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JOURNAL

The Power of Discourse

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Journal Article | May 2 2014 - 9:00am

The Power of Discourse

Angela Karrasch and Heather Gunther

Organizations exist only as far as their members create them through discourse...it is the principle means by which members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are. - Mumby and Clair, 1997

Col. Gordon “Skip” Davis sat at the conference table in the dusty operations center in Afghanistan and paged through his notes. It was June 2008 and surrounding him were the over-caffeinated members of the combined joint planning team representing the Commander, International Security Assistance Forces (COMISAF). They were eager to meet and greet their inter-agency and inter-governmental partners in the effort and had worked hard to prepare for the engagement. While Col. Davis had already met the representatives from the United Nations (UN) and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), his team wanted to make a good impression by sharing their initial mission analysis. Col. Davis allowed them to brief with the caveat that the ISAF planners would seek input from the others.

As the final slide clicked into the frame it was evident that the tone of the briefing did not communicate their collaboration. A chilled quiet settled in the room. Before the silence stretched from pensive to awkward, Col. Davis turned toward the Head of the Policy and Planning Unit, to ask for her thoughts. She stood up and said something to the effect, "Why do you need our thoughts? Looks like you have it all figured out." She walked out and all the UN and GIROA reps followed. What Col. Davis’ team had done, confirmed later in the weeks it took to rearrange another meeting, was give the impression they weren't serious in conducting integrated planning as they had not discussed the mission together from the start.

Deciding to work more with partners and be more inclusive in our decision making is a step forward, but will not be enough. Although we interact with others in conversation every day, we aren't very good at serious discourse, especially in groups with diverse membership. Effective discourse can have very real and significant influence on military decisions and is a key to better group decision making. This article makes the case that if more and more decisions are made by groups, we will need better discourse skills.

Individual decision making is prone to emotional influences and cognitive biases including fundamental attribution error, naïve realism, sunk costs, framing, anchoring, confirmation, availability biases[1]. Many other cognitive biases operate on our thought processes[2].

Group decision making is imperfect also. Amongst diverse groups there are challenges in discussing a comprehensive set of decision alternatives. Vinokur and Burnstein’s Persuasive Arguments theory[3]

argues it would make sense if shared information would be discussed less in decision-making groups, and unshared or unique information should be discussed more. Surprisingly, research in the area of group decision making demonstrates just the opposite. Shared information dominates discussion and determines decisions[4]. This finding is referred to as the “common knowledge effect”. Additional research found that whether critical information is revealed to the group at all is dependent upon the number of members in the group who are aware of that particular piece of information.

Information sharing also appears to be dependent upon the climate for dialogue (e.g., is the group primed to think critically or is it primed to come to consensus quickly?). Obviously, the amount of time the group is given for discussion influences the revealing of unshared information. However, given a time constraint it would seem important to quickly discuss the unshared information; we find instead that groups will quickly place emphasis on shared information and explore fewer alternatives when under perceived time pressures[5]. One way to attenuate the “common knowledge effect” is to ensure members of the group have a solid understanding of other group members’ expertise.

Other psychological phenomena influence group decision making. Sometimes there is pressure on a group to become or appear “united”. This pressure can lead to groupthink – an excessive tendency to seek concurrence. Groupthink emerges when group members prioritize agreement over the motivation to obtain accurate knowledge to make appropriate decisions. The expression “on the road to Abilene” refers to a group of people doing something no individual member really wants to do, but all are willing to go along for the sake of getting along. Another group phenomenon called group polarization is the exaggeration through group discussion of an individual’s initial tendencies. It occurs when validation from the group makes an individual not only more certain of their opinion, but also more extreme in opinion. Risky shift is the tendency for individuals to make a riskier decision when working as a group than they would if they made the decision alone.

