

Where's the rub?

The Dialogue Workshop is a fast way to make an executive team's conversations and meetings more productive

When facilitators have the opportunity to work with an intact executive team (a senior executive plus direct reports, typically 6-12 people) they have a wide range of intervention options. This Dialogue Workshop approach enables an executive team to achieve alignment quickly on the few key challenges they face, by re-including into the conversation crucial elements which typically create blockages because are denied and avoided.

The “real time” approach has grown out of many years experience of facilitating executive teams. It enables seasoned executives to set out their real agenda quickly and to discuss it more honestly, openly and effectively than usual. Feedback which arises in the course of the conversation produces shifts in the behaviour of individuals, which are strongly reinforced because of immediate pay-offs in decisions and progress.

Here is a summary of the facilitator approach with examples.

1. Prepare people to experiment with their conversation

When you ask what they want to gain from a dialogue workshop, typically executive team members say:

- *To stop being spread too thin*
- *To become more efficient*
- *To get on the same page, with collective responsibility*
- *To become focussed and all pushing in the same direction*
- *To stop working in silos*
- *To free ourselves from the treacle*
- *To find the right way to communicate.*

Once they have expressed such intentions their minds are engaged and you have permission to help them make their conversations more productive. But how will you do this? Meet participants individually or offer a short “taster” session before the full workshop.

2. Focus on the team's current crucial business questions

Programmes which teach people dialogue techniques prior to applying them in real conversations can seem to senior executives demeaning, artificial and not relevant to them.

Instead by tackling real business questions while demonstrating in real time the benefit of “a dialogue approach”, no one says “*But back in the real world...*”. The dialogue workshop is immediately relevant to senior executives because it happens during a senior executive team meeting in which they are discussing their most compelling current issues. Team members are challenged to make their discussion highly productive.

How it works is that, on an agreed basis you press pause button and initiate reflection. The experiment cannot be dismissed as a meaningless or theoretical diversion: it is the real work. The challenge to existing habits becomes legitimate and eye-opening.

3. Hold up the mirror right from the beginning

The experiment begins with the very first task: setting the agenda. When you ask any team to identify the crucial questions they need to discuss, you notice who talks first, who talks most, some characteristic conversational quirks and foibles, energy levels, difficulties with listening, probing, avoiding, challenging, building ideas, deciding and so on. Consciously or not, team members' behaviours are causing one another difficulty in engaging and being open.

You give the group just ten minutes to set the agenda, then stop them when time is up even if they haven't finished. Ten minutes is rarely enough and often teams find this surprising. What follows is the first reflective interlude: you choose up to three people to be a "mirror" that reflects on how the group worked, while the others listen. Ask the "mirror" three simple questions such as:

- *what did you notice about the result?*
- *what did you notice about the contribution/energy level?*
- *what did you notice about the behaviour which helped/hindered?*

Example responses

Roger: We haven't got an agenda yet – but we're on the way

Jane: Are we avoiding talking about individuals?

Malcolm: I feel awkward talking like this us while being observed

Jane: Have you noticed Paul is talking a lot while others are quiet?

Cautiously at first, the mirror soon reveals who is dominating, who is/isn't listening, what is being avoided, how visible everyone is to everyone else, how without necessarily intending to, people are getting in the way of one another. The facilitator can add observations and highlight dynamics for example by asking executives to line up according to how much they speak, or listen, or contribute relative to colleagues.

If after five minutes reflection you ask the group to propose what they want to do differently to get a better result in the next 10 minutes, you can write up a couple of their points on the flipchart then ask them to continue. The impact of the first mirror can be dramatic and the group will typically install changes immediately... but as soon as they resume they run into further difficulty, perhaps with closure.

Having as their first task created an "agenda of crucial questions" and reflected on how the group is working, you can ask what behaviours people want to encourage and discourage in the next phase of the experiment. This sets a "contract".

Often an executive team expresses a wish to get beyond "nice" and "nasty", in other words to "say what you're really thinking" without aggression or holding back. They want to get to the rub.

4. Set up a clear and predictable rhythm

Once they get into the rhythm of working-pausing-working confidence rises.

Example responses

Paul: There is quite a lot of energy now. We're getting into our stride. Let's raise the level of challenge.

Jane: We're already disagreeing but it is less difficult now.

Geoff: We've made some important decisions and laid the groundwork so we can afford to get into some more difficult topics.

The initial rhythm might be 10 minutes talking followed by 5 minutes mirror, or for more complex topics 15 minutes followed by 10 minutes mirror. Much more than 15 minutes before using the mirror and people get lost in the talking: some important moments will be missed. A simple variation is to nominate team members to take turns to sit outside and observe.

