Developing a Dialogue Driven School – The key to unlocking your school as a professional learning community explained

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Background

As the public's expectations of education has risen over the last two decades school leaders and teachers have come under increasing pressure to enhance student achievement and to provide exceptional learning opportunities. Exceptional learning opportunities are best provided in organisations that learn.

The notion of Learning Organisations is not new. There has been much writing and research into Learning Organisations and in the education sector, the equivalent – Professional Learning Communities.

The early work of people like William Deming, Chris Argyris, Peter Senge and more recently educational thinkers like Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink, all extol the virtues of developing organisations (schools) as Professional Learning Communities. There is little doubt students and staff who are in schools which are *authentic* Professional Learning Communities develop, grow and learn in more beneficial, dynamic and powerful ways than those who are not.

However, what is a Professional Learning Community is a mute point. In our work in schools we see increasingly see two types of very different schools. The irony is that leaders in them are driven by the same set of aspirations and outcomes but choose two divergent ways of achieving them. It comes back to leadership in the end.

Two Types of School

• Professional development communities and informational learning

In Professional Development Communities staff are provided regular and frequent developmental opportunities around curriculum, pedagogy and instructional practice. There are ample opportunities for staff to listen to experts in their fields, to work alongside external coaches and facilitators to develop new instructional practices and methodologies around curriculum areas and to go off site for professional development opportunities. Professional development has its own budget and often it's very generous. When school leaders develop capability and bring about change in this way we have begun to refer to them as Professional Development Communities.

In Professional Development Communities the desired speed for change by leaders is often rapid. For teachers new initiatives can come quickly. Numeracy, Literacy, ICT, Formative Assessment, Bullying, Restorative Practice ..... The focus of Professional Development is to provide teachers with what is referred to as *Technical Learning or Informational Learning.*

Technical/Informational learning is designed with the intention to fix perceived problems or weaknesses across school and in individual classrooms. Technical and Informational learning focuses on increasing the amount of knowledge and skills someone has and helps them to apply new approaches to become more effective. The belief is that so long as teachers are engaged in Professional Development they are learning. Often leaders link words such 'dynamic', 'vibrant', 'vigorous', 'active' and 'go-ahead' in their heads with quantity. When a leader says, "We're developing into a dynamic Learning Community", we have discovered this often means teachers have been exposed to a lot of Professional Development. Often school leader's work on the assumption that more is better and the more we can offer in terms of Professional Development the more of a Professional Learning Community we are.

Because Professional Development Communities are often driven by speed and a 'fix it' mentality

sometimes the number of competing programmes can make it sometimes difficult to identify a clear focus. Often teachers can become confused – one year it's one thing, the following year something else. Teachers in these schools will say to us for example that they know what the goals are without actually being able to articulate exactly what they are. Goals become a bit like 'background noise" or "static" in these schools. Teachers know the goals are there but really "we're trying to focus on other things – the things which really count. The goals sort of get in the way", they'll often infer.

The tendency then in Professional Development Communities can be to offer more and more new practices without developing effective supports for those practices. The real danger for teachers in Professional Development Communities is that they face a generous menu of *too much development and not enough learning*.

Sometimes initiatives overlap - it can mean a teacher might be expected to be engaged in 2 – 6 initiatives at any one time. Each intervention could make a difference in students' lives but often teachers begin to feel overwhelmed in these situations. Eric Abrahamson (2004) referred to this phenomenon as "initiative overload" – the "tendency of organisations to launch more change initiatives than anyone could reasonably handle". When faced with "initiative overload", Abrahamson says, "people ...begin to duck and take cover whenever they see a new wave of initiatives coming".

In his book, Managing at the Speed of Change, Darryl Connor puts it this way: "as the number of changes multiplies, and as the time demands increase, people approach a dysfunction threshold, a point where they lose the capacity to implement changes."

Jim Knight in his book Instructional Coaching compared the implementation rate of ideas and methodologies of teachers using two forms of Implementation. These were what he referred to as Traditional Professional Development (experts talking to rooms of strangers, after school meetings, off site programmes) and what he calls Instructional Coaching (Partnership Learning with Colleagues during school time – not after school).

Implementation Rate
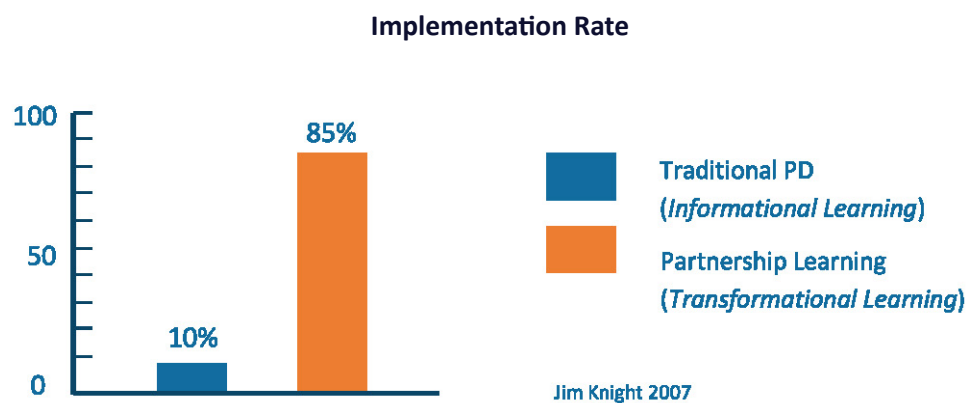
With just a 10% rate of successful teacher implementation using traditional forms of Professional Development 90% of tax payer's funded Professional Development money appears to go on lunch. Much Numeracy, Literacy and Formative Assessment Professional Development uses traditional Professional Development methodologies relying on external expertise and extrinsic motivation.

