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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PRACTICAL DIALOGUE

Emergent Approaches for Effective Collaboration

Rosa Zubizarreta

The purpose of this chapter is to point to the emergence of a field of nondirective methods for facilitating practical creativity in working groups. In addition to delineating some of the common features of this field, which I am calling "practical dialogue," I will be highlighting some of the reasons why this set of practices is relevant for developing the kinds of collaboration that are badly needed at present—not just in organizational settings but also in our communities, our societies, and the wider world.

To illustrate practical dialogue, I will describe three dialogic methods designed for small group situations that require practical action and concrete results. Each of these methods—dynamic facilitation (Rough and Zubizarreta, 2003), dialogue mapping (Conklin, 2005), and transformative mediation (Bush and Folger, 2004)—has emerged independently. Consequently, each has its own distinctive features differs in significant ways from the others. At the same time, all three methods have certain basic elements and principles in common.

In addition to developing collaborative cultures, each of these methods helps us do all of the following:

- Work effectively with highly polarized situations and widely divergent perspectives
- Address complex issues with depth and creativity
- Welcome people as they are, without requiring any prior communication training
- Support the emergence of shared understanding, practical breakthroughs, and aligned action

Background Considerations

Instead of teaching *about* collaboration, one of the best ways to develop a collaborative culture is to provide people with an opportunity to *directly experience* its value. At the same time, we need to look more closely at the kinds of collaboration that we are seeking to develop. If we consider how cultures develop, we realize that no group experience is neutral. Instead, every group experience is already teaching us something about collaboration.

Developmental Levels of Collaboration

One of the first theorists to describe the difference between developmental levels of collaboration was Herb Shepard (1965). Shepherd described "primary mentality" as the developmental stage in which we experience the collective and the individual as a zero-sum game. From this perspective, we experience an either-or choice. We can either subsume our individuality for the greater good of the collective (which can be seen as one form of collaboration), or we can to assert our independence at the expense of the common good.

In contrast to these two choices, Shepard described something that he called "secondary mentality." He described this developmental level as the embodied realization that the relationship between the group and the individual does not have to be a zero-sum game. Instead, the more a group welcomes the experience and divergent perspectives of each individual participant, the richer the collective experience becomes. In turn, the more we can share our unique gifts with others in a supportive group context, the more our own individuality is strengthened and nourished.

In Shepard's time, he believed that the most effective way of supporting group participants in developing secondary mentality was through sensitivity-training groups. This may or may not be true today. In any case, if we are looking at developing a collaborative culture, it is worthwhile to consider to what extent a particular facilitation method or group process supports primary mentality (collaboration as requiring some sacrifice of individuality) or instead helps participants develop secondary mentality (collaboration as both drawing from and strengthening individuality).

How Cultures Are Created

In his work on culture and leadership, Schein (1992) describes how culture is created as a by-product of the larger process of meeting practical challenges. When a group or an organization solves a meaningful problem, the assumptions embedded in that particular problem-solving approach begin to be adopted as part of the culture of that group or organization.

The more significant and meaningful the problem, the greater the learning. However, this learning process is not limited to any particular set of values. Instead, Schein's theory helps us understand how different cultures can evolve from different sets of experiences. For example, an organization that experiences successful collaboration as a result of having an authoritative leader with a clear-cut plan will tend to adopt the assumption that "to have effective collaboration, we need an authoritative leader with a clear-cut plan."

If instead an organization experiences successful collaboration through an approach that encourages individual initiative and welcomes divergence and complexity, these are the working assumptions that will be adopted by that organization: "to have effective collaboration, we need to welcome individual initiative, divergence, and complexity."

In either case, the group is learning something about collaboration. What the specific lessons are will depend on the assumptions embedded in the particular problem-solving approach.

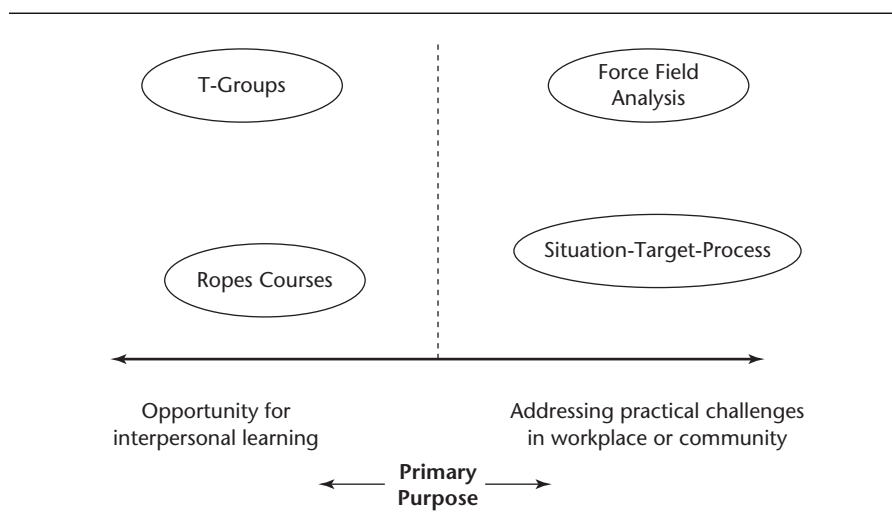## Prevailing Approaches to Working with Small Groups

