

“In complex systems outcomes are impossible to predict or manage, and so practitioners must focus their attention on managing the conditions under which emergent outcomes are produced.”

Hosting Dialogic Containers

A Key to Working with Complexity

By Chris Corrigan

Dialogic Organization Development (Bushe & Marshak, 2015) is fundamentally about working with uncertainty, possibility, and complexity. As such, only the conditions of the container and the personal state of the practitioner can be managed, not the outcomes (Corrigan, 2015). This is a highly counter-intuitive idea compared to standard and traditional management practice that focuses on managing the results of a process. While such a practice is useful in endeavors that are technical in nature, complex problems are hampered by an over reliance of expertise and the illusion of causality and predictability. Complex processes, in which outcomes are emergent and therefore unknowable, are compromised by leadership that suppresses the natural ability of a complex system to produce new and interesting possibilities. Therefore, what is the ability required of the Dialogic Organization Development (Dialogic OD) practitioner to work with the qualities and properties of the container, to make choices that will support emergence? How does the practitioner stay with uncertainty and still get the job done?

It helps to have both an understanding of the property of containers and a leadership practice that allows the practitioner to stay in complexity and uncertainty. In this paper I will look at a simple framework to do this work.

Langley Futures Initiative: A Strategic Dialogue Over Time.

We are living in a time when the social institutions we have taken for granted are

suddenly losing their relevancy and status all around us. The traditional pillars of society seem to be no longer influential. This is nowhere more visible in North American society perhaps than mainline churches. Once active places for community status, charitable works, and spiritual practice, they are now shrinking, aging, closing, amalgamating, and refocusing. They are no longer the social force they once were, and young families, once the mainstay of congregations across the continent, are finding other ways to spend their time on a Sunday.

In 2009, the United Church of Canada congregations from across the Fraser Valley in British Columbia faced this epochal change head on. After two years of research, dialogue, and study, it became clear that the status quo was no longer an option. Churches would have to choose a different form or turn their minds to practicing the art of hospicing and dying away.

Four churches near Langley, BC confronted this need in a novel way. They decided to learn how to host conversations about their future. Invitations were sent to five congregations and four ultimately responded by sending people who were interested in the future to sit down in October, 2009, and begin to discuss what it might look like. The Langley Futures Initiative (LFI) was born. A small core team of around 10 people convened the Langley Futures Initiative and invited around 25 others – based entirely on interest – to learn together about how to host the conversations.

Over the next six months, meeting and discussing possibilities, the core team and

the learning group hosted conversations with the congregations near Langley. Based on these conversation, they created a vision document and a proposal for how they might proceed together towards amalgamation of their congregations, one of the hardest processes to undertake in the church world. Using a participatory decision making process, each congregation contributed to the strength of the proposal and the core team produced a final document for joining the congregations that would be subjected to votes. Three out of four of the founding congregations voted in favor. The fourth one missed the threshold by a mere sliver of a margin.

A dialogic container is a space in which dialogue occurs, specifically dialogue during which the results are unknown in advance, and meaning, decisions, and strategy are emergent. This kind of dialogue is essential in any endeavor in which innovation or collective learning is to take place around complex and emergent issues, including strategic planning, social innovation, conflict resolution, and working with organizational culture.

The process paused, further dialogue was held, and it was discovered that those who had opposed the proposal had done so without having any involvement in the process whatsoever. The local core team members worked with them to invite and explain the process and a new vote was taken. Some of those who were opposed remained opposed but others expressed regret for not having understood how deeply the process was being held. The vote passed and by October of 2010, after hosting the congregations through a process of grieving and celebrating, the four churches joined together a year after they had begun exploring their future possibilities. It was one of the fastest congregational amalgamations in United Church history and it kicked off years of renewed worship and congregational life, using dialogue as a way to continue to address the challenges and possibilities that were forever coming up.

Heshook-ish Tsawalk: A Meeting to Inquire into Interdependence in Indigenous Child Welfare

In 2003, a child died while in the care of her uncle in a Nuu-Chah-Nulth community on the west coast of Vancouver Island. In British Columbia, such a death triggers reviews, inquiries, and subsequent recommendations for addressing discrete and systemic characteristics. Responding for the need to build a tighter relationship between the child and family services system and indigenous communities, the British Columbia Child and Youth Officer, Jane Morley collaborated with then Assembly of

First Nations Regional Vice Chief Shawn Atleo to call together stakeholders from across British Columbia to discuss how the principle of interdependence could support a healthy child and family services systems (Morley, 2006).

The Nuu-Chah-Nulth principle of Heshook-ish Tsawalk means “Everything is One.” Championed by Shawn’s father, Dr. Richard Atleo (Atleo 2004), it has become a powerful organizing principle in Nuu-Cha-Nulth communities, appearing everywhere from forestry to governance to social services.

