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# Leading through communication, conversation and dialogue

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## Abstract

South Africa has gone through a period of unprecedented change in moving from Apartheid to democracy. These sociological changes have also infiltrated organisational life and behaviour – and new approaches to leadership have become vital. In modern organisational life, dialogue and conversation are core processes for building the organisational intelligence and community which enable other business processes to adapt to change and create results. This paper discusses increasingly important leadership issues – such as diversity, teams, collaboration, trust formation, community, individual change, and relationships – in relation to dialogue and transformation. Where trust is high, change is managed more effectively and, where it is low, communication and co-operation suffer and there is an increasing tendency to resort to power. It is the author's concluding opinion that change is a phenomenon that occurs within conversation and dialogue and is therefore a necessary social construct within twenty-first century organisations.

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## Introduction

In the academic literature, communication and conversation are often seen as tools for announcing and explaining change, preparing people for the positive and negative effects of change (Jick, 1993), increasing others' understanding of and commitment to the change (Beckard and Pritchard, 1992; Morgan, 1988), and reducing confusion about and resistance to change (Kotter and Schlesinger, 1987). Kanter *et al.* (1992) maintain that the key roles communication plays are providing and obtaining information, creating understanding, and building ownership. These perspectives treat communication as a tool that is used within a change process. I, however, as is the case in Ford and Ford (1995), and Zohar (1997), maintain that change is a phenomenon that occurs within communication, conversation and dialogue.

Change as an organisational phenomenon necessarily occurs in a context of human social interactions, which constitute and are constituted by communication (Poole and DeSanctis, 1990). These interactions produce and reproduce the social structures and actions people know as reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Morgan (1986) states that much of the rational and taken-for-granted reality of everyday life gives real form to preoccupations and concerns that lie beneath the level of conscious awareness. Morgan has argued that individuals can become trapped by their thinking and influenced by unconscious concerns that are derived from their personal history. From this perspective, change is a recursive process of social construction in which new realities are created (Ford and Backoff, 1988), sustained and modified in the process of communication and conversation.

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Ford and Ford (1995, p. 543) provide us with the following definitions:

Intentional change occurs when a change agent deliberately and consciously sets out to establish conditions and circumstances that are different from what they are now, and then accomplishes that through some set or series of actions and interventions, either singularly or in collaboration with other people. The change is produced with intent, and the change agent is a cause in the matter of making the change. Unintentional change, in contrast, is not deliberate or consciously produced, but is manifested as side effects, accidents, secondary effects, or unanticipated consequences of action.

Producing intentional change, then, is a matter of deliberately creating, through communication and conversation, a new reality or set of social structures. If this is the case, then the change process actually occurs within, and is driven by, conversation and communication, rather than the reverse. It is my assertion that intentional change is produced through the development of these conversations.

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## Implications for leaders – history repeats itself

So what does intentional, or unintentional, change mean for leaders? Quite simply, that they open themselves in communication and conversation, and open themselves to input from those they lead. This, often, can be a frightening experience and requires great courage from leaders. Business people, in particular, are unused to sharing much of their private feelings and reflections with colleagues (Zohar, 1997). Moreover, it is my belief that everything, including the pursuit of change, begins with the initiative of the individual – in this case, the leader himself or herself. One cannot speak of communication and conversation without mentioning dialogue – a skill that builds critical and independent thinking, openness, and insight.

Dialogue is probably the most difficult and uncomfortable of the three concepts, since it is about insight as the source of action. It is interesting that so many pre-agricultural cultures seem to engage in the practice of sitting in a circle and talking and talking until, as many Native American Indians say, "the talk starts". I am not sure that new science, systems thinking and the so-called metaskills theories, so much part of our organisational literature these days, are not the West's gifts to the old cultures to say, "Sorry, you were right! We think that the old cultures had a clearer understanding of new science, systems thinking and metaskills" – the old cultures of Africa, the old cultures of the Aztec, the Inca cultures, the American Indian cultures, the Aboriginal cultures.

It is clear that many such cultures do not hold the view that is so common in the West today, that thought is a purely individual phenomenon, occurring within our own heads. Apparently, one reason the Greeks considered *dialogos* (dialogue) so important was their view that it was vital to self-governance. Whenever there were important issues to be considered in ancient Athens, the citizens would meet in the *agora*, the marketplace, and hold a dialogue about it – for hours, for days if necessary, until they had seen some way through (Zohar, 1997). This allowed the emergence of collective insight, collective wisdom, and a non-confrontational way of solving problems. Once a society loses this capacity, all that is left is discussion – voices battling it out to see who wins and who loses. There is no capacity to go deeper, to find a deeper meaning that transcends individual views and self-interest.

