Joan Goppelt and Keith W. Ray
with commentary by Patricia Shaw

17

Dialogic Process Consultation

Working Live

Opening Scene

Fade in . . . dining room of CEO's house at 9 a.m. Six people are sitting around the dining-room table. Two flip charts are set up. Two cats are lying lazily on the windowsill. Bright sun and a cool breeze, typical fall coastal weather. . . .

Sitting around the table are:

Brad: CEO of Durant, a small engineering firm
Trent: Head of HR at Durant
Julie: Internal OD at Durant
Bridget: Internal OD at Durant
You: External Consultant
Your Partner: External Consultant

After pleasant greetings, the meeting begins.

Brad: OK. We're here to talk about restarting the leadership development program. So whatcha got for me? *(with a slight New York accent)*

Julie: Here is our agenda. *(She hands out the agenda to everyone.)* I thought we would brainstorm some requirements first. Then discuss how we can align what we're doing to the company. Then we can outline a plan for getting there.

Brad: *(sitting back in his chair)* I don't care how you align. I want to know what *value* you are going to bring to the company and the people.

Trent: But Brad, aren't those the same thing? *(sighing, looking frustrated)*

Brad: Not to me. I will need to argue to the board to get this effort kicked off and the directors are going to have to buy in too. It's not just going to be my thing.

Julie: *(looking perplexed)* If we were aligned with the company goals, wouldn't people buy into that?

Brad: *(leaning forward)* Look, you will need to convince the directors at our October meeting that this is something worth investing in and their investment will provide some value to a defined measureable objective. I don't want to brainstorm requirements. I want you to propose what you have and make the case to me. I'm the CEO, you should come prepared with a value proposition. *(Julie exchanges looks with Bridget.)*

Bridget: I thought that we were going to come out of today with a basic outline of the program you are looking for. We really haven't talked with you much lately and so we don't know what your vision is for the program. We only discussed this once with you about a month ago. I thought we needed to discuss your vision first so that we get you what you want. That is why we thought you called our consultants back in. *(nodding toward you and your partner)* so they could help us understand the vision when they worked with us before.

Brad: *(shuffling through papers)* In your last email you said you wouldn't kick off the program for a year and a half. Why would we wait that long? I need something with definitive plans and structure before we commit funds and this is the time of year we commit those funds. You have been giving classes and getting "I liked it" feedback, but that isn't what I would call a value proposition. *(Julie, Bridget, and Trent are looking at each other. Trent shrugs his shoulders. Julie crosses her arms.)*

Bridget: If we understand more of what you want, we can get to the "whos," the "hows," and the "whys." Isn't that what you are looking for?

Brad: *(getting agitated)* I expected the "whys" and the "hows" to have been discussed before you got here. I expected a notional plan to be presented. Not develop it here!

(A tense pause. Bridget and Trent are glancing at you.)

Acting in the Living Present

If you were in the previous scene, how would you respond? What would your next move be? Similar scenes play out daily in our lives as consultants and members of organizations and as they do we must continuously make meaning, take action, and relate to one another. Such activities of relating do not, in our experience, call for a model, theory, or standard process. What is called for is a type of praxis; a way of acting into the everyday forms of relating that create our social world.

A Search for Resonance

In this chapter we will describe our practice through detailed scenes and broader reflections that track and reveal how we think and what we do. Our

aim is to reveal a distinctive practice in the field of process consultation first distinguished by Edgar Schein (1969) and which he refined and reformulated in 1999 . For the purposes of this chapter we will call what we are doing Dialogic Process Consultation (DPC), although this name is not currently used as a reference for this practice and we are not aware of any other names. The editors of this book suggested it. We believe that what we do is recognizable to a growing cadre of practitioners who would see themselves moving in a similar direction although they would likely describe how they think and act in different ways,. We will describe how we might identify that direction as we progress through the chapter. Many of us have been inspired by the work of Ralph Stacey, John Shotter, and Patricia Shaw, to name just a few. We refer you to Chapter 7 by Ralph Stacey, who offers further conceptual orientation for the approach we are taking.

We will not define a model of DPC, nor will we define ideal principles of practice or a specific process that can be enacted when performing DPC, and argue for your agreement. As Wittgenstein stated about practice, "not only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice. Our practice leaves loop-holes, and the practice has to speak for itself" (Wittgenstein 1969, 21e). Following this logic, we will describe a montage of examples with the hope that through the overlapping and incomplete vignettes, a larger practice will begin to speak for itself. More to the point, we will describe how we have moved away from special processes and situations toward working in the everyday communicative actions that people engage in as they organize themselves. We are not trying to define a standard by which people do things or should do things. Instead, we hope to identify some specific practices and heuristics for engaging and helping people in organizational life that pay special attention to our processes of relating and sense making. We describe a way of working that we believe has profound implications for how a consultant engages with a client or group, or the larger world for that matter.

