A report from the Center for Organizational Learning's Dialogue Project lays out a promising new way of promoting collective learning and dealing with lingering conflicts— in union-management relations, among urban leaders, and in South African politics.

Taking Flight:
Dialogue, Collective Thinking, and Organizational Learning

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I think there is a beginning to dialogue, but I do not think there is an end.

—PRESIDENT OF LOCAL UNION,
UNITED STEELWORKERS OF AMERICA

Commenting on the G7 Summit in July of 1993, former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban noted that the attending leaders "bring an extraordinary concentration of power, but their meetings don't seem to produce anything." His core observation: "Perhaps it's because each of the leaders is thinking individually, not collectively."

Given the nature of global and institutional problems, thinking alone at whatever level of leadership is no longer adequate. The problems are too complex, the interdependencies too intricate, and the consequences of isolation and fragmentation too devastating. Human beings everywhere are being forced to develop their capacity to think together—to develop collaborative thought and coordinated action.

This capacity is also rapidly becoming acknowledged as central to management effec-

tiveness. According to Alan Webber, former editor of the *Harvard Business Review,* conversation is the means by which people share and often develop what they know. He says, "the most important work in the new economy is creating conversations." In fact, some writers have gone so far as to conceive of organizations themselves as networks of conversation.

During a single conversation, a management team may navigate through a variety of forms of group talk, each with its own effects on the quality of the team's results. Unfortunately, most forms of organizational conversation, particularly around tough, complex, or challenging issues lapse into debate (the root of which means "to beat down"). In debate, one side wins and another loses; both parties maintain their certainties, and both suppress deeper inquiry. Such exchanges do not acti-

vate the human capacity for collective intelligence. Dialogue is a discipline of collective thinking and inquiry, a process for transforming the quality of conversation and, in particular, the thinking that lies beneath it.

What makes dialogue (as we are now defining it) unique is its underlying premise: that human beings operate most often within shared, living fields of assumptions and constructed embodied meaning, and that these fields tend to be unstable, fragmented, and incoherent. As people learn to perceive, inquire into, and allow transformation of the nature and shape of these fields, and the patterns of individual thinking and acting that inform them, they may discover entirely new levels of insight and forge substantive and, at times, dramatic changes in behavior. As this happens, whole new possibilities for coordinated action develop.

Our standard way of thinking suggests that coordinated action occurs when different people reach a shared agreement, then create an "action plan." Dialogue proposes that some levels of coordinated action do not require this rational planning at all. In fact, some of the most powerful forms of coordination may come through participation in unfolding meaning, which might even be perceived differently by different people. A flock of birds suddenly taking flight from a tree reveals the potential coordination of dialogue: this is movement all at once, a wholeness and listening together that permits individual differentiation but is still highly interconnected.

At The Dialogue Project at MIT, we have begun to learn how to nurture this coordination in the context of diverse organizations and social systems—including a steel mill with a troubled labor-management history, an entire healthcare community in the Midwest riddled with competitive antagonisms, South African professionals and leaders, managers in corporations, and a group of urban leaders in a major U.S. city. This discipline, which involves reflection on ways of knowing, on language, and on the embodied experience of meaning, turns out to have exceedingly practical applications, and suggests equally powerful applications for cultivating learning within organizations.

This article reviews our emerging theory of dialogue and reports on early evidence of its impact in practical settings.

DIALOGUE: A WORKING DEFINITION

The word dialogue comes from two Greek roots, *dia* and *logos*, suggesting "meaning flowing through." This sense of the word stands in stark contrast to what we normally think of as "dialogue"—a mechanistic and unproductive debate between people seeking to defend their views against one another. In dialogue, as we use the term, people gradually learn to suspend their defensive exchanges and further, to probe into the underlying reasons for *why* those exchanges exist. However, this probing into defenses is not the central purpose of a dialogue session: the central purpose is simply to establish a field of genuine meeting and inquiry (which we call a container)— a setting in which people can allow a free flow of meaning and vigorous exploration of the collective background of their thought, their personal predispositions, the nature of their shared attention, and the rigid features of their individual and collective assumptions.

Dialogue can be initially defined as *a sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions, and certainties that compose everyday experience*. Yet this is experience of a special kind—the experience of the meaning embodied in a community of people. All organizations, even dysfunctional organizations, are full of a rich store of meaning—it is what produces the commonality of behaviors across any complex organization, and what gives communities the power to torment and stifle their members. Yet often that meaning is incoherent, full of fragmented interpretations that guide behavior, yet go untested and unexplored.

If people can be brought into a setting where they, at their choice, can become conscious of the very process by which they form tacit assumptions and solidify beliefs, and be rewarded by each other for doing so, then they can develop a common strength and capability for working and creating things together. This

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free flow of inquiry and meaning allows new
possibilities to emerge. This capability exists in
every community, but in most organizations it
is dormant. Dialogue allows it to be awakened.

Unlike most forms of inquiry, the inquiry
in dialogue is one that places primacy on the
whole. Dialogue's aim is to take into account
the impact one speaker has on the overall sys-
tem, giving consideration to the timing of
comments, their relative strength, their se-
quence, and their meaning to others. Dialogue
seeks to unveil the ways in which collective
patterns of thinking and feeling unfold—both
as conditioned, mechanistic reflexes, and po-
tentially as fluid, dynamically creative ex-
changes.

Dialogue is an old term. Some evidence
suggests that human beings have gathered in
small groups to talk together for millennia; to
claim this is a new art is a mistake. Indeed, it is
because dialogue is, at its core, very natural to
human beings that there seems real possibili-
ty for its use in modern settings, despite a
range of institutionalized barriers.