When we examine how leaders make people aware of key concerns or shifts in organisational focus, it is readily apparent that their questioning style has a pervasive effect on how organisational members direct their attention. Used effectively, questions can concentrate the mind and set the agenda. We sometimes have to question how these questions are used – whether this does not lead to leaders imposing their personal agendas on others. During part of my research in 1997, Colin Hall (executive chairman of Wooltru – a top retail company in South Africa) made it clear that in his previous leadership role (and previous mind-set, as managing director of South African Breweries), he was able to focus people's energies, time and effort in a direction which he saw fit at the time. He admits that this was not always congruent to what the employees wanted, felt or desired (April 1997). In contrast, Mindell (1992) points out how imperative it is for successful leaders to work with the natural energy of their

followers that arises from changing moods, tensions, emotions, roles, and time spirits. The narrow path that the leader must follow is a path that the followers themselves create and can accept, and leaders need to realise that the energy of their followers cannot be completely controlled or predicted.

According to Covey (1997), the deepest part of human nature is that which urges people, each one of us, to rise above our present circumstances and to transcend our nature. If you can appeal to it, you tap into a whole new source of human motivation and involvement. In 1970, Robert Greenleaf made the point that the forces of good and evil are propelled by the thoughts, attitudes, and actions of individual beings (Spears, 1995). Greenleaf, along with Burns (1978), describes how leadership is more than skills and situational know-how and is, instead and more fundamentally, a moral contract between leaders and followers to bring out the best in each other for the good of the whole.

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### **Metalinguage, symbols and meaning**

Zuboff (1988, p. 394) has observed that "we're prisoners of our organisational vocabulary". Kouzes and Posner (1995, p. 227) claim that "we have all come to accept the words we use as the reality of organisational life". I would question the validity of that statement, especially in the light of our South African history. Many a time, words are spoken in denial of truth, for acceptance, and to please the dominant culture and value system in the organisation. South African organisations, because of its Apartheid history, are rife with suspicious and mistrust of others (especially between management and employees), hypersensitivity, and over-concern with hidden motives and special meanings. In fact, I would argue that the vocabulary spoken in organisations can trap us into a particular way of thinking about our roles and relationships, because there is a distortion of reality and loss of capacity for spontaneous action. In my mind, good leaders understand and are attentive to language, especially the metalanguage, and they know the power of words:

A core element in employee involvement, and the language surrounding it, is that the initiatives or techniques operate first on employee attitudes – they engage or involve the employee – leading to identification and commitment. The concept of commitment is central to the process (Guest *et al.*, 1993).

Mowday *et al.* (1982) define commitment as the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organisation, characterised by strong

acceptance of and belief in an organisation's goals and values; willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organisation; and a strong desire to maintain membership of the organisation. Leaders should therefore pay attention to the informal channels by which organisational messages are conveyed.

When organisations make major changes, they often proclaim new symbols and discard or destroy old symbols and artefacts in favour of the new. We need look no further than the toppling of the Berlin Wall and certain statues in South Africa for dramatic evidence of this. Leaders are attentive to the use of ceremonies, both official and spontaneous, in the reinforcement of shared values. Rory Wilson, currently managing director of the Independent Newspapers (Cape), went as far as having a ceremony of the slaughtering of a goat and wearing skin bracelets during the shaky period of credibility- and trust-formation in the take-over of *The Sowetan* by the Argus Group (April 1997). What does this communicate to the people, both in the organisation and its customers? Many ask, "Was it necessary to go so far?"

I would argue, "Is this not the type of intentional change, and courage, we are looking for?" According to Kouzes and Posner (1995, p. 229), "in the performing art of leadership, symbols and artefacts are a leader's props. They're necessary tools for making the message memorable and sustainable over time". The sensitive and intelligent management of those "tools and artefacts" can be vital in how particular sectors of a leader's followership will respond to future challenges and ideas of the leader. This was seen in the South African Parliament, just after the 1994 democratic elections, when certain paintings and pictures of the previous Apartheid regime were removed from the halls. However, they were not discarded. Instead, President Mandela insisted that they should be put in prominent positions in museums and galleries, since "they are part of our history and culture". This action has had far-reaching effects for President Mandela's credibility as a leader, especially among the white, Afrikaner sector of the population.

