



Being the Container in Dialogic OD

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One of the common images used by people who work with “Dialogic OD” (Bushe & Marshak, 2009), as well as personal growth groups, is that of a “container” – the idea that, as facilitators or OD Consultants, we create the right set of conditions for effective processes to unfold. I first came across the image of the container in the “Men’s Conferences” run by Robert Bly, Michael Meade and James Hillman in the 1980’s. During their powerful, five day, residential, psycho-spiritual growth events, they seemed to break all the “rules” I was taught as an applied behavioural scientist and I did not begin to understand what they were doing until I learned their theory base was not social-psychology but “mytho-poetic” – a combination of anthropology, Jungian psychology and mythology (Meade, 1993). Over the four years during which I annually attended these profound events I learned that we were creating a container to “cook our souls”. The idea went straight back to alchemy and the metaphor of turning lead into gold. We were there to experience initiation into the next stage on our soul’s journey and doing that required a “leak proof container”. One of the processes for this was the creation of individual masks – a 2-3 day process of contemplation and creation using plaster bandages moulded to one’s face and then painted and adorned – culminating in a ritual where we wore our masks while engaged in other activities. I still have those masks and the progression of my soul’s journey, over those four years, is clearly apparent for anyone to see.

Around that time one of my colleagues at the university was having our EMBA students make similar masks. These were made in a classroom, by people in office attire, who came to the university straight from work for a three hour class. I was aghast. What was she doing? Where was the containment? How could this be anything other than a big joke? To my surprise, when I talked to some of the students, some of them had found this exercise a profound experience. Not everyone, but enough to dislodge my nice, neat ideas about what a container is, and what is required for it to work. The more I have thought about, and talked to others about, the idea of the container, the fuzzier it has become. What is a container? Is there more than one kind? How do

you create them and how do you know if you have a good one? Too often I saw things happen that just should not have happened because the container was so full of holes and leaking all over the place. Most recently this occurred while I was working with an executive team. My colleague and I were running a quasi T-group type experience over two days for a group of executives during which people were coming and going, monitoring their blackberries, in a room at their head office. My colleague was aghast and wanted to confront them on their behaviour. I did not believe it would do much good, and counselled treating them as adults who make their own choices and reap the consequences. Well, the two days ended with the CEO, a sixty plus year old man, openly weeping as he talked



about how important this organization and this team were to him and his dream of what could be. Strong emotions swept through the group as they discussed the quality of their relationships, how much had changed in those two days, and their commitment to retaining and building on what they had learned. What struck me most was how far they had come in a container that, given my training about the need for group stability and psychological safety, was clearly inadequate. It seemed to me that the team's progress had more to do with the psycho-emotional maturity of the leader than the physical properties of the container. Maybe the character and presence of that CEO created the container where those things could happen. What would change in a room if Nelson Mandela or the Dalai Lama entered it? Would not their mere presence create a whole different kind of container for any group of people with some knowledge of who those men are?

As I was thinking about that experience it struck me that my thinking about containers was too limited. The container metaphor pointed my thinking toward the physical and temporal qualities of containment. It made me think of the leader or facilitator building or creating a container. Concerns about creating "leak proof containers" put me in a closed system world. In open systems, everything has containers too but they are all semi-permeable. Those containers are not built from the outside in but emerge from the inside out – by processes internal to the organism. And in dialogical, complex adaptive systems, everything is influenced by, and influences, the ongoing stream of interactions and the meanings people make from them. I began to think that perhaps containers are co-constructed by the groups inside them with the leader or facilitator playing a pivotal role through their very being.

This led me to suggest a break out session at NTL's 'Is There a New OD?' conference during which about 25 of us came together in a remarkable act of barn-raising, talking about how we are when we are doing a good job of being containers for our clients. In the rest of this article I will share with you my current thinking on being a container for transformational change. Working with this image of the facilitator as container, however, is dangerous if we reify the facilitator and we forget that it is the whole group that, through its internal processes, creates the semi-permeable boundaries within which transformational change can take place. It may be more useful to think of the facilitator as a strange attractor around which processes that allow for the emergence of strong, positive containers are evoked. While I use the word 'facilitator' throughout, I am thinking of the individual who is giving leadership to a small or large group during an event to support transformational change. That could be a T-group facilitator, internal or external consultant, or "the boss".

