

Dialogue, Learning Teams and Evidence Based Practice – How Do They Fit Together?

The Virginia Department of Corrections is committed to Evidence Based Practice (EBP), in common with many other State Departments of Corrections. Uniquely in Virginia, however, Learning Teams are being established to provide all staff with forums to learn and become adept at using EBP in everyday work situations. Many of these Learning Teams are being set up by using Dialogue skills, so it would probably help to consider how Dialogue, Learning Teams and EBP are related to each other.

Evidence Based Practice has two related meanings – one is more generally applicable, and the other is more specific to work with offenders and the reduction of recidivism. The more general meaning of Evidence Based Practice, that is also in use beyond Corrections, is relevant to all employees in the agency, whatever their role. It applies equally to staff in Atmore, ASD and in the field, whether you are in catering, finance, the Executive Team or work as a Correctional, Probation or Parole Officer. There are two main reasons why poor quality decisions are made in the work-place – habit and assumptions. Decisions that are habitual are the decisions we hardly think about because we are just doing what we always do, without checking whether they work or not, or are still relevant in our changing situations. Decisions that are based on assumptions are the ones we make by leaping to a conclusion without checking the facts with those involved. Poor quality decisions, that are either habitual or based on unchecked assumptions, perpetuate a culture of poor practice and ineffectual activity. You will encounter such decisions every day at work that affect you and others around you.

The Learning Teams are designed to help to change this. If instead you use Evidence Based Practice, and what you do is based on evidence (rather than assumption or habit) you will think about what you are doing and why. Instead of jumping to a conclusion, you will check things out. This will often include asking people about what they said or did and why, before coming to a conclusion and acting. Or you may need to look for observed or recorded data about the situation before you make a decision. Using data in this way leads you to be more effective. Of course it is your interpretation of the data that informs your decision, so care needs to be taken with the logic you use to interpret what you have heard. This is where Dialogue comes in. The Dialogue skills lead you to engage colleagues, listen to their views, support and challenge their reasoning and reinforce the rigour of good decision-making. This involves the use of Skilful Conversation and Dialogue in the Learning Teams so that as you engage with work colleagues you become more

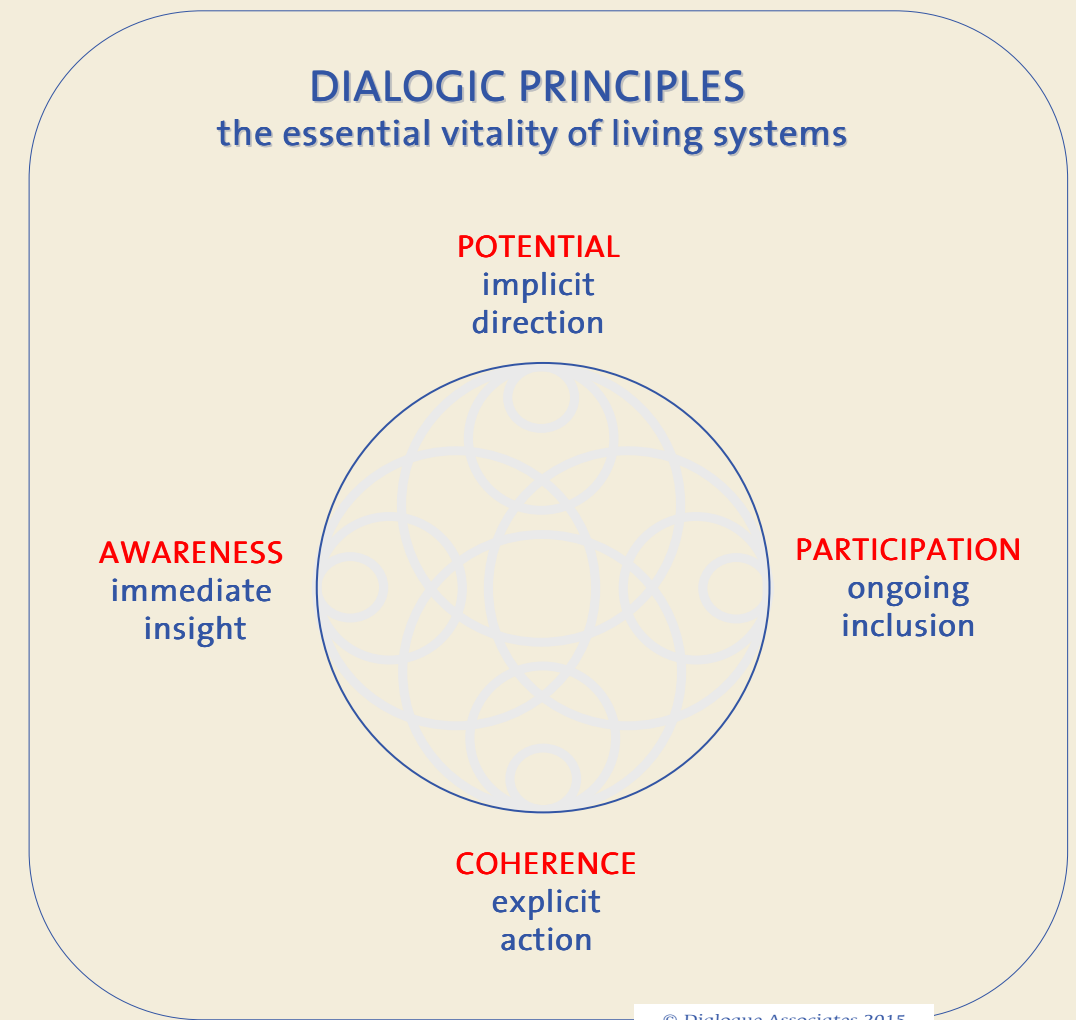
aware of the impact of decisions to act (or not act) in particular ways. This is a structured form of learning – and why they are called Learning Teams.