One way we might sort the various methods of working with groups that are prevalent today is according to their primary purpose. In one category, we might place methods that support interpersonal learning, the development of communication skills, and the growth of collaborative attitudes. This category

would include sensitivity-training groups (Bradford, Gibb, and Benne, 1964), Ropes courses, and other forms of experiential learning.

In another category, we might include methods designed to help a group directly accomplish practical workplace tasks. This could include technical issues such as increasing production, redesigning work flow, or eliminating toxic hazards in the workplace, as well as "softer" goals such as developing a vision statement or elaborating a strategic plan. Facilitated problem-solving strategies traditionally used to help a group accomplish these kinds of tasks include methods like "situation-target-process" and force field analysis. The distinction between these two kinds of basic purposes and where various group processes might fit in to this scheme is shown in Figure 13.1.

Of course, reality is always more complex than any classification system we might devise. For instance, many experiential simulations ask the group to focus on a simulated practical problem in order to catalyze interpersonal learning. These methods might be more difficult to classify according to the scheme in Figure 13.1 because they help a group address a practical workplace task (albeit a simulated one) yet their primary focus is on the development of collaborative attitudes.

**FIGURE 13.1. DISTINGUISHING
SMALL GROUP PROCESSES BY PRIMARY PURPOSE.**

Where Does Practical Dialogue Fit In?

The three group processes that I am describing in this chapter as examples of practical dialogue are also difficult to categorize according to the scheme just presented, as they seem to contain elements of each category. On the one hand, they have been designed for addressing practical, on-the-ground situations. On the other hand, they feature a nonlinear orientation that has historically been associated with approaches designed to facilitate interpersonal and experiential learning.

As mentioned earlier, one of the distinctive features of practical dialogue is an open-ended approach to practical situations. Yet most facilitation methods that are open-ended and nondirective tend to have interpersonal learning as their primary aim and are generally thought to be inappropriate for supporting the accomplishment of practical workplace objectives. As a culture, we seem to take it for granted that to achieve practical ends or work-related tasks, we have no choice but to engage in linear, directive approaches. And indeed, most facilitation methods that are designed to help a group directly address practical workplace challenges tend to embody that step-by-step orientation.
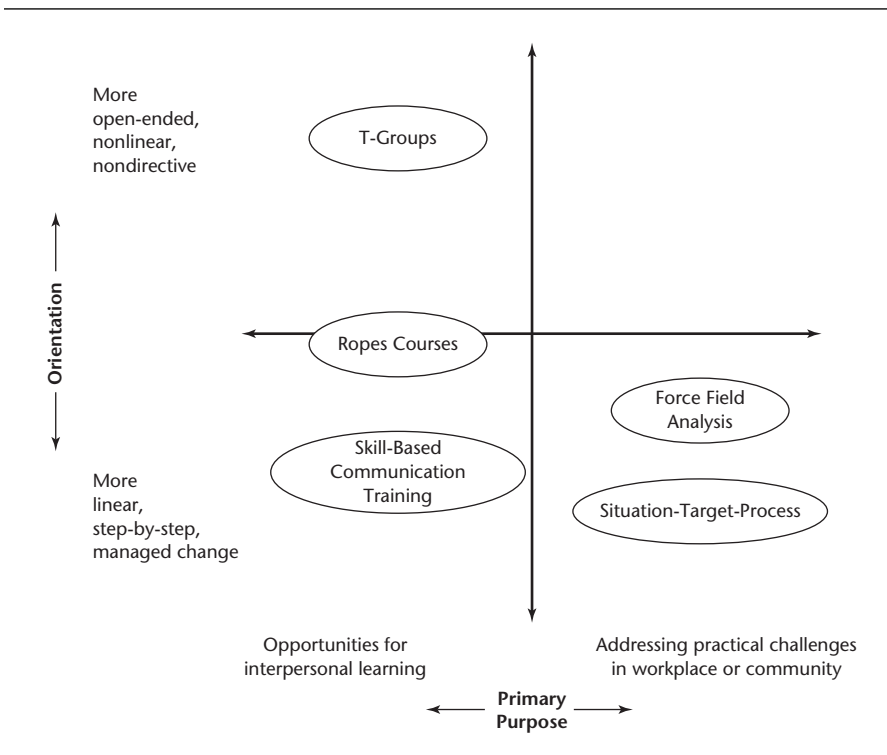
Given these prevailing assumptions, introducing a nondirective approach for addressing practical tasks is no easy matter. It might help if we expand Figure 13.1 into a two-by-two matrix to depict the possibility of considering purpose and orientation independently of one another, and shown in Figure 13.2.