The chapter concludes with a commentary by Patricia Shaw, who in reading our text listens for what "strikes chords" with her as key aspects of a practice that emphasizes working emergently with organizational phenomena—a practice she calls "working live."

Back to Our Opening Scene

As we continue with the opening scene, we (Keith and Joan) assume the identities of the external consultants.

> *Keith:* Well, given that we are all here now, how about we share some ideas given our recent work on the East Coast? *(looking hopefully at everyone)* Granted we only talked with ten people, but we found it interesting.

—-1
—0
—+1

Joan: (looking at Brad) Once we get some ideas out, I think we might be able to outline the sort of value proposition you are looking for, Brad. *(Looking at Bridget and Julie)* Bridget and Julie, you can add your observations along with ours.

Bridget: Sounds good to me. I'm curious what you guys saw while you were back there. *(Julie nods slowly, looks down at her notebook and begins to write. Trent opens up his computer to begin to take notes.)*

Brad: We need something by October and that's only a few weeks off. *(pausing)* I am interested in what you heard and what ideas you might have.

Keith: (diving right in) Some of the East Coast employees were sharing stories about the West Coast regarding project TRP. As you recall, this project has several companies involved, from both coasts, and is quite political. They were saying how frustrated they were when the new edict came out about configuration management. Now, we know that the person who developed that particular policy is another Durant employee out here, but they didn't know that. Perhaps there is opportunity for Durant to connect employees working on the same project even though they work in different divisions?

Brad: (looking doubtful) Well, what do you think that would get us?

Joan: (quickly responding) It might create ways for you to add more value to the customer. Right now your TRP program manager may have to deal with a teaming issue between the two coasts that's taking time away from focusing on the project. If Durant employees were able to work things out on their own, then the customer wouldn't need to get as involved. Would it be worthwhile to have a reputation out there about Durant that you work together seamlessly?

Brad: (slowly and thoughtfully) Well, it doesn't really matter what our reputation is with the customers we work with, since someone else will write the contract. But I can see that we could connect people across the life cycle of a project differently. I don't know how to do that.

Fade out. . . .

Jumping into the Flow

Life does not "fade in" like the scene with which we began this chapter. It is a constant flow in which one thing always leads to the next. Any "scene" is an extension of a previous "scene" that we may see as more or less connected to the current one. History matters, and how we got "here" is as much part of the meaning making as what is happening in the moment.

We know we will not be able to fully comprehend what is happening, but must react nonetheless. We must react, and our reaction will elicit other reactions in such a way as to create some unfolding of the scene and larger dramas

to which this scene belongs. Our attention is with the scene in its unfolding, and our intention is to contribute constructively to that unfolding.

Each interaction is an entry point into an ongoing web of conversations. We jump into the flow, reacting with the intent to create movement forward. We draw on what we have at hand, we grab the resources that come to mind for us, and use them to make what we can. We are both enabled and constrained by the conversations, stories, narratives, and discourses that we have each engaged in or sustained through our telling and referring, and we must use these to make meaning and coordinate our activities together. We are making our social world as we jump into this flow (Pearce 2007).

Cocreating with Whatever Is at Hand

John Shotter (1993) refers to our joint action of sense making as coauthoring history. As authors we create a landscape of enabling constraints, a network of moral commitments, and argue for this landscape with each other. Because we cannot merely author fictions, our creations must be grounded in shared experience and coherent meaning—thus we must feel our way forward, staying in touch with the way our circumstances are developing.

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) drew on art and craft work to coin the term *bricolage*. He described how people pull together whatever myriad of materials they have at hand to construct something useful. These "bricoleurs" take seemingly junk items and make order from the disordered. The process of creation is not based on a set of fully formed theories of operation of the parts or the whole but more of a trial-and-error approach. The end result can be both artistic and useful. Frank Barrett argues that organizational life requires bricolage,""fumbling around, experimenting, and patching together an understanding of problems from bits and pieces of experience, improvising with materials at hand" (2012, 27). As we work with others to piece together an emergent shared meaning and action, we are performing as bricoleurs in constructing our social worlds. We use our collective stories, narratives, discourse, descriptions, explanations, and context to cocreate something. Sometimes it is something new and creates possibilities for novel action.

