

Finding a Common Future with Dialogue: Content, Process, and Transcendence

By: Scott C. Hammond*

Abstract

Dialogue is used in business to do strategic planning, create team based solutions, and manage knowledge. Yet many do not understand how to use dialogue to solve the complex problems presented by modern business. This article proposes a four part model for dialogue leading to transcendence. Conclusions are based on observations made on ten strategic planning dialogues in seven different organizations. The research suggests that transcendence can be reached in dialogue if groups account for issues of content and process that affect individuals and the group. The article provides helpful suggestions for managers to successfully manage dialogue to produce solutions to complex problems.

Modern organizations deliberately engage in various forms of dialogue to solve a variety of commonly held problems. Dialogue may be used to solve disputes between business entities, create new market opportunities, give performance feedback to employees, create training, or resolve human resource issues related to race or gender. Organizational change practitioners like Senge (1990), building on the work of Bohm (1990), say dialogue enhances organizational learning. Isaacs (1999) says dialogue leads to better solutions in the process of human organizing. Ellinor and Gerard (1998) apply the Bohm model to workplace creativity. Bristow (2000) has advocated dialogue as a means for giving performance feedback. A structured dialogue called "future search" brings all stakeholders in a work community together, in order to create a new product, new organization, or build a strategic plan (Weisbord et al.; 1992).

While these practices tell us what dialogue *does*, it is still difficult to know what it *is*. Of the many operational and theoretical definitions of dialogue, Grudin's (1996) definition that focuses on "reciprocity and strangeness" practically describes how collective meaning is made within the context of an organizational dialogue. Grudin said, "By reciprocity, I mean give-and-take between two or more open minds or two or more aspects of the same mind...By strangeness, I mean the shock of new information—divergent opinion, unpredictable data, sudden emotion, etc.—on those to whom it is expressed."

Rhetorical patterns of dialogue that appear in strategic planning dialogues designed to determine a common future are examined. Conclusions are based on a content analysis of thirteen dialogues within ten organizations. In four cases a video tape was made of the entire dialogue. In the other cases, participant observation was used. The intense dialogic strategic planning processes contained representative phases described below. These phases lead to a loosely defined intangible but mutually agreed upon transcendent point. While the focus of this model is large group dialogue, we can assume that these patterns are present whenever strangeness and reciprocity are dialogically in play within human interaction.

The Rhetorical Patterns of Dialogue

The rhetorical patterns of dialogue tend to reveal three distinct phases. The first is an introductory phase that allows the group to understand process and content, and self and other. One might assume that this phase accounts for just the brief beginning of a dialogue. But it is not brief nor is it just at the beginning. All dialogues, to be sure, begin in this introductory phase. But they move in and out of this phase throughout the time the group is together. Most groups spend 60 to 70 percent of their time in this phase, while other groups never get out of phase one.

The second phase involves intermediate transcendence. Phase two is a time when the group is finding, together, the links between self and other, and content and process. Phase two takes a good deal more intellectual and social energy than the first phase. Typically groups spend less than 30 percent of their time together in this second phase. These intellectual transcendences lay the foundation for the third and most memorable phase that I have referred to as the transcendent point. The third phase is relatively brief, but in post dialogue interviews is most clear in the memory of the participants. Participants spend less than five percent of their time in the phase, but it is clearly the most significant time.

Phase 1: The Introductory Phase

In order to understand the rhetorical patterns that occur in structured dialogues, we must first explore the types of comments that are made in dialogue session. Systematic observations of structured dialogues indicate that the group conversation appeared to wander. Some participants

talked about their personal experiences while others spoke about the problems facing the group or the organization. As the chaotic non-linear conversation continued, many participants tried to bring order by imposing parameters, limits, or rules on the dialogue, which leads to a discussion about process. As the dialogue continued, distinct themes emerged, which centered around content and process, self and other. Bohm (1990) argued that there is both a content and a process dimension to dialogue. Hawes (1999) and others have argued that there is an individual and a group identity aspect to dialogue and can be categorized in at least one of these quadrants. Participants either speak about themselves in the process of dialogue—asking how they are doing, or they focus on the dialogic performance of the group. Generally in western cultures, the dialogue group begins with the common issues they face, assuming that the process is fixed. Participants addressing content issues may examine how they understand the topic or they may focus on the understanding of the dialogue group, or they may take an even broader focus and describe or question the content understand of the generalized other outside the dialogue.

Process	Content
How am I doing in the process of this dialogue? 1	How do I understand and feel about the content of this dialogue? 3
2 How is the group doing in the dialogue process?	4 How do others in this group and in my environment understand and feel about this topic?

