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Vicki Sussens-Messerer interviews John Kent

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SPOTLIGHT

INTRODUCTION : Voice Dialogue at work

British management trainer John Kent spoke to Business Spotlight about Voice Dialogue.

What exactly is Voice Dialogue?

It is a process of getting in touch with the many voices that we have in our head telling us to do different, often conflicting things.

Why is it relevant for work problems?

I remember being shocked once when, as a little boy, I visited my father in his office. He was a completely different person. He made a very clear distinction between his family and work roles. Back then, it was possible. But today, people are expected to act more naturally at work, to be more themselves. You just can't compartmentalize your life so much anymore.

How did you come to use the technique in management training?

I run workshops all over the world on things like intercultural communication, international team building and team leadership. I had done Voice Dialogue in Tucson, Arizona in 1988 and realized it addresses a lot of the issues that I was coming up with in my workshops, such as dealing with conflicts, decision making, and relationships.

What does Voice Dialogue mean to you personally?

It's become a way of life. I really believe that the more aware we are of what is going on inside ourselves, the better people we become. And more conscious human beings will result in more conscious companies, more conscious countries and, hopefully, fewer wars.

FEATURE ARTICLE : Managing your selves

"I really don't know what I am doing here," says Karen S. "This is an interesting workshop, of course, and it will help me in my job, but I have done so many like it. I don't really need it. I just don't understand myself."

Do you ever have conversations like this where one part of you seems to be speaking to another? Why is Karen attending this workshop when she doesn't think she needs to? And what is that other voice inside her that made her go?

British management trainer John Kent is guiding Karen through Voice Dialogue, a therapeutic tool that was developed by American psychologists Hal and Sidra Stone in California in the late 1970s. Kent, who runs Voice Dialogue UK, believes the tool is increasingly useful in helping people solve complex work problems.

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Voice Dialogue is based on the idea that we are made up of different selves that came into being at various stages of our lives and for specific reasons. Over time, some are suppressed or “disowned” while others become dominant or “primary”. When we have to make important decisions, many inner voices will be telling us what to do. Because our primary selves were developed to protect us, we are most likely to listen to them - even though another part of us will be telling us this is the wrong decision. “Voice Dialogue is a practical tool to get in touch with those voices so that we can learn about ourselves and make more conscious decisions,” says Kent.

Karen works as a craniosacral practitioner and is attending Kent’s weekend workshop to train as a Voice Dialogue facilitator. She wants to try the technique on her patients, whose physical problems, she believes, have psychological roots. But she also thinks the technique may help her personally and has agreed to be the guinea pig for the demonstration.

Karen sits on a chair facing Kent as he explains what is going to happen. He is going to speak to the different voices that come up in their discussion. If he senses a new voice appearing and feels it appropriate to do so, he will ask Karen to move her chair to a place she feels this new voice can best speak from. He will ask the new voice questions.

To start the discussion, Kent asks Karen if she has anything on her mind. She answers that she is very, very tired. She has a lot of responsibility and works very hard. However, even when she has free time, she fills it up with appointments. Tonight, for example, after the workshop, she is going to an opera. “I just don’t seem to know when to stop,” she says.

Kent says the part of her that doesn’t know when to stop sounds like a pusher voice. “Oh, yes” says Karen. “The pusher side of me is very strong. She is the one who wants me to be functioning 24 hours a day.” Kent then suggests that they talk to this side of Karen. She moves her chair closer to him and then stands next to it. “Hi,” says Kent. “So you are the pusher part of Karen. Tell me about yourself.”

“I am the person who makes sure Karen doesn’t let herself go,” she says. And then she explains how strong she is, how much she achieves, how much energy she has and how important she is for her whole family. Kent does not criticise or question this self. This is where Voice Dialogue differs from most conventional psychotherapy, which tends to look for pathology and then to treat it.

“Well, you seem to have an important role in Karen’s life,” Kent continues. “You protect her. Why do you think you became part of Karen’s life?” We now learn why her pusher became dominant. Her mother died when she was 21, and Karen took on the mothering role in the family. Now, the 56-year-old single mother of four is again looking after a lot of people. “So how big a part of Karen do you think you are?” asks Kent. “I would say about 75 per cent right now,” she answers. “Wow, that is a lot,” says Kent. Then he asks this voice what it thinks would happen if it were not present. “Karen would be lazy and let everyone down,” it says. This is the cue for Kent that there is another voice present.

He asks Karen to move her chair back to the middle and explains that this is the point at which a person can develop an “Aware Ego”. The more conscious this part is of our different selves and how they interact, the more able it is to listen to all the voices, rather than automatically do what the dominant voices say. By moving her chair into different positions for these selves, Karen is creating a physical and mental separation from them, which allows her to see them more objectively.

“How do you feel now,” Kent asks Karen. They discuss the emotions the pusher self caused in Karen and how she felt speaking to it. They then agree that it would be useful to talk to Karen’s lazy self. “Hi,” says Kent. “So, you’re Karen’s lazy self. Nice to meet you.”

