Champlain College

Week 4: Assignment: Consulting Case #2

The Retrospective Consultant

Paul Sherwood

1146080

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Roberta Peirick

I am going to explain a change event from years ago that could fall under the banner of Dialogic OD. We all know that change can be tough on some people; we get set in our ways, and it is hard to see the benefits of what change could bring. In my field, in particular, more people tend to stick to what works rather than looking for positive changes. We know that in the Dialogic approach, it is important to have valuable conversations. It is in this aspect that I believe my example falls under.

“When Dialogical OD consultants live out these values in conversation with others, then it is more likely they will create collaborations and conversations that are generative.” (Bush, 2015, p. 192) When I was first hired and walked into the shop, they immediately started talking about “Kaizen.” Now, I knew nothing about this word or its history, but I slowly learned how it affected everything in the shop and the company. I would have thought that, like most companies, the change would come from the top, but in the case of this chemical company, the change came from groups.

These Kaizen groups were made up of leaders and or, most often, associates from many departments. The thinking is that each person has their own expertise that they bring and will be able to understand the business structure differently. We keep the holes in our knowledge minimal by shoring them up with outside perspectives. After the group is selected, they are given a new shop to look at and understand the shop's goals and perspectives on the duties they perform. It may seem like this could be a problem, but similar to what I stated earlier, outside perspectives can be your best friend.

Now, this change group will first discuss all the perceived inefficiencies. This gives the outsider perspective. Now, not every group member knows or interacts with the shop that I was a part of; however, there is potential feedback there, first with the connected neighbors to the shop that need each other and the perspectives of personnel outside the shop. Dialogic OD teaches us that “practitioners think in terms of interpretive meaning-making process, fostering inquiry, addressing how conversations create social reality, and organizational change as a process of continuous emergence.” (Bushe, 2015, p. 25)

On a giant board, people throw ideas, and all of them are written down. The next natural step is to enter the shop, look around, and discuss. The open discussion in “hosting large groups of people who care about something can lead to emergent, improvisational, and transformational change on a scale and at a speed that normal action research cannot muster.” (Bushe, 2015, p. 34) When entering the shop, there are limited interruptions to the staff working. We don’t want to become a burden; the time spent is to allow everyone to understand what they are working to assist.

Again, the whiteboard is updated with the new understanding of the group. At this point, we are using preunderstanding to make sense of the environment we seek to improve. “Preunderstanding is the set of holistic background concepts and skills that gives us familiarity” (Bushe, 2015, p. 65) to cope, understand, and think through the problems we are facing. While we have many discussions during this process, it is after the second run of whiteboards that everyone sits down to discuss and hammer away what should and should not change.

“The Dialogic OD practitioner might start interacting at any level or location in the organization and then attempt to encourage new conversations.” (Bushe, 2015, p. 86) To me, the step where everyone comes back together to hash out ideas is most important. There needs to be a guide to the conversation without overriding others' opinions, but it needs to be able to guide the conversation forward. After this meeting, the group writes a report in detail about what they have found and changes they wish to implement.

In my own shop, while we were working well, they did find inefficiencies, such as equipment positioning. Walking around to move from one station to another, such as the chemical bath, could cause you to impede others' progress; we also had a problem with shipping where, depending on the size of the equipment, you would need to walk around the long way. I am sure people have noticed most of the concerns, but there is something in people that will make them accept the norm. For what it is instead of seeking change. Maybe that is a power issue where you feel helpless.

After watching this process play out firsthand, I was amazed. To take a group of people who have never met and walk them through this process (which for some is new) and come out of the other side with positive improvements is unreal. The Kaizen was taken from a Japanese auto factory that used these techniques to send out the most reliable cars we had seen at that time. Similarly, the book states, “Bushe to argue that people would not put in the effort required for transformational change unless there were widely held concerns motivating the change.” (Bushe, 2015, p. 111)

It is true that the main motivation is to keep your job; however, while watching those involved troubleshoot and implement the change, they become passionate, and they take ownership of what they see as good. For those of us who have been affected by the change, we can see the clear positives that are happening. Some are minor changes, but in some cases, with our group, there were changes that improved production and customer support. It could be that people will resist change, but that is where Dialogic OD practices kick in and help.

“Dialogic OD practitioners have a responsibility to constantly reflect upon and, if necessary, adjust their discursive practices in response to the effects upon those engaged in the change process.” (Bushe, 2015, p. 92) It could happen to anyone of use, but as the book said, as you continue your journey as an OD practitioner, you will have a self-improvement that will help guide groups to positive outcomes for the employer and the employee.

References

Bushe, R. B., & Marshak, R. J. (2015). Introduction to the Dialogic Organization Development Mindset. In Bushe, G. R., & Marshak, R. J. (Eds.), Dialogic Organization Development: The Theory and Practice of Transformational Change. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.