It's not too hard to imagine what might go into the bottom-left quadrant: people often use directive, step-by-step methods to support interpersonal learning. For example, we might easily imagine a design for communication training that introduces a series of skills in a linear fashion and includes directed practice for each one. Whether or not this is the best approach to take may depend on the situation. In any case, that question is beyond the scope of this chapter.

What I want to emphasize here is that there seems to be a cultural taboo with regard to the upper-right quadrant. Until quite recently, it has been difficult for most of us to consider the possibility that there might be nonlinear, nondirective processes that effectively support a group in achieving practical ends.

There is, however, a historical precedent for open-ended exploration of practical realities, primarily within the *conscientização* process of Freirean dialogue—a form of dialogue that is seen as an intrinsic element of an ongoing cycle of reflection, action, reflection, and so forth. Unlike the more widely known tradition of Bohmian dialogue, Freirean dialogue has its roots in the

**FIGURE 13.2. TYPICAL ORIENTATIONS OF
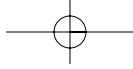SMALL GROUP PROCESSES AS CORRELATED WITH PURPOSE.**

worlds of social change, community empowerment, and adult education (Freire, 1996).

There are also a number of large group methods that use nonlinear approaches to accomplish practical ends, such as Open Space Technology (Owen, 1992), Future Search (Weisbord, 1992), and World Café (Brown, 2005). However, when it comes to facilitating a task group that needs to address practical issues, there have been few models of effective nonlinear, nondirective practice.

Rationale for a New Approach

Even if we grant that it might be possible to achieve practical results in an open-ended manner, it may not be obvious why we should bother to do it that way. I'd like to look more closely at why a different approach to facilitating task-oriented groups may be helpful, especially in certain situations and contexts.

Drawbacks of "Managing Convergence"

As the use of both facilitation and mediation has grown, so has awareness and concern about their potential for abuse. The power that a facilitator or mediator wields over the process can be misused. This is especially true in task-oriented circumstances where there can be pressure to reach agreement. Directive processes are particularly vulnerable in this regard: divergent positions can be minimized in an effort to reach closure, or facilitators can discourage participants from bringing up concerns, framing them as distractions or hindrances to the process. When these kinds of things happen, participants understandably feel that they have been manipulated.

Of course, it is possible to use directive approaches with integrity. Still, especially in situations where trust has been damaged, it can be helpful to have effective, open-ended approaches where practical issues can be explored and convergences can emerge naturally, in a nondirective manner.
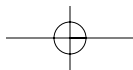
Drawbacks of Premature Problem Definition

Even when all participants feel that they have been treated fairly in a facilitated process, difficulties can arise when the effort to manage complexity leads to defining the problem or the situation too narrowly. This may allow us to feel that we have "kept the problem within bounds" and yield agreed solutions in the short run. However, it is also likely to create worse problems down the road, especially when dealing with complex issues.

It is often said that "identifying the real problem is 90 percent of the work of solving it." In cases where the way that a situation is being defined may itself be part of the problem, there is an immense value in using alternative approaches that do not require us to agree at the outset on a problem definition or a desired outcome. The possibility for achieving an entirely different level of understanding is enhanced when the method we are using does not require us to deem any perspectives as "irrelevant" to the practical issues under consideration.

Benefits of Inclusion: Welcoming Emotions

Especially when we are dealing with complex issues, it is likely that there are strong emotions attached to the various perspectives at hand. Many directive facilitation processes encourage people to "leave their emotions at the door"

in order to be able to speak calmly and rationally. While this may make things more comfortable for some participants, there are a number of significant disadvantages to processes that frame strong emotions as impediments to the facilitation process.

Restraining strong emotions often ties up a great deal of participants' and facilitators' energies and attention. Norms regarding what is considered "polite discourse" can be used to privilege people from certain social groups and to stigmatize or silence others. They can also lead a facilitator or a group to marginalize the potentially valuable perspectives held by people who are strongly advocating for or against a certain position. As a result, the whole group loses potential sources of passion and commitment.

Processes that welcome emotions have the advantages of allowing people to "come as they are," without having to learn any special ways to communicate. They also place the responsibility on us as facilitators or mediators to listen deeply enough to recognize the gift in each person's contribution, regardless of how that gift might be wrapped.

