

Practitioner Critique of Dialogue as an Approach for Overcoming Leader ‘Bullying’/Toxic Leadership

Eileen Piggot-Irvine (Leader, Leadership Supervisor, Professor of Leadership)
Beth Rogers (Senior Leader, Health Sector)

Eileen is a recent ex-leader, practising leadership supervisor offering 1:1 support, researcher and developer/facilitator in the field of bullying/toxic leadership. Beth, (a senior health sector leader at the firing line) offers an insider, practitioner, view of the appropriateness of dialogue to address bullying/toxic leader behaviour.

Acknowledgement: The theory in this article has links to previous publications, including Piggot-Irvine and Biggs (2020).

Introduction

In this article we ‘open up’ a dual perspective: a ‘conversation’ between Eileen and Beth on the use of non-defensive dialogue. The latter is just one of many approaches Eileen has employed for helping leaders to avoid or address accusations of bullying.

We want to begin by declaring that we are hearing less about bullying now. The discussion appears to be more about a toxic workplace or poor leadership. We question whether this means that there is less bullying, or whether we now have poor leadership. Or have we incorrectly called it bullying previously? Eileen would argue that there is considerable overlap between the features of bullying and the current use of ‘toxic leadership’ to describe such environments. Kellerman (2004), for example, lists types of toxic leadership as incompetence in leading positive change, rigidity, intemperance (low self-control), callousness, corruption (putting self-interest ahead of public interest), insularity, and causing physical or emotional harm. Almost all of the ‘types’ fit strongly within definitions of bullying and defensive responses generally. In this article, the term bullying is employed with the latter in mind.

We begin with the trigger for our ‘conversation’: Beth’s interpretation of considerable escalation of staff accusations of bullying and toxic leadership in the current post-pandemic arena. Eileen links that interpretation to clarifying, with reference support, considerations of what both bullying and non-bullying leader interactions are considered to be. Following key definitions, the principles of defensive and non-defensive interactions, as well as those of dialogue and its facilitation in workshops, are presented.

We have both ‘opened up’, exchanged, commented on, and critiqued this material extensively ... with intent to demonstrate how important it is to receive feedback non-defensively! ‘Opening up’ means that both of us have exposed our practice to critique in a way which hopefully illustrates the process of dialogue and leads to our own learning and improvement, as well as that of others.

Post-Pandemic Interactions Through a Senior Leadership Lens: Beth’s View

As we have come to a point of ‘new normal’, I am seeing leaders try to take on even more – without taking the time to ‘stop, pause and reset’. We find ourselves in an ever-increasing hamster wheel. We are doing more of the same at a greater and greater frenetic pace as we respond to crisis mode operation, and/or changing rules and boundaries. We’re expected to respond to ‘get back to normal and do our business’ once again with increasing efficiencies, better governance, higher specifications and continuous improvement. I, like many others, wonder how far we are expected to push our people ... and not be seen as highly controlling. With some leaders I worry that we are at a point of increasing pressure and without opening some of the outlet valve we will get to bursting point and become bullies and toxic without realising it.

At the other end of the continuum, one of my leaders is high performing, capable of leading high performing teams, intelligent and can critique themselves very well, and has absolutely shone through the covid period. They were thrown into an unknown when having to change roles; to lead without any governance and authority but solely by influence. They had to build from the ground up. This competent leader suddenly became an avoider. I saw behaviour that was unconsciously destructive mainly to themselves and was a real barrier to get a service improvement project started. I think the behaviour was driven by having the hiatus of two to three years where we were in survival mode, constantly on edge, responding to the next directive or expectation.

In summary, some of my leaders are struggling with how to deal with their staff, especially when they are not feeling great themselves. I'm seeing either more reactive, highly stressed, type responses or simply hiding or running away from addressing staff issues ... or working around a problem to find the answer they want (often to do nothing) – or a muddled combination of these responses.

