

Drilling Down: Effective Collaborative Relationships are Deep!

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Introduction

Collaboration, effective relationships, openness and trust in organisations do not happen by accident. They result from extremely complex interactions, at a deep one to one level, that are based on non-defensive values and strategies. It is easy to be collaborative and open when there is no contention. The test of collaboration occurs when this is not the case because such relationships are strongly affected by the way in which problems are confronted and dealt with. They do not result from an emphasis on needing to be nice, or liked, and this is echoed by Chris Argyris who is the renowned expert in the psychology of effective work relationships.

The ability to get along with others is always an asset, right? Wrong. By adeptly avoiding conflict with co-workers, some executives eventually wreak organisational havoc. (Argyris, 1986:74)

Wreaking havoc by avoiding conflict is not confined to executives in business organisations. Such avoidance exists at all levels of leadership and management in schools. My own research (Piggot-Irvine, 2001) in multiple sectors has revealed that the oft stated educational leadership goals of openness, examination of underlying issues, honest sharing and collaboration are frequently a sham and exist as little more than liberal rhetoric or espousals when situations become fraught. I acknowledge, however, that these goals are relatively easy to practise when problematic situations do NOT exist and when we are not emotionally stretched.

So, before I examine ways to create effective collaborative relationships, I want to explore both what collaboration itself entails and how defensive interactions block collaboration.

Collaboration

The concept of collaboration is frequently associated with consultation, involvement and participation; shared goals and shared vision, openness, trust and democratic ideals. It is often linked with terms such as partnership, co-operation, agreement, consent and working in combination because the word literally means 'to labour together'.

Collaboration is integrally connected to culture in an organisation (see Schein, 2004, for extensive elaboration of this concept), so successful collaboration in one context may not be replicable in another. I frequently hear leaders in schools implying that the culture in their school leads to collaboration but when asked exactly what this culture is they show little understanding of the intricate and delicate underpinnings. An effective collaborative culture is not a nebulous concept but is associated with the employment of extremely complex and detailed skills.

Collaboration is also connected to leadership. Many leaders believe that collaboration implies less direct leadership – a belief that could not be further from the truth. Collaboration requires the leader to actively

manage the collaborative process by drawing on a repertoire of interpersonal and change management skills. This is a very different kind of leadership to the traditional control, monitor, and direct style that can flourish within hierarchical structures, and such structures abound in our schools. Handy (1990) sees leadership in organisations which foster collaborative practice as post-heroic leadership.

Whereas the heroic manager of the past knew all, could do all and could solve every problem, the post-heroic manager asks how every problem can be solved in a way that develops other people's capacity to handle it ... Let us make no mistake: the cultures of consent are not easy to run, or to work in. Authority in these organisations does not come automatically with the title; it has to be earned. The authority you need is based on being able to help others do the job better, by developing their skills, by liaising with the rest of the organisation, by organising their work more efficiently, by helping them to make the best of their resources, by continual encouragement and example (Handy, 1990: 132).

Cardno (1990:3) expresses a vision for collaboration in these terms:

- . there is sound leadership and direction
- . staff are knowledgeable about the school
- . teamwork is evident at all levels
- . roles and responsibilities are clearly defined
- . mechanisms for participation exist and operate
- . emphasis is placed on the development of communication skills
- . problem-solving is related to school development
- . professional development is given a high profile
- . internal and external collaboration are managed

Cardno's list begins and ends with links to leadership in order to emphasise the role's critical importance.

Collaboration that creates openness and trust is associated with the overarching notion of organisational learning. In organisational learning there is a focus on 'growing' the learning capacity of individuals, teams and the organisation and it is individuals who act as the agents of organisational learning. Senge (1990: and Senge et. al, 2000) in fact asserts that organisations learn only through individuals who learn. Leaders of learning organisations design settings where everyone can deal productively and non-defensively with each other. The leaders foster learning and openness for everyone and, most importantly, they model learning themselves! Dissecting what it is to be defensive and non-defensive is therefore central to developing openness, trust and collaboration. At the heart of collaboration is a set of very specific, micro-level, skills and such skills are hard to detect and even harder, but not impossible, to learnas you will see!

