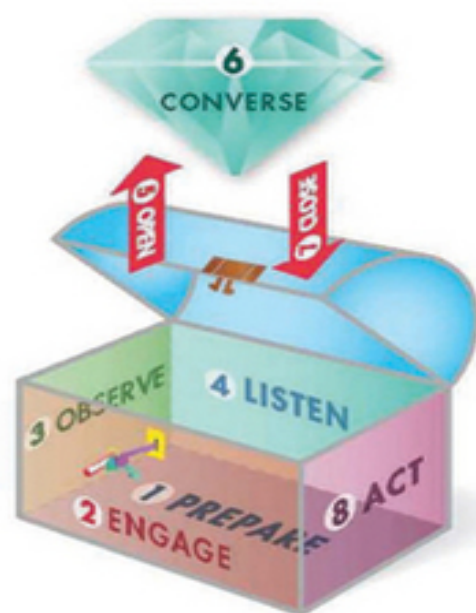


Why
Communication
Isn't Enough
and
What We Can Do
About It,
Fast

Dialogue Gap



Peter Nixon

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Dialogue Gap

*Why Communication
Isn't Enough and What
We Can Do About It, Fast*

Peter Nixon



John Wiley & Sons Singapore Pte. Ltd.

More Praise for Dialogue Gap

“As someone who spent 50 years managing people, I wish I had read this book long ago. Peter provides us with a detailed description of the difference between negotiation and communication; he makes us realize that in times of crisis, dialogue is always the solution and the very essence of teamwork.”

—Jean Marchand

Chairman and Founder, Universitas Trust Funds of Canada

Chairman and Founder, Educaid, educational assistance fund

“Peter has been a passionate proponent and champion of effective dialogue for many years, and his latest book should be considered an essential reference tool for anyone looking to take their negotiations, mediation, and dialogue to the next level.”

—Peter R. Morgan

Former police hostage negotiator and Head of the Police
Negotiation Cadre

Hong Kong Police

“I value how Peter Nixon has covered dialogue in his book and have already adopted a dialogue-based behavior that has led to a healthier, more productive working environment.”

—Dr. Hayat Abdulla Maarafi

Executive Director, Qatar Debate

Member of Qatar Foundation

“I share Peter’s passion for promoting and, indeed, pointing the way on how to achieve meaningful dialogue. In business as in the global community we now live in, it

all comes down to transparency and open sharing of thoughts.”

—John Crawford, JP
Chairman, International Quality Education Limited
Hong Kong

“Effective dialogue and negotiation in business are the only way to remain on top of your competition. I thank Peter for letting me understand the skill and the art of effective negotiation.”

—Irfan Muneer
Sales Director, Din Group of Industries
Karachi, Pakistan

“Effective dialogue is needed to help congregational life; dialogue training is needed for clergy and church leaders, and dialogue is essential if the church is to remain an instrument of transformation in the world of the twenty-first century.”

—Father Mark Rogers
Discovery Bay Church
Hong Kong

“This is a must-read book for all who want to understand the art of conversation and the virtue of listening.”

—Therese Necio-Ortega
Marketing and corporate communications specialist
Principal, TNO Link Concepts Consultancy Ltd
Hong Kong

“I fully endorse the fact that dialogue is the key process in making real change happen within teams and organizations.”

—Joanne Davis
Managing Director, Eventworks Ltd
Hong Kong

“It is only through dialogue and understanding that we will ever create peaceful hearts and minds.”

—The Very Reverend Diane Nancekivell
Chair, Kids4Peace USA
Vermont, United States

“Peter Nixon’s Optimal Outcomes dialogue road map is my new talisman (defined as ‘to initiate into the mysteries’) of optimal outcomes.”

—Denis Vaillancourt
Founder and Managing Director, Securicom Solutions
Vancouver, Canada

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Despite the fact that optimal outcomes are derived through dialogue, we often endure dialogue gaps @ work, @ home, and in society.