What's needed most now is for leaders to be flexible and fair with their staff. I think leaders need to focus on being accepting of an environment not of our choosing resulting from the pandemic; being comfortable in not knowing the end point when answers are not available or satisfactory. Leaders also need to constantly have their antennae up in all directions: be sensing what is going on above, beside and below them and feeling confident to validate staff in this tough time. Staff need to know that we as leaders are visible/available and we've got their backs. The latter doesn't mean us overprotecting or being a safety net – that just results in burnout.

If there are problems, then what is needed is for us as leaders to show compassionate confrontation which involves much more than just 'picking your battles'. It needs genuine deep and caring collaboration but also addressing concerns rather than avoiding or deflecting them. The latter happens frequently.

Over and above the skills needed to confront concerns compassionately, we leaders need be deeply comfortable with staff differing in opinions to our own: in being open to decisions which might not have been our own. This means we need to have acceptance with boundaries. The latter creates safety! It also means that as leaders we need to be able to show vulnerability.

In the next sections Eileen will make links between Beth's views and the theory of dialogue. Beth's comments accompany Eileen's material.

Linking to Theory from Eileen, with Comment from Beth

<i>Eileen – Theory</i>	<i>Beth Comment</i>
<p>Rationale for the Theory</p> <p>I agree with Beth that confronting concerns compassionately is important. I have spent over half my career helping leaders and staff to identify and then address concerns in the workplace. I strongly adhere to an approach overall that goes beyond individual interactions. I believe a comprehensive, systems-wide, action research oriented, organisational learning level, intervention approach is needed when addressing problems. Such an approach supports leaders and staff together identifying, examining, and actioning improvements. In keeping with the thinking of Berlingieri (2015), and Branch, Ramsey and Barker (2017), I believe that such intensity and depth is needed to prevent accusations of bullying/toxicity arising.</p> <p>Underpinning a comprehensive, systems-wide approach, my experience has shown that it is exceptionally important to have some specific ways of initially helping leaders and <i>staff themselves to identify</i> behaviours that are linked to bullying/toxicity. This paper focuses solely on just one lens that I use - a defensive/non-defensive lens - to assist leaders in such identification. Further, once identification has occurred, I usually help leaders to focus on understanding just one non-defensive tool – dialogue - for conducting an early conversation when there are concerns. There are a multitude of other tools, but this is the key one that I have found to have deepest traction in addressing concerns in a way which is not interpreted as bullying or toxic.</p>	<p><i>Do I think leaders can truly be coached if they don't have all the key attributes and skills? Absolutely, but we and they will make mistakes along the way. We need to do this safely and not damage our emergent leaders along the way.</i></p> <p><i>High involvement and ownership by the leaders is vital.</i></p>
<p>Defining Bullying ... Defensiveness</p> <p>Some statistics on bullying first of all:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global studies show that organisations with respectful workplace cultures outperform those where negative behaviours such as bullying and harassment are tolerated (Gupta et al, 2020) • 60-75% of employees across a wide spectrum of occupations report the worst aspect of their job is their immediate Supervisor (Cooper, 2018) • Bullying and harassment is on the rise in NZ: in 2020, 37% of NZ surveyed organisations recorded instances of bullying and harassment compared to 27% in 2018 (NZ Workplace Diversity Survey, 2019/2020) 	

- All types of organisations report bullying
 - Public sector: NZ Defence Force, NZ Police, Fire and Emergency NZ, Parliament, Education
 - Private sector: legal profession. (MBIE, 2020).

Bullying has always been difficult to pin down, define. O’Driscoll et al, (2011) report, in a very general way, that: “Bullying at work, a severe form of anti-social behaviour, has become an issue of major concern to workers, organizations, unions and governments. It has also received considerable attention ... over the past 20+ years.” (p.390). Branch et al. (2017) note that it can be seen as a persistent pattern of incidents of inappropriate behaviour wearing those bullied down and contributing to an imbalance of power. The government agency Employment New Zealand have described it as a serious health and safety breach. It is a form of misconduct and must be dealt with properly.

Though loosely defined, bullying’s consequences are widely reported. Bullying has drastic impacts on self-esteem, physical and emotional health, and cognitive functioning. It impacts families as well as those who witness bullying (Wallace, Johnston, & Trenberth, 2010). Overall, the impacts of negative social interactions are also thought to have a much more significant impact than positive organisational outcomes (Baumeister et al., 2001).

