positioned the best, to take investment decisions.

AND THERE IS MORE...

The dialogic practice can be supported in a lot of ways. All kinds of co-creative methodologies (Bushe & Marshak, 2015) can be used, such as Appreciative Inquiry, Theory U, Intervision, peer coaching and large group interventions. Jobcrafting (Leemans, 2014) as a co-creative alternative for job descriptions could also contribute.

And a lot of online collaborative tools (the ones we now massively learn to use) can support that. "More and more work is being done in online and virtual settings. How can we use these environments to host people in generative change conversations? It turns out that the principles (...) still hold good. The difference, of course, is that the space we are creating is now online". (Bushe G., Organizational Development Online, 2020)

There is a lot you can do, but there is also something you could stop doing: stop saying **"we don't trust you"**

Think about things like : reporting, requesting approval to get a new pen or even worse, first handing in your old pen, filling in timesheets so that your boss can see what you have done when and for how long, a time clock, not being able to access a number of databases or information with limited access for specific groups of the organization, etc.

The long list of 'signs of distrust' in your organization will leave you bewildered. So, if it's not supporting an inclusive dialogue, get rid of it!

Remember, people will behave as professionals and be committed to the ambition they share with others in the organization, if considered as professionals and truly included in the dialogue.

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