Introduction:

The Fire of Conversation

"Come now, let us reason together. . ."

—Isaiah 1:18

Following a summit meeting of world leaders, former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban couldn't help expressing his disappointment. Together, he noted, the attending leaders brought "an extraordinary concentration of power, but their meetings don't seem to produce anything."

A child looking at such a gathering might expect great things—at the very least, a sense of direction and leadership. But what do we get instead? Usually only cautious steps, a scripted collection of position papers and talking points, policy speeches and press releases so polished that controversy slides right off them. Abba Eban's diagnosis of the central problem was succinct and right on the mark: These leaders "have not learned to think together."

Most political and corporate leaders, academics, community builders, and families struggle with this same problem. It's not that they don't care. Most people care very deeply about the shape and quality of their lives and the institutions that foster them. Nor does this difficulty stem necessarily from a lack of money, power, intelligence, connections, vision, or anything else that people assume is necessary for success or greatness.

Something else is missing—something subtle, almost invisible, and yet powerful enough that it can prevent even the leaders of the seven largest industrialized nations of the world from providing truly great leadership, the kind of leadership that inspires and that brings out the best in people. Clearly, providing this kind of direction is every leader's dream: It is a dream so deeply held that it may often go unvoiced. Yet very few politicians—and not many of the rest of us— succeed in reaching this height.

What is lacking? Is it some innate quality of wisdom that only a few of us have? Or is it related, as Abba Eban suggested, to the fact that we don't know how to think or talk together in a way that summons up our own deeply held common sense, wisdom, and potential?

The underlying problem has to do both with our lack of personal capability and with the larger context in which we live. Most individuals can't seem to recognize the undercurrents beneath the surface of their conversations, undercurrents that can bring people together or tear them apart. At the same time, however, this is not merely an individual problem. It can't be "cured" merely by self—help programs or energetic corporate change initiatives. It is a symptom of a larger set of fragmenting forces not just resident in the body politic but in the culture of humanity as a whole.

THE PROMISE OF THINKING TOGETHER

If this is true—if the problem of thinking together is both personal and larger than personal—then what is needed is a powerful set of practical tools and practices that can help us deal with *both* dimensions. They must let us produce pragmatic, successful results out of difficult conversations. And at the same time they must call forth and help us address these fragmenting forces by helping us integrate the good, the true, and the beautiful within each of us and within the larger institutions in which we live. Presenting a way to address both dimensions is a central aim of this book.

Practical people may think that it isn't too important to make the world come alive in this way. But one of the most fundamental struggles for any leader—in business, in organizations, or in public life—stems directly from the separation that most of us feel between who we are as people and what we do as practical professionals.

As I shall emphasize again and again, these things cannot in the end be separated. What we do in private *does* impact how we perform in public. How we think *does* affect how we talk. And how we talk together definitely determines our effectiveness. Indeed, it could be said that all great failures in practical and professional life stem from parallel failures in this single domain of conversation. The problems that even the most practical organizations have—in improving their performance and obtaining the results they desire—can be traced directly to their inability to think and talk together, particularly at critical moments.

Here is an example: Two divisions within a very large corporation recently conducted a strategic thinking process, trying to address an important new market with unprecedented energy. The stakes were high. This new market could bring billions of dollars of new revenue to the company. The leaders of these divisions were polarized around two very different views about who should control the destiny of the new business and how they should invest in it. Each felt that this new business would strengthen his own division; each had already begun to "take it under his wing," when the CEO requested that they join together in a company-wide approach.

Arguably, success in this new market depended on establishing new synergy, but neither the division heads nor their lieutenants were prepared to think openly and directly about the problem. Their positions were mutually contradictory: Each believed that to pursue the other division's approach would harm or at least limit their own growth. So they created task forces to study the problem, as if that in itself would be enough to overcome the contradictions. Privately, they acknowledged that they had a serious unresolved conflict. But as a group, they refused to admit the fact, much less discuss the fundamental underlying fears and issues—losing control, losing revenue, and ultimately losing face within the larger company. They dodged the issues and acted as if they were not. One of the task forces made some progress in loosening assumptions and making more possible an open conversation about the stakes, people's fears, and their beliefs about their bosses' proclivities. Yet even this team was unable to shift the well-defined and well-defended assumptions many people held, including the most senior ranks of the company.

The decision? To let each division pursue its own strategy for the new market without ever really exploring directly the new synergistic power they might have gained from working together. And they completely bypassed the inevitable contradictions and internal competition that would result when two divisions of the same company attacked the same market. Instead of creating a wholly new business that combined the best of both divisions, they fragmented themselves further and cannibalized each other's business. All the while they issued public statements of inevitability,

stating that "present circumstances require us to go in this direction," and acting as if this were not just the only choice but the best choice.

This was failure of leadership, where the possibility of coming to a much more powerful, jointly committed course of action was abandoned in favor of one that did not require people to confront their assumptions, concerns, fears, animosities, and dreams.

And beneath it all lay that same inability to think together.

This is not an unusual situation. It is embedded in the very fabric of present-day human interaction. This kind of inability to think together has become so familiar that it might seem strange to talk about it as a deficiency. "That is just how human beings are," most people would suggest. It is actually counterproductive, the skeptics among us might argue, to get too close to one another's thoughts. To do so is to risk losing our objectivity, our distance, our cherished beliefs.

The idea of thinking together can sound like a dangerous illusion in which the quest for harmony leads people astray until they unwittingly sacrifice their individuality. But in assiduously avoiding false harmony, people can go to the other extreme—to an equally unwitting "argument" mode in which we stand in a stagnated pond of our own predispositions and certainties and blindly defend what we have as necessary and unalterable. In both cases—in false harmony and in polarized, argumentative stagnation—people stop thinking.

Another word for "not thinking" is "memory." Human beings live out of their memories, insulated from direct experience. Memory is like a tape recording; it plays back a once-experienced reality that mayor may not apply well to the current situation. Like a tape, memory is limited. The parameters of its responses are already set. The emotions are already defined. Thus, when we face novel situations where the instincts of our memories don't apply, we don't know how to respond. Instead, we fall back on the habits that most people learn from hard experience: to protect ourselves from one another's words, actions, and behaviors. Lacking any new way to operate that might let us move beyond the false "solutions" we remember, we cling to our views and defend them as if our lives depended on it.

In this book I suggest that we can do better than this. We can learn to kindle and sustain a new conversational spirit that has the power to penetrate and dissolve some of our most intractable and difficult problems. We can learn to do this in ourselves, in our closest relationships, in our organizations and communities.

The method and ideas about dialogue explored here are as old as the human race, and yet they are also being reinvented in our time. They represent an art of not just talking together but of thinking together that seems to have been all but lost in our modern culture. The simple premise of this book is that neither the enormous challenges human beings face today, nor the wonderful promise of the future on whose threshold we seem to be poised, can be reached unless human beings learn to think together in a very new way.

RIVERS OF FIRE

A few years ago a group of colleagues and I from MIT were invited to one of America's largest steel mills to introduce managers and steelworkers to a new way of talking together, to help them break through many years of intense division and strife.

Our first visit to the plant was like a visit to another world—on the surface, at least, it was an unlikely setting for dialogue. However, as I discovered, the place itself served as a perfect metaphor for deeper interaction.

Vast, loud, and oppressively hot, the steel mill lumbered through its paces. As I stepped into the main hall of the plant, I saw a great expanse of machinery stretching almost two football fields in length. Above me 180,000 pounds of scrap steel were gradually being dissolved into a molten, white-hot brew by an intense arc of electric current. The steel seemed to roar as it melted.

Suddenly the clanging ceased, and an eerie silence pervaded the plant. The cycle of steel-making had shifted to another phase. Three thirty-foot-high by forty-foot-wide vats of molten steel, spaced out above me on a wide ledge, stood like jars on a giant's shelf. These were the "electric furnaces" that turned worn-out refrigerators, broken-down cars, and extinct buildings into raw new steel, which was later refashioned into bedsprings, steel wire, and steel balls. The steel grinding balls were used in the mining industry to pulverize raw metals like copper into a granular soil that could then be more easily processed.

