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# Desired Outcomes Through Deliberate Design: How the Communication Perspective Enhances Organizational Development

**Abstract:** The study includes an analysis and results of a Deliberately Developmental Organization (DDO) effort in an academic department. In this study Kegan and Lahey's conception of a DDO is coupled with the Circular Questioning technique to deepen the intensity of the employees' participation. The ultimate goal of a DDO is to enhance the employees' personal development and thus improve the organization. The authors point to the communication perspective as a way to understand the centrality of dialogue in the

DDO process. It was found that Circular Questioning as a means of intervention allowed the members to generate new thoughts and actions thus building an understanding of their interdependence. It was clear their communication acted as a constitutive force, shaping the lives of the interactants and their future understanding and work in the organization.

**Keywords:** Deliberately Developmental Organization (DDOO), Circular Questioning, communication perspective, joint action, organizational development, adaptive skills, systems orientation.

## Introduction

In the last few decades there is a growing conviction that the success of an organization is linked to the developmental growth and capabilities of its employees. Since companies have realized this correlation of employee growth and organizational success, many have implemented programs to weave the goals of employee development into the daily fabric of the workplace. The Deliberately Developmental Organization (DDO) is one approach aimed at helping employees flourish and ultimately advance organizational outcomes (Kegan & Lahey, 2016). Participation in the DDO process allows employees to probe below the surface of their everyday work tasks, evaluating inner workings and growth strategies to better themselves as well as better their company. A guiding principle of the DDO is each person within an organization can identify at least one aspect they are trying to change about themselves relevant to doing better work. The focus of the DDO is to facilitate and support its members' personal development and become a place that fuels capabilities and renders the organization more productive. The successful organization will not regard employees as just workers, but embrace the belief and commitment its employees are individuals who need cultivation leading to personal growth and development.

What may be considered a paradigmatic shift, many believe employees working towards personal change and their human potential contribute significantly to the organization's future, strengthening its purpose.

As communication scholars we became interested in DDOs because dialogue is a central feature of the DDO process. The members are asked to share their aspirations and discover and discuss the competing commitments compromising their efforts. Talk among the participants is critical and the sessions require an open and honest exchange. Since these individual goals are personal, the DDO process relies on building a trustworthy bond and a welcoming and confidential environment among the participants. This type of environment allows employees to feel safe, knowing they can transform their own weaknesses or areas of growth with their co-workers, be supported as they work towards their goals, attain more in terms of their own capacity, and ultimately contribute to the organization's mission.

In this paper we present the findings of a team within a University where the participants embraced the concepts of DDO and combined these with the method of Circular Questioning to intensify their understanding of personal transformation within the context of their organization. In the following we define the concept of a DDO and briefly discuss its origins and influences. We also define communication perspective and its relation to the process and outcome of this project. It is our belief that a more robust understanding of communication in growing relationships and human capacity can help other practitioners using the DDO process. We will then move to an explanation of the Circular Questioning methodology and how it impacts individual understanding and transformative processes. To our knowledge, we are unaware of other studies combining Circular Questioning within the process of a DDO. We studied this believing that Circular Questioning can enhance the work of a DDO and help its participants transform their thinking in a much richer manner. We will also explain the structure and process for this particular DDO, its stages of development, and provide an analysis of the process. We will discuss the value of the DDO for these participants and conclude with a summary of our findings.

Deliberately Developmental Organizations (DDOs) were first conceived by Kegan and Lahey, most notably influenced by their works *How the Way*

*We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation* (2001), *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (2009) and most recently *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization* (2016). Kegan and Lahey were pioneers in articulating and making an application of new findings in adult learning – that development does not stop at the end of adolescence and learning is a life-long process. Findings as early as the 1990's demonstrated that neuroplasticity, or brain development, can occur at any point along the continuum of the lifespan, making change and transformation possible throughout all of adult life. Prior to this, many believed the adult brain reached its capacity as the individual chronologically entered adulthood. However, the new knowledge and understanding of neuroplasticity had significant impact in conceptualizing leadership, transformative efforts, and ultimately organizational development. Simply put, the brain and its capacity can change anytime during a person's life. The impact of this trend allowed the employee not just to act simply as experienced individual accomplishing routine tasks, or to be regarded as a static entity. New vistas of potential for the individual and the organization became a reality. In time the link was made between organizational growth as a product of individual growth. This was a true recognition of the employee as a vigorous asset of the organization, capable of greater performance if cultivated and supported.