Defensiveness

Most of us are non-defensive and open in situations where there are no problems or conflict. As soon as we get ourselves into problem situations however we act defensively because we are afraid, threatened, anxious, or embarrassed. Argyris (1990) defines defensiveness as the tendency to protect ourselves and others from potential threat and embarrassment. We behave defensively by covering up or bypassing threat; being indirect with people, giving mixed messages, or withholding information. Defensiveness, he says is an anti-learning process. It leads to misunderstandings, distortions, and ultimately ineffective teams and organisations.

Defensiveness is most often conditioned, routine, automatic behaviour that is below our level of consciousness, where it remains untested and unexamined. It has roots in our early childhood experiences, where we are instilled with the virtues of caring, helping and supporting; respecting others; upholding honesty; advocating to win; and sticking to our principles, values and beliefs. All of these virtues are laudable when we practise them in moderation. If the first three (caring, helping and respecting) are overdone, however, they are also the virtues that lead us to be avoiding in our responses. Let me use an example. If a manager is excessively helpful with staff they most likely prevent them from becoming self-directed and autonomous. Such avoiding behaviour leads to ineffectiveness. The other virtues noted earlier (advocating to win and sticking to our principles, values and beliefs) are also fine in moderation but destructive if overdone. Another example. If a manager excessively wants to win an argument they are controlling and this often results in power play and ultimately bullying. Again this leads to ineffective teams and organisations. Avoidance and control are therefore the two major strategies of defensiveness.

People do not set out deliberately or consciously to behave in avoiding or controlling ways. Our behaviour becomes so automatic over time that we are often completely unaware that we behave in such a way or that there is a gap between what we espouse (or say), in terms of dealing with staff, and what we do.

There are many manifestations of defensiveness, and Table 1 summarises some of these.

Table 1: Defensive Reasoning Strategies

- * Starting with positives or assurances (often called ‘easing in’) in conversations
- * With-holding information in important conversations
- * Failing to state your position or where you were coming from when discussing problems
- * Making judgements or assumptions about people without testing or checking them
- * Failing to check what your colleague thinks about any information you provide in conversation
- * Using persuasion to get what you want
- * Giving false reassurances to people to cloud your message
- * Giving mixed messages or confusing the message in an effort to be nice to colleagues
- * Trying to keep things comfortable
- * Deciding on the outcome before any conversation about problems
- * Deciding to hold back in order to protect your colleague from embarrassment or threat
- * Naming dropping when you need to support your argument
- * Ignoring or downplaying information provided by your colleagues
- * Making statements without illustration, evidence, or explanation
- * Using questioning in order to disguise your own view
- * Ignoring the feelings/responses of your colleagues
- * Avoiding disclosing your own feelings
- * Avoiding disclosing information that may upset your colleague, or weaken your position
- * Providing your own solutions to any problem with a colleague without inviting theirs (leads to low ownership)
- * Taking responsibility for following up any problems yourself (again leading to low ownership)
- * Failing to plan for any improvement where problems might have been raised
- * As a last (or maybe first) resort deciding to ‘give it to them straight’ (a blasting!) if you have a problem to resolve

Deeper analysis of these strategies reveals the two guiding values of defensiveness. The first is a controlling value (also sometimes described as “win don’t lose” or unilateral control), the second value is avoidance.

Argyris’ research, observing the way that thousands of people behave, has revealed that this conditioned defensiveness is the norm in our society. Additionally, the defensive behaviours are reported (Argyris, 1996) to be unvarying across country, age, economic status, gender, race and educational status.

The essential features of control in defensive reasoning have been summarised in the following way:

... people seek to win rather than lose and to do so with a minimum of unpleasantness. People strive to win by keeping control of both the process and the content of key conversations. They make unilateral judgements about how to interpret information, and about the goals to pursue and how to achieve them. In addition, they seek to involve others in way that protects their own judgements from challenge. (Robinson *et al.*, 1990:2)

Dick and Dalmau (1999:47) further summarise defensiveness as an approach which is “adversarial, competitive, and narrowly rational”. Defensiveness should not necessarily be viewed in a derogatory way. In low contention situations, that is when there are no problems, or when it is easy to be collaborative, some control and avoidance can be effective.