Leaders are a considerable part of the bullying issue. For example, 61% of workplace bullies have been noted to be bosses (NZ Workplace Diversity Survey, 2019/2020). Leaders also have typically scored lowest on items related to seeking feedback from their teams (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Cowan (2011), Salin et al., (2018) and many others believe that leadership has responsibility to model the right behaviours. Leaders need to manage psychosocial risk at work (MBIE, 2020) by creating respectful workplace culture and conditions for psychological safety.

Moving from Theory to Practice

I contend that lofty ideals such as ‘leaders modelling the right behaviours’ are too intangible for the majority of leaders I have worked with. I have found that it is critical to identify and examine the inappropriate behaviours first before transitioning to ‘right’ behaviours. Such examination through a ‘defensive’ lens has been highly constructive, tangible and practical in my difficult work in helping leaders to create respectful workplaces.

The two key defensive strategies of avoidance (A) and control (C) are frequently noted as destroying integrity and trust. Bullying is most often associated with control, but avoidance can be more subtle and devious and therefore could be seen as bullying too! Defensive behaviour was considered by Argyris (2003, 2010) to be governed by three key principles (with my categorisation): (1) achieve the intended purpose at all cost (C); (2) maximise winning and minimise losing (C); and (3) suppress negative feelings (A and A/C).

Argyris (2003) defined defensiveness as the tendency to protect ourselves and others from potential threat and embarrassment. The avoidance and control dominant defensive strategies include covering up or bypassing any threat rather than confronting it, giving mixed and confusing messages rather than being direct, or knowingly or unknowingly withholding information to prevent upsetting others. I would suggest it is not always easy to categorise responses so simply. This is because what often looks like an avoidance strategy might also be highly manipulative controlling.

In workshops, I often stop theorising at this point and, as an introductory activity, I ask participants to record which of the defensive strategies (my own interpretation of multiple other researcher and leader ideas) in Table 1 are A or C or A/C. The categorisation of each strategy is important in allowing for subsequent analysis of workshop participant own practice.

One of my tasks as a leader has been modelling how to develop my leadership team. I appreciate and strive to have diversity within my teams. Being the extroverted leader, I need to stop and remember not to leave others behind, listen for understanding (not to reload), and to let others thrive.

Leaders come naturally to leadership if they have developed lifelong opportunities of expectation, respect, resilience and challenge – but not everyone is born into that type of nurturing environment. Throw in a bit of trauma and you can end up with controlling or avoidant leaders instead.

Post-COVID I have seen previously high achieving leaders who are strong, outcome driven, good people managers, also move into avoidant styles as they are challenged with roles that lead by influence rather than organisational structure.

I am fascinated by the ‘introverted leader’. At one session Eileen gave me a challenge with the statement “Can you make the kitten roar ... and sometimes maybe that person just isn’t the right fit for leadership?” I responded: “okay that’s the challenge, now watch me – I can make this kitten a non-avoiding leader. So, in short – yes, I think you can. And we need to.

I myself have swung both to avoidant and control

Table 1: Defensive Strategies

A Excessively starting with positives or assurances (often called ‘easing in’)
B With-holding information about important issues
C Failing to state position/where coming from when discussing issues
D Making judgements or assumptions without testing or checking them
E Failing to check what recipients think about any information provided
F Using persuasion to make a point
G Giving false reassurances to cloud the message
H Giving mixed messages or confusing the message in an effort to be nice
I Trying to keep things comfortable
J Deciding on the outcome before any conversation about issues
K Deciding to hold back in order to protect recipients from embarrassment or threat
L Name dropping to support an argument
M Ignoring or downplaying information provided by recipients
N Making statements without illustration, evidence or explanation
O Using closed, yes/no, questioning in order to disguise own view
P Ignoring the feelings/responses of recipients
Q Avoiding disclosing own feelings
R Avoiding disclosing information that may upset recipients, or weaken own position
S Providing own solutions to any problems without inviting those of recipients
T Taking over any following up of issues rather than allowing for ownership by recipients
U Failing to plan for any improvement where issues might have been raised
V As a last (or maybe first) resort, deciding to ‘give it to them straight’ (a blasting!) if there are issues to resolve

