

and felt that there was a vital though enormously challenging hurdle to climb to begin to understand how this worked.

Developing predictive intuition, we can begin to perceive how the structures of our interactions guide behavior. As we learn to see these structures, we can greatly increase the likelihood and quality of dialogue.

P A R T I V

ARCHITECTURE

OF THE INVISIBLE

If you walk into Chartres Cathedral in France, you are immediately struck by the beauty and quiet of the place. Alive and sacred, it makes you feel dwarfed in its immensity. Chartres has a sense of wholeness to it, though you may be hard pressed to say exactly why. In part this is because there are centers of focus in this building—not just one, but many throughout the building—which draw your attention and energy, make you feel comfortable and at home, give you a sense of the ground beneath your feet. Even with the various foci, there is an overall sense of cohesion to the setting.

The same feeling may be evoked when you talk with a close and truly supportive friend about something that matters to you both. You may find yourself taking a deep breath, relaxing, feeling gratitude. You gain perspective, a new outlook, a fresh start. Things come clear in this kind of exchange—precisely because there is now a central element to the conversation—your common interests and concerns.

By contrast, think about what it is like to walk into a meeting where people have just broken off an argument. You may be struck by the tension in the room. Most people naturally contract, withdraw, protect themselves. The feeling is more one of fragmentation than unification. This is a conversation without a center.

In each case, the feelings give you a sense of a distinct “atmosphere”—a quality that is discernible, though not always glar-

ingly obvious. It is the difference between a romantic dinner conversation and a chat on a subway platform just as a train comes screaming into the station. This difference is based partly on the nature of the physical arrangement of things, and includes the noise level, the smells, the sense of space.

The underlying feeling you experience relates to more than just physical arrangement or even the associations you bring to each setting. It is a function of the quality of energy, experience, and *aliveness* that each setting gives rise to. It is determined, in each case, by a very precise set of conditions. This is no abstract notion. These feelings are real, and are consistently experienced by wide numbers of people. In other words, while we may have our own visceral sense about a place, it is possible to validate our perception with others who are there.

Each of these settings evokes a different quality of what I shall call a "field of conversation." In physics, a field, is "any system of variables that vary in some systematic fashion through space."¹ For instance, iron filings line up around a magnetic field, distributed in a systematic fashion around the poles of a magnet. It is these overall spatial patterns of concentrated energy that allow different kinds of patterns to appear.

CONVERSATIONAL FIELDS

Conversations have fields too. A field of conversation is made up of the atmosphere, energy, and memories of the people who are interacting. When you talk and interact with people, much of your experience is at first colored in fact by your memory of them, of people like them, of circumstances and feelings that we have had previously. These memories provide a base of experience from which to think and talk. Embedded in these memories are energy and feelings as well as prejudices and blindnesses.

Think of a person with whom you are presently having difficulty. If you were suddenly to come upon her unannounced, you would no doubt fairly quickly recall all the thoughts you have about her, and all the negative feelings you have been harboring. The encounter might be tense. The "field," or space between you, would be filled with the history of your reactions. Words that you each might speak would come, initially at least, from this atmosphere. Fields like these are powerful, because the memories have an emotional charge to them and tend to work quickly, seamlessly, automatically. They create an atmosphere in which it is hard to change.

Yet being aware of fields of conversation gives us some ability to influence things beyond what we normally can do. We can be very deliberate about creating settings that alter the "field" in which the conversation takes place. We can begin by becoming conscious of the "field" we have within ourselves—the qualities of character and energy that are within us. We can then evoke new qualities from others, just as the facilitator in Chechnya did by telling the story about his mother. It may even become possible to realize that these fields change in character over time, and that mapping the qualities of fields can help our practical efforts.

Physicist David Bohm once compared conversations to the field behavior of a superconductor. In a superconductor, electrons moving through a wire are cooled to the point where they no longer collide or create heat through resistance. Instead, after reaching an optimally low temperature, they begin to act like parts of a coherent whole, moving around obstacles like ballet dancers on a stage. Under these conditions the electrons flow with virtually no friction. They have both high intensity and high "intelligence" as they naturally align themselves with an invisible pattern. Similarly, when we are in dialogue and are thinking together in a coordinated fashion, we are like the cool intensity of these fields of electrons. Rather than seeing our conversations as the crashing and

careening of billiard balls, individuals may come to see and feel them as *fields* in which a sense of wholeness can appear, intensify, and diminish in intensity again.²

The idea that social “fields” are an important determinant in the quality of our thinking, acting, and conversation represents an important evolutionary step in how human beings think about society and organizations. It is as important as the earlier shift in the 1940s, with the movement from a linear to a systems view of the world. The explosion of systems thinking in almost every subject of human endeavor is enormously powerful.³

The work that my colleagues and I have been doing over the past fifteen years with dialogue, in social and organizational settings, suggests that there is another important change in the offing, from systems thinking to *field-based* thinking. In a way this is a return, from a different vantage point, of a much older tradition in social science started by Kurt Lewin. Lewin was a psychologist who saw “fields” as a kind of life space made up of the forces acting on a person. He conducted very rigorous analyses of this, using complex mathematics, though his attempts were not widely followed.⁴

The concept of fields in dialogue is somewhat different from the way Lewin described them. He was concerned with the field of the events, feelings, and thoughts that an individual builds around him or herself during a lifetime. But in dialogue we look at the dynamic fields that arise in each moment, continually shifting, among groups of people and large organizations. Where a system is a set of interrelated and interdependent elements, a field of conversation derives from the ideas, thoughts, and quality of attention of the people involved here and now. It includes not only the interpersonal forces but the force of the ideas at work. The ideas and memory patterns they evoke carry energy and atmosphere, and are charged, to the point where people form elaborate neuropsychological internal re-

actions to them. For instance, a conversation between two baseball fans can evoke in each a whole host of memories, associations, physical sensations, emotional reactions, and sense of belonging with one another. The body, mind, and emotions are all involved. The “field” they create by sharing memories predisposes the way they see each other. Similarly, when it comes to making change in businesses or organizations, creating evocative fields can provide important leverage points for change.

For example, several people I worked with were recently trying to reform California’s health and safety education program for children. They lamented the excessive competition they saw between state agencies and social service nonprofit organizations. Everyone claimed to care about the children, they noted, but the groups viciously fought one another for funding and recognition. Traditional efforts to change this ongoing, self-perpetuating mess had failed.

As we spoke together, it became apparent that there was an underlying, hidden set of factors at play. The protagonists began to realize that an atmosphere of isolation prevailed in themselves, in government agencies, and in those running the social programs. Isolation led to mistrust, which in turn reinforced the structure of “independent agendas” and competition. The atmosphere of isolation and loneliness influenced people’s thinking and actions, though they had not initially realized it. Seeing this, they realized they had many new opportunities for addressing the problems between these agencies, but only if they could change the discourse now, staying conscious of their own tendencies for isolation, and the ways they reinforced this in others.⁵

My colleagues and I have explored the nature of these fields as they form within individuals, groups, and larger social settings like organizations and communities in depth. I think we are just now on the cutting edge of this subject. We have found that

people who wish to innovate or develop new knowledge, who seek effective strategic choice making or who are engaged in organizational learning efforts, must come to see their work as functions of the quality of these fields rather than as the product of individual action or willpower alone. In fact, we have found that *without* an awareness of fields and their qualities, most such efforts unwittingly create resistance and cause unintended consequences that may be greater than the problems they set out to solve.

In the course of this part of the book I describe our discoveries, so far, about the underlying architecture of these fields: the ways they form, differentiate, collapse, and emerge; the principles that govern them and methods to manage within them. We have developed practices that you can use to develop a field that will tend to produce dialogue as well as make you aware of those that tend to inhibit or destroy it. I also suggest an approach to change that links the individual, the group, or team and the larger system, and shows how we might begin to develop a coherent approach to learning that pervades each level. Thinking this way points to an entirely new kind of leadership—one that is based on the capacity to evoke, hold, and embody such fields. This means developing in-depth knowledge of the ways that fields engender behavior, both in day-to-day life and in the emotionally high-stakes and high-stress episodes that occur from time to time in every business.

T E N

Setting

the Container

In the summer of 1993 five thousand people from nearly every religious tradition in the world met in Chicago for a gathering held only once each century—the Parliament of World Religions. Turbans and crosses, feathers and flowing robes, naked chests, conservative suits, and blue jeans all mingled together under one roof. One of the key meetings within this conference consisted of a group of 250 leaders from the various religions around the world. According to one of my colleagues, when these leaders sat together in silence, their dignity and stature seemed immense. They displayed a level of respect for one another that was consistent with the aims of the gathering.

They lived up to the behavior that we might expect from our religious leaders. "They did silence well," noted my colleague.

This was particularly evident in a brief ritual that occurred between one of the Native American elders and the Dalai Lama. Early in the conference, this Native American elder, who was in a wheelchair, was quietly moved over to be near the chair of the Dalai Lama. This created something of a stir. It was unplanned and unexpected; it broke the flow of the carefully orchestrated event. From within his coat, the Native American elder slowly removed a long peace pipe. He lit it, took a puff, and then passed it to the Dalai Lama. The No Smoking signs in this Chicago meeting hall glared down at them. People who were there said the room shimmered as these two leaders sat together. All eyes were fixed upon them. The Dalai Lama took a puff from the pipe, and gently passed it back to the elder. All were aware that they were witnessing an "unofficial" but significant moment; it was suddenly clear that the Native Americans were the authentic hosts of the event. They had once lived on the very spot where the conference hall was erected. The majestic silence of the ceremony reminded everyone in the room of their stature and understanding, and of their ability to convey an enormous amount of energy and intensity in a few simple gestures. What is striking about this incident is its genuineness. There was no pretense, just a quiet, respectful exchange between two revered elders.

This quality of authenticity is at the core of the dialogic state. But it presents a challenge. It cannot be faked; such exchanges must be genuine. One can try them on, experiment with them. But gaining genuine understanding requires work. Alexis de Toqueville, the great chronicler of American culture and life, once gave a very pointed description of the work required:

A great man has said that *ignorance lies at both ends of knowledge*. Perhaps it would have been truer to

say that deep conviction lies at both ends, with doubt in the middle. In fact, one can distinguish three distinct and often successive stages of human understanding. A man may hold a firm belief which he has adopted without plumbing it. He doubts when objections strike him. Often he succeeds in resolving those doubts, and then he again begins to believe. This time he does not grasp the truth as if by chance or in the dark, but sees it face-to-face and is guided forwards by its light. . . . One may count on it that the majority of mankind will always stop short in one of [the first two] conditions: they will either believe without knowing or will not know precisely what to believe. But only a few persevering people will ever attain to that deliberate and self-justified type of conviction born of knowledge and springing up in the very midst of doubt [*italics in original*].¹

Doubt and confusion are the flaming swords at the gate of true understanding. It would be far easier if there were a less intense route! As far as I know, there is not. But the opportunity lies in choosing not to be discouraged by this but to trust it. I am less sanguine than de Toqueville about people's abilities to come to genuine understanding. I find the willingness to go into the unknown is made easier when one realizes that it is the same as trusting oneself. "Trust thyself," Emerson once put it; "Every heart vibrates to that iron string."