I will describe seven ways in which, through the character and skill of the facilitator, he or she aids in the emergence of the kinds of containers in which a group can "cook" – where transformation can happen. I'll start with the more

mundane and finish with the more esoteric. I'll conclude with some thoughts on how to distinguish between being controlling and being a container.

MAKING IT SAFE

One of the ways we facilitate the emergence of a container where difficult thoughts, strong emotions and repressed desires can be brought to the surface is, of course, by making it safer than normal to become aware of, and express, those things. There are devices facilitators can utilise, like imposing structures and clarifying ground rules, that can increase safety but here I am interested in how a facilitator makes it safer by their essential *beingness*.

I think one key idea of this essay is captured in the phrase "being a non-anxious presence". Even if you, as the facilitator, are churning inside, by simply looking as if you have your act together you can help a group take a leap across a chasm they need to cross. Actually having your act together is obviously better still. What does it mean, in this context, to have your act together?

Different traditions have different ways of expressing a similar idea of what it means to be psycho-socially mature. I think it is most easily described as not being attached to, or identified with, your experience – being able to separate yourself from your thoughts, feelings and wants while being still aware of them. It is the ability to feel strong feelings like anger, anxiety or joy but not be taken over by them. It is the capacity to be aware of your less-than-desirable motives and needs without allowing feelings of shame or guilt to stop you from being choiceful about whether, and how, you act on them. It is the capability to remain calm and make clear choices about how to act in situations that tend to make the average person reactive. People who can do that have learned to distance themselves enough from their own in-the-moment experience so that they can treat their thoughts, feelings and wants like something interesting they found in the woods, to be marvelled at and maybe shown to others. They have their experience but they are not their experience.

The alternatives can make it much less safe for people. The facilitator who is too attached to, or identified with, his experience acts as if he is his feelings and wants; they take over him. In the face of a strong emotion he reacts. He is too caught up in his own stuff to be able to put the needs of the whole ahead of his own. With such a facilitator it is every person for himself. The other unsafe alternative is the facilitator who is able to stay calm and rational by being unaware of her feelings and motivations. This dissociation makes it easier to retain a calm surface in the midst of anxiety, but is it safe? Will this facilitator experience the impact of decisions she makes that harm others? For example, will she be aware of the terror others in the group are feeling when she calls on them to do something risky? Will she really know what is motivating her? In our bones we know that such leadership cannot be trusted. Its apparent strength is too brittle. Being based on dissociation, it has no resilience.



The facilitator who, through her being, helps the emergence of a safe container has a “juicier” strength that comes from being fully aware of her feelings while not being controlled by them; being connected to her experience but separate from it at the same time.

PROVIDING A SENSE OF CONTINUITY

The willingness to let go that transformational change requires is aided when people know where they will land after letting go. A facilitator aids the emergence of a strong, positive container through her own clarity about where she and the group are in the larger processes they are working on. Are they at the beginning, middle or end? Does she see how the process will unfold over time, and the key points along the way? Does she punctuate social interactions in ways that make clear beginnings and endings? Does she weave a story out of the group’s experiences that give people a sense of continuity – what academics call “sense-giving” - so that people think they know where they have come from and where they are going, linking what happened before with what is happening now and what will happen next? When a facilitator does that she is being a good container.

The alternative is a sense of chaos, or conflicting narratives, that create holes in the container and make it difficult to “cook”. Without a sense of continuity people get apathetic, or cynical, or anxious, and energy dissipates.