However, it would be misleading to think of neuroplasticity as simply the idea that the brain can do more. Following the work of Siegel (2007, 2011a, 2011b, & 2012), we make the distinction between mind, brain, and the significance of interpersonal relationships in the expansion of brain function over the life span. While this paper is not an exploration of interpersonal neurobiology, we place weight on the significance of the interpersonal interaction among the members of the organization in the DDO process in developing human capacity. The brain is the physical structure we are all familiar with, but mind emerges from the process of brain activity. How-

ever, mind is not just brain activity – it is the product of both relationships and the entire neurophysiological system (Porges, 2011). Consistent with the foundations of interpersonal neurobiology, we see mind as a relational process managing the course of information generated through experience. The mind's capability to change relies on the regulatory balance of information and maturation of the neurological system that is inseparable from experience. We do not view the person as a closed system; instead people are always engaged in neurophysiological and interpersonal processes, sensing the world around them, interpreting what they find there, and ascribing meaning to the experience. Participation in the DDO process involves a different way of speaking about work, actively working, and personal growth. This process represents a different kind of interpersonal experience, requiring the individuals to look at their own experience and to build support among the members in their group. The members are most likely learning to talk in a different way and forming a different kind of relationship with one another. We view this as significant to the development and transformation of the members. Properly cultivated, the potential for the employee and the organization can be extremely positive as employees increase their capacity to be successful.

Kegan and Lahey were influenced by the work of Ronald Heifetz, Founding Director of Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Among Heifetz's contributions was making the distinction between technical leadership and adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994). A technical problem is well defined with known solutions, and the employee or leader with adequate expertise and organizational resources can solve the issue. A technical problem or issue might be the purchase of a new building, purchasing a software program, hiring of employees, or construction of a budget. On the other hand, adaptive problems are not well defined and answers are not known in advance due to the complexity of the issue, an ever-changing context, and the uniqueness of the problem. The capacity to address an adaptive problem can

be much more demanding as it requires innovation and learning. An example of an adaptive issue or problem could be a societal problem, such as hunger or poverty. Finding the solution requires thinking in new ways and not relying on standard procedures. Yet another significant obstacle to the resolution of an adaptive problem lies in the fact the issue can be rooted in the attitudes, priorities, or behaviors of stakeholders. Solutions not only require the development of new knowledge, but often rely on a change in outlook (Heifetz, Kania, & Kramer, 2004). An adaptive leader achieves change by creating an environment where dialogue and debate is valued, and where encouraging and fostering new thinking and mobilizing the parties to work towards a solution. Most of all, adaptive leadership requires experimentation and flexibility. Kegan and Lahey recognized leaders and employees needed to know the difference between technical leadership and adaptive leadership, as some of the greatest challenges organizations face require an adaptive perspective. The organization should foster an environment where adaptive thinking and leadership can thrive in order to address much more complex problems.

A common occurrence in both organizations and employees is to hide their weaknesses. Hiding weaknesses limits the possibility for growth in both the organization and its employees. Identifying weaknesses and talking openly about them is important to the DDO process. Weaknesses are confronted along with speaking publicly to team members. The belief is through open dialogue about weaknesses and lending the support members need to overcome them, both the individual and the organization are placed on a path to adaptive learning. However, it is more than just identifying a weakness or an area of growth. A central tenant of the DDO process is overcoming our own personal immunity to change. While many people recognize the need for change or what they need to do better, they are stuck in a pattern of behavior that sustains their ways of acting. Within this pattern of action they are often aware of this stuck-ness, and recognize the limits of their actions through a pervasive feeling of frustration or hoping for a different future.

Kegan and Lahey (2009) developed a process known as Immunity Mapping. A central premise of Kegan and Lahey's work is most people have a resistance to change which keeps them from achieving their goals. Kegan and Lahey see the resistance as analogous to an immune system. In this context, the "immune system" protects a person from psychological uncertainty or stress brought about because of change. While the "immune system" may be protecting the self, it can unintentionally deter a person from making positive changes. Overcoming the "immune system" requires shifting our ways of knowing, and Kegan and Lahey felt ways of knowing become more complex "when we create a bigger system that incorporates and expands our previous system" (p.51 Kegan and Lahey, 2009).