Inviting multiple stakeholders into a space to discuss interdependence in response to a child’s death is an unnerving experience. I was contracted as the host for the day and we deliberately used a circle process for the conversation. Working with local people, we poured a huge amount of effort into the invitation process making sure that the right people were in the

room, a reflection of the system as a whole from youth in care to agency directors, traditional healers and Elders, to Deputy Ministers and elected officials. We held the gathering at a First Nations cultural center located by the bank of a river, and we had healers present to work with the emotions and grief should people feel overcome during the day. The key players in the situation were in the room. The system was talking to itself, making sense of what had happened, and lifting its collective eyes to a higher principle that sometimes went missing in the work.

On the day of the gathering, we used a talking piece to deliberately slow down the conversation. We started with a check in and then we spent the rest of the day in dialogue exploring the question of how to make the principles of heshook-ish tsawalk active in the child and family services system. At the end of the day we held a check out round for reflection.

Emotions were high during the day, and the question and the talking piece helped us to speak and listen clearly to one another. Having a cross section of people in the room helped us to understand the issue from multiple perspectives.

Containers: Places for Crafting Complex Adaptive Behaviors

Every act of dialogue takes place within a container. When two or more people gather to engage in dialogue, they are bounded by space and time and they have something in between them that forms the basis of that dialogue. Even if the dialogue is the strictest Bohmian dialogue (Isaacs, 1998), in which the topic itself is allowed to emerge, the conversation nevertheless begins to focus around a center. A dialogic container is a space in which dialogue occurs, specifically dialogue during which the results are unknown in advance, and meaning, decisions, and strategy are emergent. This kind of dialogue is essential in any endeavor in which innovation or collective learning is to take place around complex and emergent issues, including strategic planning, social innovation, conflict resolution, and working with organizational culture.

Dialogic containers are like clouds, in

that they are both ephemeral and real; they exhibit a unique identity and they persist over time. They change within themselves and they are subject to the environment in which they exist. And like clouds, dialogic containers are productive: they become places for meaning making, culture building, strategy, and decision making.

In Dialogic OD we can think of containers as spaces of complex adaptive behavior. Complex adaptive behavior is characterized by a non-linear causality and an unpredictable outcome. Dialogic containers defy control and prescription and collapse into apathy when practitioners engage in behaviors that inhibit the natural ability of these systems to produce emergent results. For activities such as innovation in which groups are seeking newness and emergent practice, it is essential to host a dialogic container well. A good hosting practice helps to establish and support a container while allowing the emergent properties of such a structure to operate.

Understanding containers as spaces of complex adaptive behaviors helps guide practitioners in design choices and behaviors that will ensure these containers do their best work.

ABIDE: A Model for Focusing on Hosting Containers

The anthro-complexity theorist Dave Snowden has created a mnemonic – ABIDE (Snowden, 2016) – that is a useful guide for understanding the properties of dialogic containers where we are working with complexity. Snowden originally created this mnemonic to point to the areas in which complex adaptive systems can be influenced and managed. As such, it provides a useful framework for designing and hosting dialogic containers. This mnemonic is useful for considering in the design phase when containers are being established and as a way to check in on what is happening during the hosting process. Because containers shift and change over time, ABIDE provides a useful reminder about key factors over which a host has some influence.

Each element of the model represents

a part of a container which can be changed. Defined with relation to dialogic containers the elements are:

- » **Attractors:** Things around which a group of people organize.
- » **Boundaries:** Things which constrain, limit, or enable the work of a group of people.
- » **Identity:** The identity of the group and participants within the group.
- » **Diversity:** The amount and kinds of diversity within the group.
- » **Environment:** The influence of the context in which the group is operating.

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Changing any one of these things will change the work of a container. Facilitation and hosting of dialogic containers invites the host and the group to attend to these elements, rather than pre-determined outcomes. This is a fundamental practice and an inviolable principle of hosting if one is working with complex adaptive systems with the intention of working with emergent results.

Applied to the stories in this paper and to dialogic containers in general, we can see how ABIDE is a helpful framework for attending to design questions and real time hosting decisions.

Attractors

Attractors are those things within containers that draw you towards them. Attractors in a dialogic container include:

- » Invitation
- » Shared purpose
- » Shared work
- » Powerful or charismatic individuals
- » Possibility

Multiple attractors in a space (such as produced during Open Space Technology meetings) become really interesting. Invitation helps to build a recognition of the attractors. Connecting to need ensures that the container will coalesce around attractors. Shared purpose is one way of doing things, but where this breaks down, shift to shared work. In the stories above, a powerful need formed the basis of the container, and it became core to the invitation process that brought people to the work. The core need (addressing child deaths or congregational survival) was so present and urgent

that participants joined and stayed in the process, even when the process was confusing, difficult, or emotionally draining.