Dialogue vs. Consensus

In consensus building, people seek some ratio-
nal means to limit options and focus on the
ones that are logically acceptable to most peo-
ple. Often, the purpose of a consensus ap-
proach (the root of the word means "to feel to-
gether") is to find a view that reflects what most
people in a group can "live with for now." This
assumes that shared action will arise out of a
shared position. This assumption is question-
able. While consensus approaches may create
some measure of agreement, they do not alter
the fundamental patterns that led people to
disagree at the outset. Consensus approaches
generally do not have the ambition of explor-
ing or altering underlying patterns of meaning.

By contrast, dialogue seeks to have people
learn how to think together—not just in the
sense of analyzing a shared problem, but in
the sense of surfacing fundamental assump-
tions and gaining insight into why they arise.
Dialogue can thus produce an environment
where people are consciously participating in
the creation of shared meaning. Through this

they begin to discern their relationship to a larger pattern of collective experience. Only then can the shared meaning lead to new and aligned action.

For example, in 1992, the labor and management representatives from a troubled steel company in the Midwest realized that, if their company was to survive intensified competitive pressure, they would have to find a way to resolve intractable differences between them—differences they had maintained for more than 30 years. They turned to dialogue to explore those differences, to see what sort of mutual learning they could create, and to discover whether that might lead to performance differences in the mill. At that time, representatives from both sides could barely speak without shouting at each other or walking out at the first signs of anger. Less than one year later, the two sides have grown so accustomed to talking together that they regularly make joint presentations—not as "first management speaks, and then the union speaks," but as presentations made by a third entity that contains both management and union. This particular group has transformed an intense adversarial relationship into one where there is genuine and serious inquiry into taken-for-granted ways of thinking. It's significant that the allegiances to management and union have not disappeared. Dialogue, instead, has given birth to a metaphorical container—with their steel mill background, these people call it a "cauldron"—that is large enough to contain the allegiance to union and management within it.

In a recent presentation by this dialogue group to 80 managers from a variety of companies, one union participant said, "We have learned to question fundamental categories and labels that we have applied to each other." A manager in the audience shot up his hand and said, "Can you give us an example?" "Yes. Labels like *management* and *union*." The manager's face registered evident surprise. Perhaps, in his company, no one would have even voiced the fact that these labels existed, for fear of raising questions about "class" and "worth" and "status" that people would be afraid they couldn't confront. The union pres-

ident is articulate about what has changed:

> ... they hired me from the neck down. They never hired any of us from the neck up... I was given the opportunity to say and do and make things happen myself and voice my opinion. And you know, I didn't do too bad. I was shocked with some of the things that I actually said, that came out of my mouth. Things that we couldn't have done several years ago.

In another setting, we brought together major health care providers for a city—the CEOs of the major hospitals, doctors, nurses, insurance agents, a legislator, and technicians. The group was, in effect, a microcosm of the healthcare system. Within that setting, people were able to mutually inquire into some of the underlying assumptions and forces that seem to make this field so chaotic. Said one senior physician during a session, "I am struck by my schizophrenia: the difference between how I treat my patients and how I treat all of you." In another session, participants confronted the collective pain levied by the inhuman demand that they should assume responsibility for all the illness of a community.

In these sessions, this group has begun to inquire openly about underlying—and deeply taboo—subjects, such as feelings of self-protection and anomie among health care professionals, and how these feelings, themselves, are a key source of the counterproductivity inherent in the healthcare system; they lead to costly isolation, misplaced competitiveness, and lack of coordination. Dialogue produces insights into collective challenges that can alter people's ways of thinking and acting in their systems.

By focusing on underlying thinking, dialogue appears to be directed away from producing results. This perception, however, may stem from our expectations about *how* common direction and results are produced. One story, recently told to the author, illustrates the power of a dialogue-like kind of exchange.

In the late 1960s, the dean of a major U.S. business school was appointed to chair a com-

mittee to examine whether the university, which had major government contracts, should continue to design and build nuclear bombs on its campus. People were in an uproar over the issue. The committee was somewhat like Noah's ark: two of every species of political position on the campus. The chairman had no idea how to bring all these people together to agree on anything, so he changed some of the rules. The committee would meet, he said, every day until it had produced a report. Every day meant exactly that—weekends, holidays, everything. People objected: "You can't do that." He insisted, "Yes we can. We will continue to meet. If you can't be there, that's okay."

The group eventually met for 36 days straight. Consistent with our emerging theory of dialogue, for the first two weeks, they had no agenda. People just talked about anything they wanted to talk about—the purpose of the university, how upset they were, their deepest fears, and their noblest aims. They eventually turned to the report they were supposed to write. By this time, people had been drawn quite close to one another.

To the surprise of many, the group eventually produced a unanimous statement. They agreed that the university should gradually phase out the building of weapons. This was not a consensus process in the traditional sense, in that the dean did not seek to find common ground among the competing views, or insist on agreement by compromise. What was striking was that they agreed on a direction, but for different reasons. Some felt the laboratories were extremely expensive and administratively complex; others felt the presence of the weapons was morally wrong. An important lesson showed itself here: people did not have to have the same reasons to agree with the direction that emerged.

DIALOGUE AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

The discipline of dialogue is central to organizational learning because it holds promise as a means for promoting collective thinking and communication. Three factors point to the need for new levels of practical improvement on this score:

First, organizations today face a degree of complexity that requires intelligence beyond that of any individual. To solve problems in complex systems, we must learn to tap the collective intelligence of groups of knowledgeable people. Yet in the face of complex, highly conflictual issues, teams typically break down, revert to rigid and familiar positions, and cover up deeper views. One result of this is "abstraction wars"—people lobbing abstract opinions across meeting rooms, without exploring what the opinions of others mean. Another result is "dilemma paralysis"—people find themselves stuck: raising the issues leads to polarization; failing to raise these issues means ineffectiveness is likely to continue.