As preparation for my workshops, I require participants to confidentially write a ‘what I said: what they said’ record of a real conversation about a concern they had with a staff member that they felt did not go so well. After the completion of the categorisation in Table 1 in the workshop, participants then use the Table 1 content to confidentially self-analyse their own conversation. In my experience, the participants themselves quickly discern whether defensive strategies are present. Most importantly also, they almost always recognise that avoidance is sometimes subtle, devious, control. Recently, one recurring comment from participants after this exercise has been that of leaders reporting that if they show defensive strategies, they often also see an escalation of defensiveness in their staff responses, including gaslighting the leader. Regardless of the strategy categorisation (and it is not always clear), participants recognise that both avoidance and control are usually damaging because they lead to misunderstandings and consequently low openness and trust.

The self-analysis of leader participant defensive behaviour in a safe and confidential environment provides a necessary prerequisite for exploring how to create non-defensive, non-bullying, leadership. The goal is to achieve high openness and trust and to therefore minimise defensiveness and to incorporate the strategies and beliefs described by Argyris (1990) as ‘productive’. Unlearning defensive, inauthentic, strategies is essential if leaders are to become genuinely open and trust engendering. That is far from easy, because defensive strategies are created in every day, micro-level, interactions. At this point in my workshops, I take leaders back to theory again and briefly outline what non-defensiveness looks like when addressing concerns.

Some Theory: Overcoming Defensiveness, Bullying

In earlier writing I have noted the importance of the leader “... creating authentic, shared power, non-defensive, collaborative relationships that lead to trust” (Piggot-Irvine & Biggs, 2020:55). Authentic collaboration has links to organisational

behaviours when in situations that I found myself out of control – often when I didn’t feel supported or that no-one had my back and I had to protect my team.

The behaviour is sometimes a combination of both avoidance and control.

We need to think about what the triggers are that contribute to avoidant or controlling behaviour? What are the preventative measures? Or are these leaders just out of their depth?

learning (OL) skills (Sun & Scott, 2003). The latter creates openness and trust. In an earlier publication (Piggot-Irvine, 2012) I stated:

The root meaning of the word collaboration is to 'co-labour'. Collaboration is bound to notions of joint work, consultation, involvement and participation: it is based on shared goals and shared vision, openness, trust and democratic ideals. It is a term that expresses partnership, cooperation, agreement, consent and working in combination to accomplish mutual objectives and positive change. (p.89)

Authentic collaboration enhances ownership via the leader 'giving voice' to staff, guiding staff in decision making and implementation of improvement. The outcome should be enhanced staff ownership, greater understanding, acceptance, motivation and commitment. The leader in such collaboration is a supporter, developer, resource provider and clarifier. There is alignment with Spiller's (2015) interpretation of 'Wayfinder Leadership' where leaders step into Rangatira Space of deep humility, leading WITH, fiercely caring about staff, and having true mana.

Collaboration, if inauthentic, can be seen as a contrived means for controlling/bullying – so the word 'authentic' is critical. 'Authentic' refers to a deep commitment on the part of the leader to be without guile and have genuine openness that results in both staff and leader mutually understanding each other's perspectives – an 'inquiry' perspective (Piggot-Irvine & Biggs, 2020; McMorland & Piggot-Irvine, 2000). Such understanding should lead to trust and learning. In a non-controlling relationship, there should be equality and openness, with no winners or losers in terms of dominance or power ... no bullying!

In my experience, creating trust and learning is a life-long journey because most of us can exhibit these behaviours and values in non-stressful (read non-pandemic outcome contexts!) interactions but in stressful situations we often revert to the earlier described defensive routines that are strongly embedded from our early years. Chris Argyris (2003), the original expert on controlling and non-controlling interactions, was clear also that we often find it harder to have authentic collaboration as we become expert in our field. He believes that as we become expert, we can tend to develop more strong but subtle, frequently unconscious, controlling strategies.