Figure 1.1: Categories of Dialogue Inquiry

For example, comments regarding self/process generally ask the question “How am I doing in the process of this dialogue?” Or, is a self-assessment of current individual performance in the dialogue process—a here-and-now oriented comment of statement that is characterized by reflections of personal performance and feeling. Questions or statements in this category are often preceded by a disclaimer, such as “I have never been in a dialogue before...,” or “I’m not very good at this but...,” or

“I’ve been to many dialogues and...” Such comments often continue as the participants describe something that just happened and then quickly describe their feelings. For example, in one of the video taped dialogues a participant said, “I’m feeling like this dialogue is becoming a ping-pong match, and I don’t like it. For me a constant back and forth is moving to quickly....I feel lost.” Others express doubt in the process or elation at the active communication and listening. In one dialogue at a Midwest computer company a woman who worked on a large data processing team said, “I have been working the floor fifteen years and for the first time I feel like someone has listened to me.” Another woman in the same dialogue said that the process was too “touchy-feely.” She said the group should deal with work issues and not get mired in “feelings.”

Comments regarding the other process are also process-focused, but they take a more general tone when the participant is speaking for the group. Such comments ask the question, “How is this group doing?” These comments are related to the group’s ability to learn and practice the dialogue process and seek comparison to other groups, “this group...,” or “I feel we are going in this direction...,” or “I’m not sure if it is right for us to....”

An example of a process/other question can be seen in the strategic planning sessions with a government agency. After a number of people in the room made comments containing technical jargon, one young engineer suggested, “We need to stop talking like experts. Every time we use one of our scientific terms, we put a brick in a wall around this room. On one side of the wall are all these scientists, and on another side are the people in this room who care about this place but who don’t speak our language. We need to be together if we are going to really make a future for this place.”

With this comment, the young scientist was observing the language of his colleagues and taking responsibility in managing the process in the room. His comment focused on the process of the dialogue on the group scale. Comments regarding content/self move across the line to content and ask the question “How do I understand the material?” in self-assessments related to an individual’s understanding of the content of the dialogue. For example, “I don’t understand strategic planning, but...,” or “in health care, as I understand it, we need....”

In one dialogue with a federal government agency, a participant said, "If I don't understand why it takes that long to go through a planning process, then how can I explain it to the people who really care about the company....It seems to me I need to get clear about how long it should really take before I start making these kinds of decisions." Note that this participant has not yet moved towards speaking for the other. Responses reflectively focused on this own knowledge and not on what the group knows.

Some participants do not feel they are making progress in the dialogue unless comments are on the content side of the quadrant. Some participants make a process/other comment saying, for example, "Let's stop arguing over how to get into this dialogue, and just dialogue."

Comments regarding content/others ask questions such as "How will others understand the material?" These are questions or statements related to others' understanding of the content of the dialogue. The "other" in this quadrant has two dimensions. The first is the other in the dialogue group, and the second is the other in the person's work group, social group, or family. In one of the dialogues, a participant concluded a long content-related discussion by saying, "I don't think we are really communicating....When you use that term it means something completely different than when I do. I use learning to describe a classroom like experience, not everyday life experience." The participant claimed that the group was not close enough to a shared understanding of "learning" to engage in a fruitful dialogue. Other participants are concerned about the content understanding of a more generalized "other." For example, "I understand this new science, but once I get back to the hospital....," or "I think this group needs to push further through this material before we can...."

In the structured strategic planning dialogues, content/other questions and comments were particularly important, since in each case the participants in the dialogue were creating policy and making decisions that would affect other people who were not in the room. Comments such as this are often pretended to bring into the room the voices of those not present. For example, one person said, "My group will never go for this, unless we take it to the union first." But generally, content/other comments focus on the immediate problem the group has convened to address. For example, a participant in the business community dialogue said, "This plan could have the support of the council and various commissions if we

take the time to refine it here in this group over the next few days. By refining it,

I mean really putting out pencils to the pad and figuring out how much this is going to cost and where the money is going to come from."

Note that this comment pretends to find the heart of the matter. Cost is often defined as "the bottom line" because it addresses the material ability of the group to deal with the issue. Cost issues are content related and generally focus on the "other."

The first phase of dialogue involves comments that are in one of each of these categories. Dialogues always begin in one of these quadrants and move between each of them. But as the dialogue continues and participants become more familiar with each other, a group identity begins to emerge. In the second phase of dialogue the rhetoric shifts to more complicated statements that transcend the categories described in Phase 1.