Benefits of Creativity: Welcoming Nonlinear Thinking

If we are to adequately address complex issues, we need the full power of human creativity. And we know that creativity does not tend to proceed in a linear fashion. Step-by-step approaches may be more comfortable and familiar, but they do not tend to encourage the full flowering of a group creative process.

We have plenty of anecdotal evidence about the kinds of performance that are possible when a group is in a "flow state." We need greater familiarity with methods that can reliably create the conditions for the emergence and continuation of such states—not just during a brief brainstorming period but throughout the life cycle of a working group.

Benefits of Intrinsic Motivation: Supporting Shared Understanding and Energized Action

Agreements that have been brokered or negotiated often become agreements that everyone can "live with" but no one is particularly excited about. These tend to require significant expenditures of energy to ensure follow-through. In contrast, many of us have witnessed the power of group flow. We know from experience that group outcomes tend to be much more compelling when they have been arrived at freely, through a naturally unfolding creative process.

At the same time, regardless of how we manage to reach agreement, we know that external circumstances are continually changing. As a result, it is likely that our understandings and actions will need to be revised and reconsidered. The more enjoyable and rewarding our process, the more likely participants are to experience the ongoing conversation as an opportunity rather than a burden.

Building Capacity at All Levels

While we are helping people address practical issues, it is doubly helpful if we can simultaneously offer participants the opportunity to realize experientially the value of listening deeply to divergent perspectives and looking at whole systems. Beyond resolving the immediate situation, this builds participants' capacity for sustained collaboration.

When our approach allows us to work with people "as they are" instead of needing to learn to "communicate better" as a prerequisite for participation, we are able to engage with people across a wider spectrum. In turn, participants have the opportunity to learn interpersonal skills experientially by engaging in a supported process. These various points are summarized in Exhibit 13.1.

EXHIBIT 13.1. DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF PRACTICAL DIALOGUE.

- Participants' differences are respected by a nondirective exploration of practical issues that continually welcomes divergence.
- Ability to handle complexity is greater, as no initial agreements are needed or sought with regard to problem definitions, desired outcomes, or selection criteria.
- Emotion and passion are welcome and are not regarded as an obstacle to the search for meaning.
- Practical creativity is accessed by making room for the nonlinear flow of conversation, as well as nonlinear thinking.
- Intrinsic motivation is tapped by allowing for the emergence of powerful natural convergences by refraining from"brokering" or "managing" agreement.
- Participants can "come as they are"; there is no need for preliminary training to participate in the process.
- Powerful interpersonal learning takes place experientially as a by-product of working on practical objectives in a creative manner.

It is also important to develop our own capacity as facilitators. Non-directive methods can be particularly helpful in this regard. As Peter Senge has said, "Good facilitators have actually internalized a belief based on experience, that whatever happens is supposed to have happened—even if it is very problematic and unfortunate. And because you have that belief, you don't waste your energy trying to fight what is going on. Instead, you try working with it" (Staples, 2000, p 10).

Whether or not we decide to specialize in nondirective methods, there are always some situations in which more linear or more directive methods are either not feasible or not appropriate. Becoming familiar with nondirective approaches can help us become more prepared for such an eventuality.

Overview of Practical Dialogue and Description of Specific Methods

Now I would like to describe three different methods that I see as examples that point to this emerging field of practical dialogue. Each of these methods has its own origins, history, and particular characteristics and arose independently of the other two.

Dynamic Facilitation: Cosensing Emergent Wholeness

Jim Rough, the creator of this approach, began his explorations looking for a way to help task groups creatively address "impossible-to-solve" problems, challenges that a group might not even consider addressing due to their perceived intractability. At the time, Rough was an internal consultant at a lumber company in the Pacific Northwest, directing a project where shop floor workers were being invited to participate in quality circles for the first time in the mill's history.

Over time, Rough continued to develop his innovative approach to working with groups, which he has named *dynamic facilitation*. In this process, the facilitator's main task is "listening to understand" (Covey, 1989). In the process, the facilitator is drawing out all of the various problem definitions, ideas for solutions, concerns, and perspectives that are present in the room, in no particular order. Each contribution is recorded on one or more numbered lists as a way to begin mapping the shared field of meaning that is emerging.

Reducing Anxiety. Instead of using "ground rules," a strong sense of safety is created by the facilitator's listening work, which involves drawing out, reflecting, appreciating, and "protecting" the contributions of each participant. By "protecting," Rough means that whenever a conflict arises, the facilitator steps in, welcoming the divergent perspectives and inviting participants to address their comments to him or her as facilitator or "designated listener." This allows each person to be heard in full while giving others the opportunity to "overhear" each person's perspective in greater depth. (For another method of facilitating difficult conversations that also makes use third-party listening, see Pearce and Littlejohn, 1997.)