Becoming non-defensive is associated with some unlearning that requires what McKay and Kember (1997), some time ago, described as engagement in 'deep learning' where values and beliefs as well as skills are changed. In my experience, the latter skill development often facilitates/enables value and belief shifting to enhance deep learning. There are complex interactions involved in openness (see Argyris, 1990; Cardno, 2001; Senge et al., 2012). The following sections outline a suggested approach for just one element i.e. conducting a difficult conversation where non-defensive openness is a goal. Such a conversation is often described as dialogue.

In a dialogue approach, the two critical initial facets of a conversation are usually described as *advocacy* and *inquiry*. The first facet, *advocacy*, involves the leader raising concerns by stating their views, the premises for those views, and the evidence available to support the views.

The real example shown in the next scenario is one of many I use in workshops as an aid for analysing the steps in dialogue. The Judy and Sam script should demonstrate how Judy, as senior leader, makes *advocacy* statements about the situation in the first two parts of her dialogue with Sam, a team leader. Here, she reasonably clearly gives her views, evidence, and premises/reasons for her concern. The latter evidence should be clear, factually-based, and tangible as far as possible, and only linked to the concern under discussion. A common mistake is for a leader to introduce multiple concerns which will overwhelm the staff member. An important, if not more important, component of the advocacy step is that the leader's views are expressed in such a way to invite checking and challenge by the staff member to whom they are addressed. It is critical that the leader withholds assumptions about the concern until every aspect of the situation is checked with the

I have seen some of my lions (those leaders that are strong, dependable, grow developing teams and allow high performing teams to flourish) become avoidant leaders when challenged beyond their own tool kit. The switch at times has been sudden and such a change in their norm that I wondered what was going on. I don't think it was necessarily devious but certainly destructive and was as a result of being out of control and feeling very vulnerable.

When engaging in advocacy, I state the fact only and withhold judgement. If there are multiple concerns check how this can be summarised or the theme stated.

staff member. In the script, workshop participants usually see that Judy made it reasonably clear it was her interpretation only, and she proposed this in a way which could be seen as hypothetical, i.e open for checking or testing.

Participants then identify the second facet of dialogue, *inquiry*, in the subsequent section of the Judy/Sam script. *Inquiry* involves receiving the staff member viewpoints which might check and challenge the advocacy statements. Just receiving the viewpoints is not enough, however, because there must be no prejudgement or need to control linked to hearing alternative points of view. The leader has to be open to be wrong and to change their perception. In my workshops, I often repeat ‘if you go in thinking you might be wrong; you can’t go wrong!’. This is so easy to say, but in my experience is the toughest challenge in becoming non-defensive in dialogue. As you can see in the Judy/Sam scenario, Judy actively invites checking and the challenge of her views from Sam. Sam did have alternative views, and it was critical that Judy was genuinely willing to accept the challenge to her views non-defensively.

Scenario: Advocacy and Inquiry Steps

Judy (leader):

I see several anomalies in your 360-degree staff feedback that I would like to explore with you if that’s okay. (*Advocacy*)

Sam (leader):

Oh! Okay, what do you mean?

Judy:

My interpretation of the data here (which could be wrong, so I want to check this with you) seems to suggest that about 60% of your staff believe that you are poor at meeting facilitation. If this is accurate, I would want to help you with that ... so can I show you how I came to this conclusion, and can you check whether I have interpreted this correctly... (Judy identifies specific feedback items as evidence which might support this interpretation) ... (*Advocacy*)

Sam:

Well, I think you might be right about one of those, but I am not sure that the feedback from the staff on the second question supports it.

Judy:

Can we look at that Sam? I’m not discounting what you are saying, so show me what you mean. I’d like to see that. (*Inquiry*)

Judy and Sam next spend half an hour checking and comparing perceptions. They finish with a decision that Sam will see if he can find some other evidence to clarify whether staff felt there was an issue and agree on a time to re-meet.