I looked up to see a small vent opening at the bottom of the center vessel. Out poured a river of fire, bright red and white hot. The molten metal streamed like liquid light into a waiting railroad-car container below. Stepping back, I could see fireworks of red and white as other "hot" furnaces were tapped. Above me, catwalks stretched across fifty-foot-high ceilings. Brilliant bursts of yellow and red light lifted the darkness momentarily as sparks flew and molten fire fell into the giant waiting ladles.

Standing in a corner of this surreal drama, I felt I had stumbled on the inner workings of creation itself. Out of sight of the everyday world, I felt privileged to see these enormous forces being brought under control. This was creation on an almost mythical scale.[2] The men who ran this plant were like the forgers of the world. As I later told them, they were not steelworkers, they were "managers of fire." Everyone worked purposefully. Everyone agreed it was safe.

In fact, there had been no major injuries in the mill for years. Most of the employees had worked there for more than twenty years, and some for as many as forty. Some had fathers who had worked in the same mill. Men who work near the molten steel have to wear thick violet glasses clipped to their hard hats to protect their eyes from the brilliant light of the white-hot steel. The look this gave them, otherworldly yet grounded, made it clear that the mill was not a foreign place but a kind of harsh home. One reason it all was safe here was that the molten steel was held inside these large vats. The process was contained by steel, fire enclosed by fire-forged steel.

Standing near these rivers of molten steel, I realized that these people already knew much about containing creative processes and managing the "fire of their thoughts." Here, after all, were some of the most intense forces known to man—3,000-degree molten metal, turned daily into usable steel—a power they handled with relative ease. Our work involved exploring how human beings could contain their intense emotional, intellectual, and even spiritual selves, especially those aspects that arise in conversation—and to find ways to turn them to creative uses. Containing this human fire often seems much more difficult than containing molten steel. Not surprisingly, the steelworkers understood this analogy instantly.

Over a period of two years our MIT research team worked with these steelworkers and with the senior managers of the company—two groups with a history of deep, bitter labor disputes between them—to find a way of conversing that would transform some of their deepest differences into a meaningful, useful dialogue. After some months, many of them experienced a radical change, one that—for a time at least—turned their swords into plowshares. We delved into the deep assumptions carried by both groups and as a result forged great mutual respect, coordination, and connection. Moreover, this mutual understanding was extended to action in the form of improved performance, fewer grievances, and, for the first time in generations, mutual action to solve chronic problems in the mill. The changed atmosphere helped to convince outside financial groups to invest over $100 million in the business. And despite the actions of people who sought to stop these explorations, many of the initiatives continue today. Understanding how

processes like these work and why they unfold as they do, or fail to unfold in ways we intend, is one of the central focuses of this book.

A BOOK ON DIALOGUE

Writing a book about dialogue is in some respects a contradiction in terms. *Dialogue,* as I define it here, is about a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together. It is not something you do to another person. It is something you do *with* people. Indeed, a large part of learning this has to do with learning to shift your attitudes about relationships with others, so that we gradually give up the effort to make them understand us, and come to a greater understanding of ourselves and each other.

But a book is supposed to be authoritative: As the author I am supposed to have answers for the reader. This presumption often leads the reader to question how quickly and easily he or she can extract that information from the pages. But dialogue does not work this way. Dialogue is a living experience of inquiry *within* and *between* people. A decade and a half of writing about and conducting dialogue around the world has led me to realize that the most important parts of any conversation are those that neither party could have imagined before starting.

So, without being overly prescriptive, this book will offer you a kind of road map to help you find your way. You'll discover what tends to encourage (or discourage) dialogue; what happens when you try to introduce it into difficult settings; and how to manage the internal changes that must take place in you in order to become effective at it.

DIALOGUE IN ALL WALKS OF LIFE

The dialogue process is a form of conversation that can be meaningful to people from a large number of backgrounds: from every walk of life, from every nationality, from many different professions and levels of responsibility within organizations and communities. People come to dialogue for many different reasons. Some want to resolve conflicts. Others wish to get along better with a particular person, a business partner, a boss, a spouse, a parent, a child. Still others wish to solve problems more effectively. The purpose that has brought you to this book may just be the beginning of what you may find useful in dialogue.

For instance, if you are an operational manager, then this book can help you enable people to work together in a highly coordinated and creative fashion, without the need for constant, heavy-handed, external controls. Many people seek breakthroughs in productivity and performance by developing measures and metrics, carrots and sticks. Dialogue achieves this by deepening the glue that links people together. This "glue" is the genuine shared meaning and common understanding already present in a group of people. From shared meaning, shared action arises. You will learn here how dialogue is generated out of all the interactions of the people, not a set of rules that they can apply from the outside.

If you are a corporate executive or senior leader in your organization, then you are likely faced with leadership challenges that are growing exponentially. If your organization is like many others, people will often withhold from you what they think you do not want to hear, for fear they may be punished. Thus you do not know what is going on around you. Dialogue can help you to uncover the undiscussed thinking of the people in your organization.

As a leader anywhere in your organization, you can learn to take dialogue one step further. The problems we face today are too complex to be managed by one person. We require more than one brain to solve them. Dialogue seeks to harness the "collective intelligence" (think of this as the collective intelligence quotient, or "CQ") of the people around you; together we are more aware and smarter than we are on our own. And together, we can perceive new directions and new opportunities more clearly than we can on our own. When many businesses are continuously reinventing themselves today, this capacity for collective improvisation and creativity is essential. And as a leadership method, the dialogue approach differs from other methods because you must develop it within yourself, and model it for others, before you seek to apply it to the teams you lead or the problems you face. In this sense dialogue invites you into greater balance as a leader.

If you are a diplomat or public official, all of these challenges may also apply to you. But you may be faced with a different set of issues—navigating the enormous cross-cultural problems that arise in our global and multicultural world. People from different cultures speak different languages, bring different underlying assumptions, carry different ways of thinking and acting. Dialogue can enable people to bring out these differences and begin to make sense of them, fostering communication and understanding among people. It does this by helping people create settings in which their differences can be safely and consciously reflected upon. Managers and executives will of course also face these difficulties as well, given the global nature of most firms today. Even within one team, people often come from startlingly different cultures—from different corporate divisions or different functions, which can be as diverse as ethnic cultures within a region can be.

If you are an educator, you may find this book confirms intuitions you already have about the conditions for learning—settings in which people listen well to one another, respect difference, and can loosen the grip of certainty they might carry to see things from new perspectives. Dialogue has promise in education because it challenges traditional, hierarchical models and proposes a method for sustaining "partnership" —between teachers and staff, teachers and students, and students with each other. Dialogue can empower people to learn with and from each other.

Finally, if you are a parent or family member, dialogue may help you bring a sense of healing, quietness and clarity to your interactions. For many of us, our families are the places where we first learned to listen and relate to people. But these experiences have not always been as fulfilling and satisfying as they might be. Some of the methods and ideas in this book may help you to transform your interactions at home. Once, a very senior investment banker came up to me after a talk I had given, looking a bit sheepish. He said, "Can I ask you something?" He continued, "I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but I was thinking about how what you said applied to my family. Do you ever work with families?" I asked him if he thought he might be insulting me because he was not asking about his business. He said, "Well, it seemed to go to something more important than my business."

Whatever reason you have for reading this book, dialogue offers a route for understanding and effectiveness that goes to the heart of human beings—the meanings we make, and the thinking and feeling that underlies what we do, individually and together.

THE THREE LANGUAGES OF THIS BOOK

For one thing, I have tried to write this book in a way that combines three distinct and different languages at once, languages that do not usually go well together.[3] The first is the voice and language of *meaning,* to give you a sense of the ideas behind this ancient practice, the concepts I have developed to make it more understandable, and the larger context in which it sits. The second is the language and voice of *feelings* and aesthetics. This is the sense of beauty, of rhythm, and of timing that we have in our conversations. How we *feel* deeply impacts what we *think.* The third is the language and voice of *power*—particularly the power of our actions. This voice speaks of the tools you need in order to act more effectively. Dialogue is not in the end merely about talking, it is about taking action. And at its best, dialogue includes all three of these voices: meaning, aesthetics, and power.