Boundaries

Boundaries are those things that you push against. In a complex system, boundaries both constrain and enable the work to get done:

- » Available resources
- » Degree of commitment
- » Support of those with power and influence
- » Physical boundaries: a room, a place, the rim of a circle

In facilitation processes such as the circle, the boundary and the center have physical representations in the room. The rim of the circle is the boundary, the center of the room (often marked with objects of importance to the group meeting) stands for the center of the work. Physical boundaries also come into play. In the child welfare work, there was a ceremonial entering

into the space of deliberation, a welcome from the Elders as we entered the actual room together, and an acknowledgement that we were crossing a threshold from the outside world to a dialogic space in which our behaviors and practices were invited to be different.

Such dialogic containers are created and held by facilitation that invites particular practices by participants with limits on how they participate. These are familiar as guidelines for behavior or rules of engagement.

In the Langley Futures Initiative, the core team practiced a sophisticated form of boundary management that created nested containers of commitment. Imagined as concentric circles, the core team exhibited the highest level of commitment to the purpose of the work and invested the greatest amount of time. Other participants were mapped onto two other rings, and together this bounded the strategic effort. Ensuring that people were included in one of these three circles was essential to the success of the initiative. When people from outside this strategic container appeared in the decision making process it created a difficult situation. By definition there are always more people outside a container than within it, so issues of exclusion and contribution are very important to deal with.

Containers that last over time benefit from having permeable boundaries that exhibit both definition and accessibility. There should always be a cost to entering more deeply into a process, usually expressed in terms of time, attention, and commitment. This is well defined by Peter Block (Block, 2008) when he talks about an invitation having a barrier to overcome that causes the participant to be authentic about their commitment. Making the center of a process easy to access dilutes the commitment of the people at the core and invites passion without responsibility.

Identity

Identity plays on both the personal and collective level in a container. This refers to both the identity of the container (including a definition of the role it plays in a larger context), the identity of the group

(Langley Futures Initiative Core Team), and the identity of those who show up in the work, as in the stakeholders:

- » Roles and positions of the actors within the container
- » Group identity of the container itself
- » Stories that are told about the group's work

In creating containers for Dialogic OD, it is important to invite people to attend in their roles, but connect them together to see how much more complex each person is. Stories about their life beyond the roles they occupy help people to see outside of their fixed roles. Likewise, giving the group an identity (Langley Futures Initiative) helps to create curiosity and defines the groups role in the scope of the strategic work.

Within containers, having multiple identities at play increases the diversity and resourcefulness of a group. In the child welfare work we did, a wide variety of people participated ensuring that we got multiple perspectives on the question of interdependence. With complex work, where there are no clear answers or pathways forward, it is important to rely on a diverse set of identities and roles in order to act well.

Diversity, difference, and dissent

Linked closely to identity is the property of diversity, difference, and dissent. Complex systems thrive on diversity, and strategic work on these kinds of problems benefits from having difference and dissent contained within the work. Examples of differences include:

- » Demographic diversity
- » Cultivation of multiple perspectives
- » Tolerance for and encouragement of dissent

Homogeneous groups tend not to produce innovation, whereas groups that contain diversity and dissent are able to engage critically with their current situation and test solutions.

Glenda Eoyang, in her work on Human Systems Dynamics, writes that “difference provides the motivation for change . . . when everyone is the same then nothing new is going to be created.

Difference also establishes the form of the patterns as they emerge” (Eoyang, 235). Tending to difference and diversity within containers is critical, even if these differences lead to conflict. There are many practices designed to amplify and transform dissent and conflict, many of them using ritualistic practices to depersonalize conflicts while pointing out and working with difference. These include simple tools like Ritual Dissent (Snowden & Boone, 2007) to larger scale practices such as Deep Democracy and Arnold Mindell's Process Work (Mindell, 1995).

In our work with the LFI, dissent was held through participatory decision making processes, including using Likert scales to make decisions. Such tools allow people to participate in a decision using a gradient of agreement, and allow processes to surface difference and diversity so it can be used as a creative resource for a group or a strategic initiative. In the child welfare work, difference was built into the process at the invitation stage and supported with processes that allowed for different voices to be heard and given equal opportunity for contribution.