The latter is more effective for routine, non-threatening issues. (Argyris, 1985:259)

In problem situations however, when individuals are likely to resist control, or when change is threatening, avoidance and control are not likely to be effective. What is required is a change to non-defensive ways of interacting. Such change requires significant, profound, shifts involving exposure, examination, and alteration of a person’s governing values. As I have suggested earlier this is a lengthy and difficult task:

... the approach on its own is extremely complex and usually involves months, maybe years, of training. The reason for this is that the approach requires rethinking and altering our underlying value systems, and this involves changing many automatic, conditioned responses. Such values and responses cannot be changed in two hours! Robinson *et al.* (1990:55) describe the training time as taking as long as it requires for a veteran tennis player to relearn how to correctly grip a racket and to eliminate backhand slices. For many of us this takes an extremely long time and some people never learn at all! (Piggot-Irvine, 1995:140)

Overcoming defensiveness involves looking at the way that **we personally** are implicated in the problem. Such learning is described by Argyris (1990) as ‘double loop learning’, as opposed to ‘single loop learning’ where we would just learn new skills or techniques, but not surface the underlying problems. Overcoming defensiveness requires the adoption of values and strategies of productive reasoning.

Productive Reasoning

Argyris (1990) believes that team and organisational excellence is derived from learning and competence. He states that such competence involves problem solving so that problems remain solved, that is, a ‘double loop learning’ approach. Argyris’ beliefs are fundamental to understanding the concept of productive reasoning. Essentially this type of reasoning is based on the set of guiding values, and key strategies summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Productive Reasoning

Guiding values		Key strategies
Increase Valid Information For All (<i>Advocacy</i>)	* * *	When working or talking with others: - share control by exposing rather than withholding information; state position - share responsibility for goal achievement Disclose views, premises, and the evidence (hard data) or logic that lead to those views Invite challenge, evaluation, and public testing of those views
Enhance Freedom of Informed Choice (<i>Inquiry</i>)	* *	Treat views and reactions of self and others as hypotheses (rather than predetermined outcomes) to be tested Check to see how views have been understood and what views others hold; encouraging and non-defensively receiving others' views and disagreements without pre-judgement; checking perceptions in ways which reveal implicit and explicit assumptions
Gain Internal Commitment to Choice and to Monitoring (<i>Bilateralism</i>)	* *	Seek bilateral solutions and joint responsibility for planning, implementing, and monitoring of achievement of goals Manage difficult emotional issues as a joint responsibility

Piggot-Irvine (2001), adapted from Cardno (1994:159), Robinson, Absolum, Cardno, & Steele (1990:3)

Not mentioned in this summary table are other two other features of productive reasoning which also overlap with descriptions of the elements of good interpersonal relationships generally. These are the feature of managers helping staff to feel appreciated and that of adopting listening and reporting skills based on confidentiality.

Productive reasoning involves a balancing act between the two predominant features of advocacy and inquiry. Advocacy includes stating our position, and disclosing our views, premises and hard data (evidence), supporting that position in such a way that it is both hypothetical (not predetermined in terms of outcomes), and invites evaluation, challenge, and public testing. Inquiry includes encouraging and non-defensively receiving others' views and disagreements without prejudgement, the testing of our position and checking our own and others' perceptions in ways which reveal implicit and explicit assumptions. The over, or under, use of either of these features can result in either controlling or avoidance strategies, that is, defensive strategies. Advocacy and inquiry should create a genuine two-way dialogue, or informed debate,

between the manager and staff which leads to a mutual understanding and agreement about issues, even if the agreement is to disagree.

... participants should seek to understand the basis of relevant disagreements and, if possible, to resolve them through debating thebasis of the differing claims and their practical consequences. (Robinson, 1992: 349)

Once this empirically informed debate that Robinson refers to has occurred then solutions to the problem can be mutually agreed upon, improvements planned for, implemented and monitored in ways which enable individuals to be responsible for their own decisions.