Phase 2: Intermediate Transcendence

In the last few paragraphs, I have described dialogic comments that can be classified in one of the quadrants in the model found in figure 1.1. But I have observed while reading the transcripts of dialogues that only early in the session do the comments fall into these distinct categories. After a period where the group has spent some time in each of the quadrants, participants make comments that fall into two of the categories. For example, one participant who transcended the process/self quadrant to the process/other quadrant said, "I am having a great experience here with this group. I have come to see things in a whole different way...I am afraid that when I go back to my work group they will think...."

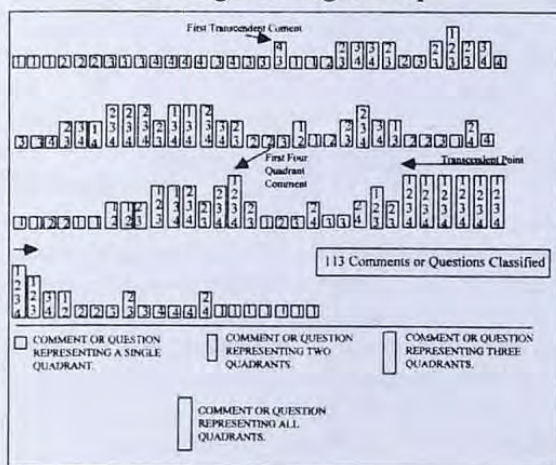
Notice that the participant begins with a comment on the process of dialogue that locate their concerns within themselves. But, the comment also moves over the boundary to account for the other within the process of dialogue.

As the process of dialogue emerges, it becomes apparent to participants that the dialogue is as much about self as it is about other and as much about the process of dialogue as it is about the content. Dialogues emergent characteristics and comments transcend content and process or self and other. Following is a map of a dialogue I found to be fairly typical of dialogues reaching a transcendent point. The map represents a two-hour session on a day three of the dialogue. The squares represent comments made by participants that fall into a single

quadrant of the dialogue model in figure 1.1. The numbers represent the respective quadrant. The small rectangles represent comments that were classified in the quadrants. The medium-sized rectangles represent questions or comments classified in three quadrants, and the large rectangles in four.

On this map a self/other transcendent comment is numbered as a 1,2 or a 3,4. A "process" transcendent comment is numbered as a 1,3 or a 2,4. Note that there are seventeen comments before the first transcendent comment and that the first transcendent comment is not immediately followed by another transcendent comment. Also note that transcendence gradually builds until the dialogue ends with a cooling-off period that could be described as polite, but not risky.

Dialogue Emergent Map



Hammond, S. C., 2003.

The patterns in the dialogue mapped in Figure 1.2 are typical of other groups. Dialogic learning for organizations involves transcendence of self and others and of content and process. This is a hard thing to understand without the experience of dialogue, but when one has developed a new strategic plan, enhanced customer service, or built community relationships through dialogue the simple patterns are evident.

Phase 3: The Transcendent Point

In the dialogue sponsored by a large government agency, one participant representing an environmental protection group said, "I came to make sure that they didn't mess up again,...but I came away with a new understanding of what we can do to help...I learned what information they need and how to give them information they need and how to give them information without creating conflict or political

enemies....I think I am a changed person, and I'm going to see that my organization behaves differently."

As an activist, his transcendence helped him find opposition to most federal agencies, he found common ground with the government agency, which he had previously perceived as the enemy. Dialogue is an opportunity to transcend content and process, and to see the relationship between how we do things, and what we do. When these transcendent points are reached, then the group has a very significant experience. Isaacs (1999) described this point as metalogue. Others call it *healing*, *revealing*, and *accelerated learning*. I call it the *transcendent point*.

Dialogue participants have described the transcendent point like this. "We reach a point...at which all we can see as a collective is the issue we have been discussing,...and all we can understand is the process of how we got there. That does not mean that we lose individuality or that personal agendas are gone. It means that we reach a point of common learning about self, group, the issues, and the process."

Another participant said, "This is a point of profound learning at which group wholeness no longer compete with individuality, and the line between our process and the topic becomes blurred and insignificant." Something transcendent is seen as crisis resolution. In one strategic planning dialogue a participant said, "Two hours ago I was wanting to bash that fellow. Now I think we have found a direction together that is more than workable, it is exciting." In the government agency dialogue described several times in this article the post dialogue interview revealed 56 changes in the park planning process as a result of the dialogue. One administrator reported that "Twenty-two of the changes were on no one's agenda before we came together and were pure creations of the group."

