



DIALOGIC DECISION-MAKING in an organisational context

A developmental educational course recognised by the
Academy of Professional Dialogue

PARTICIPANT FIELD GUIDE



Academy of Professional Dialogue
accredited course



DIALOGUE PUBLICATIONS

The Firs
The Square
Chipping Campden
Glos GL55 6AL
UK

First Published in the UK by Dialogue Publications 2023

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Typeset by Ventures in Design

ISBN: 978-1-7399911-7-3

www.aofpd.org

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THE ACADEMY OF PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE

The Academy of Professional Dialogue is an educational non-profit charity established in 2016 to make Professional Dialogue available for the benefit of society. Every year the Academy convenes an international conference under the title ***The World Needs Dialogue!*** and publishes accounts of work by its members. The Academy's certificated courses and accredited programmes provide the opportunity to discover the remarkable value of Professional Dialogue in the workplace, and the benefits that the practice of Professional Dialogue offers to an individual's career and private life.

EDUCATIONAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL

The Academy's courses and programmes are co-facilitated by Accredited Professional Dialogue Practitioners, supporting proven educational learning. They are developmental in design, providing insightful frameworks and ways of thinking that enable ongoing first-hand learning for many years after participating in the course or programme.

WHO WOULD BENEFIT FROM THIS COURSE?

This course takes a practical approach to the process of decision-making, particularly in the context of organisations. Anyone working in an organisation will find value in understanding and then practicing a dialogic approach to making decisions. Similarly, coaches and consultants who work with individuals, teams or organisations will find greater clarity about how to help others in making effective decisions.



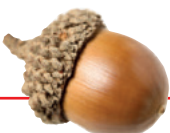
THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

The deliberate focus of this course is decision-making within the context of organisations because we live in an era of organisations. Almost everything we do, from birth to death, is managed or regulated by organisations – including our food, housing, health, transport, education, employment, money, recreation, and entertainment. Organisational decisions affect everyone every day. Organisations pay their staff to make decisions and act on their behalf, and the leadership often provides training and instruction on how to do so. This course in Dialogic Decision-making is a significant step beyond a *do and don't* set of rules, or a simplistic *five steps to the right decision*. It opens the door to a deeper understanding of what is involved in making decisions with others within the structure of an organisation.

A SET OF THREE COURSES:

1. DIALOGIC ENGAGEMENT
2. DIALOGIC DECISION-MAKING
3. WORKING DIALOGUE

We recommend taking the Dialogic Engagement course prior to the Dialogic Decision-making course, and completing both before taking the Working Dialogue course. The Dialogic Engagement course concentrates on how we talk together, placing Dialogue in a continuum of communication skills needed to manage ongoing activities and to introduce change into organisations. Working Dialogue is a structured and facilitated intervention pattern for making good decisions in complex situations with multiple stakeholders and accountabilities. Together, the three courses cover the practice, theory and skills for sustainable decision-making in organisations by supervisors, managers and leaders.





PART 1: CONSCIOUS DECISION-MAKING

The Dialogic Decision-making course has four parts. Each one considers a different aspect of the process of decision-making. The purpose of the first part of the course is to encourage awareness of how prolific our decisions are, and how little we may have attended to how we make those many decisions. We make decisions all day every day, no matter what we are doing. For example, in speaking a sentence, I decide what meaning I want to convey, what words will carry that meaning best and how to modify the communication depending on the response of those to whom I am talking. Some of this is done consciously, like choosing a particular adjective or adverb to emphasise a point, whilst I may not even notice how I form the rest of the sentence.

Similarly, as I drive my car down the road, I must make many decisions. If I am an experienced driver, most of these are done automatically. Whilst I hold the conscious intention to get to my destination safely, I may not notice how often I change gear, accelerate, brake and use the indicators as I travel on my journey. In fact, I may even overlook my destination and follow my habitual route to work, forgetting it is a Saturday and I am going to play sport, not travelling to work. And all the time I can be driving quite safely.

It becomes apparent that there is a wide spread. At one end are the decisions that we make deliberately and with conscious awareness, whilst at the other end are the many decisions that are made automatically without our noticing that we have made them. In between are those that we are partly conscious of needing to make, and then of having made them. This range is necessary for us to live our daily lives successfully. We assume the sidewalk is flat and we walk comfortably without really thinking about it. If we trip, however, we must take more care, notice the irregular flagstones in the pavement and be more careful about how we lift our feet as we walk.

This gives an interesting insight about the relationship between the conscious decisions that need to be made, and the less conscious ones that happen more automatically. Our conscious awareness can monitor the many automatic decisions by getting the 'feel' of how they



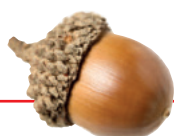
INDIVIDUALITY	RELATION	ACTION
NO DECISION	REFUSE	TALK
YOUR DECISION	DELEGATE	INSTRUCT
MY DECISION	CONSULT	ADVISE
OUR DECISION	REACH CONSENSUS	AGREE
EACH DECISION	UNDERSTAND	AID

are working, and only intervene if it is evident that they are not good enough. In this way, having a sense of how the whole is working guides us when more conscious and deliberate decisions may need to be made. If we are not clear headed (perhaps because we are emotionally disturbed or inebriated) and we lose this sense of the whole, it will impair our decisions. One situation where we can easily lose track of the way things are working overall is in organisations. We can easily find ourselves more attentive to our own area of endeavour and largely oblivious to how things are working in other parts of the organisation. In fact we may be trained and rewarded for doing so. That is one reason why organisational decision-making needs special attention.

HOW DO WE MAKE OUR MORE CONSCIOUS DECISIONS?

Accepting that many decisions are made 'on automatic', how do we make the more conscious decisions that we make? It will be somewhat different for each person, and will vary according to the circumstance they are in. There is no one answer, but we can find patterns in our decision-making. We may prefer to be proactive and leap in before others; cautious and prefer to wait to see which way to go; or reactively forced into decisions. We may be analytic; enjoy going with the flow; like to stand out as different; or stuck in our traditional ways of deciding. Each of these characteristics have strengths and weaknesses. It is not about good or bad, but how to use one's propensities well. The relevant patterns are the ones that reveal where we regularly succeed, and where we regularly fall short in making good decisions. As we become more conscious of what we do, we can vary our approach with significant rewards. If we act too quickly or impulsively, slowing down may help. If we wait too long and miss the opportunity, taking more chances may be called for. We are encouraging an enquiry into our own behaviour, in order to understand why and how we do what we do. This is far more helpful than trying to remember a decision-making technique to superimpose on our natural inclinations.

