

Introduction

*“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field, I will meet you there”
(Rumi)*

If you are a Dialogic organization development practitioner and leader, or consider practicing the dialogic way, and you find yourself asking the following questions:

- ❖ What needs to be done differently, from the start, if I want to work dialogically?
- ❖ How can I avoid falling back onto the well paved roads of the knowing, expert stance?
- ❖ How can I smoothly negotiate and contract from a dialogic, ‘not knowing’ stance, with results-driven individuals?

This book can guide your entry process by helping you understand what is needed and why throughout the entry and contracting stages of a generative dialogic process. It is my theory of practices for how to prepare leaders and members to successfully engage in a dialogic and emergent process aimed at addressing a complex problem with seemingly no easy answers.

This book offers ways you can be, think and do dialogic work as a person and an organization development practitioner. This dialogic and emergent way is reflected in three ways: many stories from my personal practice of using dialogic processes in various organizational systems, descriptions of actual step by step guidance for action, and in the conceptual working model and underpinning of my Dialogic OD work.

For 45 years I have worked as an external organization development (OD) consultant. In the last 25 I have primarily worked with dialogic large group methodologies, from a dialogic mindset (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). My practice is mainly in **large scale** whole system process interventions in situations of confusion when leaders are seeking an answer to a complex burning issue. (Comment: when I use the same mindset, skills, theory and principles in limited scale it works effectively as well). Most of my work is done within **limited time frame** of 3-6 months. My clients are high tech industry, government, military, communities and cross sector initiatives at local, national and international level. My experience has taught me that dialogic processes can be valuable and fruitful in any situation where people are facing a real burning issue with multiple stakeholders and have no simple answer. Working with the whole system in a limited/short time span on a burning issue is an intensifier and accelerator of the process.

If ever we needed proof that life is becoming more and more unpredictable; more Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA), the COVID-19 pandemic and the turbulence it brought into the world has turned this idea into visceral knowing. It seems

we are all in a never-ending beginning - as soon as you feel you have a grip on the story, you are back to stage one. Major changes, turbulence and disruptions have become the new normal. Nothing we did before prepares us sufficiently to know what to do next.

When we meet complex situations, situations in which we are unable to see any pattern of cause and effect (Snowden & Boone, 2007), our first tendency is to simplify or to familiarize the unfamiliar by saying, “this looks exactly like something I know”, to gain some ability to make sense of the situation. Without a coherent story line, complex situations are often narrowed down into a bi-polar story line: good or bad; for or against, either/or. By narrowing the perception of complexity, we calm our anxiety and get a false sense of control. The cost is - inadequate inquiry and ineffective solutions.

When a disrupted and complex situation meets performance-based, and results-driven leaders and organizations, Dialogic OD offers effective processes to meet uncertainty and navigate complexity. With a dialogic mindset we look at reality knowing we do not know. We use collective processes to orient ourselves and make meaning as we go along, while tolerating the not knowing and the never- ending beginnings of stepping with purpose into the always unfolding unknown (Shaw, 2002).

Why Beginnings?

Birth and beginnings hold the full potential of what’s to come, so some essential qualities must be present from the beginning.

This book focuses on getting started, initiating, because of the critical importance of beginnings in general and in dialogic, emergent, work processes in particular. Beginnings are essential to Dialogic OD both as formative initial stages of the work, and as a fresh, curious and open state of mind - beginner’s mind.

The initial stages of entering and contracting are usually perceived by consultants as “pre-work”; necessary and critical components, but not really part of the professional assignment. I hold the stance that any interaction we have with the client is an intervention. From the first hello to walking together to a meeting, the process of exploring, contracting – all. There is no pre-work. It is all interventions. In this book I will show how entering, contracting and readiness assessment are a critical and vital component in our professional work. They are the conception and birthplace of dialogic relations, climate, mindset and process. Everything has a beginning. Complexity research shows us that initial actions, beginnings, are fateful. As most of my practice is short term engagement, initial steps become even more critical because of the timeframe.

Our responsibility as consultants is to embody our dialogic mindset authentically in who we are as people and how we conduct ourselves as practitioners in the beginning and throughout the dialogic process. To succeed in transformative change, essential characteristics of dialogue must be present from the beginning of our relationship with

the client in our presence, conduct, process-design and contracting. By starting a consulting process in a dialogically embodied way, your client system experiences the distinct dialogic presence and mindset of Dialogic OD in every interaction. Being a dialogic person-professional helps generate trust and intimacy in all relationships, preparing our clients for the work to come. From their relationship with us, clients learn viscerally by directly experiencing a dialogic mindset and emergent process, rather than hearing and being taught about it. There is never enough time to teach all that is needed before you intervene. The more you manifest it, the less 'preaching and objections' you encounter. It's easier for clients to learn as we walk along.