This brings us to important ways we think about intention, outcomes, evaluation, and control. As we fumble around towards creating a social world in DPC we are doing so as part of the everyday conversational flow and not as something separate. We do not intentionally create special situations with special rules, but rather engage in the mostly unstructured world that is organizational life (Ray and Goppelt 2013). We are not saying that some of the more structured forms of Dialogic OD (Busche and Marshak 2014) are not useful. We are merely describing how we approach engagement. Though

—-1
—0
—+1

some may desire a more predictable and controllable situation or process, our experience is that when we have attempted to create "specialness" in order to increase the likelihood of success or to maintain control we missed something important and vital to our humanness. As Shotter noted:

> Indeed, the power of prediction and control, a power that we can locate solely within ourselves as individuals, is not without its attractions. However, it still leaves us ignorant of the ordinary, everyday ways in which we do in fact relate ourselves to the others and othernesses around us. We remain unacquainted with the ways in which we do in fact come to a grasp of the unique character of the unique people and the unique circumstances in relation with which, in practice, we live our daily lives. . . . But to arrive at this kind of essentially practical knowledge, rather than at an understanding of regularities and repetitions, of generalities and abstractions, we need to arrive at unique understandings of unique persons and of unique, never-again-to-be-repeated events. For these are the kind of understandings that enables us to go on in particular, practical situations. (Shotter 2005, 110)

DPC is an attempt to help people "go on in particular, practical situations" in a manner that creates a better social world. How do we know that this bricolage is something better? How do we know that we are working toward a better social world? We can begin to see people engage more optimistically. People are more certain about the next step, while sometimes being less certain about the future. People express hope in the promise of what is next: "I think this is the right move even though I don't know where it will lead us." Whether these interactions create something better is usually only known in retrospect. However, there is a quality to the conversation that speaks to excitement and possibility even though it is not always clear that the future will be better.

Weaving Conversations

Returning to Durant, we wanted to continue to build upon the conversation that had just occurred, so we scheduled a series of follow-up conversations that included others. These were intentional yet unfolding sense-making episodes. Our role became that of conversation weavers, taking strands developed in one conversation into the other. In order to provide something to react to, we wrote a paper that described the ideas from the initial conversation. At the next directors' meeting, which we were not able to attend, that paper was discussed. We strongly resisted any attempt to abstract bullet points for PowerPoint presentations for the directors. Instead, we wanted them to engage through reading the paper and discussion. The directors exchanged re-

-1—
0—
+1—

actions and thoughts and were told that we would be contacting each of them to continue the discussion. After collecting ideas and reactions, we wrote and distributed an addendum to the original paper. We then held a meeting with everyone. Our role was to host, weave, and pose questions for the next steps. We began the meeting with the question, "What thoughts came as you read through the addendum?" We resisted any urge to summarize or "report out," and instead responded to their thoughts, impressions, and concerns.

We settled on an initial set of tasks, some of which we led as external consultants, some of which internal OD led, some of which human resources was the focus, and some of which the directors would primarily engage in. Tasks with distinct beginnings and endings help all of us stay coordinated in our work together. They provide us with a legitimate space to continue to engage and work into the flow of the everyday conversation. We frame the tasks as ways to participate in the flows, with the tasks being the next moves, as we learn our way forward. All of the tasks are short term (less than three months) with the expectation that through these tasks we will learn the next move. Instead of building toward an ideal state, the tasks are a way to coauthor what we create next.

Being Poised for Surprise

Another scene several months later:

Fade in. . . .
Joan is at her home office, dogs lying at her feet, holiday decorations up in the background. She is on the phone with Brad discussing some final details of the proposals for furthering the work with Durant.

> *Joan:* So from your email, Brad, it looks like you have a few more questions, I think I've covered them in the revision I just sent. How does it look to you? *(glancing nonchalantly towards the window)*
>
> *Brad:* I think we are all set. Although I was wondering if we should include Steve in the coaching program?
>
> *Joan:* *(a bit surprised)* Well, we could. *(pause while she looks through notes)* Although I recall you mentioning that wouldn't be worthwhile given his seniority and role in the SER project, and we put SER on the back burner for now. *(looking up)* What's going on?
>
> *Brad:* His budget came in and it is obvious he is not doing what I said needed to be done. *(heavy sigh)* There is no logic to the numbers he is requesting. *(voice raised)* How does he think he can spend that when he hasn't made money yet? I was thinking coaching might help.
>
> *Joan:* What did you tell him he needed to do with the budget?

—-1
—0
—+1

Brad: (irritated) Well, it should be obvious, I told everybody the same thing. They need to demonstrate how they will make their numbers and be able to justify their expenses. Steve is hiding information from his team, and well—I'm just discarding any sales projections Steve gives me because you can't trust them.

Joan: Is this something recent you are experiencing with Steve? It seems when we talked a year or so ago you thought he was the right person for this job?

Brad: He's too optimistic and talks pie in the sky, nothing realistic or concrete. I've stopped talking with him, I told Leo: "You work with him, you know what I want."

Joan: (smiles and thinks to herself, "Well, I didn't see this one coming."*)*

Joan now became aware (rather acutely) of an ongoing background conversation that was not apparent until this call with Brad. Even though the items in the proposal did not include much effort with the SER project at Durant or Steve, this turn in the conversation provided a reason to respond differently.

