



On the importance of communication in change processes

How does change in an organisation actually start? And what role does communication play in this? Deficits in cooperation and management, challenging targets and performance pressure are just a few of many factors that make working life difficult.

Lisa Sterr

International Consultant
MACHWÜRTH TEAM
INTERNATIONAL



To begin with, deficits are identified: Projects are not running well, teams are not motivated, those responsible do not lead correctly, clients are not satisfied, external pressure is increasing.

Or, interests and targets are identified, for example: We want to implement our visions and guiding principles, work more effectively, operate in a more service-oriented way, increase our turnover, become a more attractive employer and player on the market.

worries and sometimes real suffering. Things that are not revealed at first glance are revealed by taking a closer look: The need for change is always a hidden need for further development, involvement, meaning and balance; No matter if it is expressed in this way, or not. But how on earth can that work, when there is so much pressure, compulsion and speed in our daily working lives?

them how a better customer orientation could be achieved.



The need for meaning

Have you noticed anything? Change always begins with a target/actual comparison, whether or not you start with by identifying what's not working, or with how it should be in the future. Behind the target/actual comparison there are always needs, sometimes even pipe dreams. But also fears,



Communication is essential

Communication is very important in all change processes – in my opinion it is even the celebrated A and O which ensures change processes run smoothly. Unfortunately many people often underestimate its importance. Imagine that you, the boss, want your team to take more personal responsibility, become more motivated and effective. If you just made an announcement or held the usual meetings in which a few people speak and most are silent, then this would cause problems. Or that you as a (female) manager, want your female employees finally to behave in a more customer-friendly way. If you didn't inform your employees about your impressions, about developments – or didn't even ask

Learning together is fundamental

By this I mean: For companies, triggering change means embarking on learning processes and these only achieve their aim if you get everyone on board.

They lead to success if employees recognise the meaning of change and can get involved; if they experience the innovation as co-creators rather than "victims". This demands a high degree of communication. Because you can only convince people if you inform them, if you ask them for their knowledge, experiences and ideas – and if you take their needs and feelings seriously. Dictatorial pronouncements from above have had their day, as have many common status-oriented forms of discussion.

New communication skills are called for

Change processes are by nature “fluent”, dynamic and related to openness and insecurity. New communication skills are therefore called for, as well as an approach which respects partnership and communality as important resources. An approach/focus which relies on collective intelligence and the common good and not on the knowledge and interests of individual parties.

Many of the discussion formats in our working worlds are no longer adequate for solving complex problems or answering burning questions.

Classic formats are no longer enough

Formats such as the classic debate, discussion or negotiation are proving themselves more and more to be inadequate forms of discussion. Debates, which can be very interesting for forming an opinion and taking a decision, only allow a Yes or No vote.

Discussions which should actually be about clarifying the facts, mutually and intensively, often become hefty exchanges and participants “haggling” their point of view.



And negotiations – an important instrument for striking a deal in your interests – are only used by many to assert their own claims or even to find the lowest common denominator.

Assertiveness and lecturing have had their day

In many organisations the need for assertiveness, lecturing and explanation of the world dominates the culture of discussion, and also in the public and political arena. But it is not the formats that are the problem, but the ways in which they are used: issues are dissected in a self-centred, demanding, know-it-all way, then judged and shoved to one side again. In the classic team meetings and discussions too, things often turn out like this. The researchers, those with alleged or genuine higher status assert themselves as opinion-formers - with the result that the level of frustration in the others increases. All forms of discussion that facilitate the assertion of individual players, that only focus on factual target-oriented exchange, do not deliver any suitable answers for us nowadays.

New forms of discussion are growing in importance

In order to design change – in the sense of mutual learning for all involved in a beneficial way, new communication formats are needed! Helpful new formats are, for example, the “World Cafe” and the moderator’s method known as “dynamic facilitation”. The World Cafe connects the ex-

periences and ideas of a large group in continually new discussion rounds, focuses on knowledge increase and inspiration through communication. The method of dynamic facilitation consciously incorporates all reservations and doubts of the participants in a discussion round, in order to thereby create room for a consensus-oriented solution to the problem. After extensive speaking and “communitisation” the solution idea often emerges, easily and surprisingly.

