

Management for Professionals

Jan De Visch
Otto Laske

Practices of Dynamic Collaboration

A Dialogical Approach to Strengthening
Collaborative Intelligence in Teams

 Springer

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A Dialogical Approach to Strengthening Collaborative Intelligence in Teams



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*We dedicate this book to Adelheid Maekelberg
and Nadine Boughton, our wives, with
gratitude for their clarity, wisdom, and
patience.
Above all, with gratitude for their love.
Without them, the book would not have come
into being.*

Foreword

As a reader of *Practices of Dynamic Collaboration*, I have had the good fortune of reflecting anew on my work with Otto Laske, one of the co-authors, as a client and collaborator. While I have been a student of adult development and organization design influenced by Otto's and Jan De Visch's work for over a decade, only now do I get to turn the pages of one of their books I helped research.

Otto and I had the opportunity to intervene in an organization comprised of about 100 people who have spent years attempting to apply models such as Holacracy, Lean, Agile, GTD, and a myriad of other frameworks to "working on the business." What we began observing was that these ideologies and their associated instruments, although meant to transform a business, led to thought fixations that further separated cultural ideals from extant ways of working and organizing.

Rather than to import "models" to help get people closer to real-world dynamics as they show up in organization's conflicts (or "tensions," as we called them), through semistructured *real-time* interviews Otto and I began to uncover the adult-developmental realities of individuals and teams that no pre-fabricated, out-of-time model is able to capture. In short, we started to work as what this book describes as *critical facilitators*.

In doing so, we came to understand that and how people's *inner workplaces*—including our own—were the original source of the imbalances between working on visionary strategy and the daily delivery of work (which kept us employed). To my surprise, I discovered that the dilemmas of people's and teams' inner workplace could not be resolved by processing those tensions within an imported holonic organization design.

In fact, it was the formality of the holonic model the organization was following that led to the tensions the model was meant to solve (and I had been hired to fix). Rather than focusing on how to metabolize the natural conflicts that arise within developmentally diverse teams *internally*, the holonic model zapped the rich complexity that makes up "the organization" of its energy and flow, in particular on account of the fragmented de-collage of meeting practices, software applications, and, to boot, an almost religious adherence to idiosyncratic working agreements.

Specifically, we noticed early on that the executive team, of which I was a part, was divided, not only behaviorally but adult-developmentally. On the surface, this division looked like a split between the CEO and I, on one side, and the CFO and CMO on the other. While we were focused on an agenda of transformation, with

the aim of differentiating profit centers through including new startups into the business portfolio, the CFO and CMO were focused on growing the still strong core of the business through its legacy functional areas. Under circumstances in which three of us stood in opposition to the CEO as we attempted to reform the team toward a more common purpose, I found the executive team's division exacerbated by my now heightened awareness of its developmentally sourced, counterproductive dynamics.

After reading *Practices of Dynamics Collaboration*, I now have the language to understand what we were dealing with was a “downwardly divided” team, if not organization. While it looked like the team was divided down to a level of operational efficiency because of the 2:2 stalemate, in reality we were downwardly divided because our team could not even produce a developmentally more mature member that could coach teammates to find a consistent “we-space,”—not even the CEO.

While terms such as “downwardly divided,” “developmentally mature,” and “we-space” may be new to you, through reading this book you and your teams can begin to become aware of the developmental realities that lie behind what was, at least for us, an emotionally wrought and conceptually confusing situation these new terms precisely represent. These terms do not only represent a sob story in all cases. What stood as entirely “emotionally negative” conflicts in my memory before reading this book became a collection of insights into the developmental limitations of the executive team I and Otto had worked with.

While new terms can become their own obstacles, my bet is by reading *Practices of Dynamic Collaboration*, lingering conflicts in team dynamics you have experienced, once you relive them in terms of the book, may offer you a deeper experience of the developmental realities of human systems. In this book, Jan and Otto demonstrate how real-time communication between different types of teams brings to light that what is viewed by each of them as “real,” unbeknownst to them dramatically differs from one to the other team, even though their members use similar words, phrases, and modes of interaction.