Second, most of the current efforts at fostering collective thinking and learning in organizations backfire. While all organizations are continuously learning, some seem to be supporting learning that maintains a dysfunctional status quo. Paradoxically, our very efforts to produce learning can be counterproductive. The Challenger disaster is one of many sad examples of how organizations (in this case, a network of organizations working with NASA) can learn systematically to distort information and block communication channels, despite rigorous attempts to avoid this. Carefully defined procedures and checkpoints did not stop people from withholding their doubts and preventing or delaying productive debate about possible dangers; they were following "official" protocols and unofficial face-saving rules.

One antidote to problems of this sort has revolved around efforts to promote learning by introducing "vision" and "values" into the daily lexicon and practice of managers. Yet organizations that use ideals in this way are particularly susceptible to creating behavioral rigidity; people make "ideal-images" of these same values, of themselves, and of their performance. These images devolve into superficial ideology and blind people to the numbing self-deception and enormous dilemmas they create for people seeking to live up to

them. And when organizations learn a pattern that produces breakthrough results, they often become locked into that same trajectory, staying with it even after it begins to head toward downfall.

The work of The Dialogue Project indicates that breakdowns like these are reflective of a broader crisis in the very nature of how human beings perceive the world and take action in it. To address this crisis, humankind will require radically new approaches. The essence of the crisis is based in the fact that people have learned to divide the world into categories in thought and make distinctions within those categories. Though these categories are a natural mechanism to develop meaning, we have a tendency to become almost hypnotized by them, forgetting that we created them. We act mindlessly, as if our assumptions and categories of thought were perfectly representative of reality. Our own creations, our thoughts, take on a seemingly independent power over us. Perhaps most striking is the realization that we do this collectively. Organizational learning will not advance substantially, it seems, without a collective discipline for inquiring into this subtle and yet profoundly influential domain.

A central and serious manifestation of the crisis of perception is the problem of "fragmentation" in thought, as described by Fred Kofman and Peter Senge in "Communities of Commitment." (See lead article in this issue.) We have divided our experience into numerous isolated bits that seem to have no connection to one another. As a result, specialists in most fields cannot talk across specialties. Nowhere does this fragmentation become more apparent than when human beings seek to communicate and think together about difficult issues. Rather than reason together, people defend their "part."

Yet recent developments in both quantum theory and cognitive science make strong cases to support the notion that perceiving the world in terms of separate fragments is based in a fictitious way of thinking. In quantum theory, the discovery of what Niels Bohr called the "quantum wholeness" suggests that there is an irreducibility of observer and observed when it comes to looking at small particles of matter. According to quantum theory, light can behave like a particle or a wave depending on how you set up the experiment. What you perceive, in other words, is not determined by independent external properties of "parts" of reality, but is a function of the ways in which you try to perceive that reality. At the most fundamental level, the work of dialogue rests upon an understanding that noted physicist and author David Bohm and others found articulated in quantum physics theory. As Bohm puts it:

> ...fragmentation is now very widespread, not only throughout society, but also in each individual; and this is leading to a kind of general confusion of the mind, which creates an endless series of problems and interferes with our clarity of perception so seriously as to prevent us from being able to solve most of them...
>
> The notion that all these fragments are separately existent is evidently an illusion, and this illusion cannot do other than lead to endless conflict and confusion.

The practice of dialogue focuses on uncovering and inquiring into the feedback loop between our internal interpretive structures (our tendency to name events in certain ways) which then influence the world and (eventually) our internal structures. It seems increasingly clear that our perceptions and thought can literally create our worlds. Bohm and Edwards give the example of walking down a dark street late at night, where one might see a shadow, suddenly finding one's heart pounding and breath quickening. Naming the perception of the shadow as an attacker leads us to behave in particular ways; when we discover it is only a shadow we relax. Our internal interpretation of an external stimulus produces a physical response. We constantly do this in our worlds, naming external stimuli in certain automatic ways and responding to them, all the while directly producing our own internal experience of them.

Finally, to understand the pervasive nature of fragmentation, it is important not to

think of fragmentation as a problem and dialogue as its solution. Fragmentation is a condition of thought, and dialogue is one tentatively demonstrated strategy for stepping back from the way of thinking produced by fragmentation and incorporating another way of thinking. Dialogue is an attempt to perceive the world with new eyes, not merely to solve problems using the thought that created them in the first instance.

Dialogue and Triple-Loop Learning

One approach to ameliorating these problems within the field of organizational learning attempts to help individuals and organizations examine and change the underlying assumptions, or the theories behind their actions. Instead of merely trying to improve along a particular set of standards or dimensions, "double-loop" learning (a concept developed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon) focuses on the assumptions underlying these standards.

An organization that *does* successfully modify some of its underlying values or standards has thus achieved a remarkable result. The consequences of this can be impressive. The mini-mill phenomenon in the American steel industry is one example: an industry based on large scale integrated mills has been transformed by powerful competition and now accepts a premise that would have not have been considered 15 years ago: that success and quality can come from small, flexible mills. But the question remains as to whether such organizations have actually learned about the underlying reasons that rigidity and limited assumptions ruled at the outset. Without learning about learning at this next level, the cycle is likely to repeat itself.

Gregory Bateson used the term "learning III" to describe this form of learning about the context of learning. It could also be called "triple-loop learning." If Argyris and Schon's "double-loop learning" answers the question, "What are alternative ways of seeing this situation that could free me to act more effectively?" triple-loop learning would answer the question, "What is leading me and others to have a predisposition to learn in this way

at all? Why these goals?" Double-loop learning encourages learning for increasing effectiveness. Triple-loop learning is the learning that opens inquiry into underlying "why's." It is the learning that permits insight into the nature of paradigm itself, not merely an assessment of which paradigm is superior.

While this type of learning may seem abstract or risky, especially when people understand how vulnerable it might make them feel, experience has begun to show that it can be quite practical and actionable by managers and employees in organizations, and that it can have a transformative and creative effect on their lives.

