

Quarterly Reflections on Leadership

September – December 2024

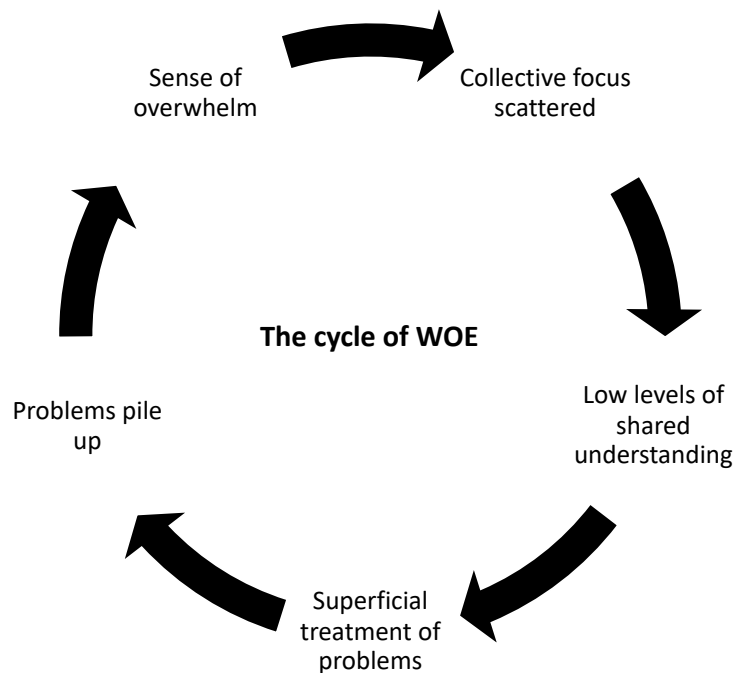
The Dialogic Organisation



Introduction

In our work we often come across organisations where people are working very hard and where there seems no end to the workload. In the old days people would talk about heavy workloads as temporary. Nowadays people talk about inboxes permanently overflowing with emails, no holidays, no time for exercise, and fractious relationships with colleagues, friends, and family. We call this the cycle of WOE; low levels of **w**ellbeing, high levels of **o**verwhelm, and low levels of **e**fficiency and **e**ffectiveness.

The cycle is self-sustaining and systemic. Leaders at every level feel overwhelmed, unable to manage everything they are asked to do. Their response is to focus on their most pressing tasks, things they need to get done to meet their individual objectives. They struggle to find time to contribute to the needs of others, or to make time to talk to their peers about what the organisation as a whole is trying to achieve. Problems must be dealt with quickly, because there are lots of problems to address, and so they are often dealt with superficially, without consulting other people whose views may matter. Those problems keep bouncing back and the overwhelm is reinforced.



Working in partnership with such organisations, we notice two things. First, though conversations may be amicable, they tend to be short and transactional. People don't make the time to explore in any depth what others are trying to say. Second, people are rushing from task to task and meeting to meeting, and while they are working and taking part in these meetings, their thoughts are racing, leaving little energy for considered reflection or effective action.

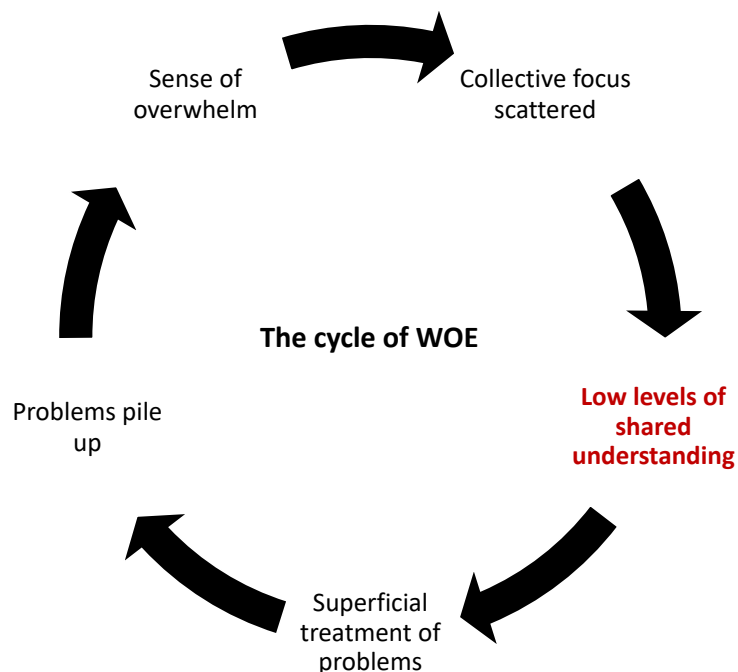
Breaking out of the cycle

Think organisation

How can organisations break out of this loop? Notice we position the question at the organisation rather than at the individual. If the individual is working in a WOEful organisation, then it is extraordinarily difficult for that one individual to break the cycle alone. That individual may purposefully make time to contribute to other's programs, but others don't reciprocate. That individual may attempt to talk to others about overarching strategies and collective priorities, but others don't make the same time. That individual may seek other's perspectives in addressing complex issues, but those people may not make themselves available. That person may attempt to leave home later and get home earlier and engage in regular exercise, but others are unlikely to support those efforts, because such a lifestyle is not seen to be consistent with advancing further in the organisation.

