Dialogic group coaching – inspiration from transformative mediation

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present an approach to group coaching in the workplace that can enhance shared learning in groups and teams through dialogue as opposed to group members' individual positioning through discussion and debate.

Design/methodology/approach – An action research project conducted throughout one year in collaboration between the management groups of the Elderly Care in a Danish municipality, two organizational consultants and two researchers from the Department of Communication and Psychology at Aalborg University. The dialogical approach to group coaching is developed in the interaction between dialogue theory and the performance and close analysis of 12 video-taped coaching sessions with four management groups. The development of the dialogic group coaching concept is further supported through common reflections between researchers and groups in initial meetings as well as during the coaching sessions and final interviews, reflections between researchers and groups in initial meetings as well as during the coaching sessions and final interviews.

Findings – The non-directive approach of dialogic group coaching is inspired by Transformative Mediation. This approach includes a focus on empowerment and recognition within the group in terms of promoting common reflection and learning. This also appears to diminish conflict talk and conflict-based relationships. Further, the dialogic approach emphasizes the importance of a coaching contract to create a common basis for reflection and action, which is found to reduce individual positioning.

Originality/value – The paper develops a dialogic concept of group coaching in theory and practice, while focusing on the learning processes and development of the participating management groups.

Keywords Empowerment, Recognition, Facilitation, Dialogue, Group coaching, Non-directive

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Conversations are of great importance in workplaces and organizations both in working groups and management groups where decision-making takes place. Group conversations can ensure that decisions are made and implemented on a common and informed basis. But it happens that the participants understand decisions differently or they do not support them, and sometimes individual positioning prevents the group members from listening to each other and getting to a common decision. Conversations can be expressed through a variety of forms of talk:

> During a single conversation, a management team may navigate through a variety of forms of talk, each with its own effects on the quality of the team's results. Unfortunately, most forms of organizational conversation, particularly around tough, complex or challenging issues lapse into debate (the root of which means "to beat down"). In debate,

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one side wins and another loses; both parties maintain their certainties, and both suppress deeper inquiry" (Isaacs, 1993, p. 24).

The question is how to enhance deeper inquiry and reduce debate within an organizational group.

One way to search for deeper inquiry is through coaching. Coaching is a professional helping conversation, which often takes place in dyadic interpersonal relationships. A coach helps a focus person to examine, clarify or resolve a private or professional challenge. There are many different approaches to coaching based on different theoretical basic assumptions. Accordingly, there are different practices: systemic, dialogic, narrative, cognitive, etc. coaching. Most of these approaches have been developed on the basis of therapy (Dahl, 2010) and take place in relationships between two people.

Coaching a person, however, is somewhat different from coaching a group. There is not much research when it comes to coaching of groups and teams in the workplace (Clutterbuck, 2010, p. 271; Brown and Grant, 2010, p. 30). Just as coaching in dyadic relationships, coaching of groups can be understood as a learning process that aims at change and being changed through facilitated reflection. However, group coaching is much more complex, as it focuses on the group's collective challenges, goals and learning in the organization – not on individual challenges, goals and learning. Group coaching deals with common challenges of groups, not with individual coaching in or by the group[1]. Such differences need to be considered to enhance "deeper inquiry" (Isaacs, 1993, p. 24) in group coaching and workplace learning.

This article introduces an approach to group coaching, where one or more coaches facilitate the group conversation about common challenges in a dialogic way. The dialogic approach has been developed in theory and practice on the basis of an action research project conducted throughout one year in collaboration between the management groups of the Elderly Care in a Danish municipality and four action researchers.

The Head of the Elderly Care has decided to develop the area in line with the local policy objectives of improving both the efficiency and the quality of the assistance provided to citizens. She has undertaken to prove that savings in the social sphere do not necessarily lead to deterioration in the quality of assistance to citizens, but it requires a new type of strategic thinking and an increased focus on leadership. Management groups at all levels have thus been faced with new challenges both within the specific areas and within the Elderly Care as a whole.