ENABLING AUTHENTICITY

The authenticity that the facilitator embodies evokes a container for the authenticity that will emerge in others. Authenticity is, however, a tricky thing. I am not of the opinion that being “open and honest”, saying whatever is top of my mind, is always effective or even authentic. I am reminded of the musings of Sidney Jourard (the godfather of self-disclosure) about what to do when a T-group participant asks him for his opinions of her. He notes that, as a facilitator, he has multiple thoughts and feelings, some conflicting, about every participant, and that he makes choices about which of those to share and which to keep to himself. Would expressing a negative judgment really help that participant? If he has an authentic desire to support her growth, and believes that voicing that judgment would be detrimental to that desire, which would really be a more authentic expression? His top-of-mind judgment or the other thoughts and feelings he has that would support her growth?

I think “authenticity” can be a dangerous thing in the hands of a facilitator who holds other people responsible for his (the facilitator’s) experience and/or believes that his judgments of others are “The Truth”. Even if he is being “open and honest” about what he really thinks and feels, can anyone who blames others for the in-the-moment experience he is creating for himself, really be called “authentic”? And does that help evoke a container for others to be authentic as well? I do not think so.

I think the kind of authenticity that creates a strong, positive container for others is one where the facilitator is deeply aware of his in-the-moment experience – the observations, thoughts, feelings and wants he is having in that moment – fully aware that he is creating this experience for himself, and fully aware that others are probably having a different experience in that same moment. He not only allows, but expects, others to have different observations, thoughts, feelings and wants, and authentically makes a space for the expression of the variety of experiences in the room. Just as importantly he holds others as able: able to hear what he has to say, able to make choices about what they will say and do, able to live in a group that is authentic. He makes authentic choices about what aspects of his experience he should express based on clarity about his intentions for the group. In the service of evoking a strong, positive container, the most important thing to be fully disclosing may be the intentions and the motives behind what he says and does.

MANIFESTING INTENTION

The facilitator aids the emergence of a positive container by being clear what her intentions are for the event she is leading. Research on the effects of visioning, goal setting, expectations and the like amply demonstrate that we tend to get what we envision, and the clearer and more emotionally connected we are to that vision, the more likely it is to manifest. So one easy way to be a better container is for the facilitator to take the time to focus on exactly what she is trying to make happen.

Some people use simple rituals to help them focus their intention and maybe even to get some help (if you believe in help from the “other world”). Walking around the space while you contemplate your intention, prayer, and burning incense while chanting are some examples of the range of practices that are utilised for this purpose – they are attempts to manifest intention. I’ve also heard of colleagues who work a large group event by having one person at the front of the room facilitating, while their partner is at the back of the room focusing on their intention for the group.

Harrison Owen, noted OD consultant and inventor of Open Space Technology, once told me that the morning before he facilitates any Open Space event he may spend up to an hour getting into a deeply meditative state and then focus for a considerable amount of time on his intention for the group. I suspect that those consultants who are the most consistently successful with emergent processes like Open Space are doing a great deal that is not visible to be effective strange attractors for strong, positive containers.

REDUCING AND ABSORBING ANXIETY

Is there any stronger force in group and organizational life than anxiety? People want to avoid anxiety, and for good reason, as our reactions to anxiety are the source



of so much interpersonal dysfunction. Yet the very things group members are too scared to say are often exactly the things that, during an OD process, need to be said. A good container is one that will help people do and say things that would normally be too anxiety-provoking to be expressed.

To be a good container a facilitator needs to have ways to contain and reduce his own anxiety. There are many. The Heartmath Institute has some tested methods that are simple and effective, like “freeze frame”. The “emotional freedom technique”, while having much less testing behind it, is used successfully by many people. Both are easily found through Google. Techniques for centering and grounding originating in Hindu and Buddhist meditation practices are also effective. Of course the ability to use any technique requires being psychologically mature enough to avoid unconsciously reacting to the anxiety in the first place.

For the facilitator, the times when such techniques really count are when you are the target and it would be easy for you to get anxious. Maybe the group is expressing anger, or disappointment, or hurt, or fear related to your actions? If you act on your anxiety at all, react to what is being said, or try to persuade others to feel differently, the container falls apart. What is most needed at those times is the capacity to contain your own anxiety and lean into your curiosity. Display an openness and interest in the other’s experience without necessarily taking responsibility for it. Try to understand what their experience is from their point of view, and demonstrate this understanding. Describe your own experience without insisting that the other person change theirs. If you can do that you can almost always keep the container intact. Sometimes, it can even be the tipping point that leads the group to a deeper place.