Burns (1978) points out that the essential strategy of leadership in mobilising power involves recognising the array of motives and goals of potential followers. He states that this process is an elusive one – it is, in large part, to make conscious what lies unconscious among followers. The words and symbols we choose to use are metaphors for concepts that define attitudes and behaviours. Our words evoke images of what we hope to create and how we expect people to

behave. Meanings, however, held by people cannot be taken for granted, because they are composed of expectations about "what they think" and "what should be", even to the point where "what is" becomes conditioned by "what should be". Meanings which are ignored lead to the withdrawal of commitment because people value meanings they have formed together. Part of the responsibility of such good leadership is to allow people the space, time and energy to expose their true feelings, beliefs and attitudes – both to themselves and others. This requires creating opportunities for individuals to meet others in intense communicative engagements ("communities of practice"), which hopefully change and shape the way they experience each other. In this way, individuals are able to develop their own capacities to go deeper, and to find deeper meaning that goes beyond self-interest and individual viewpoints.

Presently, in organisations, families and communities, people operate separately, often creating barriers between each other by their fragmented thought – thought resulting from age-old thinking, no longer relevant in our changing world. According to Senge (1995, p. 19) "once a society loses this capacity [to have fruitful conversation], all that is left is a cacophony of voices battling it out to see who wins and who loses". It seems reasonable to ask whether many of our deeper problems in governing ourselves today, and loss of mutual respect and caring might not stem from this lost capacity to talk with one another, to think together as part of a larger community.

I believe that when an individual has less concern for the ego associations of leadership, and more for the mission to serve by liberating and redirecting individual resources and energy, potential expands. People do more than they had been doing because they feel freer to be more than previously they had felt it possible to be. As a result of the greater energy available, through the more actualised individuals, there is more possibility for creative change in organisations. This requires those in the organisation to think and act beyond their functional domains, and to work in an alignment similar to that required of players in a symphony orchestra. With a high degree of interdependence required to optimise such a system, serious attention is paid to open communication and conversation, collaboration, and the innovation required to achieve the aim of the system. A special effort is required to equip leaders to lead this kind of organisation and community.

## Growth stages

Stubbs (1998, p. 318) offers a model for transformation and change, which includes the following growth stages: self-mastery (SM), dialogue and conversation (DC), and transformational (T). McLagan and Nel (1995, p. 11) similarly describe the “development stages” leaders have to go through if they are to maintain a balance between “momentum and stability”. They suggest the following: letting go of the past (SM), assuming the stewardship of participation (SM), forming alliances to extend authority and responsibility and achieve the ultimate purpose of participative management – high involvement and performance (DC), and finally, leading the transition (T). Senge (1990) suggests five disciplines for the learning organisation, which easily translates into the five disciplines a leader needs to master: personal mastery (SM) – the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience and of seeing reality objectively; sharing mental models (DC) – the need to think collectively in dialogue and conversation so that the diversity of personal and shared constructs of the world is explored; shared vision (DC) – a collective picture of the future which fosters genuine commitment and enrolment rather than compliance; team learning (DC) – the capacity to creatively explore ideas and suspend our own judgements in a free flow of meaning whereby the team thinks as a single organism; and systems thinking (T) – a methodology for seeing in wholes and for recognising patterns, relationships and the interrelatedness of parts which go to make up these wholes. Senge (1990) made the point that systems thinking is the fifth discipline that fuses together the other four, and suggested that these five learning disciplines might just as well be called the “leadership disciplines”. Hitt (1995) asserts that those who excel in these areas will be the natural leaders of learning organisations.

### Self-mastery (SM)

First, the leader must achieve a high level of self-mastery – to become more himself or herself and achieve his or her full potential. As well as intellect and skill, this includes purpose and identity. To accomplish this, the leader is encouraged to draw on the teachings of Joe Luft and Harry Ingham on communication, and the teachings of Stephen Covey on habits that lead one from dependence through independence to a level of interdependence. This stage also requires a self-assessment of one’s own personal system, including the values that shape the individual’s unique approach to leadership. This is

a life-long process, living in a state of continuous learning to become what one may be.