Two organizational consultants have been acquired to support the management groups in this process. It has been decided that coaching of all management groups should be one of the methods to facilitate common leadership challenges that originate from the new situation. The aim has been to provide clarity and common ground in all management groups on the tasks, objectives and framework, and also to facilitate the development of ideas in relation to the new options. The Head of the Elderly Care is very interested in development processes and research of new methods in the field of leadership, and, therefore, two researchers have been invited to engage in the project.

The action research project has had a dual purpose. First, it has aimed at developing knowledge about how such change and learning processes can be facilitated through coaching of management groups, and, in this regard, more specifically, to develop a dialogic approach to group coaching. Second, the project has aimed at facilitating and

developing new practices of the Elderly Care leadership. The purpose has been for the participating leaders to learn together and create a common ground and direction for their leadership. There has been an organizational framing of the coaching conversations, but, within this frame, the groups have been allowed to determine the focus, aim and direction for their conversations.

This article is concerned about the first purpose of the action research project, i.e. the development of the dialogic approach to group coaching. This approach has been developed in the interaction between dialogue theory and the performance and close analysis of 12 video-taped coaching sessions with five management groups[2]. The development of the dialogic group coaching approach has further been supported through common reflections between researchers and groups in initial meetings as well as during the coaching sessions and final interviews.

The following discusses the concept of dialogue and the basic theoretical assumptions of dialogic group coaching developed from the action research project[3].

Dialogic approach

All coaching takes place through conversation, but not all conversation can be called dialogue or dialogic. A dialogue is understood here as a conversation with certain qualities of learning (Alrø and Skovsmose, 2002). A dialogue is not symmetrical, but it aims at equality in the interpersonal relationship. So despite different role relationships, no participant of a dialogue has a higher status than others. Dialogue is a conversation of investigation, i.e. it is open-ended, wondering, dwelling, challenging for the participants to get to know together. There is no result or solution given beforehand. In this way, the dialogue is also unpredictable and potentially risky. This means that participants may have to discontinue well-known patterns and attitudes for new opportunities to emerge.

This understanding of dialogue refers to two different theoretical approaches to dialogue (Pearce and Pearce, 2000). One approach considers dialogue to be a certain form of communication that is essentially different from discussion, debate or monologue. Key references for this understanding of dialogue are Bohm (1996) and Isaacs (1993, 1994 and 1999). According to this approach, dialogue is something you "do" in a specific context. The second approach considers dialogue to be a particular way of being in relation to others that is characterized by specific qualities of interaction. Significant sources of inspiration to this concept of dialogue are Buber (2004/1923), Cissna and Anderson (1994) and Rogers (1957, 1962 and 1971).

Dialogue as a way of communicating

Bohm (1996) presents a dialogue as a free exchange between people where there is no pre-defined agenda or purpose other than to explore the process by "thinking aloud together". A main principle of dialogue is that the participants do not make decisions or draw conclusions. The purpose is to create a "container" where preconceptions, prejudices and emotions should be suspended for something new to appear. Assumptions and ideas are brought forward but not argued for. The group examines the assumptions in a non-judgmental way, permitting space for thoughts and feelings that may occur. Thus, the group is supposed to come up with ideas that no one could have foreseen. The focus is not on individually generated ideas, but on ideas produced collectively among the participants.

Isaacs (1993, 1994 and 1999) is inspired by Bohm in his approach to organizational learning, when he points out the importance of:

> […] participants thinking together not just in the sense of analyzing a shared problem or creating pieces of shared knowledge, but in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility, in which the thoughts, emotions, and resulting actions belong not to one individual, but to all of them together (Isaacs, 1994, p. 358).

The role of the facilitator is to organize a process. First, the stability of the "container" should be established that allows for a dialogue to take place. According to Isaacs, a dialogue is a collective investigation that tries to get participants to talk to the "centre of the room, and not to each other". They should create a common pool of meaning and avoid direct questions as "interpersonal dynamics" can make the participants "fall out of the dialogue" (Isaacs, 1994, p. 380).