Robinson *et al.* summarise productive reasoning as:

... 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. (Robinson *et al.*, 1990:2)

Bilaterality (two sidedness), or sometimes multilaterality if more than two people are involved, underpins every facet of the productive reasoning approach. This informed mutual checking of meaning, understanding, perspective, and agreement, is central to the success of the approach. The critical elements of productive reasoning, according to Dick and Dalmau (1999:47), include being “more consensual, more open to change” and as an approach it “provides more opportunity for choice”.

Most people espouse, or say, that they are productive, but few employ it in problem situations where contention and threat are heightened.

Grounded in over a decade of research that was conducted in all types of settings, including professional and educational institutions, businesses and government agencies, Argyris and Schön concluded that defensive behaviour is the predominant leadership orientation. (Bifano, 1989:60)

Note that productive reasoning is not the opposite of defensiveness. This would mean that everyone would have equal control: everyone a winner. This is unrealistic in today’s society and organisations. Decisions often have to be made and control exerted in some situations.

Nor is the productive approach suggesting that you should expose all of your thoughts to your staff. Some of our thoughts should stay hidden and our internal sensors often wisely direct us on this one. However, if we are in situations where we need to arrive at mutual understanding there are many of our thoughts that do need to be exposed.

You may be questioning at this point whether in fact you would want to become this honest. Not everyone does. Individuals who act in ways to overprotect themselves and others will not feel happy with a productive approach. Also, in dysfunctional organisations which support the practice of avoidance and control, many individuals have distanced themselves and have chosen to play it safe; to not rock the boat. Such individuals learn to disguise or suppress their productive tendencies as a way of protecting themselves. The situation is different for individuals who genuinely care about their individual performance, who are committed to striving for excellence and who want to live out their values of honesty and integrity. These individuals usually cannot suppress their productive tendencies in poor organisational environments and often choose to leave if they feel they cannot bring about changes.

Skills for Implementing Productive Reasoning

There are multiple key skills that are associated with becoming more productive, open, trust engendering and collaborative. These include:

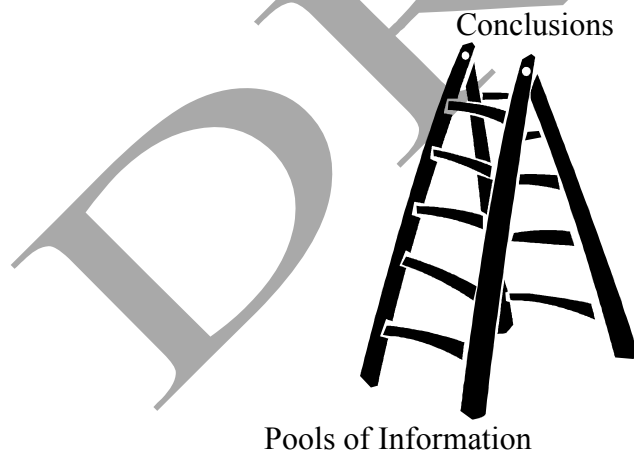
- Withholding assumptions (or to put it another way ‘not leaping to conclusions’);
- Employing both reflection **in** action and reflection **on** action;
- Engaging in double loop learning; and
- Learning and practising the skills of ‘productive dialogue’ (or ‘learning conversations’).

All of these skills will assist you to live the values of productive reasoning. You will need to recognise that in learning these skills you will have to slow down and be patient enough to unravel the existing strategies that you employ with staff. This is difficult because most of us are impatient to learn.

Withholding Assumptions

Most of us are quick to leap to our own conclusions and make assumptions about a situation and usually this occurs without reference to any supporting evidence or facts – particularly the evidence of others. Argyris (1990) and Senge et al (2000) have used a ‘ladder of inference’ to illustrate the way that we need to avoid leaping to conclusions without checking facts/data. At the bottom of the ladder is a pool of information or data, as shown in Figure 1. Each rung on the ladder represents the assumptions, or inferences, we make about that information as we incrementally move up the rungs towards a conclusion. The top step of the ladder represents a conclusion that should be factually/data based. To ensure that we are developing valid conclusions, the data (whether that is our own or others’ data) at each rung should be carefully checked for accuracy. Checking involves a high level of ‘**inquiry**’, or questioning, to test both our own and other’s perspectives. Checking minimises the drawing of invalid or inaccurate assumptions. Providing and checking of evidence is therefore a crucial component of productive reasoning because it prevents us from drawing premature and often inaccurate conclusions.