### Dialogue and conversation (DC)

The second stage includes attention to a deeper level of communication, a serious commitment to co-operation, labelled “dialogue” by Bohm (in Jaworski, 1996). The word “dialogue”, comes from two Greek roots: “dia” and “logos”, suggesting “meaning flowing through”. This stands in stark contrast to the word “debate”, which means “to beat down”, or even “discussion”, which has the same root as “percussion” and “concussion”, meaning “to break things up”. Gerard and Teurfs (1997, p. 16) inform us that dialogue really consists of four skills and a set of guidelines:

- 1 *Suspending judgement.* Because our way of thinking divides things up and creates what seems like ultimate “truths”, it is difficult for us to stay open to alternative views. Our egos become identified with how we think things are. We defend our positions against those of others, and close ourselves off from learning and do harm to our personal relationships. When we “suspend judgement”, we see others’ points of view; hold our positions lightly; and build a climate of trust and safety. As people learn that they will not be “judged” wrong for having opinions, they feel free to express themselves fully. The atmosphere becomes more open and truthful.
- 2 *Identifying assumptions.* The opinions and judgements we hold are usually based on layers of assumptions, inferences, and generalisations. When we do not look at the underlying belief system behind our judgements, we make decisions that lead to disappointing results. Only when we peel away the assumptions can we see what might be giving us trouble: some incomplete or “incoherent” thought. We can then explore differences, build common ground and consensus, and get to the bottom of misunderstandings.
- 3 *Listening.* The way we listen impacts how well we learn and how effective we are in building quality relationships. We focus on developing our capacity to stay present and open to the meaning arising at both the individual and collective levels. We can learn to listen and perceive at more subtle levels by overcoming typical blocks in our ability to listen attentively and to stay present.
- 4 *Inquiring and reflecting.* Through inquiry and reflection, we dig deeply into matters that concern us and create breakthroughs in our ability to solve problems. By learning how to ask questions that lead to

new understanding, we accelerate our collective learning. We gain awareness of our thinking processes and the issues that separate and unite us. By learning how to work with silence, we can identify reactive patterns, generate new ideas, perceive common ground, and gain sensitivity to subtle meanings.

As people gather to dialogue, they commit to a common set of guidelines: listening and speaking without judgement; acknowledgement of each speaker; respect for differences; role and status suspension; balancing inquiry and advocacy; avoidance of cross-talk; a focus on learning; seeking the next level of understanding; releasing the need for specific outcomes; and, “speaking when moved”.

Bohm (in Jaworski, 1996, p. 110) points out that a great deal of what we call discussion is not deeply serious, in the sense that there are all sorts of things which are non-negotiable – the “undiscussables”. No one mentions the “undiscussables” – they are just there, lying beneath the surface, blocking deep, honest, heart-to-heart communication. Furthermore, we all bring basic assumptions with us – our own mental models or pictures – about how the world operates, our own self-interests, etc. Our basic assumptions are developed from our early childhood days, our life experiences and socialisation, our peers and family, our education and reading. We hold these assumptions so deeply that we become identified with them, and will defend them with great emotion and energy when they are challenged. Quite often, we do this unconsciously. Jaworski (1996, p. 111) says, “If there was an opportunity for sustained dialogue over a period of time, we would have coherent movement of thought, not only at the conscious level we all recognise, but even at the tacit level, the unspoken level which cannot be described”.

### **Transformationalism (T)**

At the next level, the leader must practise transformational leadership. This dimension of leadership includes attention to releasing human potential and high levels of interaction and alignment. Instead of simply learning to “do what we have always done a little better”, transformationalism, dependent initially on individual learning, requires the re-examining of everything we do. This often means making sense of past experiences, then letting go of our existing knowledge and competencies, recognising that they may prevent us from learning new things.

Collaborative enquiry, fostered through dialogue and conversation, forms a bridge between individual learning and the learning organisation (Pedler and Aspinwall, 1998).

Adaptive learning is applying the same old concepts or skills in new ways. Generative learning, fundamental to transformationalism, or what Argyris and Schön (1974, 1996) call “double loop learning”, what Bateson (1972) called “deutero-learning”, and what Michael (1973) called “learning to learn” requires the learner to reframe, to develop new concepts and points of view, to cognitively redefine old categories and to change standards of judgement. Such changes increase the individual’s (learner’s) capacity to deal with situations in new ways and lay the basis for developing radically new skills (Senge, 1990). This is a challenging and painful endeavour, and it is through dialogue and conversation – making the implicit explicit – that we come face to face with it. When individuals address change in this manner, accompanied by a learning effort, then the challenge and pain of examining existing frames is continuous.