If you want to help others - as a coach, supervisor, colleague or leader - then understanding how people reach their decisions is essential. If you don't know how they make their decisions it will be hard for you to help them. Trying to reach a decision is a process that occurs over time and may involve a range of information, assumptions, reasoning,



Acknowledgement: P Garrett, J Ball



feelings and impulses to act or to refrain from acting. Once the decision itself has been made, these all become evident or accessible. One is left with a simpler rationale, having declared the decision, with which to advocate or defend it.

Talking with an individual about what they are thinking and feeling as they move through this complex process can be of immense help to them. Advising them of what in your opinion is the best decision to make, on the other hand, is far less helpful - since it withdraws attention from the other person's decision-making process, leaving them no better equipped next time they face the same situation. The key to improving decision-making is first-hand learning, where realising oneself what is happening is all important to the learning.

PERSONAL DECISIONS AND ORGANISATIONAL DECISIONS

Decisions that we make regarding our personal lives (rather than our working roles) are largely based on the needs, interests, comforts and discomforts of ourselves and those around us. We are often seeking to maintain or to change the relationships with people close to us.

Organisational decisions are made in relation to the workplace and have a different complexity. Our role means that we have some kind of contract or formal relationship with the organisation. It is not only our own voice and interests that matter, but also the implicit and explicit responsibility to represent the organisation. We must consider the organisation's needs and interests, and those of other employees, clients, beneficiaries and stakeholders.

Organisations are decision-making structures that organise and distribute power through decision-making rights and accountabilities. Put simply, we are employed to make decisions, and we are accountable for the quality of those decisions and the resulting actions. Having to speak and act on behalf of others makes it more difficult. There are many meetings and teams to address this complexity, as anyone working in an organisation knows.

Yet there is an additional handicap! Typically, employees do not actually know what others in the organisation are doing or trying to do. They understand and concentrate on their own area of work, and



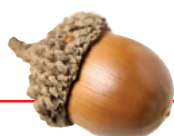
ACCOUNTABILITY	POWER	ACTION
NO DECISION	INFORM	TELL
YOUR DECISION	DELEGATE	INSTRUCT
MY DECISION	CONSULT	ASK
OUR DECISION	REACH CONSENSUS	AGREE
EACH DECIDES	DIALOGUE	ALIGN

the reporting lines generally discourage asking about or interfering in decisions made in other parts of the organisation. Calling parts of the organisation 'divisions' is a telling description. It is apparent that organisational decision-making does have some different challenges from personal decision-making.

WHOSE DECISION IS IT?

Because of their complexity, many team meetings are convened within organisations. Generally, their aim is to make a decision or a series of decisions. This is not always as easy as it appears and sometimes the meeting can go around and around without a convincing decision being reached, leaving a sense of dissatisfaction. We have all probably had such an experience as a participant or facilitator. One aspect of this confusion or dysfunctionality in organisational decision-making can be addressed with a simple framework called *Whose Decision Is It?*

NO DECISION	INFORM	TELL
YOUR DECISION	DELEGATE	INSTRUCT
MY DECISION	CONSULT	ASK
OUR DECISION	REACH CONSENSUS	AGREE
EACH DECIDES	DIALOGUE	ALIGN



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Confusion arises when people are not clear what their role is in the process. This framework emerged from work with a very inefficient new team that was making little progress. The team (who at that time were really a group rather than a team) always had a clear agenda that they followed, but they tended to argue without reaching constructive conclusions. As the source of the problem became clearer, the first facilitation step was to place a name (or names) as a lead against each agenda item so that it was clear who wanted it included in the meeting. Then the lead person was required to top and tail the consideration of their item. As they began, they were asked to say if a decision was to be made – and if so, what it was and by whom. Then at the close of their agenda item they were asked to say if a decision had been made - and if so, what it was so that it could be recorded. What a difference it made to those team meetings!

In the early meetings the lead participant's intentions had been quite vague. They mainly talked about what had happened since they last met, and occasionally about what they were endeavouring to do. This took the form of rambling reports designed to display how busy they had been, and essentially intended to impress their colleagues and the team leader. Update reports can be very helpful – but not if they take 80% of the meeting time and force decisions about other matters out of the meeting to be made privately later. The problem became blatant when, at the outset of an agenda item to which an hour had been allocated, it was apparent that it was for information only and no decision was required by the team. The solution? Instead, team members started to provide pre-reading or post-reading, and used five or 10 minutes to emphasise the key points that needed to be noted and why. This reversed the balance, and the team spent at most 20% of their time on 'no decision' updates rather than 80%.

There were other parts of the meetings where the team leader was delegating tasks or responsibilities to others. He was quite clear that they were to be determined by the team members to whom they were being given, and without further reference to him. These fitted the category of 'your decision'. There may be questions raised during the meeting for clarification, and any obvious gaps or duplications could be questioned, but then they moved on without an open consideration about how someone should do what was delegated to them. The reason



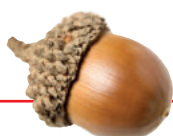
ACCOUNTABILITY	RESPONSE	ACTION
NO DECISION	INFORM	TELL
YOUR DECISION	DELEGATE	INSTRUCT
MY DECISION	CONSULT	ASK
OUR DECISION	REACH CONSENSUS	AGREE
EACH DECIDES	UNCOORDINATE	ACTION

the tasks were delegated in the team meeting was so that everyone knew who was doing what. The requirement was outlined, and it was the team member's responsibility to decide how to manage it, not anyone else.

