Dialogic Organization Development and the Generative Change Model: Opportunities and Challenges for Managing Global Crises

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Executive Summary

The Dialogic Organization Development Mindset, and the Generative Change Model, have proven effective for dealing with complex, adaptive challenges in organizations. There are good reasons to think they may be more effective for managing global crises than traditional top-down, planned change approaches. While attempts to use Dialogic OD for managing community, national and international problems have been tried with varying success, we see two challenges that need to be worked through for this approach to be more consistently successful for managing global crises.

The Challenge

Dialogic Organization Development (OD) methods (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; 2015a) emerged over the past 30 years to aid organizations and leaders in addressing increasingly complex (Snowden, 2002) adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1998). These are problems with many moving parts, known and unknown inter-dependencies, that span multiple boundaries and require changes in behavior and changes in attitudes, perceptions, and cognitive maps of stakeholders. Successful cases of Dialogic OD in large group settings of hundreds or even thousands of participants (e.g., Cooperrider, 2012; Davies, 1992; Lukensmeyer, 2015) appear to follow what we have described, building on the dialogic approach, as the

Generative Change Model (Bushe, 2020; Marshak & Bushe, 2018).

Global crises such as global warming, the Covid-19 pandemic, and mass migrations fit the kinds of issues for which generative approaches to change are designed. In a few cases a generative change approach has been successfully used for community and social issues. However, there are crucial differences between organizations and communities that, to our knowledge, have not been reckoned with to produce reliably successful generative change processes at the community, let alone global, level. This chapter will briefly describe Dialogic OD, and then the Generative Change Model and why it is more effective for managing

,complex, adaptive challenges than more traditional planned change approaches. We also describe two challenges we believe need to be addressed for generative change processes to be used successfully for global issues. While these challenges apply to all change situations regardless of size, they are particularly vexing when dealing with scales larger than organizations.

What is Dialogic OD?

In parallel with the increasingly complex and uncertain contexts and challenges organizations face have been the advancement and application of new ideas from the social sciences. While offering new insights and approaches to social change, they also suggest a less controllable, more ambiguous, world calling for letting go of long established and culturally reinforced notions of command-and-control leadership in favor of newer approaches.

These newer approaches, like Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search, and Open Space Technology utilize recent advances in social science (social construction) and natural science (complex adaptive systems and emergence) and have been used in various contexts to address social and global concerns. These are exciting developments that hold great promise for the challenges of contemporary times.

Recently, to help clarify and define what's different about these newer approaches to change, we labeled them as "Dialogic OD." It's important to understand that Dialogic OD is not simply about dialogue or prescribing ways in which people ought to talk and listen. We selected that title to contrast this set of practices with a more conventional "Diagnostic OD" approach to change. We also selected that label because all the different methods we classify as dialogic practices agree that transformational change occurs by changing the ongoing conversations and resulting meaning-making that have become patterned and routinized in the subject organization.

In studying the underlying similarities in dozens of different dialogic method-ologies we have concluded **that it is not the method, but the mindset of leaders and change agents** that makes the change process more or less transformational (Bushe & Marshak, 2014; 2016). The contours of this mindset include premises that invite leaders and change agents to move away from traditional problem-solving, analyze and envision, top-down, directive, thinking and doing (Bushe & Marshak, 2015b). Instead, we find processes that are purpose driven, focus on preferred futures, engage those who must change in deciding on those changes and utilize self-organizing, generative and emergent

social processes are more transform-ational.

Part of that mindset includes the belief that transformational change requires at least one of the following three enablers. These are 1) a shared narrative about the nature of the organization and/or the presenting challenge is changed; 2) a disruption to current processes of organizing in a way that stimulates self-organization and the emergence of new, better, and adapted processes and 3) the use of a generative image that creates opportunities for new conversations, thoughts, and actions (Bushe & Marshak, 2014, 2015b).

The Generative Change Model

One strand of Dialogic OD uses large group interventions that can involve hundreds of participants, utilizing dialogic methods and mindsets to produce rapid transformational change. This "Generative Change Model" is broad enough that it encompasses a wide variety of different methods, specific enough that its use can be imagined by people who are only used to planned change methods, and revealing enough that it alerts leaders and change agents to important considerations for the successful utilization of Dialogic OD methods.