School leaders referring to their schools as Professional Learning Communities without realising they are Professional Development Communities can sometimes be one of the greatest blockages to school improvement. Instead of improving learning their teachers passively resist – as a 10% implementation rate might suggest.

• Professional learning communities and transformational learning

Some leaders have started to follow a very different path. Tiring of a 10% implementation rate, or something like this, they have sought alternative ways to go about school improvement. Whilst they acknowledge Professional Development their focus is on Professional Learning. To do this effectively requires slowing down, not speeding up or continuing to operate at break neck speed.

In their minds learning is about teacher inquiry and reflection and Partnership Learning It's about creating an ecological system allowing teachers to partnership learn – to connect professionally for the purposes of challenging each other's basic assumptions, to explore previously unseen opportunities for growth and to tap into the richness of what resides in the heads of colleagues as tacit knowledge. Not to knowledge share or share resources (Informational Learning). These schools are developing into Authentic Professional Learning Communities. What these leaders have come to distinguish between is Informational Learning and *Transformational Learning.*

Transformational Learning relates to the development of cognitive, emotional, interpersonal and intrapersonal capacities that enable a person to manage the complexities of work and life. Through transformational learning a qualitative shift occurs in how a person actively interprets, organises, understands and makes sense of their world. This is the type of learning teacher inquiry and reflection is hoping to create.

Transformational learning occurs when people collaborate and learn to think and learn together in relationship. This is not about sharing practice and solving problems (Informational learning). It's about finding problems and collectively new meanings through dialogue.

Because transformational learning is spirited through professional dialogue it means participants control direction, source and meaning. This learning is unstructured, organic and happens all the time as teachers inquire progressively into their own practices and beliefs and those of others. Through transformational learning we grow ourselves, develop curiosity and connect in deep and powerful ways. It's the basis of a Community.
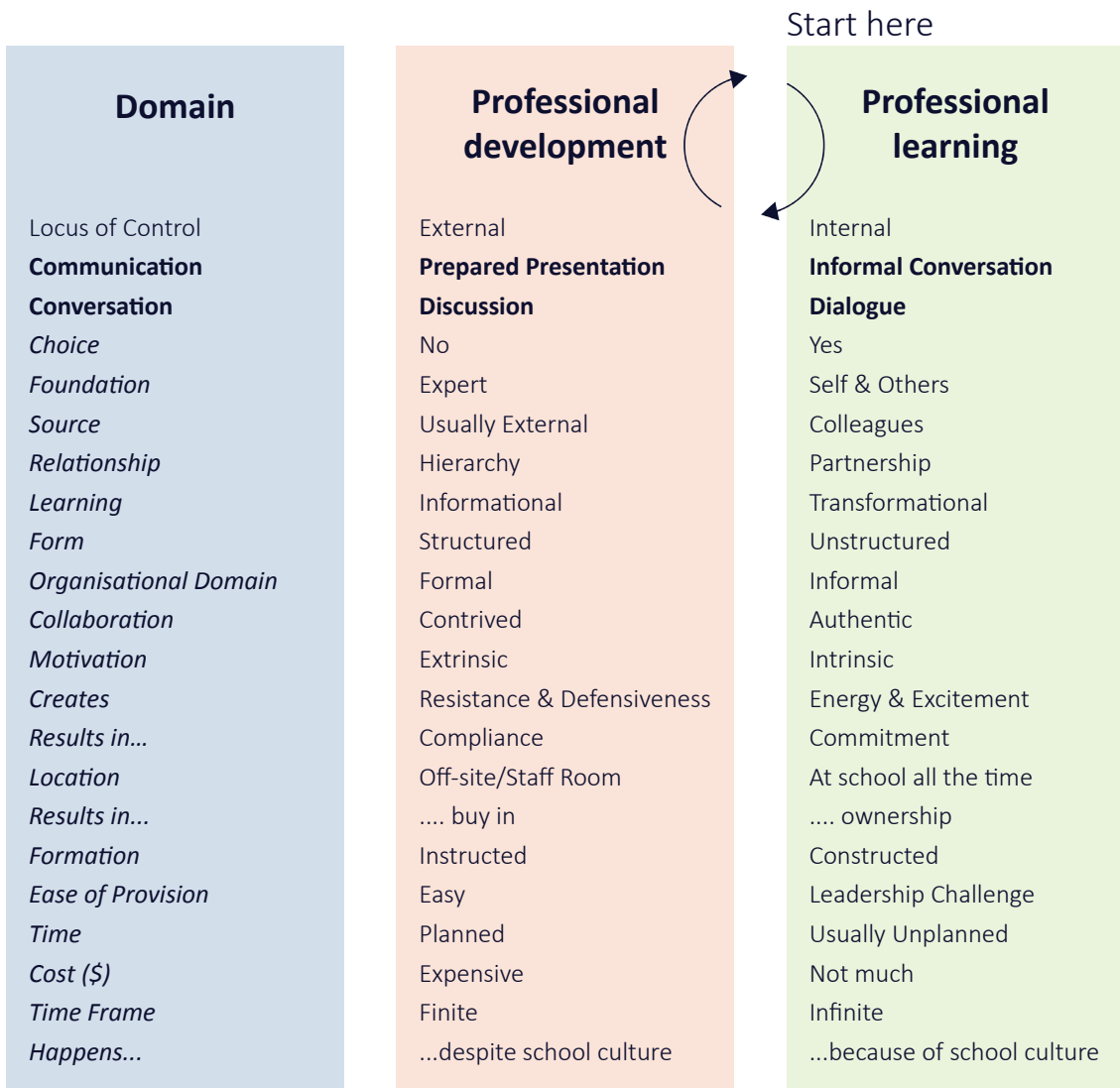
The extent to which school leaders are able to create professional learning opportunities (transformational learning) is determined by their ability to foster and create an ecological system supporting it. If they are unable to create this supportive school culture which allows teachers to experience regular and frequent opportunities for transformational learning to occur it is a reflection of their leadership. Developing school culture is the work of a leader. Leaders who struggle with culture, who do not have the capacity to develop it, can circumnavigate this challenge and take an easier route – they can choose to develop their schools as Professional Development Communities.

