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# LEADERS FOSTERING DIALOGUE THROUGH DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS: AN OD PERSPECTIVE

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## **ABSTRACT**

In complex and chaotic contexts, technical approaches to organizational change fail to produce desired results. This chapter explores how leaders can foster developmental relationships at the individual and group levels by using dialogue-centric methods to help individuals and groups identify emergent solutions. We integrate the literature on dialogic organization development (OD) and psychological safety to develop a perspective for developmental relationships in emergent contexts where groups cannot find clear solutions. The chapter culminates with an overview of three families of methodologies for fostering developmental relationships through dialogue at the group level: Technology of Participation (ToP), Liberating Structures, and Design Thinking. We provide real-life case examples of each from our own practice. Although not widely written about in the OD literature, each of these families of methods offers multi-faceted approaches for organizational change in contexts calling for dialogue and exploration rather than identifying technical solutions. Most importantly, these widely-used methods demystify the process of fostering developmental relationships among teams through dialogue in emergent contexts.



The COVID-19 pandemic upended norms for organizational life and created an unprecedented risk to sustaining organizations in nearly every sector. Cultural norms are under challenge as inequities and injustice become more visible and patience increasingly exhausted. Against a backdrop of so much complexity, chaos, uncertainty, and risk, organizations of all types find themselves facing situations that call for leaders up to the task of adapting their systems and people for the work ahead.

Despite this era of significant turbulence, conventional views of leadership perpetuate the idea of the leader as the source of both direction and critical knowledge. This approach can work for supervising routine tasks but lacks effectiveness for organizations needing to address problems demanding complex or innovative problem-solving skills required in today's climate. Edmondson (2012) contends that modern organizations in all sectors engage in routine, complex, and innovative operations. Leaders and followers need support in shifting into a more dynamic role fostering knowledge creation among all organization members. Developmental relationships serve a central role in providing trust, safety, and space to promote collaborative relationships. Dialogue also serves a fundamental role in this process by providing a creative, generative function in which multiple perspectives converge to create a new, better reality (Camargo-Borges & Rasera, 2013).

Gallup's workforce engagement report finds the US workforce engagement at record low levels (Harter, 2020). Fifty-four percent of the workforce is not engaged and instead, are "psychologically unattached to their work and their company" (para 6). Leaders need practical ways to engage their workforce in troubleshooting, problem-solving, and reimagining organizational norms. In the chapter, we explore how leaders can foster dialogue through developmental relationships. We use the lens of rational/diagnostic and dialogical/dynamic approaches to organization development (OD) to consider problem-solving, knowledge creation, innovation, and shared understanding (Allen, 2018; Morgan, 1993). We also explore how developmental relationships at both the individual and group levels help encourage this type of OD. By combining various theory-informed perspectives, we establish the role of leaders in building developmental relationships with (a) followers, (b) other leaders, and (c) among groups

to foster psychological safety for knowledge-creating dialogue. These relationships take the form of various types of developmental relationships such as mentoring, coaching, providing access to networks, and fostering team learning. Each of these serves different purposes and takes multiple manifestations. Lastly, we explore how leaders can foster developmental relationships at the group level through three specific families of OD tools. We describe theory-based tools from these families of approaches to provide tangible resources that leaders can use to support dialogue that encourages knowledge-creating culture change.

We primarily approach OD from the lens of leaders and managers who practice organization change in their everyday work rather than through consultants' lens. Consultants can consider how they might coach clients to use these dialogic perspectives in advancing teams and organizations. In terms of developmental relationships, we do not actively distinguish between various forms of developmental relationships. Instead, we take Higgins and Kram's (2001) comprehensive approach to developmental relationships: including mentor, sponsor, coach, and peer as advisors in one's network.

# DIALOGIC ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

In the last ten years, the OD literature has seen an increasing emphasis on the centrality of fostering dialogue in bringing organizational change. This shift is a return to OD's early roots. Shortly after World War II, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the United Kingdom pioneered the concept of considering technical changes and social dynamics simultaneously (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Emery, 1959). These dialogue-based approaches provide an early model for a more holistic OD practice. Within human resource development (HRD), North American scholars have historically emphasized a more technical/rational approach to OD, focused on a diagnosis-intervention approach (e.g., Swanson & Holton, 2009). This approach largely aligns with Cummings and Worley's (2009) popular model. Others within HRD have proposed more dialogic approaches (e.g., Bierema, 2010; Han, Kuchinke, Boulay, 2009; Maurer & Githens, 2010), while other scholars present a mixed approach (e.g., McLean, 2006).