A mechanistic way of seeing would lead us astray here. A set of "practices" for dialogue could begin to sound a lot like a set of simple rules. It is this very way of thinking *itself* that I am asking you to reconsider.

FOUR PRACTICES AND CREATING THE CONTAINER

As I have intimated, perhaps one of the most important dimensions of dialogue concerns the atmosphere, or "field," in which it occurs. A field is the quality of shared meaning and energy that can emerge among a group of people.

We cannot manufacture a "field." But we can create conditions under which a rich field for interaction is more likely to appear. These conditions make up what we have called the *container* for dialogue, in which deep and transformative listening becomes possible. You cannot work "on" a field. But you can create a "container."

A "container" is a vessel, a setting in which the intensities of human activity can safely emerge. The active experience of people listening, respecting one another, suspending their judgments, and speaking their own voice are four key aspects of the container for dialogue. As I noted in the first chapter, often the missing ingredient for those who try to listen to one another is not just their individual effort, but a setting where it is possible to hear one another and speak safely together.

When I first introduced to the steelworkers the idea of a container, they understood it immediately. In fact, they coined a term for it—they called it a "cauldron." A steel mill has built into it a very graphic illustration of a container: enormous vats of 3,000-degree, white-hot molten steel in a room the size of two football fields, over 100 feet high.¹

The image of the container is very old. One finds references to it in the Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical texts; in the writings of the alchemists; and in modern times in some of the work of psychologists looking to create what they call a "holding space" for the emotional intensity of a family.²

The Holy Grail, the image from the myth of King Arthur, was

supposedly the chalice that was used by Jesus at the Last Supper. The word *grail* comes from the French *graille*, which means "great container." The *graille* was a common soup container. The word also has the same root as *corral*—a round, containing enclosure—and also *kraal*—a Zulu word meaning "an enclosure of huts and cattle." According to Laurens van der Post, a novelist and unique elder to this age, these roots reveal the magic of this term and the universal quest behind it. The container is

round, forming the circle which has always been magical and an enclosure of life, sacred because it is an image of wholeness, something which contains all. . . . This is more evidence that the search for a divine container, to be divinely contained, is African as well. It is most moving that even the words show how unending and universal is the quest for spirit to be contained in wholeness. . . . When a Zulu in time becomes wise and resolved so that he becomes an *Induma*—a headman and advisor to the King—he wears a circle of metal or ivory around his head to indicate he is whole.³

The container is the circle that holds all, that is a symbol of wholeness, and a setting in which creative transformation can take place.⁴

The idea behind a container is that human beings need a setting in which to hold the intensities of their lives. Typically, we do not have many of these. The people around us react to us, but they cannot hold us, nor we them. Circumstances often seem larger than we are.

Containers take many forms. Our bodies are containers: They hold ourselves. Intimate relationships are another kind of container, settings in which certain things can be said and done that cannot happen anywhere else. Our teams are containers, as

are our organizations. Typically, our containers are incoherent—they hold inner contradictions and inconsistencies, and they are limited in what they can hold. When our “container” is full, we get “filled up”—unable to hear or absorb more.

Dialogue sets out to clarify and expand the container in which a conversation might take place. The premise I work with is “no container, no dialogue.” More precisely, no consciously held container, no dialogue. As I will show, the container can evolve and deepen over time. Containers for conversation hold a particular kind of pressure. As they become more stable and conscious, they can hold more pressure. It seems to take a certain amount of pressure for human beings to think together. As people come together and bring their differences out, the pressure builds. Then the question arises, Is there a container to hold this pressure? If not, people will tend to try to avoid issues, blame one another, resist what is happening. It is possible to create containers that can hold the fire of creation. When this is the case, those within the container do not have the feeling that they will get “burned” or that things are “too hot.” They may feel stretched, but included and safe.

The container concept provides people with a measure of psychological safety. But there is more to dialogue than psychological safety. Author Joseph Chilton Pearce, writing about childhood development, notes that the matrix of successful development for a child—initially the womb, later the enfolding of the parents—has three elements: energy, possibility, and safety. All three of these are needed for growth to take place. Chilton Pearce’s matrix is a similar concept to the container; and all three elements are needed.⁵ In any setting, particularly one where you are about to have an important conversation, you might ask yourself: Is there energy, possibility, and safety here? If the answer is no, I believe you can predict before a single word is spoken that the results you obtain will be limited.

The concept of the container, and more important the ex-

perience of it, enabled the steelworkers to talk together in ways they had not done before. For example, a container was forged in the very first session I arranged to bring steelworkers and managers together. Here is what the union president had to say of it:

The container was stretched to the max that day because it was being bent, popped, cracked, and when it was over that night, I was so tired I just went to my room and went to bed. The next morning when we all met, the container had strengthened itself. We had a bond in that room that we didn’t really realize that we had.

The union president continued:

The day that it was over, some of us rode back to the city together and we talked about that and we said, “Isn’t that incredible? We sat down and no one got mad and left.” No one from the management was screaming and no one from the union was screaming. We were men and we talked about it.

This container enabled conversations to happen that simply had not taken place before. But the goal was not to feel good together. It was a setting that enabled a search for truth.

Having a “container” in the steelworker dialogues meant that the people involved participated in creating and sustaining it continuously. This came through very clearly after several of the steelworkers had a chance to present some of their experience at the management conference mentioned above. It was a source of considerable amusement and puzzlement to them. They were surprised to find that they had developed an understanding of dialogue that others, like these managers, did not

seem to have, and they pointed out something that resonated deeply with the consultants and corporate people in the room:

The difference between all of the programs that we had—and they were numerous—and this one was that we didn't "buy into" this program, we were there at the ground floor and we helped to build what we call a "container" together.

For this steelworker and the others, there was a vital difference here: They understood through experience that they had a very direct responsibility for what was happening in the dialogue, that no one had imposed it on them, that it had developed through and from them.

THE ACOUSTICS OF DIALOGUE

I have been in some hotel conference rooms lately that have horrible acoustics. These are places that were supposedly designed to hold large group meetings. But I simply couldn't hear people unless they stood up and fairly shouted across the room. And there are some concert halls, in contrast, where you can hear the proverbial pin drop. Some settings are made for listening and speaking together, and others are not. Designing rooms or settings where human beings can talk together comfortably seems to be something of a lost art. But it was not always so.

In 1780, Benjamin Franklin and a group of the Founding Fathers commissioned the Congress Hall in Philadelphia as the place where the first United States Congress would meet.⁶ The Congress Hall is a vast room with high ceilings. Its windows are placed at the very top to limit distractions from the outside. It is full of light. The seats are arranged in a semicircle, in such a way that every member of the group can see everyone else. What is perhaps most striking about this room is that it has ex-

traordinary acoustics. One can hear what is said from anyplace in the room, even when it is spoken in a normal or even quiet tone of voice. This was a room made for conversations about governing the country. The Congress Hall was designed to put conversation at the center of governance.

Congress Hall is a physical container, one that clarifies and reflects the sound well, enabling people to hear what is being said. But Congress Hall is more than a physical setting. It is symbolic; it has a function that goes beyond the mere structure of the materials in the building. This symbolic container also serves as a reminder for the people representing their country of the meaning for which they are responsible.

Every conversation has its own acoustics. Each one takes place in an environment that has both physical, or external, dimensions as well as internal, or mental and emotional, dimensions. There is, in other words, an invisible architecture to the container. Most such structures are made for discussion, for thinking alone. We have very few designed for thinking together, for dialogue.

Inner Acoustics

Similarly, there are physical acoustics arising from the structures of our skulls and inner ear, and there are internal dimensions to our capacity to hear. What are the internal acoustics? What kinds of sounds can be heard within you? How delicate are they? How strong? Can you hear what is said without overly distorting or muffling it?

There is a great debate over whether human beings are capable of objectively seeing or hearing anything. Many cognitive scientists believe that we filter everything we see and hear. Some say we do this through the very structure of our nervous systems. Others posit that we carry maps or models within us, to which we refer as we learn new information.

However conceptualized, it does seem clear that human beings impose things on the sounds that they listen to. Unlike physical sounds, however, we distort or dampen our internal hearing not with hard, sound-absorbent carpets and tiles but with our readiness to listen. The shape of our internal container guides our ability to hear what is being said. The shape of a collective container equally determines what can be said and heard.

The oral defense for my doctoral dissertation at Oxford University was held in a container designed for discussion. This was a rite of passage, a ritual designed to mark a transition over a threshold. The goal was to keep things distinct between student and professor, to maintain order and hierarchy, to clarify meanings and make a decision.

The physical structure of the room for my defense clearly reflects the imbalance of power between doctoral candidate and examiners and greatly influenced the nature of the interactions we had. Two examiners and myself gathered in this small room. All three of us had dressed in *subfusc*, black academic caps and gowns. Three rectangular tables stood in the room, two next to each other for each of the professors, and one about eight feet away, facing them, for me. I was at the point of the triangle of their inquiries.

One of the professors had placed what seemed like fifty Post-it notes on the pages of my dissertation; I knew then that this was going to be a long day. The conversation started gradually, with the professors questioning me, one after the other, about why I wrote certain things in my thesis, why I left things out, and so on. I felt beginning to rise up in me a desire to explain in as powerful a way as I could why I was justified in doing what I had done.

It was a fencing match in which the professors made parries and then I deflected or countered them. Over time the ante was upped. Somehow we got to the point where they had begun discussing the implications of what I had said between themselves—questioning their own insights. I knew then that I had

been successful. The ritualized nature of this exchange was reflected in the roles we played and in the transformation of the roles. After two hours of grilling, I had become a peer.

Afterward everything was different. The two professors deliberated for a while, gave me their verdict—I had passed—and invited me for a glass of wine in the college bar next door to celebrate and reflect on the process. They laughed and acknowledged that while they had to be deadly serious at the time, they also enjoyed my work (they did not say this during the defense), and just wanted to “push things a bit.”

