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Authentic Dialogue in Organizations a Dangerous Idea: Viewing the Art of Authentic Dialogue through the Science of Evolutionary Psychology

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Whether verbal or displayed through body and facial expression, communication is the foundation of what it means to be human. When an infant, driven by its biological propensity for language utters its first words, it marks the start of a transformation toward human interaction. Embedded within this interaction are human emotions that elicit an array of behaviors, some more favorable than others. It is at this juncture the art of authentic dialogue, and its use in organizations, is examined.

Evolutionary Psychology

The science of evolutionary psychology describes the origins of human behavior and cognition in terms of Darwinian biological and adaptive principles. A major assertion of evolutionary psychology is that toward the end of the Pleistocene-epoch (approximately the last one hundred and fifty million years) the brains of humans adapted to their physical and social environments in ways that resulted in identifiable traits and behaviors that became “hardwired” in the human brain. The meaning of “hardwired” is analogous to that of the human capacity to acquire language, along with innate physiological behaviors such as the fight or flight response, which are products of successful environmental adaptation. However, it takes hundreds to thousands of generations to construct any complex adaptation (Symons, 1992). Larsen and Buss (2002) explained,

An “adaptive problem” is anything that impedes survival or reproduction. All adaptations must contribute to fitness (survival) during the period of time in which they evolve by helping an organism survive, reproduce, or facilitate the reproductive success of a genetic relative. Adaptations emerge from and interact with recurrent structures of the world in a manner that solves adaptive problems and, hence, aids in reproductive success. (p. 133)

Among these Pleistocene adaptations are, for example, traits and behaviors for hunting and gathering, negotiation with friends and foes, defense against predators, childrearing, habitat selection, altruism, social dominance, reading facial and body language, and mate strategies (Buss, 2004, Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Pinker, 2002; Trivers, 1972). Because these complex behaviors are slow to evolve, not enough evolutionary time has passed to significantly change or alter these evolved traits and behaviors. Therefore, these behaviors continue to be exhibited in our modern social environment (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992, p. 5).

The science of evolutionary psychology has gained a significant foothold in mainstream psychology. Recently, fields outside the psychological sciences have shown significant interest in how evolutionary psychology can expand their disciplines. These include: women’s studies (Campbell, 2002,), psychiatry (Stevens & Price, 2000), public policy (Bloom & Dess, 2003), marketing and consumer behavior (Saad & Gill, 2000), environmental aesthetics (Voland, 2003), economics (Laurent, 2003), and politics (Charlton, 1997), organizational behavior (Nicholson, 2000). The art of dialogue could certainly be added to this list, as communication is a foundation of human behavior, and is therefore rich with possibilities as well as perils.
Swidler (1998) defines dialogue as, “a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that s/he can change and grow” (¶ 2). While there are numerous interpretations of authentic dialogue (Bohm, 1996; Grudin, 1996; Isaacs, 1999), at least one element of dialogue is certain. For true dialogue to occur it needs to take place within a safe environment of mutually accepted rights and responsibilities, rooted in two fundamental values: respect for the human person and trust in the process of dialogue. Dialogue works best when the participants are willing to develop certain skills that facilitate the process (The Art of Dialogue, ¶ 2).

Dialogue evokes a form of reciprocity, although perhaps not initially. For authentic dialogue to occur, participants must learn to slow their thinking processes, be thoughtful, and be comfortable with silence. Grudin (1996) states, “Through reciprocity and strangeness, dialogue becomes an evolutionary process in which the parties are changed as they proceed” (p. 12). Grudin (1996) continues, “People, who know nothing about each other, work hard to put aside the human impulse to converse, and learn to listen, which is a most difficult task” (p. 12).

Organizational Behavior

We cannot expect people to leave their evolved traits and behaviors at the door when they enter the work environment; gossip, dominance, harassment, and status seeking behaviors permeate organizations, and create conflict, intimidation, and envy.