A generative change process begins when a complex, adaptive challenge has been identified and accepted as requiring attention by leaders willing to sponsor the change. Leaders and change agents then reframe it in a way that will capture the interest and engagement of the diverse stakeholders who must ultimately generate, embrace and enact the thinking and actions needed for transformational change. The most powerful purpose statements are "generative images," a combination of a few words or even a new metaphor that are both appealing but ambiguous, and open up opportunities for new conversations and new ideas (Bushe, 2020; Bushe & Storch, 2015). The purpose statement is used to engage the people who will have to change into joining one or more events designed to produce "generative conversations" – conver-sations that will lead to new ideas people want to act on. These are normally events involving large groups of participants designed to include the diversity of stakeholders, deepen the group's understanding of the systemic nature of the issues, allow people with similar interests and ideas to find each other, and ultimately launch as many pilot projects as possible, with basic guardrails articulated by organizational leaders. At the end of these events participants are encouraged to take initiative and act on their ideas without waiting for permission. Processes for monitoring
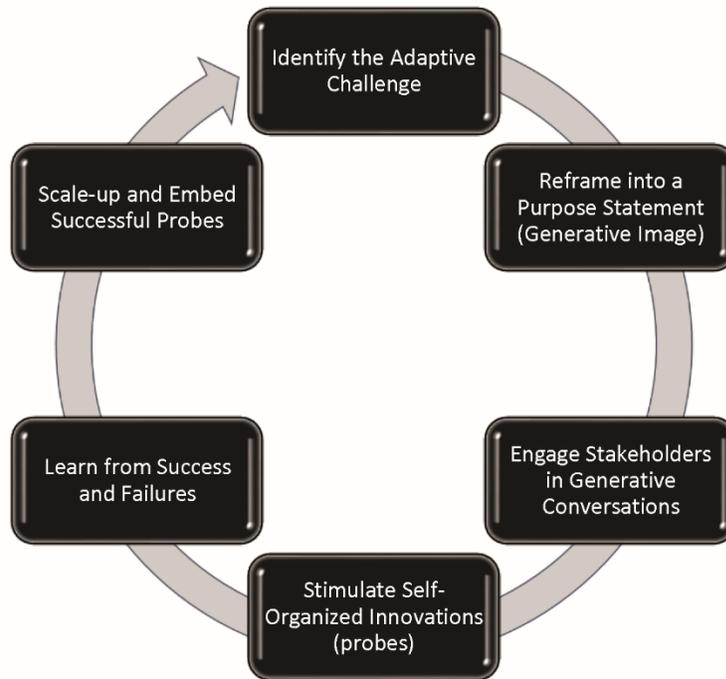
Figure 1: The Generative Chagne Model (from Bushe, 2020)

what then takes place allow leaders to learn from the pilots, support promising initiatives and scale-up and embed successful ones. Figure 1 depicts the Generative Change model.

Recently, Bushe (2020) illustrated the use of the Generative Change Model to transform an old, unionized warehouse and distribution department with 170 employees inside a company with depots distributed across a large geographic area. The adaptive challenge the leaders wanted to address was increasing employee engagement throughout the department and reducing the daily sense of chaos. The chaos was caused by an antiquated IT system slated to be replaced at some unknown time in the future and employees responding to demands from other parts of the organization in ways that circumvented procedures, creating even more chaos. Leadership was concerned about poor morale that resulted from the perception that a good day was one where you didn't get yelled at by a customer. The generative image they developed for their purpose was "stress-free customer service" and began with a one-day event where all the managers, supervisors, and some volunteers from the unionized workforce (about 60 people in total) resulted in thirteen self-initiated pilot projects. It was widely viewed as a new way to do things and successful. As

leaders tracked what was taking place, they realized four of the pilots were complex and interrelated. They made the champions of those four pilots into a design team that organized another two-day event with the purpose of "ensuring depots get their last order before they have to make their next order". They engaged volunteers from all the departments and the whole warehouse staff in exploring how to reduce turnaround, from the time materials were requested to the time they were shipped, from three days to one. Seventeen pilots emerged from that event, and they reached their turnaround reduction goals in six weeks. The impact of experiencing successful self-organizing, emergent change by workers, along with a change in shared narratives about what employees could do, led to real cultural changes that many years later continue to make this department the model of an adaptive, engaged workforce even though all the managers who led this project have since been promoted. Furthermore, by nurturing and amplifying a pilot focused on how to log in information at the warehouse, leaders were able to engage the entire organization in going from a pencil-and-paper-based system , to a fully modern, digital barcode and scanner operation. This transformation occurred in less than eighteen months without a plan, a vision, training or a dedicated budget. Instead, they did it through a generative change process.