There is nothing wrong with this kind of exchange. In many ways, in fact, it preserves a ritualized dimension of life that mostly has been abandoned. But for many of the problems we now face, this approach cannot work.

By contrast, dialogue involves creating a very different kind of container, both physically and in terms of the ways people interact with each other. In a dialogue, for instance, we use a circle, not a series of lines or rows or a triangle. The circle is an ancient symbol for dialogue. It is an economical form, efficient in its ability to enable everyone to see and hear. It is a leveler: It implies that everyone is on the level. Interestingly, one of the derivations of the word for *truth* in English is *alatheia*, which means “on the level.” We talk about leveling with one another, meaning we are telling the truth. The circle allows us to do this. The circle is also, however, a lens—a focusing device. Things intensify in the circle. One cannot predict what will happen within it.

As simplistic as it may sound, try holding your next meeting in a circle, without tables. It will have a profound impact, I predict, on what you say and think and do. People can, of course, always resist or struggle against the structure. One manager, who was the coach and facilitator of the top group at a major United States corporation, tells the story of how he had convinced everyone to abandon their traditional table. One tall

manager walked into the room, looked around, and asked, "Where am I gonna put my coffee?" He then looked over at the facilitator and said, "If I spill this on my suit, you are paying the cleaning bills!" He was not kidding. They then proceeded to have, they later reported, their best meeting in a long time.

PROTECTING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE CONTAINER

Consciously managing boundaries in a group setting is an essential way to sustain and deepen the sense of safety that people feel. This is especially true if the stakes are high. In practical terms this means making a set of choices about whether there is to be an open, closed, or random and unregulated system. Shall people be free to come and go as they wish—an open system? Shall the conversation be closed, limited only to those who are invited and no others? Shall we leave it up to the individuals to decide this sort of thing—making it random?

Boundaries of this sort also relate to the ways people interact together. For instance, often in a group someone will (unwittingly or not) say things that upset or disturb others. Someone might say, "Well, George's comments really were off the mark to me. Let me tell you what I think." And he or she might proceed to make his or her point. George and the others have been put in a dilemma. He can ignore what was said and the implied slight in it, or he can object. Either option may prove difficult.

Let's say that George is given no chance to respond to what was said—in fact, he was made the object of someone else's argument, and depersonalized. Is this sort of thing undiscussable? Or do individuals feel free to raise the issue and inquire, asking for illustration, for the reasons behind the thoughts and feelings? Dialogue requires a willingness to raise

these things for the purposes of testing them. Evoking an effective architecture means that someone will need to have the space to ask George, "Were you understood as you intended?"

Gradually growing a set of norms for how these kinds of interactions are handled is an important part of container building.

Fields of
Conversation

It had been a full and exciting few days. The conference had brought together people from all over to talk together and exchange ideas. And they had talked, energetically and enthusiastically, though mostly after the sessions. There had been many presentations, yet few opportunities simply to talk together as a whole group. Finally, on the last morning, the moment came. They were a large group—over seventy-five people. A moderator opened the floor to conversation and sat back. The quietness of the summer's day shone through the windows of the conference room, casting a gentle light. People looked around. To the surprise of many, after all the intensity of the past days, no one spoke.

They sat for some moments, waiting. It gradually became

clear that there was, at least for then, nothing yet to say. The silence, not the speaking, filled the room and the people. This was a silence without tension, more a rhythmic listening, a breathing out. People seemed unusually patient, as if they were fishing on the shore, waiting for the sun to set. The bloom of the moment, its uncontrived elegance, and its fertile presence were both unanticipated and relaxing.

"I did not want to break the silence, but I found the words spilling out of me and into the room and knew that I had to speak," one man began.

The atmosphere of the exchange depicted above is one of four essential "fields of conversation" that can arise as people endeavor to have dialogue. For many, this experience represents a pinnacle, a goal to be achieved, even an end in and of itself. Yet one of the more important ideas about dialogue that we have discovered in recent years is the notion that the *process of movement* through different fields or spaces of conversation is much more important than trying to produce a particular outcome. It is the creative motion itself, more than any single feeling or insight, that I have come to associate with dialogue.

CONVERSATIONAL EVOLUTION AND IMPASSE

We can often become disappointed with the "progress" of our conversations. This is because you or your group may be getting stuck in a particular kind of conversation, finding yourselves unable to move.

For instance, people often wind up at an impasse, stuck in polarized positional battles. In fact, these positional wars—where one person advocates in favor of rent control and another in favor of free market forces to control real estate rental prices—quickly reach a standoff. Yet this kind of interaction may also be sought. People often believe this is the best and perhaps only way to get at truth. Failing to fight eventually seems re-

pressive and false. No fight, no reality. A *New York Times* writer in a recent review of Deborah Tannen's book *The Argument Culture* worried aloud about this. In her book Tannen describes many of the conflicts in public discourse that devolve into nasty fights—media attacks on politicians, vicious legal battles, gender wars—that seem to fill the modern landscape. She excoriates Tannen's claim that these fights, and the combative spirit that lies behind them, are bad for us. "We like to fight," says the reviewer. Her fear seems to be that losing a fight means becoming a passive recipient of whatever cultural programming or political nonsense might come our way. This is so only if we imagine fighting should never happen or, on the other hand, that it is the end and aim of genuine discourse. Neither is true.

People may also become stuck in what one manager I knew some years ago called "terminal niceness." It was impossible, in his organization, to ever raise a challenge to the status quo. People were simply too polite to do this. Of course, the battles behind the scenes were intense, but ably covered up.

The notion that dialogue is *conversation in motion* can greatly liberate our concepts about what is required to have it. Yes, there are times of fighting and times of niceness, of politeness. But none of them is static. They evolve. The motion of dialogue is not a linear succession so much as it is an evolution. As the map I develop in this chapter shall show, the progression does not always seem to go in a straight line. What is more, dialogue does not necessarily stop when a group of people who have been talking together stands up and leaves. Often the conversation carries on in other ways and picks up later where it left off.

CONTAINERS HOLD POTENTIAL

This type of evolving conversation takes different forms depending on the quality and nature of the container. Containers

for conversation hold different qualities of pressure, energy, and knowledge. These spaces evolve through particular inflection points or crises. I will define leadership here as the capacity to hold the container for gradually larger sets of ideas, pressures, and people as the different crisis points unfold. Leadership itself, understood in this light, provides a container in which tremendous change can occur.

Nelson Mandela, president of South Africa, is an example of a leader who is capable of bearing a great deal of pressure, and yet seems to remain free of bitterness. After spending some twenty-seven years in prison while his country was under the grip of apartheid, one would expect him to resent his captors. Yet Mandela, by all accounts, does not. In fact, Mandela seems to be a man who learned to transcend the pressures he faced.

A highly talented Bahamian architect named Jackson Burnside described his first meeting with Mandela recently as a remarkable encounter with humility. Burnside had held Mandela in very high esteem for years, and met him when Mandela came to the Bahamas for an official visit. The prime minister of the Bahamas and other political and community leaders were present. Yet Mandela made Burnside feel that he was the most significant person present: "Oh, I have been waiting for a long while to meet you. I have such great respect for what you do," Mandela said. Burnside was deeply moved by this. He said that even though Mandela towered over him both physically and as a historical figure, it was Mandela who prostrated himself. Mandela's humility and strength have provided a symbolic container for the changes that have taken place in South Africa, a reference point for noble acceptance and struggle.

There is always some kind of container present among any group of people. The question is, For what purpose does it exist? Some people say dialogue is about emotional intimacy in the end, and that the ultimate goal is to enable people to relate well to-

gether. Others say that without shared meaning there can be no dialogue. These advocates work hard to surface the different frames and assumptions that people carry. Still others worry about the internal contradictions that arise as people act, and wish these to be named and explored. But the container requires all three. If any one is left out, the overall ecology is unbalanced.

Dialogue is a process by which we can create containers that are capable of holding our experience in ever more rich and complex ways, making legitimate many approaches and styles. We can see this in the experience of a couple that continuously fights and has no space to understand the tensions they are feeling. We can imagine the change they might feel if they could walk into the arms of a very wise, understanding friend who could soothe and reassure them by letting them know that he sees the struggle each of them is going through. He could offer the kind of hope that motivates them to fight both for their own identity and for each other.

In this latter space, both people might relax and discover that they had thoughts and feelings they were unaware of and out of contact with because of the immediacy of the battle. They might come to see, in fact, that they had unresolved pain in their hearts that was being triggered by their interactions but was not initially produced by the other person. They might, in other words, start to move further "upstream" toward the source of their difficulties once they had a larger psychological and emotional place in which to relax and interact. They would have moved into a larger container.

Bohm used to say that if there is pollution in the river of our thought, then we have essentially two strategies we might pursue: removing the pollution from the river downstream, or changing something farther upstream. The evolution of the container spaces that I describe here are ways to tackle our thought and feeling farther upstream. It is a way of understanding how we might come into a greater measure of clarity, not just around our

own inner ecology, but in the ecology of our team, our organizations, and—potentially, at least—society itself.

The intention here is to develop a greater capacity to reflect on and transform ourselves "upstream." In doing so, we are able to change and heal.

FIELDS AND CONTAINERS

The term *container*, as I have indicated, gives us a way of putting our arms around the more elusive notion of a "field of conversation." As I outlined on pages 254–55, fields are spaces in which there is a particular quality of energy and exchange. Containers are the relatively observable features of fields. Each field of conversation, as I outline in the next few pages, seems to have distinct characteristics, patterns, and pressures. Each one transforms into another only through crises, significant changes evoked by the people who are participating in the dialogue.¹ These crises are thresholds over which one must pass in order to experience dialogue.

FIELD I: INSTABILITY OF THE FIELD/POLITENESS IN THE CONTAINER

When a group of people first meets, whether the members know one another well or not, they generally do not have a container that can absorb or hold much intensity and pressure. In fact, most settings for conversation seem to be designed *not* to hold much space for what is new. The work setting, for instance, seems to be designed to require us to leave certain parts of ourselves at the door.

In these initial moments, people bring with them a set of inherited norms about how to interact. In a staff meeting, for instance, they may have a mental model about what is "supposed" to happen.

If it is a lecture, then they know to sit and listen. A board meeting has another set of formal protocols.

From an external standpoint, each of these settings can seem quite different. The initial intensity of a board meeting differs greatly from the initial chatter of a group of shop-floor workers in an automobile factory as they gather for their morning meeting. And yet they do not differ in one critical respect: These people have well-accepted and well-learned ways of interacting and being. They have accepted the social container in which they live. They are not, for the moment, reflecting on what lies below the surface—unstated expectations, tensions, differences. Some of these tensions and expectations are known to the people concerned. Some of them are not—they are part of the associations that they carry around with them. People, in other words, bring a set of taken-for-granted assumptions about the situation, rules about how to think and act within it.