Within the OD literature, some scholars continued emphasizing the centrality of complex social dynamics for years (e.g., Marshak, 2006; Schein, 1999). In recent years, a new approach, called dialogic OD, has gained broader favor, given the societal questioning of purely technical solutions. Dialogic approaches to OD embrace the unknown and work toward a general direction without having a predetermined process or outcome (Schein, 2015). In such approaches, leaders do not assume they have the answers, but they create safe spaces to find solutions collaboratively.

What do these approaches look like in real-life practice? Bushe and Marshak (2015) explain although both diagnostic and dialogic approaches have humanistic, democratic roots, they have critical differences. We have outlined some of the key differences in Table 1.

	Diagnostic Approaches (Technical)	Dialogic Approaches (Emergent)
Change is...	Planned and developmental	Emergent and iterative
Change starts...	With leaders in a hierarchy	Anywhere in an organization, heterarchical
Aims to achieve...	Behavior and pre-determined results	Discourse and generative activity

The dialogic approach supports dynamic organizations with shifting and emergent goals. The pandemic has shown that nearly all organizations face such circumstances at various times. In times of regional, national, or global crisis, work becomes more interdependent and complex, which necessitates dialogic approaches to problem solving. The increasing automation of routine tasks has shifted the focus from routine activities to knowledge work requiring analysis and decision making at lower levels in organizations. Few tasks can be completed by a single individual, requiring more effective handoffs and increasing potential for delays and defects. As we describe below, such complex systems require continuous collaboration between staff to improve system performance and to spot and attend to subtle shifts (Edmondson, 2019). These systems require cultures of high interpersonal trust and reinforcing systems that enable high levels of organizational performance.

These shifting needs require substantial changes in leaders' approaches. Bohm, a physicist, began an inquiry into the role of dialogue in knowledge creation as early as the 1930s. He proposed dialogue to engage organizational members in a transparent, open, honest, and spontaneous process (Bohm, 1991). As a result, groups surface and respect vulnerabilities, allowing a deeper understanding of the organization, its culture, and each person's role within it. Senge (1990) credits Bohm with influencing his perspective about dialogue's role in fostering team learning, one of the five disciplines in his learning organization model. In other words, Bohm's inquiry into the importance of dialogue in organizational practice affected Senge, arguably one of the most influential scholars and practitioners of OD in the last 30 years.

In considering the relationship of these perspectives on developmental relationships, Higgins and Kram (2001) explain that traditional hierarchical forms of mentoring are less appropriate for current organizational and cultural contexts. They present a development network perspective, in which mentoring occurs in a more dynamic, reciprocal manner in multiple directions. This multi-directional perspective aligns with the dynamic perspective of dialogic OD in recognizing the need for a less structured approach. Dialogic OD deemphasizes beginning-to-end structured processes, in favor of micro-processes that emerge during a larger change process (e.g., a structured conversation might happen as one piece in a larger emergent change process).

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## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Lipshitz, Popper, and Friedman (2007) contend that psychological safety is at the center of a learning organization approach. Growth cultures require psychological safety to be cultivated among individuals, groups, and teams to take risks (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012). However, leaders cannot instantly bring psychological safety into existence. Leaders foster psychological safety by creating an environment where taking interpersonal risk is more beneficial than the risk of staying silent. In other words, the risk of an individual looking wrong or looking as if they do not know something is a risk that is worth taking. Edmondson (2019) argues that leaders should not foster a culture of safety as an end itself and explains that psychological safety is a condition needed for performance among complex, interdependent functions (e.g., learning and adapting is a necessity for innovation and change required for survival). When combined with actionable behaviors like leaders highlighting failures as learning opportunities, displaying fallibility, and using direct language, leaders can help create organizational culture change. In addition to modeling, leaders can utilize developmental relationships to encourage cultures of "questioning, feedback, support, and structures for learning" (Rock & Garavan, 2006, p. 339). The fostering of dialogue through developmental relationships allows leaders to support the creation of knowledge rather than merely managing dissemination.

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*Leaders foster psychological safety by creating an environment where taking interpersonal risk is more beneficial than the risk of staying silent. In other words, the risk of an individual looking wrong or looking as if they do not know something is a risk that is worth taking.*

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## ROLE OF DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

This chapter focuses on leaders fostering developmental relationships to achieve OD. To explore these practices comprehensively, we consider the ways these relationships manifest with followers, peers, and groups.