In addition to reducing and absorbing your own anxiety, a facilitator can be a good container by absorbing and reducing the group’s anxiety. To some extent that can be accomplished by someone who is good at grounding her own anxiety and holds the intention to ground the group’s as well. But I think real mastery of that is aided by some knowledge of practices that originate in the management of life energy, chi or ki as it’s known in Asia. Rei-ki, A-ki-do, Chi Qong, Tai Chi Chuan are examples of the many Asian schools of energy management, some concerned with health, others with self protection, that teach people how to sense and work with “energy”. These processes can easily be adapted to the practice of “grounding out” negative energy in self, in interactions, and in groups.

FREEING UP AND CHANNELLING ENERGY

These same energy management techniques can be used not just to absorb and reduce negative energy, but also to free up and channel positive energy. Even without the esoteric knowledge of a Chi Qong master, facilitators can increase the quality of their containers when they pay attention to, and seek to manage the flow of, energy in the group.

On the one hand, in any OD event, there is the content of what is taking place. The content is important to plan for and manage – without good content people will wonder what the heck they are doing there. But what makes the difference between an everyday, mediocre organizational event and a great one is the energy – the ways it is generated and the ways in which it is used by the group. When energy flows constructively during the event, and people leave feeling more energized than when they started, it has been a good event. To make that happen requires a strong, positive container.

The facilitator aids in the emergence of that container simply by paying attention to the energy in the room. Who is energized? What is energizing people? What do people have energy for? The ability and willingness to let go of plans and follow the energy can make a big difference to how much transformational change is actually supported during an event.

One key principle of systems theory is that energy accumulates at boundaries. Ironically, the facilitator creates a container for freeing up and channelling energy through creating boundaries. Over and above the usual structural, spatial, and process boundaries consultants normally deal in, leaders create containment through their being by the things they choose to focus on and the things they ignore. This attention, and the calling of other’s attention, is one of the most important boundaries for channelling energy in a group.

Those of us who practice dialogic OD know well the power of the right question to free up and channel energy. Many years ago while studying trainer interventions in T-groups I stumbled upon a way of framing attention that always resulted in a developmental shift in a group. It had three qualities:

1. It directed the group’s attention to an underlying conflict, polarization or paradox that was unspoken but, in all likelihood, an ingredient in the group’s current dynamics.
2. It was described in value-neutral terms.
3. It was phrased as a question directed at the whole group.

This always had a much more powerful and dramatic effect than simply naming the underlying dynamic. I called it a framing intervention because it created a boundary for people’s attention within which energy would accumulate until some break-through occurred.

The more facilitators are able to be aware of, and channel, the energy that flows through a group, the better the container they are.

CREATING RITUAL-TRANSFORMATIVE SPACE

The facilitator aids the emergence of a container for transformational change by invoking images that activate the unconscious mind’s dormant readiness to change. Societies use ritual – which I have come to think of



as a means of supporting the unconscious mind in a transformation of identity – to stimulate this readiness to change. So, in an initiation ritual or a marriage ritual the unconscious mind gets the message “time to change”, and it then plays out deep, archetypal patterns of change and development. In a ritual, the inner world of images and symbols are represented in the outer world, helping to unleash built-in developmental urges. But what I want to describe here is how the facilitator of a client group can, through her being, evoke the kind of container in which such a readiness to change can be activated. Of all the processes I have listed in this article, this is the one I least understand in more than a tacit way. Yet it may be the most profound.

Because I do not know how to describe this in general terms, I need to describe it concretely. I have learned to notice when I am doing it – I notice because I get a tingling in the back of my neck, and other people have pointed out that I am doing something that is creating a shift in the group consciousness at the times I have that feeling. I am still groping to find ways to explain what makes it happen, but I am sure it does happen. And I think it happens when I am able to name deep longings that have been buried in a group in a way that re-energizes their possibility. This, for example, is the approach I have applied with some consistency when I have encountered cynicism in the managerial groups with which I have worked. As a recovering cynic, I describe how cynicism is a state I put myself in to avoid taking on a worthy purpose that will inevitably fail. After I have pointed out how soul-destroying that turns out to be, I recite a poem by Antonio Machado (1983, p.57) that I preface by depicting it as a poem about the consequences of cynicism.