Developing Professional Development Communities are less challenging, in fact they are very easy to establish – you can provide Professional Development irrespective of school culture. Professional learning is your school culture.

In way of a summary. We have not met one teacher yet who is not open to learning. We have discovered how when teachers are exposed to transformational learning opportunities they leave excited, exhilarated and healthily anxious. For example they may have conducted Walk Throughs with us through their school and as we have introduced them to the art and science of dialogue they are able to use their colleagues as vehicles for their own reflection and evaluation. They are able to pull apart their teaching practice and work out exactly how they can go about moving from 'good' to 'great', or from 'great' to 'greater'. There is not one teacher whom we have worked with over a decade who has not engaged in this type of learning positively, enthusiastically and passionately. Interestingly all teachers are very interested in their own teaching practice but the way leaders choose to engage them around this is critical. Transformational Learning is the vehicle they seek as an 85% Implementation rate would suggest based on Knights' research.

We meet however too many teachers who are cynical and tired of being developed. They are tired of more and more Informational/Technical Learning and they are cynical about new initiatives designed to 'fix' them. It is Transformational Learning opportunities your teachers desire, not informational opportunities– only they don't have the language to ask for it.

• The key differences between professional development and professional learning

Start here

Domain	Professional development	Professional learning
Locus of Control	External	Internal
Communication	**Prepared Presentation**	**Informal Conversation**
Conversation	**Discussion**	**Dialogue**
Choice	No	Yes
Foundation	Expert	Self & Others
Source	Usually External	Colleagues
Relationship	Hierarchy	Partnership
Learning	Informational	Transformational
Form	Structured	Unstructured
Organisational Domain	Formal	Informal
Collaboration	Contrived	Authentic
Motivation	Extrinsic	Intrinsic
Creates	Resistance & Defensiveness	Energy & Excitement
Results in...	Compliance	Commitment
Location	Off-site/Staff Room	At school all the time
Results in...	.... buy in	.... ownership
Formation	Instructed	Constructed
Ease of Provision	Easy	Leadership Challenge
Time	Planned	Usually Unplanned
Cost ($)	Expensive	Not much
Time Frame	Finite	Infinite
Happens...	...despite school culture	...because of school culture

• Starting at the right place – avoiding the trap

Most leaders start with the left hand column - Professional Development - because it's easier. We look for things we need to 'fix' or strengthen. By starting here leaders hope the Professional Development initiative will ignite teachers' interest and enthusiasm so that Professional Learning ensues.

In reality this does not necessarily happen. If it does it happens it is found in pockets across. This reaction consistently disappoints many school leaders. One issue is that we see the presence of teachers at Professional Development and assume teachers are committed. However, the fatal flaw is to confuse compliance with commitment.

What happens over time (often years) is that leaders can get trapped into a cycle of Professional Development initiative after initiative all the time hoping next time "we'll get it right". Jim Knight in his book Instructional Coaching explains how leaders can end up blaming teachers for resisting change and teachers end up blaming their leaders for poorly structured, poorly implemented and poorly timed professional development initiatives. It starts a cycle of blame. Starting in the left hand column hoping to generate outcomes in the right hand column often leaves school leadership teams tired, drained, frustrated and angry. Over time they have worked tirelessly to motivate and encourage teachers to embrace things which teachers should naturally be embracing if they really did have the best interests of children at heart. Paradoxically, teachers are also left tired, drained, frustrated and angry as they try to survive a barrage of constant externally driven change initiatives.