Google conducted an extensive study of team performance called Project Aristotle (Duhigg, 2016). They found none of the previously conceived characteristics deemed essential for high performing teams to be borne out, “...there was nothing showing that a mix of specific personality types or skills or backgrounds made any difference. The ‘who’ part of the equation didn’t seem to matter” (para 17). The research led leaders at Google to Edmondson’s (1999) work on psychological safety and the need to find practical ways to support people’s connection with each other. Edmondson presents fear of interpersonal risk as a barrier to organizational learning. This fear arises in multiple ways. Foundational among them is the “asymmetry of voice and silence” (p. 34), in which a person must choose between the effort of speaking up about something that might (or might not be) consequential. Therefore, they consider the safe and easy route of silence because the risk associated with speaking up may be perceived as being greater than the benefit of staying silent.

History is replete with examples of preventable failures and catastrophic outcomes that could have been prevented had people spoken up with observations, concerns, and questions (Edmondson, 2018). But overcoming this asymmetry requires deliberate focus to create an environment of psychological safety that lowers the risk of speaking up, structures that invite speaking up, and a culture of welcoming voices when they do speak. Organizations must deliver their products or services through teams that increasingly find themselves in volatile, uncertain, complex, or ambiguous situations in this time of pandemic and cultural upheaval. Being able to engage employees in discovery and learning may be a deciding factor in organizational success.

Edmondson (2018) describes the calculation involved in the asymmetry of voice and silence as a simple risk and reward. Sharing a concern, question, or different opinion entails interpersonal risk of looking foolish, uncooperative, or stupid. Consider the nurse who is concerned about a physician’s orders – the nurse does not have equal standing, may not be right, and risks an angry response when raising a question. Similarly, staff may just devise a workaround in a process that seems onerous. In the nurse's case, withholding the question does not risk the physician’s ire, and the patient's health may or may not be at risk. The workaround avoids questioning the process but does not solve the problem that prompted the shortcut. The shortcut addresses the immediate goal but avoids addressing the problem.

The need for psychological safety as a condition for employee engagement poses serious challenges for the leader who lacks interest, skill, or knowledge for building the necessary culture of trusting relationships. Most organizations employ hierarchical structures that use authority to achieve objectives. Leaders and

structures that do not create a culture of psychological safety hamper organizations' ability to respond to environmental complexities by failing to learn and grow rapidly (Frese & Keith, 2015). Such failures have a range of real-world organizational impacts, from work performance errors (e.g., medical errors) to financial performance (Baer & Frese, 2003; Edmondson, 2004). In that context, we view developmental relationships by fostering a culture of openness, honesty, and care for the individual. These key elements for achieving high performance can be argued to be an essential component of leadership. Table 2 provides practical examples using diagnostic and dialogic approaches when the recipient of a developmental relationship is a follower, another leader, and a group. The classification scheme below encompasses a broader, more comprehensive approach to developmental relationships. We developed this scheme using multiple frameworks and perspectives from the literature on developmental relationships, facilitation, and OD (e.g., Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Schwarz, 2016).

Recipient of Developmental Relationship	Diagnostic Approaches	Dialogic Approaches
Followers	Advice- and direction-setting for successfully navigating and growing professionally. Focused primarily on needs as they align with predetermined organizational goals and direction.	Emergent and dynamic goal-setting. Support organizational goals while supporting the emergent needs of the follower and emergent needs of the organization.
Other Leaders	Coaching and advice to help leaders troubleshoot challenges they're having in effectively leading (e.g., personal fulfillment, meeting organizational goals)	Working in a dynamic relationship to mutually support personal fulfillment in their roles leadership effectiveness.
Groups	Facilitating groups working through structured processes toward pre-articulated outcomes.	Fostering collaborative knowledge creation in and among teams.  (In the sections below, we provide three families of methodologies that leaders can use to support this approach: Technology of Participation, Liberating Structures, Design Thinking)

## DIALOGUE WITH FOLLOWERS THROUGH INDIVIDUAL RELATIONSHIPS

A central role of leaders is engaging in various developmental relationships with their followers. These relationships need to be safe to be effective. Perceptions of leader effectiveness correlate with perceptions of psychological safety (Edmondson, Higgins, Singer & Weiner, 2016). Leaders create these conditions by establishing expectations for speaking up, creating structures that reinforce doing so, and welcoming questions and doubts through 1:1 conversations with followers. For example, raising a concern about a problem that might result in system failure, an accident, or another problem, especially when the leader might be oblivious to it. These findings indicate a relationship between being a good leader and creating a psychologically safe climate for employees at all levels of a hierarchy.