Because the differences within and between teams determine the quality of an organizational transformation, as I have briefly highlighted above, in my view working on team members' and teams' dialogue *in real time* is today of greater importance than ever for any organizational culture's future. After all, it is by speaking with one another in teams that we gain access to our colleagues' otherwise hidden thought process. While thinking is only one of two forms of adult development Jan and Otto teach us about, how sense is made of the real world is crucially relevant for how members link to their team, and for linking teams' performances to the totality of their organization.

As we learn from this book, upwardly and downwardly divided teams communicate with one another in distinctly different ways because they operate in adult-developmentally different *dialogue-spaces* (we-spaces). How we speak with one another in real time reflects how we think, and since thinking precedes action, assuring high-quality dialogue becomes paramount when composing sets of actions for achieving larger organizational outcomes.

Importantly, Jan and Otto take us beyond behavioral notions of communication. As a result, the book makes its readers realize that they communicate with each other based on their internal mental process (what the authors call their *internal dialogue*) in which thinking and use of verbal language become entirely meshed. On account of this merger, people bump into developmental limits of what they can communicate precisely, relative to their present understanding of how the “real world” works.

Having also worked as an organization designer and strategist in some of the largest companies in the United States, such as American Express, PepsiCo, and General Electric, I can tell you that to succeed in realizing complex initiatives through matrixed organizations with entrenched political climates, answering questions, such as “how are the teams I am initiating developmentally composed?” and “do I have a grasp of the capacity of my team adult-developmentally speaking,” would have served my clients and their missions well.

Consultants and executives alike benefit from reading this book as a guide to designing and developing teams and scrutinizing the conceptual quality of their communications, that is, of the ways in which team members’ internal dialogue is translated into their external dialogue with each other.

You will be relieved to know that the book’s authors have given you a shovel to dig yourself out of the complicated meeting practices and frameworks you may presently be using, which bury simple and clear communication with your colleagues. While you might be initially surprised by how Jan and Otto lift you from the malaise of conventional management thinking, do not be dissuaded by their unorthodox style. The book’s style exactly fits the subject matter they are trying to convey, in order to provide you with a more realistic and practical way of working.

Please enjoy reflecting on *Practices of Dynamic Collaboration* as I have.

Brooklyn, NY, USA
Winter Break 2019

Nathan Snyder

Preface

Dear reader,

Just before the publication of this book, the World Economic Forum published its Davos Manifesto (Schwab 2019). The manifesto documents the growing awareness that we not only need to reconceive of organizations but that to do so, a different dialogue culture is required. Without a greater awareness of the quality of our dialogues, we may be unable to tackle issues such as climate change, inequality, and trade conflicts in an integrative way. A different conversation is needed at all levels of society. Such a dialogue is characterized by greater critical realism due to a greater awareness of our thinking.

In your company, you are surely confronted with the consequences of the fourth industrial revolution. The simultaneous emergence of new technologies—artificial intelligence, robotics, blockchain, chatbots—is exerting a profound influence on how jobs and collaborations are evolving. Project and teamwork play an increasingly decisive role, and the quality of the dialogue, both between individuals and in teams, influences whether a company can maintain its competitive position. Perhaps you share our frustration about the low quality of the dialogue culture now in place in your company.

You may even have noticed a direct link between the way innovations and improvements are *spoken about* and the fact that the results they yielded do not match your expectations. You may also have noticed that initiatives meant to shift the balance between hierarchy and self-organization have failed to lead to a higher quality of decision-making.

Let us give you a better idea of what this book is about: the book is designed to make you aware of the dimension of *thinking* that empirically underlies the functioning of collaborative intelligence. Specifically, the book describes how teams at different levels of work complexity (“We-Spaces”) think and fail to think together. The book’s uniqueness lies in its focus on what is grounding role identity, decision-making, foresight, and action in the context of team collaboration. To accomplish our intention we move beyond behavioristic views of what it means to plan and deliver work, compose teams and networks of teams, and boost human resources. We do so grounded in our own experience of working with teams, especially in organizations transitioning from hierarchical arrangements to self-organization. Every day, just like you, we see how people struggle over collaborating in concert. This led us to ask: what is missing from teams’ thinking?