These three voices echo a more ancient set of ideas, one that opens before us not only today's practical challenges, but the underlying forces that impact how we live and work as human beings. To the ancient Greeks, human society was characterized by three value activities: the pursuit of objective understanding, the subjective experience of beauty, and the shared activity of coordinated and just action. They called these three the True, the Beautiful, and the Good. The True evolved into the pursuit of objective scientific truth, the Beautiful into aesthetics and art, and the Good into ethics and the challenges of collective action. As each developed, it produced its own language: The True focuses on objectivity, using "it" language, the Beautiful focuses on our subjective experience and uses "I" language, and the Good on intersubjective descriptions, and uses "we" language—speaking of what we express in taking action.[4]

As Ken Wilbur in his book *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* indicates, since the time of the Greeks, these three have evolved, but also separated, becoming fragmented and disassociated from one another. It is therefore unusual to combine, in any serious book on improving how we think and talk—that is, in part, learning to say the right next words to produce the right next action, an equally serious concern with the aesthetics, feelings, and timing of how to speak and think together. And while we may focus on effectiveness, or even how to remain human as we talk, we might leave out any reflection about whether our ideas are any good or just. Yet all three are essential. And it takes all three to have a genuine and balanced dialogue.

Dialogue is a very old idea. Yet it is not practiced all that frequently. One reason for this is that human beings have an inner ecology, a network of thoughts, ideas, and feelings that guide our actions. This ecology might be compared to a computer operating system—the set of instructions that inform a computer how to perform calculations. This human inner ecology is shared among human beings, and so when a problem arises in one part of the culture, it also tends to arise everywhere else as well.

Too many of us have lost touch with the fire of conversation. When we talk together, it is rarely with depth. For the most part, we see our conversations as either opportunities to trade information or arenas in which to win points. Difficulties that might otherwise be resolved or even dissolved persist. And often we find we simply do not have the wherewithal to genuinely consider new possibilities, new options. Such miscommunication or misunderstanding condemns us to look elsewhere for the creative intensity that lies dormant within and between us. Yet it is an intensity that could revitalize our institutions, our relationships, and ourselves. In the end, this book is about rekindling that fire.

WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

ONE

A Conversation with a Center, Not Sides

"I never saw an instance of one or two disputants
convincing the other by argument."

—Thomas Jefferson

When was the last time you were really listened to? If you are like most people, you will probably find it hard to recall. Think about a time when you saw others try to talk together about a tough issue. How did it go? Did they penetrate to the heart of the matter? Did they find a common understanding that they were able to sustain? Or were they wooden and mechanical, each one reacting, focusing only on their own fears and feelings, hearing only what fit their preconceptions?

Most of us, despite our best intentions, tend to spend our conversational time waiting for the first opportunity to offer our own comments or opinions. And when things heat up, the pace of our conversations resembles a gunfight on Main Street: "You're wrong!" "That's crazy!" The points go to the one who can draw the fastest or who can hold his ground the longest. As one person I know recently joked, "People do not listen, they reload." When televised sessions of the United States Congress or the British Parliament show the leaders of our society advocating, catcalling, booing, and shouting over one another in the name of reasoned discourse, we sense that something is deeply wrong.[1] They sense the same thing, but seem powerless to do anything about it.

All too often our talk fails us. Instead of creating something new, we polarize and fight. Particularly under conditions where the stakes are high and differences abound, we tend to harden into positions that we defend by advocacy. To advocate is to speak for your point of view. Usually, people do this unilaterally, without making room for others. The Israelis and the Palestinians could not agree over settlements on the West Bank. Sales managers fight with manufacturing managers over production schedules. Executives differ over the best use of capital. Friends argue about what constitutes morality. The headlines chronicle a multitude of times when people might have come together in a new way and yet somehow failed to do so.

There are, of course, many ways in which strong advocacy like this is reasonable. We have loyalties to our tribe, to our company, to our religion, or to our country. We do not live in a neutral world at all, but, rather, one in which the landscape is thickly settled with opinions, positions, and beliefs about the right and wrong way of perceiving and interacting with the world and each other. As a result, we have interests to protect, ideas and beliefs to defend, difficult or downright crazy colleagues to avoid, and our own way in the world to make. There are certainly times when we must defend our views.

But dialogue is an altogether very different way of talking together. Generally, we think of dialogue as "better conversation." But there is much more to it. *Dialogue,* as I define it, is a *conversation with a center, not sides.* It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarization and into a greater common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people.

Dialogue fulfills deeper, more widespread needs than simply "getting to yes." The aim of a negotiation is to reach agreement among parties who differ. The intention of dialogue is to reach new understanding and, in doing so, to form a totally new basis from which to think and act. In

dialogue, one not only solves problems, one dissolves them. We do not merely try to reach agreement, we try to create a context from which many new agreements might come. And we seek to uncover a base of shared meaning that can greatly help coordinate and align our actions with our values.

The roots of the word *dialogue* come from the Greek words *dia* and *logos*.[2] *Dia* means "through"; *logos* translates to "word," or "meaning." In essence, a dialogue is a *flow of meaning*. But it is more than this too. In the most ancient meaning of the word, *logos* meant "to gather together," and suggested an intimate awareness of the relationships among things in the natural world. In that sense, *logos* may be best rendered in English as "relationship." The Book of John in the New Testament begins: "In the beginning was the Word *(logos)*." We could now hear this as "In the beginning was the Relationship."[3]

To take it one step further, dialogue is a conversation in which people think together in relationship. Thinking together implies that you no longer take your own position as final. You relax your grip on certainty and listen to the possibilities that result simply from being in a relationship with others—possibilities that might not otherwise have occurred.

Most of us believe at some level that we must fix things or change people in order to make them reachable. Dialogue does not call for such behavior. Rather, it asks us to listen for an already existing wholeness, and to create a new kind of association in which we listen deeply to all the views that people may express. It asks that we create a quality of listening and attention that can include—but is larger than—any single view.[4]

Dialogue addresses problems farther "upstream" than conventional approaches. It attempts to brings about change at the source of our thoughts and feelings, rather than at the level of results our ways of thinking produce. Like the Total Quality Movement, it seeks not to correct defects after they have occurred but to alter processes so that they do not occur in the first place. A similar analogy can be found in the environmental movement, which has moved in the past twenty years from trying to clean up waste after it spews out of the pipe to "source reduction" —eliminating toxins by redesigning core processes. Dialogue seeks to address the problem of fragmentation not by rearranging the physical components of a conversation but by uncovering and shifting the organic underlying structures that produce it.

The ideas I discuss in this book emerged out of work done first in association with physicist David Bohm beginning in the early 1980s and, later, at MIT's Center for Organizational Learning. Over this period of time, my colleagues and I have found increasing interest in dialogue and in efforts to apply it. Now many corporations like Ford, Hewlett-Packard, Shell, Amoco, Motorola, AT&T, and Lucent as well as communities, schools, and health-care systems have been experimenting with dialogue and producing powerful results.[5] At Ford, one manager initiated dialogues to begin many important meetings, reporting that people, at first skeptical, came to view these sessions as critical to their success. A colleague of mine, Peter Garrett, has held dialogues within maximum security prisons in England for four years now. He has found that offenders will attend these sessions when they will boycott everything else. The prison dialogues provide a setting where genuine healing can begin to occur and where the prisoners can begin to come to grips with their experiences, their emotions, and their situation, producing what some are now seeing as unprecedented change. Finally, there are groups of people in many countries now who meet informally for dialogue: friends in a home, a group of women from different countries who meet every year or so, citizen groups exploring the potential of dialogue to resolve difficult social issues, literally dozens of groups exploring the power of talking together. Here are some examples.

DIALOGUE IN ACTION

In South Africa, President de Klerk met privately with Nelson Mandela while he was still in prison in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They were not merely negotiating issues but engaged in dialogue about a totally new context for their country. These talks set the stage for the dramatic changes that subsequently took place.

