

Improving Quality and Efficiency Through the Lens of Dialogic OD

By David Shaked

I just finished reading Gervase Bushe and Robert Marshak's excellent, recently published *Dialogic Organisation Development*. The editors and many contributors have written a ground-breaking book. Its importance and contribution to the field of OD is already evident and will continue to grow.

I have always believed that driving quality and efficiency is a form of organisational development (OD). The roots of approaches such as Lean Thinking and Six Sigma may come from statistics, engineering and systems theory rather than psychology, anthropology and sociology, but ultimately they too drive fundamental change to the ways people perceive reality in their organisations, how they do their work, and their views/beliefs about the organisation or system as a whole. Many leading thinkers in the field of quality, starting from Deming, integrated a human and system thinking approach to the more technical side of their work. Ultimately, both OD and process improvement seek to create better, healthier organisations that are more flexible in dealing with challenges.

If we consider process improvement as a form of OD and accept that Dialogic OD is ground-breaking, we can benefit from looking at what the book means to the practice of process improvement and whether new possibilities for driving continuous improvement are emerging. A common approach to organisational problem solving is "analyse the current state, articulate a vision, plan for how to achieve that vision and execute". This approach is also behind most of the process improvement methodologies, such as DMAIC and Kaizen. Dialogic OD offers a viable alternative based on notions of complexity and emergence.

Dialogic OD presents three core change processes essential to transformational change, singly or in combination. It also defines the dialogic mind-set that guides the work of OD practitioners. In this article, I will explore the three core processes; [in my next article](#) I will explore the mind-set.

Essential change process #1 – Emergence

Emergence is a process whereby clearer patterns and new developments come to life through interactions between different parts. For example, when people with shared interests find each other, connect and share different perspectives, new and creative patterns, designs and ways of working can come to life.

Dialogic OD emphasises the value of creating containers within which reality can be made sense of and responded to in a safer way, with less anxiety. Inside these containers, trust can be built through dialogue; improved ways of operating can emerge. Opening and holding a space for participants to explore and make sense of the complexity of their processes and situations for long enough helps bringing in emergence.

The Kaizen approach and Kaizen blitzes offer the best containers to allow for emergence; traditional Six Sigma projects that rely on a belt (an "expert") to lead the analysis, sense-making and improvement journey may not be optimal. Knowledge-transfer and tool-driven approaches also create the risk of stifling emergence, whereas a light-touch approach by a facilitator using inquiry and dialogue can encourage it.

Emergence is also important when testing new ideas. Rather than spending time on careful planning, risk mitigation and step-by-step execution of well-crafted plans, as is often the case in Lean Six Sigma, we can encourage participants to self-organise and initiate changes. Experimentation to see

what happens can bring new and better ways of working, provided freedom to experiment is allowed, without premature evaluation. As improvement leaders, we can pay close attention to what is working well, encouraging and looking for ways to expand it.

Essential change process #2 – Narrative

Narratives are accounts of events and experiences that evolve continuously from everyday conversations, documents, metaphors and exchanges in organisations. They are essential in helping make sense of reality, both by explaining how things are and by providing a rationale for decisions and actions. People are sense-making beings and organisations are meaning-making networks of people. When a change to one or more core narratives shared by a group of people takes place it can guide fresh thinking and acting, and change reality.

Using this essential change process means that we understand and appreciate the power of stories in influencing our reality. The story is consciously used at the beginning, middle and end of the change effort; it is not a by-product or tool to “communicate change”.

Stories as tools for change are almost never considered by efficiency and quality improvement leaders and change agents. In fact, actively using stories may appear to contradict the scientific and analytical approach that claims there is one objective explanation to each situation and that improving processes should focus on finding and changing that root cause. Inadvertently, the focus on waste, problem solving and the ever-present need to continuously improve helps create a strong narrative describing organisations as being laden with problems, issues to overcome and an ever-present gap between reality and where the organisation ought to be.

As I show in my book, *Strength-based Lean Six Sigma*, an alternative focus on the parts of our processes that produce value as well as good outcomes actually helps create a stronger narrative, which in turn drives us forward.

Essential change process #3 – Generativity

Transformational change requires new ideas, new ways of seeing and new conversations. A great way to enable these is by creating a generative image which is future-focused and possibility-centric: something people care about. It is particularly powerful if it uses new words, metaphors or artistic expression. We move in the direction of a generative image because it represents a compelling future; it is an invitation, deliberately ambiguous rather than detailed or concrete. When a generative image surfaces (or is introduced) it allows new and compelling ways for thinking and acting – ways that could not be imagined before. The power of generative images is well documented in research.*

This essential change process has been all but ignored by quality and efficiency practitioners. It can offer significant help to improvement efforts. Imagine using metaphors and artistic expression to convey the possible future – Could we imagine processes “flowing like rivers” and value creation as “mining for diamonds” (after all, “diamonds are forever”)? What might be the impact of changing “continuous improvement” to “quality ever after”?

In summary

In this post, I want to raise the awareness of business improvement practitioners and leaders to new research about organisational transformation. While the first essential ingredient of emergence

already exists to some degree in the Kaizen approach, the other ingredients of “narrative” and “generativity” invite us to stretch our imaginations and understanding of how to drive quality and efficiency improvement in new ways that are exciting, engaging and liberating!

References:

Dialogic Organisation Development – the theory and practice of transformational change, Gervase R. Bushe and Robert J. Marshak, Berrett-Koehler 2015

*Generative Image: sourcing novelty by Gervase Bushe and Jacob Storch

David Shaked is a certified Lean Six Sigma Master black belt and NTL certified AI practitioner. He has many years of experience in quality and efficiency improvement methodologies as well as strategic planning with large corporations in the US, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. He is a published author of "strength-based Lean Six Sigma".

David enables clients to think differently and unlock possibilities – no matter how difficult a situation may seem. He does this through flexible, creative and practical use of strength-based approaches to change facilitation/enablement. He can be reached at: david@almond-insight.com.