Informed leaders start with the right hand column – Professional Learning. Whilst infinitely more difficult to do than starting with Professional Development, the results are stunning.

Creating opportunities for teachers to Professionally Learn allows them to identify for themselves personal and school wide strengths and developmental areas. The motivation for embracing change and learning becomes intrinsic as teachers take ownership for their professional learning and development. Starting on the right hand side with Professional Learning empowers teachers. It allows them to make choices and decisions and from the very start they are engaged. It means teachers see the link between Professional Learning and Professional Development and a natural cycle of professional growth and development ensues.

As you read this you may be thinking that you are already providing teachers with opportunities to cultivate Professional Learning. If you are thinking that Learning Circles, Focus Groups and Professional Learning Communities within your school would allow you to tick the box it might surprise you to discover that these are all examples of contrived collegiality, and without developing teachers ability to dialogue, real learning leading to changed practice, will be minimal.

Contrived collegiality consists of administratively contrived interactions between teachers where they meet and work to implement the curricula and instructional strategies developed by others. Through these interactions, according to Andy Hargreaves, contrived collegiality enhances administrative control. As opposed to empowering teachers it has the opposite outcome – teachers feel less in control. Peer coaching of the technical kind, Andy Hargreaves concludes fosters implementation rather than learning, education rather than training, contrived collegiality rather than collaborative culture. At the heart of this is discussion.

In contrast, truly collaborative cultures comprise evolutionary relationships of openness, trust, and support among teachers where they define and develop their own purposes as a community. At the heart of this is dialogue. Collaborative cultures foster teacher and curriculum development because people are genuinely motivated to and it's through dialogue that motivation and commitment are established and built.

Dialogue and Discussion

• Background

Human beings have created two primary types of discourse – dialogue and discussion. Both are critical because conversation is our most important and most powerful 'influence tool' at work and at home.

If you were to have this one 'influence tool' removed from your Influence Tool Kit what would you be left with? How could you influence your partner, spouse, work colleagues, your children and those ones you teach, your neighbours, parents and siblings? Take away conversation and you're not going to be an effective influencer.

Conversation occurs around us at all times and often we are expected to participate. When we talk about effective communication and effective communicators what people are referring to often is an ability that that person has to use the right discourse at the right time. Those who are highly effective communicators, and therefore influencers, have knowledge, skills and abilities to both discuss and to dialogue. However, there is some bad news on this count - people are flawed in many ways and one of our natural flaws is how we as a species have come to default to discussion as the primary way of conversing. We have lost the ability to dialogue.

Dialogue is a very old idea but because it is not practiced that frequently we have lost the ability to generate creative tension in our conversations. We have come to think that discussion is the only way of conversing and whilst people may say they have entered into a dialogue, when we monitor their conversations nothing has changed – they're still in discussion. Rather than change the way they think about their conversations, frame them and genuinely engage participants the word dialogue perhaps popped into their heads before the word discussion did – and so it was a dialogue they had rather than a discussion. This is to belittle the true meaning of dialogue.

Discussion has the same root as percussion and concussion. It suggests something like a 'ping-pong' game where we are hitting the ball backwards and forth between us. In such a game the subject of common agreement may be analysed and dissected from many points of view provided by those who take part. Clearly this can be useful. Yet the purpose of a 'game' is normally 'to win' and in this case winning means to have one's views accepted by the group. You may occasionally accept part of another person's view in order to strengthen your own, but you fundamentally want to prevail. A sustained emphasis on winning is not compatible, however, with giving first priority to coherence and truth. In *skilful discussion* we defend well, appearing to remain open to ideas, but intend to win. In *controlled discussion* we defend badly and hope to win. These types of unproductive conversations devolve usually into *debate*, whose roots mean to "beat down".

In reality everyday important conversations which we take for granted are abstract 'mini wars' and are for the majority of participants potentially unsafe. Subsequently participants use a number of tactics. Flight (silent) tactics include withdrawing, avoiding, masking & sugar-coating. Fight (violent) tactics include controlling, labelling and attacking. What becomes the overriding focus in discussion is survival. It means all too often talk fails us. *Discussion does not unlock Transformational Learning*.

Dialogue is a very old idea revered by the ancient Greeks and practiced by many primitive societies including American Indians and New Zealand Māori. Yet, it is lost to the modern world.

The word 'dialogue' comes from the Greek *dialogos*. *Dia* means through. Logos means the word, or more broadly, the meaning. It has been suggested that the original meaning of dialogue was the "meaning passing through … a free flow of meaning between people, in the sense of a stream that flows between two banks".

In the most ancient meaning of the word according to Isaacs, logos meant "to gather together", suggesting an intimate awareness of the relationships among things in the natural world. In that sense, logos may best be transferred in English as 'relationship'. It means when in dialogue, participants

access a large "pool of common meaning" which cannot be accessed individually. "The whole organises the parts" rather than trying to pull the parts into a whole.