These associations are profoundly influential. For instance, an experienced manager may see an entrepreneurial start-up business, its fast-paced energy, and its evangelical zeal as an opportunity. People with less experience living through such a start-up might see it as a “mess.”

Many people, for instance, saw the extensive burning of the Yellowstone National Forest in 1988 as a sad and disastrous event, and they clamored for a change in the management of our forests. They worried enormously and felt it was a mark of failure that so much of the park burned. Yet many experienced forest managers saw this same event as a part of cycle of rain and drought that moves through the area every three hundred to four hundred years or so, as evidenced by the tree record. Typically, the Yellowstone forest has a means of self-regulation and most fires there burn very little. There are many tall trees and very little “fine fuel”—kindling for the fire close to the ground. While disastrous from a human standpoint, the ecology of the forest was likely working in Yellowstone that year exactly as it should have.

While people come to dialogue with a great many different expectations, at first this is not entirely obvious. Discussion about the differences seldom happens. For example, the health-care workers in Grand Junction came together with a widely varying set of hopes about what they were going to do in the dialogues they were attending. Some wanted to reflect on health, others wanted to fix the system, and still others wanted to make sure their competitors did not collude to drive down their market share. None of this came out until later. What we found, instead, was a pattern of politeness, cooperation, pleasantries. People did at first what they usually do when they gathered: told war stories, relaxed, complained about the changes in their industry.

In our initial research I described this space as one of “instability of the container”—at least insofar as the capacity to hold a more intense kind of conversation. My colleague Claus Otto Scharmer, who proposed the structure of the map on page 261, has suggested that we can think of this behavior as “rule following.” The language that people use in these settings is one that remains consistent with the dominant social norms that they grew up with and are comfortable with. In some cases this is polite interaction. In others, like one high-tech company I know, people immediately start pointing out what is wrong and why nothing is going to work. They have set themselves enormously high goals—far outstripping anything ever done in their industry before. And they admit to feeling unable to do anything about this. But this is what people in this culture do when they first meet—they carry on a kind of aggressive banter about what is wrong and what needs fixing.

In this conversational field people do not surface what they “really” think and feel. Scharmer refers to this first space as being dominated by a norm where the (as yet unexamined) rules governing the whole are primary and more important than what any one individual wants.

To illustrate: I met recently with the senior management

team of a company that had two paradigms constantly in conflict. Some valued a random culture, others a closed one. The norms of the social whole were to have these dynamics play out but not to call attention to any of it. People would feel frustrated, but distanced themselves from any public engagement in the difficulties. Many felt frustrated but did not really know why—they knew only that certain people bothered them.

This is typical of this first field (Field I) for conversation: Though a range of taken-for-granted and socially generated norms are present, people do not either see them or know what to do about them, and operate as best they can, following the prevailing rules.

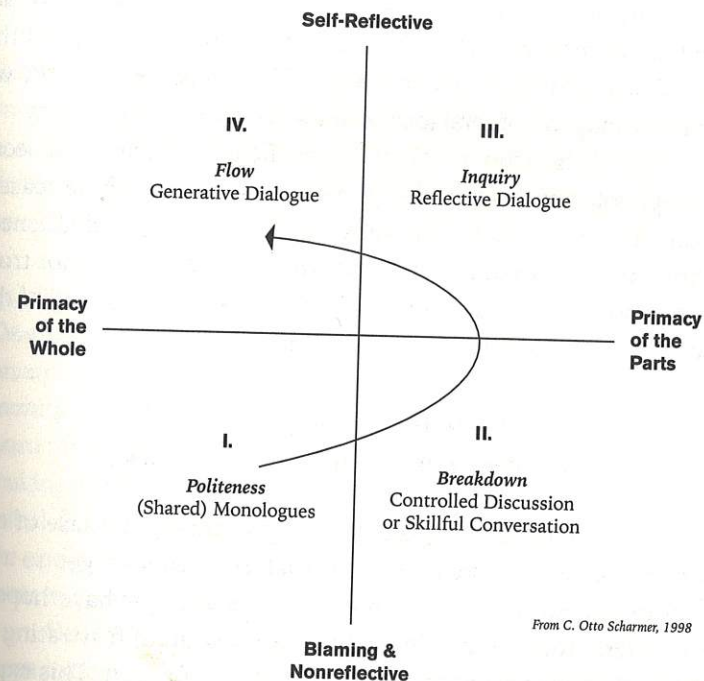
Scharmer points out that a key feature of Field I is that it lacks reflection. For example, in a session that I was facilitating, leaders from two divisions of a company were trying to find a unified approach to their strategy and were having trouble agreeing. Their culture was one in which the norm was to be polite and never differ publicly. But I knew that they had problems, because I had spoken with them all individually. They would raise privately what they feared to raise publicly.

At one point, people were trying to map some of the differences they faced, the different ways they saw the market, and their theories about what to do within it. I felt as if I were pulling teeth! They were reluctant to say directly that they did not trust the other division to look out for their interests. They felt they could trust no one, but to say such a thing would be heretical. One of the consultants they had hired to do some market analysis then spoke up: "You know, I really think you are digging for something that is not there. These people basically agree," he said as he looked around the room. "I think we are ready to move on." The face of the senior manager in charge of the strategy fell. One of the consultants he had hired had just given voice to the very things he was hoping would be challenged. It was a voice that reinforced the fear of reflection and sought a route to let people escape the pressure that

was beginning to mount. In Kantor's four player system terms, Field I is usually characterized by "more-follow" sequences: some people move, others follow, no one opposes or bystands.

The emotional component that drives this sequence is often fear. People often feel no small measure of fear when they join a group of people, even one they know well. This fear seems to reinforce rule-following behavior.

A similar situation developed in the Grand Junction dialogues we conducted. People entered the project thinking mostly about themselves and how their interests might be damaged or helped by a conversation among the leadership of the health-care community of their town. One CEO, Mike, who arrived at the first session looking very reluctant to be a part of it, admitted this quite freely.



From C. Otto Scharmer, 1998

I said to him, "You do not look like you want to be here."
He replied, "I don't. I am here but I will not participate."

"Then why have you come?"

"Because I have to make sure that nothing happens here that will damage my hospital."

"Would you be willing to say at least that?"

"No."

The patterns of behavior that one sees in Field I have been chronicled in the writing of famed sociologist Erving Goffman. Goffman identified the enormously complex and varied ways in which people learn to maintain "face" to protect their image of themselves and to mutually protect others in the same way. This is perhaps one of the most fundamental rules that people follow in this rule-following space.² Field I is generally the space of "civility." Generally, this means a civility that represses, for the good of all, the free expression of the individual: We do not generally tell the boss that we think he is a jerk even if we think so; similarly, we generally laugh at others' jokes even when they are not funny.

If one's horizon is limited to this field, it can and will seem like a prison. Yet this will also prove to be true in *all* of the spaces. It can seem promising that one space may be more enlightened, more attractive, than another, though this is in practice not true. Each space is essential. As I said earlier, it is the sustaining of the movement *through* the spaces that is important here.

The Crisis of Emptiness:

"You Can't Make Dialogue Happen"

When people seek to engage in dialogue, this first phase of experience generally demonstrates that they cannot get to the level of shared meaning as readily as they might have hoped. Particularly for action-oriented people, it is quite frustrating to realize that we simply cannot *make* dialogue happen. This expe-

rience often leads to the first of a series of crises that seem necessary in developing a deeper space for dialogue.

The word *crisis* comes from an Indo-European root *krei*, which means "to discriminate, distinguish, or separate." We get the words *discern*, *criteria*, and, interestingly, *riddle* all from this root. A crisis is a turning point, distinguishing all that has come before from all that comes after. I think of a crisis in dialogue as a gateway to deeper silence and deeper listening. One cannot "outthink" a crisis; one has to go through it. We can try to avoid it, but then we do not let real change take place. Dialogue in this sense requires the emergence of a new kind of sensitivity and awareness, which is not something one can mandate. It emerges, in fact, as one realizes precisely that one cannot mandate it.

I have found that there is a series of crises in dialogues—not always experienced as such, but nonetheless critical turning points that require navigation and understanding. One of the reasons people get stuck and fail to experience what they imagine to be dialogue is that these crises are challenging. In particular, they challenge our identify. They ask us, each time, to reexamine who we think we are as we try to engage in serious conversation.

I call this crisis the crisis of *emptiness*—because one must quickly empty oneself of expectations if anything new is to happen. One must look for what has not yet happened, for what might be unexpected, different. The writer Scott Peck, in his theory of community development, uses a stage model, but he places *emptiness* toward the end. *Emptiness* to Peck is emptying out the falseness, making room for what is authentic, genuine. I refer here more to the initial dislocation that comes when we realize that our expectations are not going to be met, and that we cannot fully control the outcome we want to produce.

One of the things that triggers this crisis is when someone steps back and reflects on the total process of the conversation and

how it feels. Generally speaking, making a comment of this sort about the process of a conversation while it is ongoing is seen as rude! It can break the happy somnolence of a group, and this triggers the breakdown described next. This move, where someone speaks the forbidden or unsayable, forces a change.

Of course some groups seek to appropriate "process" comments by making them part of the fabric of things. Meeting facilitation, for example, has become big business. The trouble with this is it can become a kind of crutch, a way of bypassing the crisis that requires people to face their essential inability to manipulate into existence a greater form of internal commitment and collective intelligence. While it is not always the case, reliance on facilitators can be a kind of work avoidance, a way of seeking to escape the crisis of emptiness, with a false hope that there is some method, some expert, some technology that can actually get us from here to there.

This first crisis is one in which people find their expectations being dashed. One of the cultural assumptions people have about the way knowledge is generated is that one person is likely to have information or knowledge that others need. This hierarchical view assigns responsibility and blame to an individual or group that people imagine are in control. In dialogue, people come to the realization that knowledge arises because of the shared experience of a collective. No one can make this emerge. In fact, efforts to do so simply get in the way. The crisis here is realizing that we all together are somehow responsible, and must discover what to do all together. This is a significant shift for many people who expect an expert to tell them what to do. Unfortunately, no expert can help here; the creation of new knowledge is a community activity and must be done by everyone. The team must decide its fate; the board must come to its own conclusions; no external help can do this for them.