Initially, the dynamic facilitation process relies strongly on the listening work of the facilitator. However, in a fairly short period of time, participants begin to experience the value of hearing one another more fully than is usually the case in a fast-paced meeting. The growing excitement of the creative process leads them to show a genuine curiosity for divergent perspectives, and they begin to spontaneously draw one another out. This eventually allows the facilitator to fade into the background to a much greater degree, although he or she continues to listen and to record each individual contribution.

Maintaining Creative Tension. Throughout the process, the facilitator remains in a position of "radical inclusivity," welcoming each contribution and working hard to understand the meaning of each perspective in the participant's own terms. This inclusivity is made easier by the fact that the facilitator does not need to labor to keep the group "on task"; the only agenda is the one that emerges in from participants' concerns in the moment.

Equally important, the facilitator is refusing to "manage convergence" in any way, instead allowing an ongoing flow to emerge in which each naturally arising convergence opens into a new level of divergence.

As the group and the facilitator work together to map the territory of the present situation, including but not limited to the initial "impossible-to-solve" problem, the complex picture that begins to emerge can feel overwhelming to participants and create a momentary sense of crisis. Still, while creative tension is high, anxiety is reduced somewhat by the supportive listening work of the facilitator.

Creative Breakthroughs. Once each perspective has been received and appreciated and all the various "puzzle pieces" are on the table, a natural shift

occurs as participants begin to realize the incomplete nature of all of their earlier perspectives. As each participant begins to consider all of the information that has surfaced, thinking rises to a new level.

Although the facilitator does not make any attempt to lead the group toward convergence at any point, he or she listens for any apparent convergences that emerge and verifies them with the group a short time after the fact. For example, a facilitator might say, "When John offered his solution to issue X, everyone nodded and people started talking about how to implement it. Is everyone really on board with this?"

If the convergence was only apparent, and one or more participants avail themselves of the opportunity to express something they had not revealed earlier, this is a good thing! The facilitator welcomes any divergent perspectives that surface, continuing to draw out participants and to engage in an open-ended process. Of course, participants will have ever more information to consider, and often a previously unvoiced perspective will shift the quality of the conversation in unexpected ways.

If the convergence was real, however, participants might pause for a moment in acknowledgment before resuming their conversation about different implementation strategies. However, what confirms the convergence is not the acknowledgment per se but rather the fact that each person's attention is now fully engaged with how to address the implementation questions that have arisen in response to the particular solution the group has converged on.

The process still has the same quality of open-ended exploration, and there is still a wide range of diverse perspectives on the table. Only now the process has jumped to another level, as participants are now engaged with the next set of challenges that have just emerged as an inseparable aspect of any authentic convergence.

Working with Time Frames and Acknowledging Accomplishments. At the end of the session, the facilitator helps participants summarize where they are at the end of the session and review what has been accomplished during its course. This is important at the beginning of the process, since the group may still be in the initial stages of mapping the shared field. However, it can be equally important if the group has already entered a highly creative flow state, since now the participants are likely to be working just as hard at the end of the meeting as they were at the beginning, only on an entirely different set of issues.

Bridging the Paradigm Gap. One of the most significant challenges when using dynamic facilitation is the absence of the familiar markers that most of us consider a necessary part of a decision-making process. I am not just referring to the absence of a formal voting procedure. Even most consensus methods generally include protracted negotiations as part of the process.

Instead, the emergence of shared understanding is more like a eureka experience ("Aha! I see it!"), where a perceptual shift occurs and a figure that has been hidden now becomes obvious to everyone in the group. The term *cosensing* has evolved to distinguish what takes place in this process from most kinds of consensus.

Even when people are satisfied with the result, they can be uncomfortable with the experience of a new and unfamiliar process, and the absence of conventional markers can be disorienting. To reduce potential discomfort, it can be helpful to present dynamic facilitation as an avenue for creative exploration and a preparation for a later stage of conventional decision making, instead of as an alternative way to reach agreement. However, facilitators experienced with this method know that many of the "dilemmas" facing a group tend to simply dissolve as a result of the emergence of shared understanding.

In the past fifteen years, Rough has continued developing this process, which he describes as a synthesis of "head and heart creativity." He and his wife, Jean, regularly offer well-attended seminars on dynamic facilitation in their hometown of Port Townsend, Washington, as well as in other locations around the world.

Dialogue Mapping: High-Tech Help for "Wicked Problems"

Dialogue mapping is a software-assisted facilitation process. It was developed by Jeffrey Conklin as a way to help groups address difficult issues or "wicked problems" by creating a shared perceptual map that depicts the full complexity of the situation. (For more on "wicked problems," see Rittel and Webber, 1973.) In dialogue mapping, there is no need to reach premature agreement on any aspect of a problem, including divergent perspectives of the problem definition (Conklin, 2005).