An individual completes an Immunity Map to identify habits needing improvement (referred to as their "edge") and they also identify the limitations that may stand in the way of such improvement. Utilizing the process of the Immunity Map approaches change as an adaptive process. The intention of adaptive change requires much more than a change in behavior. The process of adaptive change also requires new insights and a significant shift in perspective. The Immunity Map exercise becomes an important process of self-inquiry and exploration leading to new insights and a shift in perspective. Kegan and Lahey believe adaptive change requires a shift in mindset—or what they refer to as the meaning-making system—shaping thoughts and feelings. A person undergoing adaptive change learns to observe their own thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and regard these as important data to discover what is influencing their actions. As someone is undergoing such a process, they can see more possibilities for action or ways of being at work or in their personal life. A successful candidate of adaptive change is not only more insightful about their assumptions about self and others, but they understand the depth of the assumptions they are making and can distinguish between consequences real or imagined. Perhaps the most striking benefit is they have developed new competencies that can be applied to other challenges in their life (Kegan and Lahey, 2009).

The Immunity Map provides a snapshot of how a person actively prevents the change they want to make. Kegan and Lahey described immunity to change as a three-dimensional circumstance encompassing a change-prevention system, a feeling system addressing anxiety, and a knowing system organizing reality. These dimensions hold us in a pattern of non-productive actions. While the individual may make attempts to change a behavior, they are mired in a change prevention system. Immunity is rooted in unexplored beliefs and assumptions we make about ourselves. An exploration of these beliefs and assumptions is needed to move ahead towards their goals.

The Immunity Map is organized into four columns. Column one begins with a participant identifying their personal goal, or what may be referred to as their "edge" or "frontier", providing concrete behaviors required to achieve their goals. Column two is used to record the behaviors preventing the participant from achieving their goal. This may include the things a person does or does not do which impedes the individual from achieving their goals. The purpose is not to explain or understand the obstacles; it is a matter of defining the action. The third column asks the participant to identify what their competing commitments are or what concerns them the most about change. Here we ask the participants to identify what is most uncomfortable when they try to do the opposite of behaviors they identified in column two. Column four asks a participant to list big assumptions, which are the way they believe the world works or the truths they hold onto. These are the reasoning for the competing commitments in column three. When done correctly, this column helps the participant to see the behaviors that undermine rather than support the goal in column one.

Immunity is often sustained by our thinking and Kegan and Lahey make the distinction between three categories of mental complexity: the 1) socialized mind, 2) the self-authoring mind, and 3) the self-transforming mind. The socialized mind relies on the values and expectations of people in the person's reference groups – such as family, social institutions, or leaders at work or school – who set the boundaries of professional and personal



life. There are rules for the things a person can do, must do, cannot do, that making up social expectation. Such a person works to stay aligned with the values of the reference groups and as a result garners the protection of the groups. Fear or anxiety is rooted in the potential of being shunned by the group because of unacceptable thoughts or behavior. This rule-based approach to life does not tolerate much deviation, if any at all, from the social expectations of the reference groups. The person with a self-authoring mind distinguishes the opinion of others from their own opinion and selects the degree they will let others influence their ideas. This line of thinking allows the individual to combine opinions and possibly create new values or beliefs, thus authoring their own ideas of reality and truth. Unlike the socialized mind that fears exclusion from the reference groups, fear for the self-authoring mind lies in the failure to live up to its convictions or losing control of the ability to be self-authoring. Lastly, the self-transforming mind breaks through limiting assumptions to a more complex awareness. A person with a self-transforming ability is capable of recognizing limitations in their own or others' thinking and is engaged in a never-ending cycle of growth in ways of knowing, adapting even at the cost of disturbing the balance of life. Adaptive change is interconnected with the epistemology of the self-transforming mind. This is a person that is capable of exploring new ways of working and living, but most important willing to address the assumptions that lock them to immunity system interrupting change.

The results of the Immunity Mapping process are shared with other organizational members, and as indicated above this requires a context where members feel trust and security so they can speak openly about what they are working on and the assumptions that obstruct their goals. These assumptions can often be part of a long lasting personal narrative and the members must be assured their confidentiality is protected.