Diagnostic relationships focus more squarely on helping employees meet organizational goals and personal goals as they align with organizational outcomes. Dialogic approaches encourage a multifaceted focus with both organizational and personal goals emerging through conversations. In other words, a leader taking a dialogic approach to developmental relationships with a follower would feel no need for a strict focus on encouraging development that relates directly to one's organizational goals. For example, a manager could support an employee with an outside hobby or interest. Although not immediately apparent, the hobby could provide a more well-rounded perspective that allows the employee to contribute new insights to their work indirectly.

Swart (2015) explains that dialogic approaches to coaching provide space for meaning-making through authentic curiosity and questions that produce narratives that allow people being coached to arrive at new understandings of themselves. This process contrasts with traditional coaching practices of providing advice, asking questions that the coach already knows the answer to, or leading the person to a predetermined solution. Leaders must engage in sustained practice and skill-building to create these types of dialogic developmental relationships.

## DIALOGUE WITH OTHER LEADERS THROUGH INDIVIDUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Leaders regularly engage in developmental relationships with other leaders at various places in organizational hierarchy (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Rock & Garavan, 2006). On the diagnostic end of the spectrum, leaders provide each other with advice, access to networks, and serve as a safe space for “venting.” Taking a more dialogic perspective, leaders support each other, provide each other with differing views on reality, serve as sounding boards, and engage in generative dialogue.

Innovation can flourish when leaders from different backgrounds collaborate in finding solutions. Complex problems benefit from bringing together people of different perspectives, disciplines, and expertise to discover something new. To benefit from dialogue with other leaders, leaders should open themselves to not having the answers. They can be willing to step outside of the human tendency of looking primarily to others with similar opinions. Higher quality answers frequently lie in the intersectional boundaries of multiple players within the organization. Seeing others whose viewpoints may be different as important colleagues rather than competitors opens possibilities for challenges emerging from paradox so plentiful in today’s environment. Edmondson (2012) describes “teaming” as a verb, “It is a dynamic activity, not a bounded, static entity” (p 13).

## DIALOGUE TO FOSTER GROUP LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE CREATION

At its core, OD fosters change through groups. We contend that this application of developmental relationships has the most potential for creating new knowledge to sustain organizations. New knowledge emerges from encountering and dealing with things differently. Today's knowledge workers are constantly confronted with new challenges for which they do not have ready answers. Learning and driving in this context requires an openness to failure in which experimentation and learning can occur. This challenges leaders to create psychologically safe cultures that expect and reward problem

solving, tolerate and constructively manage conflict and risk, and stand ready to make changes as new learning occurs.

Considering how to create cultures that foster group learning and knowledge creation, mindset is an important factor for leaders. Schwarz (2006), calling on the work of Argyris and Shön (1996) cautions against a mentality of unilateral control - noting that leaders typically are unaware of how they make decisions. Through careful introspection and feedback from group members, leaders can help identify behaviors that contradict expressed values (Schwarz, 2016).

An example of the intersection of collaborating across different disciplines and having an open mindset played out in the impossible challenge presented by the 2010 rescue of 33 miners trapped in a copper mine collapse in northern Chile. Based on interviews with key leaders of the rescue, Rashid, Edmondson, and Leonard (2003) explain that while leaders often feel torn between directive and empowering, this tension is natural. Effective leaders balance giving orders, being decisive, and shutting down discussion by providing time for exploration, ideation, and asking questions. They do not err too much on one extreme or the other. Extending earlier organizational theorists' work, they developed a model of directing and enabling through envisioning, enrolling, and engaging. Approaches like this provide a framework for helping leaders foster group learning and action in a dialogical way.

In some cases, leaders may decide to convene cross-functional groups or even cross-organization groups (i.e., multi-constituent convenings) to bring in perspectives outside of an immediate team or organization (Gordezky, 2015). Such convenings can help groups address complex, adaptive challenges, encourage diversity of thought, and provide dialogue that helps groups move beyond trade-offs or either/or decisions. Dialogical approaches to OD offer an array of tools for facilitating knowledge creation in the shifting environment in which most organizations exist.