Originally, Conklin created the software that supports his method as a tool for public utility companies to document complex decision-making processes involving vast amounts of information in a way that would withstand later public scrutiny. Over time, he realized that this software could be used for

supporting real-time creative problem solving in a variety of contexts, including high-tech industries and multisectoral collaborations.

Using Software to Support a Nonlinear Process. The current version of the software used in dialogue mapping is an open-source shareware program called Compendium. It allows the facilitator to create a map that depicts all of the different problem definitions, potential solutions, pros and cons of each solution, assorted perspectives, and general data. Most significant from the point of view of this chapter, the design of the software allows the group to engage in a creative and nonlinear process while generating a highly ordered product.

Of course, dialogue mapping is only one way of using the Compendium software. Like any piece of software, Compendium can be used for a variety of applications (see Kirschner, Shum, and Carr, 2003). At one end of the spectrum, Compendium could be used to create an accurate record of a highly conventional meeting that followed Robert's Rules of Order. Yet Compendium also allows a group engaged in dialogue mapping to proceed in a creative, nonlinear manner while allowing the facilitator and group to generate a rigorously detailed map of the various considerations that are being explored.

To illustrate the concept of how a nonlinear process can lead to a highly organized result, consider the example of a large jigsaw puzzles with more than five hundred pieces. Which piece gets placed when does not usually follow a linear sequence: one might choose to work on a bit of sky here, a bit of border there. However, when all the pieces are put together, the final product is finely ordered, not at all chaotic. This analogy can help us understand how a nonlinear creative process can, in the end, result in something that is perfectly logical and rational. (For a more complex explanations of how nonlinear processes can lead to linear results, see De Bono, 1992.)

Unlike a jigsaw puzzle, however, the number of pieces of the puzzle are not fixed or even known in most problem-solving situations. While participants come into a meeting with different relevant experiences, information, and perspectives, they are also involved in an active process of sparking and inspiring one another, seeing new connections, and creating new possibilities. Any of these contributions can ultimately add to the emerging picture of the larger whole.

Welcoming "Initial Ideas for Solutions." Dialogue mapping and dynamic facilitation were developed independently. One is a high-tech, software-assisted

facilitation method, while the other relies only on chart paper and markers. However, the two approaches have much in common, including the basic orientation of welcoming any contribution as a valuable piece of the emerging larger picture. One example is welcoming initial ideas for solutions as a key aspect of both methods.

Most problem-solving approaches ask participants to refrain from offering possible solutions until a much later stage in the game. In contrast, both dynamic facilitation and dialogue mapping welcome possible solutions at any point in time.

In his workshops, Jim Rough points out several advantages of welcoming initial ideas for solutions:

• It helps participants listen better to others by first helping each person feel fully heard.
• It supports creativity by welcoming and honoring all of the efforts participants have already made to come up with ways to address their current situation.
• It brings to light all the different assumptions that are held by participants, which are embedded in the various initial solutions or prototypes that people are bringing to the table.

When describing why dialogue mapping welcomes initial solutions, Conklin offers a further advantage drawn from cognitive research:

• It allows the group process to more closely resemble the natural creative design process.

Researchers in cognitive science were initially surprised to discover that the actual design process of moving from initial specifications to a final working product is *not* a linear progression toward a final goal. It is in fact a non-linear process where early attempts at solutions help test the design requirements for the problem. This natural cognitive process, described in the literature as "opportunity-driven problem-solving," could also be characterized as "opportunity-driven creative design."

The natural process of opportunity-driven problem solving helps explain why traditional meetings can feel so stifling. Attempting to keep everyone focused on the same stage of a predetermined sequential process does not

appear to fit the creative process of any individual in the group. Based on their previous experiences in groups, people tend to believe that it is impossible for individuals to be creative together as a group, that meetings are inherently tedious, or that creativity is incompatible with practical results. In reality, the constraint is not human nature but the structure of conventional meetings.

High Tech or High Touch? One of the major differences between dialogue mapping and dynamic facilitation is in how information is recorded. In dialogue mapping, Compendium software is used to generate a visual map in which graphics distinguish the various kinds of contributions (questions, ideas, pros and cons, general information) that are contained in each text box. In addition, the map uses arrows to show the connections among the different elements: which possible solutions address which problem statements, what concerns were raised with regard to each solution, and so on.

In contrast, dynamic facilitation uses chart paper and markers to create four numbered lists (problem statements, possible solutions, concerns, and general information) on which the facilitator records each person's contributions. There are no visible links between the various elements on the different lists; for example, which possible solutions correspond to which problem statements is not recorded explicitly on any of the lists, although the links remain surprisingly clear in the minds of the participants.