Environment

Containers are heavily influenced by the environment in which they are set. Dialogic OD happens in a context, and context is crucial to what is produced by dialogic containers and sustained over the term of a strategic initiative. Environment includes:

- » Information available to people, accentuated by learning journeys
- » Making sure people have the tools they need to do their work
- » The physical environment of the space we are working in
- » Having power to enable new pathways to sustain work

You can best change behaviors by changing the physical space in which the thinking happens. The principle of “creating hospitable space” (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) speaks to this. A dialogic container needs a physical space which enables people to do their work. Participants need access to tools and information that will help them address their shared purpose. Disrupting

the environment by, for example, planning meetings in unfamiliar contexts or setting a meeting room up in an unfamiliar configuration can introduce a level of disturbance to a group that helps break them out of entrained ways of thinking and invites them to think and work differently. In the work we did around child welfare using the circle and ceremony was an intervention that both privileged an indigenous cultural perspective and evoked ways of thinking together that were very different from other forms of inquiry into the systems change.

Likewise, the environment of power and support for an initiative creates a rich context for support and sustainability of strategic work. If a dialogic container is not supported by power in a system, it runs the risk of being marginalized and the work can be scuttled. We have seen examples of strategic work that was terminated by CEOs who became anxious and insecure about the work and withdrew their consent. Sometimes referred to as the Highest Paid Person's Opinion (HIPPO), such a factor in an environment can trump even a rigorous evaluation process. Paying attention to relationships and environmental factors outside of the container helps to support the work within the container.

Hosting Containers for Complexity

A body of work has arisen around the practice of convening and hosting containers. Notably surveyed in Peter Block's book *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Block, 2008) and developed by the Art of Hosting community of practice among others, hosting is a form of leadership that enables participatory work to address complex challenges. The term "hosting" conveys a sense of active attention to the state of the container from within the container itself. Hosting is a form of leadership and facilitation practice that is conscious of being embedded in the system in which change is taking place. There is no neutrality or objectivity in the role. Hosts therefore must be keenly aware of the influence and impact they bring to work. The ABIDE framework helps hosts to focus on the work of managing the

container rather than managing the activity within the container.

Each of the elements captured in the ABIDE mnemonic requires facilitators to make design choices and real time decisions in order to host the work of the container. In the initial phases of a Dialogic OD intervention, working with a core team around an initiative requires the host to discern the attractors to the work that form the basis for the invitation and what is a clear articulation of the need and purpose for the intervention. Preparing invitations is an art that also includes becoming clear

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about the boundaries for the work, the gradients of commitment for participants, clarification about initial roles, and a good mix of perspectives and experiences.

As the work unfolds, the host, along with the core team for an initiative, pays close attention to the five elements of the ABIDE framework, making small decisions as they go about what is working, and trying to dampen the effects of things that are not working. Hosts have choices about the ways in which they influence and manage the container and this becomes important work to creating the conditions. For longer term strategic initiatives such as the Langley Futures Initiative, the design and hosting of containers for strategic work becomes an iterative and emergent process. Examples of working with the elements of containers include:

Attractors

- » Add new attractors to the system.
- » Change the focus of work.
- » Re-purpose or reframe the work to be more in line with needs.

Boundaries

- » Tighten boundaries around the work to force creativity, such as constraining time, variables, and iteration cycles.
- » Loosen boundaries that are too constraining to allow for fresh ideas and perspective.

Identity

- » Actively monitor the roles within the container and ensure that there are people doing jobs that are needed.
- » Use expressive and creative arts to invite participants to show up with

multiple identities and to more deeply explore those identities and what they can offer to the work.

- » Ensure that participants are clear about the identity of the container, or allow participants more responsibility to co-create that identity.

Diversity, difference, and dissent

- » Ensure a mix of individuals within a container so that complex problems can be explored from a variety of perspectives.
- » Investigate and confront limiting beliefs that generate anxiety about "certain people" being a part of the process.
- » Build in deliberate testing and dissent of ideas generated in the container in order to temper them and improve them and avoid "group think" and entrained patterns of behavior and thinking.

Environment

- » Pay attention to opportunities outside of the container that can accelerate the work.

- » Pay attention to dynamics outside the container that might derail or impede the work.
- » Understand who has the power and influence.
- » Work with the physical space to amplify or disrupt patterns of thinking for groups depending on what is required for the process.

Conclusion

In working with complexity it is essential that the practitioner of Dialogic OD be focused on the container. In complex systems outcomes are impossible to predict or manage, and so practitioners must focus their attention on managing the conditions under which emergent outcomes are produced. Snowden's mnemonic, based in solid research from the fields of anthropology and complexity thinking, provides practitioners with a practical tool and guideline for creating and hosting containers.

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Chris Corrigan is a global steward of the Art of Hosting. For 20 years he has worked with organizations and communities in North America and beyond to help address complexity using dialogue and participatory leadership processes. He blogs and collects resources at www.chriscorrigan.com. He lives on Bowen Island, near Vancouver, off the west coast of Canada. He can be reached at chris@chriscorrigan.com