THE THEORY OF DIALOGUE

To create an operational theory of how a reflective learning process—dialogue—can produce "triple-loop" learning, we began by drawing on the work of three key Twentieth-Century thinkers. The philosopher Martin Buber used the term *dialogue* in 1914 to describe a mode of exchange among human beings in which there is a true turning to one another and a full appreciation of another person, not as an object in a social function but as a genuine being. Psychologist Patrick DeMaré suggested in the 1980s that large group "socio-therapy" meetings could enable people to engage in understanding and altering the cultural meanings present within society—to heal the sources of mass conflict and violence or ethnic bigotry, for example.

David Bohm, with his understanding of the changing view of the nature of physical matter, suggested that this new form of conversation should focus on bringing to the surface, and altering, the "tacit infrastructure" of thought. Bohm suggested that as groups of people learned to watch and articulate the assumptions and pressures inherent in individual and collective thought, they might catch and alter their self-defeating and self-deceptive processes.

While each of these thinkers has stressed important dimensions of dialogue—Buber's emphasis was on "being," DeMaré's on cultur-

al meaning, Bohm's on thought—the development of a theory of dialogue remains in an embryonic stage. In our research project, we have been exploring ways of combining elements of these theories and producing dialogue in the world, examining its impact in action, and in so doing, extending the theory behind it.

To understand dialogue and its contribution to collective learning, one must explore the domain of collective thought, and in particular, the underlying processes that seem to govern it. This opens an inquiry into the nature of "tacit thought" as it is held by individuals and collectives.

Most people know how to ride a bicycle. Once you learn, you never forget. But trying to explain how you ride could cause you to fall off! Philosopher Michael Polanyi called this "tacit knowledge." You know more than you can say. Other examples include our knowledge of how to digest, and how (without consciously thinking about it) to follow the roads that lead to our workplace. Finally, and most importantly, our use of language is tacit—and collective. People who communicate share an understanding not simply of words, but of how to form words to make meaning.

As Bohm conceived it, dialogue would kindle a new mode of paying attention, to perceive—as they arise—the assumptions taken for granted, the flow of the polarization of opinions, the rules for acceptable and unacceptable conversation, and the methods for managing differences. Since these are collective, individual reflection would not be enough to bring these matters to the surface. And since reflection, by its nature, looks back at what has already taken place, it is innately limited for anticipating assumptions, opinions, rules, and differences that are only now emerging. The mindfulness embodied in dialogue involves awareness of the living experience of thinking, not reflection after the fact about it. For us to gain insight into the nature of our tacit thought, we must somehow learn to watch or experience it, in action. This work would require a form of collective attention and learning. Dialogue's purpose is to create a setting where conscious collective mindfulness can be maintained.

CREATING FIELDS OF INQUIRY

Dialogue is a discipline that conducts "field experiments"—i.e., experiments that attempt to make conscious the underlying field in which different frames and different choices for action emerge. The notion of a "field" of influence can be traced to one of the pioneers in the study of groups and social interaction—Kurt Lewin. Lewin noted that human association could be understood as shared fields, with forces that could be measured and influenced. Though seemingly ephemeral, fields are obviously tangible forces: a current of electricity running through a wire creates, as a byproduct, a weak magnetic field that is invisible and yet has impact.

Our emergent dialogue theory and practice builds on this notion, claiming that shared tacit thought among a group comprises a field of "meaning" and that such fields are the underlying constituent of human experience. As these fields are altered in a variety of subtle ways, their influence on peoples' behavior changes too. In many cases, the social fields in which people live are unstable and incoherent. That is, there are many different "tacit programs" in motion, in conflict, leading people to hold images of the world that they experience as literally true and obvious. The images that one person holds might be very different from the images held by his or her neighbors. People also tend to defend these images, particularly under conditions of threat and embarrassment. This creates organizational defensive routines of the sort articulated by Argyris. An unstable social field supports defensive routines.

Based on his work in quantum physics, David Bohm has compared dialogue to superconductivity. In superconductivity, electrons cooled to very low temperatures act more like a coherent whole than as separate parts. They flow around obstacles without colliding with one another, creating no resistance and very high energy. At higher temperatures, however, they began to act like separate parts, scattering into a random movement and losing momentum. Depending on the environment in which they oper-

ate, electrons behave in dramatically different ways. The field in which the electrons operate changes.

When confronting tough issues, people act more like separate, high-temperature electrons. Their associations are unstable and incoherent, in the sense that they collide with one another at times. Dialogue seeks to alter this by producing a "cooler" shared environment, by refocusing the group's shared attention. When this takes place, people can spend time in high-energy interactions with reduced friction, without ruling out differences between them. Negotiation tactics, in contrast, often try to cool down interactions among people, but do so by bypassing the most difficult issues and narrowing the field of exchange to something manageable. They produce somewhat cooler interactions, but lose energy and intelligence in the process. In dialogue the aim is to produce a special, "super cooled" enviroment in which a different kind of relationship among the parts can come into play.

Traditional forms of inquiry focus on the nature of the parts of the system and their causal interrelationships. Following the analogy here, this might be called "hot inquiry." Dialogue can permit the emergence of a form of inquiry that requires a new repertoire of collective attention called "cool inquiry." Cool inquiry focuses people's attention on collective thought and shared assumptions, and the living social processes that sustain them.

The Practice of Dialogue

Dialogue poses several paradoxes in practice. While it seeks to allow greater coherence to emerge among a group of people (not necessarily agreement), it does not impose coherence. Beginning a dialogue exposes another paradox: while the process encourages people to have a shared intention for inquiry, it does not have an agenda, a leader, or a task. Dialogue does require a facilitator initially, who can help set up this field of inquiry and who can embody its principles and intention. But by deliberately not trying to solve familiar problems in a familiar way, dialogue opens a new possibility for shared thinking.