As an observer, it is easy to be sceptical about this technique. It sounds so, well, Californian, to be talking to the different voices in a person. But something extraordinary happens as we watch Karen. When she was her pusher self, she was strong and confident - much as she was when she walked in the door this morning. Now, she changes. This time, Karen positions her chair farther away from Kent and sinks into it. All signs of strength seem to have gone.

Kent asks “lazy Karen” to tell us about herself. “Well, I am just everything that Karen hates. Because if I had the chance, I would do nothing, just enjoy life,” she says. “And when did you become part of her life?” Lazy Karen thinks about this. “I guess I was always in her life but Karen only really became conscious of me about 15 years ago. She was pregnant with her fourth child and her ex-husband lost his job. Although she felt she was working hard, he kept on telling her she was lazy.” Kent asks her what function she has in Karen’s life. She takes a while to think about this. “My job is to warn Karen to slow down, and that if she doesn’t, she is going to become sick. It is so typical of her to be doing this workshop when she is burned out. It is also typical that she was the one to volunteer to be your guinea pig!” she laughs. Kent asks lazy Karen if there is anything she would like to tell Karen. “I’d like to tell her to stop trying to be Miss Perfect.”

Later, Kent explains that this lazy part is Karen’s disowned self, the one her pusher self feels most uncomfortable about. Our disowned selves are almost always the opposite of our primary selves. “They are not necessarily bad, but for some reason we have given them a negative value,” says Kent. Often, we could benefit by taking over even a small part of this rejected self. “If Karen were to allow herself to be lazy every now and then, she would be able to relax more,” explains Kent.

Karen’s problem of not being able to achieve a satisfactory work/life balance is a common one. But there are lots of other possible applications for Voice Dialogue. For example we may find it difficult to make a career decision. Or, if we have a dominant “pleaser” self, we may find ourselves working overtime, doing the jobs of other colleagues. Or, we might experience an unexplained block before doing a task. A good example of this last problem is the nervousness many people feel before giving a presentation or going into negotiations. “I find that even the most self-confident people can become a bag of nerves,” says Kent. “In most cases, it is an inner critic

that says something like, 'I can't do this' or 'I'm going to make a fool of myself'. Becoming aware of that voice helps the person to acknowledge its presence but not to buy into it."

Kent believes Voice Dialogue also has applications in intercultural training. "In some cultures, a primary self will be the opposite of what it is in another culture. So, for example, the typically direct personality of Americans is the opposite of the modesty that tends to be the British primary self. For each of these cultures, the other style is a disowned self. Being aware of this can help us to overcome cultural barriers.

Voice Dialogue was first developed in California at a time when people were experimenting with spirituality and altered states of consciousness. Hal and Sidra Stone lived in this world, drawing on its influences. But Voice Dialogue also has its roots in the psychological theories of people like the behaviourist B. F. Skinner, as well as C. G. Jung, with whom Stone (now over 80) once had an individual session.

John Kent believes that Voice Dialogue is relevant again today, as people try to make sense of a business world that is becoming increasingly complex and pressured. He is just one of a small handful of people who have trained with Hal and Sidra Stone and are introducing Voice Dialogue into the workplace. Paul and Robin Gale-Baker, who run Voice Dialogue Australia, are other practitioners. They use the technique to help people to run small businesses.

"Entrepreneurs often do not have the full 'team' of inner selves needed to run a business," says Paul Gale-Baker. "So, for example, they may be good business people, but not good at marketing. Or, they may have good ideas but are no good at putting them into action. In our courses, we look at who stands in the way of this inner business team."

Personal development is increasingly recognized as an important business tool for managers. However, John Kent believes everyone - from the cleaner to the boss - can benefit from it. He explains why: "I remember once seeing a t-shirt in California that said, 'Wherever you go, there you are'. If we are not aware of why we are behaving a certain way, we can create problems for ourselves that won't change, whether at home or in the office."

PRACTICAL EXERCISE : Talking to your selves

When you have to make a decision, there will be many voices inside you telling you what to do. Often, one is stronger, and you will end up listening to it - even though another part of you is telling you this is the wrong decision. Here, management trainer John Kent shows how you can make sense of those voices using a technique called Voice Dialogue.

“First, write a description of the issue you want to get more clarification about. This will help you focus. As you do this, you may notice two or more different inner voices - for example, the part of you that wants to do something and the part that isn’t so sure about this. A sentence in which the word “I” appears more than once is a sign of several voices in conflict. For example: “I don’t like my job but I just don’t have the courage to change,” or, “Whenever I lose my temper with my staff, I feel so guilty”. Now, ask one of these voices the following questions. As you do so, refer to yourself in the third person. It is going to feel strange, but it is a way to get a bit of distance from that voice.

- Hello, how long have you been in (your name’s) life?
- What is your purpose?
- How much energy do you take up doing your job?
- What would happen if you were not around?
- What is your opinion about this particular decision?
- If you could come out and take (your name) over, what would you have (your name) do?
- Is there anything else you want to say?

When you have finished talking to one part, thank it and then interview the next voice. At the end of this process you will have a lot of information about yourself that may surprise you. You won’t necessarily find an immediate solution to your problem, but that is not the point of Voice Dialogue. It allows you to stop before you react in an automatic way, to recognize the different voices that are coming up inside you, and then to decide which one of them it is now wisest to listen to.