The purpose of a dialogue is to go beyond any one individual's understanding. We are not trying to win in dialogue. We all win if we are doing it right. In dialogue, each of us gains new insights that simply could not be achieved individually. A new kind of mind begins to come into meaning …people are no longer primarily in opposition, nor are they said to be interacting; rather they are participating in this pool of common meaning, which is capable of constant development and change.

In dialogue participants explore complex difficult issues from many points of view. Individuals suspend their assumptions freely. The result is a free exploration that brings to the surface the full depth of peoples' experience and thought, and yet can move them beyond their individual views. For example, when a conflict surfaces in a dialogue people are more likely to realise that there is tension, and that the tension arises literally from their own thoughts. People say, "it is our thoughts and the way we hold onto them that are in conflict, not us". By thinking like this people are able to take a more creative, less reactive stance toward their thought. Dialogue is the basis for Transformational Learning.

• Discussion and Dialogue – The differences diagrammatically

Discussion ← Conversation → Dialogue

Discussion
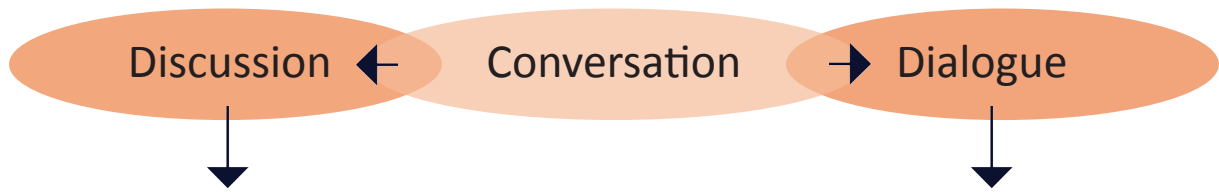
- Your position/s are stated
- You advocate convictions
- You try to convince others
- Build allies and alliances
- About getting your idea/s across
- Seek to control
- Focus on survival
- Evaluative
- Listening for agreement/ disagreement
- Compete
- Focus on right and wrong
- Judgmental
- About narrowing down
- Decision making

Results in:

- Short term resolution
- Compromise
- Agreement by logic
- Opposition is beaten down
- Mind sets held onto
- Little change
- Winners and a losers
- People withdrawing
- People acting as 'Judge'
- People treating others as objects
- High advocacy; low inquiry
- Little to know new learning
- No generation of new knowledge
- Inhibits development of long term relationships.
- Stifles and suffocates creativity – creates uniformity
- No risk taking
- Living in dependent relationships at home/workplace
- Passivity
- Disengagement with learning
- Stress, isolation, anger, resentment
- Disempowered to deal with complexity at home/work

Dialogue

- Reveal feelings
- Explore assumptions
- Suspend convictions
- Build common ground
- Learn from others' ideas
- Seek to share
- Equal balance of power
- Focus on 'the now'
- Non-evaluative
- Listen for hidden opportunities
- Collaborative
- Focus on seeing others' points of view.
- Recognising other options
- About creating unseen opportunities
- Exploring choice and invoking insight

Results in:

- Long term resolution
- New previously unidentified solutions
- Unified team
- Shared meaning
- Transformed mind sets
- Win: win
- Deep understandings
- Compassion
- People are honoured as human beings
- New/previously hidden opportunities are surfaced
- Generation of new knowledge
- High advocacy; high inquiry
- Building partnerships
- Sparks creativity
- People take healthy risks
- People live and work in interdependent relationships
- Engagement and enthusiasm
- Increased connectedness
- Ownership for Learning
- Improved emotional health
- Happier and empowered to deal with complexity at home and work

• Dialogue shown as pools of shared meaning

A conversation may be thought of as a 'pool of shared meaning'. In discussion, different views are presented and defended and through this, decisions are made. Through discussion the 'pool of shared meaning' shrinks. In dialogue, different views are presented as a means towards discovering a new view. As dialogue continues the 'pool of shared meaning' increases. This is not brainstorming. Brainstorming is a means for coming up with ideas to solve problems and is Informational Learning. It is not dialogue.