FIELD II: INSTABILITY IN THE FIELD/BREAKDOWN IN THE CONTAINER

As people move from initially conversing and deliberating together within the context of the accepted norms of the social whole, they shift to the point where they start to say what they think. This second field, or space for conversation, we call *breakdown*. It is at this point, Scharmer notes, that people "say what they think." Rule-revealing behavior becomes the norm here. The subsurface fragmentation comes up. But now there is a container that can begin to hold the intensity and pressure. People experience instability in the conversation, but it can be held. I originally called this space *instability in the container* because we now have both—instability of association *and* enough of a container to see it function.

In Field II, the social whole is no longer dominant. As Scharmer has shown, the parts become primary—in particular, the particle-like nature of the individual. The billiard-ball image of atoms colliding fits well in this space. People tend to collide and smash into one another. What this means in practice is that people begin to battle over whose meaning will have more power. In Kantor's four player system, Field II is characterized by move-oppose sequences; followers and bystanders tend to be silent and made to feel powerless. How people handle the energies and intensities of this space is a critical question for leadership, one I address in more detail in the next few pages. But it is clear that this can be either a time of creative change or of recycling old memories and viewpoints.

The challenge of this space is to change the meaning of the trauma that arises, both individually and collectively. In this space some of the pain that is present in and among the people can arise. This evokes what I refer to as the *crisis of suspension*—learning to find a way to cool down the exchange, as described

in the superconductor example so that the entire group can move into a more fluid inquiry and reflection.

Unfortunately, many groups never get beyond this point. Things heat up, people try negotiating, compromise, or unilateral control, but they fail to move collectively into the space of reflection. Eventually, they recycle back into politeness, because it is the only other alternative that they know. People's appetite for dialogue is often limited because they have had experiences that never got beyond this point—and the promise of more of the same is unappealing.

People typically experience this dimension of the container's development as the time when trouble arises. They begin to interpret what is happening in terms of personal discomfort, are less concerned about censoring what they say, and tend to cling to their perspectives.

Recall the story of the first day we brought steelworkers and managers together. They were excited by their own progress and began to speak about forging "a single container" that could include everyone. This led people to relax and begin to reveal how they really thought and felt. One manager suggested that man-hours per ton be reduced. The steelworkers immediately reacted, seeing this as a betrayal. It meant cutting or losing jobs. Now they were not polite—they vented.

The resulting breakdown was a necessary step in the process of discovering just how difficult it would be to dissolve years of trouble, and it powered the process by which that could actually begin to happen. People learned that it was possible to come to the point of reflecting on the structures and forces that led to this breakdown, that they could suspend together their difficulties. This propelled them eventually out of this field of conversation and into the next.

The great quest in this phase is for a set of new rules or new ways of operating that can enable people to think, talk, and work together differently. But instead, the breakdown comes. The dominant emotion in this field tends to be anger. This

seems to arise as people discover that not only can they not *make* dialogue happen, they also cannot get anyone to even agree with them!

Patrick de Maré spoke about dialogue as being fueled by the energy of anger and hatred. De Maré drew on Freud's theory outlined in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in which he stated that human beings have a great deal of repressed hatred and violence in them, much of it the result of the formation of civilization. This repression, however necessary for human society, also has never had a chance to be processed or made conscious. It has just rolled around in the subconscious of humanity, spilling out at various times. Dialogue provides, de Maré believed, a way to enable the cultural healing and change that was required—for instance, after the trauma of war, dialogue can provide society a space for this intensity to come up and change the *meaning* of the anger and frustration. I agree with this. Field II is a necessary space for human beings to learn to move through. It provides the fuel for change.

When the steelworkers and managers found themselves caught in a series of reflexive reactions to one another, based on their long-standing collectively held memories, the temptation was to think that the idea of gathering as we did was a mistake. In fact, people came up to me at the breaks during this session and asked, "How do you think it is going?" their question really a statement of worry and concern. I reassured them: "How could we change a collective pattern like this if the pattern itself never came up?" The art of transformation of these patterns moved the group into the next field space. There they began to see the crisis as a vehicle for understanding what was happening among them. It changed in *meaning*. It was no longer a symbol of their failure together, but an opportunity for change and reflection.

Now, this does not necessarily mean that people have to have a difficult time, or that the experience needs to be violent.

In fact, as there is greater understanding of the inevitable frustrations that arise as a group of people struggle to learn to talk together, there can be a much greater ease and more fluid movement. Sometimes, though, this movement requires assistance by people who have experience with the cycles of dialogue.

In the Grand Junction dialogue, the underlying difficulties also eventually came out. During the first two-day session we held, I presented some of the dilemmas I believed faced the people in this system, for instance, their desire for more open relationships and collaboration across and between hospitals, and their fear that greater openness might erode their competitive positioning. The group spoke quite freely about these things, and how they had responded in the past to them—describing the paranoia that had sometimes loomed large in their minds. People began to remark that something had seemed to shift to enable them to say even that much.

Finally the CEO's lieutenant, who was required by his boss to remain silent, could not help himself. He nearly came out of his chair: "I have heard this in the past . . . that St. Mary's would like to see Community Hospital buried, would like to see it go away."

There was a moment of stunned silence. I could feel people begin looking for cover. Others then spoke up. "I would confirm that I have heard that also."

A doctor from St. Mary's Hospital said, "I have heard that too. But the only folks I have ever heard it from are Community Hospital folks. I haven't heard it from St. Mary's folks, HMO folks, or the community."

"Has anyone ever heard this before?" I asked. "Or is George crazy?"

People acknowledged that yes, there has been intense rivalry and people had heard rumors to this effect.

The CEO of the largest hospital, only recently arrived, began to inquire: "I have been here only a year and a half. But if there is anything I or my hospital have done that has produced this climate, I want to know about it and I want it to stop. Can you help me see what you see going on?"

People had begun to say what they thought. The result: The dialogue proved itself to be a setting where truth could be told and where genuine inquiry into the problems most troubling people could be discussed.

Another critical dimension of this field is that there is little or no real reflection yet on what is happening. People may advocate their positions but will likely not stop to inquire into what led them to think as they do. In this state, people are more concerned about expressing their point of view than challenging it. In its extreme, as Scharmer points out, this dimension collapses into blame. The underlying sentiment is "not only do we have different positions, but clearly yours is wrong and to blame for the difficulties we are facing." As it turns out, movement out of this field requires the very thing most lacking—self-reflection.

The Crisis of Suspension:

"I Am Not My Point of View"

For many people, the difficulty in engaging in dialogue revolves around the fact that the only thing they know is a seemingly endless recycling between the politeness and rule following of Field I, and the breakdowns in Field II. After a period of anxiety and frustration, they retreat into politeness and, sometimes, denial. This does not build confidence or hope that there is a way through the difficulties, and tends to build cynicism.

The recycling happens because people do not succeed in navigating the second crisis—the crisis of suspension. The crux of this crisis involves coming to the point of realizing that "I am

not my point of view." I have a point of view, but that is not what I am. Field II is characterized by people taking positions and battling one another. The way through this is to suspend these positions and the assumptions that drive them, to come to the point of being willing to listen to other views. This is a move that truly changes the game people are playing.

The transition here is essential and perhaps one of the most difficult ones in the entire dialogue process. It is here that people may choose to loosen their grip on their positions and take in a wider horizon.

There is a crisis involved here because of the fact that people hold their assumptions as "necessary." Sometimes these become "absolute" necessities—people with fervent religious beliefs hold them as absolutely necessary, and therefore prevent any kind of real change toward mutual understanding. This is another shift of identity—one that says, "Though my positions may be right and well thought through, they are still not *who I am*. I can make space for other positions without jeopardizing my own inner stability." Coming to understand this is to navigate the crisis of identity inherent here.

The crisis of suspension also moves individuals into a zone of reflection that previously they had not been willing to occupy. Suspending my views opens the space not merely for more advocacy but also for inquiry.

Opposition as a Catalyst for Field Change in a Group

An individual comment in a dialogue can precipitate a substantial change in direction for the conversation, especially if that comment comes from a space that the majority of the group is not in. In one dialogue, the vice president of the union compelled a new kind of inquiry by opposing the direction in which

the conversation was going simply by reflecting on and suspending his *own* inner state and his reactions to it. The group really was not prepared to join him yet:

UNION VP: Everybody seems to be agreeing on just about everything, but those two sparks of mine haven't seemed to come together, and I don't know whether that's a positive or a negative thing. They just haven't come together.

UNION EXECUTIVE: Just don't leave it like that, what the hell are you talking about?

(Loud laughter)

COMPANY CEO: Let's suspend this!

UNION VP: I'm not too sure that—

MANAGER: Are you raising [trouble]? *(More laughter)*

UNION VP: I don't know whether or not we really churn when we have some positives and negatives that set each other off, or set us off. We've had so much getting along this morning, that it just hasn't—

UNION EXECUTIVE: More sickening than anything. *(Laughter)*

UNION VP: —just hasn't got me awake yet so . . . I can't really add very much. We're not getting there, yet how do we go about doing it?

This exchange prompted other people to begin to advocate solutions—to direct what they wanted to have happen. The group had moved out of politeness and into a Field II space.

FIELD III: INQUIRY IN THE FIELD
AND THE FLOWERING OF
REFLECTIVE DIALOGUE

It is at this part of the dialogue process that a recognizably different kind of conversation begins to take place. Here the energy changes. People finally stop speaking for others, or for "the group." There is a shift here from "third person data"—stories about other people and other places—to "first person data"—inquiries into how things look from where I stand. People do not simply stand on their position, they let the group know more about what it is about them that leads them to it. People are reflective in this phase—about what they are doing, about the impact they are having.

Perhaps most dominant in Field III is the spirit of *curiosity*. While many people privately will admit to themselves that they do not understand why things happen as they do, that in some respects they are as puzzled as the next person, they rarely if ever do this in public. As this phase of the container opens up, people become more willing to acknowledge such things. They do not have to have it all figured out or have all the answers. They discover that there is a larger meaning unfolding through the conversation—something that goes beyond what they might have imagined and constructed for themselves. It is at this phase that people start to be surprised—not by their negative reactions to others, but by the fact that they are thrown back on their heels, and by their realization that they are being forced to slow down and *think*.

We have termed this *reflective* dialogue, because it is here that people begin to notice and are willing to explore their assumptions. Scharmer described this state as *rule reflecting*. People are now willing to examine the rules that have

governed how they have operated. They are prepared to begin to explore the nature of the structures that guide their behavior and action, and they do so increasingly publicly.

It is also at this point in the dialogue that new meaning can unfold, seemingly from many different directions at once. It is like a dam that once broken floods the low-lying plain of a subject, filling it to overflowing. People raise things from many perspectives. They do not feel compelled to have to agree. Ideas tend to flow freely, often grounded in the fact that people are speaking now for themselves.