It was the next type of agenda item that started to build a team out of the group. The lead made clear it was their own decision to make, and they were asking for their colleague's input. They were consulting their colleagues for their experience, guidance, or ideas – but they were not giving away their responsibility and accountability for the decision to be made. As others realised how to contribute to this kind of consideration, they began to participate constructively, without trying to determine the outcome. Sometimes a decision was stated during the meeting, but more often the individual chose to ponder on the matter further before making their decision later. The group matured as people became helpful to each other's thinking.

Beyond that, there were a few decisions that required the agreement of every member of the team. Originally, they had been treating every item as if a consensus was needed, but it was surprising how infrequently that was really required. Generally, 'our decision' was needed for major corrective decisions that had a material impact on everyone present. Their earlier meetings had been so filled with 'no decision' updates that the big decisions would end up being made privately between the stronger members who then presented them as a fait accompli. To make 'our decision' well requires time. It needs attention to what is needed by the whole, as well as the benefit or cost to the individuals. This is like changing hats. Instead of wearing the hat of your own part of the organisation, each person is now invited to wear the hat of the whole team or organisation - and to make a decision for the good of the whole even though it may be detrimental to their part. Going to a vote is rightly seen as a failing, although it may occasionally prove necessary depending on the constraints of time. 'Our decisions' are binding on all the team members, deepening the ethical expectation for colleagues to support their collective decisions.

Lastly, there is the category of 'each decides'. For each to decide how to proceed in their own area, there needs to be a good sense of alignment amongst everyone. That is found through open Dialogue. People began

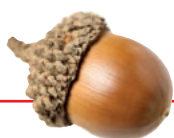




to learn how to listen to each other's situations and views respectfully, whilst explaining their own carefully and with the awareness that it was their best interpretation or understanding. People were not trying to win, or to back down. Instead, they sought a common understanding to which they all contributed. Gradually a feeling of common sense emerged about how to proceed. With this collective alignment there is a real team operating well individually and collectively. Dialogue is definitely needed in organisations and in teams.



DECISION/RESPONSE	FUNCTION	ACTIVITY
NO DECISION	INFORM	TELL
YOUR DECISION	DELEGATE	INSTRUCT
MY DECISION	CONSULT	ASK
OUR DECISION	REACH CONSENSUS	AGREE
BACK- DECIDES	DISAGREE/NOT	ALIGN



Acknowledgement: P Garrett, J Ball



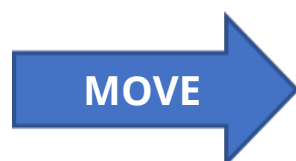
PART 2: DECISIONS HAVE A STRUCTURE AND A PROCESS

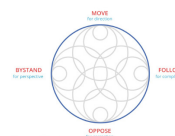
Few people realise that there is a simple structure and process to every decision. Understanding this makes it easier at a practical level to reach a decision, or to know why a decision is not being made. To consider this, we first need to look at the basic make-up of communication. This thinking is derived from the work of David Kantor, a (now deceased) member of the Academy. Peter Garrett and Jane Ball worked closely with him whilst developing the meaning of functionality within their Integrated Dialogue Model. His deep interest as a practicing family therapist was functional and dysfunctional communication.

THE ESSENTIAL *STRUCTURE* OF COMMUNICATION

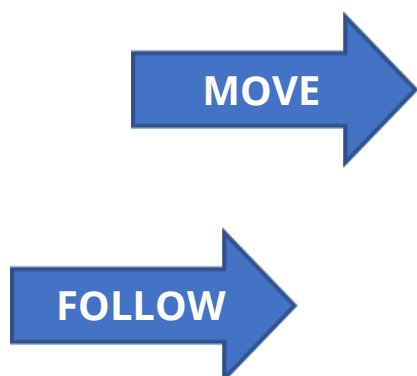
In this model, when we talk and think together there are just four actions we can make. By actions we are referring to the act of communicating, rather than to the content of what is said. These actions can be tracked reflectively after a conversation to understand what happened. Their greater value, however, is that they are simple enough to use live and be helpful in the moment when things are not working well, and people are not ending up where they are trying to go. The four Dialogic Actions are: a Move, a Follow, an Oppose and a By-stand. Each action does a different thing. The Move gives direction, the Follow gives completion, the Oppose gives correction and the By-stand gives perspective. Each time someone speaks they will either move, follow, oppose or by-stand.

A MOVE: When someone makes a Move they introduce a subject or a topic. This is an invitation for others to go in that new direction. The opening action made at the start of any conversation or communication will be a move. It could take the form: "Let's talk about..."

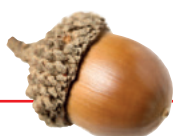
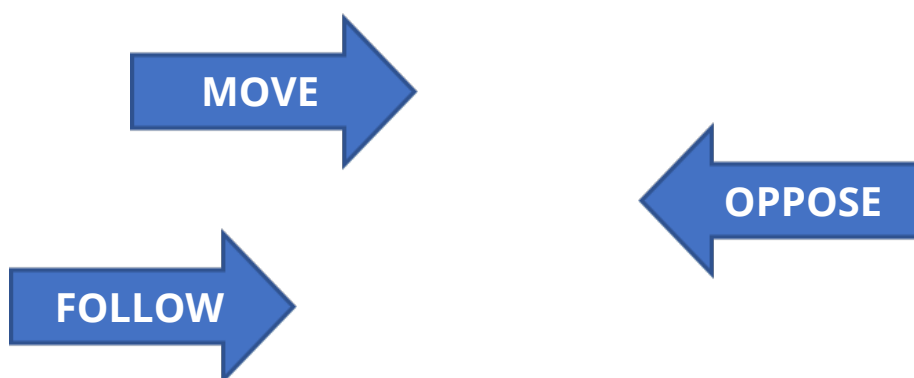




A FOLLOW: Responding to that Move and going in the same direction is called a Follow. This may be a statement of agreement, or it may expand on the matter raised in the Move. This may sound like: “That is certainly of interest and concern to me...”