## Looking at the DDO from a Communication Perspective

The communication perspective is a different way of viewing the process of human communication. Generally, traditional views of communication assert people use communication to express their inner purposes, attitudes, and feelings. Within a traditional view, communication is thought of as a tool to describe events, objects, and ideas. While this appears to be a straightforward and accessible idea, scholars and practitioners working from the communication perspective believe this oversimplifies the complex act of communication and falls short of understanding what people do together (Pearce, 2007; Pearce, 1989; Cronen & Chetro-Szivos, 2001; Parrish-Sprowl, 2014). The frame of the communication perspective asserts what we are doing together is always making social worlds. It is through the process of communication we advance our sense of self, others, and larger groupings of people such as a family, community, and even our culture. More than this, the communication perspective stresses the importance of understanding the implications and consequences of our actions (Chetro-Szivos, Havimb, & Pearce, 2016). When we understand the implications of our actions and the consequences they produce, we are better equipped to participate in constructing better relationships in all aspects of our life (Pearce, 2007).

We offer these five assumptions about the communication perspective:

- 1) Communication is the primary social process
- 2) Social action is mutually influential joint action
- 3) The critical role of ascribed meaning
- 4) People actively interpret the world and their social interactions
- 5) Trust serves as the contextual framework for collaboration

As the primary social process, communication is a form of social action and through our active engagement with others we create and manage our social realities. Our behaviors are guided by social rules, expectations, and conventions. We regard the development of individual identity as a remark-

able achievement. However, life is also the weaving together of our individual experiences within a social context. When we act into the world, we call upon our own individual perspective as well as the social perspective to act with others. It is through the process of communication our lives are joined with others and we become the people that we are.

Social action is mutually influential joint action, as the events and ideas that shape us arise in moments of interaction, as well as our relationship to those in the interaction and the environment we are experiencing. We believe communication is the way social phenomena are created. Caregivers, friends, co-workers, colleagues, neighbors, political parties, and more participate in shaping what we believe to be real or true about our place in the world. And yet, our accounts of what is going on or what things mean are derived from these interactions. When we approach interaction as joint action we shift the focus of study from inter-subjectivity to what goes on between people.

Our actions are based on the meanings we ascribe to an interaction. Human action is critically dependent on the world as it is perceived rather than a world as it is. A simple exchange with a co-worker about what they did during a holiday is governed by the meaning or position this episode has in maintaining a friendly co-worker relationship. We participate in such exchanges because of the meaning of the event and the social rules that govern our behavior. We may have similar exchanges with others, but our intention or obligation to engage in this kind of talk differs.

We see people as actively interpreting their world and their interaction with others. People are continuously engaged in making sense of other people, objects, or events in their experience. We call this social knowledge. While we are incapable of stopping this process, we sometimes act as if things are the same and remain static or fixed. We rely on the process of social knowledge to figure out how to act in a specific context. This is especially true when new situations we are unfamiliar with present themselves. For the participants in the DDO team, they were faced with news

ways of thinking and talking about work, how other team members and the organization could support them, and the ways they could explore and address assumptions holding them in unproductive patterns. This was a different way of acting at work and it required the co-construction of social knowledge among the team members. It took some time for the members to adjust to the process as they developed the necessary social knowledge to go on with each other in productive ways.

In the world of interpersonal relationships, trust is the cornerstone for communication and collaboration. When trust is present in relationships we find people in the relationship are open to deeper levels of involvement. In the work setting, trust can lead to a greater degree of commitment. Trusting can involve risk, but when the other person is trustworthy they will not exploit other's vulnerabilities. The success of a DDO team is critically dependent upon peoples' capacity to support, trust, and engage one another. We recognized for team members to collaborate and support one another, they needed to do so in the context of open, direct and honest communication that fostered an atmosphere of trust.

Much of the work done through the DDO process relies on communication and interaction. The communication perspective elevates communication from epiphenomena to a constitutive force shaping the lives of the DDO members. In much of the work to date about DDOs there is inconsequential attention paid to the communication and dialogue among the members of the team. We feel our study places greater emphasis on the dialogue members share, and the critical impact it had on their experience within the DDO group.

## Circular Questioning as Methodology

Working from the communication perspective, we called upon the process of Circular Questioning to deepen our understanding of how the members