Another critical feature here: People feel no obligation to require that others respond or agree with their perspective. Typical of Field II is the sense that if I say something, others must reply. People still treat one another as positions rather than as people in Field II, and their main aim is to find out if the other person is, in essence, for or against his or her point of view. In Field III this changes. While I may have a position, I am also a person with a history, a particular background, and none of this am I now seeking to hold back.

There are some striking examples that illustrate this space from the health-care dialogue in Grand Junction.

Here, for instance, is a comment that eventually became "famous" in our dialogue. Early on we spoke about the impact of the medical profession on doctors, as people tried to reflect on the most effective way to re-create the health-care system in the city. The conversation turned to the fact that there seemed to be differences between the ways men and women talk about health-care issues, about how the profession of medicine devalues or discounts feelings despite its claims to care.

One doctor then turned to another and asked, "When was the last time you cried in public?"

The group then explored for some time a range of different experiences people had had about how emotion and medicine danced together about what counted as acceptable expression and what did not. Not everyone was able to let their feelings flow. In fact, there was an elaborate system of what one person called the "modulation of emotion"—the ways professional appearance regulated feeling and its expression. This proved quite difficult to sustain. Recalls a nurse:

I remember an instance where a man died, and the nurses started running around the room. And the wife came in, and she started telling her husband how much she loved him, and the nurses started crying with the wife. And the physician almost left. I did. I couldn't take it. And I went out to the desk, and everybody saw me crying. Nurses will do that. They'll come up and hug each other and be real supportive. But the physician, when he came out of the room, I could tell he was emotionally distraught, but he hauled off and kicked a trash can against the wall.

This man's violent reaction estranged him from the nurses, who could not let themselves express this kind of rageful feeling, only the grief.

The group eventually raised, after this conversation, in both a personal, and then remarkably impersonal fashion, the critical issues that surrounded the pressure to care for people continuously, and be provider of last resort for an entire community. These conversations evolved into a discovery of the immense reliance that people in the medical community have on technology.

This triggered a soul-searching inquiry by the doctors and board members responsible for major technology decisions into the sources of some of their decisions. This was not a group of

alternative health practitioners, but people who had invested many years in maintaining medicine as it is traditionally taught, for instance, in United States medical schools. Here is what these doctors had to say:

I think over the past fifty years there's been a development of an arrogance in medicine because of our toys, our antibiotics, our medicines, that what you're talking about . . . I think there's a much more important part, not only of individual practice, but hospital practice as well, and the whole culture of caring and medicine that has over the past fifty years of our toys and technology has been repressed.

And then we realize that we're frustrated. And why we're frustrated is because we've had this artifice that's out there, and we've felt this power that was not real.

[We] in this room are responsible for promoting what I'm talking about. We promoted that artificial position. And now it's awfully hard to say we're sorry.

This was a particularly poignant matter in this town, as it is in many small ones, where there tends to be redundant technology purchases because the people in different hospitals feel it unwise or uneconomic to leave to other organizations valuable revenue streams that arise from medical testing. But it became clear that the community tended to invest in technology to assuage this sense of limitation and guilt, and that rising health-care costs were at least in part attributable to a collectively held habit of belief in technological solutions that lead people to buy first and ask questions later.

When we started the dialogues, the CEOs of the various lo-

cal hospitals rarely if ever set foot in one another's facilities. A few months into the process, these same CEOs began to meet to talk through major technology purchases and the implications for the community as a whole. Insight about a problem translated immediately into action. New action does not necessarily require an action plan; dialogue points the way toward a far more direct route to action—deep shifts in the shared meaning of a group of people. What I have found, in fact, is that the action plans produced in many teams and executive settings are elaborate ritualized dances that rarely culminate in the intended action. Insight that emerges as a result of a shared field of meaning and is jointly developed—what Patrick de Maré. Called “outsight”—simply and profoundly changes what people do.

This conversation space is also marked by a growing ability to speak across models—for people who generally have very different points of view to begin to talk and listen in ways that enable them to connect to people who are very different from them. It was when they were in this field in the dialogues that the steelworkers and managers began to feel understood by the other side. It is also at this point that people realize more fully just how little understanding there is among them.

**The Crisis of Fragmentation:
“We Are Not Our Point of View”**

As a group of people comes to the point of engaging in a rich flow and exchange of inquiry together, there is a point when pressure for another change builds. Up until that point, people generally are focused on their own point of view and their own personal contribution to the inquiry. They are, as noted above, in the “primacy of the part” end of Scharmer's continuum. As this experience develops, something new comes into place. People begin to see the extent of the fragmentation that has actually been present

all along, though covered up. The impact our judgments of one another have on our effectiveness and our hearts becomes apparent. The possibility opens through this to see that what we together thought we were doing is not the full picture.

In one dialogue we held some years ago, this arose in a poignant way. One of the two Israeli men attending said he worried about the quiet reflection that the group had entered. He “learned through intensity” and felt that somehow this was missing. The other Israeli, a thoughtful academic, wrote a long note afterward describing his experience of the following moments. He said:

[His] words struck something very deep, deep inside me. I then opened my mouth and begin to talk about intensity. As Jews and as Israelis, all of our lives are unbelievable intensity. The intensity and pain of the oppressed . . . the vivid memory of every persecution . . . the pain of every attack . . . the constant fear and expectation of more . . . and the intensity and pain of finding ourselves to be the oppressor and having to kill, torture, and whatever for our own survival . . . I simply expressed the pain.

At that moment I realized [and spoke about], I think for the first time, the paradox of learning through intensity. We protect ourselves from intensity by creating intensity. Creating artificial experiences of intensity [i.e., entertaining, exciting, risky, and/or emotionally arousing] can shield us from our real, personal intensity. They can keep us from having to face the pain, anger, guilt, uncertainty, and doubt as well as the beauty that are deep inside of us. The real danger is creating moments of slowing down and silence, when the troublesome feelings and pain can

well up. So we keep things speeded up and learn to learn through intensity. And we learn to teach through intensity.

When this man spoke in our session, the room became very quiet. It was as if we were staring into a still pool, and in those few moments could hear a vast cultural pattern at work, one that operated like a reflex, automatically, without conscious awareness. People began to inquire into the ways that this pattern lived also in them, ways that they supported it. The inquiry began at a personal level with one man, but quickly went beyond that to explore cultural factors. In these moments we saw something of the collective ecology of a nation; we got at least a window into it, and a sense of a very new possibility: that a dialogue group could enable at the collective level the kinds of insights that are typically only possible for individuals—insights that can change the total nature of one's experience.

This fellow added in his journal:

When I spoke, I was speaking for myself—. . . as a Jew, as an Israeli. Afterwards, however, I really felt as if *the group had spoken through me*. I think I was giving voice to the shadow side of the holiness and peace that many of us were experiencing: the real pain and fear that we carry inside ourselves as members of families, groups, and organizations . . . the pain and fear that we are going to return to after the conference. It is very difficult to describe the experience in retrospect or to say what led me to believe that the group had spoken through me. Perhaps it was that I spoke so spontaneously and without forethought. Perhaps it was the reaction of the group. Perhaps it was the way in which people followed on what I had said.

The crisis of fragmentation is one in which a group of people loosen their preconceptions about who they think they are and what they think they are doing together, enough so that they may see a much wider set of possibilities. In this case the shift was from personal insight to at least the potential for cultural healing.

This crisis requires a letting-go of an isolated identity that many of have developed and used to survive in the world. It comes in part by grasping the extent of the loss that arises when we live in an isolated way. It also comes when we see the possibilities of developing other kinds of collective identities.

Rilke, in his essays on love, describes marriage as enabling two people to see further into the future than they otherwise might. Two people who come together can learn, in other words, to transcend the limits of their identities and come to the point of knowing a larger sense of destiny together than they might have experienced on their own. This is an example of the fruits of successfully overcoming the crisis of fragmentation. In it comes the realization that we are not our point of view, that the shared identity we have had is not what we thought, and that we can together see more than we might have on our own. This crisis, once navigated, enables people to move into a space where there is much more fluid creativity than ever before.

FIELD IV: CREATIVITY IN THE FIELD:

GENERATIVE DIALOGUE

This fourth field and container space is the rarest of all the spaces. It is the one where people cross over into an awareness of the primacy of the whole, as Scharmer suggests. It is also a time when genuinely new possibilities come into being. As Scharmer also suggests, this is a space where people generate new rules for interaction, where they are personally included

but also are fully aware of the impersonal elements of their participation. In this fourth space, people have an experience of *flow*—often a collective flow. Synchronicities arise more often here: One person will think of something and another will say it. People become more aware, in essence, of the primacy of the undivided whole that links us all, and so notice it more readily.

In this fourth space, traditionally held positions are sufficiently loosened that very new possibilities can come into existence. It is in this space where the two gay women I described in the beginning of this book found a way to connect with the woman who deeply disapproved of them, and they of her. The experience of an atmosphere large enough to accommodate radically different points of view without requiring any of them to change is a fundamental quality of this space. In it, many new possibilities and options can be seen that were hidden before.

A recent dialogue we held illustrates the qualities that arise in this space. It was one of the final dialogues in a year-long leadership program that my consulting company runs. People began sharing their feelings about the fact that the session was coming to an end—their relative readiness to take on the world and sustain a profound container for others, their own self-doubts about what they were ready to do. What emerged in the conversation was a quality of intelligence, depth, and flow that moved everyone. It was as if everyone were playing their part in creating a larger musical score, though no one had all the notes. Each one simply played his or her part:

Early on, one man began by reflecting on his own question of himself: “Have I used my time well?” Another man offered the metaphor of birth—that the process of learning together was more like a pregnancy. People responded with humor. Said one man;

It’s like you’ve got a child now. It’s like, “oh shit I’m going to be a father!” So it’s sort of like some grow-

ing up has got to happen for me. I use a lot of excuses . . . for not doing things in a more professional way . . . So some maturity and sobering are starting to sink into me.

A woman joked: “Have you thought about labor?” To which he replied, “No, I have not, but I do want drugs!” Several people began to reflect openly on their use of the time in the year-long program, and the fact that they had found a great depth to their commitment.

Into the stream of dialogue people reflected on the theme of loss. Several people spoke about critical endings and how they had handled them. This comment triggered a flow of other reflections about the theme of loss, about ending. One man, for instance, spoke about the time when his daughter, who was in her late teens at the time, ran away from home:

And for me that was quite a shock, because she had been within my home and within my field of protection, if you like. She was— And, so my fatherhood, in *that way*, came to an end very rapidly, more rapidly than I would have chosen, in a more *measured way*. Had she gone off to University or whatever, then it would have been what everybody had expected, there would have been no problem, I would have *felt* it in a different way.

