

Dialogue as an Organizational Learning Intervention: Taking a Closer Look at Psychological Barriers

Martin Maurer

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This paper synthesizes conceptual and empirical literature on organizational learning interventions based on dialogue. First, I attempt to delineate the concept of dialogue and to explain its relevance to organizational learning. Examples and arguments in support of dialogic learning initiatives are presented. Organizational realities and individual psychological dispositions which hinder such interventions are subsequently discussed. Even though recognized, individual psychological barriers are rarely explored in research and considered in practice.

Keywords: Dialogue, Organizational Learning, Psychology

The various models and metaphors that have been proposed to describe the field of HRD demonstrate that HRD draws on a multitude of theories from other disciplines including psychology, management studies, sociology, education, communication, and economics (McLean, 1998; Swanson & Holton, 2001). Swanson and Holton (2001) contend that economic, system, and psychological theory are the core theoretical foundations of our field. The psychological theory component of HRD, to which this paper attempts to make a contribution, is extremely broad and includes among others learning, motivation, and information processing theories (Swanson & Holton, 2001). The major contribution of this stem to HRD is its focus on the individual in the organization, but the emphasis in HRD scholarly literature on organizational and more recently national perspectives lead to the conclusion that this individual perspective has been pushed to the sidelines. Swanson and Holton (2001) also introduce other emerging foundational psychological theories such as the individual growth perspective, which adopts a more humanistic orientation. In their view, other theories such as “psychoanalytic theory, simply do not fit” (p. 103). Cognitive and behavioral aspects of psychology are considered as relevant to HRD, but I will argue that emotional aspects must also be understood because our emotional states greatly impact how we act, how we make decisions, how we learn, and how we communicate (Goleman, 1996). The individual psyche is the most basic building block of any system. Psychodynamic leadership theory based on Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung’s insights recognizes this insight in the context of leadership skills and abilities (Northouse, 2001). This theory suggests that leaders, who gained insight into their past, specifically into the dynamics of the relationship with their parents, are more effective leaders. Sofer (1972) contends that administrative problems are the “neurotic problems [of individuals] writ large in organizational terms” (p. 703). Along similar lines it has been argued that group or social psychology is fundamentally individual psychology (Bion & Rickman, 1943). Those who do recognize the individual psychological roots of organizational problems (Argyris, 1994; Brown & Starkey, 2000) usually avoid a deeper examination of the origin of these issues. Psychologists are clearly in a better a position when it comes to addressing this question, but given HRD’s focus on the human aspect in organizations, HRD scholars and practitioners cannot afford to ignore individual psychological and emotional realities.

A lot can be learned for instance from Alice Miller’s (1983, 2001, 2005) insights on the relationship between childhood experiences and adulthood. She makes no specific reference to the effects of people’s psychological make-up on organizations, but rather how our childhood experiences, in particular those of abuse and neglect, negatively impact the adult and consequently society at large. For example, the lack of genuine communication, that is, communication based on facts and communication that “enables people to tell others about their thoughts and feelings” (Miller, 2005, p. 177) combined with physical corrections that are often carried out in the name of good parenting, have been shown to result in defects in the brain (Schore, 2001). From these findings it can be concluded that a person’s ability to communicate with others and to learn are negatively affected by such experiences.

Learning has always been of central interest to the HRD profession (Marsick and Watkins, 1993; Russ-Eft, D. 2002; Cseh, Watkins and Marsick, 1999). It is in particular the literature on organizational learning and the learning organization that emphasizes the centrality of dialogue as a means to learning. For instance, Marsick and Watkins propose seven action imperatives that characterize learning organizations. The authors claim that on the individual level these organizations have a culture that promotes inquiry and dialogue. Similarly, Senge’s (1990) discipline of team learning, one of the five elements of a learning organization, emphasizes the importance of

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dialogue in organizations. There have also been several efforts to explicitly link dialogue and organizational learning (e.g. see Isaacs, 1993, Levine, 1994; Schein, 1993). Given that HRD is primarily concerned with promoting and fostering learning in order to enhance organizational performance (Yorks, 2005), it is crucial to examine the barriers preventing individuals from engaging in dialogue, which, according to the aforementioned authors, is a key element for organizational learning.