As suggested elsewhere (Piggot-Irvine, 2015), the imbalance, or overuse, of either of these two critical facets of advocacy and inquiry usually results in defensive control or avoidance. For example, if Judy had spent ten minutes strongly advocating her concern and backing it with excessive reasons for the concern but then just quickly asked Sam to provide his viewpoint, Sam would likely be overwhelmed and possibly be feeling cornered by Judy’s statements. In this situation, Judy could come across to Sam as dominating and controlling. It is vital, therefore, to keep a balance between advocacy and inquiry in the conversation. The balance creates a two-way dialogue linked to mutual understanding and agreement (or agreement to disagree) about issues, as shown in Figure 1.

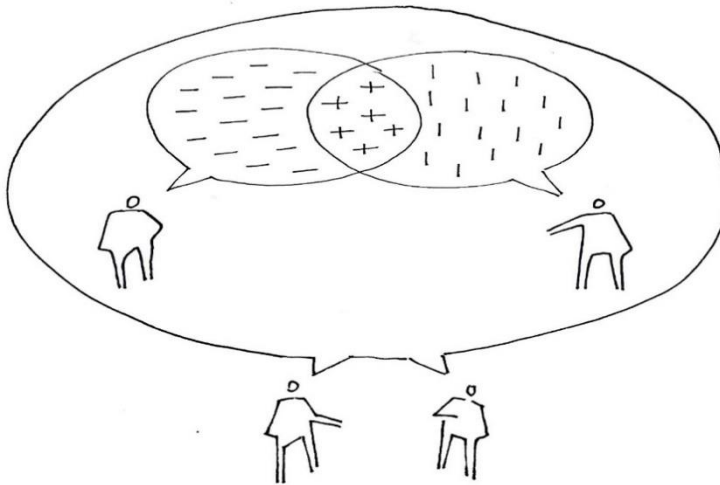
Saying something like “why is that” may be a good inquiry start with a non-defensive tone.

Recently I had a leader feel uncomfortable with being challenged and potentially changing their viewpoint. It is important that we are comfortable overall with inviting the challenge and prepared for coming to a negotiable outcome. It is not about backing down or winning or losing it is about mutually having the need met.

Alternatively, I would potentially come in with indicating that we will be reviewing the 360-degree feedback; firstly, asking their thoughts and if they have had time to review, digest and interpret any of the feedback as 360-degree feedback makes a lot of leaders feel vulnerable. Following a discussion regarding how the person feels about the review and their general state, I might move to stating: “I am interested in the feedback across these areas – in summary, I am wondering if this indicates that facilitation of meetings is an area that you are less confident or comfortable with? I am interested in your reflection on the responses in this area and if you have a similar or another conclusion?”

In the end, I would conclude by giving Sam time to review the feedback in entirety and look at any themes, choose three areas they would like to work on, and check what support he might need from me to do that.

Figure 1: Mutual inquiry via Advocacy and Inquiry Generates New Thinking



Once advocacy and inquiry have occurred (usually with space/gaps in time for further data collection and reflection), in a dialogue approach it is essential for some summary of shared understanding to be reached between the leader and staff. The understanding might include an agreement to seek further information in order to provide more clarity about a situation before any conclusion is made. An extension of the previous scenario will show such an agreement.

Scenario: Summarising Shared Understanding

Judy: Okay, I think I am getting a pretty clear picture here now Sam, but can I check to see if we are both on the same page about it? It looks to me like there are two areas out of the 10 items in the survey that the scoring was pretty low, but in item two, I agree, it's not so clear cut because the comments conflict with the continuum results. Is that what you would conclude as well?

Sam: Yes, that's pretty much right, but I guess that second question about meetings does need a bit of clearing up.

Judy: How do you think we might clarify that?

Sam: Well, I suppose I could go back to the staff and ask them to help me to understand their responses better.

Judy: That sounds like a great idea. Do you think they would feel comfortable doing that? How might you do that?

Judy and Sam then explore the type of approach that might be appropriate for gathering further staff feedback.

