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DIALOGICAL INTERACTION

According to our understanding, good-quality reflection and the learning it supports happen most successfully within dialogical interaction. By dialogical interaction we mean a discussion in which all participants can join-in with their own experiences and points of view and learn from one another. The aim of dialogue is to gain a better understanding of the topic, of others, and oneself. This type of interaction produces an atmosphere that builds trust and encourages creativity. By making dialogue a basic skill of employees and a widespread practice in workplaces we can build a work culture where everybody learns.

Dialogue in a Supervision Session

The supervisor must act as a director of both reflective learning and dialogical interaction. Only then can she help her supervisees to utilise each other's experiences and pursue new points of view, instead of merely repeating their rigid behavioural patterns and sticking to out-dated beliefs. Building dialogical interaction is challenging in many ways, because it differs from our everyday interaction, which is largely based on relatively superficial conversations, one-dimensional debates and the search for hasty compromises.

Dialogue on the other hand is based on listening patiently to another person, being aware of the limits of one's own point of view, and considering the points of view of others. It strives for learning and creativity. A director of dialogical interaction should help people rid themselves of their usual conversational habits for a moment and to adapt towards another form of communication. To support this task, the supervisor needs a clear understanding of how dialogue is created and facilitated. First and foremost, she needs to have skills to direct dialogical interaction in order to support learning and reflection.

The supervisor should tell her supervisees what sort of interaction is pursued in the sessions and what are the benefits of dialogical interaction. She can start by presenting some of the core features of dialogue and by discussing examples of what can be achieved in supervision through dialogical discussion. The most important promoter of dialogical interaction is, however, the supervisor's own example: her way of directing the conversation

and participating in the session. This is manifested in both what she says and how it is said and in her non-verbal gestures and expressions.

In the beginning of the session, the supervisor must help the participants to settle into the supervision situation and create a benevolent, safe and open atmosphere for reflection. For the supervisor, preparing for the dialogical interaction starts before the session, because her attitude towards the situation and the supervisees affects how the session starts. The best way for the supervisor to prepare for her task is to make sure that her own mind is sufficiently calm and composed. This allows her to listen genuinely to her supervisees and to help them listen to themselves and others.

Facilitating dialogical interaction begins right at the start of the session, when the participants begin to describe their work situations and the kinds of questions they have. At this point it is most crucial to build a feeling of safety around the interaction. In community and group supervision this sometimes entails acknowledging the existing tensions and conflicts between the participants and discussing the supervisees' willingness to examine them together in a respectful manner. The supervisor's task is to ensure that *all sorts of experiences can be brought up*. An essential difference to regular, everyday interaction is that supervision encourages discussions in which the participants consciously abstain from presenting interpretations, definitions and conclusions, and do not try to change others' thoughts, emotions or opinions. This is supported by the calm and focused nature of the discussion. If needed, the supervisor can ask the participants to speak slower and without haste,

so that they can express their own experience with sufficient intricacy.

The goal is for the participants to talk specifically about their *current experiences* and not to repeat their habitual thoughts. The supervisor can support this by asking them to describe things exactly as they are in their minds at that moment. She can direct their speech towards the current moment by asking what is important to them in the things that arise right now: in this situation, at this moment. The supervisees can also be asked to explain more, to clarify what they have said and to continue freely in their train of thought.

A facilitator of dialogical interaction also strives to listen to and bring to light the participants' *internal dialogue*. A person's experience is not formed in a monologue, but in an internal conversation which has many different voices and perspectives. In our minds, we constantly discuss with other people, and we ponder things from many different perspectives. When a supervisor listens to a supervisee's speech, she tries to distinguish the different voices and perspectives within it. She can ask the supervisees who they are discussing this topic with in their minds. She can also ask what the subject looks like from different perspectives: What do you think about this yourself? What do your colleagues think? What about your clients?

The supervisor should also pay attention to her own inner dialogue. She should grasp what is in the focus of her experience at the moment and what kind of perceptions, thoughts, emotions, memories and images appear at the fringes. From this flow of experience she can try to gain insights into the supervisees' situation and formulate questions for them.

Example: Internal dialogue in individual supervision

Matt was a private entrepreneur who worked as a consultant in the technology industry. He wanted to attend individual supervision to be able to examine his work situations and professional development. He had thought for a long time about shifting the focus of his consulting from questions about technology more towards developing teamwork. The supervisor listened to Matt and noticed that he had many types of ideas about the changes to his consulting work. Sometimes Matt was very excited about these new ideas and their potential. Sometimes he was hesitant and talked about the financial security his current job offered him.