While the impact of individual psychological factors on organizational learning, and, more broadly, individual learning, are well researched (e.g. see Argyris, 1982; Lipshitz, Friedman, & Popper, 2007), my review did not yield any attempts to examine psychological factors that influence people's ability to engage in dialogue. Much of the literature implicitly assumes that dialogue flourishes once the proper conditions, structures and cultures are in place (e.g. see Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Senge, 1990). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to answer the following questions: What is dialogue and how does it relate to organizational learning? What are the psychological causes of people's inability to engage in dialogue?

Methodology

The databases used to identify scholarly literature were the Social Sciences Citation Index, ERIC, ABI Inform, and PsychInfo. Keyword combinations included: dialogue and organizational change, dialogue and organizational learning, dialogue and organization development, dialogue and human resource development, organizational learning and psychological barriers, organizational change and psychological barriers, organization development and psychological barriers. Based on a review of abstracts, articles that did not shed light on any of the two research questions were discarded. I also included books resulting from a university library search with dialogue, organizational learning, and organizational change as the search terms.

Dialogue and Organizational Learning – Conceptual Framework

To a large extent scholars and philosophers agree on the meaning of the term dialogue. Organizational learning on the other hand is a more contested concept (Lipshitz, Friedman and Popper, 2007). This review article is informed by both the literature on dialogue and on organizational learning.

Dialogue

For Gadamer (1992) knowing or understanding in the human sciences is not centered on the objective scientific grasp of an object but rather on coming to an understanding with someone in dialogue. In a genuine dialogical encounter each participant is not only willing to share knowledge with one another, but also willing to risk confusion and uncertainty about themselves, their own assumptions, the other and other's assumptions, and the issue at hand (Gadamer, 1992). Furthermore dialogue partners need to be willing and able to acknowledge that they lack knowledge, that they are influenced by prejudices, and that they need to listen to the other and be communicatively accessible. Hence, an important attitude that allows for this examination of our thinking and underlying assumptions to occur is that of openness.

These themes are also apparent in conceptualizations of dialogue by scholars who have applied dialogue based interventions in organizations. For instance, Isaacs (1993) defined dialogue as "a discipline of collective thinking and inquiry, a process for transforming the quality of conversation and, in particular, the thinking that lies beneath it" (p. 25). Edgar Schein (1993) stated that "dialogue aims to build a group that can think generatively, creatively, and most importantly, together" (p. 44). For Barge (2002) "dialogue is ... a collective and collaborative communication process whereby people explore together their individual and collective assumptions and predispositions (p. 168). Similarly, Ellinor and Gerard (1998) describe dialogue as:

Seeing the whole rather than breaking it into parts; seeing connections rather than distinctions; inquiring into assumptions rather than justifying or defending them; learning through inquiry and disclosure rather than persuading, selling or telling; and creating shared meanings rather than gaining agreement on one meaning (p. 21).

All of the above definitions imply that dialogue can help a group of people to establish shared meaning and understanding, and thus to learn together. Barge's (2002), Isaacs' (1993), as well as Ellinor and Gerard's (1998) definitions further point to the importance of surfacing individuals' assumptions and ways of thinking. This is a distinguishing feature of dialogue not found in other forms of talk such as a negotiation, a debate, a personal quarrel, or idle chatter.