But it came to an end very abruptly. And then, after she had been away for maybe three or four days, her cat, which *also* lived within our home and was our—obviously we loved and was responsible for—the cat died. And I remember burying the cat with tears streaming down my face, partly because of the loss of the cat but *largely* because I knew that that symbolized the fact that

my daughter would never come and live in my home again in the same way.

And it sort of shocked my wife and my son, who were there, that I was so upset about this. But for *me* it came very rapidly, and I had to deal with that loss. Of course, it wasn't the loss of my daughter—my daughter I subsequently met up with not that much later, and we had a great meeting, and I really felt rather jealous of what she'd been up to—she had some *excellent* experiences. And *particularly* when I found where she was living and what she was doing, I thought, "This is—I'd rather be doing that than what I'm doing." It was great, there was no issue there.

But what I had lost was my fatherhood, *that phase* of my fatherhood, if you like, now I'm a father of a daughter who is an adult, who doesn't live within that kind of sphere, although she comes down and lives with us often. So we've talked it through, and thought it through.

But it *was* a lot of feeling, and it was the ending of a particular *way* in which I held myself, I suppose, a kind of containment, but a way in which my presence extended, it is now different. And it was very painful, and very good to feel it. By *feeling it so much*, it was really clean. And there was nothing left as a result.

People responded to this not by reacting to other's experiences, but by connecting what was happening in the conversation with what was happening in themselves. The wider theme that emerged here was about the release of structures that limit the flow of meaning. From one perspective these appear as loss. From another, they are ways life makes space for something new. Perhaps most striking here was the unplanned collective artistry

that coordinated around this theme, where the people acted as servants of the emerging flow of meaning as well as participants within it. While there were personal stories, the dialogue was not about the personal stories but about the deeper meaning that came through all of them. This is the magic of dialogue.

One other important feature of this fourth conversational space is the discovery many people make that they simply do not have words to describe the experience that emerges. To genuinely move into uncharted territory is at times to be struck dumb. We do not know what to say. This can be quite disconcerting if we are used to controlling our experiences through our words. To get a feel for this, try deliberately not speaking for a while in settings where you are generally talkative. Present experience is often fused with our memories of how things have been. People often use talk to continue to bring for the world with which they are familiar. Ceasing this can, for the moment, change the pattern.

Learning to access the part of ourselves that do not yet have a voice can also be quite freeing, as we realize that we must evoke something from within ourselves. We move from reporting our memory to speaking our hearts. And we shift to a mode where it can be legitimate to speak our thoughts, to notice and value our insights, and not to discount them because they seem underdeveloped or "small" in comparison to more articulate positions voiced by others.

In this fourth space of dialogue people become quite understanding of one another's inability to be articulate, because they experience their own limits. They also become more aware of their participation in the wider group—and discover that what they say impacts everyone. This can be a space of immense discovery—one where we find, for instance, that the language system we use tends to blind us to certain experiences.

Western languages, for instance, tend to be noun based. They tend to objectify the universe, to try to measure it, to capture it. This can leave us trapped in categories. The in-

indigenous peoples of North America have a very different language structure—one that is verb based, in motion. According to Native American scholar and linguist James Youngblood Henderson, these languages focus not on what is seen but what is heard. And what is heard is in motion. For instance, there is no word in Micmac, one of the Algonquian languages, for tree. Instead, people speak of different trees according to the sound that the wind makes when it blows through the leaves. The word for *forest* in Micmac translates as “shimmering leaves.” Language, they say, is a container for the forces or spirits of nature.

Unlike Western European languages, native languages like the Algonquin teach people not to forget the “glue” of life that binds everything together. Henderson was struck by the way Westerners become caught in their categories:

Take the words *income tax*—they created that word that you call the tax code and devoted their life to it. I said once to someone, why did they live in New Hampshire? And they told me how these categories had dominated their universe, they only lived in a place where they don't pay [state] taxes.

I don't want my son and daughters to do that—to live in imagination. We go walking in the forest and say, this is this, and this is that. See this footprint here, that insect walking over it, that's called time. That's the closest we get to time. If insects can walk over a footprint, you know it's been there overnight. . . . It's as good as my watch if you know what you're looking at. But Mic Maq and Cheyenne are so totally related to this world that you call nature, we don't have a word for it, it's just too abstract.³

The point of Native communication is to create an experiential interchange, one that is completely grounded in experience. An English-speaker must deliberately distinguish between a statement that is a report and one that is a person's own experience. In Algonquian languages the distinction is made automatically. The phrase “There is a war in Indonesia” would become “There is a war in Indonesia, he said to me” as if it were a report.⁴

The worldview behind the Algonquian language system is that people must find their experiences for themselves, from the inside. Says Henderson:

We have a theory of the universe that's been given to us that covers a lot of stuff about relationships but not about *things*: how to maintain families, and how to maintain love between brothers, sisters, and cousins and nephews, and how to live in an environment that looks hostile but is very giving. . . .

Their language is intimately connected to the earth. To understand them, he says, you have to “be” nature, to be the world. This is the experience that can emerge from the fourth space of dialogue—a connection with oneself and the world around that allows a fundamental new sense to emerge.

Intriguingly, this fourth space is also one where words take on a power that they do not seem to have in other spaces. This fourth conversation space brings about a level of alignment and connection among people such that, as Bohm put it some years ago, “People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting; rather, they are participating in this pool of common meaning which is capable of constant development and change.” When someone speaks from this experience, their words have a thunder behind them that is greater than if they were simply speaking on their own or for themselves.

The Crisis of Entry (or Reentry)

There is a fourth crisis, a fourth boundary to navigate in the dialogue process. However powerful and flowing a conversation becomes—either within yourself or in a group, you do not live in this experience permanently; you must leave it. The return is a return to a world you departed, but from a different place. You return to the world of “politeness,” of “civility”—knowing now that very different kinds of conversations are possible. And yet you find that many people around you either have no interest or no experience (or both) in this. They look at you as if you had been away a little too long, and have lost perspective on the “real world”—which for them may consist of only one or two of the conversational spaces you now know exist. People typically are well aware of Field I and II, and might imagine but have little experience with Fields III and IV.

Returning to the world you have left produces a crisis, because it is hard to give up the hard-won sense of power and potential that you have experienced. And it may feel as if you are the only one who can understand what you know. The crisis here involves *learning to let the meaning of this familiar old world change*. Your relationship to it changes. Initially, the world does not change at all, and you do discover you have no need for it to change. In this sense you can move back to the third space more readily than you might have before you took your journey: You can reflect on your own moves and their impacts. You can begin to understand when people are speaking across frames and clashing, and suspend these clashes as opposed to seeking, as you might have before, to “fix” them.

Joseph Campbell, in his description of the hero’s journey, notes that the challenges of returning are among the most formidable the hero faces. This is because there is an inconsistency between

the world that permits great insights and freedom of expression and the “ordinary world” that seems to deny the value and legitimacy of such experiences. Many of the ancient myths picture the return as a kind of responsibility, a requirement to bring new insight into the life of the community. This can weigh heavily on the individual traveler. Indeed, it is quite possible to become addicted to this fourth space, to imagine that this is indeed the pinnacle of experience, that everything else is subservient to it.

But as I have said throughout, the intention in dialogue is *motion*, movement. I have found people who imagine—and I know I initially believed—that achieving a sense of deep conversation and even communion with a group of people, out of which can come profound new insight and action, was somehow the point. But by equating this space to dialogue, it becomes too precious, too inaccessible, a new-age fantasy that in a way denies the real possibility for transformation, which is a continuous cycle of change.

Leadership emerges when an individual or a group understand the shape of the world, and so are not deceived or overly intoxicated by any particular arrangement of its features. The attempt to retreat into an experience of edenic fantasy, of intimacy, without going through the challenge of reentering the world of the mundane eventually becomes quite toxic, quite limiting, and life denying.

FOUR DIFFERENT QUALITIES

FOR SILENCE AND TIME

Looking through the lens of the four conversational spaces I discussed can illuminate a variety of experiences that are central to the emergence of dialogue. People’s experience of silence in conversation varies greatly from one field space to the next. In first space, silence is socially awkward, even strange. People do not sit together long in silence without someone becoming quite un-

comfortable, thinking it odd that no words are being spoken. The expectation is for action, for direction. Its absence can be very disconcerting.

The second space treats silence differently. There is tension. People may disagree and attribute another's silence to judgment about oneself, or perhaps even to calculation—"He is sitting quietly to think of his next move!" (Or "I have him on the ropes.") Silence here is conflictual and may seem even dangerous. In the third space, silence is pensive, thoughtful. People are reflecting, waiting, looking inward, listening for new possibilities. Finally, in the fourth space, the silence is whole and, at times, sacred. The wisdom of the wider group takes precedence over the chatter of the individual.

The uses of silence are displayed in the ways time is understood as well. Our sense of being and our sense of time are very intimately linked. One of the reactions to the proposal of using dialogue for anything that requires action is that it simply takes too much time. But through dialogue you can discover that there is plenty of time. It enables you to experience time differently.

Kronos and Kairos

The sense of time also changes through the evolving fields of dialogue. Most of us live in what I would call sequential time: measured, linear, one moment after another. This kind of time we could call *kronos*, after the Roman god of time. *Kronos* still controls us; most people have his emblem strapped to their wrist! The relentless pressure arrow of *kronos* time is the one most of us try to manage. We often have the sense that it is scarce, that we must ration it.

But there is another kind of time: the time of the seasons, of the moment. This kind of time, which is called *kairos*, is the

early September and say, "Fall is in the air." How did you know? *Kairos* is the sense of time you get when you go to the beach, and can tell whether the tide is coming in or going out. Again, how did you know? Your own inherent awareness of cycles and rhythms tells you. *Kairos* time reveals the movements of natural rhythms; it is the sense of "appropriate time," the "right" time for something. Where *kronos* follows the external schedule, *kairos* follows an internal one. The cycle of gestation and birth for a child is pure *kairos*.

The process of dialogue helps us to rediscover and appreciate *kairos*. We have had many dialogues where two hours go by and people are shocked: "Where did the time go?" they ask. "It seemed like we had barely begun." They lost the sense of *kronos* and were following the present-moment rhythms of the conversation. When *kronos* reasserts itself, it often feels like an imposition: People in dialogues often complain: "Why are we following an arbitrary schedule? Something important is happening here!"

