



## Dialogue: How to Reflect in a Group

**Edgar H. Schein**

*Sloan School of Management*

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

*United States of America*

I would like to take the opportunity in this Foreword to reflect on reflection. It seems to me that there are many calls from various pundits that learning will occur if we learn to reflect, but there is remarkably little advice or even analysis of what might be involved in this process of “reflection.” Don Schon showed us brilliantly what this process looks like in reflective practitioners and professionals. I would like to add a small voice to his on what this process looks like if we consider reflection to be a process that occurs within groups as well as within a given individual and if we take the concept of culture seriously, especially if we extend the concept of culture to organizations and occupational communities (Schein, 1992, 1999a).

My basic point is that reflection implies some self-understanding but that in a group how people may understand themselves does not necessarily guarantee that they will understand each other. In fact, if group members come from different organizations or occupational communities, the odds are very high that they will not understand each other because they will have particular ways of interpreting words and concepts based on their histories. Yet they may fall into the trap of thinking they understand each other if the

basic language they speak is the same. The problem then is how to uncover this dilemma, confront it together, and do something to overcome it.

Let me give an example. The words “organizational learning” have been very widely used lately by managers, consultants, and academics. Yet one would be hard put to find any kind of common definition that they might agree on. If one looked at the words individually we would find that the word “organization” means different things to different people, and the word “learning” is all over the map in terms of what associations we have to it. Then add the connotation that organizations have to “unlearn” something before they can learn something new and we have a semantic mess. The result of this mess is that we have advocates suggesting all kinds of solutions to how organizations can learn without realizing that they are not talking to each other in any meaningful way. If we take this issue into the domain of “teaching” we find the same complexities. Is teaching science the same thing as teaching history as teaching soccer? Can there be a single theory of teaching? If teachers get together to learn from each other, to reflect together, how can they get past the fact that their language and thought are all different and individual.

The answer to this dilemma lies in finding a new way for people to converse with each other, a way that acknowledges at the outset their different occupational and organizational culture roots, a way that begins to build a new set of concepts and a new set of meanings for old words that are shared, Bill Isaacs in his book on Dialogue (1999) calls it “the art of thinking together,” and I think this is a very appropriate concept. How can individual thoughts based on different culture roots come together? Is there a form of conversation that will begin to make this possible? I believe that the way Isaacs conceptualizes Dialogue may provide one avenue. Let me describe briefly my own version of Dialogue based on his seminal work (Schein, 1999b).

We must begin with some motivation to reflect together, to have a conversation that leads to the uncovering of our own assumptions and thought patterns. Dialogue as a form of conversation cannot induce such motivation, but once one gets involved, the rewards in terms of personal

insights and mutual understanding keep the process going. Getting involved means the suspension of several norms of conversation that have come to be taken for granted. First, we sit in as nearly a circle as possible. Second, we agree that we are each talking to the group as a whole which can be behaviorally symbolized by talking to a hypothetical campfire in the center of the circle. The point is we do not maintain eye contact, contrary to many “rules” of communication. Third, we begin by “checking in” which means that everyone in the group contributes something before we engage in any kind of exploration. During the check-in we do not ask for clarification or interrupt in any way until everyone is “in.” Fourth, we suspend the norm that if we are asked a question, we must answer it, and we try to catch ourselves before we ask a question or voice a disagreement.

For me these are the minimum requirements to get a dialogue started and the purpose of all of these suspensions is to open up my own mind to my own thought processes. The goal is to become conscious of and reflect on what I say and what I think and what my impulses are. If I get in touch with my own assumptions, filters, biases, and impulses, I can begin to listen for these in the contributions of others to the conversation. And as we struggle collectively to listen more to ourselves and each other we are actually building a common framework from which to build joint reflection. The topic is not important, and there need not even be a topic. If we want to be more reflective we just have to begin and see where the process leads us. As you read the fascinating tales in this volume, get together with others who have also read it and begin to reflect together in a dialogic manner. Have Fun.

## References

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