Book reviews

Dialogic Organization Development: The Theory and Practice of Transformational Change

Gervase R. Bushe and Robert J. Marshak (editors)

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Review by Mark McKergow

Even though solution-focused (SF) practice has its roots in therapy, it has for some years been increasingly used in the field of coaching, team coaching and organisational development (OD). The first two of these areas have been the subject of a lot of attention and several books, many of them reviewed in this journal over the years. The area of OD has received less attention in the SF world.

Even though SF offers both a lens to look at OD (every case is different, focus on language, take small steps, do more of what work whatever that turns out to be) and a way to do OD (using familiar SF tools like scaling, future perfect etc.), there have been relatively few reports of large-scale SF organisational change work. The Solutions Focus Working casebook from the SOLWorld community (McKergow & Clarke, 2007) and interviews with Susanne Burgstaller (McKergow, 2015) and John Pelton (Brooker, 2015) show this kind of work in action, and Susanne Burgstaller's book *Lösungsfokus in Organisationen: Zukunftsorientiert beraten und führen* (Burgstaller, 2015, still only available in German) is an excellent introduction for those lucky enough to be able to read it.

So why am I telling you all this at the start of a review of another book – Gervase Bushe and Bob Marshak's excellent and ground-breaking *Dialogic OD*? Because Bushe and Marshak are both aware of SF work as a dialogic (as opposed to diagnostic) practice, and have produced a remarkable collection of chapters which sets the move from diagnostic to dialogic work into a much bigger OD context. The opening chapter lists some 40 different strands of dialogic OD work, from the familiar (Appreciative Inquiry, Open Space, World Café) through historic (talking stick, Stafford Beer), to the emerging (Art of Hosting, Theory U). And, to my delight, they have included Solution-Focused Dialogue in their list. So many lists of these practices seem to miss our community, and it's very refreshing to see SF up there with the others.

The 17 chapters in the book range through introductions to dialogic practice (with helpful tables showing distinctions from diagnostic practice), and both theoretical and practical elements. The theory comes from the likes of Frank Barrett (known to me for his work on improvisation and jazz along with Appreciative Inquiry) and Ralph Stacey (whose complex responsive process framework connects well with our idea of turn-taking and turn-making in conversations). All these chapters have a nice 'starting from first principles' feel to them. The authors have usually written much before on these topics, but here they start at the beginning without assuming familiarity – which makes the book an exceptional primer. To give an example, this is a juicy and relevant snippet from Frank Barrett's chapter 'Social Constructionist Challenge to Representational Knowledge' about the link between knowledge and action:

> *Plato and the Enlightenment philosophers held that the highest form of knowledge is contemplation. In that view, we contemplate and then we act. But social constructionists propose that the arrow is reversed. We act into the world, we engage with things we care about, and then reflect or contemplate. Knowledge is an activity rather than an internal representation (p.70).*

What a pithy and relevant statement! The book is crammed with insights and pieces such as these which, while not new, make clear and helpful connections between the thinking behind dialogic work and the way it comes into practice.

The second and longer part of the book is concerned with practice. The chapter by Tova Averbuch on 'Entering, Readiness and Contracting for Dialogic OD' is outstandingly useful. Averbuch looks squarely at all the practical difficulties in engaging with clients who may be more accustomed to dialogic work, with greater alleged certainty of process and outcome. She shows different ways to engage with both the situation and the stakeholders, build connection and trust, make contracts and even how to bill when the work appears uncertain and emergent. This is not a cheap book, but for those engaged professionally in OD work this chapter alone provides great value.

I was particulary interested to read Chris Corrigan's chapter on 'Hosting and Holding Containers' with its potential connections to my work on host leadership. Corrigan is a long-term expert on thinking about hosting conversation but, as in the theoretical chapters, he too holds this expertise lightly and starts from the beginning. A container in this case is not, of course, a Tupperware box but is rather a combination of topic, group, facilitator/host and boundaries. Careful thinking about how these elements interact can make all the difference between effective work and a complete mess, and Corrigan brings the topic to life with stories connecting to initiating, building stability, supporting inquiry and finally ending a container. One simple tip – "If it's about us, don't do it without us" gives a flavour of the work here.

There is not space here to go into all 17 chapters. Each one has its own topic and flavour, and the whole work comes together as a unit with Bushe and Marshak's careful curating and editing. There is also a website, http://www. dialogicod.net/, with resources, articles and details of the book. If you're engaged in OD and want to think broadly about your work, this is the most important book to appear for many years – a very bold move in a field which has been

emerging for decades and yet seems now to be becoming more formed and confident.

References

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