In the next call with Brad, Joan began to ask more questions about SER. In addition, she paid attention to how others described what was taking place with SER. Later, Brad mentioned a meeting that was scheduled with most of the SER team. Joan asked if Brad thought it would be good for her to attend. Brad had not considered that before, but now appreciated the idea and the benefits of having Joan there. Joan helped Brad develop the agenda for the meeting. Joan was careful not to take over creating the agenda, but instead had a series of phone calls with Brad in which he would write up his thoughts about the meeting in an agenda format, and then revise it after they spoke. Joan viewed the "agenda" not as the product or outcome, but as a way to interact with Brad (Billing 2009). At the same time, these interactions formed and informed each other's perspectives on what was happening and what could happen.

Being in the In-Between

At the meeting, Joan in part played the role of facilitator, but not in the traditional sense of a neutral process manager (Schwarz 1994). Joan asked questions that she was curious about, often asking for more description or examples. She used her own curiosity to guide when she spoke and when she remained quiet. She did not offer any ground rules (Ray and Goppelt 2013). She also offered the conclusions she was drawing and exposing what she was thinking, which in turn often caused others to do the same. At the same time she performed the motions of facilitation by capturing key agreements on flip charts and checking periodically to see if the conversation was remaining useful for those attending.

Importantly, Joan made it a point to meet with the managers outside of the formal meeting room. She would catch them individually at breakfast at the hotel, set lunch dates, or arrange for common transportation to and from the airport. All of these moves were attempts or experiments to experience the "in-between."

As a result of this meeting, another sequence of conversations occurred. As the reader might recall, the initial request from Brad was to offer coaching to Steve. Instead, Joan explored multifaceted ways of interacting with more than just Steve, to experience and at the same time influence the flow of meaning and coherence.

Being in Tune to the Emergent Present

As we relate with DPC, we experience an intriguing emergence of possibilities. Visibly engaging into an unknown, yet constructing a set of possible next steps through that engagement, cannot happen through observation and planning, but only through acting into and noticing responses and then taking a reciprocal responsive action. At some point there is a joint exploration, a joint curiosity, a movement in some way together with overlapping identities that is energizing and anticipatory. Through mindfulness of the "jointness" of our actions, we become focused on relationships and how those relationships create identity and power differentials (Stacey 2011). DPC is very much a relational practice (Lambrechts, et al. 2009).

Emergence, in the way we are using the term, is not an intentional teleological process of transforming into a "higher" whole of existence (Wilber 2000), but rather, as Shaw put it, "the everyday conflict of taking the next step, as we participate in the ongoing patterning of communicative action in which identity and difference of persons in society are always emerging simultaneously" (2002, 156). Our identities shift and flow from episode to episode as we negotiate how we are positioned and how we position others.

Avoiding the Siren Song of the Abstract

As DPC consultants we are mindful of how positioning is taking place with others and us. We had been working for about a year with a company to help improve collaboration among senior managers when another consultant, William, whose company offered specialized services and training, met with the CEO and some of the other managers participating in the effort. We were there as well. The meeting started with some sharing of ongoing activities and what was being learned, with some tentative suggestions of what could or should be done next. William went to the whiteboard and began to ask the group questions about the current state and future state. He was encouraging

—-1
—0
—+1

and in some ways challenging them to define what work culture they wanted to create and how that would close the gaps on the issues they had with the current state. He asserted that without that clarity they could not realistically move forward. We observed the conversations change among the participants. They began to mention characteristics of work culture in abstract terms that were hard to argue or debate, such as "open communication," "more trust," "more collaborative," and "less stress." They also began to talk only to William and not with each other. The conversation had shifted from glimpsing potential action taking together to answering the questions the "expert" consultant was asking.

Discussing, understanding, and agreeing to abstract concepts and principles are attractive activities for people in many organizations. Abstract thinking and communicating is like the call of the Sirens of Greek mythology. There is beauty in the rationality and internal consistency of abstract concepts and at the same time there is a danger of losing one's way. When consumed by abstract thinking, people often deny their own lived experience, history, and context; in other words, the messiness of life. As Vern Cronen argued, we must take seriously and recapture our experience (Cronen 1995).

One Thing Leads to Another

ITA is a software development and test organization of about six hundred people. The chief financial officer of ITA wanted to improve communication internally and requested our help. As we were talking with people about communications we heard people explain and describe other issues, primarily dissatisfaction and frustration regarding a new project lead role. As people brought up the project lead role, we would ask questions to elicit examples and stories and ask for their thoughts or ideas about why the new project lead role was not working or why it was needed in the first place. In some cases these ideas were contradictory. We wrote up what we had heard as a set of thirteen "hypotheses." We used the term "hypothesis" deliberately because it had a useful meaning within the engineering and scientific community within which we were working.