We are well prepared for writing this book: over the past 20 years, we have been exploring a new paradigm of thinking for the sake of collaboration in teams and have extensively tested it with our clients. The new paradigm focuses on what we call executives' and employees' *sense-making*. From this vantage point, we pay focal attention to how the faculty of making sense of the world conceptually—in contrast to making meaning emotionally—evolves across adulthood, and how this evolution can dramatically change people's life and work. Throughout the book we show in detail, practice by practice, how contributors transfer their understanding of the world at large to how they deliver work at different levels of work complexity. We show in particular how contributors' sense-making determines the way in which they naturally interpret the organizational practices they carry out as a function of their level of cognitive development, and thus also what they pay attention to, or bypass, in their daily work.

After a decade of team facilitation with a focus on their movements-in-thoughts in real time, we come to the conclusion that contributors' interpretive processes are the arbiters of the quality of their dialogues when collaborating. The new paradigm we have adopted gives rise to entirely new dialogue practices that we have tested and successfully implemented in a wide range of companies. The new paradigm has enabled us to create employee ownership, achieve coherence in action, build cultural common ground, take an innovative approach to employee and manager development, and, above all, get more out of meetings.

Specifically, we have written this book for posing for you the challenge of viewing your organization as a huge *dialogue-space*. Taking a dialogical approach, we are focusing your attention to how contributors "think" when speaking to themselves and others in real time. As we see it, such an approach to organizational work uniquely promotes self-organization and leads to success in the global market. In our experience, the quality of the dialogue nurtured in an organization's teams transfers to the dialogue with its clients and other stakeholders. By "dialogue" we mean a way of being together in real time as interlocutors willing to stop themselves when speaking, to "think twice" about the concepts just brought into play in real-time exchanges of information and ideas.

How does our thought-centric paradigm work? The stop sign we teach interlocutors to put up for each other has to do with more deeply inquiring into "what was just said" that was meant to lead to mutual understanding. We have had very good success with redirecting speakers' momentary awareness to how they "create," rather than merely describe, realities, in the process of speaking. We have seen this "stopping to think twice" creates a new organizational work culture. Our notion of speech behavior is that language by nature does not describe, but rather "creates" World and that this World is indeed all we can know about what we call the "real" world.

As a result, the "facilitation" we are providing to clients is a way of making possible high-quality team dialogues. In these conversations, each team member functions as a critical thinker who takes responsibility, not only for his or her own speaking and thinking, but also that of others, and does so as an integral part of his

or her role mandate, thereby acting as a *sense-making officer*. For us, doing so forms the basis of creating collaborative intelligence.

Because human thinking does not come out of nowhere but develops to higher levels of complexity over an adult's entire life span, we find it necessary to issue to executives and employees an unusual invitation. The invitation is: to begin to absorb key insights from research in adult development into the way adults make meaning and sense of each other, and how, consequently, they interact with each other according to their present level of emotional and cognitive maturity. The challenge the book poses is thus to take seriously that we adults are all on a developmental journey, both regarding the way we function emotionally and intellectually. In this book, we show extensively that where we are in this development over the life span at a particular moment in time has direct consequences for how we deliver work, interpret the environment in which we work, and link our work to our life. In order to make this challenge easier to take on and absorb, we make distinctions between a number of organizational practices in three different dialogue- or "We"-Spaces: (1) *continuous improvement*, (2) *rethinking value streams*, and (3) *business model transformation*. These distinctions allow us to show the dramatic difference in how a practice such as "holding a meeting" pans out differently in different domains of organizational functioning. In each of the dialogue- or We-spaces we discuss, the same organizational practice (such as a meeting) is shown to take different forms. In short, we differentiate the notion of "teamwork" by giving an outline of "how teams think based on how its members speak" at the three different levels of work complexity just introduced.