Outside the realm of organizational studies my review also revealed the works of the Canadian philosopher Walton (1999, 1989), who focuses on argumentation and fallacies which has been applied mostly in legal contexts. He developed a typology of dialogues consisting of six types of dialogues: (a) persuasion dialogue or critical

discussion, (b) negotiation, (c) inquiry, (d) deliberation, (e) information seeking dialogue, and (f) personal quarrel. Walton differentiates the various types based on the initial situation faced by interlocutors, the main or primary goal of each type, and the participants' initial aims as they enter the dialogue. I found considerable overlap between dialogue as outlined above, and Walton's persuasion dialogue, which arises from an initial conflict or clash of points of view between a proponent and a respondent. The main goal of this type of dialogue is to verbally resolve this initial conflict and to arrive at some sort of stable agreement through an exchange of arguments. Walton (1999) considers persuasion dialogue successful even if the initial dispute is not resolved because it can be beneficial to both parties to bring their assumptions and commitments to the surface in the course of the dialogue. Walton (1999) further explains that in a successful persuasion dialogue the exchange of arguments must have the following five characteristics. These characteristics describe the ideal stances or attitudes that each dialogue partner must exhibit so that there can be a "genuinely two-sided and interactive argument" (p. 32), or, what Walton (1999) calls a balanced argument. Walton includes (a) flexible commitment, (b) empathy, (c) open-mindedness, (d) critical doubt, and (e) evidence sensitivity. Flexible commitment means that the proponent and respondent should stick to their commitments, but can also take them back in light of new information. Empathy refers to the fact that each arguer must base his or her arguments on the commitments of the other side, and must portray these commitments accurately. Open-mindedness refers to the interlocutors' willingness to consider the arguments opposed to their point of view, instead of simply rejecting them. Critical doubt means that arguers must be able to suspend their commitments when considering objections to their arguments. Evidence sensitivity means that each party must retract or modify commitments when presented with a valid and reasoned argument. Not all of these five characteristics or attitudes are exhibited in the other dialogue types described by Walton.

In summary, dialogue is viewed as an ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1981), characterized by principles, behaviors and attitudes such as a focus on inquiry, willingness to expose one's thoughts, willingness to reconsider one's point of view, a strong orientation towards the issue while setting aside differences in rank or status, equal opportunity to participate, honesty, empathic listening, and argumentative reasoning. Several of these dispositions appear to be most important and prevalent in Walton's definition of a persuasion dialogue, which is why it received particular attention in this section.

Organizational Learning

The many perspectives on organizational learning (e.g. see Shrivastava, 1983; Pawlowsky, 2001; Senge, 1990; Easterby-Smith, 1997), have contributed more to a conceptual confusion and mystification rather than to a clarification of the concept (Lipshitz, Friedman and Popper, 2007). I therefore avoid a concise definition of the term, and instead present a selection of the literature describing core characteristics of organizational learning.

Argyris and Schön (1978) describe organizational learning as the cyclical process of detecting and correcting errors. It is their contention that organizations learn when individuals learn, and more importantly, when they reflect on the organization's behalf. In addition to detecting errors or opportunities, productive organizational learning also involves the dissemination of knowledge and taking action by implementing new behaviors (Lipshitz et al, 2007). Similarly, Brown and Starkey (2000) conceptualize organizational learning as "a virtuous circle in which new information is used to challenge existing ideas and to develop new perspectives on the future and new action routines through organizational dialogue" (p. 103). These perspectives have in common that learning involves critical scrutiny of existing mental models and assumptions. Marsick and Watkins (1994) define mental models as "deeply held cognitive, value-based, feeling-fraught frameworks people use to interpret situations they encounter" (p. 356). According to Marsick and Watkins (2003), for organizational learning to occur, "rules, memory, values, the system of relationships or structure, and the underlying dynamic or pattern that characterizes the organization all need to change" (p. 136). This notion of learning corresponds to what Argyris and Schön (1978) have termed double-loop learning.

