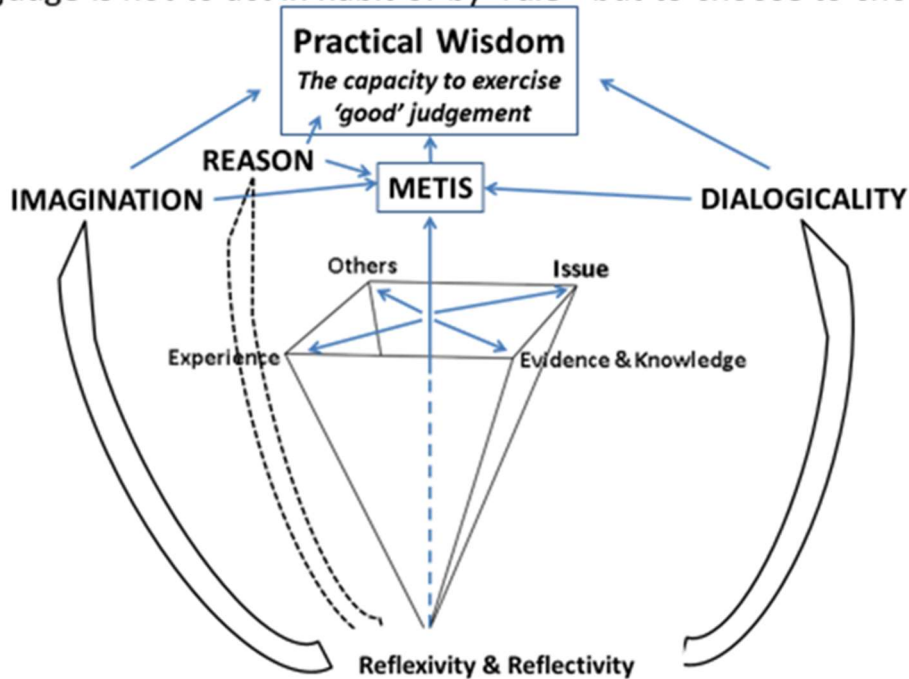


The Capability of Dialogue – Reading 1

The capabilities are the cognitive and collaborative skills that are required for the development and exercise of practical wisdom, and the making of good judgements – they are Reflectivity, Reasoning, Dialogue and Imagination. Here we talk about Dialogue.

To judge is not to act in habit or by 'rule'- but to choose to choose!



"Like a seed is an aperture to a tree, dialogue is an aperture to our future" – David Bohm

"The four most important words in business – What. Do. You. Think." – Kevin Roberts

Managers/leaders spend the vast majority of their time talking, and mostly to people within their own organisations. When we look at an organization chart we see the lines, boxes, labels, names and job titles but it is in the white space of the chart that the organization & its endeavours are shaped and sustained – it a white space of perpetual talk! How we talk together determines our effectiveness - quality conversational conduct is the bedrock on which organizational performance is built – it was, for sure, the foundation on which the governing citizens of Ancient Greece, the Polis of the Athenian Forum, saw civilisation to be built.

Dia Logos was the name they gave to 'quality talking together'. It translates as 'flow of meaning' – it is not the words uttered or heard that counts, but only the meaning intended and received. Dialogue is not raw debate, nor is it simply polite conversation, it is a purposeful deliberation with a centre, not sides. It is not about skilful advocacy and the winning of arguments, but is an attempt at a purposeful collective inquiry into the topic to hand. Participants in a dialogue are partners in the pursuit of shared understanding, not contenders in a battle – there are no winners or losers – in a way dialogue is the opposite of debate. In dialogue we harness collective intelligence – it is the most productive form of conversation we can have.

To be good participants in dialogue we must consciously choose to be listeners and be **purposeful & deliberate in our listening- we must listen not just hear**. We must pay **deep attention** to what our interlocutors are saying and what is possibly 'between the lines'. Our **focus must be on understanding** what is being said. We must be singularly listening - we must quieten the voice in our head and not simply be 'reloading' – thinking about what we want to say next.

A wise one is genuinely, and manifestly, proactively interested in the arguments, perspectives & ideas of others – curiosity is king!

We have two ears and only one mouth – maybe we should use them in proportion

In our listening we must strive to be reflexive, to **'listen through our prejudices'** – we must not leap to assumptions/conclusions about our partners in dialogue, about what they are saying, or about why they are saying it – we must **hesitate, suspend judgement**, and **attempt a naked receptivity** to what is being said; no matter by whom. We must loosen our grip on our certainties – **if you don't like what you hear, start listening!**



To be good participants in dialogue we must also be **smart questioners** – asking timely questions of an appropriate form with the intention of developing and propelling the dialogue. As Voltaire says – ***“we should judge a man by his questions not by his answers”***.

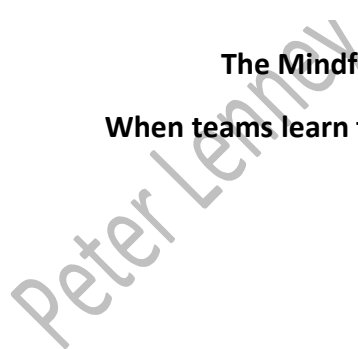
A wise one attempts to reveal to their interlocutors the assumptions that underpin his/her perspectives, and s/he seeks, through questioning, to surface the foundational assumptions, understandings, motives & ideas of others, and engages their imagination in an attempt 'to see things the way they might'. A wise one pursues what Hannah Arendt terms this enlarged mentality and persists in asking the dreaded multiple 'why' question of Toshiba fame.

When concordance is elusive it is often because deep assumptions are not 'up on the table' for scrutiny. These 'hidden' assumptions can also often be those that underpin the very problem/issue that is the subject of the dialogue. It is often by engaging with these foundational premises/'taken-for-granted' that a new understanding of challenges, problems and issues can emerge, and the best ideas arise. In dialogue we are not focused on agreement, but on deep understanding that can form a basis on which we can think and act.

The wise one also understands that it is easy not to ask penetrating questions when the argument in play resonates with their own prejudices, but as Nietzsche says *“We question a thinker when he proposes a tenet that is disagreeable to us; and yet it would be more reasonable to do this when we find his tenet agreeable”* When one finds oneself too easily nodding along to the tune of the argument in play we must hesitate and purposefully seek a discord that jars the path to too easy a concordance.

Open questions should always be our preference. Even when we feel that maybe we should ask a closed question, we can attempt to turn it into an open one that still propels/develops the dialogue in

We also need to have the courage to ask questions that might reveal our potential ignorance/incompetence and the emotional resilience to handle the potential embarrassment of this revelation. Often the most seemingly stupid question is the one everyone feels they should ask – a wise one understands that making oneself vulnerable and taking this risk is necessary for powerfully productive dialogue. It is a risk that senior leaders and managers, ill-advisedly, will not take as it is felt to show weakness to be publically ‘wrong’. I would say it is her/his duty if they are the most ‘powerful’ in the room as it assists in setting the necessary climate for interaction – it helps groups move towards the most productive form of dialogue, that of ‘thinking out loud together’. In fact the ‘power’ they have is possibly the biggest barrier to powerful dialogue



When teams learn to dialogue, their effectiveness improves exponentially