# THEORY-BASED TOOLS FOR GROUP KNOWLEDGE CREATION

Lipshitz, Popper, and Friedman (2007) contend that popular organizational learning approaches come across as mysticized, making organizational learning seem unachievable. Considering that criticism, we provide three families of methodologies that have achieved widespread adoption while aligning with dialogic OD (Nelson & Nelson, 2017; Liedkta, 2018; Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2016). These methodological families are not frequently discussed together in the literature and provide unique ways for leaders to approach problem-solving. Each method originates from different sectors while rooted in practices that place dialogue as essential in the meaning-making process. Leaders can use these tools to help groups address challenges in various types of situations. To provide readers with the context for applying these methods, we provide a case example for each from our own professional experiences. Given the focus of the chapter, we provide examples using these methods as leaders rather than as consultants or outside facilitators.

Each varies in the degree of predetermined structure, with Technology of Participation being the most structured, Liberating Structures being less regimented, and Design Thinking being the most flexible and fluid. For each, we provide a real-life case example to illustrate how these families of methods might be used in practice.

## TECHNOLOGY OF PARTICIPATION

Technology of Participation (ToP) is a family of methods structured to begin at a tangible beginning point, include everyone's voice to discover deeper meaning, find areas of agreement, and build practical plans that groups will own. ToP methods originated in the 1950s and resulted in a method of "experiential phenomenology" to develop group wisdom and understanding (Nelson & Nelson, 2017). As such, OD practitioners frequently use its tools and processes based on ToP's community development philosophy of radical openness and inquiry.

The ToP methods arose from a study of phenomenology by an ecumenical Christian student group at the University of Texas at Austin in the 1950s (Nelson & Nelson, 2017). That work continued in the 1960s as several members formed what would become the Institute of Cultural Affairs in Chicago (Stanfield, 2000). The new group would go on to build a federation of institutes working on community development and training around the world.

Heidegger (as cited in Nelson & Nelson, 2017) explains the purpose of phenomenology as to “let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (p. 4). Nelson and Nelson contend that sentence contains three critical foundations of phenomenology, which form a basis for ToP: (a) intentional focus, (b) radical openness, and (c) methods of inquiry. ToP processes involve an iterative examination of a topic through asking questions, incorporating objective and subjective information to expand thinking, and exploring themes by synthesizing them into understanding.

The structure employed in ToP requires an inclusive process and respect for all participants and their ideas. It begins with describing the phenomenon (the topic) to ground it in as concrete a manner as possible. This description develops a shared objective reality. Questions invite information taken in through the senses (external data processed internally through the senses), to focus on the thing itself, free of assumptions, biases, and attached stories. This stage fixes the conversation on a tangible thing rather than abstractions and elicits a rich diversity of observations. Responses at this stage make clear what the conversation is and is not about. The second round of questions asks participants to add their internal reactions to the topic, which elicits reactions and experience with the topic and data just shared. These questions evoke memories, associations, intuitions, and invite participants to take in the full scope of tangible and experiential responses to inform their thinking. The third round of questions helps participants integrate the information to start making collective sense of it, focusing on raising possibilities, options, insights, and meaning. The final stage calls for action, which can include the decision to be made (individual or collective, depending on the topic), the thoughts to be adjusted, and next steps to be taken. This framework of focused conversation (i.e., objective, reflective, interpretive, decisional—ORID)

serves as the foundational structure (“applet”) that can be recombined and repurposed in many ways.

The Focused Conversation Method uses series of questions to help group members expand their thinking, increase awareness of perspectives beyond their own, and allows them to explore possibilities collectively. The method’s purpose is to broaden awareness in the group. The format can apply to a single conversation or a framework for a meeting, a report, conference, or an event.

The ORID applet can be combined in a nested fashion of small rapid cycle iterations to help a group discover areas of agreement that allow them to move forward together. Such a design makes up another core ToP method, the consensus workshop. Members of the Institute of Cultural Affairs built on the early concept of brainstorming by applying Gestalt Psychology within a group process (Stanfield, 2002). By organizing and processing brainstorming ideas, groups make sense of individual ideas to create a cohesive whole understanding. A consensus workshop is a highly structured method for eliciting differing perspectives and possibilities and enabling the group to distill the options that work for them in a unified way.

A third popular method in ToP, action planning, combines the Focused Conversation and Consensus Workshop Methods with a structure for creating an action-oriented timeline. The process provides a collaborative process for action planning that helps a group convert their ideas into action. The value underlying this approach is that the group has the knowledge, wisdom, and ability to create processes they will own and improve performance.