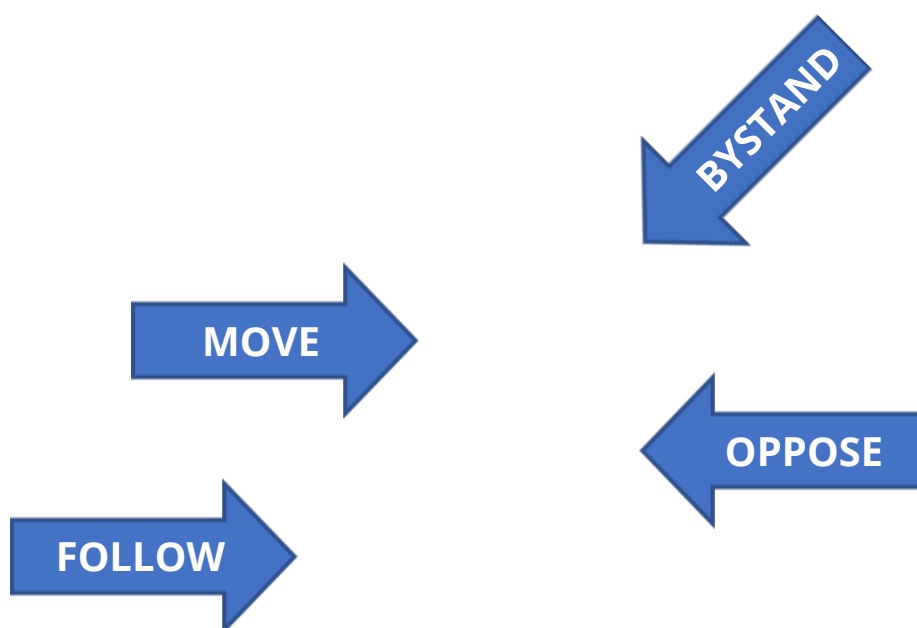


AN OPPOSE: Disagreeing with a Move and choosing not to go in the same direction is called an Oppose. This may stop the progress in the direction of the Move. It does not imply going in a different direction, just not going in the direction proposed by the Move. Perhaps: “We have talked about that so many times before that I am not prepared to do so again!”





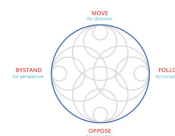
A BY-STAND: When someone steps back to a neutral position and describes the process or dynamic they noticed, or the sequence of the various Actions they have heard, then that is called a By-stand. A By-stand is an observation about what is happening. It does not propose going in a new direction (a Move), going in the same direction someone has proposed (a Follow) or disagreeing with a direction (an Oppose). Instead, the By-stand describes what has been happening, perhaps by recalling the sequence of Actions. This is particularly helpful if the sequence is a repeated one that has or has not worked well in the past. By-standing can draw awareness to the process and its impact, relevance or helpfulness in the current situation. Perhaps: "I notice that two of you often raise this issue whilst John then refuses to consider it."



THE ACTIONS ARE SPOKEN

There is a difference between thinking and talking. The Actions become meaningful to others when they are spoken. Thinking about any of the Actions but not saying them is ineffective. That is like writing a letter or an email but not sending it. Thinking things and not saying them, and thereby not making your thoughts available to others, is one of the main causes of dysfunctional conversations. Learning how to say what you are thinking in a way that can be understood by others is part of learning how to communicate better with other people.





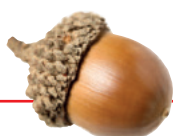
THE ESSENTIAL *PROCESS* OF COMMUNICATION

The process of a conversation or exchange between people is determined by the sequence in which the different Actions are made. For example, a brain storming session to generate new ideas takes the form of a series of Moves, each in a new direction. A repeated sequence of Moves then Opposes, however, is a different dynamic – namely a debate or an argument. The process of any verbal exchange between people can be described by the sequence of Actions involved. A change of sequence, and a change of which Actions are included makes all the difference. Politeness or courteous compliance is a Move and then a series of Follows. This sequence describes people agreeing in a superficial and perhaps a socially acceptable way.

THE PROCESS OF A DECISION

What about a decision? Described as a sequence of actions, a simple decision takes the form of a Move then a Follow. That is the most basic form of decision. It involves those two Actions in that sequence. “I think we are best to do X” followed by “I agree!” seals the decision between two people. It is worth noting that without the Move there cannot be a decision, and without the Follow there is no decision. If nobody makes these two actions when a decision is needed, they can be solicited. “Does anyone have a proposal for what we should do?” will encourage people to make Moves. This may be necessary because without a clear proposal (or move) there cannot be a meaningful decision. Similarly, to call for Follows, one might ask “Does anyone agree with the proposal that has been made?” It is surprising how often the decision-making process fails because there is no clear proposal (move) or no clear agreement (follow).

The sequence of move and follow is the essence of a command-and-control culture. It often takes the form: “This is what I want you to do...” and the response “Yes, Sir!”. In matters of urgent safety this may be appropriate and necessary. It may also be the case where there is the call for trust, respect or loyalty. Often, however, more of a process is required. A more carefully considered or rigorous decision amongst a group of people would involve all four of the actions, including opposes and by-stands. Opposes helpfully test the direction in which things are





going, perhaps because there is information that has been overlooked. By-stands draw attention to repeated sequences of actions which help or hinder the process. A more rigorous decision, therefore, begins with a move and ends with a follow or series of follows. In between are follows, opposes, by-stands and other moves.

A good supervisor, leader or facilitator can encourage more rigour in the group's decision-making. For example: "Before we finalise this decision, can you think of any reasons why it might not work?" That solicits opposes. "What would others say about the decision we are making?" encourages by-standing. It is helpful to take various views into account before making the decision, rather than encountering them after the decision has been made. Otherwise people may resent their views not being considered, and hearing them may necessitate a change to the decision.

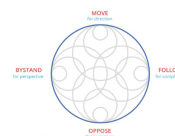
USING THE ACTIONS EFFECTIVELY: CLEAN ACTIONS

The Actions work best when they are clearly understood by others. Generally, the simpler they are the better. An example of a simple and clean Follow is "Yes, I agree with your view". You might choose to pause, then to continue with an explanation that develops the thoughts and feelings behind your statement - but giving the explanation whilst missing out the clean Follow is far less effective. It is the follow that is decisive. Similarly, it is only a Follow if it is spoken. If someone asks: "Does anyone disagree with the proposal?" and is met with silence, a decision has not yet been made. They may then say "Fine, is nobody disagrees then we have agreed to proceed", but that is not really true, as may later be revealed.