This book is dedicated to those of you who suffer the negative effects of dialogue gaps whether they are caused by others or by you. If you know a dialogue gap that needs improving, offer the stakeholders this book and engage them in dialogue for a better world.

Be a dialogue leader—the solution is in the dialogue.

—Peter Nixon

Introduction

What Is Dialogue Gap?

Only praying and wishing for a world without problems is unrealistic. We must learn from our sad experiences and promote the spirit of dialogue.

—14th Dalai Lama, 2009¹

We believe that there is a greater need than ever for leaders to meet and genuinely “think together” the real meaning of dialogue. Only through creating such opportunities can there be any hope of building the shared understanding and coordinated innovative action that the world desperately needs.

—2001 letter penned by senior leaders from BP, Hewlett-Packard, Intel, Shell, Visteon²

To open yourself to begin to understand the theory behind dialogue is to open yourself up to the forces that make human endeavours effective or not. Once you are aware of these forces, you can no longer simply blame people for situations that don’t work out and you can begin to set up conversations that will engender better results.

—William Isaacs, 1999³

The world is in crisis. Everywhere we turn we are confronted with unprecedented problems be they economic, environmental, social, or health related. To survive the twenty-first century we need to rediscover how to dialogue not just to live peaceably and sustainably on this planet, but also to lead our organizations through the turbulence and into a successful future. Communicating better isn’t enough.

We need to innovate and find ways to do things differently. This requires effective dialogue at work, at home, and in society.

This book explores the gap between the quality of the dialogues we have and the quality of the dialogues we need to survive and thrive in the twenty-first century. I call this gap *the dialogue gap*. In this book I explore the causes and implications of dialogue gap; how to improve our dialogues to reduce the negative effects of dialogue gap in our lives; how to assess, practice, and sustain improved dialogue; and finally, I share my vision for a dialogic future.

Dialogue is the only important human skill that we don't train people how to do effectively. Many of us have studied breathing, sleeping, eating, walking, but nowhere in the academic or corporate curriculums will you find lessons on how to dialogue. Is it any wonder that the world is in the poor state that it is?

"Clearly we need to rethink the old approaches to governing the global economy," say Tapscott and Williams, authors of *MacroWikinomics*.⁴

The world is still a beautiful place full of promise and opportunity and new solutions are being developed through the global collaboration of passionate like-minded people who are connecting through the Internet and in person to share ideas and think together. The Global Redesign Initiative of the World Economic Forum (WEF) is just one of hundreds of groups around the world trying to stimulate dialogue toward creating a sustainable future.⁵ Klaus Schwab, founder of WEF, suggests that the old ways of solving problems "through traditional negotiation processes characterized by the defense of national interests are inadequate in the face of critical global challenges."⁶

In dialogue, we change through mutual appreciation, sympathy, and empathy. This is not the easiest method of human communication, but it is the most fruitful. That is

why dialogue is the most meaningful path to negotiating a new global civilization based on the contributions of all past human civilizations.

—Majid Tehranian⁷

The 2010 IBM CEO Survey revealed that complexity in business today is rising but CEO ability to deal with it is doubtful. Likewise creativity is considered the most important skill of CEO's today; co-creating products and services with customers is defining success and the most dexterous leaders are producing the best results.⁸ What do I consider to be the common thread between all these findings? A leader's ability to dialogue effectively will help him or her handle complexity at the speed it arises, harness the creative ideas of people around him or her, co-create with others, and remain dexterous to deal with change. Why is dialogue not therefore included in corporate curriculums and business schools everywhere? I think it is only a matter of time.

The Clarity of Expatriation

Important insights arise from periods of reflection assisted by trained observation, input from a wide variety of perspectives and compassion to understand differences. Things we know and take for granted today were once unimaginable. Discovery of new information is often made easier by people encountering situations from a completely different mind-set and whose resulting detachment allow them to see things as they really are.

