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The New Leaders

Bringing Consciousness to Business

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The Return of Dialogue

"There are only two or three human stories," American novelist Willa Cather once wrote, "and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before."

Dialogue - the practice of coming into the circle to listen and think together - is one of those stories. Where "discussion" is derived from words *dis-quatere* meaning to scatter examine or shake apart, and its companion word "debate" is derived from *battuere* (the same root as dueling) which means to beat down or do battle with words, "dialogue" is derived from the ancient root *leg* which means to collect or speak, as well as from the Germanic word *lekjaz* - the one who speaks magic words and, most recently from the Greek, *dia logos*, which translates into the flowing through of the word or meaning or relationship.

The story of dialogue originated with small groups of hunter-gatherers who formed in circles of conversation around the fires at night to share their stories and dances and songs. The word conversation means "to turn together." It involves a forgetting or a surrendering of oneself and a reciprocity with the other in order to create a collectively - held space through which another dimension of reality can emerge. A part of what is surrendered is our relationship to memory and conditioned knowledge. In its place we begin to cultivate a more subtle intelligence

that is focused on refining and inquiring into our moment - to - moment perception and experiences of what it is.

With the exception of the arts, certain spiritual traditions like the Quakers and cultures who have maintained close connections to their oral tradition, the practice of dialogue became too time - consuming and it gradually dropped away. But as author David Abram reminds us:

"humans are tuned for relationship." Dialogue is a fundamental aspect of who we are. In giving it up, we became separated from an essential aspect of ourselves.

The practicality of this is implied by Gary Hamel when he says, "The critical lack in business today are not resources or strategies, but imagination." The imagination is revitalized by acknowledging the truth of what is real. The new leaders will be those who are able to create spaces and processes for skillful conversation. Through surfacing the underlying images and structures of our thinking, and making the implicit explicit, we create the possibility of re - imagining ourselves, our organizations and the quality of our work.

While we belong to organizations, we also belong to a story. The capacity for thinking together is one of those stories. It is both new and also very old. We need to connect again to the underlying narrative that gives form and vitality to our organizations. The stability we seek is not only in our technologies, structures and products but in the quality of thinking and feeling that lie beneath the stories, the images and the values and visions and the thoughts that form us. The story of dialogue has been going on for more than ten thousand years. its re-emergence may be a signal that the capacity for collective intelligence is the next

step in our evolution - and an essential step for the story of our journey together to continue to unfold.