Dialogic group coaching is inspired by the Bohm-oriented approach to dialogue, but it also differs in a number of ways. In each coaching session, an investigative dialogue, similar to the study phase suggested by Isaacs, takes place. The creation and stabilization of the container, however, is made at a joint leader group seminar and in the initial conversations before the coaching conversations take place.

Dialogic group coaching focuses on collective learning in the sense of getting to know together, which relates to "thinking aloud together" in Isaacs' terms. In the Bohm-oriented approach, there is no agenda, and the group should not make decisions. In dialogic group coaching, the agenda is to examine a "common challenge" put forward by the group. The group itself determines the purpose of the coaching session. The goal may be to create new ideas, but it can also be to create a reflective basis for decision-making.

In dialogic group coaching, participants are encouraged to "speak to the centre" in the sense that each contributes to the conversation by talking about his or her understanding of the common challenge and not only about his or her own challenge. However, the coaching participants would also address each other. It is a basic assumption that participants by asking questions and commenting can help each other elaborate different present perspectives. This view includes inspiration from another approach to dialogue.

Dialogue as a way of relating to others

Dialogue understood as a particular way of relating to others is inspired by Buber's (2004/1923) vision of dialogue as an interpersonal "meeting". A genuine dialogue is described as an I-Thou relationship as opposed to an I–It relationship (Buber, 2004/1923). Persons relate to each other as equal subjects, which Buber describes as an I-Thou relationship. If the person relates instrumentally or strategically to others, however, he talks about an I–It relationship:

> There is a genuine dialogue – no matter whether spoken or silent – where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular beings in turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them." (Buber, 2002/1965, p. 122).

Dialogue for Buber means to let the other become present as the person he or she really is and can be. Buber (1966) believes that there must be specific conditions for an I-Thou relationship. The first condition is "personal making present", which is a basic

awareness and acceptance of the other as a particular person different from oneself. The second condition is "imagining the real" which is the ability to empathetically realize who the other is and can be. The third condition is "confirmation", which is a basic acceptance of the other.

These conditions are similar to the conditions described by the humanistic psychologist Rogers as qualities of contact in the interpersonal helping relationship: empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. It is important that these qualities are present in the helper and experienced by the client in a dialogic helping relationship (Rogers, 1962; Alrø and Kristiansen, 1998; Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, 2005).

Based on Bubers philosophy, Cissna and Anderson (1994, pp. 13-15) characterize a dialogue as a conversation with certain qualities, which have also inspired dialogic group coaching:

- immediacy of presence (the importance of contact);
- emergent unanticipated consequences (the outcome of a dialogue is unpredictable);
- recognition of "strange otherness" (openness towards diversity);
- collaborative orientation (toward self, other and topic);
- vulnerability (it takes courage to enter an open dialogue);
- mutual implication (willingness to examine different perspectives);
- temporal flow (past, presence and future); and
- genuineness and authenticity (congruence of the participants).

Pearce and Pearce (2004, p. 45) refer to both Buber and Bohm when describing dialogic characteristics of communication:

> When communicating dialogically, one can listen, ask direct questions, present one's ideas, argue, debate, and so forth […]. The defining characteristic of dialogic communication is that all of the speech acts are done in ways to hold one's position but allow others space to hold theirs, and are profoundly open to hearing others' positions without need to oppose or assimilate them. When communicating dialogically, participants often have important agendas and purposes, but make them inseparable from their relationship in the moment with others who have equally strong but perhaps conflicting agendas and purposes.

If one follows this line of thinking in relation to group coaching, it is not for the coach to avoid interpersonal dynamics, but rather to relate dialogically to the participants so that they can become what they really are – as a group. Dialogic communication is about being clear on one's own argued perspectives, while listening and being open to the perspectives of others.