Exercising leadership, to use Plato’s allegory, is akin to encouraging others to come out of the cave and to deal with the true, rather than the shadow realities. As Plato pointed out, those who escape from the cave require great skill to persuade others to do the same. The skill of mobilising others to move to new ground, where they will experience the initial discomfort of new vistas, is called transformational leadership.

Leaders at this level must therefore liberate their colleagues to go beyond the experience- and knowledge-base of any one talent source, to be systems thinkers and optimisers of a living system. For a systems thinker, understanding the network of relationships and investigating the nature of those relationships is primary. The systems thinker understands that to perceive reality is to perceive a certain network of relationships. The systems thinker grasps that different people from different cultures and different walks of life have had different experiences and are themselves living organisms composed of a variety of different networks. Understanding the implications of this diversity of networks helps us to understand why multiple realities exist. “Stepping back” or “going to a higher viewing point” always provides a different perspective (Beerel, 1998, p. 124). By seeing the whole, we can better understand how the parts fit together and how the different parts are needed to constitute the whole. To be sensitive to multiple realities is vital in a cross-cultural world, and cross-cultural empathy provides enormous payoffs in dealing with employees, business partners, customers, and competitors. The first step is to acknowledge these new realities through

dialogue with other members of the organisation. This serves to both communicate and test that these realities exist and that they are perceived correctly.

The development of the whole person has always been valued by the best teachers, but it is now increasingly important in work organisations. This is because of the link between individual personal development and change in the wider system or organisation. As Revans (1998) has put it: "Those unable to change themselves, cannot change what goes on around them". To make changes at this level requires more than behavioural change. It requires individuals to reframe the situation, to learn new concepts and to develop new attitudes. In order to develop those capacities, individuals must undergo a learning process that is functionally equivalent to the "organisational learning cycles through learning histories approach" (Nevis *et al.*, 1997), which is currently under development at MIT in the USA.

Transformational leadership therefore requires individuals to be observant as to how relationships evolve, dissolve, and how and why new ones form. It also focuses on the roles that different relationships play and how they function within the operation of the entire system. However, not everyone in the organisation is able to do that, without training and coaching. It therefore becomes important for organisations wishing to be successful in the twenty-first century to devote dedicated resources to the monitoring of new realities, and these should be included within the strategic planning function. Such resources must include employee development time, specified periods set aside for group and individual dialogue, specified spaces for dialogue and reflection, and organisational mentors – skilled professionals – whose task is to coach others through the growth stages, so that they can also exercise transformational leadership.

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### **Guidelines: a starting point**

The proposed guidelines attempt to provide a plan for organisations to start thinking about how to produce change in the psychological structure of individuals within the organisation – to move as many as possible of their organisational members towards exercising transformational leadership – by employing notions from systems thinking methods, scenario planning, and organisational learning. What is important to remember when dealing with the psychological structure of individuals is the personalities of those involved in the change process, the history of

the individual and the organisation, and the manner in which the change is introduced (Willcocks and Rees, 1995). It points to the value of open and honest communication when attempting to avoid defensive behaviours that are grounded on misinformation. It is hoped that these guidelines will lead individuals through the growth stages as described above.

### **1. Creating space for dialogue and conversation**

I believe that it will become important in twenty-first century organisations to create "special places", to be more conducive to dialogue and conversation than traditional conference rooms. Dixon (1998, pp. 103-4), stresses the fact that these are

less formal spaces, often with comfortable couches and overstuffed chairs. They have more natural lighting than the harsh fluorescent lights of conference rooms and they typically have coffee and refreshments handy ... The walls of the room are covered with whiteboards, filled with diagrams, lists, pictures, quotes, charts and other thinking tools teams have used.

Studies have shown that the availability of community common rooms actually serves to increase team member collaboration (Wild *et al.*, 1996). A number of forward-thinking organisations are leading the way in thinking about space for dialogue by designing special "dialogue common rooms" where informal conversation and personal interaction can occur, e.g. Hitachi, America Ltd, National City Bank, Owens Corning. SAS Airlines in Stockholm, for example, has a "central plaza" in the midst of its corporate headquarters, which contains shops and a café where people from all levels and functions are encouraged to visit and share ideas. Dixon (1998, p. 104) stresses the point that "these designs reflect the increasingly relational nature of our work and the importance of creating space that accommodates a more relational kind of talk".