ToP methods training is widely available with a major focus for equipping leaders with skills to build highly engaged teams capable of creative, adaptive work. ToP methods provide a framework for fostering developmental relationships through a highly structured, straightforward process for helping groups embrace ambiguity by using steps that help groups feel comfortable and supported.

## Case Example: Leading a Large Health Department Program by Empowering Clear Thinking”

A program director in a large California county health department applies ToP processes broadly in her department and develops her staff in learning how to apply them in their work. When COVID-19 lockdowns struck in California, staff did not know what to do next with offices closed and working from home. The director knew their service population would quickly experience lack of access to food. She engaged her team in exploring options to address the issue and reached out to community partners. She focused her team on food insecurity and engaging staff and partners in considering how they could handle the situation. Using a focused conversation, she engaged colleagues from six different organizations in a review of the problem. Within two days, they identified what their programs could do, explored ways to simplify and standardize a message for accessing the various program services, approved language for a joint flyer with partners, and received support for printing 60,000 copies of the flyer. Using a focused conversation approach, she had helped coalition members focus attention on reality, process the implications, explore options, and choose a path. These partners were able to rapidly implement a strong community-wide response involving multiple agencies and public, private, and informal resources because of this leader’s grasp of a method to engage productive thinking.

As conditions shifted, she and her team turned attention to the plans they were charged with implementing that they could no longer do. She used the Focused Conversation and Consensus Workshop Methods to explore ways to repurpose their efforts. In short order, the team identified new strategies to connect with clients and gain deeper understanding of their situation. Based on new information, the team set out to discover things they could do and rethink training for online delivery.

This leader’s drive to fully engage her team in rising to their best thinking is exemplified by her direction, “don’t bring me a problem or a proposed solution until you have taken it through an ORID and can demonstrate you have thought about it.” She has provided opportunities for fostering developmental relationships among her

staff to learn ToP methods, models use of them herself and encourages staff to regularly use ToP methods to elicit clear thinking and consensus in their work internally and with partners. Her leadership is not about designing programs for the team. It is about helping the team focus on where they want to be and inviting their best thinking in how to get there.

## LIBERATING STRUCTURES

Liberating Structures provides a decentralized set of tools for infusing dialogue and harnessing creativity within small groups. The structures form a toolkit of scalable and flexible group facilitation processes for various situations. Lipmanowicz and McCandless (2016) present Liberating Structures as a vast alphabet that can be combined to address various situations. They contrast that with the five-letter alphabet most groups use to work together: presentation, managed discussion, status updates, open discussion, and brainstorming. These tools are like molecules that, when combined, form a meaningful group process.

This family of methods arose in the early 2000s through Lipmanowicz and McCandless' engagement with the Plexus Institute (Liberating Structures, n.d.). That work led them to consider lessons from complexity science for working with organizations. Qua and McCandless (2020) describe this as using an ecosystem metaphor instead of a machine metaphor. That metaphor aligns with the literature on dialogic OD. From a learning theory perspective, the method's conceptual roots are in dialogue and collaborative learning espoused by scholars such as Dewey, Bruner, Piaget, and Montessori (Lipmanowicz, Singhal, McCandless, & Wang, 2015). Their work started with rough group process prototypes tested in healthcare settings, followed by further fieldwork in business settings in Latin America (Liberating Structures, n.d.). The initial concept was to provide simple structures for group innovation, attract rather than compel participation, and include and unleash large groups to increase ownership of solutions.

The structures generally address five types of goals through facilitated processes that include small group discussion and harvesting of the wisdom from small groups (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2016):

- Discovering everyday solutions – for problem-solving and coordinating in regular types of meetings
- Noticing patterns together – making meaning of changes occurring
- Unleashing local action – identifying ways for each person to take action
- Drawing out prototypes – quickly developing mini-solutions that can be combined and refined
- Spreading innovation – disseminating ideas and scaling them to higher levels

At their core, Liberating Structures provide a flexible set of small group processes that deemphasize the role of outside facilitator or consultant (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2016). With one or two workshops, members of an organization can be trained on the method's fundamentals and can use them in various settings. Leaders can weave Liberating Structures into group sessions as an additional structure for eliciting and harvesting small groups' wisdom. Leaders can use them for fostering developmental relationships among groups and organizations. Because of their embrace of complexity and emergent group wisdom, they support the basis of dialogic OD in creating new collective futures rather than moving toward a pre-determined outcome.

