Looking beyond the Surface

Initiating »real« dialogue in organizations

In our rapidly changing world, organizations are faced with the need for quick adaptation to different kinds of development by ensuring appropriate decisions and fast learning. Although this sounds reasonable, many organizations seem to not be prepared yet for this kind of pace and valid communication.

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Recommended Reading

On Dialogue, Culture and Organizational Learning, Edgar Schein, Organizational Dynamics, vol. 22, 1993

Manual for Jim Rough's Dynamic Facilitation Method, Rosa Zubizarreta, www.co-intelligence.org/DFManual.html, 2006

Digital Opera: www.innotiimidigitalservices.com/download-app/

Managers of organizations are often caught in their meeting routines when answering emails instead of listening, not being really mentally present, withholding information and saving face. In addition, time pressure often creates a real dilemma for problem-solving groups (Edgar Schein): »Voicing the truth might lead to a quicker solution but undermine the relationship-building process. In a discussion or debate, various parties may see a factual disagreement as a personal attack, which leads to unsatisfying outcomes.« We met Ed Schein in September 2016 and exchanged our thoughts on the »organization of the future.« We agreed on the idea that open and real dialogue (about individual beliefs, perspectives, knowledge, ideas and so forth) is one of the critical success factors for the future. But what makes a good dialogue?

Real dialogue

According to Ed Schein, »All problem-solving groups should begin in a dialogue format to facilitate the building of sufficient common ground and mutual trust, and to make it possible to tell what is really on one's mind.« On an individual level, this requires questioning one's own underlying assumptions as much as actively listening to the other person. Some strategies can be used easily to avoid misunderstandings and get to the essence of a topic of interest: Simply asking clarifying ▶

questions or rephrasing are very helpful to get on the same track of conversation right up front. Likewise, talking about oneself rather than about the other person – i.e. »I would have needed more information to understand« instead of »You didn't give me enough information« – are useful communication strategies to create a fruitful dialogue.

On an organizational level, it is very important that the top management embraces the idea of real dialogue. Only if top leaders acknowledge the establishment of a culture of open communication as important and urgent can activities to get there be successful. Implementing open dialogue is a learning process for leaders. They act as a role model for others; hence, their part in creating a culture of dialogue is especially important. Last but not least, time and space for dialogue has to be created. How can we support open dialogue?

Designs to create dialogue

As we develop designs to support open dialogue in our daily consulting practice, we would like to describe three examples of effective formats:

1. Dynamic facilitation

This distinctive and powerful approach to group facilitation was developed by Jim Rough in order to help groups arrive together at creative, practical and elegant solutions to challenging issues. Basically, the idea is that each participant gets as much time as he/she needs to talk about the topic while all the others are listening. There is no direct conversation between the participants, but all of them talk to the facilitator, who takes notes on four pinboards:

— **Challenges:** The discussion starts with one challenge or question. Additional ones are added by the individuals talking.
— **Solutions:** All ideas of the participants to solve the challenges or answer the questions.
— **Objections:** Doubts with regards to suggested solutions.
— **Perspectives:** All of the information that does not fit into the other categories, e.g. background information, feelings.

The facilitator takes on a very active and consistent role in supporting the emotional safety, unique perspective and creative contribution of each participant. As all the others have to listen while their colleagues are talking, we see understanding that is much more real. After a first round, additional slots for further thoughts are offered. Interestingly enough – although there is no direct conversation between the participants, a solution »emerges« at some stage. And this is not the result of a discussion, but by truly listening and sharing thoughts and feelings, which is pure real dialogue.

2. Large group events

If they are set up in a dialogic way, large group events can be very powerful interventions in organizational development. On average, we work with groups between 100 and 500 participants. Depending on the stage of the development process, these events can be used for a) gaining information and ideas of the employees, b) getting feedback about concepts (sounding boards) or c) communicating the results and the start of implementation. Only if participants are given sufficient opportunity to really share their
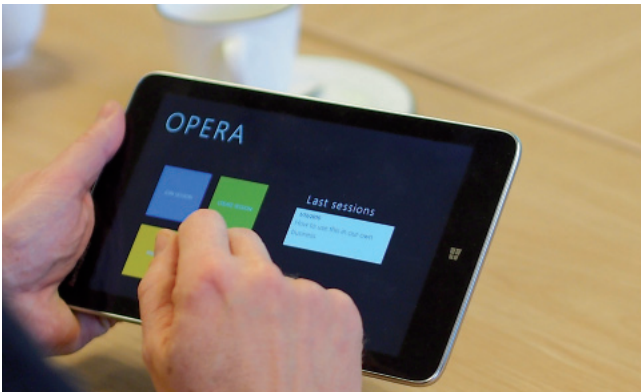
thoughts, ideas or doubts, will they perceive the event as meaningful and as a good basis for further activities. How can we achieve that? People are arranged in small groups of six to eight people around small tables. Presentations should be kept to an absolute minimum, as the focus should be on intensive dialogue in those small groups. Questions, remarks or ideas of the small groups are collected – either verbally or written down. Just to give an example: If we take option b) (feedback to concepts), we present a concept and then invite the small groups to discuss questions like: How do we understand what we heard? What questions do we have? What has to be considered for the implementation stage? Management will reply to some of the comments or ideas immediately and take the rest along for further action – management has to take all feedback seriously and inform later on about what has been done with the input.

3. Digital OPERA

As working in virtual teams is getting more and more important, we would like to describe an online tool as well, which should help initiate an efficient group solution process remotely: Digital OPERA. The method follows five steps which can be accomplished via different devices, e.g. tablets or laptops. At first, each team member formulates his or her own suggestions on a certain topic/question. Then, an online facilitator arranges participants in pairs. The duos discuss their ideas and agree on the most important suggestions. After that step, the suggestions are made visible to all participants. In the explanation phase, clarifying questions can be posed and are answered by the according pair. Afterwards, a ranking is done – every duo chooses the most important suggestions, which are listed later

on according to the number of votes; the ones not chosen by any pair are excluded from the further process. Finally, the remaining suggestions are arranged – the participants commonly organize them into topics. Based on this, further actions can be developed.

All of the formats described provide a clear structure (physical/virtual space, time frame) for dialogue and all of the participants are given the opportunity to share their thoughts with each other. These aspects are important when initiating dialogue in organizations. Although enabling real dialogue in organizations can be hard work, it is worth the effort because a collective organizational learning process can be triggered – and your organization will be ready to meet further challenges. ●

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»If problem solving and conflict resolution in groups is increasingly important in our complex world, then the skill of dialogue becomes one of the most fundamental of human skills.«

Edgar Schein