

Dialogical Fitness

Being ready for high quality conversations

“In a corporate environment that is changing at warp speed, performing consistently at high levels is more difficult and more necessary than ever. Companies can’t afford to address their employees’ cognitive capacities while ignoring their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.”

Jim Leohr & Tony
Schwartzⁱ

Dialogue is “the art of thinking together”ⁱⁱ. Thinking together involves more than just kicking ideas around. We do that all the time. We hear what others have to say, listening only for things we can agree or disagree with. Dialogue, on the other hand, is the quest for mutual understanding. It is the respectful exchange of personal viewpoints. Dialogue results in shared ownership of solutions and social cohesion. Whilst dialogue is rare these days, we believe dialogue is key to effective coaching and something to be aspired to. But dialogue is effortful and we need to prepare ourselves if we are to be able to engage in dialogue when needed. We need to cultivate within ourselves high levels of ‘dialogical fitness’.

The listening challenge

Few would argue that listening is a cornerstone of good coaching. Most of us are now nodding our heads sagely in agreement. Most of us may also claim to be competent listeners having been taught listening skills on a coaching or leadership development program. Fewer of us confess to being poor listeners, because to be a poor listener implies we are disrespectful of others, and that violates basic social norms. But to listen well is hard. It is complex and demanding. To illustrate this point, let us consider how different it is to learn about the world using our eyes (**reading**) compared to our ears (**listening**). Several factors make reading less demanding than listening. For instance, when we read:

- We can control our rate of processing - by reading more slowly
- We can recover easily from moments of inattention - by re-reading sentences
- We can reflect on the message - by pausing to think
- The message is usually clear - or it wouldn’t have been published

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Listening offers none of these advantages because:

- We generally have to keep up with the speaker
- We lose track if we lose focus
- We can become distracted if we reflect too much
- The clarity of the message depends on the speaker's vocabulary, accent, and/or speech habits

As such, competent listening is much more than sitting and hearing another person's words. We must also comprehend those words and actively seek to understand the meaning ascribed to those words. This requires the capacity to *concentrate* for long enough periods to allow others time to organise their thoughts and ideas. It requires *patience* to allow people that time and space, and the *curiosity* to explore the story in depth. Perhaps most importantly, we need to be able to *self-regulate* – to manage our reactions to things we like or dislike, find interesting or disinteresting, or that make us happy or sad.

High quality listening is therefore a high intensity interpersonal experience. One that requires considerable energy; the energy to concentrate, stay patient, remain curious and manage our reactions. Because good listening is so critical to dialogue, we think it's relevant to consider how ready, willing and able (or *fit*) we are for such activity. Hence the idea of **dialogical fitness**.

Dialogical Fitness

Twenty years ago, Gary Loehr and Tony Schwartz published an article entitled, *The Making of a Corporate Athlete*¹. In it they argued that the performance of people in organisations could be enhanced by emulating the training principles of professional athletes, especially in respect of their rest and recovery rituals. These rituals were important, they explained, because of the “oscillations” – or short breaks – they created, allowing important energy reserves to be restored. The more we think about dialogue, the more we believe a person's fitness for dialogue depends on the successful management of key energy reserves. Adapting Loehr and Schwartz's four-tier high performance model, we propose these reserves are; physiological, emotional, cognitive and (what we'll refer to as) spirit.

Physiological reserves

Our bodies are intricately designed to capture, store and activate the energy we need to function well. How we feel on any given day is directly related to how well our various bodily systems are performing. Unfortunately, we tend to put our bodies under more pressure than is useful. For instance, not drinking enough water can leave us feeling headachy and sluggish. Using electronic devices late at night reduces sleep quality and results in fatigue. Physical

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inactivity reduces how well the heart and lungs can oxygenate the blood and pump it around the body. In the same way that public health campaigns encourage people to drink plenty of water, get adequate sleep, be physically active and make healthy dietary choices, we think these basics are also important for dialogue. That is, our ability to enter into dialogue with others is likely to be assisted by being well hydrated, having a happy gastro-intestinal tract, a low resting heart rate, and the physical strength to be still and relaxed throughout.

What to do? The good thing about this dimension of dialogical fitness is that most of us already know what to do – we just don't do enough of it. Developing better sleep habits is an obvious place to startⁱⁱⁱ. You can do this by doing things like, (i) going to bed and getting up at the same time each day, (ii) not using electronic devices 40 mins prior to going to bed but, rather, (iii) reading or doing something else to wind down, or (iv) incorporating foods with high levels of melatonin into evening meals and snacks (e.g. corn, broccoli, nuts, bananas, and even some red wine!).

