

About the sense and nonsense of Dialogue (and about an alternative approach)

In this paper the modern Dialogue theory as an instrument to strengthen business performance is critically examined. The conclusion is that the adherents of this theory simply have chosen the wrong perspective to be really able to solve the problems they promise to solve. But there still is hope: just start from the right perspective and we indeed have new chances to make organisations and their employees more 'learning', creative, motivated and committed. (And - from a more philosophical perspective - a chance to do justice to the strong moral appeal of postmodernism.)

Part 1 - The sense

Dialogue is the sort of inspiring communication that mobilises knowledge, creates a fundamental basis for growth of a company's knowledge and the ability to transform and innnovate products, people and organisations.

The key factor necessary to create dialogue is suspension of judgment. We are often too eager to express our opinions, our judgments on whatever the topic may be. Thereby we fail to see other possible perspectives, fail to really listen to others, tend to see our colleagues as intellectual competitors and interpret other ideas wrongly because of our different ways of looking at the problem. If we would be able, not to erase our judgments, but to set them aside momentarily and be open for different views, we would create a basis for really thorough examination of a problem. We would be able to look at it from different angles and to lift it to a higher level. Also, we would be able to really listen to each other. We would create a feeling of unity, a climate that inspires us not only to work together, but even, as some writers say, to think together. And if this kind of dialogue is not seen as a an incidental phenomenon, organised intermittently at special occasions, but as an ongoing process of communication, we would in the end change and improve the culture in our organisation profoundly and lasting.

The fact that the word dialogue has its root in ancient Greek leads many writers, scholars and management gurus alike, to philosophical introductions about the meaning of the Greek word 'logos', the dialogues of Plato, the Socratic dialogue as an open way of exchanging thoughts, and so on. However, the Greek word 'logos' has many meanings, ranging from 'word' to 'divine truth', 'rational ability' and even 'cosmic order'. But the word 'dialogos', in contrast to the word it is built upon, misses all of these philosophical connotations. It really means nothing more than 'conversation'.¹ Furthermore, Socrates, the main figure in most of Plato's dialogues, used his famous conversational strategy not as a means to create an open discussion, but as a clever way to prove him right. Ancient dialogue, therefore, has nothing to do with the way we want communication to take place in our organisations.

¹ Cf. Liddel & Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, Oxford, 1968. This lexicon also quotes a source who uses dialogos in the meaning of 'debating argument', which is even entirely opposite to the meaning the adherents of the modern dialogue-theory want it to have.

The modern dialogue we are talking about actually expresses a breach with the ancient way of appreciating ourselves and the world around us, which for centuries has influenced our minds and (western) culture profoundly. To understand this we have to turn to the subject of truth. Plato didn't believe in earthly truth, but he did believe in the existence of an absolute, 'higher', non-earthly truth and, more important in the given context, in the ability of mankind to come to a rational understanding of this absolute or divine truth. This conception of absolute truth and especially the valuation of our rational abilities have been taken over by Christian scholars and philosophers for ages.

Only in the course of the last century a new philosophical conception of truth has emerged, together with a new appreciation of our intellectual abilities. In this theory divinity is separated from absolute truth, and the existence of earthly truth as well as absolute truth is rigorously denied, or maybe better said, made irrelevant. The one thing relevant is that we continue talking, exchanging experiences and visions, in order to keep developing ourselves, to be surprised and marvel at new experiences again and again, to discover new intellectual agreements and consensus and to keep ourselves committed to each other and society.

In this sense, though relativating truth in this way might at first sight seem highly immoral – and Plato would surely have condemned it as such –, this new theory offers us a complete new horizon of possibilities and chances to make the ways we live and work together more inspiring and meaningful. It obliges us to evaluate over and over again, in dialogue with the social environment we take part in, our conception of the world around us and the true meaning we find in the way we live and work together.

As a consequence, this so-called postmodern theory is strongly related to moral notions of solidarity, commitment to society and feeling of responsibility. Modern dialogue finds its roots, consciously or unconsciously, in this postmodern theory. It is a way to create, strengthen and maintain these moral values. Furthermore, and equally important, it can be used as a fundamental tool to realise intellectual development. In fact, this kind of dialogue – challenging our ideas, our knowledge, our certainties and deepening our discussions - can be seen as imperative for the true and continual development of our 'intellectual capital'.

Part 2 - The nonsense

However, when considering the possibilities of instilling this form of communication as an ongoing process into our organisations, we are confronted with a number of serious problems.

First, the research about the subject thus far has been limited to finding methods of creating dialogue in small groups, for instance staff-members in an organisation. The ultimate criterium to measure the real impact or success of the dialogue-theory is whether or not we will be able to find an effective method to create dialogue in our organisation as a whole, even in organisations with tenthousand or more employees.

Furthermore, the practical examples of how to create dialogue all have a strong ritual and incidental character. And though these ritual moments are important and can, at

least for a limited period of time, really strengthen feelings of commitment and can give new creative and intellectual impulses, we are still far away from instilling dialogue as a continuing way of communication.

Another barrier for creating dialogue we find in the way organisations communicate to their markets. When we market a product we usually try to convince the potential customers that our product is the best there is. This way of communication deeply influences our internal communication. So the question still to be resolved is whether we can create dialogue not only internally, but also in communicating with our customers (and all other stakeholders as well). Can we sell our products only by creating a bond of trust between ourselves and our customers? Can we still be successful if we really leave the choice between our product and those of our competitors completely up to the customer? If not, our way of communicating externally will inevitably have a negative impact on the desired way of communicating internally.

Finally, another major problem is that human communication is extremely complex. We don't just communicate with words alone, but also with our eyes, our gestures, the way we sit or stand, our clothes. Even the environment, the places of our meetings and gatherings, influence our communication. As a result many different sciences - linguistics, philosophy, social sciences, psychology etcetera - all study different aspects of communication. The enormous complexity of communication really makes it impossible to overlook all the problems involved in finding ways to change communication in such a profound and lasting way the adherents of the dialogue-theory would want it to change. As a result today's literature and management seminars about the subject offer rather superficial tricks to create ritual and intermittent experiences of dialogue. In fact, in their eagerness to come with answers and solutions the dialogue gurus of today deal with the subject with an attitude that is entirely opposite to the theory they embrace.

Conclusion and an alternative approach

Given what is said above about the sense and nonsense of Dialogue, we cannot but conclude that the management gurus promoting dialogue in organisations as a way to enhance openness, commitment and development of knowledge, are to a certain extent misled. As we have seen above, dialogue can indeed have these effects, but the idea that we can realise these effects structurally and enduringly in organisations as a whole by organising intermittent dialogue sessions or practice, is nothing more than an illusion.

However, realising ourselves the actual enormous, multidimensional complexity this concept of dialogue really comprises, the one thing we can and should do is think and act and speak from a position of modesty. We shouldn't come up with new, fashionable concepts and instant solutions every other month or year. Instead, we should develop and strengthen our modesty, not in the sense of an attitude, but as a true competence. The competence that enables us to postpone judgments, to think and reflect again and again and to be as openminded as we can. In other words, in order to strengthen other competences needed to really learn and develop ourselves, to realise dialogue, to realise more commitment and solidarity and to strengthen notions of moral responsibilities, we should first of all develop the competence of modesty.

Modesty should be seen as the crucial competence we need in our ways of acting and communicating and doing business.

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Note

This concept of modesty as a business competence is further elaborated and illustrated by a practical example and ideas to strengthen this competenc, in my paper 'Modesty – The crucial competence for long term success', to be published in Journal of Management Philosophy, Oxford