Initially the facilitator in this experiment holds the time boundaries firmly and makes their own interventions sparingly in order to increase the team's own capacity for self-observation. It is worth more if a team member observe something themselves rather than relying on the outside facilitator.

Towards the end of pause, the group are asked to take on board the learning when they restart the conversation.

Example responses

Roger: It started well but then it jarred and became uncomfortable. It started jumping around between topics. Jane, how did you feel about Geoff stopping you?

Jane: It's a hard topic. I was OK with Geoff saying no to me.

Geoff: But I'm not sure you should be OK. What I said should bother you! You're holding onto something.

Facilitator: right let's restart from there – what are you holding onto Jane?

The effort of switching each time between work and pause and back again is demanding. As the day wears on groups get spontaneously more reflective during the working mode. In a typical day an executive team works on up to three big topics from their self-generated agenda. In doing this they complete six to ten formal work - pause cycles but instead of treating pauses as wasted time they are more and more deploying reflection naturally as a real time tool to create traction in the conversation. As a team they are operating with less baggage and much greater openness.

5. Work in the “here and now”, not the “there and then”

The pause mode lets participants pay attention directly to what is happening between them, noticing how they are impacting one another. Even when historical matters were being discussed, such as “past trading performance”, the “here and now” reflection enables a deeper exploration of sensitive issues.

Example responses

Paul: We are meant to be looking to the future, to next year, but if that means we have to review the past to get there then that is OK. It does mean we have to go into some personnel areas and into what we do as a team.

6. Provide simple tools to aid observation and understanding

Sometimes participants are weighed down by hard-to-express experience. We can offer tools (such as the Left Hand Column, Ladder of Inference, Edge-work, Johari Window, Transactional Analysis and others) but we use these sparingly as they can divert a group from the real conversation.

7. Acknowledge the emotional journey

Typically during such workshops, executives make a journey from “I” to “we”. This takes them from accepting their current way as fixed, through cautious questioning, noticing frustrations and blocks, confusion and disorientation, arriving at a personal experience of transformation (often subtle in character rather than a blinding bolt of lightning) bringing an increased sense of confidence and fulfilment in the team.

During this journey behaviour shifts: you get better listening, more direct challenge, sufficient support to keep everyone engaged, less avoidance, less aggression, less defensive banter and a more committed contribution from all. People go through expression of differences to acceptance of one another. You get more combined thinking, a meeting of minds and a deep understanding of how they depend on each other to create results.

Example Responses

Jane: Currently the systems project work is in silos

Malcolm: But if Paul gets his bit wrong, then my bit won't work

The first signs of this loosening appear early on, and whatever is highlighted in each pause releases further insight and energy.

Example Responses

David: It feels like we might be reaching consensus. Would someone summarise?

Julie: (Blah, blah...)

Geoff: Yes that's right. I feel different already than when we started

Where the boss is present, their emotional journey can be the most difficult. They may feel their leadership is “on the line” and in truth some criticism is inevitable. Typically at the start it is the boss who sponsors and introduces the workshop, but then he or she steps down giving space for the team to experiment with different ways of working. When the boss doesn't give sufficient space to the team they must expect to get pushed out of the way, and pick up some criticism for being “too controlling”.

Example Responses

(The boss)... is dictating the answer

(The boss)... is summarising but not really capturing what people meant

The good news is that very soon, after 2-3 rounds with the mirror, people start to invite the boss back in, to play a somewhat different and more effective role that

delivers greater impact because others have stepped up their contributions and the new added value role of the boss is truly welcomed.

Example Responses

(The boss)... is still summarising regularly, but it feels different that at the beginning, more appropriate, a relief thing, phew!

8. Get to the rub

When a conversation goes beyond pleasantries through a tense period in which you “feel the rub” of one person against another, this releases something which leaves no doubt that change has happened, for better or worse.

Example Responses

Julie: Come to terms with it Roger. This is company policy. You seem to be fighting it. You're blocking us making progress

(After a break)

Roger: OK. I'm getting the point and I'm making a conscious change and moving on.

In this middle phase, between the opening and closing on any sensitive agenda topic, people are grappling with judgements and beliefs about each other's competence and trustworthiness, and with a tendency to scapegoat, blame and “project” responsibility onto others inside or outside the team. Often blame may go to someone/something beyond reach and outside the room such as “the company” “the culture”, “the marketplace”, “the Board”, “the government”, thus giving up by reassuring everyone that “it's impossible do anything constructive because the world is rubbish and we're powerless”. A constructive challenge process taking place between team members wakes them up to their individual and collective responsibility.