Dialogue in Action: Case Study in a Steel Mill

The case of the steel mill provides examples of all these facets of dialogue. The management-union structure that prompted the dialogue effort still exists, but participants can stand beside it with far more perspective. This plant has experienced the pain of intense downsizing typical of much of the American steel industry. From 5,000 employees in 1980, the largest plant now has shrunk to fewer than 1,000.

When we entered the scene in 1992, we heard stories about confrontations in which people had thrown chairs at one another or stormed out of meetings, slowed down work, and called each other names. Both union and management were skeptical about the possibility of genuine reconciliation—and vociferous about the lack of trust that they felt for the other. Competition from mini-mills, however, had forced them to recognize the need to cooperate. Consequently, they had recently agreed to a participative total quality improvement process, formed joint committees to solve problems, and set up an individual reward system for cost-saving improvements.

In our earliest conversations, held separately with labor leaders in one group and senior managers of the plant and division in the other, we explored ways each group was projecting blame for problems onto the other. There people developed an initial grasp of inquiry skills, such as how to detect an abstract statement and invite people to explain their thinking. We introduced the set of initial guidelines for our time together shown in Exhibit 1.

The metaphor of a "crucible" emerged in these conversations as a powerful influence on the initial thinking and connection of all parties. Steelmaking involves intense heat and pressure under control; this was an image for dialogue that made immediate sense to the steelworkers. Human intensity under control allows forces to be brought to bear and change to be wrought. Typically, however, there is no "container," or field, in which such changes can be made. The steel mill participants still sometimes speak of how a meeting got "hot," that someone was "burned." The heat analo-

gy refers to intensity of human exchange. One central concern was how to create a setting where the intensity of years of adversarial relationship could be transformed.

Eventually both groups met together. In the initial two-day gathering, people found that talking together was not as horrendous as they had expected. They began to relax and say what was really on their minds, expressing their worries, their concerns, their beliefs about the business. But they did this in ways that sparked old conflicts. Someone went "ballistic" and people began to feel that all was lost.

To manage this intensity, we asked people to step deliberately into their anger, and to step back from their collective (and hopelessly stuck) reasoning. To achieve this, we created a map of their interactions, then sought to "suspend" the map—to look at it without trying to fix it, but simply to see it together, and see its impact on the organization.

Together, we succeeded in seeing the conflict as a patterned behavioral response in the group's shared field, and allowed it to change. This proved to be a turning point: members of the group gained insight into (and to some degree arrested) familiar conflicts that previously they had felt helpless to change. This encouraged people to, as one manager subsequently put it, "play along."

Following this two-day session, the group agreed to meet once every two weeks in an open setting. At each meeting, the group sits in a circle, and each person is typically given a chance to say something about what is on his mind. There is no agenda and no effort to solve problems directly. Topics emerge. People learn to see how others are thinking and feeling about critical plant matters and about each other. They learn to inquire into the nature of the assumptions behind their thinking. This free flowing exchange has not only allowed new insight, it has altered fundamental assumptions about the union's relationship to the business. The union president, speaking about the progress they have made, put it this way:

> When we first started...the only thing that we ever talked about was the past: How you've screwed me in the past. How you've lied to me in the past. How you went from 5,000 workers down to 1,000. How you've promised us job security and right on down the line. You know, we don't hear that any more. That went away. That's gone. Now we're looking at the future....
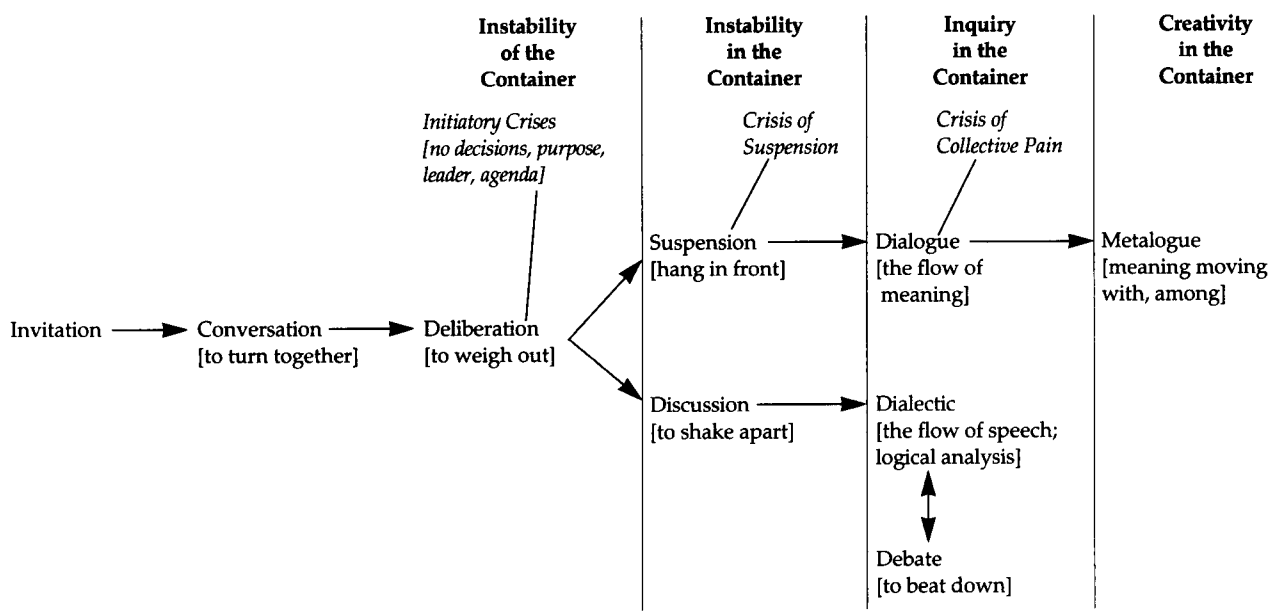
People report change of this sort across the group. A manager in one session said:

> I was very antsy about this at first— to dedicate that much time, a half a day every other week—I thought Lordy, that's a lot of time. But what we've done is to dedicate the time, to slow down and then create a space to listen to each other so that people can collectively learn the values of a lot of various people as opposed to the same people.