USING THE ACTIONS SKILFULLY

COMPOUND ACTIONS: When a speaker contributes more than one action at a time, it is called a compound Action. This can be very effective. For example, one might say "I fully support your proposal, but I do not think your method is the best way to achieve it". That is a compound Action made up of a Follow then an Oppose. It secures agreement for part of what is said (the proposal), whilst seeking to correct another part (the method). Similarly, one might By-stand then





Move by saying “For some time we have been talking about three different proposals at the same time, and I see that we are not making much progress on any of them. I suggest we concentrate on one at a time”.

PROBLEMS THAT LEAD TO DYSFUNCTIONALITY: STUCK, DISABLED AND SPIN

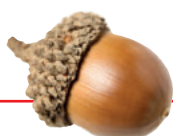
STUCK: It is natural for people to have one or two stronger Actions that they are particularly effective at. A problem arises when they make one action repeatedly or exclusively, and they thus become **Stuck Actions**. Only moving, only opposing or repeatedly following or by-standing limits the exchanges that are possible. The repetition leaves everyone stuck and frustrated.

DISABLED: When people cannot make one or more of the Actions because they feel **disabled** from doing so, the situation becomes dysfunctional. Perhaps nobody can oppose because of the power differences in the room, or nobody can follow because as a group they are too proud or arrogant. If nobody by-stands, unhelpful sequences will be repeated – “here we go again!”

SPIN: Actions that are simple, clear, and put across respectfully are easy to respond to honestly and openly. It is harder when someone puts a **Spin** on the action they make. A spin doctor is someone who makes something appear to be different from what it really is. Putting **Spin** on an Action makes it harder to respond, much like in tennis, where adding topspin or slicing the ball makes it harder for the other player to return it. An example of spin is: “Well if you want to put it that way, I have no choice but to disagree with you”. That oppose has confused who is responsible for what, making it more difficult to respond. The clean version might be: “I do not agree with your idea”.

A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

The Dialogic Actions are a developmental model. The aim with the Dialogic Actions is for people to develop the skills to do all the Actions well. The value of the Dialogic Actions is that despite your natural preference or propensity to use some actions more than others, you are



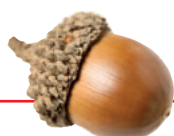
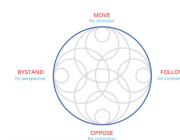


encouraged to learn them all and to use each of them where needed. They are Actions, not labels or identities. By contrast, a labelling model is one where you accept yourself to be a certain type and must live with only being good at some activities whilst learning how to manage not being good at others. It would make no sense to say “I am a mover”. That would be like saying “I am a forehand”. Just as you would say “I played a forehand” so in this model you might say “I made a Move”.

GOOD DECISION-MAKING

In summary, everybody makes many decisions every day, and when people work in organisations they are employed to do so. They are responsible and accountable for making decisions, and the Dialogic Actions are particularly helpful in this regard. A simple decision in this model is a Move and then a Follow or a series of Follows. That is an efficient decision, and in times of emergency efficiency is essential – hence the command-and-control culture in such situations. A more rigorous decision, however, requires all four Actions. The Moves provide the proposals, the Follows support them, the Opposes challenge to correct or improve them, and the Bystands reveal repetitive sequences of Actions that inadvertently may be interfering with the clarity of the decision being made. A more rigorous decision begins with a move and ends with a follow or a series of follows. In between are all four of the other actions. The additional skills are to make clear actions rather than adding spin; to beware of getting stuck by repeating just one or two actions; and to use compound actions to gain common ground whilst making more rigorous decisions.





Acknowledgement: P Garrett, J Ball



PART 3: STORIES MAKE DECISIONS

WE MAKE SENSE THROUGH STORY

To decide what to do, we draw on our understanding of the situation. Curiously, that understanding takes the form of a story. This phenomenon is so common that you may not have noticed it. If someone is asked what the situation is, they will tell a story about it. It is their version of what is really going on. These sense-making stories all have a past (what has happened), a present (what is happening now), and a future (what may or will happen). That is the nature of a story. Within that unfolding process, we make our decisions in the present to help to determine the future. By making that decision, we are determining what to do (or not to do) to affect the future in some way.

Although we may think we are making the decision, in large part it is our story that determines what decision we make. This is not problematic when everyone involved has a similar story from which they are acting. Then people will be reasonably aligned in the decisions they make and what they do. We can celebrate the diversity. It is often the case, however, that those involved have different stories or understandings that are at odds with those held by others. When people are acting from very different and conflicting stories, it causes trouble. It leads to misunderstandings, confusion, counter-productive activity, frustration, and perhaps anger.

ADVOCACY AND ENQUIRY

It is apparent that if we want to work well together, we will need to check the accuracy and validity of our own and other people's stories. To do this we need to distinguish between *advocacy* and *enquiry*. Put most simply, advocacy is telling, whilst enquiry is asking. Stories are told. They are a form of telling what we know that naturally leads to what to do next. It is our stories that are informing our decisions and telling us what to do. In contrast, enquiry is the way to find out what we don't know. An enquiring mind wants to discover more and to understand more. Enquiry is helpful where we have different stories about the same situation. We could ask: "What do our stories have in common, and in



what ways are our stories different?" Not knowing, asking, and wanting to know are different aspects of good enquiry. The stories may prove to be accurate, or they may be only partly accurate and benefit from the additional information, perspective and rationale revealed through the enquiry.

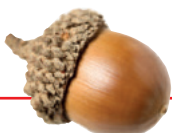
ENQUIRY AND ASKING QUESTIONS

Enquiry is a skill that is harder than it first appears as we are often conditioned by childhood experiences at school. There teachers ask the questions, and as pupils we are expected to find the 'right' (pre-determined) answer to any question we are asked. As a result, we tend to be more familiar with the focussed nature of advocating the right answer, and to be less comfortable with the openness and receptivity that is natural to enquiry. Good questions can help the enquiry. For example, an open question like: "What might I have overlooked?" may reveal things that we had not thought to ask about. Closed questions that lead to "yes" or "no" answers, on the other hand, are generally less helpful because they constrain the scope of the enquiry tightly. The least helpful questions assume the answer is obvious and are intended to confirm the pre-determined answer, such as: "Do you agree that this was the wrong thing to do?".