A non-directive facilitative approach – inspiration from transformative mediation

Developing a dialogic approach to group coaching involves a description of both theoretical and practical implications. These theoretical and practical implications are interconnected in the sense that a particular practice depends on the theoretical basic assumptions that inspires this practice. "Purpose drives practice" as it is formulated in the concept of transformative mediation (Folger and Bush, 2001). This means that the

basic theoretical assumptions determine how a facilitator or coach chooses to unfold his or her role. Conversely, a specific dialogic practice of the coach role can provide new ideas and inspiration for developing the theoretical concept. Thus, a dialogic approach to group coaching differs from, for example, a systemic (Hawkins, 2011; Moral *et al.*, 2011; Molly-Søholm *et al.*, 2007) or a narrative approach (Stelter, 2014) to group coaching that are developed from other basic assumptions and practices.

Dialogic group coaching is a conversation in which the communicative acts constitute a coherent pattern based on the concept of dialogue. It is a respectful, responsible and confidence-based conversation in which participants are given the opportunity to follow each other's thoughts and ideas as they explore a common concern. Dialogic group coaching is a conversation where a coach helps the group to clarify, examine and reflect to reach a common understanding and recognition of the challenge they have chosen to investigate in order for them to qualify their decision-making.

A dialogic approach to coaching believes that the client or focus group is motivated and has the resources that are necessary to cope with its own challenges, but the group may need help and support to do so. Dialogic group coaching can be seen as such a support in which the coach facilitates the learning process of the participants. The group is supposed to have the resources and the will to see new possibilities and to make decisions about the choices that will bring them forward together as a group. The dialogic coach does not give expert advice, but it supports the group through a process where participants jointly define and explore challenges and objectives in relation to their leadership tasks, decisions and actions. The non-directive coach leaves the ownership and responsibility of challenge, choice, understanding and action to the group.

However, the dialogic coach is neither neutral nor objective. A coach will always influence the conversation and content alone by his or her presence and way of asking and challenging. The non-directive attitude can rather be seen in the fact that the coach only highlights things that are put forward by the group. The dialogic coach would reflect back what the group members say and ask further questions in order for them to decide the direction of the conversation. The overall purpose is to:

> […] identify and support the conversations that team members want to have in order to enhance productivity and task objectives, support team member relationships, or facilitate communication. (Folger, 2010, p. 368)

The non-directive facilitator role is also highlighted in the transformative approach to conflict management with third party intervention (Bush and Folger, 1994 and 2005). The transformative mediator helps the parties to transform their relationship from destructive and self-absorbed to constructive and responsive interaction. The mediator basically focuses on two things in the parties' interaction, namely, *empowerment* on the one hand and *recognition* on the other. In the mediation process, the mediator does not bring his own ideas and suggestions to the table, but helps the parties listen to themselves and each other in their ongoing interaction. The transformative mediator is impartially present but neither neutral nor objective. The interactional focus on empowerment and recognition is decisive for the mediator's work.

As a coach, you cannot control the process without controlling the content. Thus, like in transformative mediation, dialogic group coaching does not follow certain predefined

stages. Dialogic group coaching is not progressing as a linear process consisting of specific phases in a specific structure. It is an iterative conversation moving between the elements of the coaching conversation contract (see below). However, while transformative mediation holds its focus on empowerment and recognition shifts, dialogic group coaching follows a certain rhythm of the coaching conversation, according to the dialogic basic assumptions. The role of the coach is to facilitate the process through a dialogic way of being (Rogers, 1957 and 1962) that involves being appreciative, searching, wondering, inviting, lingering, challenging toward the group conversation.