The supervisor told Matt about detecting these two different “voices” in his speech, which clearly showed conflicting views of his situation. The supervisor asked what Matt thought about this internal dialogue. Matt was quiet for a long time and finally said that the side that searches for security comes from his father, who had been a private entrepreneur who had struggled with debt his whole life. After hearing this, the supervisor asked Matt to consider the origins of the side of him that wanted change. Matt said he did not really know but would like to understand it better. After this, the sessions focused on examining where this need for change originated and how it “spoke” with the need for security that had dominated Matt’s life for such a long time.

In group supervision, clear structures are needed to *separate speaking and listening*. In its most simple form this means that at the beginning of the session everyone speaks in turn while the others listen. The supervisor ensures that everyone has their turn and that the participants do not interrupt each other. For some groups this may require the supervisor to allocate and limit turns.

Dialogical interaction is also promoted by *relating to the content of others' speech*. This means that the participants do not give monologues during their allocated turn but connect their experiences to what they have heard others say. The supervisor can steer the interaction in this direction by asking what the experiences of others awaken in the members of the group. She can also propose connections she has noticed herself between the themes brought up by the participants.

Example: Relating to others' speech

A group of four experts wanted to participate in supervision in order to develop their collaboration skills. The supervisees were all experts in the same field but had very different jobs. They had moved from separate workspaces to working in a common open office and felt that the new physical work environment created a lot of friction. The common workspace brought out the different work practices of different workers and simultaneously revealed previously hidden conflicting notions of what the work entails.

In the first session each participant spoke in turn about his or her own perceptions of the work and listened politely to

what the others said without relating to them in any way. Each supervisee, however, hinted continuously that there were significant disagreements in the team regarding how the work should be done. When the supervisor asked about this directly, the participants either could not or did not want to say anything specific.

After observing the situation for a couple of sessions, the supervisor began to determinedly build the team's dialogical interaction. At the beginning of each session she asked each participant to talk freely about his or her most prominent work experiences. They did not directly shift from the speech of one participant to another but instead the supervisor asked the others to explain what was significant for them in what they had just heard. The team was encouraged to say if they experienced things in a similar or a different way to the previous speaker. This kind of listening and relating to others' experiences took a lot of time. Slowly, though, the participants' different notions began to come through and could be openly discussed during the sessions.

Learning dialogical interaction may be time consuming because it has many different levels: the dialogue between the supervisor and the supervisees, the interaction between the supervisees themselves, and the individuals' – including the supervisor's – internal dialogues. Utilising all of these levels in the sessions enriches reflection. At its best, this can lead to creating completely new ideas.

As the supervision process continues, the supervisor can ask the participants to evaluate the supervision from the point of view of the interaction: Can I talk about

things in the sessions which feel important right now? In what ways have I related to the themes brought up by others? Have my own ways of speaking and listening promoted dialogical interaction or prevented it? Regularly paying attention to the interaction in supervision encourages the supervisees to learn dialogue skills and reveals the development that has occurred with it.

Dialogical interaction is not necessarily very deep with all supervisees. Genuine dialogue is not always generated even with the most skilled participants. Nonetheless, directing the sessions *towards* dialogical interaction is usually significant, since it promotes safety, calmness and concentration.

The more experiences the supervisees have of being heard, the more trust they have that they can also raise difficult and sketchy topics in supervision. The more they are able to trust that they can move past even difficult things with the help of dialogue, the more excited they are to try the potential of dialogical interaction with different kinds of issues.

The Principles of Dialogue Supporting Learning and Reflection

The reflection practiced in supervision is broadened and deepened by utilising participants' different experiences. Dialogical interaction promotes obtaining this goal. It is an attempt to use the potential of the many voices generated within supervision and to develop this potential. The position of the supervisees within the reflective cycle determines the core of the

work, while the supervisor directs the interaction in a way that makes it possible for the processing of different experiences and perceptions to generate new ideas.

For the supervisor this means strengthening dialogical interaction and consciously directing it to support reflective learning. With this it is important for the supervisor to keep in mind certain principles that promote dialogical reflection. The most important of these are *pursuing different points of view, using everyday language, examining tensions and searching for issues that have gone unnoticed.*

Reflective learning relies on a freedom to approach a topic from *different points of view*. This builds a comprehensive picture of the reflected phenomena and enables honest examination. Bringing in different points of view benefits all phases of reflection: problematizing, the analysis of the topic, anticipating actions, planning experiments and their evaluation. By considering things from different perspectives, the supervisees assemble a sort of puzzle with the supervisor, and the big picture can only emerge when there are enough pieces. Differences in opinions are not essential, but what points of view arise are.

In addressing different points of view, the most important factor is less about variety and more that the views in question genuinely arise from the participants' own experiences. Conflicting notions should thus not be artificially constructed, and the supervisor's task is to help the supervisees to focus on the different sides of their own experience. She can do this by encouraging supervisees to talk about the various dimensions of their experiences: perceptions, thoughts, emotions, memories

METHODS FOR THE SUPERVISOR'S TOOLBOX 3:

Discussing and Listening in Pairs

Listening intently to another person's speech activates and enriches internal dialogue. This method strives to initiate and enliven dialogical interaction in group supervision.