Growing up in the French Canadian city of Montreal in the 1960s and 1970s is incredibly different from my current life in Hong Kong where I have lived since moving here a few months after the fall of the Wall in Eastern Europe and the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing in 1989. In many respects the insights I offer in this book arise from my being

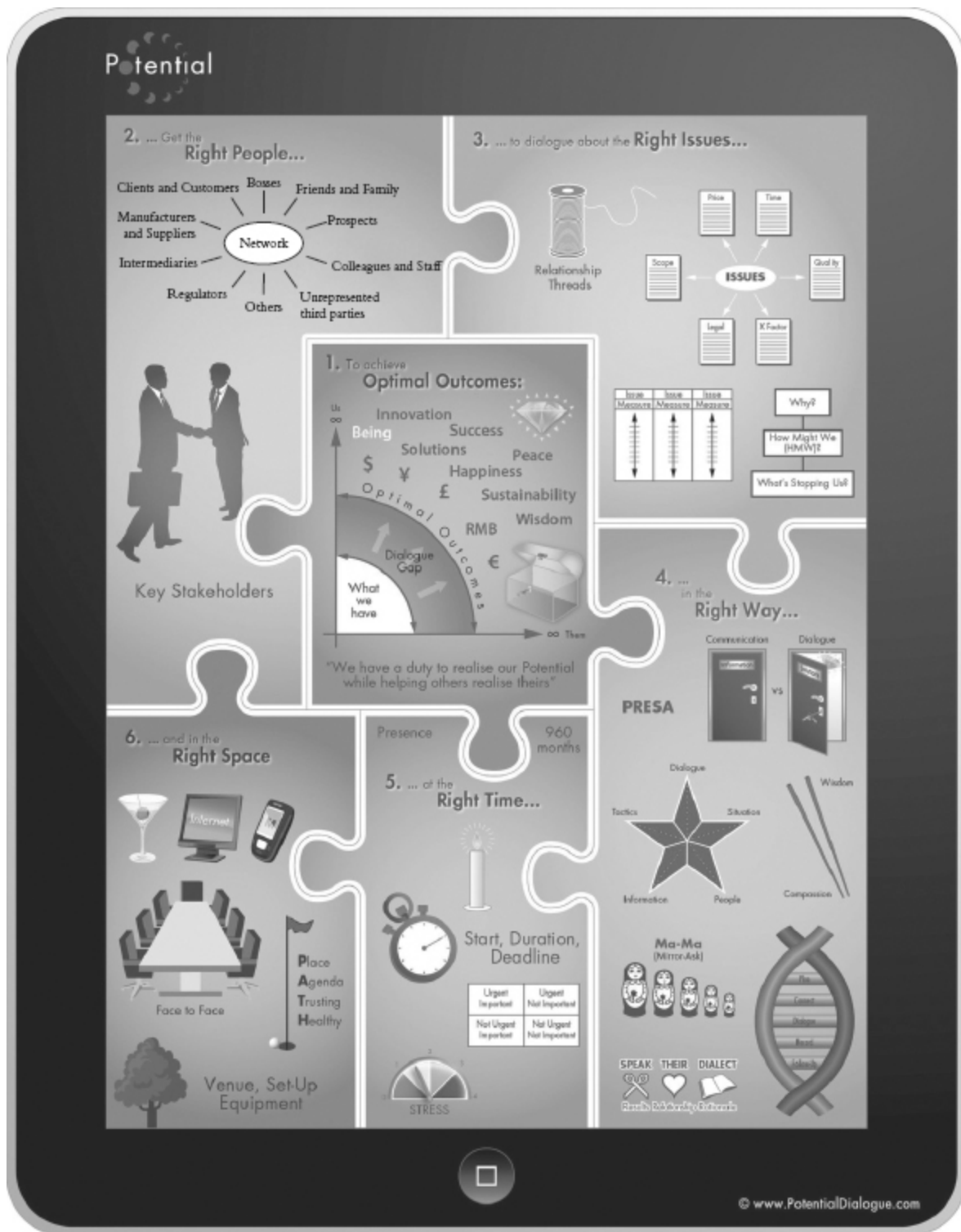
displaced and therefore detached, a feeling typical of expatriates everywhere, and yet I am compassionately interested in and professionally trained to analyze life in my new surroundings.