What is in the book?

This book presents an elaborated dialogic mode of being and doing through the formative stages of the change process. It is for anyone seeking to bring life, generativity, engagement and joy to people and organizations; to navigate complexity, and to bring creativity and vitality to any human system.

This book is designed for **new and experienced OD practitioners** who:

- Find the initial stages of dialogic OD challenging and would like some guidance and deeper understanding on forming dialogic relationships with internal and external potential clients.
- Find it awkward to insist on essential conditions for genuine Dialogic OD process.

And for **leaders** who:

- Are sick and tired of hierarchal and linear ways.
- Doubt the suitability of 'expert models' of knowing in virgin territories.

The **first part** of the book is dedicated to the practical theory that informs and communicates the thinking about the practice:

Chapter 1 lays out the theoretical ground I am building on explaining when and why Dialogic OD process is useful, and how to work with the innate paradox of offering emergent process to result driven organizations.

Chapter 2 offers a working model, 'the swirling spiral model', which gives shape and name to the underpinnings of emergent, dialogic work. It lays out the sequence of widening circles of entering and engaging with the client system (spiral) and the energetic flow from authentic presence in beginner's mind to emergent outcomes in each one of the circles (swirl). Each entering circle resolves its main task and enables going up the spiral to another beginning that engages a larger group of people.

In Chapter 3 I describe why beginnings are so important in every process and how they are tied to emergence, generativity, and narrative, both as formative stages but also as a beginner's state of mind. In this chapter you will also learn about the unique nature of outcomes and endings in emergent processes.

The **second part** of the book presents the practice, step by step guidance for creating conditions for success, inviting vital interaction and evoking creative energy. These chapters are supported by stories from my practice, to illustrate how it actually happens.

Chapter 4, on readiness, refers to the pre-formal contracting phase of our work with the client. Here I describe what you need to know and how to engage with the client so that you both can discern the suitability of dialogic process to the issue presented, to the client and to yourself.

Chapter 5 walks you through the process of aligning with the Caller, the person who sees the need and connects us with the organization, and partnering with the sponsor, the authority in charge, accountable for the issue we are called to assist with. Since, in complex situations, the sponsor is the person(s) you are journeying with, looking for a path to generate transformation, special emphasis is made on creating a covenant relationship, not only a transactional partnership of joint interests, with the sponsor.

Chapter 6 is a comprehensive guide for contracting for Dialogic OD work, which gives special attention to doing it in a way consistent with the principles and practices of Dialogic OD. Contracting this way is uncommon to most people. Many find it challenging to establish both a formal contract and a psychological contract needed for successfully stepping into a generative change process, where the actual process is to be chosen together and the outcomes are unknown.

Chapter 7 concludes the practice part of the book by describing two more entry points for widening circles of engagement: the management team and a diverse stakeholders' planning team. This chapter reminds you to work with management keeping in mind that in most cases they are not used to dialogic and generative engagement of stakeholders. It describes the steering committee/planning team formation as a microcosm of those diverse stakeholders, and how they lead, co-operate, co-create and co-own the emergent, generative change process.

A concluding note offers how to start right away.

One last personal note about beginnings: as an emigrant to Israel at the age of four, I have been fascinated with beginnings all my life. The concern and worry of what and how will it be and become... the fresh smell of infinite possibilities...the whoosh of adrenalin coupled with the sweet sense of adventure... Yes, I am afraid. Yes, I feel vulnerable and exposed, but YES, I feel so alive and pregnant with potential! I know that not all of us love beginnings, I know none of us loves it all the time. But all of us meet them every day.

Befriending beginnings can be beneficial as they are becoming more and more our prominent reality.

Writing this book was an emergent dialogic process. Dialogue between me and my practice, reality and conceptualization and with people (most of them I acknowledge in the beginning of the book) who disrupted or challenged my habitual way of thinking and expressing myself. Sometimes it was pleasant and other times not so much, yet it was always extremely valuable in keeping the process of writing alive and emergent, feeding my search towards a fuller and more truthful integration.

I hope you find your experience with the book usefully disruptive and joyful.