Double-loop learning involves critical questioning of our governing variables and assumptions when we encounter a problem or a mismatch between a desired goal and the actual outcome. For instance, if an organization changes its norms and policies based upon this reflective process, double-loop learning has occurred. Single loop learning on the other hand means to simply choose a different course of action without asking what has led to the prior action in the first place. One continues to operate within already existing plans and goals (Argyris, 1982). Single-loop learning does not necessitate deeper levels of reflection and questioning. In practice, double-loop learning is of course not always necessary, but the argument goes that the increasing speed of change of organizational environments requires organizations to be increasingly flexible, innovative and creative in order to remain competitive. Those organizations which remain stuck in their old ways will experience decreasing performance and eventually become obsolete.

Linking Organizational Learning and Dialogue

I argue that dialogue is mostly relevant for individual and organizational learning that requires a more critical analysis and scrutiny of current practices, assumptions and mental models, that is, double-loop learning. Single-loop organizational learning on the other hand does not depend on successful dialogue, even though it might benefit from it as well. For instance, a multidisciplinary health-care team charged with the task of reducing delay times for the hospital's patients will most likely be able to improve the process by studying the causes of the delays and identifying opportunities to speed up patient throughput. This can be achieved without scrutinizing team members' mental models and assumptions. On the other hand, if the same team is dealing with interpersonal struggles which prevent it from performing its assigned task, it will be necessary to identify the causes of these interpersonal issues. Their successful resolution can hardly be achieved without the team members' willingness and ability to engage in an open dialogue that brings the causes to the surface. As I have pointed out earlier, it is in particular the inquiry into others' as well one's own assumptions and preconceptions, which promotes individual and collective learning. In order to foster such learning experiences, good, healthy and open communication is essential (Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Thus, dialogue processes primarily serve as platforms of inquiry into existing ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

How Dialogue Facilitates Organizational Learning

In this section I provide more specific examples from the literature which demonstrate the centrality of dialogue to the facilitation of organizational learning. Some argue that dialogue is necessary when people have incommensurate worldviews with the simultaneous need for coordination among them (Barge, 2002; Isaacs, 1993). Multidisciplinary teams, which are very popular in research intensive industries, are a case in point. For instance, Schein (1993) claims that the increased need for specialization in a complex knowledge economy leads to fragmentation. This fragmentation creates subcultures, and these subcultures tend to produce their own languages or jargons, mental models, and views of the world. Organizations increasingly depend on collaborative efforts between members from these subcultures. Whether a group or eventually the entire organization is effective or not, increasingly hinges upon the quality of communication across subculture boundaries. Dialogue is therefore proposed as a vehicle for creating a shared or collective understanding and meaning, and this cultural understanding across subculture boundaries is viewed as a necessary precondition for organizational learning. However, what these authors fail to explicate is what exactly they mean by shared meaning and understanding. An understanding of what? Is it an understanding of our different points of view, views of the world, and assumptions, like in the case of management and labor disputes? Or, is it a clarification and thus a shared understanding of a specific issue at hand, such as agreeing on a strategy on how to solve a specific organizational problem? I think it can be both, but this needs to be further clarified.

Another argument for the need of dialogue in organizations is that managers and employees are often confronted with ambiguous, complex tasks and situations for which there are no set standards or rules (Lipshitz, Friedman, & Popper, 2007; Noordegraaf & Abma, 2003). Noordegraaf and Abma claim that in these situations, "stories and dialogue are important vehicles to manage ambiguity and to develop a shared understanding of the situation and required actions" (p. 864). Similarly, Argyris (1982) asserts that for nonroutine, nonprogrammed, and difficult organizational issues, a deeper questioning and reflection upon existing organizational and individual assumptions and values is necessary.

With few exceptions (Abma, 2003; Tee & Liang, 2005), most of the academic literature linking dialogue and organizational learning is normative. Empirical evidence of these arguments is rather scarce. Besides, these perspectives also fail to address the individual psychological component that influences our ability to engage in dialogue. Because double-loop learning is based on the premise of free and open exchange of information, inquiry and public testing of positions, and joint ownership of the task (Argyris, 1982), people's capacity for engaging in genuine dialogue is instrumental. After a quick review of other factors that might prevent dialogue from flourishing, I will specifically take up the issue of psychological barriers to our ability to engage in dialogue.