Dialogic group coaching is inspired from the interactional principles of transformative mediation. A focus on empowerment in a coaching conversation thus implies that the coach supports the parties in making decisions – e.g. about their common challenge and associated objectives, interests and aspirations. This also includes a support to participants to take joint responsibility to select between what is important and less important. Empowerment in communication means a willingness and ability to brainstorm, explore, argue and analyze to qualify common decision-making. When the parties are able to see strengths and weaknesses in their own and others' views, they can come to manage situations together that they would not be able to master alone. Conversely, a focus on recognition means that the parties are willing to inquire into each other's perspectives on the common concern. This includes, in particular, being able to appreciate the diversities of the group and also to let go of ingrained patterns and habits to come to see things in a new light. The ability to make shift of perspectives is a key element of recognition and to do so it is necessary to be able to make decisions for oneself – i.e. be in possession of a certain empowerment. Empowerment and recognition are interconnected.

The transformative approach is based on a number of basic assumptions and values that are quite similar to the humanistic psychological assumptions on which the dialogic approach is grounded (Della Noce and Prein, 2010; Bush and Folger, 1994 and 2005; Rogers, 1962; Alrø and Keller, 2011). It is the parties' choice and their responsibility to do the work. The parties know what it takes and have what it takes. Transformative mediation and dialogic group coaching thus share a basic confidence in the participants' motivation for learning and development and in their competences to do it. It also gives room for uncertainty and confusion in the process: "Clarity emerges from confusion" (Folger and Bush, 2001, p. 30). Finally, the transformative model states that even the small step counts (Folger and Bush, 2001, p. 30). Learning and development is seen as a process over time, and not necessarily as something that can be guaranteed in every conversation.

The transformative mediator operates with a few communicative tools, which, among others, have been used in the development of dialogic group coaching. One is *reflecting back* where the mediator as literally as possible paraphrases what the parties say. The mediator or coach reflects back one party at a time so that he or she experiences his or her contributions seen and heard in the group. The other parties in the group can listen from a "safe distance" without being obliged to comment on what is being said. By reflecting back, things get said once more, and all parties therefore have the opportunity to listen again to what is said. Reflecting back is a dialogic competence included in both the dyadic approach to dialogic coaching and supervision (Alrø and Kristiansen, 1998) and in the transformative principles of mediation (Bush and Folger, 2005 and 2010).

Another tool that is also used in transformative mediation is *summarizing* (Bush and Folger, 2005 and 2010). After the parties have kept the conversation going for a while, the coach summarizes what topics the parties have been talking about and with which attitudes and feelings. As opposed to reflecting back summarizing is related to the issues presented in the conversation by the whole group. It is important for the facilitator to remember all topics brought forward by the group and to keep away from selective listening. This summary of course is the coach's interpretation of what has been talked about in the group. The parties have the opportunity to correct the summary if they do not find it sufficient or precise enough.

Both reflecting back and summary can be completed and accompanied by a check-in question to the participants, if the reflecting or summary is adequate and where they would like the conversation to continue. Thus, the purpose of *check-ins* is to allow the participants to make decisions for the coaching conversation and what perspectives are important to them. Check-ins can also concern how the group wants to talk about the topic and what they think would be helpful for the process. So, check-ins are very important to maintain the non-directive role of the coach. The participants decide how and where to go.

Thus, in several ways, dialogic group coaching is inspired by transformative mediation, but it also differs at some points. Unlike transformative mediation dialogic group coaching emphasizes the importance of a conversation contract.

The coaching conversation contract

The transformative mediator is explicitly clear about his non-directive role and what he can offer the parties during the mediation conversation, but he does not establish a contract concerning content, focus, direction or goal of the mediation conversation. The transformative mediator would ask the parties what brought them to mediation, and it is entirely up to the parties what they prefer to talk about, how they do it and what directions the conversation would take during the mediation process.

