Using a dialogical and dialectical epistemology in the world of analytical reasoning

By Otto Laske

At first, the notion that the Constructive Developmental Framework is "only" an epistemology, or theory of how to dialog with clients based on developmental knowledge, rather than a method for turning businesses around or making them thrive, or finding concrete solutions to a present problem, might seem disappointing and even exasperating. What would such a discipline be good for? Nobody even understands the notions of "development: and "epistemology". Come on, you must be kidding.

But at IDM we are not kidding, we are taking the world of analytical reasoning very seriously. For one thing, this is the world we live in, showing the shape human reasoning has assumed over the 20th century. It's a world outwardly like many before it, of other centuries, of expansionism, brutal wars, religious strife, political deadlock. So what is new about it?

Viewed from social science, the main difference between the 21st century world and earlier worlds is that we know more about how consciousness develops over the human life span. While Freud and Piaget shed light on the beginning of the development of consciousness in infancy and childhood, developmental theories since the 1970's have aimed higher, trying to unravel adult consciousness, its mental growth and developmental limits.

Unfortunately, there has been too little thinking about how the results of adult-developmental science have been obtained, the empirical methodologies that have been used. Knowing these methodologies helps understand both the strengths and limits of what has been found out about consciousness developmentally speaking. This is shown by the obsession with the notion of "development" that has arisen, mainly focused on "agentic development" in the sense of "we develop this team". The other, second meaning of development, its "ontic" meaning, expressed in "this is an immature team", has been much less understood and thought about.

And that is a problem. Because you cannot understand your client if you are unable to read his or her state of consciousness based on insight into individuals' ontic development.

This is the entry point of CDF. This epistemology urges you to do three things:

1. Assess where you are yourself developmentally

2. Based on this insight, get a grasp of your client's level of development relative to yourself

3. Act on insight into the level of your client's adult development, both social-emotionally and cognitively, through the dialog methods CDF provides you with.

Luckily, learning developmental theory through CDF allows you to do all three things, -- iff you persist in learning CDF dialog through interviewing and text analysis. Professionals have avoided this task in droves, seduced by "developmental" ideologies, some even in the form of "philosophies".

So what can be done about the failure to rise above mere "theories" of development? What practice is needed to make these theories concrete and ready for application?

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I think that the first thing is to realize that we live, as Jaques pointed out, in a "language-suffused" social world, and that human speech, when properly analyzed developmentally, lays bare "where somebody – individual or team – is ontic-developmentally. This is of huge consequence. It points to the need for new ways of LISTENING to what people SAY.

After the early twenties, when everybody begins to look "adult", this is the best if not only way to UNDERSTAND people. In a larger context, it points to the need for new ways of understanding, i.e., listening to, corporate cultures which are based on particular kinds of discourse. This is the first step toward using CDF epistemology: becoming aware of ideologies. In this sense, CDF is a tool for ideology critique, pure and simple. The same three postulates named above regarding levels of development are in effect here:

1. Assess your own use of language: what dialog modes are you practicing, and which when?

2. Listen to the structure of your client's language, social-emotionally and cognitively.

3. Act on your insight into your client's use of language, especially concepts, which is based on his or her developmental profile.

Why? CDF gives you powerful tools not only for listening to and understanding, but also for responding to clients. The set of social-emotional prompts you have learned in CDF interviewing, as well as the table of DTF thought forms, is at your proposal, -- iff you know how to use them in dialog.

What do I mean by "dialog"? There are many kinds of it. In fact, each coaching school is associated with its own universe of discourse, and so is every consulting approach.

It is here that we can best learn from psychotherapy (not liked by coaches but still inescapable). There are many approaches to psychotherapy but, as research has shown, the particular approach used matters little, and the same holds for coaching. We have to compare both psychotherapy and coaching approaches on a meta-level, in terms of criteria that govern the dialog methods they are using. Ultimately, what makes a psychotherapy session or coaching session effective is whether a number of different dialog modes is used in a well-balanced way by a self-aware professional. The content of the approach, whether ontological, ICI, ICC, ICF, is totally forgettable since it only points to the limited philosophy of what is a human being behind it, no more.

So what does psychotherapy research tell us about modes of dialog that need to be balanced for a professional consulting to be effective?

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Living, according to Edgar Schein, in a "tell and do" society, the most important distinction to make in consulting and coaching is probably that between telling and asking. These are two modes of being. In the first, I know, while in the second, I am conceding I might not know. As a result of not knowing, I am subordinating myself to my client and let him or her tell me what is on their mind. This is the entry gate to using CDF because as soon as I listen to the client based on my social-emotional and cognitive interviewing skills, I move into knowing something about my client's world. I am able to lay bare structures invisible to the eye and ear not schooled by CDF dialogical epistemology. In this sense, my initial task as a consultant is very simple: let the client speak.

However, that is not quite enough, since the more succinct my question is, the more succinct the client's answer has a potential to be. But what is "succinct" in the context of CDF/DTF? This is a hard lesson to learn as IDM case studies show. The answer to "what is succinct in CDF" has essentially to do with how so-called prompts are used.

There are two sets of developmental prompts in CDF, social-emotional and cognitive ones. (I am leaving out need/press variables.) Both of them can be used in three different dialog modes: attentional support, interpretation, and enactment. This makes six types of using prompts, three social-emotional and three cognitive ones. Since there are 10 social-emotional prompts and 4 cognitive prompts. It's still a manageable universe as long as we don't take individual dialectical thought forms (as extensions of moments of dialectic) into account. But nothing hinders us from reducing the number of thought forms from 28 to 12, for instance, as Dr. Vurdelja and others have done.

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