### Case Example: Fostering a Culture of Learning Across Silos in a State Agency

A former student of Rod's learned Liberating Structures and applied it in her OD role supporting senior leadership at a state agency. The agency had been known for bureaucratic inflexibility and had an entrenched culture of taking a compliance-oriented approach in supporting local service providers throughout the state. Due to a variety of external changes, the agency needed to shift its approach from a punitive compliance orientation to having a developmental, consultative approach in supporting local agencies. With this new approach came a need for learning across agency silos, collaborating, and learning from those in the field. Regular cross-division sessions allowed anyone in the agency to learn and collaborate through

initiating developmental relationships with those outside of their usual workgroups. They used Liberating Structures to provide a developmental structure for discovering solutions, noticing patterns, unleashing action, drawing out new ways of working and spreading innovation (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2016).

One example emerged when the agency responded to a new federal mandate that dictated significant changes in administering multiple federal programs. The new mandate required a significant shift in service delivery, and a couple of divisions within the agency were grappling with how to address it. The internal facilitation team provided conversation café as a way for participants to make sense of large-scale, unexpected changes. They ran multiple conversation cafés with employees at various levels of the organization. They captured take-aways from each café. At the end of the entire process, they held a larger session where they shared the take-aways from each session and used the open space Liberating Structure to provide employees a space to explore the implications of the take-aways for how these changes should best be addressed. This process directly resulted in knowledge creation that led to substantial changes and innovations that would not have happened if mid and lower-level staff had not been involved in collaborating across silos.

The leadership team in this agency set out to provide mechanisms and structures to reshape the agency's culture through persistent, structured collaboration opportunities. They used Liberating Structures as one of the approaches to achieve that change, which unleashed individual employees at all levels to collaborate, learn with and from each other. This shift also sparked the curiosity and imagination of multiple managers, who decided to use these methods in their teams, providing a space to use Liberating Structures to support group-level knowledge development.

## DESIGN THINKING

Design thinking is a human-centered approach to innovation. The term describes a popular family of methodologies that put empathy for the end-user at the center of organizational problem solving (Lockwood & Papke, 2018). The approach can roughly trace its origins to the early

industrial revolution with engineers who tried to make products better for the people experiencing them rather than merely finding technological solutions (Brown, 2019). These engineers balanced “technical, commercial, and human considerations” (p. 8). This balance remains key for design thinking.

Compared with the other two families of methods, design thinking does not have clear historical roots. The influences are varied and across organizations and groups. An early pioneer in design thinking, Stanford University embedded three concepts into their Mechanical Engineering Department's innovation curricula as far back as the 1950s: creative thinking, visual thinking, and ambidextrous thinking (von Thienen, Clancey, & Corazza, 2017). These processes were primarily influenced by John Arnold, who refined these concepts at MIT and Stanford. Arnold was one of the first authors to use the term design thinking in 1959 (von Thienen, Clancey, & Corazza, 2017).

The design firm IDEO has used human-centered design since its founding. Eventually, IDEO began supporting clients on work outside of product design in areas such as corporate reorganizations and alternative learning environments (Brown, 2019). That led them to use the term design thinking to distinguish from the practices associated with elite lifestyle magazines and modern art. In contrast to idealized versions of design and innovation, design thinking focuses on innovation that “find the sweet spot of feasibility, viability, and desirability while considering the real needs and desires of people” (IDEO Design Thinking, 2020, para 2). IDEO has played a major role in the worldwide popularization of design thinking.

Various models of design thinking exist. Stanford’s 5-part process is arguably the most widely used: (a) empathize, (b) define, (c), ideate, (d) prototype, (e) test. Stanford’s d.school shares its resources in an open-source environment, making them widely used and popular: <https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources>. Other widely-used models include IDEO’s framework (Brown & Wyatt, 2010), which includes three “spaces”: (a) inspiration, (b) ideation, and (c) implementation. This model devotes somewhat more attention to implementation than the Stanford model. The implementation phase includes communication (internal and external), storytelling, and variations of this model include business model development. Liedtka and Ogilvie’s (2011) model provides a different syntax from the other two models, with groups

moving through four questions: (a) What is?, (b) What if? (c) What wows?, and (d) What works?.

Each of these models has some common characteristics. First, they have a deep interest in empathy for the end-user, the person for whom the product or service is designed. Second, they each embrace ambiguity, generative activity, and emergent design. Lastly, the processes are not linear and demand heavy collaboration among designers, clients, and potential users.