To sum up, we show in this book that an organization's teams are delivering work in three distinct dialogue- or We-Spaces, and that how they differ from each other is grounded, above all, in how they communicate with each other on account of the way they make sense of themselves and the world at large *at a specific level of development*. We show that how a team makes conceptual sense of its internal and external workplace determines its mandates and sets of goals, and that the difference between one team and another in large part reflects the quality of dialogue possible as well as required in each of them.

The framework we use is not simply a descriptive, but also a prescriptive and pedagogical, one. Throughout the book, we make a considerable number of recommendations, and give examples, for achieving higher-quality dialogues in each of the three We-Spaces and detail what is the thought structure of such dialogues. We conceptually detail the dialogue-spaces we distinguish by pointing to the specific *thought forms* that carry a team's dialogue. Finally, we show that, differently in each adult-developmentally defined We-Space, the collaborative intelligence follows its own dynamics, either "downward" to failure or "upward" to success. Throughout the book we demonstrate the importance of having teams work with a "critical facilitator," but also that critical facilitation is learnable and teachable by contributors.

As a CEO, CFO, manager, and team member, you will learn from this book how to reshape organizational practices in the direction of becoming self-organizing. We are about to demonstrate to you that the ideal of working in an "agile" and "lean" way hinges on the fluidity of thinking more than the speed of action. Our concern in

this book centrally regards the challenges of developing collaborative intelligence, and of doing so against the background of an adult-developmentally sourced understanding of human thinking. We demonstrate through the book that human thinking is much broader, as well as deeper, than logical thinking, and that cognitive maturity has to do with overcoming thinking's own instrumentalism, thereby waking it up to the deep gap between "how the real world works" and "how humans think."

As the reader journeys with us through different organizational practices, it becomes clear to him or her that taking executives' and employees' phase of adult development into account not only leads to more effective collaborations, but potentially also a more humane organization. In our view, humane organizations are those in which all stakeholders continually interlace the richness of their personal developmental transformation over the life span with the transformation of their work practice. The book concretizes how jointly people can meet the practical challenges of the World Economic Forum and respond better to the complexity of the evolutions we are facing as a civilization.

Essentially, then, the book invites you personally to consider the impact of your adult development on your life and work. The challenge we pose for you is to ask: "what are the limits of my present functioning at work, and how can I transcend them by forming a crisp notion of my emotional and cognitive resources?" In this sense, this book is about YOU, and about what you yourself can do to make your organization a more collaboratively intelligent one, starting with yourself.

We hope, dear reader, you will find this challenge mind-changing, not just inviting, and wish you a mind-opening reading journey.

Leuven, Belgium
Gloucester, MA
January 2020

Jan De Visch
Otto Laske

Acknowledgments

“Who is wise? He who learns from everyone.” (The Talmud)

We want to thank the many people, too numerous to name, who have shaped our thinking and been supportive of our efforts. This includes, first of all, our clients in many companies and various industry sectors who dared to step into dialogue experiments and new ways of organizing work; the many students in the portfolio of programs we teach who learned complex thinking “the hard way”; as well as our colleagues in critical facilitation and organizational development who provided encouragement for implementing our approach and gave us feedback.

We also want to thank the thought partners we have felt most attuned to throughout our learning journey, Roy Bhaskar and Elliott Jaques.

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Understanding Developmentally Sourced Diversity as a Key to High-Quality Dialogue and Collaborative Intelligence

1

The fundamental flaw in management thinking is that the concepts used are often seen as ingredients of what is thought to be “reality.”