In this scenario, the shared understanding or thinking which might result from further feedback gathering should be some mutual agreement to solutions for any difficulties identified. Solution generation is one of the steps I notice many leaders have problems with. The reason for this may be that many of us as leaders jump quickly to giving solutions, despite the fact that we know this will result in low ownership by our staff. A leader needs to draw upon all their listening, prompting, brainstorming, and clarifying skills to STOP offering solutions and to guide the staff member to find their own. In my experience, it is not unusual for staff to need to be given time to go away and think about the solutions. However, once those solutions have been offered

If Sam's summation is quite different or Sam prioritises different areas, can both Sam and Judy agree to include meeting facilitation as a goal to improve as one of the 3 areas?

I really do feel this summaris vital. At times we need to have a goal given to us e.g. agreeing on improving meeting facilitation (introduce with karakia, review actions, standing agenda items, new business and keep to time formats and close appropriately) but how and what support is required needs to be driven by the recipient to be meaningful. Suggest strategies if you must but do get the ownership by the leader.

by the staff member then jointly discussed with leader, the staff member can prioritise, plan for implementation, and discuss how the improvements will be checked. Collectively all these facets are often described in the dialogue process, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Dialogue Steps

STEPS
1. State views hypothetically and disclose premises for views
2. Show the evidence for these views Steps 1 & 2 are 'Advocacy' Steps
3. Seek responses and invite checking and challenge to views, premises and evidence This step is the 'Inquiry' Step
4. Summarise shared understanding or the need for more information and determine how collected
Repeat steps 1 – 4 if necessary before moving on
5. Joint understanding of concerns and evidence ... if in fact there is a concern Suggestions for solutions if needed and evaluation of these solutions
6. Decide together on priorities for solutions
7. Jointly plan for implementation steps and checking of improvement

Adapted from Piggot-Irvine and Doyle (2010)

At this point in my workshops/learning contexts, I usually briefly, again, dip into some theory links to dialogue. Dialogue, for example, is often also referred to as productive dialogue (or as 'learning conversations' by Robinson & Lai, 2006) and mainly involves a translation of the theory of productive reasoning into practice steps. Productive reasoning, as Robinson, Absolum, Cardno, and Steele (1990) earlier determined, involves:

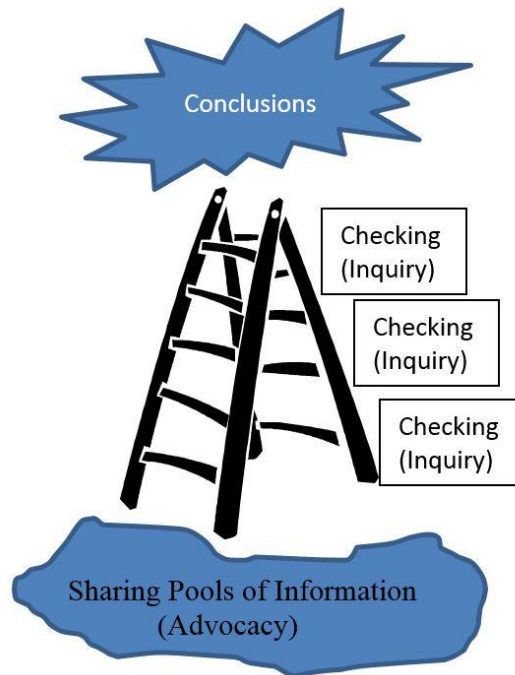
... a disclosure of our views together with the evidence of logic that led us to those views ... to enhance the freedom of others to express differing views and to make uncoerced choices about courses of action, including about how to resolve impasses.
(p. 2)

Bilaterality (considering two sides) is essential in the approach because checking and understanding others' perspectives is vital. It might look like the steps of dialogue look logical and easy to implement, but I have found they are challenging to apply in difficult situations. Use of the steps: "requires significant, profound, shifts involving exposure, examination and alteration of defensive values at a deeply personal level which is both cognitively and emotionally difficult" (Piggot-Irvine & Doyle, 2010, p.61). Dick and Dalmau (1999) suggested that the combined value and behaviour shifting necessitates a high level of self-honesty.