Figure 1: Ladder of Inference



Another important facet of withholding assumptions is the revelation/sharing of our own thoughts and beliefs associated with this checking of data as we move up the rungs on the ladder. Such openness, **or advocacy**, about our own views helps others to understand our own perspective.

Employing Reflection *in* and Reflection *on* Action

Schön calls ‘reflection in action’ our ability to check and test our assumptions whilst we are engaged *in* a conversation. This is a fundamental skill that enhances productive reasoning but it requires us to be exceptionally skilled at responding appropriately in the midst of a conversation. This is the most challenging level of reflection:

- it occurs when we are able to think about what we are doing, while we are doing it;
- it occurs when we are capable of changing our actions in mid-performance; and
- the hardest thing to learn is how to check and test our assumptions whilst we are engaged in a difficult conversation.

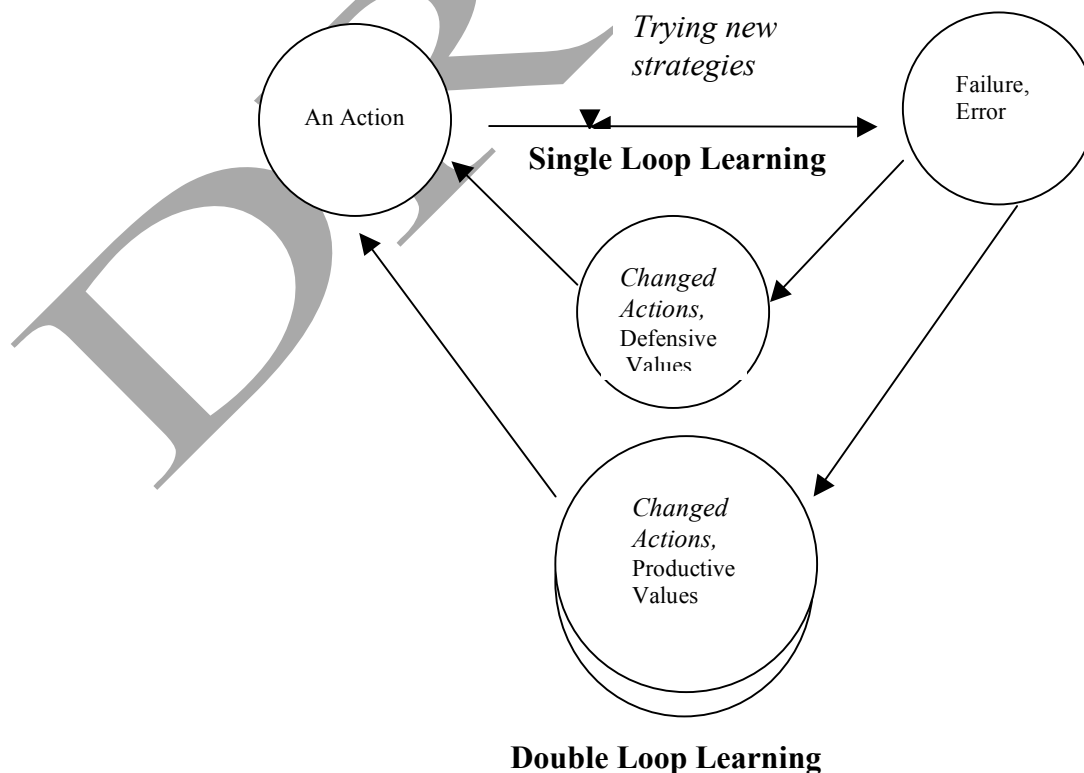
Reflection *in* action becomes easier as we practise all of the skills linked to engaging in productive reasoning.

Reflection *on* action, on the other hand involves stopping and standing back to think about what happened retrospectively. This is much easier to do than reflection in action because as we all know it is easier to be wise in hindsight!

