



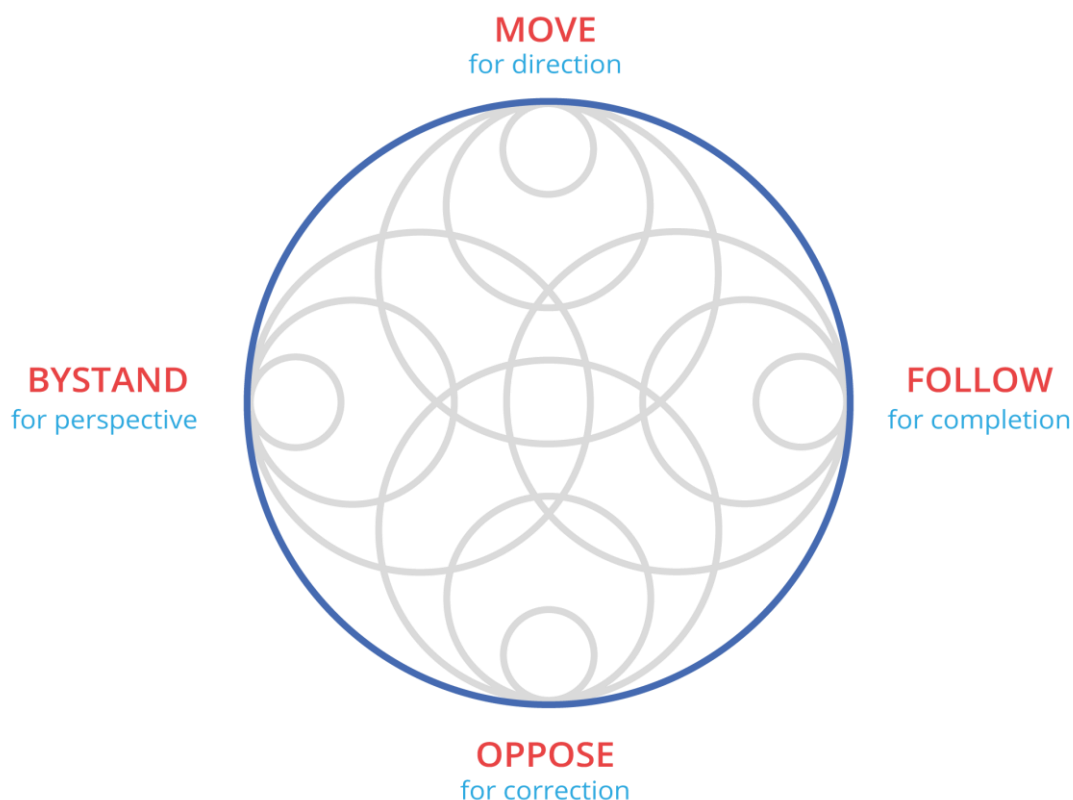
FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION PART 2

THE DIALOGIC ACTIONS

AN INTRODUCTION

The Dialogic Actions help people to talk together more successfully and productively. They refer to the structure and dynamics of the communication itself, rather than to the content of what is being said. They can be used reflectively after a conversation to understand what happened. Their greater value, however, is that they are simple enough to use live, in the moment when things are not working well, and people are not ending up where they are trying to go. These Actions are derived from doctoral research by family therapist David Kantor. He worked with dysfunctional families to learn how they might talk together more functionally. Although we may not consider ourselves to be dysfunctional, there are times for everyone when problems arise in communication and we are unclear how to proceed. At such times, the Dialogic Actions are particularly helpful.

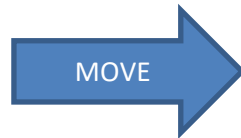
There are just four Dialogic Actions – a Move, a Follow, an Oppose and a Bystand. Each one has a different structure and purpose: the Move gives direction, the Follow gives completion, the Oppose gives correction and the Bystand gives perspective. In this model, every time someone speaks it will be either a Move, a Follow, an Oppose or a Bystand. It is the sequence in which the Actions are made that determines the dynamic of the conversation or exchange between people.



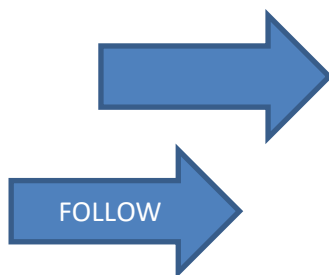
Acknowledgement: D Kantor, P Garrett, J Ball



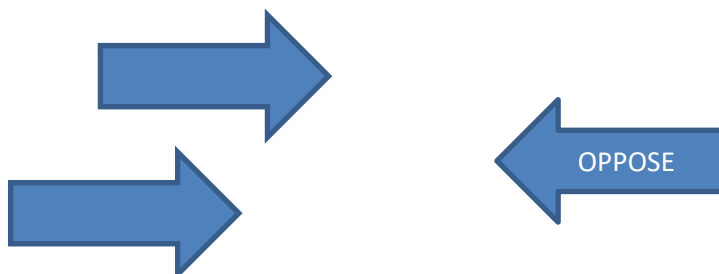
A Move: When someone makes a Move, they introduce a subject or a topic. This is an invitation for others to go in a new direction. So, the opening Action made at the start of any conversation or communication will be a Move. It could take the form: “I want to talk about....”