Of course, this leads to major differences with regard to the amount of information that can be processed with each method. In addition, software programs such as Compendium make it possible to store, retrieve, and reorganize data in a flash. At the same time, the dynamic facilitation method serves to illustrate that although the underlying principles and usefulness of practical dialogue can be enormously enhanced by advanced computer technology, it is by no means dependent on it.

Transformative Mediation: The Power of Principle-Based Practice

A third example of practical dialogue originated in the field of conflict resolution. Transformative mediation was developed by Bush and Folger (2004) as an alternative paradigm for working with conflict, and one of its distinguishing features is a principled refusal to "manage convergence" in the mediation process. Instead of placing any pressure on "achieving resolution," the em-

phasis is on supporting participants in the process of empowering themselves and in finding their own way to a greater sense of human connection with one another.

In contrast to other forms of mediation, the transformative mediator is seen as following instead of leading the process. He or she plays an active but nondirective role in which listening and reflection are key and the conversation is allowed to unfold in its own rhythms. In addition, a much wider range of expression and content is welcome than in conventional approaches.

In a relatively short period of time, transformative mediation has become a distinctive and established approach in the field of alternative dispute resolution. Practitioners of this approach are also exploring the applications of their model to work with larger groups, such as multiparty processes exploring controversial and highly charged public issues.

Working from Principles. One significant element of the success of transformative mediation in the mediation community has been the clear articulation of the principles on which it is based. Bush and Folger argue that if our primary goal in conflict is simply to have everyone obtain a satisfactory outcome, we end up missing opportunities to support human growth. In this "satisfaction model," we are seeing human beings as primarily focused on accomplishing their own ends.

In contrast, Bush and Folger describe a "relational model" in which people are seen as seeking both self-empowerment and respectful relationships with others. If the mediator focuses on listening respectfully to participants, supporting the processes of self-empowerment and recognition of others, the practical outcomes will tend to follow.

Research on the Strength of Emergent Agreements. In the alternative dispute resolution context, research has demonstrated the efficacy of transformative mediation. This nondirective approach not only results in stronger relational outcomes, as we might expect, but it also leads to long-term practical outcomes, often with regard to broader issues than the initial presenting problem (Bingham, 2003; Hallberlin, 2001; Antes, Folger, and Della Noce, 2001).

Although practitioners of transformative mediation have experienced success in the initial applications of their model to working with groups, I am not

aware of any research yet along these lines. However, those of us who have been exploring nondirective approaches in the facilitation field know from experience that nondirective methods can be a viable and effective option with groups, not just with individuals in a mediated conflict. We have found that in return for allowing convergences to emerge in their own time, work teams tend to experience much greater alignment, commitment, and natural follow-through with regard to practical outcomes than is usually possible through managed processes. Of course, this is only experiential evidence; further research in this area is greatly needed.

Similarities, Differences, and Learning Opportunities. Many of the similarities between transformative mediation and the two methods described earlier should by now be apparent. Like dialogue mapping and dynamic facilitation, transformative mediation does not move forward in a linear fashion but instead tends to proceed in a more circuitous manner. The mediator's job can be seen as following closely rather than leading or managing. Welcoming, listening, and reflecting are key in all three methods.

One significant difference is that the transformative mediation model allows the parties in a dispute to direct their "heat" at one another instead of asking them to direct any charged comments to the facilitator or mediator, as is done in both dynamic facilitation and dialogue mapping. (Experience has shown, however, "third-party listening" may be useful in that context.)

Another difference is that transformative mediation has a very explicit and powerful philosophical foundation, which has not yet been developed in the same way for dynamic facilitation or dialogue mapping. Nevertheless, Bush and Folger's example has served as an inspiration for me in attempting the following initial description of the philosophical foundation of practical dialogue: As human beings, each of us is continually attempting to make sense of our world, as best we can, on the basis of the information that is available to us. We do so for the purpose of responding creatively in a way that meets all of our needs, including our needs for autonomy and self-determination, our needs to understand and connect with others, and our needs to contribute—to ourselves, to others, and to the larger whole. Each of the methods described in this chapter serves to create a container where we can, together, effectively draw on each individual's unique gifts and contributions in order to meet these very human needs.

Broader Perspectives on Developing a Collaborative Culture

This chapter has explored one particular aspect of developing a collaborative culture: supporting collaboration among members of task-oriented working groups. In an organizational context, this would include groups such as management teams, project teams, and functional teams; in a community context, it might include task forces, stakeholder councils, citizen deliberation councils, or coalitions.

I have attempted to show that the emerging approach of practical dialogue offers a powerful nondirective alternative for helping groups address practical issues, one that also fosters deep interpersonal learning of the sort that Shepard (1965) described in the shift from "primary" to "secondary" mentality. At the same time, I want to acknowledge that helping working groups become more collaborative is only one aspect of the larger work of developing a collaborative culture.