Barriers to Dialogue

In addition to the obvious but serious issue of time constraints (Marsick & Watkins, 1994), other reasons for the lack of dialogue to facilitate and foster organizational learning are structural barriers such as organizational departments and divisions (Ballantyne, 2004, Scheeres & Rhodes, 2006, Schein, 1993), cultural and societal norms, in particular individualism (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Marsick & Watkins, 1994; Tee & Liang, 2005), and organizational cultures (Marsick & Watkins, 1993; Scheeres & Rhodes, 2006). Even though organizations do emphasize such values as cooperation, respect, and empowerment, the lived experiences of workers often suggests the opposite. Employees

refrain from expressing their true feelings and thoughts because they fear negative consequences, such as losing their jobs.

Psychological Barriers

A few organizational researchers have grappled with the issue of psychological defenses to our ability to engage in dialogue. Most notably Argyris (1982, 1994), drawing on his experience and research in organizations, identified psychological forces which prevent us from being willing to question our own assumptions and motives of our actions. Argyris argues that on the one hand we do not want to put other people on the spot. However, by asking the tough questions, and by digging deeper, we feel that we might embarrass others. In the name of positive thinking and of expressing only positive emotions, the real issues are often covered up and crucial information needed to change organizational processes is suppressed (Argyris, 1994). I have found confirmation in my current research for this phenomenon. In my observations of team meetings of a health care team, I noticed that during the meeting evaluation at the end of the meetings, the team members always gave the highest possible mark. However, during my one-on-one interviews, some of them expressed frustration with how the meeting went, but decided to give the highest mark anyway in order to not embarrass the meeting facilitator, and to avoid having to justify and explain a lower mark.

Furthermore, organizational learning is prevented because of people's defensive routines (Argyris, 1982). Argyris explains that defensive strategies are particularly visible in stressful situations in which individuals tend to act quite differently to how they say they would. The actual behavior is driven by tacit assumptions and mental models, but only very few people are aware of this contradiction and are willing to examine their own assumptions and behavior (Argyris, 1994). Argyris (1994) contends that most of our actions are guided by the following values: maintaining unilateral control of the situation, maximizing winning and minimizing losing, and suppressing negative feelings in order "to avoid vulnerability, risk, embarrassment, and the appearance of incompetence.... It is a deeply defensive strategy and a recipe for ineffective learning ... because it helps us avoid reflecting on the counterproductive consequences of our own behavior" (p. 80). This last statement gives us insight from a psychological perspective as to why dialogue might not flourish.

Tee and Liang (2005) view dialogue as appealing but rarely observed in organizations. Similar to Argyris (1994), they maintain that the lack of dialogue in organizations is caused by the fact that people tend to suppress their true thoughts and feelings and maintain a rational, non-confrontational stance instead, in particular when sensitive issues are discussed. Tee and Liang mainly blame societal norms and organizational cultures for people's inability and unwillingness to engage in dialogue. They do point out that people might refuse to speak their minds because of fear of reprisal and because their basic needs of safety and security are not met. In other words, a lack of psychological safety can be an impediment to organizational learning (Edmondson, 2003). If organizational members do not feel safe to express their thoughts and opinions or to ask critical questions, it is hardly surprising that they will avoid taking this risk. Moreover, any kind of learning that involves significant new ways of acting and thinking is likely to be perceived as a threat because such an experience means a certain degree of losing control (Lipshitz, Friedman & Popper, 2007). For instance, learning a new language and interacting with native speakers of that language for the first time might very well be an anxiety-ridden experience. Argyris (1994) states that our strategies in dealing with emotional and threatening issues and consequently our capacity to engage in a genuine dialogue that might lead to double-loop learning, are created early in life. Unfortunately, Argyris does not address this crucial question in more detail.