framed the experience of being in a DDO. More than this, we felt Circular Questioning would help the DDO members explore the meanings of, and their thinking about, their assumptions and relationships to both their work and their life stories. Circular Questioning dates back several decades when it was first developed by the Milan Team led by Boscolo and Chechin as a practical application of Bateson's ideas of a circular hierarchy to patterns of human behavior (Tomm, 1987). Initially it was used as a therapeutic method, but it was soon expanded into a highly effective means of interviewing for qualitative researchers, most notably those working within the communication perspective (Pearce, 2007). This way of interviewing is designed to help the interviewee think through a particular episode and introduce new connections in thought and action to create new patterns, and hopefully preferred patterns of living with others. The Milan Team was deeply influenced by Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972). Primarily, Bateson's ideas offered in this seminal work provided an alternative to the concept of homeostasis, and replaced it with differences between the levels of action and the levels of meaning within a system. This view represents a shift from a linear orientation to a systems orientation. Bateson theorized interaction among members of a system exceeds simple cause and effect relationships, and is regarded as a process of joint action shared by members of the system operating in a recursive manner. Simply put, the participants act into the action of others and in so doing their conversation and their relationship is made. Bateson calls this move a circular cybernetic. When we approach interaction as joint action we remove intra-subjectivity as the focus of study and turn our attention to what goes on between people. Working in this way, we are likely to find what one person is thinking is not as important as the patterns of interaction between people. Coming to understand what a moment of interaction means is not a matter of looking inside one person or the other. Understanding is most evident when we know how to act with others, and go on in ways that are mutually intelligible. The idea of joint action speaks to the blending of the

self with others and how our worlds and our lives are the products of conversations (Chetro-Szivos, 2013).

Circular Questioning recognizes the features of a circular cybernetic that accounts for different ways of working and exploring the communication among members of a system. Consistent with the communication perspective, communication is not a simple vehicle for the exchange of ideas, but an essential feature of living. Communication is a complex interactive process that generates, sustains, or changes meaning among members of a system through their recursive interaction. In an interview using Circular Questioning, conversations serve as the primary point of observation and the episodes are the primary points of analysis. The primacy of the episode is based upon the fact that each episode occurs within a context, and carries social rules and deontological forces that shape how people act into the moment. Beyond this, each person's autobiography, their understanding of how things should proceed, and what meaning they derive from a moment of interaction are all embedded in the episode (Pearce, 2002). Exploring conversations and the features of episodes may reveal the meaning for the members of a system. When the meaning is revealed, it is possible to work to change that understanding to create better stories of how to live, or in the case of DDO members, how to understand the assumptions that underlie the immunity to change.

A circular process synthesizes behavioral connections into a larger holistic pattern. While people are likely to recall fragments of sequences, the interviewer works to help the interviewee combine the fragments into a fully circular whole. Fragments of action can skew our perspective, inhibiting our ability to fully understand what has occurred in a moment of living. Russell (1910) pointed out that our beliefs about the self are not the same as the actual behavior. Yet it is our beliefs that serve as the basis of what something means to us. When there is a shift in beliefs, we are capable of changing the meaning. Meaning is derived from the context, and a full exploration of these fragments within the context in which they occurred is the focus of a circular interview. This represents an alteration from looking for intention

to looking for effects on those in the episodes. It is the communicative interaction among members of a system that constructs their social reality. This interaction is the catalyst for the patterns that evolve, and there, patterns channel their action along reoccurring patterns. A circular interview is oriented towards enabling people to generate new thought and action. Often a fixed or stable point of reference inhibits our ability to see other choices or directions. The Big Assumptions identified in the Immunity Mapping process are often what obscure other options for change.

Change happens when existing patterns of interaction shift and people find or imagine a path that may lead them to a preferred reality or transformation. These new meanings help to change their perspectives so new discoveries can be made. We propose that a similar process can take place in the conversations that organizational members have about work, their organization, and their transformative goals. It is our belief that the DDO process can be enhanced by recognizing the significance of our engagement with others and discovering the Big Assumptions people make about their lives.

Cronen and Lang (1996) discussed the essential features of what makes Circular Questions circular. They found that Circular Questioning allows the researcher to explore the grammar used by the members of a system to determine the specific connection of meaning and how the grammar of the system is organized. Wittgenstein refers to the concept of grammar as containing rules which govern the use of words, constituting meanings or concepts. Wittgenstein theorized grammar is analogous to rules of a game. While he referred to how people speak as language games, grammar becomes the rules that govern the game (Forster, 2004). In fact, interviewers call on the actual grammar used by the participants to enter into the system of meaning and explore what rules are at work. Exploring the grammar will reveal the rules being used and the meaning of terms, concepts, and ideas expressed. What Circular Questions aim to accomplish is to make deeper connections with the participants within episodes of interaction and to explore the participant's grammar.