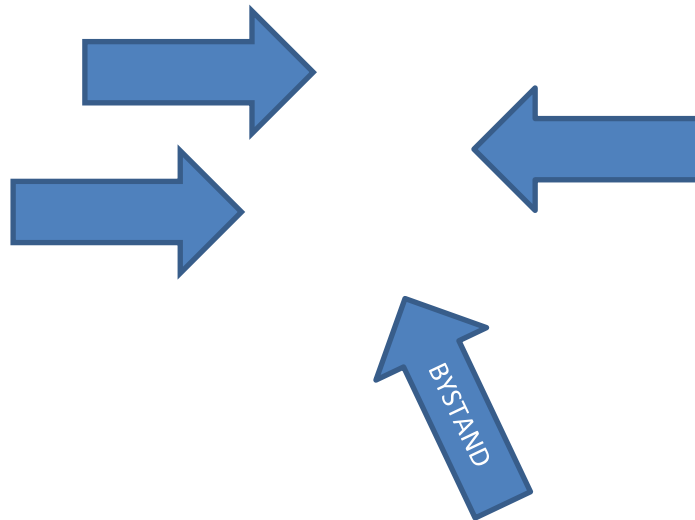
A Follow: Responding to that Move and going in the same direction is called a Follow. This may be a statement of agreement, or it may expand on the matter raised in the Move. This may sound like: “I would like to consider that too...”



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: “I have no interest in talking about that.”



A Bystand: When someone steps back to a neutral position and describes the dynamic they observe, or the various Actions they have heard, then that is called a Bystand. A Bystand is a spoken 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 Bystand describes the sequence of Actions witnessed.



The Actions are spoken: There is a difference between thinking and talking. The Actions become meaningful to others when they are spoken. Thinking about making any of the Actions but not saying them is ineffective – the Action makes no contribution to the structure of the communication. That is like writing an email but not sending it. Thinking things and not saying them, leaving them unavailable to others, is one of the main issues in dysfunctional conversations. Learning how to say what you are thinking is part of learning how to communicate better with other people.

SKILL DEVELOPMENT

A Developmental Model: This is a developmental model, and its purpose is to enable people to learn to do all the Actions well in any situation. Take tennis as an analogy. To be good at the game you need to be able to play a forehand, a backhand, a lob and a drop shot. If you cannot play a backhand, then you may have to try to run around the approaching tennis ball to play a forehand. In the same way, if you do not know how to Oppose, you may have to Move, Follow or Bystand instead, which would confuse the situation. This may be an aspect of dysfunctionality that is making things difficult. So, everyone is encouraged to use all the Actions as needed. In contrast to the Dialogic Actions, the Myers Briggs personality types is a labelling model. In a labelling model you accept yourself to be a certain type and learn how to manage your communication with others given that fact. The value of the Dialogic Actions is that despite your 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 identities. So, 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”.



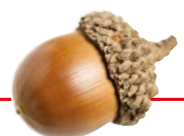
Clean Actions and Spin: The Actions work well when they are clearly understood by others, so the simpler and clearer they are the better. An example of a simple and clean Follow is “Yes, I agree”. You might choose to continue with an explanation that develops the thoughts and feelings behind your statement but missing out the clean Follow is far less effective. Putting spin on an Action makes it harder to respond, much like in tennis, where adding top spin 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”. The clean version might be: “I do not agree with your idea”. To Bystand in a clean way requires a neutral stance of observation – not being for or against the dynamic you are describing. Done well a Bystand will change the dynamics in the conversation. It helps people become aware of the repetitive patterns that are a repeated dysfunction. These patterns exist in every relationship and grouping that meets regularly. It evokes the frustrating feeling: “Here we go again!”.

Compound Actions: When a speaker contributes more than one action at a time then 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 Bystand 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 choose one and concentrate on that”.

Strong and Stuck Actions: You will find you have one or more Actions that you are comfortable making and that often gets good results. That is your strong Action, or Actions. The developmental step is to choose deliberately to use the other Actions where you are not so strong or successful and discover how to do them well. Watch other people who are good at those Actions and try copying them until you develop your own style. There will also be times and situations where you get stuck and repeated use the same Action. You might repeatedly Bystand (and thereby avoid taking a position) or repeatedly disagree without ever following or proposing anything. When this happens, you have a stuck Action.

APPLICATION IN GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONS

Learning how to use the Actions: The first step is to understand the distinction between the four different Actions so that you can easily recognise them in use. They are used by everyone in all conversations and communications so there are plenty of opportunities to observe and to learn. The second step is to understand what each of them does, so that the impact is more or less predictable. For example, a conversation where there is one Move, and many Follows sounds like one person in authority talking with others who are subservient. When the reaction to an Oppose is another Oppose, and that in turn is Opposed again, then we are heading towards an argument. It is the sequence of Actions that reveals the typical dynamics or patterns of behaviour. The skill is to see the pattern and if it is not working, to change the sequence by adding the appropriate Actions to make it more productive.



Functionality and Dysfunctionality: The aim is to have more functional conversations and meetings with others, meaning we are better able to do what we are trying to achieve together. That requires those involved being able to do all four Actions and being attentive to which Action would help most at any time. The simple rule for understanding dysfunctionality is that one or more of the Actions are not available for use in the conversation. Noticing that and providing the missing Actions, or asking others to provide the missing Actions, will always make the conversation more functional.

Good Decision Making: Everybody makes decisions, and when people are working in organisations, they are employed to make many decisions every day. They are responsible and accountable for doing so, 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.