Example Responses

Roger: Are there engagement issues on the team?

Paul: What do you mean?

Roger: Are the trading staff engaged? Motivated?

Paul: There were issues earlier but not now

Jane: (suddenly pushing in) So let's summarise, we've been talking about the balance of new and existing, then we have moved into some side issues including trading performance and staff motivation

Geoff: (challenging). For me your summary comes at an inappropriate time Jane. You broke the flow of what was happening.

Roger: (Impatiently) Can we get back to where we were?

Paul: Let's put the question differently and... (reaching for the “Edge-work” handout)... and you can ask me “What do you need?” Now this raises a lot of issues...

Surrounding the most sensitive issues the conversation can get jumpy as individuals in the group work together (sometimes unconsciously) to hide and subvert what needs to be discussed. The mirror highlights where such diversions happen and the facilitator encourages participants to complete “edgy” exchanges in which they express feelings, needs and requests. By rubbing up against one another people begin to adjust their positions and new energy gets released for decisions and action.

Example response

Julie: I feel frustrated that Paul did not seem to care about what was happening as trading performance declined

(Roger tries to come in and Geoff, noticing Paul is ready to respond stops Roger with a hand signal)

Paul: (Responding to Julie) You should have come and said so. I was not aware you felt frustrated. Then I could either have satisfied your concerns or taken it wider...

9. Harvest the learning

After several talk-reflect rounds participants often start to notice a repeating three part pattern within every agenda topic (open, rub, close) and they develop agreed upon tactics for raising the efficiency of each part.

At the end of a recent Dialogue Workshop participants were invited to express their learning:

- *Greater openness – far richer conversation*
- *Feel more relaxed now*
- *Seem more comfortable quite quickly talking about difficult issues which before the start would have taken weeks to emerge. Things are coming out on the table. Sense of making progress.*
- *Collective responsibility helped this. We are all talking about it now as collective responsibility. What this means is that 6-7 more ideas are helping each person instead of oh shit... (the boss)... is going to bullock me.*
- *Leapt forward hugely. Not actually taking away individual responsibility. We're supporting each person.*
- *We are still integrated into the same business – one cannot operate without the other*
- *I liked it. We have a more caring attitude amongst ourselves.*
- *Review of our contract. Good. Tick. This is the standard we expect back in the office.*

Participants are rarely slow to realise that the benefits of this approach extend outside the team into every one of their relationships (in work and outside), and sometimes also start to invest more in areas of their personal life.

Example response

In the weekend after the workshop my husband and kids were asking "what's happened to you?". I was only paying more attention to how we talk to one another and staying out of my usual habits, not shouting at them so much. When we sat down and talked about this a couple of days later it had clearly made my husband think about his own behaviour too.

10. Follow through

A single workshop is a start but may be insufficient to install permanent changes in an executive team's behaviour. In the first workshop participants notice their patterns and gain confidence that they can effect a shift. They experience the greater depth of connection that makes difficult topics easier to address. They identify some behaviours that they want to develop or shift. But the team risks sliding back into old habits.

Follow-through meetings can be provided so that the new habits take hold in the months that follow and continuous learning from the mirror becomes a way of life.

Example Dialogue Workshop Programme

1-2 weeks before	Pre-meetings with individuals and/or “Dialogue Taster” group session
Previous evening 1800	<p>Assemble in off-site venue Scene-setting from boss What do you each want from this? Are you willing to experiment?</p> <p>Round 1: What are our crucial business questions? 10+5 Round 2: (continued) 10+5</p> <p>The Contract Handout Dialogue Tools for overnight reading</p>
1930	Go to dinner then sleep
Workshop day 0830	<p>Discuss Dialogue Tools with examples Prioritise “crucial business questions” from Rounds 1&2 to produce Agenda (eg. by urgency, power to effect, complexity, heat)</p> <p>Round 3: Topic 1 (something easier to get into our stride) 15+10 Round 4: Topic 1 (continued) 15+10</p>
1030	Break
1045	Rounds 5 – 6 Topic 2 (practising what is being learnt about opening and closing, raising the level of challenge) 15+10
1230	Working Lunch
1315	Rounds 7-8 Topic 3 (into the core, hotter, more sensitive issues) 15+10
1500	Break
1515	Rounds 9-10 Topic 3 (making decisions on actions) 15+10
1615	Operating differently from today (a future in which this team is getting results through applying the learning and individual are each contributing differently)
1645	Back to the ranch (communications, next steps, follow through)
1700	Close and depart