The participants are divided into pairs, each sitting opposite one another. The supervisor first asks one pair to discuss the chosen theme or to raise questions together while the other pairs listen to their discussion. Then, the supervisor asks the next pair to discuss in the same way what thoughts came to mind after listening to the previous pair. This continues until each pair has had their turn. In a larger group, small groups can be used instead of pairs.

As the discussion proceeds, the supervisor can write topics that arise for all to see. Finally, a shared discussion is held in which everyone is invited to think about what kind of understanding of the theme was achieved. During the process, the supervisor can also ask the pairs listening to focus their discussion, for instance, on thinking of alternative actions or considering what broader phenomenon the topic is connected to.

and imaginations. Digging into the different dimensions of experiences supports reflective learning, because the supervisees' own experiences form the basis upon which new learning is built.

In group supervision, the experience of an individual is expanded by the experiences of others. When listening to one another's experiences the supervisees gain a deeper understanding of their own unique way of seeing the world. Addressing multiple points of view also helps to raise the level of abstraction within the discussion, because it helps to see the issue on a more general level. It also benefits anticipating actions and choosing the best alternatives because it helps to imagine the complexity of the consequences of future actions.

Using everyday language also supports dialogical interaction. When all participants avoid specialty vocabulary and jargon, everybody understands the words and expressions used to describe the topic. Different people may use different kinds of words to describe their experiences, even if they work in the same field. It frequently occurs that a common concept has only apparently been understood in the same way and that different people connect various meanings to it. This happens easily in fields heavy with jargon. It may be surprising to notice that some concepts and expressions are repeated so often that they in fact sound empty and have lost any proper meaning.

It is the supervisor's task to listen to how her supervisees speak and to help them understand the meaning of different concepts in a commonly shared way. She can also convey what she thinks the supervisees mean and ask them to let her know if she has understood them correctly.

Sometimes dialogical interaction reveals tensions between the supervisees and brings up contradictory notions concerning the topic at hand. In group supervision, when notions arise in a conflicting manner from the experiences of different people, there may ensue debates or attempts at a quick compromise. If the supervisor tries to mediate and to ease the tension of the situation, she may however suppress genuine dialogue.

Instead of mediating, *conflicts and tensions should be examined together*. This allows for them to be examined without concluding that any single one is correct. One's own opinion does not have to be presented as definitively accurate, but it can be exposed to additions and corrections. Different viewpoints are not seen as necessarily excluding others but as different sides of the phenomenon, work situation, or client process. Instead of imposing one's own view, therefore, a diversity of experiences is pursued to obtain a comprehensive picture. In many instances, seeing the whole picture produces new ideas and helps the supervisees to elaborate their initial pre-conceptions.

Instead of acting as a mediator, the supervisor should help in clarifying contradictions and in examining tensions. She should support the supervisees in enduring uncomfortable situations and appreciating the contradiction as one between notions and not between people. It is often useful to write down the different points of view and to ask participants to examine the bigger picture that they form. What do the different points of view reveal about the discussed topic? What does the work situation look like when different points of view are not seen as exclusive? What new points of view appear from this examination?

When tensions arise, the supervisor's own example plays a crucial role. She must proceed by asking questions with genuine curiosity and by describing her own understanding of the situation. However, it is crucial that the supervisor emphasises that her interpretations and ideas are suggestions that are meant to be examined together with the supervisees. Very often in conflicted situations the supervisor's most important task is to keep calm and help the supervisees also to remain calm, focused and open to each other. One way to do this is to ask the supervisees to listen to the supervisor's inner dialogue for a while. She can describe what kind of thoughts and images arise from her experience while listening to the group and formulate various questions from different points of views that come to mind. Her example sends a message that contradictory views are acceptable – and even interesting and productive – and often a sign of there being something essential that has not yet been understood. When the supervisees feel that the process is safe enough, meaningful enough and that it serves their own work, they are more likely to want to continue with the dialogue despite its challenges.

Example: Views in tension reveal the whole

A unit working in drug rehabilitation wanted to discuss different views on their clients' situations. The participants felt that sometimes they had very different opinions concerning how to help their clients. The supervisor was interested in helping the supervisees through this challenging situation and began to examine it with them. First, he urged the participants

to describe carefully an example of these situations in which different opinions have arisen. Following this he asked them to explain as clearly as possible what sorts of views they had about helping the client. The supervisor emphasised that the objective of the task was not to decide who is right and who is wrong, and, moreover, not even necessarily to decide what should be done in the situation. Instead, the goal was to improve the supervisees' understanding of the phenomena connected to helping their clients and the different views that relate to them.