It is worth noting that some questions are not enquiries at all. Rhetorical questions like "It is hot, isn't it!" or "Do you really think she deserved that?" both have underlying statements (namely: *I am hot* and *She did not deserve that*) and are really statements not enquiry.

HOW TO ENQUIRE WELL

If we find ourselves in a situation where people are making conflicting decisions and actions, then we have a number of different stories. We can argue about whether one decision or action is better than another, and to do so we use advocacy. We can try to persuade or force others to yield. To end up with aligned decisions and actions, however, we need greater common ground in our stories. Put simply, to change the decisions being made we must change the story. The most helpful enquiry, therefore, is one that checks the story and tries to understand how it is informing the thinking and understanding. A question like





“What led me, or you, to interpret what happened the way we did?” is a good starting point. A simple check of the quality of our enquiry is whether we think we already have the answer to our own question. If we have the answer on the tip of our tongue, then the question is almost certainly driven by advocacy.

STORIES AND AUTHORS

We each have many different stories and we tell them every day. Some we tell other people, and some we only repeat internally within our private thoughts. There are first-hand stories (we were there) about people we know and the situation we are in. Clearly, we are the authors of our own first-hand stories, and as we tell them we may recall more relevant details that we had previously overlooked. Other stories are second or third-hand (we were not there). These are stories we have heard or read about people and the circumstances around us. Despite that, we may find ourselves with surprisingly strong views about people we have never met, and situations we have never encountered. Although these stories were written or spoken by other people, it is important to note the degree to which we author our own version of those stories. We choose what to notice, what to attribute significance to, and what to remember and repeat. It may be someone else’s story, but it becomes our version or interpretation of their account of what happened.

STORIES AND STORYLINE

Individuals have stories, and so do teams, divisions and whole organisations. This may all look rather complex at an organisational level, given the many people and stories involved. If we look carefully, however, we will find beneath the many stories are relatively few storylines. The storyline is how the story works and the storyline embodies its rationale. To get a sense of this, take the play *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare. It is a story of five acts that takes hours to perform. The underlying storyline is somewhat simpler – the tragedy of how the misunderstanding between lovers from feuding families leads them to choose suicide rather than separation. It is the storyline that informs the decision about how to act. We may not need to pay



attention to every detail in the story, but we do need to check the storyline carefully.

The author's propensities make a difference. We may be pessimistic until things prove they can work – or alternatively be optimistic despite often failing. If we by-stand ourselves and the kind of stories we make, we can find the patterns of our storylines. These storylines drive our decision-making within the many situations we find ourselves. There are consequences. Things may work even less because of the pessimistic storyline we attribute to the situation and the decisions we make that affect the later outworking – or our optimism may help create the generative climate within which things succeed more often.

WHY DO WE HAVE DIFFERENT STORIES ABOUT THE SAME SITUATION?

People in the same situations can form very different stories about what is happening. How can that be? There are several reasons:

1. I might be wrong, but I doubt it!

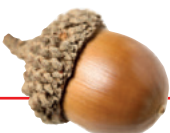
This is a lack of awareness of one's blind spot. Why bother checking my own story with any seriousness if it is self-evidently the case? Anyone of reasonable mind would see what I see. People who do not agree are perverse and unreasonable.

Other people have other perspectives (from below not above; on entering rather than leaving; and so on) that are equally self-evident to them.

2. If I had known that!

I took everything I knew into account, but I didn't know what I didn't know. With the additional information you are now telling me I would have made a different decision.

Our stories may be different because we are aware of different participants and events from each other. We have a different content of consciousness from each other.





3. I just didn't think about it that way!

For example: "It never occurred to me that in their own way they were trying to be helpful rather than trying to prevent us succeeding..."

As authors our logic and reasoning may be faulty. We may have concentrated on the impact others had on us, and as a result made misplaced attributions about their intentions.

4. I look after my own affairs and let others look after theirs

This is the localised mentality of 'I'm alright, Jack'. I ignore the impact I may be having on others and look after my own interests: "If I didn't sell them cocaine, someone else would."

As Lead Belly sang: "We're in the same boat brother – and if you shake one end you're going to rock the other – in the same boat brother."

5. Collectively-held stories

I think the same way as many people I know and respect. This is the challenge of sub-cultural groupings that hold their stories collectively as part of their identity – religiously (Muslim or Hindu), organisationally (Management and Unions), politically (left and right), educationally (lecturers and students) and so on.

Collectively-held stories may be inherited and repeatedly reinforced collectively. An intervention is required to align the collectively held stories of different sub-cultural groupings working together in the same organisation.

WHY WE NEED DIALOGUE FOR GOOD DECISION-MAKING

Dialogue is a way of talking and thinking together to find a common meaning. **Dia** means *through* (as a diameter is a line through the centre of a circle) and **logos** is *the word or meaning*. Dialogue is a common meaning amongst a group of people. That meaning takes the form of a story, and organisationally we are seeking to establish a common story about the organisation – its direction, purpose, contribution and the way we work together to achieve that.







PART 4: OUR DECISIONS AFFECT OTHERS

HOW DO YOU KNOW YOU ARE MAKING GOOD DECISIONS?

Working in an organisation we are tasked with making decisions within our area of responsibility and we are accountable for those decisions, so the most basic measure of a good decision is that it is compliant with the requirements of our role. To not be so would imply incompetence. In every organisation there are areas that fall short of this basic measure of compliance, exacerbated no doubt by staff turnover and changing requirements. Beyond that it is reasonable to expect our decisions to enhance the quality and improve the quantity of our performance output. That implies that we don't need to keep amending or reversing our decisions, which would be counter-productive to better performance. Despite meeting these two measures of *compliance* and *performance*, we find that some of our decisions do not work out as well as we had intended. There may be various reasons for this, but a major cause is that our decisions affect other people in ways we had not anticipated.