Making the World

One important perspective with Dialogic OD in general and with DPC in particular is that the world is made, not found. If objects in the world preexist our finding them, then good scientists see it as their duty to fully name, describe, and classify them and to get it right. If events and objects in the world are made, then "more complex responses are possible" (Pearce 2009, 34). Hypotheses are usually formed to test our beliefs about a world that we

find. On the one hand, discussing hypotheses with an engineering and scientific community was an easy and coherent conversation. On the other hand, we took a risk in discussing hypotheses with the group because we did not hold the same perspective on the world. If we had held the same worldview, we would have set about developing ways to test each hypothesis. Since we saw the world as made, we needed to nudge our clients in a slightly different direction.

We then met with the lead of the organization with this recommendation: "We are not saying all or some of these hypotheses are 'true' or 'false.' Our perspective is that most are at play in some way. Rather than attempt to determine which hypothesis is 'most true' it may be more useful to assume there is worthiness to all of them and perform parallel activities or 'experiments' and learn what changes."

Learning Forward

"Experiments" in this sense are ways we can move forward without knowing what will happen. We try a small, easy, low-cost, low-risk action, become attentive to what responses are created, then attend to those responses. We used the term *experiment* with this client because they seemed to accept the concept, though again we had a risk of not acting coherently. We found enough ambiguity in discussing the concept of experiments that we believed they could use the idea to enable them to try some things without the need to make detailed plans with well-defined outcomes.

We also met with the team that had been assigned to write a guidebook about the new project lead role. Writing a guidebook was deemed a legitimate approach to process improvement. What was interesting to us was that this organization had many guidebooks that were not used in any practical sense in day-to-day activities. When we asked people about existing guidebooks, almost everyone claimed that they were neither used nor useful. Yet this experience was not informing the process improvement approach. We again shared our list of hypotheses gleaned through our interactions to ground them in their own experience. In this way, we were able to help them question their own narrative. Practicing DPC often requires being critical of taken-for-granted knowledge (Burr 2003).

In this case, we did not interview people expressly about the project lead issue, but instead captured this information along the way when we were interacting in other ways. We find that if we can get into this in-between talk, so that we are interacting in natural ways in the workplace, we can lend our perspective to what matters in the everyday life in the organization.

In one experiment, we invited all the employees who were filling this new project lead role to a meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to exchange

—-1
—0
—+1

confusions, successes, questions, and ways they were currently performing their role. We suspected that good practices of how to perform the role might emerge from a less structured conversation. This conversation did not have a strict agenda and we did not "facilitate" the meeting. We simply asked an opening question and let them converse with each other. We continued to ask questions, make assertions, and disclose our own confusions as they arose.

Micropractices

We attempt now to describe more concisely some of the ways we engage. Micropractices—a term coined by Patricia Shaw and her colleagues—are examples of the kind of things we do in order to coauthor the bricolage. We have named some of our micropractices and offer brief vignettes from our practice along with how we think the micropractice matters. They are interrelated and interdependent and are ways of describing patterns in the way we act and some of the meaning we make in that action. These are not to be viewed as best practice or principles of engagement in DPC, but instead fractals of an emerging but ever-changing whole.

It is important to note that these micropractices are not reified processes. There are no formulas for their use nor are there times when they are to be considered "best practices." Micropractices are not to be "applied" at an appropriate time. Their usage is called forth in the living present from a pragmatic attitude toward moving forward. Yet, paradoxically, we believe that micropractices can be intentional through mindfulness of action and relating. We use them by reflecting on action (Schön 1983) and by our own habits and patterns of interaction. The set of possible micropractices is extremely large and that of their possible descriptions even larger; therefore we invite readers to reflect on their own practices and what those practices are creating. Table 17.1 contains a summary of descriptions and relationships between the micropractices.

Reveal Your Self

At a dinner meeting with a CEO and two other board members, Joan revealed how she reacted to some of the CEO's talk during the preceding meeting. She said that she did not feel listened to and proceeded to give some examples. She asked him to repeat back the three things that she said.

This practice matters because it places us directly in the conversation. It also calls out for a reaction that enables us to be in the flow rather than just reporting on it. It is not about trying to understand the "reality" or how others feel, since it is about your own experience.

Table 17.1 Micropractices of Dialogic Process Consultation

Label	Description	Relationship to Other Practices
Reveal your self	In the moment revealing your own thoughts, feelings, and reactions, not as observations, but as a person who is in the flow of conversation with others	Dive right in, Get between the in-between, Let go of the outcome
Question the legitimate: connect talk with experience	Becoming aware and commenting when people are using abstract management concepts rather than their practical lived experience	Explode the meaning, Turn light on the shadow side of paradox
Question the beginning . . . and the end	Realizing you are always in the middle and asking for descriptions of what has preceded or what might happen next	Get between the in-between, Host the unusual in usual ways
Let go of the outcome	Reducing efforts and practices intended to control the pace and tidiness, and still actively participating in the unfolding	Host the unusual in usual ways, Reveal your self
Explode the meaning: offer alternative perspectives	Realizing plurality of meanings and becoming adept at describing alternative meanings and conclusions in ways that open up perspectives rather than argue perspectives	Reveal your self, Dive right in, Question the legitimate: connect talk with experience
Turn the light on the shadow side of paradox	Recognizing and describing the conjoined perspectives in a situation that create an impasse, naming the paradox	Question the legitimate: connect talk with experience, Explode the meaning: offer alternative perspectives
Get between the in-between	Engaging in ways that influence the day-to-day meaning making rather than positioning oneself as an outsider	Let go of the outcome, Dive right in, Question the beginning . . . and the end
Host the unusual in usual ways	Invoking processes and settings that resemble how people interact in their life outside organizations	Question the beginning . . . and the end, Let go of the outcome
Dive right in	Reducing the need for planning and talking about the work and instead just beginning to do the work with the first conversation	Reveal yourself, Get between the in-between