Pecking order is readily observed in animal behavior. Human beings share this primate tendency to seek high social rank. Ethnographic studies of traditional hunter-gatherer societies, which are our closest guide to primitive ancestral conditions, reveals that ancestral men had clearly defined status hierarchies, with resources flowing from the top and trickling slowly down to the bottom. Similarly, a hierarchy, within the context of an organization, represents a vertical chain of command. Typically, productive individuals with advanced education and good communication skills quickly climb the ranks. Alternatively, “Workers at the bottom of the hierarchy often feel powerless and alienated. They have little say in decisions about issues that directly affect their lives, such as wages and benefits” (Daft, 1992, p. 451). In agreement, Grudin (1996) explains how modern corporations are basically vertical structures with many levels of authority, each level having substantial power over the next one down. The flow of information is often “impeded by the upper echelons, who for self-protective reasons do no want the rank and file to know too much about what is going on and especially about what is being planned. (p. 81). In organizations where there is a significant disparity in status, low status employees may be tempted to accept monetary pay-offs, offer sexual favors, pilfer, or engage in “brown-nosing”, in an effort to gain status.

From the perspective of evolved human behavior, the desire to form dominant hierarchies existed because it solved an adaptive problem in our evolutionary past. Ranking people’s characteristics and attributes maintains power, retains and increases resources, and enhance one’s reproductive strategies. However, when a hierarchy becomes unbalanced (e.g., lower status individuals significantly increase in number and power), alliances change, people jockey for positions, new hierarchies emerge, and leaders rise and fall.
The Risk of Dialoguing

Participating in authentic dialogue with coworkers, management, or organization leaders can be risky. Revealing one's inner feelings and opinions can expose one to, among other disparagement, retribution, gossip and ridicule. Opportunities to dialog are not always obvious. Dialoging is often disguised within pop-culture seminars and retreats that focus on developing managerial skills and leadership. One self-proclaimed leadership consultant calls her work with organizations “alignment” and states that without alignment, time spent dealing with conflict, backstabbing, and mistrust is wasted time which could be better used addressing issues of productivity. This consultant is on target with her assessment of human behavior, but misses the mark, I believe, when she suggests that a four-hour workshop in “alignment” will corral human emotions which have been cooking in the primordial ooze of human conscious for eons of time.

When participating in dialogue whether at a retreat, seminar or within the confines of an organization, participants may share stories, fears, weaknesses, hopes and dreams; all things that could be used against them back at the office. For example, humans have a propensity to gossip, and display envy (Campbell, 2002). Dialoguing can provide fodder for these behaviors, especially if dialogue is conducted with employees of different status or rank. For example, a person who shares their excitement about a promotion may elicit envy from group members. Buss (2004) explained,

Envy is linked with rank in that people experience envy when someone else has resources, houses, mates or prestige that they want but fail to possess. Envy may function to motivate us to imitate those who have what we want. Envy may prompt actions designed to tear down those who have more than we do, such as derogating their achievements or spreading false rumors about them (p. 358)

Through authentic dialogue, personal stories are shared, vulnerabilities exposed, and secrets revealed. And whether we like it or not, we all tend to “default” to our Pleistocene-hardwired behavior; and with a pledge by coworkers to ” not to tell a soul” we reveal other’s personal stories, secrets, and vulnerabilities to advance our position, derailed coworkers, or just get even. Grudin (1996) confers, ” [Dialogic interaction are] positive in the sense that they always generate some sort of energy. They shed light on nature and human affairs. Usually this results in growth and progress. But of course dialogue is a form of power and power of any sort can be misused” (p. 13).

The use of authentic dialogue, in organizational environments is dangerous. The obligatory promise of “what is said in this room stays in this room” smacks of naivety and ignores basic human behavior embedded deep within our psyche. So what is the alternative? Perhaps the answer lies is in pulling our heads out of the sand and acknowledging that people do not, and most likely will never leave their evolved traits and behaviors at the door when they enter the work environment. Gossip, dominance, envy, harassment, and status seeking behaviors will always permeate organizations to one degree or another. These behaviors cannot be completely eliminated, but they can be understood. For example, a department Dean dialoguing with a new hire at a university retreat about problems in the department, must understand the instructor’s aloofness may have nothing to do with being the “new kid on the block”, but more with her fear of retribution from tenured faculty. Or, the line-worker’s fear of gossip or sabotage for revealing her desire to return to college while dialoging with the management team. Perhaps authentic dialogue needs to experience its own form of evolution with theorists developing a revised model of dialoging that would be appropriate within the walls of organizations and the corporate world, as authentic dialogue is just too dangerous.
References


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