The supervisees' views were mostly divided in two: some saw that the client's rehabilitation had progressed significantly whereas others did not see any significant progress. The setting caused some annoyance and at times the supervisees found it very difficult to listen to each other. The supervisor wrote down on the board remarks and issues connected to the different views. Instead of evaluating and comparing the differences, he asked what the supervisees felt they revealed about their work or, in particular, about helping this client. The supervisees thought for a while and finally one of them announced that she felt the different views showed how intensely each of them had or had not worked with this client. Those who had worked closely with the client saw a lot of progress, while those who had less experience with the client did not. This led to thinking about how the client's progress was connected to the amount of support they had received and what aspects of that support had been carried into situations in which the closest employees were not present.

Initially, the most obvious and commonly repeated issues are raised at the beginning, because supervisees usually

approach topics from the points of view that are most familiar to them. The supervisor should listen to these views and use them as part of the work, because new things can only be approached from the perspective of old ones. However, if the work is only based on familiar views, usually no significant new understanding is gained. The supervisor must therefore help the supervisees to *consciously search for unnoticed issues*. These can be revealed by processing previously discussed tensions, adding new voices to the dialogue and examining the fringe of attention.

New voices and points of view can be brought to dialogue by asking the supervisees to name people whose experiences are important in relation to the topic under discussion. When these new “voices” have been named, they can try to place themselves in the position of these people and imagine their experiences. Significant insights are usually revealed when the topic is imagined from the clients’, colleagues’, managers’, and associates’ points of view. The task can also include deeper societal and ethical views in the dialogue.

In group supervision, timid or quiet participants might have novel views. The supervisor can directly ask them about their thoughts, but it is more fruitful to encourage the other participants to include the shyer members in the dialogue. The inclusion of “quiet” participants can also be promoted by discussions in pairs or small groups if speaking out in a larger group is too demanding for some. The supervisor can also encourage presenting new points of view by reminding the participants that they do not have to know what they ultimately think and feel about the topics, and nobody needs to stand completely behind the view they bring up.

METHODS FOR THE SUPERVISOR'S TOOLBOX 4:

Metaphors as a Description of Work

Supervisees often describe their work in metaphors or figures of speech, for example: "Work makes me feel like a piece of driftwood right now." Metaphors awaken many kinds of thoughts, feelings, memories and images. They are multi-levelled, almost like a condensation of complex and broad information. By processing metaphors, a new base of common experience is born, which reaches broader and deeper meanings than merely factual speech. Metaphors often reveal hidden aspects of work. When supervisees describe their work with a metaphor, the supervisor can help them clarify the content of the metaphor. Some good questions are:

- *What does this metaphor say about your work?*
- *If the elements of that metaphor could speak, what would they say?*

In group and community supervision it is good to ask others what they think about what they have heard. What metaphors would they use to describe their work and what do they agree with in the metaphor someone else has presented? When the metaphor has been sufficiently examined, the supervisor can direct the conversation towards change if needed. Some good questions are:

- *What metaphor would describe a situation in which work goes well?*
- *What would you change in the original metaphor?*
- *What does it feel like to work with the new metaphor?*

Utilising metaphors can also function as a separate working method, where supervisees search for, create and consciously use metaphors as descriptions of work. In group and community supervision, the participants' metaphors can be collected for all to see and the group can then examine what sort of picture the collection gives of the work or the work community.

Sometimes new views develop in the participants' fringe of attention. As we described in the second chapter, it is beneficial for the supervisor to examine the fringe of her own attention as well as helping the supervisees to notice what is at the fringes of their thoughts. In dialogical interaction one expression, metaphor or inconsistency may manifest in many different contexts or in the speech of multiple people.

The supervisor should boldly seize these sorts of vague hints and guide the supervisees to consider their meanings. Shifting attention to the fringe of the mind may at first feel strange and confusing. In this case the supervisor should emphasise that it is first and foremost an experimental expedition and that all issues can be returned to later if their meanings are not understood right away. At its best, this sort of examination leads to revealing views or ideas that have been hidden for a longer time. Such experiences of discovering unexpected things are often very inspiring and can strengthen the supervisees' belief in the power of dialogical collaboration.

When supervisees gain more experience and improve their skills in dialogue they usually start to think about how they can include dialogue in their daily work culture. The supervisor can help them to map out situations in which dialogue can be practiced in fruitful ways. She can also assist them to avoid the most obvious pitfalls and to recognise situations where dialogue is not necessarily the best method for dealing with things. When the supervisees find the most effective means of using dialogue in their work, and they have the necessary skills to engage in dialogical discussions, they are on their way to creating a work culture where everybody learns.