*The wind one brilliant day called to my soul with
an aroma of jasmine.
“In return for this jasmine odor, I’d like all the
odor of your roses”.
“I have no roses; I have no flowers left now in
my garden...all are dead”.
“Then I’ll take the waters of the fountains, and
the yellow leaves and dried-up petals”.
The wind left...I wept.
I said to my soul, “What have you done with the
garden entrusted to you?”*

There is something about this image that often, although not always, connects with a deep, unconscious longing in a group that then creates a shift in their willingness to take on a worthy purpose that is so daunting they cannot yet see how to succeed. I think the power of the image to do that work, however, requires that I be connected to my own cynicism and my own longing, and to my conviction that it is better to fail at a worthy purpose than to sit stuck in apparently realistic fatalism, as I recite the poem. But I am not sure. I do think that the image, of itself, does not have sufficient power without a facilitator who can, through their being and connection to the group, evoke the container which opens up transformative space.

HOW DO WE DISTINGUISH BETWEEN BEING “CONTROLLING” AND BEING A “CONTAINER”?

So many of the images related to containment – boundaries, continuity, intention – can suggest that the facilitator’s job is to control what happens but to do that, of course, would be to destroy any chance of transformational change (Owen, 2008). A transformational change process has to support emergence (Holman, 2010) which by its very nature cannot be controlled. On the other hand, sometimes the most useful thing a facilitator can do to aid the emergence of a strong, positive container is to provide clear boundaries and directions. So what is the difference between controlling and containing and how does the facilitator make sure he isn’t controlling?

At the beginning of this article I noted that containers emerge from the processes taking place in the group – they are co-constructed. Everyone in the group has a part to play, although the facilitator, as leader, has a special role. That said, if the facilitator is not mindful of the authority she carries because of that role, too much ownership for the container may be given to (or accepted by) the facilitator. When the facilitator’s actions take away the sense of ownership others have for what is taking place within the container, they are being too controlling. Even though I have talked about the need for the facilitator to have clear intent, sometimes the facilitator, to be most effective, needs to step back and try to make sense of what the container (and all the energy that comprises it) is trying to make happen. Sometimes there is a deeper, richer, more profound intent latent in the group. When the facilitator ignores or gets in the way of what is trying to emerge from a strong, positive container, they are being controlling.

The intent might be right, but the plan for how to get there might not be. A facilitator is being too controlling when they will not adapt their plan to what is being co-constructed in the group. One example of being a good container is staying with a process that is clearly unfinished for others, even when the plan is to move on. Another is taking a different tack when forces in the situation make it unlikely that the present course will get the group to where it is trying to go.

The facilitator’s ability to get curious and be open to new possibilities when she feels her own emotions and reactivity being hooked is central to this distinction between containment and control. It is that ability to notice at that moment, when she wants to argue with, or persuade, or ignore someone who is not making sense, that she is trying to change the other person’s experience before she really understands it. She has to be able to notice that her curiosity has gone out the window, to park her reactivity, and to re-engage her curiosity, or else she is being controlling and the container becomes too rigid and impermeable.



Perhaps the most important way a facilitator avoids being controlling is by ensuring he is transparent about the container he is working to evoke, ensuring that others have free and informed choice about the processes they are engaging with as they co-construct that container.

Dialogic OD is about creating different kinds of conversations and I think part of how we do that is by creating new kinds of containers in which old conversations can take place. Being a container has become a generative metaphor for me as I think about the processes and consultant role in Dialogic OD. It harks back to two of the earliest images of applied behavioural science, “use of self” and “self as agent of change”, but gives them a new twist. I hope this article has generated some new thoughts for you as well.

BIOGRAPHY

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