Practical Learnings from the Rhetorical Patterns of Dialogue

1. It does not matter which quadrant the group starts in, as long as the group visits each quadrant. Some groups, particularly those from individualist cultures (Gao and Ting-Toomey, 1998) may favor beginning in the "self" quadrant. Collectivists may be more likely to favor the "other" quadrant. Still others may favor beginning with the content issues while others suggest that before content can be discussed there must

be clarity about process. The dialogue model indicates that each quadrant must be visited sufficiently before the group can move to transcendence.

2. Groups that become trapped in one quadrant will not make transcendent progress. One group stayed in the content/other quadrant. "We met for hours and hours and talked about the problem out there," said one participant. "People made decisions and set strategies, but you could tell that we just did not want to do anything about it. The turning point came when Mary began talking about how this issue might affect her career, her bonus situation, and her family." Without a content issue the dialogue process becomes a sort of wandering group therapy. The dialogue must also contain conceptual space for some to evoke themselves, but also creates a collective sense of other that leads to the emergence of a dialogue group identity.
3. Dialogue is an unforced movement to transcendence. That means that the direct evocation of power is rare, though Hammond, Anderson, and Cissna (2003) argue that indirect power is abundant in dialogue. Still we suggest that dialogue is not a forced or even a facilitated march towards a particular solution to a commonly defined problem and is a self-organized process where meaning and action are emergent. In the small high tech firm, dialogue the CEO said at the end of two days, "My original intent for this was to create a strategic plan. I thought our teams were strong and vital and needed direction. In the dialogue we learned that the direction was clear, but our strategic plan needed a lot of work."
4. Transcendent moments are not automatic, but when they come they are rare and powerful. Outcomes are generally not foreseen. Intermediate transcendence into two or three of the quadrants accounts for less than a third of the comments. The transcendence of all four quadrants comes only after days of work and never lasted for more than 20 minutes. Most participants agree that transcendence is preceded by periods of chaos, confusion, and conflict.

One participant said, "It took me four days of stating and restating my position until I felt

like the others had understood what I was trying to say. After I felt understood I was able to let go of my issues. What I didn't realize was that everyone else let go at about the same time, and we were able to come together as a group around a position that none of us could see before we went through that difficult period."

5. Groups move at different speeds at different times. Often a group becomes mired in a personal situation (self/process) or deals with just the content issues for an extended period. Frustration will arise with some in the same group who are ready to move into another quadrant. Eventually the forces of self-organization will move the discussion towards transcendence. Once they have reached transcendence, the group generally expects to move more quickly. In one group a new participant joined on the third day after the group had reached fourth level transcendence. She said, "I have known these people for years but they are talking in a whole different way. It's like trying to get on a moving bus."
6. The difference between action and speech is blurred. Most dialogues are initiated as a prerequisite to right action. One participant said, "I worked differently because I knew that I would be back in front of this group accounting for my actions." Another said, "I will carry the voice of this body in my work for a long time."
7. Closure is problematic. In several cases participants reported returning to their workplace and continuing the dialogue even though they were no longer in a formal session.

Conclusion

The practical implications of the dialogue model are that planners and advocates of dialogues see that they must "create a space" rather than manage an outcome. Business leaders find it difficult to have sufficient faith in the expertise of their stakeholders to allow for this kind of exploration. But when supervisors and administrators do have the faith and dialogue functions, the surprises were productive ones.

* Scott C. Hammond, Ph. D., is an Assistant Professor in the Business Management Department of the School of Business at Utah Valley State College.

References

- Bohn, D. (1990). *On Dialogue*. Ojai, CA: David Bohm seminars.
- Bristow, N. (2000). *Where's the gift: How to achieve phenomenal success by discovering the gift in all feedback*. Lindon, UT: Cascade Press.
- Ellinor, L., & Gerard, G. (1998). *Dialogue: Rediscover the transforming power of conversation*. New York: Wiley
- Gao, Ge., & Ting-Toomey, S. (1998). *Communicating effectively with the Chinese*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Grudin, R. (1996). *On dialogue: An essay in free thought*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hawes, L. C. (1999). The dialogics of conversation: Power, control, and vulnerability. *Communication Theory*, 9, 229-264.
- Hammond, S. C., Anderson, R., & Cissna, K. N., (2003). The problematics of dialogue and power. *Communication Yearbook*, 27, (in press)
- Hammond, S. C., (2003). *Dialogue Emergent Map*, (in press).
- Isaacs, W. (1992). Dialogue, collective thinking, and organizational learning. *Organizational Dynamics*, 24-39.
- Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach: exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.
- Weisbord, M. (1992). *Discovering Common Ground*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.