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It is not only 'what' we say and do, but also 'HOW' we speak and act that transforms the reality of our lives, our organisations & our communities. The quality of our speaking is mainly determined by the quality of our listening. I believe there is a true dialogue when listening becomes an active part of a conversation as speaking.

Silence then becomes the white space in which we are painting our collective story.



In my work I often see organisations that have new inspiring ideas and visions but have difficulty to integrate them in their daily practices & habits. Often teams are not aware of the patterns of communicating they tend to engage in during "meetings". Routine habits are an important part of the culture of a team or organisation. To sustainably change a culture you have to change the habits.

This is why I strongly believe in the importance of HOW we do things, how we talk, communicate, take decisions. This is why I strongly believe it is necessary to learn, create & adopt new practices, new forms of conversations & dialogue.

A long time ago, as a creative facilitator, I learned the "Salon" technique, a way of sharing ideas and thoughts that is radically different from our typical discussions & debates. I learned about the "Talking circle" from indigenous cultures. Formats like "World Café", "Open Space" were frequently used for a long time to have meaningful conversations with larger multi-stakeholder groups. A few year ago when I engaged in a ULab, all these ways of speaking in groups were comprehensively summarised by O. Scharmer in the levels of listening and conversation he describes. This is also when I learned more about the ideas of Bohm on the "Dialogue" process. But most of these techniques remained the domain of the "facilitators" and the offside team-days or strategic meetings.

In this respect, the "Check-in" proposed in Laloux's Reinventing Organisations and in the Scrum & Agile methods helped to make it possible for organisations and teams to integrate more listening into the daily meetings.

The main purpose of a Check-In is to bring the "whole" person in the meeting room. When an old friend comes along you haven't seen for a while, you ask "How are you doing? What's up?" and you are genuinely interested in the answer. When you do this with the same intention in the office, a whole different atmosphere starts unfolding. People talk about their personal life, how they feel, what is really important to them.

When doing Check-ins or Dialogues with groups and organisations, I started adding a meditation before starting. It is a meditation that includes a breathing & grounding exercise to enhance presence. The meditation also creates awareness for the circle and the connection with each other.

The reason for a meditation before or as part of a Check-in or Dialogue is that, in order to invite people to bring in their authentic whole selves, they first have to be fully present. You are where your attention is. If your attention is with the email you just received, you are not fully present.

People most often react positively on a meditation, they are happy to have the time to relax through their breathing, leave tension and stress behind and often they even get energized. A benefit of a meditation is that it brings people in their body; it helps people to be present as a whole person, not only with their mind, also with their heart. And it creates safe space.

A Check-In, true Dialogue, Salon or Talking Circle then can follow. For me, the name doesn't matter that much. I would call it any form of deeper conversation with a shared intention to come to greater collective wisdom and connection. It is a free flow of meaning in a group, a contemplation of perspectives from which new understanding can emerge. The variations are endless, or only bound by our own creativity.

The essence for me is that the "listening" as an intentional activity, is upgraded to the equal of the "speaking"; and that both speaking & listening are happening from the heart, not the ego. Of course the mind and the senses are also deeply engaged in the process, alongside feelings, intuition, needs and values. Actually speaking & listening from the heart here does not mean "from the emotions". It means speaking & listening "from the whole authentic self", a self that is connected to a world bigger than oneself, an "eco" instead of "ego" orientation.

This, of course, presupposes that people feel safe, safe to tell their truth, safe to be vulnerable. This feeling of safety is dependent on many factors: the context & physical environment, the relation to the organiser, the relationships and dynamics in the group itself and of course the facilitator.

Facilitating a Dialogue, Circle talk or Salon, for me, is an art that needs to be performed with great care. It is at the same time difficult and easy. It requires not many words or technique, but a lot of presence and attention. The facilitator has to hold the space with compassion and wisdom, sense what is happening in the silence, and at the same time be humble, vulnerable and childlike. It is more about being than about doing.

The method can be applied to any content or used for several purposes as knowledge sharing, talking about sensitive issues, conflict or tensions in a group, searching for common ground on a new project, defining a new strategy, exploring a complex issue, taking decisions ...

Talking Circles are of all times and places. Most of the methods of facilitated conversations that we know are inspired by indigenous traditions. In these ancient traditions and a lot of non-Western cultures, time and space in conversations are treated in a very different way: Silence is part of a conversation, as the white space is part of the painting. Time is perceived as cyclical, not linear. The space in which the conversation is taking place holds information, often through the presence of ritual elements and the orientation of people and objects in the space (altar, cardinal directions). The importance of energy and the bigger collective field (of ancestors and the generations to come) are explicitly recognised. In this way an intentional conversation has a lot in common with a ritual.

Another aspect that is at the core of an indigenous Talking Circle is the importance of "respect"; respect for each other, respect for the sacred space, respect for the circle.

In the following I'll highlight some key elements we can borrow from different inspirations & methodologies and we can use as ingredients of our own Dialogue practice.

Indigenous ways, non-Western cultures, Deep Democracy, Systemic work

- Silence as part of the conversation, silence as space
- In the context, there is information, the emptiness of silence is full of information
- More indirect (tacit), non-verbal communication
- Sensing of the subtle movement of energy in a room and in a conversation
- Respect, mutual contemplation of viewpoints
- Listening & time to hear everybody, listen to the wisdom of the minority (Kgotla, talking stick, Deep Democracy)
- Listen to what is under the waterline, the collective unconscious, the field

The Circle Way (Christina Baldwin a Ann Linnea)

- Importance of the center (something in the center symbolizing the intention of the group), creating a wheel by connecting each person with the center
- Moving from social space to council space
- Agreements (privacy, respect, curiosity, compassion, expression of what we need and can give)
- Practices: use of a talking object for check-in/check-out, silence and reflection time

Case Clinic - Theory U (O.Scharmer)

- Levels of conversations: downloading, debate, dialogue, collective creativity
- Case Clinic: Leave silence after the input from the case giver, listen to what resonates, listen with open mind (images, metaphors), open heart (feelings), open will/body (gestures, sensations)
- Generative dialogue: reflections and observations of the participants based on deep listening, how these offer new perspectives on the theme, no "advice" giving
- Exploring the crack

"Explore the crack – the opening to the future – where the current system hits a wall that requires profound new ways of operating. In exploring that institutional or systemic crack, look for individuals that on the one hand are relevant problem owners of the challenge and on the other hand bring the quality of heart for exploring emerging possibilities."

Dialogue Process of D. Bohm

- No group-level decisions will be made in the conversation, no obligation to come to any conclusions, nor to say anything or not say anything, open & free
- Each individual agrees to suspend judgment in the conversation
- As honest and transparent as possible
- Individuals in the conversation try to build on other individuals' ideas in the conversation

Some interesting quotes from D. Bohm:

"...it is proposed that a form of free dialogue may well be one of the most effective ways of investigating the crisis which faces society, and indeed the whole of human nature and consciousness today. Moreover, it may turn out that such a form of free exchange of ideas and information is of fundamental relevance for transforming culture and freeing it of destructive misinformation, so that creativity can be liberated."

"If we are to live in harmony with ourselves and with nature, we need to be able to communicate freely in a creative movement in which no one permanently holds to or otherwise defends his own ideas."

"Dialogue comes from the Greek word dialogos. Logos means "the word," or in our case we would think of the "meaning of the word." And dia means "through" — it doesn't mean "two." A dialogue can be among any number of people, not just two. Even one person can have a sense of dialogue within himself, if the spirit of the dialogue is present. The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding. It's something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It's something creative. And this shared meaning is the "glue" or "cement" that holds people and societies together."