We have now entered a stage of history during which “dialogue” is becoming as necessary as “life” and “peace.” In fact, dialogue may be the only means by which we can guarantee life and peace.

—Majid Tehranian⁹

Many readers may consider the existence of dialogue gap as obvious but I consider it so important that I have diverted my work, encompassed its full importance and do all I can to share the implications of my findings and how to achieve optimal outcomes with groups around the world through writing, speaking, consulting, training, and coaching.

My main observation, that ***the solution is in the dialogue***, highlights a crisis of our time because I have observed that we don't dialogue when we should and even when we do dialogue the quality and quantity of our dialogue falls significantly short of what is needed as demonstrated by the growing number of intractable problems in the world today. My observation that the solution is in the dialogue results largely from my having had the opportunity (voluntarily) to radically change my “lifeworlds” more significantly than most people in their career.¹⁰ These changes have forced me to reconcile the glaring differences these colliding lifeworlds brought to my attention. In the following chapters you learn about what I call dialogue, where dialogue gap originates, and what we can do to improve dialogue both personally and organizationally. I am passionate about our need to improve dialogue and I believe that if we don't improve dialogue quickly the long-term prospects for civilized life on earth are limited.



Although I discuss dialogue issues @ home and @ large, the main application of this book is aimed at helping with dialogues @ work. Toward the end of this chapter you will find a list of dialogue gaps at work describing where they

appear and what optimal outcomes look like when dialogue leaders step in to make this a reality. Similar lists exist for situations at home and in society but the ways to resolve these are largely the same and the rest of this book offers solutions available to all three environments. What principally makes the difference in all these environments is your ability to effectively lead the dialogue.

What You Will Discover in This Book

This book is my dialogue with you. The book is divided into three parts of three chapters each. Part I introduces the details of the book, key definitions, dialogue gap including how dialogue gap arose and its implications @ work, @ home, and @ large in society.

Part II provides solutions to overcome or reduce dialogue gap and goes into detail about getting the right people to dialogue on the right issues in the right way and at the right time and space, all elements of what I call the dialogue puzzle.

Part III focuses on dialogue leadership and helps you identify behaviors and processes to improve and sustain dialogue both personally and inside your organization.

Sprinkled throughout the book are quotations from leading thinkers, past and present, whose contributions to our dialogue here are both an inspiration and a guide for us as dialogue leaders. Also included with each chapter are a few short case scenarios drawn from my client work to provide you with live examples of where effective dialogue or the effects of dialogue gap had an important impact on the outcomes for the organization.

How Dialogue Gap Arose

The purpose of dialogue is none other than pursuit of truth.

—Montaigne^{[11](#)}

Chapter 1 discusses the origin of dialogue gap and defines the terms used throughout the rest of this book. It provides a useful overview of my observations on dialogue. After reading Chapter 2 I suggest you jump around the book to engage in the aspects of dialogue you want to go deeper into. Chapters 3 to 5 explore the dialogue puzzle and suggest that optimal outcomes are achieved when dialogue among the right people (the stakeholders) is managed effectively to cover the right issues in the right way, at the right time, and in the right space. The chapters explore each piece of the puzzle in order.

Implications of Dialogue Gap

One of the most important differences my changing lifeworlds exposed for me is one that I share with many of you, too, especially the older and normally paper-based readers of this book. If you commenced your career before the 1990s you had the chance to work and live for a time before the advent of computers. Now, however, you find yourself living in a world where it is hard even to imagine a day without heavy reliance on computers, cell phones, and the Internet. If, on the other hand, you commenced your career in the 1990s, it is likely that the Internet world we live in today is all you have ever known and you might well be reading this book in its digital format.

Those of us who experienced an analogue youth (i.e., no computers) and are now experiencing a digital adulthood (lots of computers) will relate to and agree with the problems arising from what I refer to as ***the digital tipping***

point, the point after which we spend more than half our time digitally rather than personally connected with other people on a daily basis.¹² Many of us passed our digital tipping point many years ago.