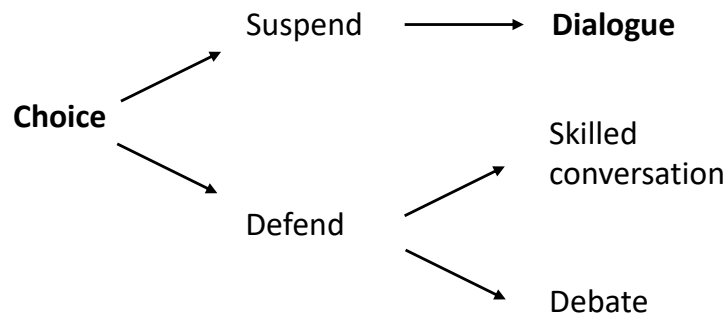
Think systems

To break the cycle requires a systemic intervention and our experience tells us that the best place to intervene is at those low levels of shared understanding. For organisations to work effectively people **must** have the same understanding as to what the organisation is trying to achieve, where the organisation needs to prioritise resource, and how people are expected to work together. For that to happen we believe people need to 'do dialogue'.



Think dialogue

By 'dialogue' we don't just mean people making time to talk to (or at) each other. We define dialogue as William Isaacs defined dialogueⁱ, as a particular type of conversation, distinct from both i) debate, and ii) skilled conversation.



When people engage in dialogue, they genuinely open themselves up to each other's ideas and perspectives, allowing room for new, unforeseen, ideas to emerge. They choose to **suspend** their beliefs, opinions, and values, and allow room for new perspectives and possibilities to emerge. And they express themselves openly and transparently – and respectfully, so that others don't feel judgedⁱⁱ.

This is different to debate, where people are more focussed on persuading others to agree with them. Many leaders gravitate toward debate, spending much of their time in 'telling' mode, especially when time is precious. Debate is sometimes useful, but is rarely enough in working out how to move forward effectively in the face of complexity. Dialogue is less obviously distinct from skilled conversation. When engaged in skilled conversation people do listen to each other's perspectives, but the extent to which people are prepared to give way on certain issues is limited. The conversation is boundaried and participants may not be fully aware of those boundaries. What emerges from the conversation is likely to be some form of compromise. There is clearly a role for skilled conversation but there will also be times when skilled conversation isn't enough. Complexity often demands the emergence of something new and original, something outside the experience of those conversing.

When we choose to engage in dialogue, we are aware of our non-negotiables, we are aware of our core beliefs and values and opinions, and we are able to suspend them for the duration of the conversation. We don't dismiss them, but we are able to suspend them long enough to stay curious, and to achieve a much deeper understanding of what the other person is trying to say and where that opinion is coming from. We are purposeful in our listeningⁱⁱⁱ.

When we engage in dialogue we are just as aware of our core beliefs and values and opinions when we speak. We are able to disentangle what we are experiencing in the world, our interpretations of those events, and the assumptions we make. For example, if I tell you I think you made a mess of that last proposal you wrote, that utterance is a mix of:

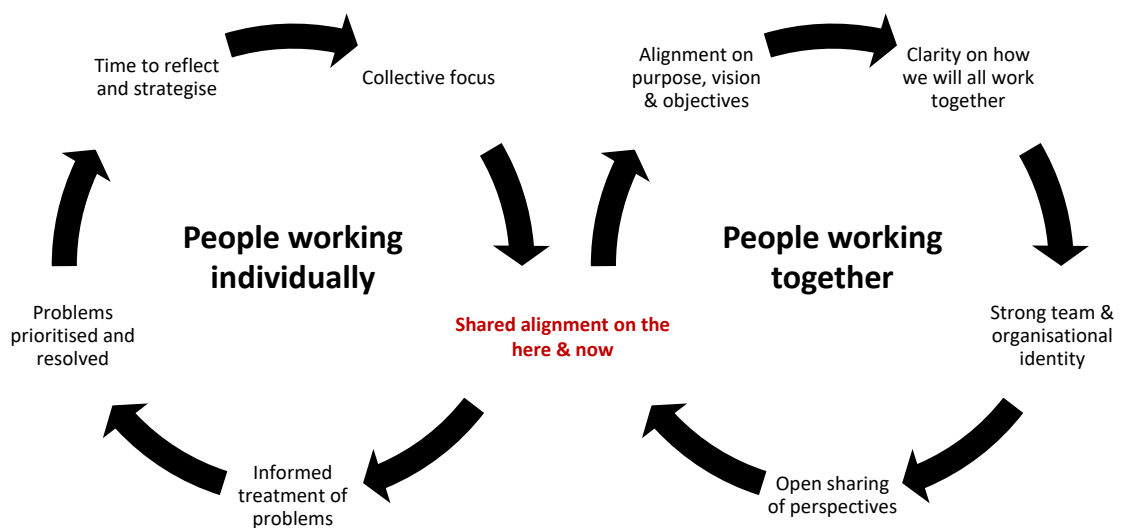
- What I saw in the proposal

- What I expected to see in the proposal
- My assumptions as to how much effort you put into the work and what I think this implies about your motivation and competence

When I engage in dialogue I limit my observations to what I saw, and I ask questions to better understand your perspective. In other words I show you respect, leaving room for your experience of events, and being curious about those experiences.

A dialogic organisation is one in which everyone in the organisation defines dialogue in the same way, understands the value of dialogue, and initiates dialogue when dialogue appears to be called for.

In the dialogic organisation people are genuinely curious as to what others are thinking, and committed to building shared levels of understanding on what is happening today, and what we all want to be happening in the future. People are clear on how best to work with one another, and these shared understandings contribute to a shared sense of identity and an ongoing commitment to engaging in dialogue. People naturally all gravitate to work on the problems where their expertise and perspectives are most needed, and problems are dealt with more efficiently and effectively. We call this the double-loop of IMPACT; shared identity, common mindset and purpose, alignment, collective focus, and great teaming.



The double-loop of IMPACT

Think reflection

Notice that my capacity to engage in dialogue depends on the extent to which I am able to suspend my core beliefs, values and opinions and the extent to which I can express myself independent of my interpretations and assumptions. The extent to which I can engage in dialogue then is related to the extent to which I am self-aware, or selves-aware^{iv}. The extent to which I am self-aware depends on the extent to which I make time to learn about myself, by

making to reflect upon my actions and to learn from those experiences. The dialogic organisation is therefore also a reflective organisation.

Dr Suzi Skinner found that effective leaders don't just reflect more often, they reflect differently^{vi}, which implies that we can help organisations to become more dialogic by helping them learn how to reflect differently together. She found that the most effective leaders:

1. See the potential in every situation, no matter how challenging or difficult. They don't shy away from confronting the realities of a situation, but their reflective process always ends with a future intention and a renewed sense of possibility.
2. Think past, present and future. Less effective leaders tend to think two out of three, often stuck in the problem of the present and/or the mistakes of the past. Effective leaders reflect actively on what can be learned from the past, they seek to understand all they can about what is happening in the present, and they consider future options, moving dynamically between all three timeframes.
3. Reflect on what is best for the team and for the organisation, not just what is best for self. They spend a significant amount of time reflecting with others, not just by themselves, and consciously ask questions that focus on the collective, not the individual.

The dialogic organisation thinks this way too. People don't waste time blaming others and covering their backs – they focus on possibility. They extract all there is to learn from the past and from the present and work together to identify options for the future. And they make time to do this together – in dialogue.

Implications

Organisations can become dialogic by:

- Helping everyone in the organisation understand what dialogue is, why it is important, and how to get better at it.
- Helping everyone in the organisation understand the importance of reflection, and what effective reflection looks like.
- Developing a different knee-jerk reaction to pressure and stress. Instead of people looking inward and focussing on achieving individual goals, they invite others in, in search of a shared understanding of both the present and what might be possible in the future.

Dialogic organisations are more successful, more effective and efficient. People know how best to work together and they enjoy coming to work. They have a strong shared sense of identity and ambition and they get things done well.

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Notes

- ⁱ William Isaacs. *Dialogue & The Art of Thinking Together*. Doubleday.
- ⁱⁱ Paul Lawrence, Sarah Hill et al. *The Tao of Dialogue*. Routledge.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Purposeful Listening Model, part of the fifth mantra (Do Dialogue) in the book *The Wise Leader*, by Paul Lawrence & Suzi Skinner.
- ^{iv} The second mantra (Know Yourself) in the book *The Wise Leader*, by Paul Lawrence & Suzi Skinner.
- ^v Dr Suzi Skinner's doctoral thesis *Understanding the Influences on Leader Self-Efficacy: A Constructivist Grounded Theory Study*. University of Wollongong.
- ^{vi} The first mantra (Commit to Reflective Learning) in the book *The Wise Leader*, by Paul Lawrence & Suzi Skinner.