Overall, this barrier to dialogue – individuals' ability to engage in such dialogic conversations – is rarely discussed in the literature, and if so, it is dealt with in a rather superficial manner. It is frequently assumed that people have this skill. In my view this assumption is overly optimistic and unrealistic. I would argue for instance that a person with low self-esteem will find it more challenging to participate in a dialogue. For instance, Abma (2003), who used storytelling workshops based on the principles of dialogue as an organizational learning intervention in the health care industry, reported that "safe and comfortable environments as well as the respect the facilitator shows are important, but do not guarantee participation by those who feel fragile and inferior. Unfortunately the author did not ask the question why people might feel this way. This, I argue, is the crucial question: What life events have led a person to acquire certain personality characteristics? Even though some organizational scholars do recognize the psychological barriers to our (in)ability to dialogue (Argyris, 1994; Brown & Starkey, 2000), very few to none have questioned the origins and reasons for our psychological defenses that prevent us from being able to engage in a dialogue. Given that dialogue is considered a key strategy in the learning organization, it is essential to address this question. Brown & Starkey (2000) contend that "improving dialogue depends upon finding effective ways to help individuals and systems clarify their assumptions and mental models" (p. 355). But how can this be done if we assume that individual psychological barriers may prevent us from doing exactly that? I should clarify that I am not referring to serious mental disabilities when using the phrase

“psychological barriers.” Recently, a friend of mine had a conversation with one of her co-workers about the weather. My friend, who observed the weather map in motion on the internet, could see that a large thunderstorm was approaching from the west. After sharing this with her co-worker, he replied that the clouds must come from the north because they always do. After my friend presented him with the evidence produced by the famous Doppler radar, his response was that the clouds will somehow make a circular motion and eventually come from the north. My friend’s co-worker holds a PhD. Eluding all concerns about scientific validity, my conclusion of this account was that his lack of education could not have been the reason for such an unwillingness and inability to acknowledge the facts.

I argue that our ability to communicate openly and freely, to open ourselves to what is unfamiliar and strange to us, to truly risk and challenge our current understanding of issues and opinions held is driven by psychological forces that are rooted in our life histories, most notably in our childhood and our relationship with our primary caregivers. By no means can I provide a comprehensive list of circumstances from early life which determine our ability to engage in dialogue, as our histories are unique, but there is irrefutable evidence in the psychological literature that explains how the lack of open and sincere communication in particular with our primary caregivers early in life impacts our communication behavior in adulthood (Miller, 2005, 2001, 1997). This topic would merit a separate paper, and I can only provide a brief outline here. Miller, one of the world’s leading researchers on the effects of childhood on adulthood, has demonstrated how physical, mental, and emotional child abuse can be linked to violent behavior, substance abuse, as well as psychological and physical illness in adulthood (Miller, 2005, 1997, 1983). Her definition of abuse however, goes beyond what most societies accept as cases of abuse. Miller also includes behaviors that are frequently accepted as methods of child rearing such as spanking, preventing a child from expressing negative emotions such as anger and rage, and any actions or lack thereof which deprive children of their basic needs for security, protection, love, and care. This is where I believe the seed of our difficulties to communicate openly and freely as adults lies. As I have pointed out in the introduction, the communication deficits with primary caregivers early in life have been linked to brain defects. We can consider this outcome as a worst case scenario, but at the very least, the lack of genuine communication with parents will leave traces in our communication behaviors as adults. For instance, children whose basic emotional needs were insufficiently tended to by their caregivers learn how to suppress their feelings and needs. In early childhood they were forced to suppress those feelings because of their dependence on their parents. Expressing them would have had undesirable consequences for the child, such as neglect, derision, or punishment. Over time, these individuals loose touch with these needs and feelings, and as adults they have difficulties to access those feelings and to know what their actual needs are (Miller, 1997). Because of their childhood experience they will continue to avoid expressing these feelings (for lack of knowledge of what these feelings are and/or for fear of reprisal). These emotions continue to exist but stay repressed. Nonetheless, there will be situations in adulthood where they surface. According to Miller (1997), individuals may distort facts and blame others for unwanted emotions. What many are unaware of is that their emotions are actually directed at their parents by whom they have been neglected when they were younger. Therefore, without an understanding of our own life histories, this is a vicious cycle that tends to repeat itself over and over again.