John Hume, the Nobel Prize-winning Ulster politician, spent many years in behind-the-scenes conversation with Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army. The recent peaceful developments in that conflict resulted, according to Hume, from years of talking together privately, out from under the eye of public scrutiny and formal terms of engagement. Both had agreed that the most critical problem facing Ireland was learning to stop the violence, and they spoke in depth about this. Says Hume: "Twenty-five years we've been fighting violence. Five governments have failed to stop it. Twenty thousand troops and fifteen thousand policemen failed to stop it. So I thought it was time to try something else. Dialogue."[6]

The top leaders at Shell Oil in the United States have spent the past several years developing their capacity for dialogue. They see conversation as increasingly more critical as their leadership roles shift dramatically. Where once this group made the decisions about resource allocation, investment, and strategic direction, much of this is now left to the local operating businesses. In their new role they are coaches, advisers, and advance thinkers for new possibilities for the company. They look into the future, set the pace for the organization, and support one another as stewards of the new companies now formed within Shell.

With a less formal operating hierarchy, these leaders realized they needed a new way to think and work together. While at first it was hard for them to adjust to this new role and loosen their grip on discussions, now they ask for more agendaless space in their meetings to scan the future and reflect on the implications of the changes they have initiated. According to former CEO Phil Carroll: "Dialogue was at the heart of our work as leaders."

Dialogue not only raises the level of shared thinking, it impacts how people act, and, in particular, how they act all together. Several years ago we held a series of dialogues in Grand Junction, Colorado. We gathered thirty-five people from every major constituency in the health-care field for these sessions, which were held about once a month for over two years. Three CEOs from local hospitals, the CEO of the local HMO, the head of the physicians' organization, senior doctors, nurses, technicians, and the CEO of one of the major purchasers of health care in town—the largest local business—all participated.

Their objective was to create a "seamless system of health care." Many in the community were eyeing the changing national health—care picture and realized that some sort of shrink ing financial pie was inevitable. The leaders of the different institutions were willing to try to create an alternative approach, and now that they had agreed to come together were very eager to move quickly to make change.

People were ready to roll up their sleeves and redesign the system. I asked them about their experience with collaboration. They replied that they had only created a hospice and that it hadn't represented a significant level of income. I asked them, "What is it about this effort that is likely to be different?" They were unable to say.

The pressure to collaborate, to find a way through these challenges, while occasionally expressed, had not been matched by action. People retained well-defended though polite institutional walls. Over the course of the year and a half during which regular dialogues were held, many issues previously undiscussed were explored, including the physicians' fears about loss of income in the new managed environment, and the pain of maintaining the image of the health-care practitioner as the last best defender of health in the community. At one point, somewhat to the

surprise of many, it became clear that the local HMO might be purchased by a large out-of-state organization. This would have significantly reduced the degree of local control and autonomy that the community enjoyed. Already there had been significant changes in the ways people thought about collaboration. But with this possibility looming, they realized they had few choices. Their best option, they decided, instead of allowing the HMO to be purchased, was to band together to buy it themselves.

The collective voice of the community had shifted considerably—from one of polite competitors to willing collaborators. This was a move most agreed could not have been conceived of a year before. If someone was asked what had changed as a result of the dialogue, the answer was "everything"—a sea change in the ways people saw one another and worked together.

What distinguished the group of people who met to design a new organization and purchase the HMO was a remarkable level of candor. The voice that had emerged here was not one of overwrought anxiety or overconfident enthusiasm. The collective voice was, simply, honest about the hope they felt and the difficulty they faced. In the end, the takeover threats to the HMO were rescinded, and no collective action was required. But the community was assured of its expanded ability to think and act in alignment.

DIALOGUE'S TRADITION AND ITS LOSS

Dialogue presents a paradox. It is both something we already know how to do and something about which there is much to learn. On the one hand, the tradition of dialogue can be traced to the talking circles of the Native Americans, to the *agora—or* marketplace—of ancient Greece and beyond that to the tribal rituals of many indigenous peoples in Africa, New Zealand, and elsewhere. This indigenous heritage has led many people today to romanticize and oversimplify the practice. According to this view, dialogue is nothing mysterious or complex. We all know instinctively how to conduct our own circles for conversation. While this seems true, it doesn't explain the breakdowns and fragmentation of communication so often seen when people try to engage in dialogue. The genuinely difficult, systemic issues of our times seem singularly resistant to anything like a conversation without sides.

For instance, when one hundred nations finally gathered to create an agreement in Kyoto, Japan, about global warming, people held two very different conversations simultaneously: a public one about the agreement to be crafted, and a private one about what should *not* be discussed and who should not be confronted. This latter conversation was more about containing the conflicts and about protecting people's economic and political interests. Many of the most volatile and potentially high-leverage issues, like control of carbon dioxide emissions in third world countries, were left off the agenda. This meant that people did not explore the deep assumptions that drive this problem: the value of economic growth, the impact of global capitalism, the spreading tide of rapacious consumerism, and, most critically, our underlying mental models of the environment. Is it, for example, a resource to be managed? A web to be respected? A cost factor external to companies that must be borne by society? Political positioning, not an exploration of responsibility, was the focus of debate.

Few people imagined the Kyoto meeting to be a setting in which a reflective and searching inquiry could be achieved. To many "hardheaded realists" at meetings like Kyoto, the very proposal to use dialogue to solve such problems seems almost absurdly naive. To them it is a fantasy to think that people can talk together and work out their differences in the face of political influence, economic pressures, and cultural differences reaching back for centuries. But perhaps

they feel that way because of a romanticized image of the simplicity of dialogue on the one hand, and because of defensiveness about their own positions, on the other.

Those who try to minimize the complexity of dialogue by reducing it to a few simple techniques about talking together will be sorely disappointed. Doing so fragments conversations in new ways by imposing oversimplified rules instead of stimulating an inquiry into what is preventing people from talking well. What is needed instead is a way of evoking what people already know about dialogue, while recognizing the ways we systematically undermine ourselves or fail to live up to the potential of our conversations.

We live in a singular time. After 150 years of industrialized life, people have a new appreciation for the value of older, traditional ways—but they have also learned that these ways cannot be taken up wholesale. Christopher Alexander, a professor of architecture at the University of California in Berkeley and one of the most widely regarded architectural theorists of this age, once offered a seminal story about this matter. For many centuries, peasants in Slovakia created beautiful shawls made of naturally dyed fabric. The tradition of shawl making was ancient. But when modern aniline dyes were introduced, the quality of these shawls rapidly deteriorated. The peasants, says Alexander, could recognize a flawed shawl by looking to their traditions and making adjustments in their craftsmanship accordingly. Their artistry was based in long-standing habits and familiar practices; they were unconscious agents of a tradition that had become embedded in them. Thus, when faced with a completely new set of technologies, they could not adapt. At the same time, however, the industrial techniques that replaced their craft lost the rootedness and quality of that old tradition. These peasants were agents of a tradition, although they were not conscious of it.[7]

Our relationship to conversation is similar. Most people living today do not recall how to create meaningful conversations. We do not easily recall traditions of speaking together—ones that might enable us to talk as naturally and authentically as the peasants of Slovakia dyed shawls. Instead, we have inherited a patchwork understanding. Sometimes we know things click when people talk, but more often we know only when they don't. Sometimes we find ourselves in creative moments that evoke genuine dialogue. But, like Alexander's shawl makers, we have lost our unselfconscious ability in this domain. So many distractions and images, so much new information, have been introduced to us, we cannot draw upon a single tradition of conversation. Nor, living in our age, could we hope to simply fall back into an unselfconscious way of talking and thinking together. We require a very different way forward. Yet we can learn to deliberately create the kind of conversations we want, especially at times when the stakes are high. Alexander's solution in architecture was to propose the creation of what he called a "pattern language." He identified creative features of the vernacular architectural tradition and made them accessible to creative people in industrial times. One of my hopes in this book is to articulate a pattern language for dialogue, one that will be continuously reinvented and developed by you and many others in thousands of conversations.