We must learn to appreciate and accept both kinds of time. Both are necessary in the world as we know it. But usually *kairos* is dominated by *kronos*. The process of thinking together with a group in dialogue seems to enable people to shift their experience of time. They embrace *kairos*. They gain perspective, they rest, and they develop a keener sense of when to act and when to reflect.

In the first space *kronos*, the aforementioned god of linear time, is dominant. Things have clear beginnings and endings. People want to know the sequence. As people move into the second space, they often find time to be "running out"—their differences take up more space than they had imagined. And people become quite irritated by the seemingly limited time that they have to speak. There is not enough *for them*. *Kronos* still is dominant here, but under pressure. In this second space

people generally refer to other times and places as ways to reference what is happening now. People are generally not fully present yet. In these first two spaces, thought—in the sense of memory—is still largely, unreflectively, dominant.

In the third space, a change begins to take place. Here we see the emergence of *kairos* time, the time described earlier as “the right season.” People become more fully present in this space, in the present moment. *Kronos* and *kairos* seem to have an uneasy coexistence here. People become quite reflective and aware of the conversation as taking place in time, but also lose track of it and begin listening more for the sense of meaning that is unfolding.

In the fourth space, *kairos* dominates. Hours go by and it seems only minutes have elapsed. It is very difficult to interrupt dialogues that are in this space when the pressure of *kronos* arises.

T W E L V E

Convening

Dialogue

Leaders of dialogue are convenors. The word *convene* means “to assemble with others; to come together.” The four phases of dialogue, or four fields for conversation, give us a template and way of thinking about convening leadership. Leadership in each field differs. The requirements differ for holding the container, for engaging the crises, for navigating the pressures within each field.

For dialogue to happen, the principles outlined here must in some way be followed, so that the energies that produce the container—listening, respect, voice, and suspension—are actively encouraged and practiced. But again I emphasize that this

cannot simply happen at an individual level. People all together must suspend their assumptions and let the container itself evolve. As they do so, as they in essence let the space between them and within them change, something very new can begin to happen. As I have said before, this cannot be done simply by the application of intellectual principles that are not backed by the living experience of the people themselves. Dialogue is not a technique in this sense, even though the principles that lie behind it can be articulated.

What follows is the outline for a guide to these spaces, and the leadership required within each of them.

LEADERSHIP FOR FIELD I

When a group of people are in this phase of leadership, they typically cover up differences or are simply unaware of them. They are caught by the structures and rules of the social whole and often feel unable to change or challenge them. Leadership here, when it seeks to evoke a more dialogic exchange, must somehow challenge the status quo and incite change. Several elements are critical here:

Clarify Your Intentions

Perhaps first and foremost for beginning any kind of dialogue effort is the realization that how you see the situation is critical. Do you have a set of prejudgments about these people that makes you think they "need help"? Is this something you would be willing to tell them and risk having disconfirmed? If not, your intention to fix them will likely be at odds with an effort to evoke a shared inquiry that has any kind of commitment from them.

Entry is Everything

The way you approach a situation will determine a great deal about how it will unfold. I have found that the first few moments of any exchange contain the seeds of the totality of the interaction you shall have. The importance of these initial conditions, of the way you choose to interact with people, sets much in motion. In this sense, any move you make is an intervention into the system you are entering.

Join Each Person Differently

Each person within a dialogue is different; each one speaks a different language. Each one prefers a different "system paradigm." Each one has a different story and way to make meaning. Listening carefully to each person and speaking uniquely to him or her matters enormously when creating the initial setting for a dialogue.

Create the Container

As discussed in many different ways, the container for the conversation must be created if there is to be a significant change. The four core practices and principles for dialogue are valuable here. They set a basic context from which to operate. It is not necessary to be explicit about having all four qualities active in the group, but they must be in some way present for there to be a full dialogue process. These dimensions help:

■ **EVOKE THE IDEAL:** The promise of dialogue is that a small group of people might do something that impacts the world. Evoking this potential, supporting its articulation, and asking people to reflect on it can make an important difference

to progress going forward. What I mean here is asking people to listen for the potential of this group, at this time, to create potent results.

▪ **SUPPORT DREAMING OUT LOUD:** The pressure of politeness tends to suppress people's willingness to dream out loud. We are far more expert at cynical judgment than at visionary thinking. And cynicism is often well founded: "Vision statements" and empty promises about the future are just as deadening and just as much a part of the culture of politeness as the taboos on openness. Dreaming about how things might actually be different, given honesty about how things now are, requires the critical ingredient of *support*. This means an unwavering sense of reinforcement that does not judge what is said or done. A good test of a leader is his or her ability to actually do this, and not collapse into sophisticated (though sometimes unspoken) put-downs of the people around him or her.

▪ **DEEPEN THE LISTENING:** People must come to the point of realizing that they listen in their minds and hearts, not through their ears. Opening a space for conversation that fundamentally changes the core meanings and, therefore, outcomes in a group requires that people discover that their listening matters.

▪ **MAKE IT SAFE FOR OPPOSERS:** In this work it must somehow be legitimate for people to oppose what is happening and not feel obliged simply to agree. Bringing opposition out makes it more likely there will be real dialogue and inquiry.

▪ **DARE PEOPLE TO SUSPEND:** The power of opposers requires an equal competence at suspension, if only by a leader at first. The power of someone who is able to make room for perspectives not his own, even maddeningly different ones, can open an enormous space of possibility.

Leadership in this space means helping people to manage, or experience, the crisis of emptiness. Having the understanding that you cannot make dialogue happen, that it must emerge, and having the resilience to stay steady while people react when they find their best efforts at dialogue meet with more polite exchange, can propel people forward.

LEADERSHIP FOR FIELD II

In this space, people discover that the interpersonal disturbances they were hoping would not arise are in fact present and actively limiting effective exchange. Conflicts flare up. Leadership in this space involves learning a great deal about the structures of the system, providing an atmosphere of safety and reassurance—that conflict, too, can be held here, and taking action that is revealing of the quality of reflective inquiry and coherence that one would like to see in others. Some elements that we have found helpful here:

Map the Structures

The key step now is enabling people to come to the point where they can find a safe place to identify the forces that are at work.¹ Why do they work this way?

For example, a program officer of a major foundation once invited me to help teach a group of senior leaders for a year-long program they were organizing. In our planning sessions he had told me that they had failed to do any work on "productive engagement" the previous year, and this had proved a real hindrance to the group; race, political, and personal conflicts swirled around but often went unresolved. "Was this something you thought of ahead of time and tried to implement?" I asked.

"Yes, but the vice president rejected it. But this year we want it." By "we" he meant the grudging acceptance of the VP.

As we talked, it became clear that three different forces were at work here: One was the program officers' own model for how to manage these tensions—which was to bring them out and talk about them. Another was the VP's approach—which was not to talk about them at all. A third force was the group's, a mix of the views of the two leaders. Serving any one stakeholder attitude well would disappoint or threaten the others. What is more, the very issue that he wanted me to address in the group was repeating itself in the foundation's leadership between the VP and this fellow. For his program to have any real impact, the inner contradictions between these forces would have to be addressed. They were as real as the tangible pressures of wind and wave beating on the outside of the building.

At the core in most of these Field II situations is a set of structural dilemmas: If people raise difficult issues, they are chastised, and if they fail to raise them, they betray their integrity, the people, the process—or all three. Naming these things makes it possible to inquire into them.

Facilitate Cross-Model Conversation

Helping people to see that their differences are as much a function of the different languages that they speak—for instance, the different action moves they prefer, or perhaps the different preferences for governance and power that guide their behavior—can greatly ease people's ability to get along. What people in this space attribute to nasty motives by the other guy (ones they not only do not understand but do not *want* to understand) can be shown by a skillful leader to be two very different ways of seeing reality. Facilitating among these different

perspectives means developing the ability to suspend them for oneself, and to provide a safe setting for all of them.

Educate

Often people do not have a clear understanding of the alternatives open to them. They imagine, when faced with a tough conversation, that their options are either to repress what they feel or fight. The third option is to engage in the ways I am suggesting here. Learning about this, particularly now, in this second phase, is an essential step. People tend to be somewhat more ready, since it is quite clear that what they have been doing is not working. It is important to explore with people the possibility of how a wider horizon of inquiry exists if they choose to enter into it. A leader here would be wise, for instance, to seek to work at all three levels: creating new capacities for action, developing people's predictive intuition, and informing them about the invisible architecture that guides behavior and thought.

LEADERSHIP FOR FIELD III

Embody Reflective Inquiry

For this phase the key is to embody the kind of reflective inquiry that you aspire to see in others. Instead of finding problems with others and seeking to correct them, you can reflect publicly on your reactions and what took place within you, inviting others to do the same. You can also look for ways to deepen and broaden the inquiry.

Listen for Emerging Themes

It becomes possible in this third field to pay attention to themes that come from a group's overall interests and ideas and yet are

not being articulated by any single person. Listening for the group's underlying questions as well as its unspoken voices activates energy and greater depth of exchange.

Model Leading from Behind

Leadership here is participatory; you do what is required not as an expert but as an increasingly equal member of a larger process of inquiry.

Predict and Deal with Retrenchment

Typical of this phase is the temptation to imagine that as people discover they are learning to talk and think differently, they are in some ways "special" or "different." This amounts to the formation of an idol within the group, and is a sign of the rigidity of thought that can limit the free flow of dialogue. Noting this and exploring it can help keep a dialogue alive and fluid.

LEADERSHIP FOR FIELD IV

Embody Service

The question for this phase of a dialogue is What is the highest end to which this conversation and/or group of people might serve? What can be done here that cannot be done in other settings? Leadership in Field IV is servant leadership; it is intended to provide for the needs of others in the team or group, or as a group seek to discover what it can best provide for others.

Reflect on the Whole Process

Another key element of leadership here is to make conscious what it has meant to participate in the complete cycle of the dialogue.

Encouraging people to think broadly and deeply at this phase greatly increases the chance that they will learn to sustain what they have learned.

Seek Paths to Resolution

Dialogues that produce insight also reveal possibilities for action. Leadership in Field IV is alert to the possibilities for action that can emerge from the conversations people have shared.

Allow the Leadership Role to Move

It becomes very apparent in this fourth field that leadership is in constant motion. Whoever is able to articulate what is happening has, for that moment, a position of leadership. No preestablished individual can be made the one and only leader. In this phase, leadership is a function of a special kind of meritocracy—the ability to listen for and articulate what is already moving in everyone.

See the Whole as Primary

This fourth phase of dialogue is characterized by the realization that there are forces at work that are larger than any single individual. Leadership at this point requires us to ask, what are the questions emerging out of the whole of this process? What is waiting to be said or done that goes beyond what any one person might have said, but is true for all?