Why use unchecked assumptions? Why talk about people behind their backs? If, whenever employees found themselves reacting to what they believe someone else did, they stopped - and asked them what they actually did, and why - the culture of the agency would be transformed overnight. This is an example of the power of EBP.

The second meaning of EBP refers to the effectiveness of rehabilitative programs in reducing recidivism and is based on specific research data of re-offending rates over an extended period of time and with adequate numbers to be statistically valid. The largest such piece of research, by Dowden and Andrews, was published in the *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* in 2004 under the title *'The Importance of Staff Practice in Delivering Effective Correctional Treatment: A Meta-Analytic Review'*. They took the broadest collection of available data, excluded punishment-based programs, and then used the remaining 273 separate sets of research studies in a meta-analysis. Their interest was not so much in the content of rehabilitative programs provided for offenders, but in the best practices and behaviours of staff delivering correctional treatment programs, and they used the Core Correctional Practices as a framework.

What they discovered about staff characteristics is that the largest single impact on reducing recidivism results from what they termed *Relationship Factors*. Programs delivered by staff without them on average reduced the rate of re-offending by 11%, but when the Relationship Factors were present this improved to an impressive reduction of 34%. The researchers found further factors of importance are effective modelling and reinforcement in a structured learning environment, and they point out that these “are relevant to both front-line correctional officers and correctional treatment providers alike”.

Relationship Factors refer to the interpersonal influence exerted by the correctional staff member. The relevant characteristics possessed by program staff were as follows: *warm, genuine, humorous, enthusiastic, self-confident, empathic, respectful, flexible, committed to helping the client, engaging, mature and intelligent*. When you stop to think about it, these are the typical qualities encountered in many good Dialogue sessions. Why? Because in the Dialogue Skills Trainings (DSTs) and the Learning Plans there are



DIALOGUE, LEARNING TEAMS AND EBP (CONTINUED)

deliberate engagement skills (check-in, modes and check-out) that lead participants to be warm and enthusiastic. There are skills to enable the conversation to be purposeful and constructive (Dialogic Actions – move, follow, oppose, bystand) that lead to self-confidence and flexibility. Being genuine, empathic, respectful and mature are firmly anchored in the Dialogue skills (dialogic practices of voice, listening, respect) and the remaining Practice (suspension) leads to greater self-awareness, humour and intelligence. This is what the Dialogue skills are all about. This is why they dovetail so well with other EBP programs.

Are people in your learning team warm, genuine, humorous, enthusiastic, self-confident, empathic, respectful, flexible, committed to helping offenders, engaging, mature and intelligent? If so there is evidence you are making good use of Dialogue. If not, instead of paying lip service, why not put the Dialogue skills into practice?

Of course EBP takes many different forms. From a Dialogue Practitioner's stand point, the evidence they are seeking, on which to base their read of the effectiveness of any core practice is found by using Dialogic Principles as a framework. These Dialogic Principles refer to the live situation encountered, as against the policies, role definitions or the official line. They are the distillation of the other Dialogue skills into a measure of 'vitality'. They apply to a society or culture just as much as to an organisation, a team or any individual (including yourself). Here are examples of the kind of questions you might pose to gather evidence for systemic vitality, and therefore where to intervene to improve effectiveness:

POTENTIAL *How fully are you realising the potential inherent in your current situation?* The quality of your moves, voice and visionary energy are implicit in the answer.

COHERENCE *How aligned are your thoughts, words and actions, and do you do what you say you will do?* The quality of your opposes, respect and performance energy are implicit in the answer.

PARTICIPATION *How fully are you including others in realising their potential in the situation?* The quality of your follows, listening and citizen energy are implicit in the answer.

AWARENESS *How aware are you of what is happening in the moment, and therefore what is most relevant?* The quality of your bystands, suspension and wisdom energy are implicit in the answer.

To gather some of your own evidence, why not raise these questions in your next team meeting and ask participants to consider the questions personally, and for the team as a whole?

Submitted by Peter Garrett

Dialogue: Building Trust at Work

Below are some suggestions designed to promote dialogue and build trust.

What topics or issues would you like to suggest for an upcoming newsletter? Let us hear from you!

Improving What We Do

Dialogue Topics:

How can we fill the gap between where we are and where we could be? What small steps can you take to advance in that direction?

Think of an example of cooperation you witnessed recently. How can we work together in a more cooperative manner?

What are you doing to serve others? Stepping outside yourself to focus on others promotes your health as well as that of others.

Discuss ways to deal with stress and maintain a reliable response.

What are the issues that impact the work place? Focus on the issues and solutions rather than the personalities.



Lynchburg P&P recently unveiled a new Healing Environment initiative "Doing Our Best So Others Can Too!" A creative graphic illustrates the effort.