Overall, the learning difficulty associated with creating dialogue requires both leaders and staff to have a key skill to *withhold assumptions*. In a difficult situation, it is common for both leaders and staff to leap to conclusions and make assumptions without reference to any supporting evidence or facts. Argyris (1990), and Senge et al. (2012) used a 'ladder of inference' to illustrate the need to avoid jumping to premature conclusions without first checking facts. Figure 2 shows that what we should be doing is staying low on the ladder of inference and slowly working up to it by checking before drawing conclusions. At the bottom of the ladder is a pool of information (data/facts) derived from either the leader or staff member revelation of thinking and beliefs (their *advocacy* in the dialogue steps). Each rung represents the checking and questioning (the *inquiry* step) of assumptions/inferences linked with that information in incrementally moving towards a conclusion. The top step of the ladder represents conclusions drawn that should be factually/data based and therefore valid if data are checked for accuracy.

Ladder of inference would be the most used tool in my office. To the point where my direct reports will say "I am right up the ladder now aren't I" when they are making assumptions and "jumping to conclusions". If you stay low on the ladder of inference you will be far more comfortable in managing competing demands as you can prioritise issues, theme areas

Figure 2: Ladder of Inference



Further key elements of 'reflection in and on action' and 'double loop learning' are also important in dialogue. I refer you to Piggot-Irvine and Biggs (2020) for elaboration of those.

In workshops with leaders, subsequent to the theoretical outline of dialogue and scenario discussion, time is spent engaging participants in re-writing their own script that they initially used to identify defensive strategies. The re-writing aim is to create a dialogue, non-defensive, outline. This is followed by extensive practice and group feedback. The facilitation is intense and requires highly sensitive facilitation skills to create the safety needed for participants to courageously engage in dialogue. The latter is another article focus on its own!

of risk and manage risk at the right level.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of staying low on the ladder of inference in both coaching and modelling. If we do that our leaders will too.

Interestingly during growth and development of an avoiding, leader, when I have seen them cross the line towards 'controlling' they often also have difficulty staying low on the ladder of inference.

A key question is: How do you stay low on the ladder of inference when there is time pressure to make a decision or to act?

In my experience of developing an introverted leader it was a bumpy road at times and we made a few mistakes? There had to be mutual respect and trust walking alongside this emerging leader. However, one word of warning – the kitten will move to lion like control as they develop leadership if they have not had the opportunity to grow and develop at the appropriate pace or if in a fright/flight or freeze mode.

Conclusion from Eileen and Beth

Eileen ... In this tough post-pandemic arena, we believe that leadership in its entirety is likely to be ineffective if empathy and compassion, genuine openness, clarity and support i.e. authentic collaboration is missing. If defensive controlling and/or avoiding values and strategies are associated with staff and leader interactions, they will not only be quickly detected but also undermine any attempt to create trust. Though difficult to unlearn we encourage that detection and addressing the unconscious strategies that result in most of us being defensive, should be given the highest priority in these testing post-pandemic times. This paper has focused solely on identifying defensive strategies associated with inauthentic collaboration and overcoming them with just one tool i.e dialogue.

Beth ... *I want to comment beyond just survival during this pandemic and post-pandemic time. If I look at those who have flourished and grown in leadership without demonstrating burnout, bullying or avoidance, there is another factor at play too. It is associated with resilience. Resilience is not limitless, and everybody will have a point that they need to replenish. I think one of the keys to replenishing is radical acceptance. This goes further than acceptance of the inevitable or being subservient or not being in control but rather being an active participant in the unknown: being comfortable with not always knowing the endpoint. It means being both a positive reactionary to the change in the moment as well as creating a sense of safety and security when in a state of flux. For example, in the pandemic we went from actively not wearing masks to having masks compulsory; from*

only accepting PCR tests to training and accepting RAT tests in the home. We quickly stood up an unregulated workforce and then deployed and stood them down again all in short periods. We didn't follow blindly but also choose when to follow the instruction knowing and trusting in the best of our systems and people. Authentic collaboration was at the core of this trust ... and we'll talk about resilience and radical acceptance in a further article.

Finally, I also pose a further question: How do you lead where you may not be liked, where you are not everyone's cup of tea? Or where there is little trust – given that trust takes time?

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