Despite the potential for process loss (when group work interferes with performance), organizations are increasingly turning to teams. There is a perception that teams manage stress, adapt, make better decisions, and are more productive than individuals. Social psychologists have been addressing the negative consequence of group interaction for a number of years, and the literature shows group decision making works best when certain conditions are met, 1) the members have diverse backgrounds, 2) the members are thinking independently, and 3) the group is able to capture all the ideas in a meaningful way. Heterogeneous teams have cognitive advantages over homogenous teams in decision making, however there are greater coordination costs (mostly in terms of time). One of the keys, then, is to lower our coordination costs through communication and training. From years of research on team performance we have plenty of guidelines. Process loss in diverse groups can be reduced by teaching members:

- About each other’s roles
- How to monitor each other’s performance to identify errors
- To seek clarification of ambiguous information
- How to give and receive constructive feedback
- To maintain high situation awareness by providing quality updates
- How to reflect on their performance and generate self-and team corrective strategies

These and many more strategies to facilitate better teamwork can be found in *Training and Retraining: A Handbook for Businesses, Industry, Government, and Military*[6]. However when it comes to problem solving and decision making, these strategies fall short. The most important key to maintaining effective decision-making teams is a better understanding of good discourse.

Dialogue requires “the free and creative exploration of complex and subtle issues, a deep listening to one another and suspending of one’s own view.”^[7] Army doctrine FM 3-24 (2006) COIN p.4-3 recognizes the importance of dialogue. Critical discussion provides an opportunity for interactive learning. It deepens shared understanding and leverages collective intelligence and experiences of many people. One of the primary tenets of Army Design Methodology focuses on social creation - ideas that develop through collaborative dialogue. Good discourse is hard to come by. When we have diverse expertise in the room and we want synthesis we have to discipline our conversations. Discipline, patience, and respect can have a profound effect on discourse and lead to synergy and learning. Some best practices regarding discourse and decision making are summarized here:

- Seek to understand, not persuade (engage your curiosity)
- Remain open, do not pre-judge ideas (Suspend judgment as best as you can)
- Focus more on engagement and less on control (every interaction should build your relationship)
- Practice deep respect for people (listen and respect all points of view)
- Respect local solutions (listening to those closest to the problem)
- Engage in seriously playful curiosity (assuming kills curiosity)
- Draw out initiative (pay attention to what energizes people)
- Value difference over consensus
- Question assumptions and look for new insights
- Speak from the heart and personal experience (Sincerity)
- Go for honesty and depth but don’t go on and on
- Speak with courage and wisdom
- Slow down – use minutes of silent reflection
- Never dress up an assertion as a question (e.g., Are you going to stand there and do nothing? - When you really mean “help me analyze this situation”)
- Ask open ended questions and then ask for more concrete information
- Don’t use cross-examination tones
- Make it safe not to answer – your question is an invitation to think more deeply – not a demand to defend what they have said

These principles were pulled from a variety of sources and some were introduced in the Starfish program by Lisa Kimball of the Plexus Institute. Her writing^[8] addresses patterns of conversation that work to create productive discourse about issues that matter to organizations.

Listening is a key component of dialogue. The type of listening required for productive discourse on complex problems goes far beyond the mechanics of active listening (e.g., maintain eye contact, lean towards speaker, paraphrase what they said to clarify). In situations where there has been no engagement or there is a lack of trust in a relationship, it is important to listen for and answer the “invisible questions”. In other words, sometimes people need questions answered, but they won’t ask those questions explicitly. Questions like, “are my thoughts valid?” and “do you understand them?” and most importantly “do you care?” These invisible questions cannot be dismissed. Once a person’s thinking and feelings are validated, then you can move on to problem solving and decision making with your partner. It goes without saying that this type of listening/discourse goes a long way in building trust within a relationship. Military leaders should understand “trust” leads to “speed” in operations and more options in the long run. So even if discourse with partners seems inefficient, if trust is present then important communications flow more freely and decisions can be made more quickly. If our partners trust us, and feel “heard” they are more likely to commit to solutions in which they participated, as we saw in the initial COMISAF example. The

solution to the complex problems in Afghanistan may have been perfectly captured in the slides the team presented, however, without buy-in from all stakeholders there was no traction. After the initial, catastrophic meeting, the team re-started the Integrated Planning Effort on neutral ground that resulted in significant consensus on a concept that informed all members and eventually developed into a long term District Development Plan. Eventually their ideas developed into common view of the Afghanistan operational environment, better informed strategic designs and plans for each organization involved (e.g. ISAF, UNAMA, GiROA), and a concept for integrated, synchronized effort in what later became the IJC-GiROA District Development Plan. Today, Maj. Gen. “Skip” Davis shares the story to demonstrate the need for an inclusive approach to planning that starts together and facilitates dialogue across different organizational cultures and perspectives.