### **2. Generating organisational awareness – communities of practice**

It is important that the leadership of the company be, and be seen to be, involved in the change process. Part of that responsibility is to develop a methodology that will systematically help individuals get past the stumbling blocks that have prevented dialogue and conversation before. Coupled to that is the need for dialogue settings – "communities of practice" – where people can reflect about their accomplishments, their frustrations, their attitudes, and tell their personal stories in their own words. At the Graduate

School of Business of the University of Cape Town, we encourage students to go beyond the obvious, to venture beneath the surface, and teach them that through true conversation and dialogue, they are able to build deep trust and respect for one another. In this way, through the medium of regular, planned communication, we intend to help each student get beyond the devaluing prejudices that we all hold – in order that true teamwork can be built among groups. Trust is considered here to be emotionally based, but with a cognitive component, and depends on the belief in the reliability of oneself or the other person, or group. It can only be given by each person rather than be demanded. Without this type of dialogue as input, individuals within the organisation will not develop a rich enough level of content, not just about the event, but about the systemic structures and mental models which exist below the surface. Argyris and Schön (1978) have rightly argued that organisational performance problems are more likely due to a lack of awareness and inability to articulate and check underlying assumptions than to a function of poor efficiency. This points to the importance of understanding how individuals perceive, interpret and respond to changes (both internal and external) in the organisational “communities of practice”. In particular, that as a result of personality and experience differences, reality is subjective and this needs to be understood by both leaders and followers. The idea behind generating awareness is therefore to bring out the unexpected relationships and fundamental causes that have been hidden, underneath the noticeable and significant symptoms that everyone sees.

### **3. Feedback**

Feedback is very important to the individual change process, and can occur on two levels, i.e. from within a group and/or individually. For feedback to be effective, organisational mentors (trained organisational psychologists) are important – they provide the important link between people’s experiences and organisational life, e.g. through note-taking during conversation and dialogue sessions, mentors capture and help construct stories, and gather data from a wide enough group of people so that judgements can be made about whether or not a story is typical. This means listening to what people have to say, asking critical questions and engaging people in their own inquiries. Mentors also continually make sure that the evolving research methodology of the process is rigorous.

### *Group feedback*

Developing trust between individuals involves encouraging everyone in a group to reveal thoughts and feelings about themselves to others through self-disclosure, and by getting feedback from others. By being able to accept risk, an individual can become more creative and open to the possibility of being able to develop sustained intimate relationships. And in a country such as South Africa, where racial groups have forcibly been kept from communicating, perhaps we can all move closer, through conversation and dialogue within a context of trust, to experiencing what deep alignment in a group or team feels like.

In the workplace this has particular relevance, if people are willing to communicate openly different kinds of information, including their fears and feelings, the result will be that they will be more willing to inform change rather than resist it. This has direct relevance to what Giddens (1994, pp. 119-21) refers to as the “democracy of emotions”, which means that individuals will not only be in contact with their own feelings but will be able to openly express these to others in a democratic manner. This requires a reflexivity of oneself, and being able to reflect on actions and values. Individuals are encouraged to raise issues about any barriers (perceived or real) that might hinder individual or team effectiveness. In this sense, trust goes beyond basic rational co-operation and becomes an emotional force that can be called upon in risky situations to allow us to go on. But if co-operation increases when conditions are unpredictable, because people realise that their futures depend on each other, then where organisations face turbulent change, trust-building is vital.

As more and more individuals within the organisation become involved and committed in the change process, the system becomes more and more effective. Along with involved leadership, there needs to be more than one “champion” who sets the stage for individual change and learning. This is particularly necessary in learning that is related to changing a basic value or a long-cherished method. The greater the number of advocates who promote a change culture, the more rapidly and extensively the learning will take place. This sets the stage for the development of a culture that will build awareness of the team concept and support critical individual change initiatives. Managers should regard dialogical communities of practice as company assets and look for ways to preserve them (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). On the other hand, where organisations see people only in terms of being

resources, then only adaptive learning can be achieved (versus generative learning).

#### *Individual feedback and reflection*

The judgements people make about themselves, and others, are not always concrete or obvious. They can be abstract and highly inferential, but sometimes individuals treat them as if they were concrete because they produce them so automatically. It is therefore important to have individual feedback sessions within organisations, where skilled organisational psychologists (personal mentors) can assist individuals during their sense-making and change initiatives. This mentoring process has to be designed so that judgements, inferences and interpretations can always be linked to actual data (sourced during dialogue sessions). The ideas of clinical research interviews (Schein, 1987) and creating reflective settings should guide this process. Individuals can be assessed (formally or informally) to determine how well their skills and abilities match the identified, required behaviours within the reflective spirit that prevails in the organisation.

