Of Definitions, Demarcation, and Disaggregation: Some Comments on the Dynamic Application of Diagnostic and Dialogic Organization Development

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Hastings and Schwarz (2022) provide a lucid account of how change is affected by the choice to engage in diagnostic or dialogic processes of organization development. More specifically, based upon their analysis of 79 cases, they assert that the likelihood of change success is increased in instances where "leaders choose to oscillate between these two processes [i.e. diagnostic and dialogic processes] as change unfolds" (Hastings & Schwarz, 2022:5). Their argument is persuasive and we find ourselves in broad agreement with the conclusions they draw. However, we want to take this opportunity to elaborate on what we see as some further implications and possible entailments of their contribution. In particular, we want to offer some brief comments on two issues. First, we consider how we describe the two contrasting processes (i.e., a definitional issue) and how we distinguish between them (i.e., a demarcation issue). Second, and based upon the challenges of establishing boundaries and drawing meaningful distinctions, how we "oscillate" between the processes (i.e., an issue of dynamics).

On Descriptions and Demarcations

In their early work on dialogic OD, Bushe and Marshak's (2009) drew a distinction between diagnostic and dialogic OD by contrasting them in terms of the methods

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they employ. Diagnostic OD was explained, via "action research" (Whyte & Hamilton, 1964), as "data-based change" (p. 350) and as a method that "presumes the existence of an objective, discernible reality that can be investigated and researched to produce valid data and information to influence change" (p. 350). Equally, they described Dialogic OD by drawing upon the methods that were synonymous with the approach (e.g., Appreciate Inquiry, Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; *Open* Space, Owen, 1992; and, World Café, Brown and Isaacs, 1995) and they explained that what this cluster of OD techniques have in common "…is a search for ways to promote more effective dialogue and conversation and a basic assumption that it is by changing the conversations that normally take place in organizations that organizations are ultimately transformed" (2009:360). Early commentaries on the formation of dialogic OD also took a methods-driven stance, for example, Oswick (2009) argued that there was considerable scope to blend established diagnostic and dialogic techniques during the OD intervention process.

In their more recent work, Bushe and Marshak have been less concerned with demarcating diagnostic and dialogic OD on the basis of the methods employed and have instead concentrated far more on the differences that exist in terms of mindset (see, e.g., Bushe & Marshak, 2014; 2016). It is fair to say that Hastings and Schwarz's (2022) contribution does not draw distinctions primarily based on either methods or mindsets. Instead, they emphasize the differences in terms of the general process. In doing so, they talk about diagnostic OD process being about how to "design and implement plans top-down" (p. 5) compared with the process associated with dialogic OD which involves "following theories of complexity science, whereby bottom level changes amplify and accumulate to become substantial changes at the organizational level over time" (p. 4). They also highlight differences based upon how leaders lead the change process.

Arguably, the reference points chosen to distinguish between diagnostic and dialogic OD matter. There are significant implications in terms of how we conceptualize both phenomena and how we engage with them in a practical sense. In particular, we would contend that different ways of thinking about these two different change approaches are likely to impact on the scope to successfully switch or "oscillate" between them.

On Dynamism

Of the 79 change cases reported by Hastings and Schwarz, oscillation took place in 23 cases (i.e., 29%). In terms of reported success, it is clear that changes involving oscillation were marginally more successful than exclusively dialogic change cases (i.e., between 89% and 93% success rate for oscillating cases compared to 86% for dialogic cases) and significantly more successful than exclusively diagnostic cases (with only a 33% success rate). However, this raises further questions about the nature of the oscillation process (i.e., when, how, and why does it occur?)

Based upon Hastings and Schwarz's analysis, we know something about when oscillation occurs during the process (i.e., from diagnostic to dialogic and vice

versa). However, we know less about how and why. That said, it would seem unlikely that the oscillation manifests itself as a "method-based" change (e.g., a shift from action research to appreciative inquiry) because this is likely to be costly and it would involve a considerable duplication of effort. It is also somewhat improbable that the oscillation is driven by a change in mindsets because mindsets are relatively enduring ways of seeing the world and are not easily changed (Dweck, 2006). What seems far more likely is that the switch arises as a response to situational contingencies (e.g., the evolving nature of the problem and/or change recipient feedback/responses) that in turn trigger a shift of emphasis in the change process (i.e., an oscillation).

Bushe (2020) has asserted that diagnostic forms of OD are particularly suited to addressing "complicated technical problems" while dialogic forms of OD are suited to addressing "complex adaptive challenges". Although Bushe separates these approaches, it is possible that they are actually connected. Hence, we might see an oscillation occur as what starts out as, or is treated as, a "complicated problem" morphs into a "complex challenge".

Leadership may also play a significant role. Hastings and Schwarz suggest that during diagnostic interventions "…leaders inquire about organizational reality objectively (i.e., *what is true?*)" (p. 5) and Bushe (2020) has stated that diagnostic style leadership is: "Performance-oriented and directive; front-loaded effort" (p. 76). By contrast, in dialogic interventions "…leaders are part of the process of discovering new futures" (Hastings & Schwarz, 2022:5) and the dialogic leadership style is: "Possibility-oriented and supportive; back-end-loaded effort" (Bushe, 2020:76). When viewed in this way, the switch between the more fixed, directive, and hierarchical leadership associated with diagnostic OD and the more open, participatory, and nonhierarchical leadership associated with dialogic OD may reflect a change in the framing of the change situation (i.e., from complicated problem to complex challenge) and/or a shift in change recipient engagement (e.g., heightened resistance which requires more inclusion and dialogue).

Concluding Comments

Beyond persuasively highlighting the benefits of change processes that oscillate, we believe that Hastings and Schwarz's make a wider and less obvious contribution by helping us to refine and redefine the way we typically think about diagnostic and diagnostic forms of change (i.e., as being more than two different clusters of tangible techniques or contrasting, relatively fixed forms of mindset). Their articulation is more nuanced insofar as both forms of change are portrayed as more malleable processes that can be adapted or changed. This forces us to think beyond the enduring tendency to dichotomize diagnostic and dialogic OD and allows us to view them as potentially interpenetrating, dynamic approaches that can concomitantly play a meaningful part in change processes.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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