Navigating Complexity
Shay Ben Yosef, Ph.D.
Consultant and Facilitator

ניווט במורכבות
ד"ר שי בן יוסף
יועץ ומנחה

Purposeful Discourse in Large Groups

Dr. Shay Ben Yosef

It is in the nature of complex issues to involve numerous stakeholders who represent a wide range of interests, approaches and positions. The interfaces between the stakeholders can become an expanse of opportunities for the creation of a "whole that is greater than the sum of all its parts (Gharajedaghi 2006). In many cases, that is precisely where the point of failure that endangers the systemic capability lies.

In the last decade, a variety of methods has developed to enable the management of group discussion involving many dozens, hundreds and even thousands of participants. These discussions make it possible to exploit the **wisdom of crowds** (Surowiecki 2004). Talks that include "the whole system in the room" improve the ability of organizations to obtain a **significant improvement within a short time** (Weisbord & Janoff 2010). These "talks" can be held face to face using digital media, both simultaneously as well as a-synchronically. This can enable leaders, organizations, policy makers and ordinary citizens to create a "**value network**," that integrates the crowd wisdom and performance capabilities of numerous stakeholders.

Dialogic approach

In the summer of 2003, the airspace of the United States became excessively overcrowded. The aviation authorities identified "traffic jams" that could place passengers' safety at risk. It was realized that the procedures used to allocate flight paths and flight control, which had been satisfactory for decades, were no longer suitable for the complexity of 21st-century airspace. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) now faced three options: The first was to wait and hope for the best and then when a disaster ultimately occurred, to identify those to blame; the second was to pass the responsibility on to a team of experts who would study the problem and submit recommendations. The leaders of the FAA, however, decided on a third option, one less standard. In early 2004, the FAA convened a meeting of representatives of all the airlines, large and small, the US military, private pilots' organizations, airline-pilots associations and flight controllers and many others. The purpose was to hold a dialogue among all the various stakeholders in order to contend with the challenge of the increasingly overcrowded skies. After eighteen hours of meetings, the principles for new regulations for the allocations of flight paths and dealing with the excessive air traffic had been formulated. In the summer of 2004, the air traffic in the United States further increased, but this time it was properly controlled according to the new regulations. **Dialogic approaches make it possible to bring the whole system into a room and hold a purposeful multi-participant discourse to advance integrated coping with the increasing complexities of organizations and action environments.**

The traditional methods for organizational development are based on the assumption that managers and/or outside experts can formulate an assessment of the system and accordingly produce effective meanings and recommendations. The more complex the systems, the more skepticism one finds in regard to the effectiveness of this method (Bushe & Marshak 2009). In recent decades, we have seen the development of an understanding that the ability of the system to function in a challenging environment is largely based on the quality of its internal and external communications (Lohman 1995; Bar Yam 2003). The dialogic approach takes the view that the central contribution of managers and advisers in a complex situation is in their ability to create conditions for better communications between all the stakeholders (Snowdon & Boone 2007).

The dialogic approach vs. the diagnostic approach (based on Bushe & Marshak 2009:357)

	Diagnostic and treatment approach	Dialogic approach
Influential approaches	Classic science, positivism, modernity	Interpretive approach Social structuring, postmodernism, critical
Attitude towards reality	- Reality is an objective fact - There is only one reality - One may learn the truth about reality via rational and analytic means	- Society structures the picture of reality - There are many different "realities" - The "truth" is a quality that emerges from reality - The picture of reality is open to discussion in a process involving power relations
How to generate change	- Usually technologically - Collecting and analyzing data and goal-oriented planning lead to implementation - Change can be planned and managed - Change can be localized, linear and goal oriented	- Change is usually the product of dialogue and argument - The creation of an inclusive space and process that encourages creativity leads to change - Change can be encouraged, but it is essentially the product of self-organization - Change can be continuous and/or cyclical
Focus of change	Emphasis on changing behaviors. What do people do?	Emphasis on changing thinking patterns. What do people think?

The basic principle of the dialogic approach is the ability to convene "the whole system in the room" and enable a purposeful discussion to contend with a shared challenge (Weisbrod & Janoff 2007). In order to implement this principle, the past decades have seen the development of a wide variety of methods involving purposeful multi-participant discourses.

Leading principals of purposeful multi-participant discourse:

1. **Participation** – All those who wish to participate, people from a wide variety of groups, organizations, ages, interests can be included in a shared process that removes barriers and flattens hierarchies.

2. **Self-reliance** – Work methods with large groups enable and encourage self-organization. The participants are invited to take responsibility and leadership to advance those interests that are important to them.

3. **Complex systemic approach** – Work with large groups is based on the convening of "the whole system in the room," shared observation of the whole, systemic thinking, the integration of various stakeholders in the planning and implementing processes.

4. **Dialogue** – Work with large groups invites meaningful dialogue among the participants, including at times of dispute and rivalry.

5. **Driving change** – Work with large groups generally reverberates quite powerfully among the public. People and groups whose voices are not usually heard are now heard very clearly. This creates opportunities to generate change.

6. **Applicability** – Work with large groups is not an exercise in group dynamics or a space to release tensions and vent. It is directed and succeeds in bringing about real outcomes based on the aggregations of crowd wisdom, willpower and organizing ability.

General information about work with large groups[1]

1.   Peggy Holman, Tom Devane, Steven Cady – *The Change Handbook* – a very comprehensive description of the methods involving large groups by the leading experts in the field.

2.   Peter Block: *Community: The Structure of Belonging*; website: www. peterblock.com.

3.   Large Group Interventions: Engaging the Whole System for Rapid Change – website: http://www.odpartners.com/lgi_article.pdf.

4.   Peggy Holman offers in-depth approaches for working with large communities and groups – website: http://peggyholman.com.

A repertoire of methods for working with large groups

Open-Space Technology

In the "open-space" method, the participants gather to discuss a "burning" issue. They set a timetable and hold an open, creative and surprising discussion, formulate recommendations and initiatives to effectively contend with their shared challenge.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry is a process that makes it possible to identify extraordinary success stories and through them, develop "keys to success" in the face of complex challenges. All this is done in a positive atmosphere while deepening the interpersonal connection among the participants.

Using information technology

Various technological methods make it possible to hold an online public discourse, raise ideas and initiatives, write shared documents, vote and organize for action. See for example these sites: http://participedia.net/organizations/idemos; Hakaveret; Wiscom.

---

[1] More detail on the some of the methods can be found on my website: www.shayby.co.il. I would be happy to offer personal assistance. My email is: shayby1@gmail.com.

CrowdSourcing

This involves the participation of the general public and uses technological means to create a shared value.

[Change Lab, U Process](#)

This is used to generate a breakthrough in the face of significant challenges in a complex system. In the context of this method, a group representing the stakeholders gathers, studies the subject together, designs possible scenarios, identifies creative solutions and designs sample action plans together.

Organizational Kaleidoscope

This method, developed by Tova Averbuch and Avner Haramati, enables a discourse from different perspectives based on "case studies" of a designated subject, with the participation of the audience. Details at [Tovaconsulting](#).

[World Café](#)

World Café is a method of convening that enables numerous participants to hold serious discussions within a short timeframe on shared topics. It has been proven to be an effective method for opening conferences and as an introduction to strategic thinking processes.

[The Art of Hosting](#)

The Art of Hosting is a method that makes it possible to heal relationships that have been harmed and create new ones. It opens possibilities for leadership and for taking responsibility in guiding others.

[Future Search](#)

Future Search convene s interest groups for a two-day workshop to plan guidelines for a shared future.