Another colliding pair of lifeworlds compares the first 25 years of my life in which family, community, and work challenges were answered by getting together to talk, discuss, debate, and work out a way forward together. If there were no challenges to resolve, then family, friends, and colleagues would meet anyway to swap stories, tell jokes, and simply enjoy each other's company. I was most impressed by the people who told the best stories, wove the best arguments, and asked the smartest questions. I respected the expression "people will know how smart you are by the questions you ask." These same people often seemed to be the community leaders for whom we all held respect.

Since the advent of digital communication, my life, like many of you reading this book, has involved much less dialogue and much more communication. We now send and receive hundreds of messages daily but find ourselves seldom if ever sitting around engaged in dialogue.

I define communication as exchanging information and I define dialogue as thinking together.

Communication and dialogue are important and closely related but not the same nor should they be used for the same situations. Sadly today many people communicate when they should dialogue; for example, people send e-mail when they should talk face to face. And to make matters worse, we are spending less and less time in dialogue so our dialogue skills are diminishing.

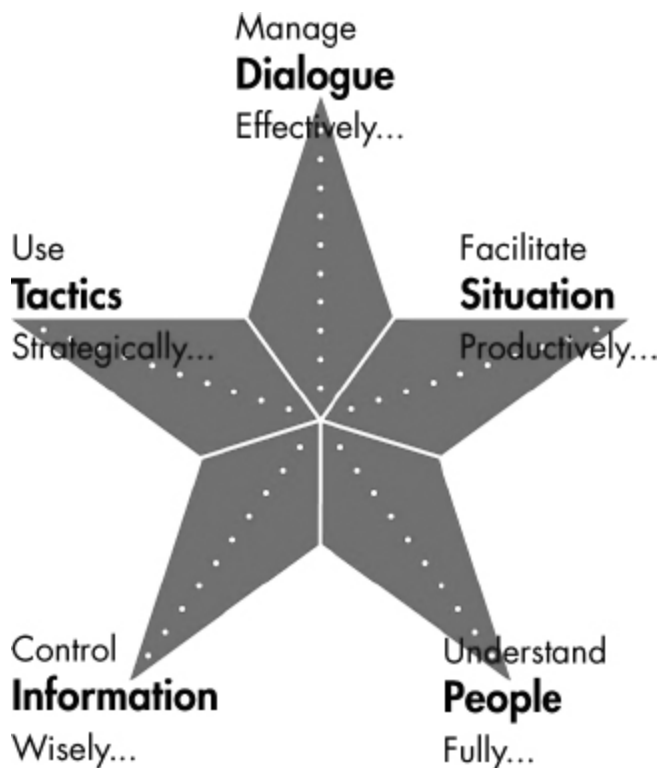
So perhaps, if we could this morning have a dialogue on whatever subject you want, bearing in mind that without this quality of affection, care, love, and compassion, we merely play with words, remain superficial, antagonistic,

assertive, dogmatic, and so on. It remains merely verbal; it has no depth, no quality, no perfume.

—J. Krishnamurti¹³

Chapter 2 explores various examples of life beyond the digital tipping point causing problems at work, at home, and in society. It looks at situations where Dialogue Gap creates problems that didn't even exist 10 years ago.

Moving from my life in Canada to my life in Hong Kong meant leaving a North American culture that values speaking up, making a difference, and leading change to a Confucian culture, which values letting others speak first, not rising above the crowd, and avoiding conflict if possible. These differences motivated my exploration of cross-cultural differences in negotiation and how to achieve optimal outcomes in our world today. My cross-cultural observations together with practical ways to improve negotiated outcomes are described in my first book *Negotiation: Mastering Business in Asia* (John Wiley & Sons, 2005).¹⁴



My international work in negotiation has created another collision of lifeworlds for me. I started my career auditing with the large international firm called Coopers & Lybrand (now called PwC and the world's largest accounting firm). I first worked for the firm in Montreal and then moved to Geneva and onto Hong Kong. My audit career gave me a professional license to walk into major multinational companies around the world and uncover what made them successful. I was deeply interested in this work and chose to use my international audit skills to build a practice helping multinationals negotiate optimal outcomes for their businesses.