Dialogue

Discussion
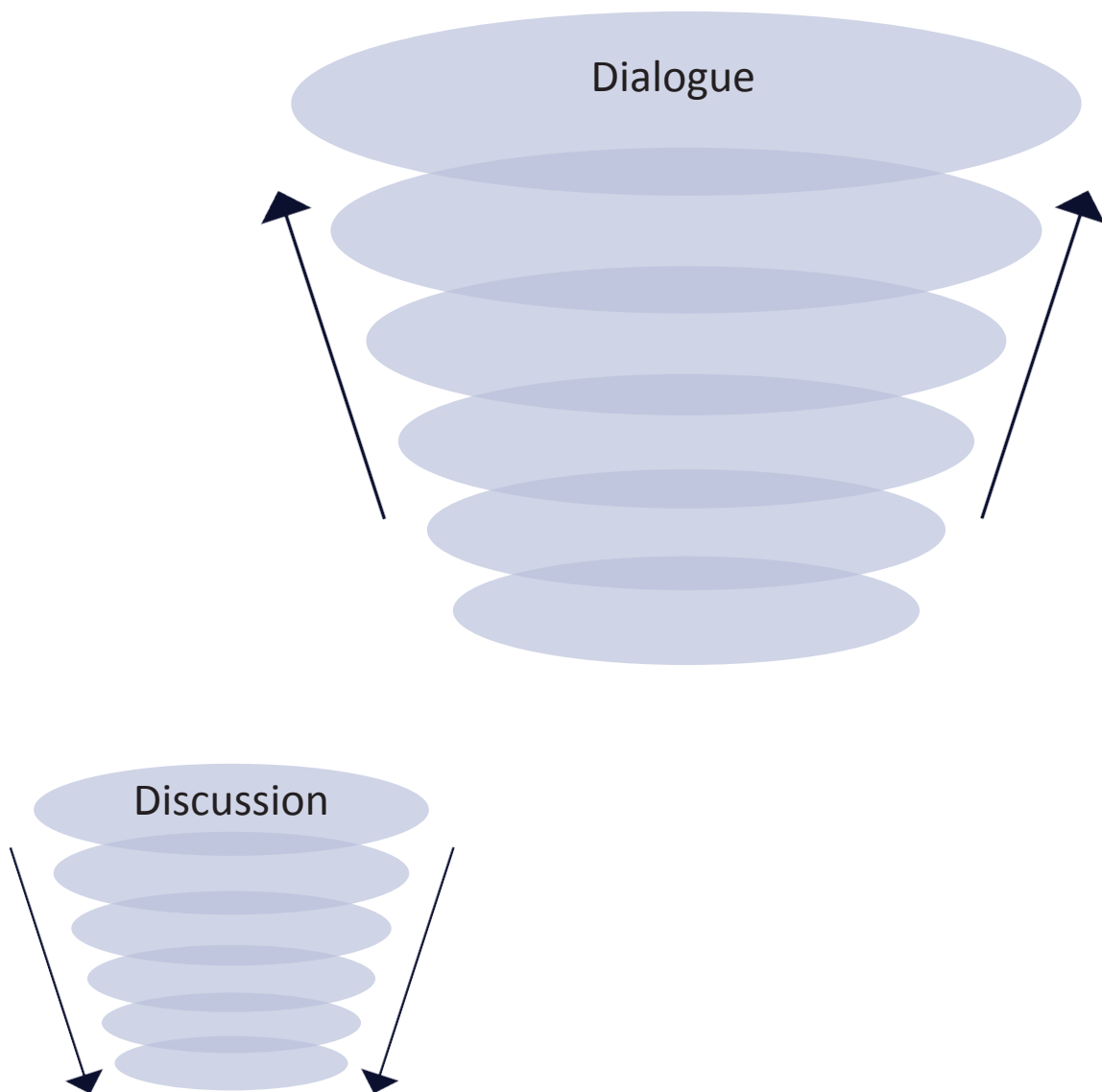
• Falling for the 'suckers choice'

Effective people are effective because they successfully deal with what lies in front of them. Most difficult and challenging situations we find ourselves in are challenging because other people are involved in either the problem or the solution.

A 'suckers' choice' keeps us off track and inhibits our effectiveness. Because in the modern world we default to discussion we consistently fall for this as the sucker's choice. It's been said by William Isaacs that "most people living today do not recall how to create meaningful conversations – we cannot draw upon a single tradition of conversation." With this as our backdrop we can't help but make a sucker's choice. This sets us up to be ineffective parents, partners, siblings, leaders, teachers, coaches, mentors and collaborative partners in a world where learning from, with and through others, has become the cornerstone of life.

In a discussion, decisions are made. In dialogue complex issues are explored. When participants engage in conversation and a decision has to be made, discussion is needed. On the basis of a commonly agreed analysis, alternate views need to be weighed and a preferred view selected. When they are productive, discussions converge on a conclusion or course of action. On the other hand, dialogues are diverging; they do not seek agreement, but a richer grasp of complex issues. Both dialogue and discussion can lead to new courses of action; but actions are often the focus of discussion, whereas new actions emerge as a by-product of dialogue.

People who are highly effective learn how to move backwards and forth between dialogue and discussion. The ground rules are different. The goals are different. Failure to be able to dialogue and failure to be able to distinguish between discussion and dialogue can render people, teams, families and organisations ineffective

Discussion   Which way?   Dialogue

• What are the benefits of dialogue?

Dialogue lies at the heart of collaboration – in our families, in our communities and at work with our colleagues. Because the dialogue process is a form of conversation that is meaningful to all human beings from every walk of life, from every nationality and from a myriad of workplaces, it is difficult to simply outline the benefits of developing skills to dialogue. People come to dialogue for many different reasons – some to resolve conflict, others because they want to get along better with their spouse or aging parents for example. Others wish to deepen their relationships with their boss, a business partner or want to work in a different way to develop a new and very different relationship with an in-law. In businesses and in schools, dialogue is the primary tool for conversations which have at their core the intention to learn and to develop. In all of these scenarios discussion is the sucker's choice.

The table below tries to simplify the benefits of dialogue for educators at work and at home.