ASSUMING WHAT OTHERS NEED

It is obvious that some of our decisions will have an impact on others, and no doubt there are times when we are particularly careful to consider what we assume this will be. Yet despite our intention to be helpful, people may still react and complain. The next measure of a good decision, therefore, is that our decisions *serve* others by helping them to *comply* and *perform* well. To serve others, we must take their needs into account in a way that helps them. Isn't it obvious what others need? If it were, we could assume these needs, but unfortunately it is not obvious what others need. We do not have the perspective held by others. The reason for this is inherent in the structure of all organisations of any size – namely *organisational fragmentation*.

Organisations are efficient due to specialisation (concentrating on one function and giving less attention to others), hierarchy (focussing on your own level of decision-making and leaving others to manage theirs) and location (the geographic or online communities that determine





most of our formal and informal interactions). It is the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation that inevitably leaves us uninformed about what others in the organisation are trying to do, and the challenges they are facing. We simply don't know because we interact with them so little.

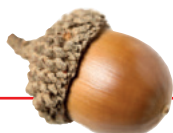
ORGANISATIONAL FRAGMENTATION AT TEAM LEVEL

What is called a team in name may lack the attributes of team in attitude and behaviour. In a well-functioning team, people support and challenge each other to serve the whole team better. In a good team the members understand their team colleagues, and where they are challenged by compliance and performance issues. It is good to ask if we know how our colleagues are managing in their different roles. What are we doing that helps or hinders them, and vice versa? The easiest way to find out is to introduce a Check-in and a Check-out at the start and close of each team meeting that asks and addresses these kinds of questions together. This is the simplest way to transform a team and its decision-making skills.

What about between teams? The solution is much the same, but the opportunities may be less obvious. The first step is to ask for feedback with open questions about where we and our team are helpful, and where we are unhelpful. As the interface challenges become more apparent, a meeting of the two interfacing teams can be very effective in shifting the quality of decision-making. Rather than assuming or anticipating what people need, why not ask them before making the decision! There are high-performing teams - ones given accolades and awards for their own brilliant performance - that are highly problematic to other teams with whom they interface. An organisation is a complex organism where each part affects other parts. When building a team, it is essential to see how it can better serve those teams with which it interfaces.

THE MODES OF TALKING AND THINKING TOGETHER

Decision-making, which is at the core of the organisation's success, is substantially enabled in teams and organisations by the use and understanding of the Modes of Talking and Thinking Together.





There are seven Modes or ways of talking together. Each has a different function in the decision-making process. Knowing that the decisions we make affect others, and realising the complexity and fragmentation inherent in organisations, the need is for a common context within which decisions are made. This takes us back to the root meaning of Dialogue: **dia** means *through* (as a diameter is the line through the centre of a circle) and **logos** is *the word or meaning*. Hence *Dialogue is a way of finding a common meaning in a group of people*. That is the fundamental starting point of good decisions – that they are aligned through a common understanding. People are participating in a common story about the organisation and what they are trying to do together. That is why we need to bring the little-known skills of Dialogue into organisations.

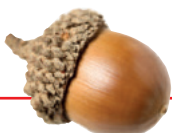
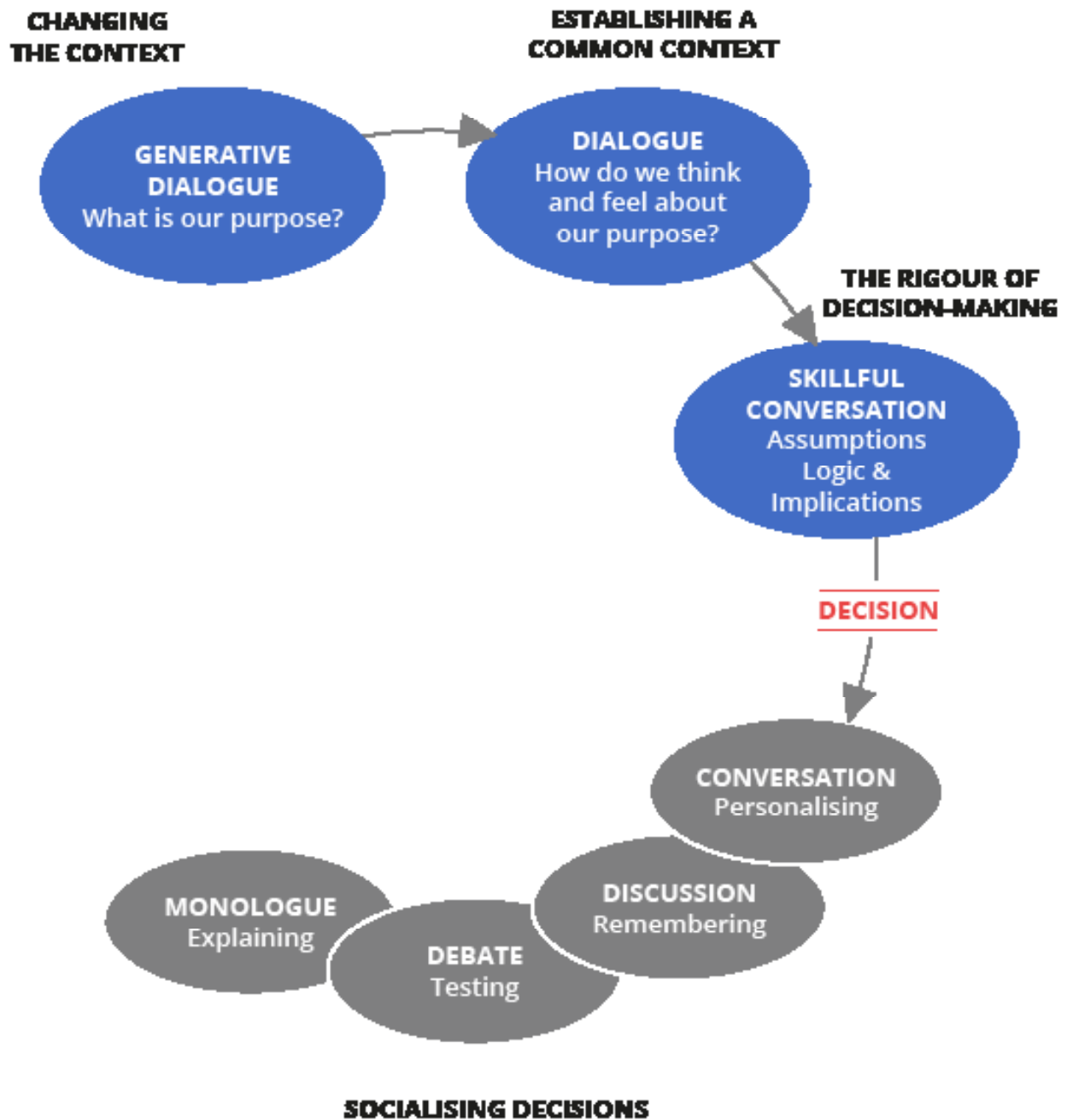
There are occasions where no single story seems able to encompass the past. Perhaps the different historical stories are held too deeply by conflictual sub-cultural groupings. Then a new story must emerge