Overcoming Psychological Barriers to Dialogue – Implications for Practice

If we accept the argument of the importance of psychological barriers to our ability to engage in dialogue, it seems that HRD’s role in addressing them is very limited, and left to psychotherapists. However, HRD departments in organizations can play a significant role by helping implement policies that give employees at all levels access to such psychotherapeutic services. This could be done by providing financial help in the form of health care plans that partly cover access to mental health professionals. Support for such policies could be gained by educating organizational leaders of the relationships between psycho-emotional health, learning, and performance sketched in this paper. It should be kept in mind though that psychotherapy is not a panacea. Its success will depend on the quality and experience of the therapist, and even a good therapist might not be successful with every client. Nonetheless, it can be an important road to self-discovery because it can help individuals understand their own life histories and how they impact their present selves. Psychotherapy for organizational leaders, in particular top managers, has become a big enterprise in the United States. Many providers of such services choose to use other labels such as performance coaches or life coaches.

HRD professionals’ can also play a significant role by devising dialogue based learning interventions in skillful and creative ways might help to overcome some of the psychological defenses. An interesting application is the so-called paper dialogue (Tee & Liang, 2005). Paper dialogue is not an alternative to face-to-face dialogues but rather a precursor to it. In Tee and Liang’s experience, people were more open to discuss and share their feelings and

thoughts, when paper dialogues were used prior to verbal dialogue. The facilitator would start by asking the dialogue participants to anonymously express their thoughts and feelings with regard to a specific topic on a piece of paper. The participants would then drop their write-up into a central bin and pick another write-up from that same bin. They are then required to respond to or comment on someone else's contribution. They authors suggest to let this process continue for at least 30 minutes. At the end, the facilitator collects the papers and posts them on a wall and everyone is invited to go around and read the comments. Applications suggested and tested in practice include the elicitation of feedback from organizational members with regards to organizational policies, 360 degree feedback, brainstorming, and as precursors to meetings.

Understanding Psychological Barriers to Dialogue – Implications for Research

This review revealed that individual psychological factors, which either enable or prevent us from engaging in dialogue, are rarely considered. Authors that do acknowledge psychological defenses fail to inquire into the root causes of these defenses. It is often assumed that they are human nature, and that they can be dealt with by creating organizational cultures, structures and interventions which help ameliorate them (e.g. see Lipshitz, Friedman & Popper, 2007). But if in fact they are not ingrained in our DNA, but rather shaped by our past histories as suggested in particular by Miller (1997), then there is a strong need to identify the root psychological causes of our communication and dialogue deficits. For instance, organizational researchers could apply life history interviewing techniques to gain insight into organizational members past. Juxtaposing the accounts of a group people with low participation with those of a group with high participation during a dialogue-based learning intervention might yield interesting insights into the relationship between people's life histories and their communication behavior.

Conclusion

One of HRD's core competencies is to help individuals learn, develop and perform in workplace settings (McLagan, 1989). HRD practice and research has incorporated much of the knowledge about cognitive and behavioral aspects of individual psychology, in particular in the context of learning, but it has paid only little attention to emotional aspects. Individual and consequently organizational learning that requires a change of existing mental models (i.e. double loop learning) can hardly be successful if individual psychological defenses are ignored. For reasons outlined in this article, not everyone is capable of a dialogic engagement necessary to achieve such learning. The learned behaviors early in our lives might prevent us from engaging in genuine communication/dialogue with others and ourselves. Because individuals are the most basic building blocks of organizations, individual learning and change is the foundation for organizational learning and change. For many of us, this learning begins with an examination of our own histories, in particular of our childhood.

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