For example, if you are working with an organization, you may need to work with the leadership of the organization to examine and modify the current reward structure of the organization in order to remove systemic constraints to collaboration. Or you may want to involve the whole system of an organization or a community in a collaborative effort by organizing large-scale conversations of various kinds (see Weisbord, 1992; Owen, 1992; Brown, 2005). Other avenues for supporting collaboration may involve creating greater opportunities for informal communication through the design or redesign of architectural features.

Although the kind of collaboration that takes place in working groups is only one aspect of creating a collaborative culture, the implications of powerful group collaboration can reach beyond the particular tasks a group assumes. Highly functioning groups can offer an example to the larger organization or community of what is possible and can serve as effective catalysts for wider collaboration throughout the larger system. This is especially true when those groups reflect the diversity that is present in the larger social fabric, as is the case in stakeholder consensus councils or citizen deliberation councils (Atlee, 2003).

One way to help bridge differences in our society is through dialogue oriented toward promoting interpersonal understanding. At the same time, we

also know that working together on common projects can also be a powerful way to help bridge differences. Stakeholder councils and citizen deliberation councils are examples of a growing trend in our society toward understanding democracy less as simply voting for those who will represent us and more as working together to forge creative and inclusive solutions to shared challenges (Barber, 1984). To do so, we need powerful tools that are suited to the task at hand: addressing practical issues in a way that fully honors the divergent perspectives among us.
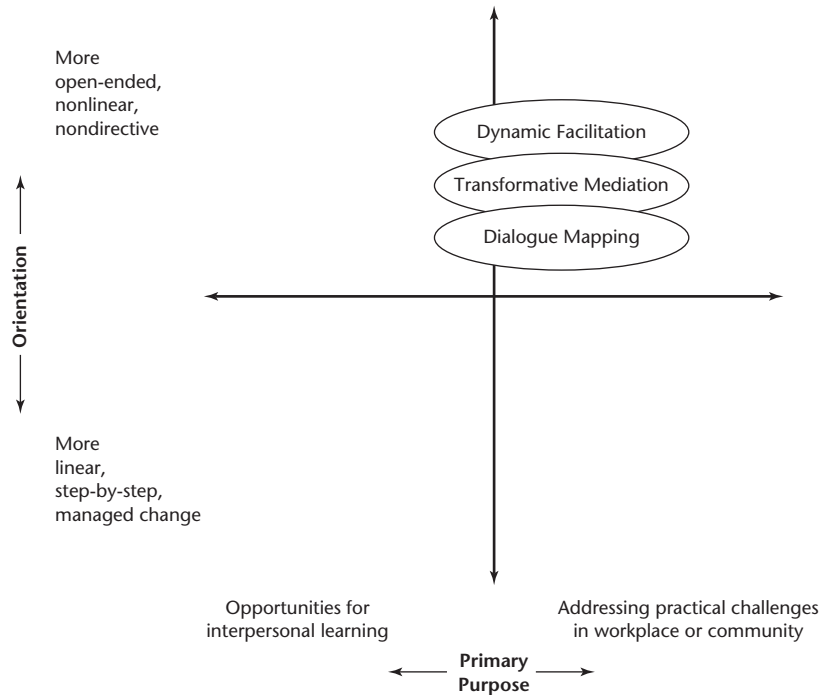
Conclusion

I hope to have made a case for moving beyond conventional assumptions that regard dialogic approaches as not applicable to situations that require practical action and concrete results. The various methods described in this chapter point to a growing body of experience that serves to challenge limiting beliefs and expand our ideas about dialogue. I have illustrated where these methods fit into the larger spectrum of group processes in Figure 13.3.

The methods that I refer to as practical dialogue are among the most powerful ways that I have encountered to help working groups accomplish the following aims:

• To engage creatively with polarized situations and widely divergent perspectives
• To work effectively with complex issues
• To welcome people as they are, tapping into their natural gifts and desire to contribute
• To support shared understanding, practical breakthroughs, and aligned action
• To develop a culture of deep collaboration in which each individual's divergence is seen as a valuable contribution to the larger whole

Yet my intention has been not only to describe these particular methods but also to point beyond them, to the next generation of approaches that may better meet the needs of our times. To this end, I hope to have sparked some thoughts about how we might best create cultures of respectful and effective

**FIGURE 13.3 PRACTICAL DIALOGUE: METHODS FOR
BREAKTHROUGH RESULTS AND INTERPERSONAL LEARNING
AS BY-PRODUCTS OF CREATIVE, OPEN-ENDED EXPLORATIONS.**

collaboration, not only in our organizations but also in our communities, our societies, and our shared world.

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