Emotional reserves

Whilst a lot has been said in recent years about the importance of deliberately cultivating happiness, we suspect that highly active positive emotions (like joy, excitement and enthusiasm) have a relatively small part to play in dialogue. Dialogue is an immersive activity in which one is fully absorbed in what is being conveyed, something more akin to social 'flow'. As we know from flow research, the emotional reactions to such tasks tend to come after the experience, not during. If positive emotions aren't critical to in-the-moment dialogue experiences, what about beforehand? Here we think that less activated positive emotions like curiosity, interest and acceptance are more conducive to dialogue. They seem more likely to prepare a person to engage willingly, openly and less-judgementally with another person.

What to do? Here you can take your lead from an array of mood induction techniques widely used in various health, education and clinical settings. You might seek to generate feelings of curiosity, interest and acceptance by (i) listening to music, (ii) watching a suitable YouTube clip, or (iii) putting yourself in a physical environment that brings on these feelings. (e.g. your favourite park). There is some evidence that visualising yourself acting in mood consistent ways and using positive self-talk statements can also help.

Cognitive reserves

Dialogue relies heavily on one's ability to maintain concentration and focus. For this we need good attentional stability. This means being able to both (i) steady our focus of attention, and (ii) manage disturbances that might

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otherwise disrupt that focus. These disturbances can be internal (e.g. feeling frustrated by something that's been said, feeling tired) and/or external (e.g. noise in the office, a client's mannerisms). Disturbances compete for our limited attentional resources and pose a threat to 'staying with' the other person. Whilst findings from neuroscience have excited many people over the past decade or so (oftentimes being misrepresented or over interpreted), one finding seems clear; attention is a trainable skill. Evidence for this comes from research tracking the cognitive performance of highly skilled and novice meditators. Numerous studies have shown that committed mental practice changes the physical structure of the brain and improves its functioning^{iv}.

What to do? There are several ways to build our cognitive reserves, with a variety of apps and online tools for 'training the brain'. Meditative techniques are especially effective. From a dialogical perspective, there are two reasons for this. First, meditation practices develop skill for managing the body (e.g. lowering heart rate) and mind (e.g. settling thoughts). Second, they improve our ability to re-focus our attention whenever it wanders, as it invariably does. Both abilities serve dialogue well, as a still and consistently focused mind are critical to high quality conversationsⁱⁱⁱ.

Spirit reserves

Finally, we come to the importance of what we are calling spirit, but could just as easily be labelled personal meaning, purpose or even spirituality. We see this as an important energy reserve primarily because it fuels our behavioural intentions or, if you prefer, it provides us with the reason(s) *why* we choose to engage in dialogue with others. These reasons are different for different people. What's important is to stay connected to our intentions, because they provide our actions with a sense of significance and fortify our efforts in the face of challenge. The idea of goal neglect captures the importance of this dimension well. Goal neglect refers to the tendency for people to become focused on lower level, concrete action (e.g. SMART goals) whilst neglecting higher order goals or 'master motives' that those actions were originally meant to service. This has the effect of stripping the action of its personal significance and tends to erode commitment.

What to do? Techniques for developing spirit reserves include highly reflective activities, such as journaling and expressive writing. These are highly congruent because reflective writing tends to connect us with our values and higher-order motives, reminding us about what's important and setting (or re-setting) our behavioural intentions. In practical terms, this might mean establishing a regular daily or weekly ritual whereby you fill a journal page

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with details about an upcoming conversation or meeting and clarify for yourself how you would like that to turn out and how you would like to 'be' during the exchange and why that matters.

Customised rituals and routines

These energy reserves can be built in many different ways. And what works for me may not work for you. At the end of the day, it's really a matter of trial and error; starting with what seems sensible and reflecting on its value. However, whatever you do, revisiting the principle identified by Loehr and Schwartz, make sure you create a small set of simple routines and then commit to them. If your effectiveness is enhanced by your ability to engage in dialogue, then developing a simple set of disciplines that enable you to manage these important energy reserves can only serve you well!

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Notes & Acknowledgments

- i. Loehr, J. & Schwartz, T. (2001). The making of a corporate athlete. *Harvard Business Review*, January, 120-128
- ii. Isaacs, W. (1999). *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. US: Currency
- iii. Spence, G. (2016). Coaching for optimal functioning. In C. Van Nieuwerburgh (Ed.), *Coaching in Professional Contexts*. London: Sage Publishing, 11-28.
- iv. Goleman, D., & Davidson, R. J. (2017). *Altered traits: Science reveals how meditation changes your mind, brain, and body*. UK: Penguin.