Perhaps the most dramatic effects of this are evident not in the dialogue sessions themselves, but in all other activities. For the first time managers and union personnel have been talking together and thinking about their business. This has evoked a sense of mutually seeing one another's opinions as valid and as part of a single system.

Over the months, there has been a remarkable change in the pattern of relationship and quality of inquiry among this group. After one recent session, a union man said, "you know, I can't tell who is on what side anymore." Initially the union men would never disagree with each other publicly, in front of the managers. Their story was singu-

EXHIBIT 2
EVOLUTION OF DIALOGUE

	Instability of the Container	Instability in the Container	Inquiry in the Container	Creativity in the Container
	Initiatory Crises [no decisions, purpose, leader, agenda]	*Crisis of Suspension*	*Crisis of Collective Pain*	
		Suspension [hang in front] ⟶	Dialogue [the flow of meaning] ⟶	Metalogue [meaning moving with, among]
Invitation ⟶ Conversation [to turn together] ⟶ Deliberation [to weigh out] ⟨		Discussion [to shake apart] ⟶	Dialectic [the flow of speech; logical analysis] ⇅ Debate [to beat down]	

lar: all the problems in the plant were the manager's faults, and any new program or plan was essentially intended to take advantage of them. Now, some months later, they openly disagree and inquire with one another, and they challenge one another to think together, instead of separately.

One critical factor in this group has been the openness of the CEO, who participates fully in the dialogue meetings. He has demonstrated a profound willingness to learn, and to admit publicly when he makes a mistake. As he put it, "The process became a method of exchanging thoughts and realizing that none of us have *the* answer, but together we might have a better answer."

LEVELS AND STAGES OF DIALOGUE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF COOL INQUIRY

Mapping the evolution of dialogue through time has been one of our initial research aims. We have attempted to articulate a practical

theory of dialogue by naming elements of this process and identifying the individual behaviors and collective skills that seem to compose it. A central factor in this has been to uncover the concrete ways dialogue requires the creation of a series of increasingly conscious environments or fields of inquiry. These environments, which we have called "containers," can be developed as a group of people become aware of the requirements and discipline of creating them. A container can be understood as the sum of the collective assumptions, shared intentions, and beliefs of a group. These manifest in part as a collective "atmosphere" or climate.

Exhibit 2 displays the evolution of dialogue. One could think of the evolving stages as enfolded within one another. In one sense, they are all present simultaneously, though one may seem dominant. Moreover, a group may pass through one level, then return to a lower level. Passing through from one level to the next seems to entail meeting different types of individual and collective crises.

1. Instability *of* the Container. When any group of individuals comes together, they

bring with them a wide range of tacit, unexpressed differences in paradigms and perspectives. The first challenge for participants is to recognize this, and to accept that the purpose of the dialogue is not to hide these differences but to find a way of letting them be explored.

Dialogue requires a container. To some degree in all settings, conflict and "defensive routines" will tend to make the container unstable. To begin a dialogue requires somehow altering these patterns of interaction in a system so that the group of people can directly observe them. In contrast to conventional intervention methods, this does not then lead to deliberate attempts to fix these structures, but only to explore them collectively in a skillful manner. The core of the theory of dialogue builds on the premise that the effect of people's shared attention can alter the quality and level of inquiry possible at any particular time. People can gradually learn to refine their modes of collective awareness to promote increasingly more subtle and intelligent modes of interaction. The process is very demanding, and at times frustrating; it is also deeply rewarding.

Dialogue begins with conversation. The root of the word conversation means "to turn together." People begin by speaking together, and from that flows deliberation. To deliberate is to "weigh out." Consciously and unconsciously, people weigh out different views, finding some with which they agree, and others that they dislike. They selectively pay attention, noticing some things, missing others. At this point, people face the first crisis, a decision point that can lead either to the further refinement and evolution of the dialogue environment, or to greater instability. This "initiatory crisis" comes because people recognize that despite their best intentions, they cannot *force* dialogue to take place. In their terms, they cannot comprehend, much less *impose* coherence on the diversity of differences of view.

For the steelworkers, the initial experience was of instability and overt hostility, as well as a gradual willingness to step back from the conflict. Said one manager during the first two-day session:
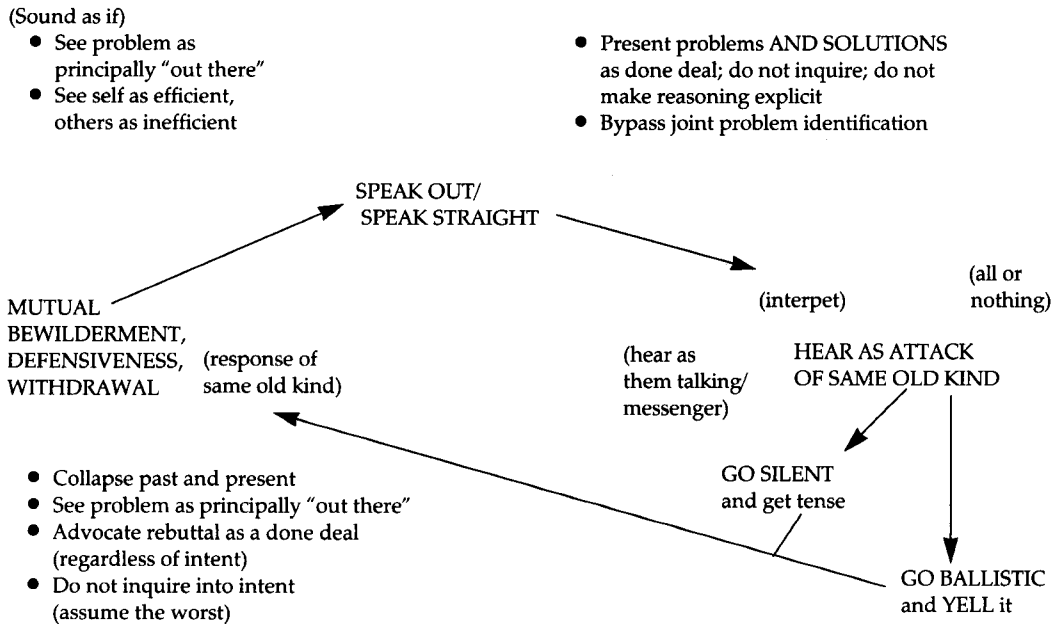
> I can see the pattern of the old pattern. I can feel it. "We want this and this. ... Well, no way can you have this and if we give you this, you have got to give us this." And that's two containers. That's us against them.