Thinking Alone and Thinking Together

In December 1997, around a crowded table in the Presidential Palace in Tatarstan, Russia, a group of senior Russian and Chechen officials and their guests were in the middle of dinner. Things had been tense earlier in the day. Chechnya had recently asserted its independence through guerrilla warfare and attacks on the Russians. They had shocked the world by forcing the Russian military to withdraw and accede to their demands for recognition as an independent state. The Chechens were deeply suspicious of the academics and western politicians who had gathered everyone into that room; the Chechens feared that they were Russian pawns intent on derailing Chechen independence. The Russians, for their part, were

fearful of adding further legitimacy to what they considered a deeply troubling situation.

And yet, despite all this suspicion, after a few hours people began to relax. At the first toast of the evening the negotiator/facilitator of the session stood up and said: "Up until a few days ago, I had been with my mother in New Mexico in the States. She is dying of cancer. I debated whether to come here at all to participate in this gathering. But when I told her that I was coming to help facilitate a dialogue among all of you, in this important place on the earth, she ordered me to come. There was no debate. So here I am. I raise my glass to mothers." There followed a long moment of silence in the room.

It is in courageous moments like these that the promise of dialogue shows itself. Displays of such profound directness can lift us out of ourselves. They show us a broader horizon and put things in perspective. Such moments also remind us of our resilience and invite us to look harder for a way through whatever difficulties we are facing.[8]

Yet these moments are usually rather fleeting. It is easy to fall back into old ways of interacting. In this session in Tatarstan, participants managed to avoid any further unraveling of existing agreements between Russia and Chechnya. This was considered a genuine accomplishment, and even evidence of forward movement. But everyone remained firmly within their original positions, and within a month the guerrilla leaders and hard-liners in the Chechen government had forced the new Chechen president out of office. The new group made it clear that they would never have agreed to speak with the Russians, as the former president risked doing. They were unwilling to begin thinking together.

Of course thinking together is not as easy as it sounds. In my experience, most people do not even consider the possibility. Most of the time they are *thinking alone.* When Russians and Chechens, Northern Irish and British, management and union, husband and wife, differ, they are usually defending their positions, looking for evidence that they are right and that others are wrong. They assume they have to make their points without making themselves too vulnerable to the opinions of their opponent. They withhold information, feel hurt or betrayed, and lose respect for the other person or party. They want to fight or flee. In such conversations someone has to win and someone has to lose. Our meetings and our institutions can be very lonely places.[9]

When I learned physics in high school I was taught to think of atoms as a set of microscopic billiard balls zooming past one another and sometimes colliding at high speeds. That image seems to fit the way most people interact when they're talking about difficult issues. They zoom past each other. Or they collide abruptly and then veer away. These collisions create friction—which we describe as things "heating up." We don't like the way that "heat" feels, so we respond to it by trying to cool things down, to at least get to "maybe," to compromise.[10] We never learn to live over time in close contact with the heat, to understand why it emerges, or to explore our mutual understanding of the conditions that produced it in first place. We do not discover our resilience or our ability to completely alter the experience.

Thinking alone is so taken for granted, so deeply embedded in our modern ways of living that to suggest anything else is possible or needful often comes across as Pollyannaish. Yet it may be our headstrong belief that this is the only way to go that is getting us in trouble.

THREE LEVELS OF ACTION IN A DIALOGUE

How can we learn, as individuals, to take actions that might be conducive to evoking dialogue? How can we create dialogue in settings where people may not have initially been willing to engage in it? How can we broaden the dialogue process to include more people? How can we prevent reentrenchment? These are some of the central questions this book seeks to answer.

The key to answering them requires we address three fundamental levels of human interaction. Together these three create a foundation by which we can think together, and are the focus of the remainder of this book. We must learn to:

1. Produce coherent actions. One of the more puzzling things about our species is that we sometimes live in folly: We do things we do not intend. You may have noticed this about yourself. A dialogic approach requires that we learn to be aware of the contradictions between what we say and what we do. Dialogue requires that we learn four new behaviors to overcome these limits. Developing *capacity for new behavior* puts us in position to resolve incoherence and produce effects we intend.

2. **Create fluid structures of interaction**. Human beings do not always see the forces that are operating below the surface of their conversations. As individuals, this leads people to misread both what others are doing and the impact that they themselves are likely to have on others. In groups and organizations, it leads people continuously to find that efforts to make change are neutralized by other, well-intentioned individuals who have very different goals and ways of seeing the world. It is possible to develop an intuitive understanding of the nature of these forces, and to develop ways of anticipating and managing them. We can develop "*predictive intuition*." Predictive intuition is the ability to see these forces more clearly, enabling us to liberate stuck structures of interaction, free energy, and promote a more fluid means of thinking and working together.

3. **Provide wholesome space for dialogue**. What is often missed when people try to create dialogue is that our conversations take place in an envelope or atmosphere that greatly influences how we think and act. The space from which people come greatly influences their quality of insight, clarity of thought, and depth of feeling. This space is composed of the habits of thought and quality of attention that people bring to any interaction. By becoming more conscious of the *architecture of the invisible* atmosphere in our conversations, we may have profound effect on our worlds

To understand how each of these levels works, consider this example. A colleague recently told me about a major capital project in a factory of his that was supposed to cost one hundred million dollars in new investment.

Architecture of the Invisible

Predictive Intuition

**Capacity for
New Behavior**
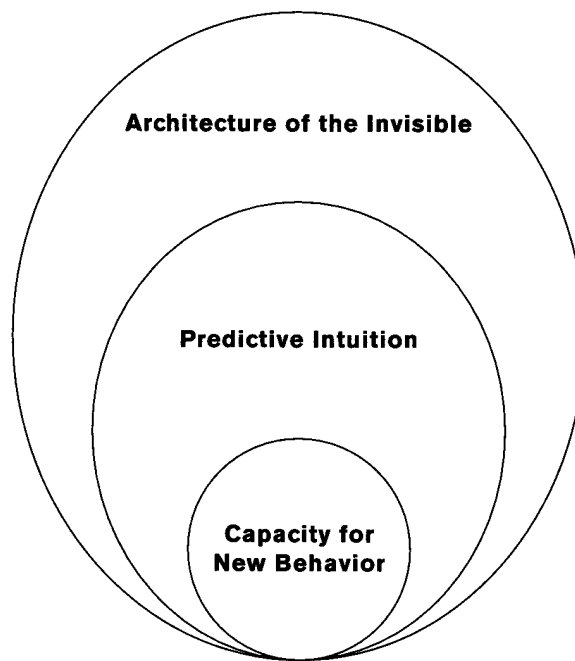
Very early on, the people planning the project realized that its true cost would likely be much higher than anyone had anticipated—perhaps as much as twice the initial estimates. They also quickly came to the conclusion that their senior managers and outside investors would reject any proposal that went over the number they had already publicly stated they were intending to spend. So the planners created a proposal that looked like it would work for the cost that had been stated. Do some things now and other things later, they told themselves. Within two years these same people were spending hundreds of millions of *additional* dollars to correct the problems that arose by using parts and materials that cost less but were not really designed for the purposes intended.

There is something familiar, obvious, and a little sad about a story like this.

They should have "done it right" the first time or not done it at all, right? Perhaps, except that this is far easier said than done! How often have you done something you knew was not quite right only because there did not seem to be any alternatives? Or you didn't realize until much later that the situation was awry in some crucial way?

How can we understand this situation?

First, their actions lacked coherence. These people *acted in ways that were problematic:* They judged and did not admit to it. They covered up and acted like they were not. They pushed for their point of view but resisted others who pushed for theirs. They attributed that others would not be interested or open to tackling the "real" difficulties and so did not raise them. In so acting, they remained unaware that they were doing to others what they attributed others would do to them. Despite all the questions about how to pull off a project of this size, no one really looked into how they were systematically undermining their own efforts.

Second, everyone in this story was caught in a web of traps: the senior managers who went public with their original numbers and were closed to hearing alternatives; the engineers who rearranged the project to fit the original figures out of a belief that this was what their managers wanted; the banks who were trying to get their money out of the situation; the investors who were focused only on short-range financial returns rather than on the long-range thinking and acting behind them; and the managers who felt compelled to hedge, to cover up this fact, and to jury-rig a solution for their cover-up. Clearly this problem is not unique. Everywhere we look, myopic vision, petty misunderstandings, and small deceits escalate into gross, wasteful calamities

that seem like they could be avoided if people would only talk to each other with a different kind of conversational presence and "fire."