Another example of generative change in the medical field involved developing a new regional strategy for managing cancer care in Sweden. The regional cancer center leader adopted a deliberatively vague and open process while avoiding the top-down implement-ation of a single blueprint. The change effort was greatly influenced by the leader's support for the adoption of a metaphor that emerged and served as a generative image for the entire effort. That generative image was of an aqueduct that delivered effective care processes through its horizontal dimensions around the patient while also needing robust supporting dimensions underneath. This image of an ambi-dextrous healthcare system broke with the traditional bureaucratic model that pervaded this health care sector. It provided a new perspective that shaped subsequent conversations, thinking and behaviors, leading to many successful patient care innovations (Huzzard, Hellström, and Lifvergren, 2014).

There are several things that make the generative change approach significantly different from traditional planned change. One is a focus on preferred futures rather than a focus on solving problems. Another is the use of a common purpose embraced by a diversity of stakeholders

to drive the change process, instead of a strategic vision articulated by the leader. A third is widespread engagement in generative conversations by the stakeholders who will have to change in devising the actual changes, rather than mostly the engagement of experts and authorities. Still another is use of numerous experiments and pilot projects to learn as you go about potential adaptive moves rather than first agreeing on and then implementing a preferred comprehensive solution. Research on organizational change (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Hastings & Schwarz, 2019; Mirabeau & Maguire, 2014; Rowland & Higgs, 2008) and experience in the field consistently demonstrate that generative change produces more change, more quickly than planned change approaches

Generative change appears to offer considerable opportunities for leaders and change agents to design effective responses to global crises, and indeed, there are instances where we see what looks like a generative change approach being used. More and less successful examples include most of the Earth Summits, the Paris Climate Accords, Walmart's transformation of its global supply chain to net carbon neutral (Spicer & Hyatt, 2017), increasing environmental conservation in Pakistan (Schwass, 1992) and attempts to bring peace to the world through the United Religions Initiative (Finegold, Holland & Lingham, 2002).

Two Challenges When Using Generative Change Methods to Address Societal Problems

When seeking to apply a dialogic mindset and generative change method to address global problems, important differences between organizations and larger social entities like communities, nations and the world need to be recognized. There are many examples of attempts to use large group interventions and a dialogic mindset to address community, national and international issues, but with mixed results. Often the good intentions and high spirits produced by dialogic events fade away without much tangible change. Two important issues need to be worked through to use these methods and mindset reliably and successfully at scale. These are the need for sponsorship and ensuring that emergent self-organized changes will be good for the collective, what we will call convivial emergence.

Sponsorship

Sponsors are the public and private sector leaders with the authority and resources to make the changes in structures, processes, policies etc. needed for adaptive change. In the generative change model sponsors are important at the beginning in framing the purpose and supporting efforts and events to generate new ideas and build participant commitment to self-initiated pilots without specifying exactly what will

emerge from those activities. They play a critical role after pilots are launched through the way they support, embed, and scale up successful pilot projects (Roehrig, Schwendenwein & Bushe, 2015). Without committed and engaged sponsors providing leadership after events, even the most enlivening and generative events will have little sustained impact. We have witnessed this pattern of a lack of committed follow through from sponsors in generative change processes as a problem in organizations, but even more likely to be a problem in larger systems, ranging from inter-agency community service initiatives to the Paris Climate Accords.

Additionally, unlike organizations with more unified and established authority structures, societal problems cross multiple boundaries, involve a greater diversity of actors, and typically require competing jurisdictions, interest groups, governing bodies, and even nation-states to put their differences aside and form a coalition of sponsors. Successful use of generative change methods at this level probably requires the initial formation of a sponsoring coalition, that increase their active commitment and support as successful pilot results emerge. One successful example would be the UN Global Compact. As of 2019 this is the world's largest corporate social responsibility initiative with 13,000 corporate participants and other stakeholders in over 170 countries. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan initiated this generative change process, supported by Professor and Dialogic OD consultant David Cooperrider, in July 2000., It brought together over 100 leaders of the largest multinational corporations to set the purpose and guildelines for what they named The Global Compact. While not in name, in practice they became the sponsoring coalition that has supported a two decade long journey that has produced thousands of pilot projects, many successful, worldwide.