There are a number of general questions that are appropriate in conducting a CMM analysis. These general questions many include questions such as: Which stories are prominent in the action? How are they accomplished? What are the relationships between the participants in the episode? How is this episode punctuated and organized? What grammars of action and grammatical abilities are present? How do the participants join, maintain, or change the action? How do logical forces guide the flow and content of conversation? What are the reflexive needs of the participants and how are they affirmed or not? What language games are present? What patterns emerge in each conversation and across conversations? What are the values and ethics of the stories, sequences, and actions? These general questions help to focus the analysis of the data the members presented, gather the stories for analysis, and reveal the coherence members of a system share. The goal of the circular interview is not to reveal hidden laws of human nature; it is a means to describe and interpret communication and meaning for the participants. Most importantly, Circular Questioning as a methodology extricates the researcher from judgment, and provides the researcher with a way to intelligently join in the activity of others so it may be understood. Through the process of interviewing, the specific words used by participants reveal how they see the organization and their place in the organization. The process of naming things has the powerful effect of bringing them into being. Once brought into being, the participants can move together towards transformation and change.

Circular Questioning differs from other forms of interviewing, in that the interviewer attempts to connect participants to specific episodes— with the intent of introducing new connections in thought and action – to create new patterns of behavior. Often the interview begins with a description of a conversation that happened in specific episodes of interaction. The interview proceeds from the feedback the interviewer received from the participants in response to the information heard about the relationship among those involved in the episode and their patterns of interaction.



We recognize the significance of stories, as stories become a touchstone for what makes us human, and we believe stories are central to living a life. It is important to recognize we do not have one story, as our lives are made up of multiple stories of the many roles we fill and how we think life should go on. There are stories about being a family member, member of a community, professional within an organization, a friend, or a romantic partner. DDO members will share stories about attempts to change behaviors, personal commitments, assumptions, and possibly a history of patterns of thinking. The stories they tell are significant as this is where meaning lives. Reframing is not possible without an understanding of the stories and the grammar of key terms. One of the advantages of using Circular Questioning with DDO participants is in the sharing of stories among the organizational members. The sharing of stories and the exploration of the stories through the depth of the questioning catalyzes the exchange organizational members have together. In the process of using Circular Questioning, participants can find connections to their stories they may not have seen, which clarifies their place and paths for action. In talking with DDO participants, they may find how their story fits together and is enacted in organizational life, and how their stories can be lived within the organization. Because the hierarchy of stories is not dependent on a linear logic, the arrangement of the participants' story may change in the course of the interview as new understandings are formed. Through the use of Circular Questioning, we are interested in moving understandings of what has happened from linear explanations to circular ones. Interviewing in this way means following a story about an episode – not seeking to enhance a linear explanation of behavior. Instead, the intent is to elicit from the interviewee an articulation of the systemic relationships at work in a particular episode. We feel that when the DDO process is combined with the Circular Questioning process, the story about our transformation can become the higher ordered story that unifies other stories. The better stories organizational members could construct would move from descriptions of all the things

that do not work or those things that are wrong to stories of addressing their edge or frontiers through their work.

## Application and Analysis of a DDO

A newly established DDO within an academic department of a private, Liberal Arts University in New England has incorporated Circular Questioning into their organizational practices. This academic department in the process of undergoing some substantial structural transformations – including academic programming and staff changes – and as such, the team believed they had a rare opportunity to adopt a new approach for organizational management moving forward. After informal discussions about best practices for ways to run the re-imagined department, the team settled on trying to follow many of the principles set forth by established DDOs, like Decurion, Next Jump, and Bridgewater (Kegan and Lahey, 2016). Guided by readings from Kegan and Lahey (2016, 2009, and 2001) and their findings from the Immunity Mapping process, the team set out to design a DDO that would provide opportunities for the department to evolve in a positive manner, while simultaneously supporting individual personnel toward improvement of personal goals.

The DDO is comprised of six individuals. The individuals volunteered to participate due to the collaborative and interdependent nature of their individual roles. Participants were tasked with reading a detailed overview of DDOs to gain a better understanding of the principles and outcomes that make DDOs unique. In addition to readings specifically pertaining to DDOs, the team also read about and discussed the practice and benefits of Circular Questioning and the communication perspective. Lastly, participants were instructed to independently complete two sections of an Immunity Map Worksheet, in which they identified a personal improvement goal as well as behaviors that go against the goal, or their areas of immunity to

change. At the second meeting the participants worked together on the final sections of the Immunity Map. These worksheets were discussed and adapted as necessary during weekly DDO group meetings.