At School

Meetings – Staff meetings, team, faculty and departmental meeting often fall flat. They can become tiresome and boring. You see people withdrawing, and avoiding; you hear people sugar-coating and masking what they truly believe and want to say. If staff had skills to dialogue they could generate the creative tension you seek to make meetings more meaningful.

Appraisal – Performance Management - For teachers the relevance and power of the process is determined by the quality of the conversation/s their appraiser/coach is able to facilitate for them. Both they and the appraiser need skills to dialogue so that learning is mutual as opposed to one way and the teacher is enthused and excited by the previously unseen opportunities they now have to play about with. Discussion leads to evaluative conversations.

Learning Circles/ Professional Learning Communities/ Communities of Practice – Often seen as contrived collegiality teachers sense they are 'rail roaded' into choosing a focus group which appeals to them. Conversations are driven by discussion and therefore centre on problem solving, sharing knowledge and strategies. Learning is informational in nature and over time becomes tiresome for many teachers. If teachers had the skills to dialogue they could harness the collective intelligence of the group in ways that change the whole way they think about how they do, what they do and why they do. They develop capacity for deep learning and identify, such is their capacity to learn and think together, future focus groups which they themselves take ownership of.

New Initiative Development – supporting teacher growth and development requires a blend of discussion and dialogue. When the balance is right teachers are often able and willing to engage. Get the balance wrong and teachers become unable, or unwilling, or both unable and unwilling to engage.

At Home

Spouses /Partners – Often grow apart due to the daily pressures and grind of life. When time is spent together through dialogue people in relationships learn to view each other in new and refreshing ways. Each day they learn to appreciate who they live with in new ways. Through dialogue people in relationships learn to think and learn together; in discussion participants in relationships think alone.

Children – Can sometimes as they grow older isolate themselves as they seek independence in their teenage years. You try and talk to them and they feel you're prying, interrogating and interviewing them. It's not your intention but that's what it appears to them. The problem is that they seek dialogue. They seek to be understood and they need help to understand. Dialogue is the one skill all parents require as their children grow older so that relationships with them are strengthened through these years and not weakened.

Neighbours – The neighbour who plays the music too loud or starts the car at 6am every morning and leaves it running outside your bedroom for 10 minutes before leaving every day. You need to talk about how you feel and how you would like the issues to go away but you're frightened they may respond negatively or see you as the neighbour from 'hell'. Use discussion and you can inflame the situation and tarnish relationships. Enter into dialogue and you will find problems dissolve and relationships are strengthened through these scenarios.

Shifting the Burden for Learning to Teachers – Teachers skilled in the art of dialogue evaluate their practice in insightful and powerful ways. It means they are able to work out for themselves exactly where they need to develop – and they are almost always right. Spending time together as a staff collaborating on where everyone's developmental needs are you can identify patterns across your school and teachers drive their own professional learning.

Parent and Teacher Interviews – When Teachers and Parents have such limited opportunities to spend time together it is crucial that when they do interactions are of the highest quality. For some parents, the teacher can get by using discussion; for other parents the teacher needs to dialogue. Help teachers get it right to and help them build stronger relationships between home and school.

Pastoral Care of Students – Deans in Secondary schools and teachers in Middle and Junior schools are often leading others through difficult, delicate and emotionally charged situations. Often having the ability to dialogue would have prevented the situation from arising in the first place; dialogue is required to ensure the issue/s are dealt with effectively.

Leadership – Is about influence. As a Principal, DP, AP, Team Leader, Head of Department or Faculty dialogue ensures you have the tools to effectively deal with almost everything which comes your way.

High Performing Work Teams – Highly effective teams dialogue and discuss. Participants know how and when to transition. They assist others who can get stuck in one particular discourse and they harness the collective IQs and EQs of all. No one is afraid to challenge anyone else – they have the ability to speak honestly and openly without being brutal in ways which keep conversations safe and moving forward.

Teacher Induction, Provisionally Registered Teachers' Programmes, Support & Guidance Programmes, and Teacher Incompetency Processes are other obvious areas.

Unhelpful People – Maybe someone you've employed to work around the home on a project whose service you are less than satisfied with; maybe someone on the end of the phone whose assistance you require but they don't appear to be listening or acting in ways that are expediting action around your concerns. Discussion will see the problem often deteriorate and tempers fray. Often an impasse is reached and all parties lose. Dialogue allows you and others to create new opportunities for reconciliation, understanding and movement forward rapidly at times when discussion often is tantamount to putting on the brakes.

Disasters – When you and or members of your family are grieving over loss of life, home, community. Dialogue is required more than ever. Dialogue with support organisations, dialogue with council, dialogue with neighbours and dialogue with each other. Dialogue creates strength, builds resilience and harmonises people and communities. Using discussion when dialogue is called for isolates people, makes them more vulnerable, heightens stress and anxiety and establishes a sense of loneliness at times when being connected is what is most valuable.

Personal Health – Because people who have mastered dialogue can 'talk in relationship' with others they are able to overcome the most challenging issues in less stressful ways. Research consistently highlights how those who can dialogue experience lower levels of stress and their emotional health is a lot better than those people who are not able to successfully dialogue particularly when it comes to critical conversations around particularly challenging situations.