But gradually people recognize that they can either begin to defend their points of view, finding others as somewhat or totally wrong, or suspend their view, and begin to listen without coming to a hard and fast conclusion about the validity of any of the views yet expressed. They become willing to loosen the "grip of certainty" about all views, including their own.

2. Instability *in* the Container. A recognition of this "initiatory" crisis begins to create an environment in which people know that they are seeking to do something different from the usual. Groups often begin to oscillate between suspending views and "discussing" them. (The root of the word discussion means "to break apart.") People will feel the tendency to fall into the familiar habit of analyzing the parts, instead of listening for the incoherence of the whole. At this stage, people may find themselves feeling frustrated, principally because the underlying fragmentation and incoherence in everyone's thought begins to appear. They may, for example, tend to defend their views, despite evidence that they may be wrong. They may see their behavior as principally a function of how others think and behave, and discount the ways their own thought deeply influences their experience. Normally, all this is either taken for granted or kept below the surface. In dialogue, we deliberately seek to make observable and accessible these general patterns of thought and feeling, and more critcally, the tacit influences that sustain them.

People begin to see and explore the range of assumptions that are present. They ask: Which are true? Which are false? How far is the group willing to go to expose itself? At this point, people begin to feel as if they were in a giant washing machine. No point of view seems to hold all the truth any longer; no con-

EXHIBIT 3
A CONFLICT MAP

(Sound as if)
- See problem as principally "out there"
- See self as efficient, others as inefficient

- Present problems AND SOLUTIONS as done deal; do not inquire; do not make reasoning explicit
- Bypass joint problem identification

SPEAK OUT/
SPEAK STRAIGHT

MUTUAL BEWILDERMENT, DEFENSIVENESS, WITHDRAWAL   (response of same old kind)

(interpet)   (all or nothing)

(hear as them talking/ messenger)   HEAR AS ATTACK OF SAME OLD KIND

- Collapse past and present
- See problem as principally "out there"
- Advocate rebuttal as a done deal (regardless of intent)
- Do not inquire into intent (assume the worst)

GO SILENT and get tense

GO BALLISTIC and YELL it

---

clusion seems definitive.

This leads to a second crisis, namely the "crisis of suspension." Points of view that used to make sense no longer do. People feel that they can't tell where the group is heading; they feel disoriented, and perhaps marginalized or constrained by others. Polarization comes up. Extreme views become stated and defended. All of this "heat" and instability is exactly what *should* be occurring. The fragmentation that has been hidden is surfacing in the container.

In our healthcare dialogue sessions, at this stage, people began to talk about the long-suppressed "myths" different groups held about each other (physicians and administrators, for example), and the anger that they felt about each other. Though expressing conflict of this sort was traditionally anathema to "caring" people, the group explored it directly—not strictly as a set of interpersonal issues, but as a function of the collective images of one another.

Similarly, in the steel mill sessions, conflict "of the same old kind" emerged. Some

participants felt helpless and defeated, others went "ballistic." Yet they did not walk out. They stayed to explore the ways in which they had each contributed to the unproductive dynamics. The facilitators presented them with a "map" of their conflict (similar to that shown in Exhibit 3), then gave them a chance to reflect on it and consider whether to sustain the pattern shown.

Maps of this sort can be used as guides to correct behavior; in this instance, it was used to raise awareness and encourage responsibility for the shared field in which the participants were operating. People acknowledged that this was an accurate reflection of their actions; we placed a copy of the map on the wall. In the very next interchange, the same dynamic appeared again. Several in the group pointed (literally) to the map, and then to the people; it dawned on them and others that they were caught in the same back-eddy of the stream of thought. The dynamic changed in that moment for the group; it has not appeared in that way since. Polarizations still come up, but tend to be handled in a very

different fashion.

To manage the crisis of collective suspension that arises at this stage, everyone must be adequately awake to what is happening. People may then avoid taking an internal "vote" about any position—not panic and withdraw, not choose to fight, not categorize things as "this" or "that," but listen and inquire: "What is this? What is the meaning of this?" They do not merely listen to others, but to themselves. They ask: "Where am I listening from? What is the disturbance going on in me (not others)? What can I learn if I slow things down and inquire (to seek within)?" Another union man said in one dialogue session:

> At the last meeting, I was very motivated to go and find out what I thought were negatives coming up in the container, what I could do to fix them. And I think some other people did too. I used to have a very significant impulse to attack an issue. I would feel like I would have to at least get my position in, or there was going to be trouble. And I'm not having that impulse — hardly at all anymore....if somebody says something I don't particularly agree with ...it's almost like, so what?