Answering “invisible questions” and following the above mentioned rules for discourse will lead to candid conversations that generate a deeper understanding of issues, more trust, and lower the probability of group or individual bias in decision making.

Beyond learning to use simple and profound principles in our everyday conversations, it is important to realize sometimes change isn’t about knowing what needs to happen, it is about the motivation and willingness to engage and value discourse. Once the affective component or “right attitude” is present, it is necessary to individually and organizationally “create a channel”. This means setting the conditions to allow for better discourse. One example of creating a channel would be to eliminate or at least mitigate the widespread “we just don’t have time” syndrome. Organizations must create the time and space for leaders to engage in discourse about complex problems and strategic issues on a regular basis. According to Hanford[9], “at the strategic level... speed can be the surest way of not being strategic, e.g. scheduling time slots that are ridiculously short for thinking through a key issue or opportunity; or for learning something new; or to change and clarify key organizational roles. All these strategic challenges take time.” An investment in conversation can be more efficient in the long term if it leads to the most effective decisions. The Army needs to examine the structures, processes, and systems that foster ongoing discourse not just internally, but with our partners and stakeholders.

Leaders rarely make critical decisions alone; they rely on many inputs from analysis, experience, and expertise that are largely the product of group consensus. Strong discourse skills are key to harnessing expertise. Empirical research confirms both the individual and team dynamics are flawed in their ability to maintain an objective perspective, and these lessons are reflected in the pages of history. Optimizing discourse and the power of collaboration can mitigate the risks in decision making, build trust in relationships, and allow for more creative solutions to complex problems.

End Notes

[1] Gilovich, T. & Griffin, D. (2010). *Judgment and Decision Making: Handbook of Social Psychology*, 5th Edition. See also Boal and Meckler (2010) *Decision Errors of the 4th, 5th, and 6th Kind*. Handbook of Decision Making. Ed Nutt and Wilson; John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

[2] Maj. Blair Williams discusses historical military examples of the availability, representativeness, and anchoring biases that commanders and staff routinely experience in the military decision making process in *Military Review* (September/October 2010). *Heuristics and Biases in Military Decision Making*.

[3] Vinokur, A., & Burnstein, E. The effects of partially shared persuasive arguments on group induced shifts: A group problem solving approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1974, 29, 305-315

[4] Strasser, G. & Titus, S. (1985). Pooling of unshared information in group decision making: Biased information sampling during a discussion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48, 14667-1478.

[5] Janis, I. *Victims of Groupthink*. Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1972.

[6] Tobias, S. and Fletcher, J. (2007). *Training and Retraining: A Handbook for Business, Industry, Government, and the Military*. American Psychological Association Division of Educational Psychology

[7] Senge, P. (2006). *The Fifth Discipline: the Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Doubleday – a division of Random House

[8] *Liberating Structures: A New Pattern Language for Engagement* (2011) Kimball, L. We also drew from chapter 9 of a Douglas Stone et al, book *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. The Chapter was titled *Learning: Listen from the inside out*. Starfish was a leader development program requested by the then TRADOC Commander, GEN Dempsey. It's purpose was to introduce strategies for collaborating in a decentralized environment.

[9] See Hanford, P. (1995). *Developing director and executive competencies in strategic thinking*. In Garratt, B. (ed.) *Developing Strategic Thought- Rediscovering the Art of Direction-Giving*, McGraw-Hill, London, pp1-8.

About the Authors



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