Most of the time, people do not intentionally set out to undermine their own projects. Yet this is certainly what happened in this case: Most of the managers who created the initial plan were eventually fired, costs were vastly underestimated, and a planned initial public offering (IPO) to the stock market was delayed by years. It would be easy to lay blame on a few seemingly incompetent or shortsighted managers rather than acknowledge there was a whole system of forces conspiring to limit effectiveness. What lay at the foot of this system? Blaming others for their political intrigue and failure to speak openly, while doing the same themselves.

These people were caught in certain roles and underlying *structures of interaction* that made them feel they *had* to relate together in the ways they did, but of which they were unconscious. Such structures guide people as to what counts as acceptable behavior. For instance in this case, some of the management team wanted to invite wide and open participation in the planning and decision making—including shop floor personnel who might have important roles in a new facility. But other managers and the investors wanted only the "experts" on the project to have a say, and to regulate quite carefully what got said to whom. They were concerned about the "qualifications" of the people. In the end, their approach won.

The beliefs of each of these groups are also part of the structure and led people to respond in certain ways. So, for instance, the investors believed they *had* to think first about the numbers. The engineers believed they *had* to do only what managers required of them. The managers believed they *had* to produce positive results as judged by others. These are all very real rules, ones that people feel they have to follow in this and in every situation, typically without reflection. And there can be very serious ramifications if they fail to follow them.

Third, and most important, these people had fallen into widely shared and widely taken-for-granted *habits of thinking and feeling* about their problems, what I refer to as the invisible architecture of human beings. To try to isolate one element and lay blame on it is to repeat exactly the problem that caused this disaster in the first place. It is this very *way of thinking and acting* that is at the root of the problem. It is a way of thinking that fragments, or divides, problems and fails to see the underlying interconnections and coherence of the situation. Dividing things up is not the problem. Forgetting the connections is.

For instance, several managers came to believe that the perspectives of the union people about the viability of the new technology were simply not worthy of serious consideration. In so doing, they were denying a fundamental reality: that all the perspectives were part of an underlying whole, however seemingly challenging, unacceptable, or unsavory. It seemed sensible to reject such things. People feared there would be too many cooks, believed union people were not experts, and were convinced they would try to impose conditions management would not like. It could all be a potentially huge waste of time to engage them, they told themselves. But this meant that critical information got buried and corrections that might have been made were not.

People also became convinced, not surprisingly, that their own perspective on the problem was essentially right, and that others had it wrong. But thinking in this way also prevented them from gaining a wider perspective—one that would enable them all to say "Wait a minute, what are we doing here? What are *we* missing?" People were not interested in what they were missing, just what *others* had already missed.

These two habits, among many others—losing respect for and so rejecting what is uncomfortable and unfamiliar, and becoming fixated on one's own certainties—pervade human consciousness. In this case they produced a detached and defensive atmosphere, hindering serious reflection and honest inquiry.

This underlying atmosphere turns out to be a critical determining factor in whether we can talk successfully or not, because it leads us either to see one another as inextricably related aspects of

a larger fabric or as separate and disconnected parts, bringing up troublesome but largely disconnected problems that must be managed and eventually overcome. When we find ourselves in the latter mode, we tend not to talk together well.

This atmosphere within our own consciousness is generated, very simply, by the ways we think and feel—the levels of internal freedom we allow ourselves, the inclusiveness we are able to sustain, the authenticity we are able to muster, the flexibility of perspective we are able to take, and the stability and spaciousness we have in our hearts.

Of course our atmosphere is not separate from others. Our feelings and habits of thinking are part of a complex web that links us all together; it is our "ecology of thought." This ecology is the living network of memory and awareness, one that is not limited to any single person but is in fact held collectively. It is the matrix that informs us the world is a certain way and that problems can be solved in only a certain way. Out of this ecology comes the collective atmosphere in which we all live and work.

The capital project disaster at the factory came down to a failure at all three of these levels: the self-defeating actions people took, the competing underlying structures or rules of interaction that guided people, and the fragmented quality of atmosphere in which it all took place. This prevented the right people from talking and thinking together about the problem in a way that all the concerns could safely and intelligently come out in advance. Everyone knew something about the issues. Everyone had a part of the problem. But they all were unable or unwilling to raise them. Everyone was in a hurry to justify the project. No amount of market analysis, technical engineering calculations, financial projections, or hand wringing could have dealt with this situation. Failing to talk together effectively, these people sowed the seeds of their own disaster.

What is needed to bring about dialogue? Coherent new actions and behavior, fluid structures and an ability to predict problematic ones, and a wholesome atmosphere and understanding of the space out of which our conversations arise.

THE DESIGN OF THIS BOOK

I have organized this book into five parts to seek to address these matters:

The first part, entitled *What Is Dialogue?,* invites you to consider the overall territory covered in this book—the meaning of the word *dialogue,* some of the reasons why dialogue fails, and what we might do about it. As I discuss in this section, human beings already *do* think together, but in a way that blocks creativity. The second part, *Building Capacity for New Behavior,* explores the four essential behaviors required to bring about dialogue for both individuals and groups: listening, respecting, suspending, and speaking our voice (voicing). These chapters also explore four principles for dialogue that underscore these behaviors and that inform us about how to apply them.

The third part, entitled *Predictive Intuition,* proposes a way of anticipating and naming the forces that can undermine any conversation. These include a way of understanding the different languages people speak, a framework for anticipating how people manage power, and an approach for detecting self-defeating patterns of action. This part also explores how we might understand the traps that arise at key interfaces between people in organizations, and outlines several ways to shift the structures of a group's conversation.

In the fourth part, *Architecture of the Invisible,* I show that conversation takes different forms depending on the quality of the setting, or climate, in which it occurs. This section explores the different "fields" in which conversation takes place. This part shows that as we focus on the

quality of the setting in which our interactions occur, we are prompted to adopt a new model of leadership. I also discuss the different contexts for conversation and the qualities that distinguish them.

Finally, in the fifth part, *Widening the Circle,* I explore the ways dialogue is being applied in large organizations, in communities, and in society. I offer examples of dialogic approaches in a number of very interesting and promising arenas. I close with some reflections on the new language of wholeness that many are seeking to articulate today. Dialogue seems to be one of the ways in which it is possible to welcome the diversity of voices that people bring to the table—and move to a new level of collective insight.

THE EVOLUTION OF CONVERSATION
A MAP OF CONVERSATION TYPES

As you actively begin to work on all these levels of dialogue, you will find that the path to dialogue goes through several distinct steps or phases. When you begin to talk with someone, you often begin with a *conversation.* The roots of this word mean to turn together *(con verser):* You take turns speaking. As you listen and participate, some things will strike you as relevant and others as irrelevant. You may like some parts of what is being said and dislike others. You select and process information; in other words, you *deliberate.* The word *deliberate* means to "weigh out." You weigh out what you like and do not like; you pay attention to some things and not to others. It is at this point that you face a choice: to *suspend* what you think, relaxing your grip and remaining open, or to *defend* it with the assumption that you are right. Typically, this is not a choice you make consciously. And more often you find yourself reacting, generally defending your position or point of view.

The Route to Dialogue

If you can make this choice deliberately, two possible routes open before you. One takes you in the direction of reflective dialogue, where you become willing to think about the rules underlying what you do—the reasons for your thoughts and actions. You learn to see more clearly what you have taken for granted. A Gary Larson "Far Side" cartoon illustrates this well. In it, several cows are happily grazing in a field. One of the cows suddenly looks up, startled, and says, "Grass! We've been eating grass!" In dialogue, we begin to reflect on what we have been doing but not noticing. This can be both startling and powerful.