People are encouraged to identify personal competencies required for effective performance and change in a future-oriented organisation. It is also the platform where mentors can get a sense of the individual's readiness for change. In addition, reflective interviews give participants a chance to talk openly and expressively about their experience – a significant source of learning in itself. Mentors need to deliver comprehensive feedback that compares performance against critical competencies – this then leads into the development of personal scenarios for individuals. They also need to ensure that participants receive accurate and reliable information about their progress through a carefully designed individual-performance management system. It is during these individual sessions of dialogue that individual anxiety concerning change, and individual defence mechanisms, can be explored. Several authors have examined that idea that formal and informal aspects of organisations act as defence systems against anxiety (Willcocks and Rees, 1995; Menzies Lyth, 1988; De Board, 1978). De Board (1978) argues that defence against anxiety is one of the primary aspects bonding individuals together in organisations, making for cohesion. Anxiety in organisations, as in individuals, is a symptom of fear or the perception of danger. The existence of anxiety and the defence from anxiety are important therefore in understanding organisational effectiveness and change.

#### *Conversational bank*

A “conversational bank”, or discussion database, is a repository in which participants record their own experiences on issues (organisational, personal, political, etc.) and react to others' comments. This is an electronic repository (operated through an intranet or similar network), similar to Davenport and Prusak's (1998) “knowledge repositories”. The “conversational bank” should be judged by the quality of the conversations it provokes.

#### **4. Keeping a diary – self-reflection**

Reflection is widely recognised as a crucial transformational element in the learning process of individuals (Schön, 1983; Mezirow, 1990; Rigano and Edwards, 1998). Efforts by some major companies such as PepsiCo, Motorola and General Motors to harness reflection as a deliberate tool for learning is a significant trend towards addressing the need for formal reflective practices in the workplace (Daudelin, 1996). The process of reflection is important for the integration of new experiences with past experience. Critical self-reflection has much in common with the action learning approach of Revans (1978, 1982). Butler's (1994) model of human action and change indicates that professional growth comes from continuing cycles of action and reflection. Reflection is the process which “can modify personal knowledge, beliefs and actions” (Butler, 1994, p. 21). The use of journal writing has emerged as a significant, introspective tool for promoting individual reflection for personal professional growth. For example, Marsick (1990) outlined ways for facilitating reflection in the workplace and identified journal writing as a useful tool for helping people become aware of their own practical reasoning and theory-building, and to make explicit their tacit knowing. Daudelin (1996) developed the “reflection workbook” which provided guidelines for the use of a learning journal to record and explore the random thoughts and summary learning statements that occur throughout a work experience. Barclay (1996) provided practical guidelines for the use of “learning logs” for recording and enhancing experiential learning. She identified some key features of self-development embodied in the learning log: personal development planning (which ties in with the personal scenarios discussed below), learning responsibility, and individuality of the method. From the mentor perspective, clear purposes and expectations, and access to skilled mentor support, are required for inexperienced journal writers to avoid superficial and non-reflective entries, and to



overcome the uncertainties and frustrations associated with acquiring new skills. Many business schools now make use of journal writing as part of their leadership development programs for MBA students. It is important that lessons learned from journal writing be used in the development of personal scenarios, in order to encourage ownership of the reflective process by the participant – vital for maintaining the necessary motivation, discipline and interest.

### **5. Personal scenarios**

A scenario is a tool for ordering one's perceptions about alternative future environments in which today's decisions might play out. In practice, scenarios resemble a set of stories, written or spoken, built around carefully constructed plots. Stories are an old way of organising knowledge and experience, and when used as planning tools, they defy denial by encouraging – in fact, requiring – the willing suspension of disbelief. Stories can express multiple perspectives on complex events, and scenarios give meaning to these events. Personal scenario planning will enable individuals to imagine, and prepare for, discontinuous change through systematic and recognisable phases. What increasingly affects all of us, whether professional planners or individuals preparing for a better future, is not the tangibles in life – bottom-line numbers, for instance – but the intangibles: our hopes and fears, our beliefs and dreams. By moving from being tacit to explicit through dialogue and conversation, only stories and our ability to visualise different kinds of futures (personal scenarios) adequately capture these intangibles. Individuals are therefore encouraged to design and implement a carefully planned, high-involvement, individual change strategy, i.e. a personal scenario(s), around five thrusts: communication, skills, accountability, collaboration and systems (process improvement). These strategies, born from their personal scenarios, teach them to envisage multiple futures for themselves, their team members and the organisation. These must be clear and can be very specific, e.g. individuals can develop a personal strategy by identifying a vision (the “where”), the values (the “how”), and critical success factors (the “what”) to bring about the desired change. If individuals, with the assistance of mentors, are prepared to look at the world in non-traditional ways, challenge their assumptions about the future, and test the viability of their personal strategies in various futures, scenario-based personal planning is the best way to accomplish this.