Engaging in Double Loop Learning

In single loop learning the emphasis is on **changing the action** or trying a new strategy but **not changing the two defensive governing values** of control and avoidance. To genuinely engage in productive and collaborative interactions, double loop learning is required. Here, foundation beliefs and governing values must be re-examined and, if necessary, changed to generate valid information and to seek and monitor joint commitment to changes that are effective. Defensiveness can be overcome by engaging in double loop learning, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Single and Double Loop Learning



Learning and Practising the Skills of Productive Dialogue

Note that Robinson and Lai (2006) use the term ‘learning conversations’ to cover a similar set of skills to those that I am calling ‘productive dialogue’. Productive dialogue skills involve disclosing your opinion and reasoning (**advocacy**) and then checking whether others see the situation in the same way that you do (**inquiry**). In addition to these initial key steps (as shown in Table 3) there are those involving working with others to find mutually acceptable solutions, prioritising these solutions, acting upon them, and monitoring. The steps therefore involve:

- **Advocacy**
 - Stating your position, being open, by disclosing concerns/views, backed by evidence, and revealing reasoning behind views
 - Inviting challenge of position, views, facts
- **Inquiry**
 - Checking to see if views have been understood and what views others hold
 - Receiving other’s views non-defensively
 - Summarising mutual understanding of issues
- **Gaining Internal Commitment and Monitoring**
 - Seeking bilateral solutions
 - Taking joint responsibility for planning, implementation and monitoring.

Table 3: Productive Dialogue Steps

<i>Remember to circle back to Step 1 whenever you need to.</i>	
STEPS	PROMPTS
1. STATE YOUR CONCERN [<i>inform</i> - say what you think] Collectively Steps 1 & 2 are often referred to as ‘Advocacy’ Steps	<i>Do not ask questions – give information and be forthright.</i> <i>Do not ease in or give mixed messages.</i>
2. STATE THE REASONS FOR YOUR CONCERN [<i>illustrate</i> - say why you think it and be open about how you feel]	<i>Explain your reasoning.</i> <i>Give examples and evidence.</i> <i>Provide information that reveals why you think/feel this way.</i>
3. GET REACTIONS [<i>inquire</i> - check what others think and feel and deal with emotions] This step is often referred to as the ‘Inquiry’ Step.	<i>Seek – ask for information.</i> <i>Be observant and listen carefully.</i> <i>Your questions should encourage others to share views.</i>
4. SUMMARISE SHARED UNDERSTANDING OR NEED FOR MORE INFORMATION	<i>Check for agreement of perceptions, facts and understanding of the concern.</i> <i>Paraphrase views, be patient and prepare to try again.</i>
REPEAT STEPS 1 – 4 IF NECESSARY	<i>Common views of complex problems are seldom</i>

BEFORE MOVING ON	<i>arrived at quickly. Keep circling through steps 1 – 4 above. This allows new information to be valued.</i>
5. JOINTLY SUGGEST AND EVALUATE SOLUTIONS	Do not be impatient to reach this point. Clarification of the concern is paramount. You are not expected to provide a solution alone.
6. DECIDE TOGETHER ON A SOLUTION	Solutions need to be evaluated by both parties to ensure that they will meet both organisational and interpersonal goals.
7. AGREE NEXT STEP AND PLAN JOINT MONITORING	Long-term solutions will require regular monitoring and continuing communication about concerns and change. Commitment needs checking.

Cardno (1994) has also coined the phrase the “triple I” approach to describe the first three steps of dialogue skills. The “triple I” refers to:

1. Inform;
2. Illustrate; and
3. Inquire

One of the unexpected payoffs of learning the productive dialogue skills is that you become quick at recognising defensive routines without being drawn into them; you do not have your buttons pushed by others who are using these routines!

Note that just changing the words that you use in developing the new skills will not be enough. Becoming candid and open (that is, employing **advocacy**) yet holding defensive “win, don’t lose” values is a recipe for distrust and disaster. In order to live the values of productive reasoning you need to practice double loop learning and to change your underlying values, as described earlier.

Learning these skills requires many practice sessions with specific the guidelines for the steps described for productive dialogue and repeated trials in numerous problem situations with a highly skilled facilitator. It ultimately requires courage. A participant on a recent course that I conducted described the approach as “courageous confrontation”! Yes, it is, but the outcome is an effective, open and high trust collaborative team and organisation. In my experience the courage is essential for all individuals and organisations that want to be excellent.

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