I offered a rare combination of skills in a rapidly growing marketplace (Asia Pacific) and business opportunities were good, so thus began a decade of extensive work and travel participating in exciting cross-cultural commercial and change management negotiations taking place during the rise of China and India. My travels took me to the United States, Europe, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and throughout the Asia Pacific region from the north in Japan and Korea through China and the ASEAN countries down to Australia and from Pakistan and India in the west all the way to Taiwan in the east and everything in between.

Whereas my audit and early negotiation work was largely focused on the financial aspects of corporations, the more I gained experience and became known in the field, the more I was invited into situations that involved social, environmental, and economic issues of great importance. At the same time I came to realize that in many situations my negotiation clients were simply looking to increase their happiness and reduce their suffering (a basic Buddhist belief). At this point my colliding lifeworlds resulted in two additional observations:

- 1.** Despite clients communicating more than ever, by leveraging the Internet and all it offered multinational

corporations, companies were still not achieving optimal outcomes. This realization led to my recognizing that communication and dialogue were not the same and that my Star Negotiator model, described in my negotiation book, needed tweaking to suggest that **Star Negotiators *dialogue* rather than *communicate* effectively.**¹⁵

2. My second and related observation is that **optimal outcomes** (as defined by Nobel Prize-winning John Nash as the point at which no one party can achieve more in a negotiation without another party losing something) **can only be achieved using dialogue (not communication).**

How to Get the Right People Talking about the Right Issues

Part II picks up where my book on negotiation left off. In Part II I explore specifically how to get the right people talking about the right issues in the right way and at the right time and space. Chapter 3 combines people and issues because they are hard to separate and given different people have different perspectives and issues of importance based on their role and background. In Chapter 4 I explore the factors involved in getting the stakeholders into dialogue and how to identify and classify their issues.

How to Dialogue in the Right Way

Another observation that resulted from my colliding lifeworlds came when I combined my external consulting with my internal career of board membership and senior executive coaching. Once the challenges of implementing

change became more fully understood so, too, did the solutions I offered my clients, family, and friends. These insights form the basis of Chapter 4 where I describe dialogue leadership behaviors in detail. When used effectively these behaviors enable you to rebuild dialogue and optimize solutions at home, at work, and in society.

How to Dialogue in the Right Time and Space

Chapter 5 reminds us that achieving optimal outcomes also requires managing the time and space aspects of the situations you or your organization find yourselves in. I delve briefly into these factors because they are important and because the cases shared in this book often point to problems in these areas.

How to Assess and Practice Better Dialogue

Part 3 of this book focuses on you as a dialogue leader and provides valuable tips to begin achieving optimal outcomes. Chapter 6 offers dialogue assessments that I use with clients at both the personal and organizational level to try and help them identify where they are going wrong and what they need to do to rebuild effective dialogue into their organizations and lives. Readers will find the list of dialogue blockers valuable when checking what is hindering their own dialogue skills. Most of these “dialogue blockers” were provided by our clients over many years of working with them to improve their outcomes.

The essence of dialogue lies in prompting the meeting of hearts and minds.

—Daisaku Ikeda¹⁶

Chapter 7, **Sustaining Dialogue**, explores dialogue theories, approaches, methods, and processes to maintain effective dialogue especially when facing the challenging situations that life throws at us. Although many of these processes are known to facilitators, they are lesser known to the business world and the general public and seldom are they lined up and compared as I attempt to do here.

The “keeper” for me [from Alan Stewart’s presentation] was the wonderful notion that every time we talk openly with another human being, a third joint-level of consciousness is created, from the best of both of us. When we argue or debate, we actually seek to block the other’s contribution and limit potential solutions or suggestions, limiting world consciousness.