Question the Legitimate: Connect Talk with Experience

When a group of managers were discussing strategies, they asked a question about ROI. How would they measure it? We asked if they had ever used an ROI analysis to decide that this effort was useful and whether or not that analysis caused them to get involved. When they said no, that they used other stories, we asked them to relay their stories.

This practice matters because sometimes people follow a powerful discourse that seems the "right" thing to do, but also seems impossible to do. By connecting people with their lived experience, the paradoxes and inconsistencies between the abstract discourse (or narrative) and the concrete context of the "living present" can be revealed. This may lead to forms of acting that people feel are more authentic and practical.

Question the Beginning . . . and the End

When a manager states that he or she wants to "initiate a change" or "start something new," we may respond with, "What is this a response to?" or "What are you reacting to by doing this?" We might follow up with "When you do that what do you think will happen next? Or what can you imagine happening next?"

It is impractical to spend significant amounts of time defining an ideal end state. It is more useful to determine where in the flow this particular episode or thought stream emerged from. Using this type of questioning often brings forth different awareness of what could be created and different descriptions of what just preceded.

Let Go of the Outcome

A new department head wanted to hear how customers viewed the services provided by her department. When a customer satisfaction survey was proposed, we suggested instead that the department should host two-hour conversations in which the customers as well as the department managers talked with each other. All would sit around a table without formal presentations. The conversation would begin with an opening question—"What is it you appreciate about the services?" or "What is causing frustration or confusion?" We encouraged the participants to ask the questions and make the comments that came to mind for them and describe examples.

This practice matters because it places people in a learning mode. Not knowing what will be said or who will say it causes people to listen and react in the moment rather than using scripts based on what they think will be said or should be said. It is not about making a safe place, but about providing experience that enables people to move forward and respond to what unfolds.

Explode the Meaning: Offer Alternative Perspectives

When a manager came to us asking for advice on how to handle a difficult customer, we listened to her description of the interactions. We asked her how the other person would describe the interactions she just told us about. We then offered what we might have felt in a similar situation. This type of perspective taking can occur upon reflection or in the moment with all present.

When we get stuck with our own notion or meaning or conclusion, we narrow the alternatives for any next move. Consideration of alternative perspectives can create both confusion and novelty; confusion because the next move becomes less clear and dislodges our personal frame, novelty because moves that were not apparent before now emerge.

Turn the Light on the Shadow Side of Paradox

A group of managers explained to us how their product was unique because the people developing it had a unique (irreplaceable) set of skills and knowledge. At the same time they disclosed that their largest risk was not having a backfill strategy for key positions. When we mentioned possible ways to look for backfills, they quickly explained that it would be impossible to replace the current staff. Keith described the paradox that became evident from the discussion: their uniqueness made them valuable, even irreplaceable, and therefore the largest risk to the company.

Using paradoxical phrasing tends to move people away from either/or dichotomous positioning. It coaxes them toward a conversation that now becomes more complex by definition and less debate oriented. Turning the light on paradox is a resource to move forward differently, replacing habitual reactions that tend to hide an aspect of the paradox.

Get between the In-Between

While on-site with a client, we make it a point to meet and interact in varied and natural ways. We may pop in on people we know. We sit in on meetings. We meet with people individually, in groups, in the office, and out of the office. As everyone gets to know us, people will see one of us in the hallway and invite us into a conversation or want to bounce an idea by us, or ask when we will be on-site next.

We want to engage as much as we can in the day-to-day complexity. It is about influencing in everyday conversations that allow them to become unstuck. If we only appear at special events or when a crisis occurs we assume the identity of the "fixer," and our influence is narrowed to those episodes.

—-1
—0
—+1

Host the Unusual in Usual Ways

The executive director had assembled a large group of managers to evoke a conversation around that future. How might their work and workforce be evolving? What did they notice already and what did they suspect might happen? As the conversation gravitated towards individual monologues and responses to and from the executive director, we suggested the group take a break. We said that the break would be extended (forty-five minutes) and we suggested that the participants talk with whoever they wanted regarding the conversation so far. No one left the room; instead everyone mingled, naturally shifting towards conversations that interested them or that they wanted to initiate.