through Generative Dialogue, changing the paradigm at times of fundamental change.

THE MODES IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS



Acknowledgement: P Garrett, J Ball



Through Dialogue we establish the common understanding and the common sense. Without this, apparently good decisions can be made in different parts of the organisation that prove counter-productive to others. The dynamic is much like a three-legged race. However, when our commonly held understanding and story do provide a common context, then each individual, team or department can make decisions regarding their own area of responsibility and accountability, knowing that their decisions will be coherent with what others are doing. It would be unwieldy and unrealistic for everyone to be involved in every decision. Instead, the smaller groupings use Skillful Conversation for rigorous decisions in relation to their accountabilities. The common organisational story informs the many pockets of specialised, hierarchical and locational thinking and decision-making.

For decisions to take root they must be socialised. We know that we make most of our decisions on automatic, as we considered in the first part of this course. The automatic decisions need monitoring, otherwise by habit we may do the equivalent of driving to our work location when it is the weekend and we intended to go elsewhere for leisure. The phenomenon is called regression. Without individual and collective attention through socialisation, we will find ourselves regressing to patterns of behaviour based on outdated storylines. Through Dialogue, and through our decisions we have changed the storyline, but the outdated one may reappear simply through habit.

Conversation is the Mode through which we manage this individually. In conversation with others we find we can easily translate the ongoing changes into our personal experience, attitude and disposition as we go about our daily work. This is important because it allows the changing situation to be accommodated in one's personal life as well. Similarly, Discussion is an easy way for us to remind ourselves of the new situation and to accommodate it in our many meetings. Where we can't get things clear in our thinking, Debate is the useful mode to get everything out in the open by arguing for and against different aspects of our changing worlds. Last, but not least, is Monologue. We need Monologue to inspire, to guide, to include, to exhort and to bring balance to the disparate factors we are managing everyday in an organisation.





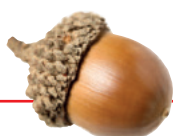
It is time to let go of the idea that an organisation is like a large machine with endless cogs turning in predefined ways without awareness of or regard for each other. We are far better served by the idea that an organisation is a living form where each individual plays a part and is related to and aware of the whole organisation. The sense of connectedness with every other part - from top to bottom, across every discipline and in every area – is achieved through the common story that enables aligned decisions throughout. That is at the heart of Dialogic Decision-Making.

DIALOGIC ENGAGEMENT, ORGANISATIONAL DECISION-MAKING AND WORKING DIALOGUES

This course sits in the middle of three courses. The first course, that is called Dialogic Engagement, is a consideration of the seven Modes of Talking and Thinking together, and of their structure, process and skillful use. This course positions Dialogue and the other Modes in relation to organisational Decision-making. The third course is an applied course for use within organisations, called a Working Dialogue. The Working Dialogue is a structured and facilitated decision-making process for use in complex situations that involve different levels of hierarchy, different specialisations in the organisation and different locations. Clearly, Dialogue is at the heart of its success and it is facilitated by Accredited Professional Dialogue Practitioners.

A DIFFERENT WAY OF WORKING

These three courses open the door to a different way of working. For those who are interested, a career can be developed in Professional Dialogue through the accredited programmes approved by the Academy of Professional Dialogue. The entry programme is called A Different Way of Working and provides the skills and frameworks needed to *Bring Dialogue into the Room*. That lays the foundation for the *Dialogic Intervention* programme, and then for professional *Systemic Dialogue* work.





REFERENCES:

[Dialogic Engagement course details](#)

[Dialogic Decision-making course details](#)

[Working Dialogue applied course details](#)

[A Different Way of Working programme details](#)

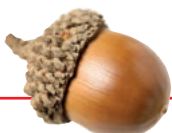
[A New Kind of Dialogue by Peter Garrett](#)

[TWND! 1 to 4](#)



ACADEMY OF PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE CERTIFIED COURSES

On completion of Dialogic Decision-Making you will be issued with a Certificate of Participation by the Academy of Professional Dialogue. A sequenced programme of further courses is available from the Academy to enable you to develop the professional skills and understanding that will be of value to you in any organisational or social setting. For details, please check the Academy's website: aofpd.org. Participation in these courses will benefit those who apply to become an accredited Professional Dialogue Practitioner, thereby being authorised to deliver the Academy's educational courses.





DIALOGUE PUBLICATIONS

Dialogue Publications was founded in 2017 to make Professional Dialogue materials available internationally. The editors release an annual publication entitled *The World Needs Dialogue!* (hardback and e-book), covering the Working Papers considered by Members at the Academy's annual conference. Other publications include books authored by Academy Members, as well as supporting materials for all educational programmes and courses accredited by the Academy.





THE ACADEMY OF PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE

The Academy is an educational non-profit charity that promotes and inspires the international use of Professional Dialogue for the benefit of society. The primary aims are to inform people about the practice of Professional Dialogue in organisational and social settings, to acknowledge the work done by skilled Dialogue Practitioners around the world, to provide professional affiliation and to develop the field of Dialogue into a profession.