Dialogic qualities

- › Keeping a good learning attitude
- › Wanting the you to grow
- › Making an open and authentic contribution to the team
- › Questioning the own thinking
- › Listening respectfully
- › Restraining critical appraisals
- › Exploring other perspectives
- › Sharing with each other
- › Discovering the whole
- › Creating new opportunities

Particularly valuable: Dialogue according to David Bohm

I find the “Dialogue procedure according to David Bohm” particularly useful in supportive change processes. It relies upon the depth and breadth of the conversation, communicating and growing together. It encourages people to speak not just from within their function, but from their respective personal experience. The Bohm Dialogue focuses on thinking afresh about an urgent issue, thereby lending this issue a new mutual meaning. The word Dialogue comes

originally from Greek and means that something flows through (=dia) in word, meaning, significance (=logos). In his research, the American quantum physicist and philosopher David Bohm (1917 – 1992) came to conclusion in his research that people must learn to think afresh and differently in order to solve their problems. He realised that many discussion rounds revolved merely around continually reoccurring thoughts. But according to Bohm, people of today urgently need new fresh ideas, i.e. thinking, in order to find answers to global challenges.

“The object of a dialogue is not to analyze things, or to win an argument, or to exchange opinions. Rather, it is to suspend your opinions and to look at the opinions, to listen to everybody’s opinions, to suspend them, and to see what all that means. If we can see what all of our opinions mean, then we are sharing a common content.”

David Bohm

Discussion as a mutual thought process

Bohm therefore thought it was important to develop a procedure in which status and hierarchy play no role and the issue to be addressed is consciously placed in the centre. This means: The issue is not controlled by one or several people and their positions, but the group thinks about the question together. In order to achieve this mutual thought process, Bohm suggests an open seating structure in a circle and recommends working with a



speech object placed in the centre. Everybody who wants to contribute something goes and fetches the speech object (a stone, for example), sits down, speaks, and then puts the object back into the centre. This conscious slowing down of the discussion helps individual fresh thoughts to be perceived in the first place, aids active listening, enables participants to be stimulated by different ideas and to come to new previously unimagined realisations.

Dialogue in organisational learning

During the 1990s David Bohm inspired many academics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston with his procedures; for example Peter Senge, William Isaacs, Freeman Dhority, Edgar H. Schein and Otto C. Scharmer who used it to explore how organisations can best learn. Many of these academics worked as advisors for organisations and used the dialogue procedure intensively, such as William Isaacs or Otto C. Scharmer, who describes this in his book, “Theorie U – Von der Zukunft her führen” (Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges). From around the mid 1990s, the dialogue procedure made its way to Germany and became known here particularly through Martina and Johannes Hartkemeyer who then founded the “Deutsche In-

stitut für Dialog-Prozessbegleitung” (“German Institute for Accompanying Dialogue Processes”) in Osnabrück.

Extra space for meaning and insights

Why is the dialogue procedure according to David Bohm so helpful, particularly now?

Because we have many change processes to master and cannot solve new complex challenges with an old thought pattern from yesterday!

To relate to a topic with an explorative and non-result prejudiced approach (and not from the respective positioning with the usual “yes. but”) creates space for new thinking, contexts and insights.

By slowing down the process, the dialogue helps us to identify entrenched points of view and over-hasty evaluations, and to go to the end of the queue to achieve the common goal, or perhaps even to leave it behind us.

The dialogue gives us the courage to get involved as people and not only speak from the standpoint of our function. It invites us to adopt approaches which we urgently require: Appreciation, respect, readiness for mutual learning and trust in collective intelligence. And it trains many competences such as active listening, opening up for new impulses, and integrative thinking.


More communication and participation

What do organisations and teams gain from this discussion format?

The dialogue strengthens the idea and approach of every individual and thereby the whole group. It encourages communication and makes participation fundamentally possible, and not only participation in terms of facts, but also experiences, feelings and needs. Dialogue creates a pleasant and nourishing space to explore operational issues, particularly in the context of the target/actual comparison that lies at the beginning of every change process. In this sense, dialogue helps to prepare decisions, develop strategies for the future and prevent conflict dynamics.



Teams learn more easily

The dialogue procedure according to David Bohm is a helpful instrument in expanding one's own communication skills, to develop further together and achieve ever more learning competence. With this discussion format, change processes are easier to implement because it relies on the potential of all those involved, creative mutual thinking – and on meaning and balance. 

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About the author:



Lisa Sterr
International
Consultant

Lisa Sterr, cultural scientist and specialised journalist, has been working as independent consultant and trainer for more than 20 years and is also working as a consultant for MTI.

As a qualified organisational developer and dialogue process supporter she disposes of a broad knowledge and experience background on designing change processes positively. In particular she supports managers and teams in terms of communication.