Abstract

This chapter introduces the structure and content of the book, as well as the central experiences, ideas, and assumptions from which the book evolved. In critically reviewing contemporary management thinking, we show the stark limitations of Tayloristic ideologies, including those in now fashionable, digitally streamlined, forms. To substantiate the calamity of these limitations, we introduce findings from empirical research in adult development which substantiate that the developmental homogeneity of teams is a fiction and that this fiction hides limits of using digital tools. We demonstrate, in contrast, that and how team members’ adult-developmentally differentiated profiles determine the quality of team collaboration. In order to provide alternatives to Tayloristic shortcuts for organizational work arrangements, we introduce a framework for actively boosting dynamic collaboration in teams. At the end of the chapter, we help readers prepare themselves for taking note of, and reviewing, behavioristic misconceptions in five practices: holding quality meetings, developing commitment and ownership, creating coherent collaborative action and common ground, and promoting an organization-wide dialogue about individual development of contributors that amplifies administering “human resources.”

In this chapter, we introduce the structure and content of the book, as well as the central ideas and assumptions from which the book evolved. We do so against the background of a review of management thinking, deriving from Taylorism. To show

the stark limitations of Tayloristic ideologies in their now fashionable upgraded forms (expressed particularly by digital apps), we introduce the topic of adult-developmental diversity that determines team collaboration. Based on this content, we then introduce a framework for enabling dynamic collaboration, detailed in five practices. In discussing each of these practices, we point to what is absent from contemporary management theory and from ideas about integrating algorithmic intelligence into human work delivery. In this way, we set the tone for a detailed investigation of practices that together compose organizational functioning, shedding light on them from an adult-developmental “constructivist” and critical perspective.

When we published our book *Dynamic Collaboration* in 2018, we were unable to assess the outcomes of the fundamental paradigm shift we proposed for looking at the nature of work, especially in teams. In that book, we only began to look at collaboration in a fundamentally different, namely *developmental*, way.

Concretely, we started from the perception that cooperation in most organizations is problematic, especially in light of the reductionist ideology of human resources that is a legacy in most organizations. This ideology is rooted in an enormous simplification of what is the nature of work and, as a result, that of the worker. In contrast to the conventional pared-down picture of work delivery in organizations—especially from the perspective of the adult-developmental sciences—the notion we have today of those who deliver work is immensely more complex than Taylorism had allowed for.

The main point of difference between the “Taylor = made” human resources ideology and the psychological and social reality of work is that contributors must be characterized as individuals who work on realizing their own agenda, based on highly idiosyncratic ways of thinking, intending, and acting that change dramatically over their adult life span. Due to their own emotional and cognitive complexity, they both reinforce and limit each other through their actions and are, on average, developmentally profoundly different one from the other and incompatible in their capabilities.

The tensions that arise in the workplace are equally complex, especially in teams. Contributors lock each other in and out, and negotiate values and ideas in fundamentally different ways, namely, based on their developmental history. They develop ways of working together based on a multitude of psychological and developmental factors that the conventional notion of the “worker” in human resources never acknowledged.

Contributors even function as politicians, where depending on their power, they set up intersecting spheres of autonomy. Not only are they free to keep subjects on or under the table, they can also unconsciously or consciously ignore them, avoiding those they prefer not to look at, or consider them as irrelevant. In short, in the human resources field, we benefit from addressing a highly complex interweaving of work-determining factors that not even contributors themselves have—and constitutionally are able to have—an inkling of.

In contrast to the complex picture of work delivery drawn up in our previous as well as the present book, organizational experts, managers, and even researchers of

organizations have acted mainly, and continue to act, as “terrible simplifiers” when thinking about *human capital*. They usually look at human resources phenomena from the perspective of persons as objects of observation. They focus on behavioral strengths and personal preferences, thereby reducing the human condition in complexity far beyond what makes business sense. For them, solutions to managing human capital are often restricted to strengthening kinds of behavior believed to reinforce intended outcomes and thus focused on reducing the impact of personal idiosyncrasies to hypothetical norms that are too simplistic to do justice to how the social world works. Compared to what we know about people’s behavior and adult development today, we are dealing with “terrible simplifications” throughout the field of human resources. This very fact makes bringing the existing complexities to consciousness in organizations very difficult indeed, as we daily experience ourselves.