The dialogic coach, however, prefers to work from an explicit conversation contract as a helping tool that is negotiated with the group. Thus, the coaching sessions conducted during the action research project include a lot of effort in establishing a coaching conversation contract. An explicitly formulated common focus is considered important for the group to develop their understandings of a common subject. It is not about consensus or getting to agree on a certain perspective. It is about talking about differences and developing new perspectives on the common topic. Contract work is a meta-communicative interaction, where the parties in the conversation work for clarity by adjusting mutual expectations of content, focus, direction, goal and framework of the conversation (Alrø and Kristiansen, 1998 and Schwarz, 2002, p. 271f.). And contract work makes use of reflecting back, summarizing and check-ins as dialogic tools.

Contract is closely related to contact in the group that may occur when participants are aware of and follow each other's thoughts and perspectives on the common concern, while creating a group relationship based on interest and curiosity. Thus, contact appears as more than just an awareness of each other. Contact implies that the parties focus their attention to each other and what is being talked about to develop new perspectives together. In contact, the group experiences a sense of cohesion when they open up to explore each other's perspectives. Contact is not only determined by the

group relationship but also by the content of the conversation and the context that sets a framework for what kind of contact is convenient. (Alrø and Kristiansen, 1998, p. 181).

In dyadic coaching, it may be difficult enough to help the client clarify the focus, direction and goals for the conversation, but with a group, the complexity increases significantly. When there are multiple participants in a conversation, there are correspondingly multiple perspectives at stake. So it can be quite challenging to help a group define what they want to happen in the conversation and with what purpose(s). In dialogic group coaching, this is named as the group's *common concern*, which is going to be clarified through the conversation contract.

Establishing a coaching conversation contract is not an attempt to close the dialogic opportunities to open perspectives and to create new knowledge, on the contrary. The contract is supposed to ensure that the participants talk about the same common concern and that they have a common direction for the conversation. But it is unpredictable what exactly is going to happen in the conversation. It depends on the investigative process that the dialogic coaching conversation invites for.

Re-negotiation of the contract often occurs in connection with summarizing what has been talked about in the coaching so far, and during check-ins, where the coach make the group decide where and how to continue the conversation. This is where the participants reconsider the common concern and what is relevant to support a conclusion or a further examination. Ongoing adjustments of the common concern can be crucial for the parties to actually reconsider differences and get to a common conclusion.

Contract work makes use the principles of "learning by doing" and "learning by talking" (Alrø and Kristiansen, 1998, p. 18). Group members and coaches learn dialogic group coaching by practicing it and by reflecting on what is happening during the conversation. In this reflection, participants voice their perspectives on the common challenges. They share experiences, discoveries and understandings – they share their tacit knowledge. Reflection makes implicit understandings explicit and therefore available for common exploration and evaluation. In this way, the dialogue is used as a resource to support, challenge and develop multiple perspectives in a joint learning process.

Dialogic group coaching progresses as a flow that supports what the group chooses to talk about, and what they want to achieve with the conversation. This is what they agree upon through the contract clarification. In that sense, the contract can be understood as directive in some way, but we prefer to talk about the contract as a facilitating tool that helps the coaches and the group to focus on topic and goal of the conversation.

All conversations are irreversible and could potentially be expanded in x number of other ways. Therefore, we tribute also the transformative principle that a dialogic coach cannot do anything wrong, unless you want the conversation to take a certain direction on behalf of the group: "The model is very forgiving as long as you don't shove people around " (said by Baruch Bush at a training course in Transformative Mediation, 2002).

Specific elements of the model unfold in the conversation between the group and the coaches: contact, contract, inquiry, reflection and evaluation. These elements run through the entire conversation in various combinations and order. There may well arise evaluative sequences continuously in the conversation, and there may be meta-communication about contact and contract when needed during the conversation.

"How do we keep the process going in a good way?" An example from dialogic group coaching

In preparation for a coaching session, the leadership group has had an e-mail correspondence, where they have suggested and considered urgent issues for group coaching. Together they have produced the formulation: "How do we keep the process going in a good way?" In the coaching session, one of the leaders takes the initiative to write the formulation on the board, and the coach wants the group to examine the formulation. What does it actually mean? The first bid for a keyword is "keep […] going" – this implicates a forward-looking. The coach challenges the formulation of the question by reformulating it in different ways with different accents of the words, which produces several different perspectives on the issue, depending on the stress of different words: "how", "we", "good", "keep going", "process", etc. This makes the group reflect each perspective one at a time, and the coach helps the process by reflecting back what each person says and finally summarizing the content of the contract conversation so far.