• How can I learn to dialogue?

The good news is that learning the skills and knowledge to dialogue is infinitely possible. Dialogue skills are learnable. It's been said the skills are easy to spot and easy to learn. So long as you have a facilitator who can break down and isolate for you the key skills and then sequence them in order to optimise learning for you, you will be able to master dialogue.

There are two things you need to know:

1. Unfortunately such is the modern world we are all looking for quick fixes. Informational Learning! Mastering dialogue does not work like this. You will have worked out if you have read prior to this, that those who master dialogue are exposed to a Transformational Learning process. It's about changing the way we think about conversations not about bringing out a few strategies whilst in a conversation!

2. Research shows how those who try to minimise the complexity of dialogue by reducing it to a few simple techniques about talking together change nothing. What is required is a way of evoking what people already know about dialogue while recognising the ways they systematically undermine themselves and others and fail to live up to the potential of their conversations. It starts by looking inwards before looking outwards. It starts by learning more about ourselves than it does about others and because so few have ever experienced dialogue, because most people living today have not experienced it, they can't draw upon a single tradition of conversation to model it.

Those of you familiar with InterLEAD Programmes will know how in those programmes focussing on Professional Conversations – Appraisal Conversations, Courageous Conversations and Critical Conversations – all bring elements of dialogue into the process. However, these alone do not create the depth of dialogue across your school to catapult you to becoming an authentic Professional Learning Community. What school leaders are increasingly seeking are tailored programmes designed to systematically change the way people talk at critical times during critical interactions.

Those of you who have invited us into your schools to implement and develop the 4 Minute Walk Through Programme and who have worked through the entire programme with us, know how this programme involves teachers working in partnership watching colleagues teach. After each walk through teachers dialogue using those teachers whom they have just observed as spring boards for evaluating and synthesising their own learning. Before doing this teachers have been trained in how to dialogue and have had it modelled for them, first hand, so that they can experience what it feels like to be in a dialogue and to know what Transformational Learning is, so that they can re-create it for themselves and others. This programme specifically focuses on generating a culture of Professional Dialogue around classroom practice - it does not necessarily assist participants use dialogue in their lives outside school or around critical conversations for example.

There is a growing awareness amongst leaders that to develop their schools as Professional Learning Communities that success requires a focussed and strategic approach. Developing a Professional Learning Community cannot be achieved easily whilst peoples' energy and focus is on other things – perhaps Numeracy or Literacy. What more and more leaders are increasingly doing is to make dialogue a focus for your school and to work through a programme specifically tailored to ensure dialogue becomes part of a school's culture. Many schools are now making the Development of their schools as Professional Learning Communities and Communication a 1 to 2 or 3-year goal just as they would for a curriculum area. Doing it this way empowers people to deal with complexity outside school too. It allows them to use dialogue at school and at home.

Whatever you do we can assure you that one essential thing is required to master dialogue. Skills development.

Human performance is based on someone having **Knowledge**, **Skills** and **Ability**. All three are required. Human Resource Managers refer to these as the **KSAs**.

Most people are amazed to discover there is a difference between dialogue and discussion. Not knowing there is a difference indicates a high probability these people have defaulted to discussion in the past. However, even as your knowledge expands, and you discover there is a difference, this does not allow you to suddenly engage in dialogue. Whilst you can also read books on dialogue and google search what dialogue is, you will develop greater knowledge but unfortunately knowledge gathering alone does not increase our ability to dialogue.

We still need to know *how* to do it. Knowledge comes first – it's the '*what*' we have to do. Skills come next – it's the *how* we do it. Putting knowledge into practice is a skill in itself. No amount of reading and googling will assist us to put the skills into action. This is where you need facilitated guidance and help. Skills are the one thing people desperately need to be able to master dialogue.

The good news is that everyone is born with the ability to dialogue. Ability is not a problem. So long as people have the knowledge and can deploy the skills, the potential ability to dialogue which you were born with will be realised.

We have been assisting school leaders and teachers develop the skills to dialogue for over a decade – well before recent educational academics have aroused peoples' curiosity in Learning Conversations, Professional Collaboration and Critical Reflection.

If you are interested in tapping into our experience of helping school leaders transform schools into authentic Professional Learning Communities and teams and people in ways that support the development of your school as a Professional Learning Community, then we would like to hear from you.

Questions - please contact us

Learn more at **www.interlead.co.nz**, email **learning@interlead.co.nz** or contact one of our team. We will be happy to provide you with more information.

Tony Burkin	Judith Price	Andrew Ormsby	John McLellan	Stephen Hensman
021 729 008	021 805 715	021 222 1700	021 729 009	027 364 7094
t.burkin@interlead.co.nz	j.price@interlead.co.nz	a.ormsby@interlead.co.nz	j.mclellan@interlead.co.nz	s.hensman@interlead.co.nz

interLEAD™
INTERPRETING LEADERSHIP

Christchurch
Wellington
Auckland

PO Box 130039
PO Box 24027
PO Box 109548, Newmarket

www.interlead.co.nz