This crisis is where skilled facilitation is most critical. The facilitator, however, is not seeking to "correct" or impose order on what is happening, but to model how to suspend what is happening to allow greater insight into the order that is present.

3. Inquiry in the Container. If a critical mass of people stay with the process beyond this point, the conversation begins to flow in a new way. In this "cool" environment people begin to inquire together as a whole. New insights often emerge. The energy that had been trapped in rigid and habitual patterns of thought and interaction begins to be freed up. People notice, for example, that they differ in their pace and timing of speaking and thinking, and begin to inquire into and respect these facts.

Our experience with a dialogue in South Africa among leading black and white businessmen and women, community organizers,

and educators provides an example. We found that people came to the point of reflecting on apartheid in ways that surprised them. They were able to stand beside the tension of the topic without being identified with it. Similarly, the steelworkers recognized that they had far more in common with management than they had previously realized or expected. And they realized that they could inquire together in ways that previously would have surprised them. In the healthcare dialogue, it was at this point that people began to discuss their "god-like" status and stopped blaming others in the "system" for the difficulties they saw.

Sometimes in this phase the flow takes on a powerful and undeniable intensity. Inquiry within this phase of the container is subtle; people here can become sensitive to the cultural "programs" for thinking and acting that they have unwittingly accepted as true. In these later stages of dialogue, the term "container" becomes limiting. It is more accurate to describe it as a kind of shared "field" in which meaning and information are being exchanged.

While people participate, they also begin to watch the session in a new way. One participant from an urban leaders' dialogue in Boston likened this experience to seeing the inside of their minds performing together in a theater. People become sensitive to the ways in which the conversation is affecting all the participants in the group. In particular, they can begin to look for the embodied manifestations of their thoughts.

This phase can be playful and penetrating. Yet it also leads to another crisis. People gradually realize that deeper themes exist, behind the flow of ideas. They come to understand and feel the impact that holding fragmented ways of thinking has had on them, their organizations, and their culture. They sense their separateness. While people may understand intellectually that they have had limits to their vision, they may not yet have experienced the fact of their isolation. Such awareness brings pain—both from loss of comforting beliefs and from the exercise of new cognitive and emotional

muscles. People recognize that their thoughts—in the form of collective assumptions and choices—create and sustain fragmentation and separation.

The "crisis of collective pain" is the challenge of embracing these self-created limits of human experience. This crisis is one that can lead to transformation of fundamental patterns of interaction. Areas in which wholeness is lacking become evident. As they are collectively observed, they change, freeing up rigidity and old habits of attention and communication. Moving through this crisis is by no means a given nor necessary for "success" in dialogue. Groups may develop the capacity for moving to the final level of dialogue over a considerable period of time. It is a deep and challenging crisis, one that requires considerable discipline and collective trust.

4. Creativity in the Container. If this crisis can be navigated, a new level of awareness opens. People begin to know consciously that they are participating in a pool of common meaning because they have sufficiently explored each other's views. They still may not agree, but their thinking takes on an entirely different rhythm and pace. At this point, the distinction between memory and thinking becomes apparent. People may find it hard to talk together using the rigid categories of previous understanding. The net of their existing thought is not fine enough to begin to capture the subtle and delicate understandings that begin to emerge. This too may be unfamiliar or disorienting. People may find that they do not have adequate words and fall silent. Yet the silence is not an empty void, but one replete with richness. Rumi, a 13th century Persian poet, captures this experience:

> Out beyond ideas of rightdoing
> and wrongdoing
>
> There is a field
>
> I will meet you there
>
> When the soul lies down in that grass
> The world is too full to talk about

In this experience, the world is too full to talk about; too full to use language to analyze it. Yet words can also be evocative, creating narratives that convey richness of meaning. Though we may have few words for such experiences, dialogue raises the possibility of speech that clothes subtle meaning, instead of words merely pointing towards it. I call this kind of experience "metalogue," or "meaning flowing with." Metalogue reveals a conscious, intimate, and subtle relationship between the structure and content of an exchange and its meaning. The medium and the message are linked: Information from the process conveys as much meaning as the content of the words exchanged. The group does not "have" meaning, in other words, it *is* its meaning. This kind of exchange entails learning to think and speak together for the creation of breakthrough levels of thought, and to know the aesthetic beauty of shared speech. Such loosening of rigid thought patterns frees energy that now permits new levels of intelligence and creativity in the container.

CONCLUSION

Our experience with the discipline of dialogue suggests that there is a new horizon opening up for the field of management and organizational learning. Several key elements stand out in this respect. First, dialogue is an advance on double-loop learning processes, and represents triple-loop learning. That is, dialogue involves learning about context and the nature of the processes by which people form their paradigms, and thus take action. Second, this field suggests a new range of skills for managers that involve learning how to set up environments or "fields" in which learning can take place. These environments are "safely dangerous," in that they allow people to risk while feeling safe in doing so. Third, this discipline stresses the power of collective observation of patterns of collective thought that typically speed by us or influence our behavior without our noticing. There seems to be leverage on this score to begin to explore deeply held underlying patterns of association and meaning.

Finally, dialogue is an emerging and po-

tentially powerful mode of inquiry and collective learning for teams. It balances more structured problem-solving approaches with the exploration of fundamental habits of attention and assumption behind traditional problems of thinking. Traditional modes of solving problems are clearly necessary. However, the same thinking that created our most pressing problems cannot be used to solve them. Unless we find ways of transforming the ground out of which all of our thinking and acting emerges, we are likely to repeat the kinds of entrained errors and produce the unintended effects we now witness. By providing a setting in which these subtle and tacit influences on our thinking can be altered, dialogue holds the potential for allowing entirely new kinds of collective intelligence to appear.

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The metaphor of birds in flight used in the opening section was first suggested by Risa Kaparo.