The facilitator's role was to provide insight from research conducted on established DDO's, keep conversations progressing forward during meetings, and assist members in the construction and evolution of their Immunity Maps. The facilitator also led open group discussions and presented Circular Questions that were written with the intent to cultivate personal reflection among the DDO participants. After several meetings the participants completed a circular interview focused on the "edge": the goal they were working on.

The progression of the DDO followed a pattern of weekly meetings, originally set up for three meetings. The members identified benefits of the process and discussions, and elected to continue beyond the initial three meetings. It took two meetings to introduce the concepts, complete the Immunity Map, and for the participants to share the edge they were working on. The edges were identified as: being less intense and letting things go; balance between work, marriage, family, and self; accountability; devotion and integrity; balance between friendship and professional goals; and balance across multiple work places. It should be noted that the participants intentionally framed their edges in a positive manner. Balance was a common theme as several of the participants often take on more projects than they are comfortable with. As the meetings progressed these edges or words added more details providing a thicker description of the terms. In line with Wittgenstein's notion of grammar, participants revealed stories, examples of the feelings and actions associated with the terms. The participant that discussed balance between work, marriage, family, and self, talked about how she "fills in gaps" in the workplace when things need to get done; as a result sometimes neglecting or not completing tasks she is supposed to do within her job description. She linked this to her assumption that she aims to avoid conflict, as conflict has made her uncomfortable

in the past. So instead of allowing a conflict to grow, she completes the task even if it is not her responsibility to do so.

As part of the DDO process members should not only reveal their edge, but discuss what they need from others in terms of support to overcome the assumptions preventing them from attaining their edge. Discussions included reminding one another when they were doing something that was indicative of their assumption surfacing.

Not all of the discussions taking place in a DDO process are favorable or friendly. At the third meeting while discussing the need for balance, the participants had a discussion about what to do while an unfilled administrative assistant position remained vacant. One member had specific ideas about what should be done that others did not agree with. This discussion became contentious, but it did provide an opportunity to talk about the edge this member identified. The discussion about the administrative assistant resulted in dialogue about what the unit should be and how it should serve students. The members examined such issues as selection of a new staff member, helping the students take greater accountability for their academic planning, and working productively with the administration of the university. The members did not always agree, but this is an aspect of the DDO process to strengthen the organization and help it transition to adaptive leadership. The participants were able to openly address the intensity of the conversation and acknowledge its intensity without it turning into a conflict. Ultimately they moved forward with what was best for the department as a whole. Tension can arise in a DDO session particularly as participants expose their weaknesses and vulnerabilities, yet when addressed openly and in trusting manner, growth is attained. The traditional attitude in organizations is to hide moments such as this, as they appear to be a threat to productivity and identity. However, after this third meeting, participants revealed they felt more connected to one another and the organization, and they better understood the notion they were creating something together and not in isolation.

Over the next several meetings conversations seemed to evolve more naturally, and participants appeared to accept different ideas and opinions with more open-mindedness and less resistance. From meeting four and beyond, the focus of the meetings shifted from independent ideas and roles to what the team was doing together in the organization. New approaches to organizational tasks were revealed over time through acknowledging and naming the different attitudes and beliefs, or edges, of each participant. Each DDO member worked to find new strengths from their edges and identified how to balance each other's edges to find consensus rather than competing ideas. Over time and through regular meetings, participants were able to make subtle changes to their workday routines, reducing the big assumptions and improving the overall functioning of the department.

As noted before, the DDO participants have decided to make these meetings a routine addition to their work calendar. In the last DDO meeting we observed, the participants shared some of the positive ways their work and interpersonal relationships in the office have changed since starting this process. Balance was a focal point for several of the participants and in time it was revealed that those seeking a greater sense of balance did so as a result of high expectations for the success of the department. They each shared how speaking openly about their expectations and standards for work and personal lives made them recognize how diligently they work to improve the academic program. All along their goals for the program were the same but before the DDO was established this shared view had not been named. Their individual concepts of perfection were replaced by a notion of acceptance for the many tasks they were accomplishing.

The group also stated the process allowed them to see the correlation between personal growth and the success of the unit. In order to be an effective and productive team they had to address their own competing commitments and prioritize what would benefit both the self and the organization. Perhaps the most notable reflection of the participants was the meetings created a "refreshed" and "revitalized" department. The DDO

meetings revealed more clarity for the functioning and growth of the department and served as a catalyst for establishing small attainable goals. Through Circular Questioning, participants were able to identify assumptions detracting from their success. Reframing their edges positively and identifying goals to combat resistant and unproductive habits allowed the participants to grow together and find a shared sense of meaning and purpose in their work. The DDO did not encourage participants to become more like each other and instead highlighted the many benefits of each member's individuality. In the latest meeting, the participants unanimously agreed each understood others' roles better and had a better sense of their own purpose and strengths in the department. In a final reflection, participants shared they felt they were creating a stronger department through this work and felt as though these meetings would have lasting and profoundly positive effects on the organization as a whole.