What today’s aficionados of agile and flat organizations are settled with is the fact that looking at human capabilities from a vantage point of behavioral practices alone is alarmingly insufficient as well as inefficient. The range of methods for strengthening employees’ self-observation, complexity handling, fluidity of thinking, and perspective-taking is woefully inadequate. This is precisely because they set themselves the primary goal of influencing organizational behavior predominantly in favor of shared intentions and cultural consensus, forgetting to acknowledge findings of empirical research in adult development since 1975.

For instance, from the tradition of Taylorism—however updated by now—derives the overall conviction that there exist relatively simple solutions for issues presented by collaboration. These simplistic solutions are currently finding their way into a large number of digital frameworks (templates) for upgrading the quality of collaboration. These initiatives aim to alter meeting practices, make role agreements explicit, steer the evaluation of colleagues, reroute information flows, and much else. The basic idea behind these “best practices” is the conviction that there exists one best way of working together and that the practices proposed can be used anywhere anytime.

Below, we distinguish in these *best practices* three unexamined beliefs: *the belief in efficiency, in motivating employees, and in strategy*. As we attempted to show in our previous book, the notion of a single “best way” lacks cogency since it disregards stark differences between organizational cultures, as well as developmental differences between contributors. More importantly, there is a disregard for the fact that employees are *adult thinkers* and thus, consciously or unconsciously, unceasingly interpret concepts such as the above in a highly complex way that moreover changes dramatically over their lifespan. As meaning-makers who are under life-long development, they do so based on their present peculiar *frame of reference* that determines their world view, both in life and at work.

The human condition we are dealing with is best addressed as *epistemological*. It has to do with how knowledge is generated in human minds (episteme = knowledge) due to how movements-in-thought are structured when articulated in real-time. Being subject to, rather than in control of, their personal development, adult thinkers have no choice but to enter into dialogue with

themselves and others in a way predetermined by their level of maturity. Whether contributors, manager, or CEOs, they “sit in the same boat” because they are, as adults, without exception on a developmental journey and therefore share world views they can decipher as “too narrow” only when they get to the next following stage of their adult development.

To see more clearly, the fallacies implicit in the conventional, behavioral line of thinking about organizational work let us briefly review modern management thinking.

1.1 Management Thinking and Its Focus on the “Best Way”

Although managers have not been reduced in their human capabilities to the extent that workers have, throughout the twentieth century, even managerial resources have been seen in a behaviorally reduced light. Managers were left unsupported in developing a vocabulary for articulating their cognitive and emotional resources to the fullest. In their majority, they remained “other-dependent” and internalized what they were thought to be about and capable of by others than themselves. As a result, managers developed a “professional” persona that significantly differed from their personal one, indirectly shaping (and often reducing) the latter as well. The self-estrangement that occurred gradually led to depleted thinking capabilities that were “brought into shape” by business schools teaching rigid curricula, as well as organizational cultures in which hierarchy, and thus control, were considered more important than collaboration.

The three salient characteristics of managerial thinking that emerged (discussed below) bear this out. They account for what today hampers managers in their ability to engage with employees as full-blooded adults and find innovative ways of working with them.

1.1.1 The Belief in Efficiency

The belief in efficiency as the standard of work delivery originated in the early twentieth century when Frederick Taylor looked for ways to do away with existing inefficiencies in the workflow. His rational thinking told him that you had to reduce work to its smallest components first, and then find a single, “best,” way for each component to be delivered. The novelty of Taylor’s method was on a par with its brutality: that by standardizing goals, they would become calculable. In his *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), he developed the concept of division of labor and explained the tasks of managers in terms of it. The manager was able to plan the job, and if the planning was right, the result was achieved automatically since workers had no say in it, nor could they have a say in it.

Taylor’s analyses made efficiency a standard of production, as well as human performance. They became the basis of performance rewards. In a factory, workers were forced to work at the speed of the assembly line, which defined the standard of