The art of natural conversation is filtered out of the ways of interacting in many organizational settings. This practice looks for things to try in the moment that bring back the skills people have to talk and interact informally. There is no expectation at the outset of what will emerge or what the reaction will be.

Dive Right in

A group of employees were hinting about an individual who would not accept the change they were proposing. They were reluctant to say the name. We asked who the person was. Obviously they all knew who they were referring to. We were the only ones who did not. When they disclosed who the person was, we began to talk and refer to this person by name. We asked them to describe how they imagined the person responding. We then offered our naïve perspectives of how we would react to what they were saying. Through this exploration they realized the unchecked assumptions they were making that were justifications for keeping the person excluded from the conversations.

In many situations we are the most naïve about conclusions drawn by others in the web of conversations that we have just joined. By asking from a place of curiosity we may create confusion as well as reveal barriers that have been constructed through a coalesced narrative. Both represent opportunities.

Ethics

As we have described, practicing DPC means consultants are closely engaged with clients, helping to change clients' social worlds, and are themselves reciprocally changed. We, as consultants, have a stake in the matter that goes beyond the transaction of payment for services. What then are we to think of ethics, and what is ethical behavior when practicing DPC?

In Bakhtin's description, "Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another I with equal rights (thou). With a monologic approach (in its extreme pure form) another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness" (Bakhtin and Emerson 1984, 292). Shotter argued that in our interacting with each other, there is an expectation, need, and ethical imperative to interact in a way that we see each other as "thou." If I sense you are not being responsive to me as a person, "that is as not being responsive to me, but as pursuing an agenda of your own, then I will feel immediately offended in an ethical way. I will feel that you lack respect not only for our affairs, but for me too." (Shotter 2005, 103).

Shotter continues that only a dialogic approach can create the immediate expressive-responsiveness that makes possible an appreciation of another consciousness other than my own and creates the sense of a "collective-we." This is an ethical position that is problematic if we try to take an objective scientific perspective of people in organizations. If, for example, we are using a generalized theory of personal or organizational change, trying to apply that theory to the situation at hand, and suggesting to a manager the means by which he or she can fix the problem, then we are at least tacitly considering "people" and "organizations" as objects of study and manipulation that we can act upon. We have felt uneasy using such theories and pulled between what we were doing and advocating and the actual people we had come to know. It was not that we thought there was some fundamental flaw in the theory, nor even that the general was not applicable to the particular, but rather that we were avoiding the humanness of our engagement. We now see this as an ethical dilemma.

By taking a DPC approach, we avoid this dilemma and directly engage with the everyday interactions, fears, hopes, and conflicts that make up organizational life. The same processes of relating that create anxiety also create our ability to help and are our guide to ethical behavior. A DPC perspective treats others as "thou" rather than "it"; it does so not with a special process that controls what ought or ought not to be said or done, for example by setting "ground rules," (Schwarz 1994) or creating a "code of ethics," (Egan and Gellerman 2005) but rather in a way that faces our paradoxical social worlds head on. One of the implications of this perspective is, as Barnett Pearce claimed, "The criteria for successful, ethical processes come from within rather than somewhere outside the communicative process itself. That is, there is no generalized definition of good that provides criteria to be met; rather, the criteria stem from the quality of the engagement." (Heath et al. 2006 345).

To be ethical, we must view "engagement"' as encompassing as many of the conversational realities as we can and not merely whoever we are conversing with at the moment. We must ask ourselves, "What are we trying to make

—-1
—0
—+1

together?" "Who will benefit?" and "Who will be harmed?" These are not merely reflective questions to be considered late at night. These are conversational seeds that can create a larger mindfulness of our identity and power and what we might do with that. We ask these questions *with* those we are engaged, not *about* them. Because we see ourselves as part of the ongoing processes of relating, these questions are asked of the collective-we and as such our own role in creation must be considered as well. There are seldom clear definitive answers to these questions, yet they can shed some light on what and how to perform the next step as we feel our way forward.

There is another aspect of DPC that elicits more authentic ethical examination. When using a special process or model, one client confided in us, she felt able to release some of her responsibility and anxiety about the outcome, since if it did not work it would be the model's problem or perhaps the consultant's problem, not hers. She went on to say that when she started working with us, she realized that she felt more confident in her own abilities as a leader to help make things better, and yet paradoxically felt less confident that things would turn out the way she wanted. Nonetheless, she felt better when working with us because she was more engaged when the process was "alive and messy." We have come to realize that by using special processes or creating special situations consultants can relieve some managers' anxiety as they "trust the process," yet or perhaps because they give up some of their responsibility. When the "outcomes" are not met both mangers and consultants can fall into a subtle, or not so subtle, blaming to explain why. Blame is placed on the process, the consultant, the managers, or if all else fails, the people in the organization who were not "bought in" or who were "resistant."