(See https://www.unglobalcompact.org/ and https://aim2flourish.com).

Conditions for Convivial Emergence

The generative change model works with self-organizing processes to create change. However, self-organization does not necessarily assure that what emerges will promote the collective good as defined by the diverse stakeholders affected by the adaptive challenge. If we ask the question, "under what conditions will people collectively organize in service to the greater good" two things stand out.

One is a common purpose. This is normally what drives effective generative change processes in organizations. The early stages of the generative change model rest crucially on sponsors' and change agents' ability to articulate a

purpose that addresses the adaptive challenge and captures and sustains stakeholders' interest and energy. Global crises tend to be framed as problems to be fixed following mechanistic imagery, or an enemy to be vanquished, following wartime imagery. Framing crises in this way might temporarily mobilize enough actions to do away with an immediate threat but is less likely to energize committed actions to realize collectively agreed-upon purposes that advance the greater good.

Consider the implications when something like the Covid-19 pandemic is framed as a war. There will be enemies and allies, casualties, front-line troops, searches for weapons and strategies to defeat and eliminate the threat, and calls for militaristic command and control leaders to take charge and articulate the war plans for their theater of operations. What if responses to the pandemic were framed by an agreed-upon purpose like "health and resilience for all"? Such a framing invites globally coordinated actions where success, by definition, requires that all actors must realize positive benefits. It might also stimulate leadership and actions that promote sustained, positive, collaborative innovation in contrast to command-and-control actions to destroy or eliminate an immediate threat.

A different condition that supports convivial emergence is a common identity, a sense of "we" that bridges stakeholders' existing differences. Without a common purpose to bind together people who don't initially have a common identity, self-organizing processes tend to fragment into different initiatives, each furthering the needs and interests of separate stakeholders who do have a group identity. This state of fragmentation can exist in organizations and sometimes the first challenge of a generative change is to create a sense of common identity amongst diverse stakeholders (Bushe, 2002; Newman & Fitzgerald, 2001; Powley, Fry, Barrett & Bright, 2004). But even without a common identity, common purpose can be enough. Only after a common purpose or common identity exists, however, can emergent change approaches hope to produce changes that will be good for all. Consider how at this point in history, a kind of tribalism is ascendent. Prior movement toward a more planetary sense of identity in the face of common challenges has reversed, with increasing differentiation of identities that lead to go it alone or competing strategies and actions. Some examples are the USA's current political climate, Brexit, ethnic nationalism flaring in Eastern Europe, anti-Muslim policies in India and Myanmar, to name just a few.

A hopeful perspective on our current situation is provided by the social science research that suggests successive phases of integration and differentiation are common to various developmental processes (e.g., Greiner, 1998; Phinney, 2013; Piaget, 1972). For example, the current breaking down of order has been observed in previous industrial revolutions, and the current one is no exception. "Big history" (Spier, 2010) suggests that we are at a threshold that will require us to reinvent social and governmental organization at a new level of complexity. Perhaps we will naturally find a path from our current differentiation to greater integration of global identity. That, in turn, will more readily support the utilization of generative change processes to successfully address global issues, which we hope will lead to a virtuous cycle of increasing use of generative change and an increasing sense of collective humankind.

Conclusion

Generative change processes have emerged in organization development to enable leaders to manage complexity and adaptive challenges better. Generative change has also been used for societal and, in a few cases, global issues. The requirements for their successful use at the societal level, however, have not been as thoroughly investigated. At least two challenges that are easier to resolve at the

organizational than societal level, have to be worked out. One is sponsorship. How do we create the degree of sponsorship required to support generative change at a global level? The second is the need for some commonality in either purpose or identity that leads people to self-organize for the common good. When dealing with fragmented group identities, how can we create enough of a sense of common identity, or common purpose, to support the emergence of convivial solutions to collective problems?

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