What the communication perspective added was it allowed the members to develop shared grammar of the words they used to identify their edges. Words such as balance, intensity, devotion had meanings that were dependent on the interpretation by the members through unique episodes. The openness of the dialogue and the circular process revealed the meanings and interpretations so a constructive dialogue unfolded among the members of the team.

## Conclusion

While it is too soon to determine the long-term effects of the DDO process for this unit, we did see an increased awareness of their high expectations and the multiple successes the team members accomplished together. The DDO process created an environment where the members more fully understood the challenges others were experiencing. This deeper understanding of co-workers challenges created a heightened sense of respon-

sibility for working together. Members began to see the issues they faced could not be resolved by improving their technical skills, but by improving their adaptive skills. The majority of issues they faced existed with unknown solutions and required innovation and learning. When they worked together and used the process of dialogue, they were successful.

What is clear in the DDO process is the members functioned as a culture and co-constructed their own rules for participation. This is not unusual for any social group, but it became evident as they engaged in meta-communication about their interaction. As there was a cultural change and shift in ways of talking, it appeared to have led to some challenges and conflicts. Our observation is the challenge itself represented a code for a new way of acting and talking among the members of the group. The conflict may not have been as much about the topic as it was about new ways of acting within the unit. There appeared to be confusion about organizational roles members were required to fill. Through the process these expectations were clarified. Some members moved toward resolution and others acted consistently with their "big assumptions". This presented a challenge which we imagine many DDOs face.

Our initial exploration in this study was about the use of Circular Questioning in enhancing efficacy of the DDO process. Undoubtedly the circular questions became powerful catalysts allowing the members to explore their own "competing commitments" and "big assumptions" influencing their behaviors and challenging their goals. As the members discussed their "big assumptions" that kept them in patterns of behavior that they didn't like, they began to shift beliefs, impacting the meaning of their actions. Clearly the circular questions allowed the members to generate new thoughts and actions. The members had either not dedicated time exploring their assumptions or the assumptions existed in a fixed or stable point of reference. This point of reference inhibited their ability to see options for behavior. Circular questions offered the members a new understanding to reframe the meaning of their actions. A story about being

needed became a story about being genuine, while a story of filling the gaps became a story of conflict avoidance. This level of insight could be invaluable to members as they learn to adapt to the world around them and the new challenges they will face.

Kegan and Lahey are accomplished developmental psychologists whose work has brought new levels of understanding and new directions for many. However, they are not working from a communication perspective where communication is seen as a constitutive force, shaping the lives of interactants. Obviously they can see the importance of talk, but may not have the same orientation to communication as co-constructed action, or what has been called joint action. Members of the DDO could appreciate the depth of their interdependence with one another. That is how one person's assumptions blocked them from engaging or working in the way the organization and/or they needed. Interdependence is a condition of depending upon the other. Communication is essential to enact our interdependence as it creates relationships, and in so doing we are changed or influenced by the relationships we share. Decades ago Shotter (1993) and Cronen (1995) conceptualized communication as joint action. They believed people co-construct or make interaction through their communication. Communication is the way people create and give meanings to social phenomena. People name things, decide how to use them, and the meaning of things, events, and ideas in their lives arise through joint action. This is called joint action because the consequences, or what happens after an interaction, cannot be attributed to an individual alone. Even our understanding of what happens in a moment of interaction is not a matter of looking inside one person or the other. Our ability to understand an interaction relies on seeing what people do together and what emerges from the interaction.

The DDO members engaged in this joint action which amplified the significance of their interdependence. This occurred through the process of identifying their assumptions, revealing their goals, and being held accountable by their colleagues. This in itself is an achievement of



significant magnitude made possible by the DDO process and seeing communication as the primary social process.

What the future holds for the members of this DDO is not known. Members have agreed to work together to move their unit to a new direction as they value the DDO experience. Their ability to enter into constructive dialogue provided a vehicle to achieve personal and professional goals. However, the future success is contingent upon team members' dedication to cultivating growth as individuals and as a valued member of the organization.

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