When practicing DPC, consultants, managers, and anyone who is engaged are invited to take a shared responsibility while "letting go of the outcome." Because we see our social worlds as emerging from complex-responsive processes of relating (Stacey 2001), the future is fundamentally unknowable and yet we must perform our everyday interactions with intention. Our intentions and actions can be critically examined when we believe in our own efficacy in creating our social world. Not only are our intentions and actions critically examined, but so are the discourses that we are using to construct our bricolage of meaning. Ethics arises out of this critical examination moment by moment, turn by turn, and conversation by conversation.

What Do Those We Are Helping See Us Doing?

We have been describing how we cocreate our social worlds together as client and consultant and we are doing this in the everyday complex-responsive processes of relating. Two questions that kept arising for us were: What do

those we are helping see us doing? Why do they ask for us to participate with them? Because we believe we need to include the voice of a client in this discussion we engaged one of our long-term clients, whom we will call "Peggy," in a conversation about our work together. As always, we jointly learn through these conversations with our clients.

> *Keith:* What does this work that we have been doing together look like to you?
>
> *Peggy:* It's not just how it looks but how it feels. Like an authentic creative way of learning. I experience it at times as confusing and different. I feel that it makes me think very differently about myself and how I lead. It has shifted me, from relying on some specialist to come in and deliver a solution to me engaging in a way where I need to be curious about what is happening and what is the solution set. Several years ago before I worked with you I took a job where I felt in over my head. I was relying on what you would term a diagnostic approach to OD. A consultant came in with a model that I latched onto like a life raft. In the end it was successful. I was happy with the results and I thought it was the model that was the Holy Grail.

Since then, here is what I have learned. That reliance on that model and process caused me not to acknowledge my "Peggy" leadership contribution. I felt that I was along for the ride. In retrospect, I liked being along for the ride because I was then no longer responsible in many ways. What continues to surprise me is that it took me years to become aware of how I contributed to the success. This did me a disservice later, when I changed jobs and that lack of awareness of my contributions kept me stuck for a while—where I just kept demanding that I needed a strategic plan. I had to clear the fog. You helped me clear that fog. It was the continual reflection and coaching with you. I kept asking you for the traditional stuff, I kept asking you for that. And you kept nudging me, ever so gently.

> *Joan:* Regarding our nudging, we were less nudging you to an answer we thought was right than using your experience of success as a way we could learn. We wanted to know what happened "in between" those strategic planning sessions. We were comparing your experience to our experience, where we had run those strategic planning processes dozens of times, we were trying to learn what was different in the context you created. Through your descriptions it helped us.
>
> *Peggy:* You nudged me with those questions, to move towards an understanding that this was more complex and dynamic than the conclusions I had drawn in my past experience. I came to recognize that the strategic plan became a vehicle for how I interacted with everyone and developed relationships, and

—-1
—0
—+1

that was my contribution. However when I tried to explain this realization to others it was very frustrating, I was met with blank stares.

Joan: Do you remember the ROI discussion we had a few years ago? Where you all were stuck in figuring out how to calculate ROI to justify your continued investment in the ego-based leadership development? (For a description of this episode see Ray and Goppelt 2013.) Can you describe what you felt us do there?

Peggy: How could I not remember, it was a transformational experience for me—that ROI discussion. I now know that this was a trap in a bigger context. We trapped ourselves. I was driven to do what I felt others would perceive as right and to heck with what I actually felt was right.

Keith: If I may, I might characterize the result as a way to take back your life; you had handed over a piece of your existence to this thing called "ROI." It's not that ROI should be removed from your repertoire, but that you should feel you have a choice and use it when it makes sense to do so, instead of being at the mercy of it.

Peggy: It was interesting to me that in that moment when you asked us, "What is it you are trying to create?" and we had already spent several weeks talking about that. We pulled up that slide that listed what we wanted to create, and then you asked, "How would you measure that in traditional ways?" It became clear to me and others that we wouldn't measure that but could describe it with our stories. And the dots connected for me. It was profound, just those two questions for me.

Keith: We use a few catch phrases with you; one in particular is "Let go of the outcome." What does this mean to you?

Peggy: Letting go of the outcome to me feels so empowering. It gives me permission to myself for not having to have the answers. "Liberating" comes to mind. It takes me from a place of performance to a place of learning. Even with the job I'm in now. I then catch myself in that moment, slipping into performance. And I say to myself, "You know what, Peggy, no one else knows the answer either, it is not knowable. However it turns out is how it turns out." And I am just a catalyst navigating my way through this. I do not need to know the answer.

Keith: But in that, you still have some intention in what you do, some desires, hopes, needs?

Peggy: Yes, in this case, it is creating a bright and vibrant future for these employees. Do whatever I can do to put the organization on this vector. It is not about me single-handedly doing this. For me, and this may be different for others, I need to develop the connections and relationships along the way. I knew some of them beforehand, others I was not aware of until I began taking the steps.