Reflective dialogue can then give rise to generative dialogue, in which we begin to create entirely new possibilities and create new levels of interaction. A jazz musician improvising and inventing new music is engaged in generative dialogue with the music and his band. But generative dialogue in words is more rare. I first experienced generative dialogue in 1984 where physicist David Bohm, at the inspiration of Peter Garrett and Donald Factor, had gathered a small group of people to reflect on Bohm's work. The attendees were unusual; many had the experience of living in intentional communities, where the aim was to develop contemplative awareness and a sense of shared responsibility within group settings. There were also scientists, academics, psychologists, educators, even graduate students like myself.

At first Bohm read several of his academic papers, giving people opportunity to comment on it. It soon became clear that Bohm's own inquiry was not merely about physics but about the

insights physics might provide for a wide range of human experience. Bohm, unlike most physicists, was attempting to look beyond the exterior surfaces of the material world to the implications for the interiors of human beings.

At the time, he was developing an approach he called "the implicate order."

The implicate order is the idea that underlying the physical universe is a sea of energy that "unfolds" into the visible, explicate world that we see around us. In this picture, reality unfolds from this invisible sea and then folds back up again. Bohm began to speculate that these ideas might serve as a metaphor for understanding other levels of experience, including thought and consciousness itself He had begun to identify the implicate order in the external world, but now he was positing that there was a direct correlation to it in thought that could also emerge or be evoked within us.

Listening to a controversial but well-regarded physicist speak about his ideas was interesting, though not in itself a breakthrough. Yet one evening this began to change. David spoke about what he thought of as the pain, or fear of imagined pain, of living in the present moment. Most people, he noted, avoid the present, tending instead to live in their memories or imagination about the future. We spoke about the possibility that if we could come into the present all together, and somehow break through this barrier of attention, we might release an enormous amount of untapped or repressed energy. I recall thinking at the time that we ought not to simply talk about this, but do it. So I said just that—could we not allow ourselves the opportunity here and now to be together, to think together, in a way that goes beyond the pain and fog that we traditionally carry around? As I said this, something shifted in that room; others said similar things; we began to experience a change of atmosphere and clarity of insight. I think of these moments as the beginnings of a dialogue among us, and a more particular initiation for me into this territory.

Bohm arrived the next morning, saying he had planned to read one of his papers, but that he felt it would now be better simply to talk together. As we reflected on the possibilities of the implicate order, and the sensitivity required to understand it, our conversation itself became a living example of the kind of new experience that Bohm was suggesting. It surprised everyone in the room, including Bohm—this theoretical idea in which a conversation could in itself somehow lead people past their natural defenses into genuine contact with one another and a more invisible, implicate reality was not just a theoretical possibility. We were watching it happen. And we could feel the result. Bohm later reflected on the experience:

> In the beginning, people were expressing fixed positions, which they were tending to defend, but later it became clear that to maintain the feeling of friendship in the group was much more important than to hold any position. Such friendship has an impersonal quality in the sense that its establishment does not depend on close personal relationship between participants. A new kind of mind thus begins to come into being which is based on the development of a common meaning that is constantly transforming in the process of the dialogue. People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting; rather, they are participating in this pool of common meaning which is capable of constant development and change. ….Thus far we have only begun to explore the possibilities of dialogue in the sense indicated here, but going further along these lines would open up the possibility of transforming not only the relationship between people, but even more, the very nature of the consciousness in which these relationships arise. [11]

Generative dialogue emerged as people let go of their positions and views. They found themselves attending simply to the flow of conversation, a flow that enveloped us and lifted us to a new level
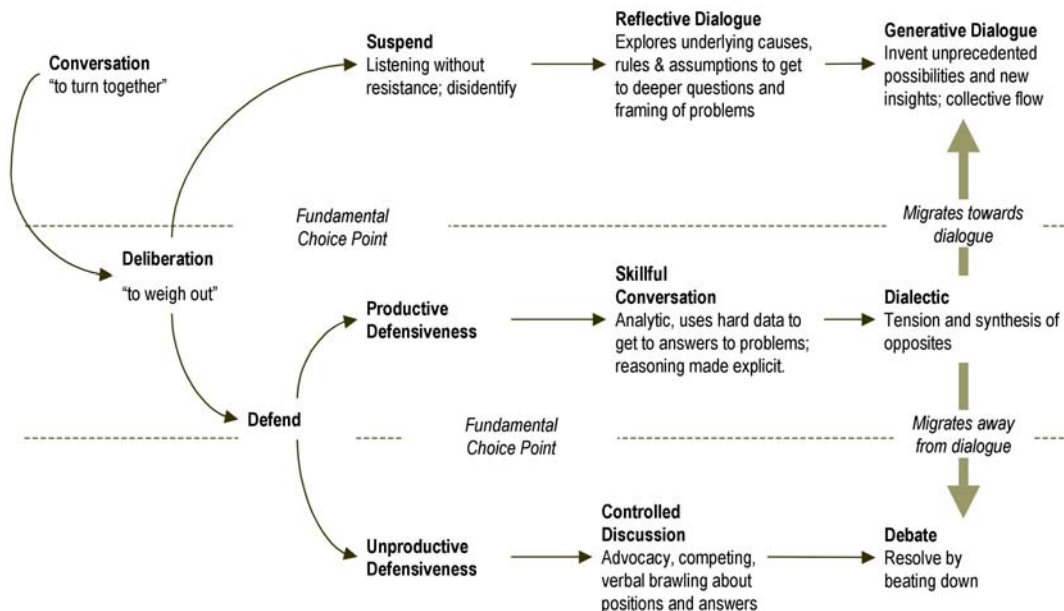
of shared understanding about dialogue.

This progression, from defending to suspending, and on to dialogue, has remained a common thread in my exploration of this field ever since. The diagram below shows this core choice, and the two roads that emerge from it:

A Dialogue Process Map

Dialogue is a way of talking together about what we think is really going on. It is a "conversation with a center, not sides."

Conversation "to turn together"

Suspend Listening without resistance; disidentify

Reflective Dialogue Explores underlying causes, rules & assumptions to get to deeper questions and framing of problems

Generative Dialogue Invent unprecedented possibilities and new insights; collective flow

Fundamental Choice Point

Migrates towards dialogue

Deliberation "to weigh out"

Productive Defensiveness

Skillful Conversation Analytic, uses hard data to get to answers to problems; reasoning made explicit.

Dialectic Tension and synthesis of opposites

Defend

Fundamental Choice Point

Migrates away from dialogue

Unproductive Defensiveness

Controlled Discussion Advocacy, competing, verbal brawling about positions and answers

Debate Resolve by beating down

5/27/03 · 1 · © 2003 Dialogos

The other direction on the diagram is toward *discussion*. As I indicated before, while people may aspire to have dialogue, much of the time their conversation reflects the tendency to think alone: People choose to defend their views and sustain their positions. The word *defend* comes from roots that mean "to ward off an attack." This is the billiard-ball model of conversation. In a discussion, people see themselves as separate from one another. They take positions to put forth arguments and defend their stakes. And they try to resolve differences definitively—if *x* is correct, then *y* must be wrong. The roots of the word *discussion* are the same as *concussion* and *percussion,* and mean "to shake apart." David Bohm referred to discussions as Ping-Pong matches. The ball bounces back and forth at a quick pace, and the point of the game seems to be to win the exchange.

As shown above, there are two basic kinds of discussion. In one, we "defend well" and produce what I call "skillful discussion." We stick to our guns but do so in a way where we remain open to the possibility of being wrong. In the second kind of discussion, we "defend badly" —that is, unilaterally, where all we hope to do is win and not lose. We are not open to the possibility that we might be mistaken. This is controlled or unproductive discussion.

Discussion in one form or other is the dominant mode of interaction in most professional settings, in part because the billiard-ball model has prevailed in organizations and professional society as the best way to obtain valid results. Discussion is a powerful mode of exchange but, as we shall see, a limited one. It tends to force people into either/or thinking. It focuses on closure

and completion. But it does so from the standpoint that the way to gain control over a situation is to try to contain and guide separate "particles" into a coherent order. It does not presume an existing or underlying wholeness; in fact, it presumes the absence of one. So when someone says, "We have to *make* a clear decision here," they are saying that they do not perceive an underlying coherence that would naturally indicate what direction to take. Lacking this, we believe we must impose a decision.

