

## DIALOGUE, LEARNING TEAMS AND LEARNING

You may already attend a Learning Team regularly, or it may yet be a while before Learning Teams will be introduced into your Unit, but the aim is to establish Learning Teams across all Units in the Department during the next couple of years. At the same time, there is a commitment to ensuring that all Learning Teams have Dialogue as well as other EBP skills. This article explains why the VADOC is advancing in this way.

Learning Teams are being set up for all staff in the agency in order to ensure that the VADOC becomes a Learning Organization. This involves a cultural shift, first proposed in 1990 by Peter Senge in his book *The Fifth Discipline* (sub-titled *the art and practice of the Learning Organization*). He defined a Learning Organization as one where “*people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.*” So Learning Organizations are innovative in finding new and more effective ways of working for the benefit of all. Also they learn from those situations where the results were not what were intended - so as not to repeat what would otherwise become a predictable “mistake.”

For his Team Learning Discipline, Peter Senge drew specifically on my early work of Dialogue with David Bohm, saying that: “*Team Learning starts with Dialogue, the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into genuine thinking together.*” In 1990, I helped Peter Senge with the official launch of his book in Grafton, Vermont, by facilitating a corporate Dialogue for him with executive leaders drawn from many different commercial organizations. So since they were first conceived, Learning Teams have been inseparable from Dialogue.

In the VADOC, the earliest experiences of developing Learning Teams were in 2008 at Wallens Ridge State Prison and at Williamsburg P&P along with several other Districts. They proved the value of Learning Teams in correctional settings, and now the intention is to create an agency-wide Learning Organization. To do this people need Dialogue skills. Participants in the Learning Team have to engage with one another in order to talk and think together about how to handle everyday work situations more effectively, and how to manage ongoing change requirements. The content under consideration may be different for the staff in different parts of the organization, depending on whether you engage with prisoners, supervise ex-offenders in the community, or manage operational, fiscal or staff functions without engaging directly with

offenders at all – but in all cases Dialogue is necessary. When you refresh or practice the skills you learned in other trainings, or as you learn new EBP skills, the basic engagement and communication skills of Dialogue will still underwrite the learning that occurs in the Learning Teams.

You will probably already be familiar with many of the Dialogue skills through attending a Dialogue Skills Training (DST). They include the **Check-in** and **Check-out** to improve the quality of engagement by hearing everyone’s comment at the start and close of each meeting. To understand how to improve the level of engagement, there are the **Modes of Talking and Thinking Together**. These progress from Monologue that is used for traditional forms of teaching and lecturing, to Skilful Conversation and Dialogue that are more useful for reflective and innovative learning in a Learning Team. Then there are the **Dialogic Actions** (Move, Follow, Oppose and Bystand) for functional interactions, and the **Dialogic Practices** (Voice, Listening, Respect and Suspension) without which you cannot have high quality thinking.

Many people don’t realize that learning within a Learning Team is either enabled or constrained by the way people think about knowledge itself. There are four distinct levels of disposition to knowledge. They are depicted in the graphic.

Some people have the dominant experience that **Knowledge is Dangerous**. These people have been silenced at some point, and prefer to remain silent in certain situations. At some time they have said what they really thought, based on what they had seen or heard, and they suffered for it. Maybe others reacted or reprimanded them in some way, and now they are reluctant to put their view into the thinking of the Learning Team. This withhold weakens the learning of the whole Learning Team. Although their views could be an important contribution if they were included, and result in a different understanding and different conclusions, these views remain unavailable to others. That is why the Dialogic engagement skills (Check-in, Check-out and the Modes) are so important - to help get everyone participating and contributing to the thinking.

There are others who believe that **Knowledge is in the Book** and there is only one ‘right’ answer to what should be done in any situation. This results in fixed thinking and entrenched debate. The set answer is third-hand and though they may not even know who wrote what is in the manual or book, they believe it to be a ‘fact.’ Of course there are some questions to which there is only one correct answer, and there are safety and security procedures which define some of these answers and pro-

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### LEARNING DISPOSITION The disposition to knowledge either enables or inhibits learning...

**NEW KNOWLEDGE CAN BE GENERATED**  
Together designing our best answer  
Learning in live situations (first-hand)

**KNOWLEDGE IS RELATIVE**  
Selecting the best available answer  
Applying best practice (second-hand)

**KNOWLEDGE IS IN THE BOOK**  
Get the right answer  
Training and set procedures (third-hand)

**KNOWLEDGE IS DANGEROUS**  
Withhold your answer  
Silenced (historic)

**Can you change your disposition when needed  
to enable useful learning? Can your Learning Team?**

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cedures that should be followed to the letter. But most questions and situations could be handled in a number of different ways depending on who is involved and why. That is what learning is about – exploring and trying other ways that may be more effective than those you used in the past.

A broader disposition to knowledge assumes that **Knowledge is Relative**. People who are thinking this way know that there may be a number of different practices in use in other places, and they want to consider which would be the most helpful way to proceed in their particular situation. This involves learning the second-hand knowledge from others about what they did and what results they had. That means a process of learning what may be appropriate or applicable, where and when, with the aim of choosing the best practice for us in our situation.

The kind of disposition that can achieve a fully-fledged Learning Team, in the spirit they were first conceived, also assumes that **New Knowledge Can Be Generated**. This is where people use their first-hand experience, to learn from what they themselves did, and to design the best way to handle whatever situation they are facing. Learning Teams are an ideal setting for such learning with others.

Each of us has experiences of all four dispositions to knowledge. For all of us there is some area where we have been silenced (was it singing, public speaking, opposing the boss?) and in that area we may still experience knowledge as dangerous and feel silenced. We all have stuck areas where we are convinced there is only one answer and we know what it is (and has that led to some hot arguments!). There are areas where each of us has tried an approach, then heard about another (was it pain-killers, exercise, chiropractic or surgery for that back pain?) and found different results because knowledge is relative to different people, different situations and different times. And there are areas for each of us where we have found that new knowledge can be generated and in the moment the right way to proceed became evident to us even though we had never heard of or tried it before.

The reason to lay out these four levels is to give us a language to help us change our disposition to knowledge when that would lead to better learning in our Learning Teams for the situation at hand. If a colleague is silenced and withholding their views, can you help them to participate? If someone's thinking is set in stone, can you help them to start to consider other possibilities? On the other hand, if someone believes they can interpret a fixed security procedure in whatever way they choose, can you hold them to the one way defined in the manual? If a colleague knows knowledge is relative, can you help them to select the best available answer or practice for their situation? And if a unique and new way is needed, can you remain confident in not knowing the answer until it becomes evident to the individual or to the whole Learning Team? If so, your learning team will be enjoyable and rewarding.

Submitted by Peter Garrett

## Youth Offenders Learn About Adult System

On February 25, representatives of the Department met with youth offenders who will soon transfer to the adult prison system. Regional Offender Workforce Development Specialist (OWDS) Marion Curry, Sr., OWDS Jennifer Jennings, and Sgt. Kingston Townsend met with residents at the Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center to help prepare the young men for changes they will soon face in the adult prison system.



The three formed a panel and offered basic information about the adult system. The youths were advised to set realistic goals, accept responsibility for their actions, respect authority, develop a spirit of teamwork and develop a positive self-image. The panel emphasized that developing these skills would help them succeed in both their immediate future and throughout their lives. After the presentation, the youths voiced their concerns and asked questions.