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## **Conclusion**

Most leadership perspectives on change propose that communication occurs in the context of change. This is particularly true of many change-management consultants, in post-Apartheid South Africa, who entertain the same notion. I, however, would like to re-assert my belief that communication, conversation and dialogue are the contexts in which change occurs. Change is a communication-based and communication-driven phenomenon (Ford and Ford, 1995, p. 541). Adapting to change takes time, because it is not just a rational process, but will always involve a degree of emotional acceptance on the part of those affected. Where change is disruptive, emotional commitment will be needed to cope with the loss. Change will be perceived as interfering with our sense of adaption by appearing to overwhelm our structures of thought which make sense of the world (Marris, 1974, pp. 15-18). Managing change is directly related to the level of trust engendered in the individual and in groups. Where trust is high, change is managed more effectively and, where it is low, communication and co-operation will suffer and there will be an increasing tendency to resort to power.

It is my firm belief that part of the healing of South Africa's soul lies in the art forms of conversation and dialogue, sometimes referred to “surface-to-depth conversations”. This, for example, was part of the objective of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – healing the nation's soul through conversation and dialogue. The challenge, in South Africa, is for courageous organisational leaders to take definite steps, based on trust and respect, towards creating forums, time and space for all the people within their organisations to openly communicate, reflect, converse and have dialogue to talk about their families and their personal crises, and to express their hurt, pain, joy, beliefs, hopes, feelings, anger, future goals and dreams, and to discover each other's undiscussables.

Until people are able to do that in their organisations, employers must continue to expect employees to bring 5-10 per cent of themselves, and their energy, to work. And the vision and mission of the organisation's executives will stay just that – the vision and mission of the executives, rather than being felt and lived by willing, enthusiastic and energised followers within the organisation. It should also be clear that as more control is used by leaders, employees will have less trust in the process (Handy, 1985, p. 327).

That communication and conversation play an important role in the production of change is not an entirely new concept. One only has to go back to Socrates, 2,400 years ago, and his use of conversation as a method for seeking deeper understanding – a way of seeking the rock bottom truth in what was being discussed. He taught Western Civilisation the art of asking questions as a tool for discovering reality. For Socrates, “the unexamined life was not worth living”. In modern organisations, the depth conversation in the Socratic mode is coming into its own again. This is fostered through the: creation of continuous learning opportunities, promotion of inquiry and dialogue, encouragement of collaboration and team learning, empowerment of people towards a collective vision, and the establishment of systems to capture and share learning (Watkins and Marsick, 1993). As more and more leaders shift towards participation and empowerment, they are beginning to learn the Socratic way of processing information through asking the right questions, instead of making pronouncements and giving orders. What we constantly hear is that the more people practise the art of orchestrating conversations and dialogue, the more opportunities they find for it: processing office conflicts, reviewing and reflecting on the past, for evaluations, for making group decisions, even for office celebrations. In dialogue, the goal is to create a special environment in which a different kind of relationship among parts comes into play – one that reveals both high energy and high intelligence (Jaworski, 1996). In a learning organisation, dialogue provides ways for teams and groups to reflect constantly on their experience and learn from it.

Conversation and dialogue force one, in a sense, to make explicit the things we could not previously talk about, the things that hindered true and real friendships. It is my experience, that once you are real, you cannot be non-real again. The challenge for leaders is to find and meet the energy and, hence, the meaning in people’s lives, by constantly digging and naming what they find in their communication and dialogue with others. As we know, not everybody will like and be happy with what has been dug up. But, leaders need to foster experiences that allow individuals to coalesce around issues of shared concern and move forward to successful resolution of those issues.

I therefore propose that leaders, hoping to be successful in an ever-changing and chaotic world, need to create organisations in which others can find, for themselves, balance, meaning and success. Much work still needs

to be done on setting the organisational context for ongoing dialogue and conversation. However, it requires of leaders the hard work of learning more about themselves, and others, and improving how they use their knowledge, skills and abilities in service to others and their organisations.

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