—David Catherine Palin-Brinkworth¹⁷

Chapter 8, Dialogic Leadership, introduces a concept I call **Potentialism** and that itself arises from another collision of my lifeworlds. Like most people my age, I grew up in the city in which I was born and, apart from a trip to the World Boy Scout Jamboree in Lillehammer, Norway, and a scholarship year at the University of Alberta, for 27 years I lived where I grew up, in the province of Quebec in Canada. Since leaving Montreal, however, to work in Geneva in 1988, at about the same time PCs were becoming fully present in companies around the world, I have worked, lived, and traveled internationally. Whereas the first half of my life was local, the second half of my life has been global. As a result of this changed lifeworld my perspectives have given rise to what I refer to as *Potentialism*.

International travel helped me see the most beautiful things the world has to offer but also exposed me to the most wretched things. I have witnessed firsthand the extremes of wealth and poverty, sickness and health, education and ignorance, pristine nature and extreme

environmental degradation, happiness and depression, peace and war, faith and desperation, life and death.

My travels, professional training, and colliding lifeworlds have given me the detached yet compassionate role of a reflective practitioner and I feel obliged to share my observations and suggested solutions with you here in this book. Many of you are fellow travelers with whom I have learned many of these things. Some of you have preceded or followed me on some of the paths I have taken and have as a result witnessed similar things. Some of you long to change your own lifeworlds to widen your understanding of the world in which we live. Some of you are content where you are and have no goal to change or expand your world preferring simply to make your existing world a better place. Regardless of where you are or what direction you are moving I encourage you to accept my concept of Potentialism—***“we all have a duty to realize our potential while helping others realize theirs.”***

Chapter 8 discusses how we might realize our potential through a dialogic future. I touch on some of the negative implications that will arise if we don't improve dialogue (some of which we can already see today in the social, economic, and environmental crisis that we face around the world) and the positive results that can be achieved if we learn to dialogue more effectively as leaders.

I conclude this book by encouraging you and other readers to use the ideas and experience shared in these pages as the beginning of your own ***dialogue on dialogue*** together with the people you share your lives with, at home, at work, and in society. I encourage local, national, and world leaders to set an example and to use this book to remind people that we need to improve dialogue effectiveness if we are to resolve the ever increasing challenges of our globalized, interdependent, and fragile twenty-first century. Finally I encourage parents, teachers, and trainers everywhere to

use this book as a resource to teach our young people and train our workforce to use dialogue to realize their personal and organizational potential while helping others realize theirs.

One thing science and religion agree on today is that we have plenty of problems awaiting us in the future. Knowing the solution is in the dialogue and knowing that leaders like you aim to make a positive difference, I join the majority around the world who in faith and hope, believe we can realize our potential while living an environmentally sustainable, socially just, and spiritually fulfilling human existence on earth.^{[18](#)}

The 21st Century is the Century of Dialogue.

—14th Dalai Lama^{[19](#)}

The World in Turmoil

As I put a wrap on the writing of this book, evidence of Dialogue Gap is rumbling through the Middle East and North Africa and sending jitters through autocratic leaders in China and beyond. In Japan questions are being asked about the quality of dialogue that placed nuclear reactors on top of known geological fault lines and close to shore in reach of tsunami waves.

People today are connected and communicate like never before. Using communication tools like Twitter and Facebook we create communities to share information and occasionally inspire assemblies in person in spaces like Tahrir Square in Cairo to dialogue and enact change @ work, @ home, and in society.

The purpose of this book is to highlight how our overreliance on communication (defined as the exchange of information) that has diminished our ability to dialogue (defined as productively thinking together) leading to suboptimal outcomes at work, at home, and in society.

I suggest that the quality of dialogue is diminishing at a time when the need for effective dialogue is greater than ever before. The shortcoming between the quality of the dialogues we have and the quality of the dialogues we need is what I call Dialogue Gap. I believe dialogue gaps are growing for most of us because our dialogue skills are diminishing and because we spend less and less time in dialogue, preferring instead to communicate using our favorite communication gadgets such as “smart” phones, e-mail, and the Internet.