Leaders using these approaches need some training in the specifics of design thinking methods. However, leaders taking a dialogic approach to developmental relationships will find they can more easily foster the openness and empathetic stance that design thinking demands. Both dialogic OD and design thinking embrace an iterative, open-ended approach to change in which change is ongoing, emergent, and without pre-determined results. An essential practice in design thinking is rapid prototyping and continual collaboration with users and team members throughout a process. These practices provide repeated opportunities for dialogue and the breaking down of silos (Lockwood & Papke, 2018). This form of dialogue is new in many established organizations. It requires leaders who cultivate a group's ability to transcend traditional boundaries, trust that rapid failure provides valuable data, and foster group ownership of melded solutions rather than early adaptation and choices. IDEO partner Michael Hendrix distinguishes between the “theater of innovation” where design thinking is performed superficially and those cultures that provide safe, playful environments where it thrives (Schwab, 2018). Liedtka found that a benefit of design thinking across sectors involves slowing down to engage in deep dialogue about what an actual problem is rather than jumping to a solution (Liedtka, 2018). Leaders must create psychologically safe environments for this form of dialogic OD to succeed, which design thinking helps to facilitate (Liedtka, 2018). Design thinking can be used as a tangible method and shared language for leaders cultivating distributed innovation within a team or organization.

### Case Example: Designing and Growing a University School for the Future

One of us (Rod) was hired by a mid-sized university to lead the start-up of a new school of education presence on a long-established law

school campus, which was being transformed into a comprehensive graduate campus. The charge was to create an innovative school of education of the future. The dean and upper administration saw it as a prototype for what the school of education might become. The first program launched as a hybrid online/face-to-face EdD for working professionals. From the beginning, design thinking served as the program development process for interviews, research, brainstorming, prototyping, co-creation with students, and testing to prepare for the initial program's launch. The initial process (from day 1 to having students on the ground) was less than 4 months, which was likely a record within this particular university.

Throughout the first year, Rod facilitated the development of a team of faculty and staff by helping them use empathy-based approaches to develop unique ways of engaging in doctoral education (e.g., non-traditional dissertation models, alternative budget model, a multi-sector learning pipeline focus). Not all of the approaches to the program worked and some were abandoned or modified quickly. The launch team saw each new approach as a learning experiment rather than as a high-stakes success or failure. For example, the multi-sector systems thinking focus for education was modified. Today, we do not have an explicit focus on the learning pipeline (i.e., preschool to education for workforce and citizenry) and instead focus on cultivating an environment where students from multiple sectors learn with and from each other about leading and innovating. Neither systems thinking nor the education pipeline remain as such central elements of the curriculum. The program continued using multiple design thinking cycles and experiments for this particular program and other programs launched on this campus over the years.

Throughout this process, faculty and staff were developed so that they could take on innovation experiments themselves and the group enabled each other to adopt a design thinking mindset through engaging in developmental relationships. Through new hiring and development of faculty and staff, other team members had more knowledge and expertise in design thinking than Rod. Curricular, program, and recruitment experiments happen multiple times a year and are now led by various members of the team. In other words, the group embraced an emergent perspective on collectively running the program and continually shifts its approach to respond in an empathy-based way to the needs of end-users (i.e.,

students). Rod's role eventually expanded to facilitating the development and redevelopment of programs school-wide on both campuses. Today the entire school looks very different than it did in 2015, both because of using design thinking and because of other OD processes. After Rod moved back to a full-time faculty role in January 2020, design thinking remained a core practice and is used as a foundation for quickly responding to changing conditions.

## CONCLUSIONS

Technical solutions to complex challenges result in missed opportunities, frustration, or failure. This chapter addressed how leaders can foster developmental relationships in such contexts through OD with individuals, peers, and groups. We described the need for an environment of psychological safety for developmental relationships to succeed through three group-level dialogic approaches to foster engagement change. The three families of methods provide specific yet flexible strategies for engaging groups to identify and test emergent solutions.

The recurring overreliance on technical/diagnostic approaches to change has come at a high cost to individuals, organizations, and society. In our time of health, economic, cultural, and climate disruption, significant adaptations in organizational life and goals are necessary for long-term sustainability. The ability to innovate and execute requires learning and adjusting at all levels. Organizations, and leaders within them, are most likely to be successful when employees understand the importance of the mission, feel invested in that mission's success, and have their observations welcomed and respected. With that level of safety, learning and experimentation can occur through the approaches to the types of dialogue we described.



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