Unproductive or controlled discussion devolves frequently into *debate,* whose roots mean to "beat down." People do not simply raise different views, they try to overcome others with their views. One way they do this is through what I have called "abstraction wars" in meetings.

Abstraction Wars

Many conversations, for example, consist of one party lobbing an abstract description of a problem at the other and acting as if what they said was clear, obvious, and unambiguous. In a meeting of doctors and administrators seeking to reform health care I heard an administrator from a thriving hospital say: "Doctors are getting paid way too much, and it is not right." Someone swiftly countered with "What do you mean? I do not think they see it that way, and would see you as being slightly hypocritical." What were these two people talking about? How much is "way too much?" According to what criteria? Who is the "they" that would not agree? None of this is clear from these people's words, though each thought he was being perfectly clear. What is more, each added additional charged layers of meaning beneath the surface of his words. What the first man was saying under the surface was "I know what is right and you do not, and I am not open to discussing it." The second one insinuated that the administrator was also very well paid, though he was acting like he was not, and that compensation was not the issue. His response might be restated as "I see your abstraction, and I raise you one."

Finding the Right Problem

Other problems with discussion arise because people use it for *every* form of knowledge generation. In the beginning stages of defining a problem, for example, a mode that seeks to force closure and completion is limiting. MIT Professor Donald Schön spoke of the need for "problem finding." We must discover *what* problem we want to address before we try to solve it. Discussion, because of its tendency to decompose issues, leads us to look for those parts of problems that are already known. Dialogue, in contrast, asks us to consider the context or field in which the problem arises, to open ourselves to new options and the thinking underlying our assumptions, not simply to go for closure.

I was in another meeting with a group of senior doctors and nurses from around the United States where this came clear. The doctors were speaking about their success at virtually eliminating the problem of infants being born with low birth weights in their hospitals. One doctor, looking at a set of statistics, declared, "There is no problem here." To him the issue had simply gone away. A senior nurse, listening to this, nearly exploded. "This is typical of you doctors," she snapped. "Where you see nothing, I see *everything*. We have worked for months, in the communities all over, to educate mothers about prenatal care. This problem did not just go

away. We have worked very hard on it."

The doctor was looking at the statistics and how to measure their change. The nurse was looking at the context out of which the changes had appeared.

Many of us believe that truth emerges after we take two conflicting ideas and somehow smash them together. The resulting spark is supposed to shed light on the situation. But more often than not, what actually happens is that one party simply beats the other down. A discussion attempts to get people to choose one of

two alternatives. A dialogue helps to surface the alternatives and lay them side by side, so that they can all be seen in context.

Discussion is not always without merit though. Done well, it provides the benefit of breaking things into parts in order to understand them more clearly. A "skillful discussion" seeks to find some order among the particles while they are still "hot." It involves the art of putting oneself in another's shoes, of seeing the world the way she sees it. In skillful discussion, we inquire into the reasons behind someone's position and the thinking and the evidence that support it. As this kind of discussion progresses, it can lead to a dialectic, the *productive* antagonism of two points of view. A dialectic pits different ideas against one another and then makes space for new views to emerge out of both.

COMPARING DISCUSSION AND DIALOGUE

We need both discussion and dialogue. There are times when it is fruitful to think alone, or use discussion, and there are times when it is essential that we think together, or engage in dialogue:

Discussion is about making a decision. Unlike dialogue, which seeks to open possibilities and see new options, discussion seeks closure and completion. The word *decide* means "to resolve difficulties by cutting through them." Its roots literally mean to "murder the alternative."

Dialogue is about exploring the nature of choice. To choose is to select among alternatives. Dialogue is about evoking insight, which is a way of reordering our knowledge—particularly the taken-for-granted assumptions that people bring to the table.

Some Ford managers with whom I was working several years ago used dialogue to generate an insight that ended up transforming the product development process they were managing. They were building the new Lincoln Continental. They found that the engineers, in the early phases of the project, were struggling to develop designs that met both the cost criteria set out by the finance department and the creative vision set out by the marketing people. The engineers kept floundering. They were in a dilemma. When they moved in one direction, one of the departments would resist; when they went the other way, the other would raise hell. During the dialogue we conducted with the project's top teams, it became clear that they were trying to build a "Lexus at a Cadillac price." (A Lexus was known at the time to be at the top of its class in luxury and quality. The Cadillac was priced at the level these managers wished to meet, yet without a concurrent loss of quality.) Each team felt this dilemma—electrical, noise and vibration, body and engineering. And no one had questioned the implicit premise so far. Now, talking together about it, they realized that this unstated (and nearly undiscussable) goal was compromising the efforts of the whole group. Once named, it began to lose its hold on the teams. People could see that as stated, a "Lexus-Cadillac" was not possible, but that other options *were*. They began generating alternatives, making more explicit the tradeoffs they were facing.

This was an example of an insight: It reordered people's existing knowledge. It did not tell them something they did not, in a way, already know. But it helped them to see what they already

knew in a very new light. They had been holding discussions about which horn of the dilemma was the "right" one—tedious battles that had frustrated everyone over some months. Now they saw that this was the wrong question altogether.

Discussion produces important and valuable results. It is necessary for many of the situations we face. But it is too limited for many of the most intractable problems before us, especially those where people bring fundamentally different assumptions to the table, have reasonable differences of view, and deep investments in getting what they want. While we need both, we must broaden our repertoire.

Finding the Freedom of Conversation

The problems with our talking together do not stem from an absence of words. We have an inflationary glut of words: more words, less and less meaning. Five-hundred-channel television services, millions of Web sites, and an endless stream of opinion from every media source about the latest political or social scandal race their way to you in a frenzied contest for your attention. Given so many different perspectives, we lose sight of any "common sense" we might make of it all. As a result, whatever "gold standard" of commonly held and deeply shared meaning that might have lain beneath our words is scattered and lost. Our world is filled with piles of words, many of which are full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Perhaps more critically, we find it very hard to say what the gold standard of meaning is, or how we might restore it.

Dialogue can give us a way to regain that gold standard. It does this by helping to create an atmosphere in which we can perceive what really matters to most to us, and to one another. Doing so gives us access to a much finer and subtler kind of intelligence than we might ordinarily encounter.

To listen respectfully to others, to cultivate and speak your own voice, to suspend your opinions about others—these bring out the intelligence that lives at the very center of ourselves—the intelligence that exists when we are alert to possibilities around us and thinking freshly. My colleague, musician Michael Jones, calls this the "intelligence of the heart."

Through dialogue we learn how to engage our hearts. This does not mean wallowing in sentimentality. It refers, instead, to cultivating a mature range of perception and sensibility that is largely discounted or simply missing from most professional contexts. Daniel Goleman, in his book *Emotional Intelligence,* has documented extensively the dysfunction that emerges due to emotional immaturities and stunted emotional development. People easily regress into reactive states, and intelligence gets thrown out of the window. Dialogue provides a means by which we can learn to maintain our equilibrium. It lets us reconnect and revitalize our emotional capacity because it compels us to suspend our habitual reactions and frozen thoughts. It requires that we learn to include and take into account opinions different from our own. Dialogue requires that we take responsibility for thinking, not merely reacting, lifting us into a more conscious state. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote of this as "the high freedom of great conversation."

EVOKING THE DREAM

Learning to inquire together about what matters most is some of the most significant work I can imagine. Our isolation, our investment in positions and roles, our defense of our own limits, fuel

the condition of thinking alone. Dialogue represents a new frontier for human beings—perhaps the true final frontier. In it we can come to know ourselves and our relatedness to the whole of Life.

Almost everyone dreams about the power that could be harnessed by groups of people thinking together. This dream seems present every time people come together: This time, they wonder, might something be different? We hear in this a promise, however difficult it is to realize, that somehow this work might activate the collective power of human beings—something that goes vastly beyond what anyone of us can do on our own. This potential is not only a dream, I believe, but a deep memory, one still smoldering in embers of ancient fires. But to access that dream and make it a practical reality today requires that we relight these passions and recall the memory of a unique but deeply familiar kind of speaking and listening.