In studies carried out in 2011, 10 percent of Hong Kong teens qualify as being addicted to the Internet while in the United States 4 percent of teens have problematic internet use.²⁰ In the U.S. study, teens who reported an irresistible urge to be online and tension when they weren’t, also reported being more likely to be depressed, aggressive, and use drugs.²¹ In Hong Kong 82 percent of those surveyed use the Internet to interact with other people or check on them through social networks, chat rooms, and message boards. Of those considered addicted, symptoms include avoiding face-to-face contact with people other than via Internet messaging.

Leadership—Dialogue versus Autocracy

Noticeable perpetrators of dialogue gap today are those leaders who prefer the command and control culture of the twentieth century—those who repeatedly remind us that it is “my way or the highway,” “take it or leave it,” “you are either with us or you are against us.” This dualistic thinking typical of autocratic leadership was successful when followers had incomplete information and a need for direction, but the world has changed. Now people access

information freely and instantly over the Internet and via mobile phones and self-organize to achieve their common goals. Successful leaders today need to master dialogue to quickly understand the situation and agree on the best way forward. It is only in this way that you will achieve optimal outcomes in the complex environments in which we work today.

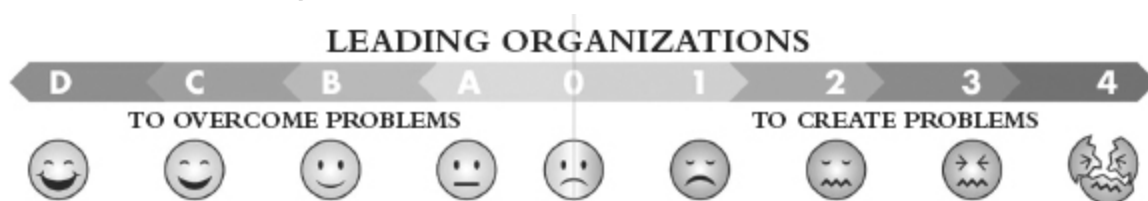
The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can't have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail. The government must create the conditions for dialogue, and the opposition must participate to forge a just future for all. . . . Such open discourse is important even if what is said does not square with our worldview. . . . That is the choice that must be made—a choice between hate and hope; between the shackles of the past and the promise of the future. It's a choice that must be made by leaders and by the people, and it's a choice that will define the future.

—Excerpt from U.S. President Obama's Mideast Speech, May 19, 2011

Although societal dialogues get the most coverage in the media, dialogue @ work has the biggest impact on us economically while dialogues at home seem closest to our hearts. This book examines dialogue in all three settings: work, home, and society, but focuses primarily on dialogues @ work.

We need to improve the quality of our dialogue if we are to achieve optimal outcomes; however, when leaders suggest dialogue be used to address problems they do so assuming that the people involved know what dialogue means and how to dialogue effectively. But dialogue has all but disappeared from the workplace and we don't teach dialogue in schools so how can we expect people to respond effectively?

As you read in Part I of this book, life in the digital era is forcing us to communicate digitally more than ever before. As we spend more and more time communicating we are spending less and less time conversing. As a result our dialogue skills are diminishing. When we do choose to dialogue our diminished dialogue skills lead to more conflict further reducing our desire to choose dialogue when decision making and the cycle continues until we find ourselves with a gap between the quality of dialogues we have and the quality of dialogues we need. Faced with dialogue gap what do we do? Rather than work things out, we change suppliers, change employers, change our spouse, or move to a new community. In many situations it is not just a dialogue gap, it is a gaping black hole where no one talks to each other and conflict is rife. Sound familiar? This book is for you.



“The times they are a changin’.”

Thoughts from Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic and one of the key opposition leaders involved in the 1989 peaceful “velvet revolution” that led to the break-up of Czechoslovakia, seem applicable today:

I think there are good reasons for suggesting that the modern age has ended. Today, many things indicate that we are going through a transitional period, when it seems that something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born. It is as if something were crumbling, decaying and exhausting itself, while something else, still indistinct, were arising from the rubble.

—Vaclav Havel²²