Coach: The round we've had so far shows that there are actually a number of different perspectives on the common concern. And it sounds like "we" and "how" are linked. [Group members: "Ahmm"] And when you do get into the "how", then you have different perspectives. Some talk about content, while others talk about how "we" do it here: plans, objectives and implementation […] and when the "we" is added you talk about the link to the specific districts. And the last perspective that is mentioned […].

This summary of perspectives makes the management team define their focus, and the coach poses check-in questions about where they would like to go on in their conversation.

Leader: I would like us to talk about: "Well, what does it mean to work with a vision? […] What does it mean to work for an ideology? What can we do to support each other in that? [Group members: "Yes", nodding].

A long process of reflection leads to the formulation "How do we get well ahead with our visions?" which is decided to be the contract. One hour has passed already. A key question is whether the contract work is really that important and helpful that it is worth it spending so much time on it? In addition to the arguments mentioned above about creating a common focus, clarity and direction of the conversation, it may also be pointed out that the process of searching into the challenges of a common concern can be clarifying and knowledge producing in itself. By considering the prospects one by one, the leaders become more focused on what the question "How do we get well ahead with our visions?" entails and what is at heart of the challenges facing them.

Conclusion

Dialogic group coaching is a facilitative conversation where one or two coaches help the group to investigate and handle common challenges. The goal is to get to know together by entering a dialogic inquiry that creates a common basis for decision-making. A dialogic concept of group coaching is descriptive in the sense that the dialogic qualities can be derived from the research process. These qualities, however, are not descriptive but normative notions, which relate to the theoretical concept of dialogue referred to.

Theoretical and philosophical approaches to dialogue imply that dialogic coaching places special demands on the coaches, including being non-directive as in Transformative Mediation. The dialogic coaches help to clarify and support each

participant's perspective, the relationships of the group and the common challenge in an investigative, appreciative and challenging way. Dialogic group coaching – and dialogic reflections – can contribute both to the individual participant to become clearer in his own professional perspective (empowerment) while differences are appreciated (recognition) and to the group as a whole to be clarified about common challenges. Dialogic group coaching requires space and time to explore differences and disagreements, and so new ideas and perspectives can emerge and be investigated. This seems to contribute to avoid or diminish conflict talk and conflict-based relationships (Alrø *et al.*, 2013).

As stated above, we do not consider dialogic group coaching to be a technique that can be learned by using a set of tools. "Purpose drives practice". A dialogic group coach must subscribe to the basic theoretical assumptions on which his or her practice is based. The theoretical assumptions offer a number of ways to communicate dialogically, which can be trained and learned over time and hopefully help to develop the concept of new dialogic ways of communicating for the benefit of future practice.

It has been very interesting to observe how the management groups have adopted the dialogic approach after the actions research project finished the coaching sessions (Alrø *et al.*, 2013). They decided that in their future meetings they would start one hour earlier in order for them to have dialogic conversations about a chosen topic, where they were obliged to qualify their decision making, but not to make any immediate decisions. A dialogic way of communicating has appeared for the groups to be helpful and to prevent conflict in these conversations because it gives them the opportunity to investigate and connect to the ideas of each other. They have learned to tribute diversity in the workplace in order to let new ideas emerge through deep inquiry.

Notes

1. According to Brown and Grant (2010, p. 32), though, some approaches to group coaching focus on individuals and individual goals within a group setting.
2. The project covers a total of 24 hours of group coaching carried out by the action researchers, including the authors of this article.
3. Further theoretical and practical implications of the dialogic approach to group coaching are described by Alrø & Dahl (2015).

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