

[This following first appeared in Norwegian, as a chapter entitled, “Når du er på jobben er du i livet: Voice Dialogue som utviklingsmetode” in an anthology for business consultants, *Kunnskap i arbeid — status og fremtidsbilder*, Hilde Doksrød (ed.), Tano Aschehoug, Oslo, Norway, 1998.]

## VOICE DIALOGUE: *A User's Manual for the Human Being at Work*

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Who is it who goes to work in the morning? The very same person who rolled out of bed, stumbled to the bathroom mirror and, in her mind, commented to the blotchy, puffy face she saw there:

*“Oh, sweetie, how tired you look! You’ve spread yourself too thin, you know. Let’s figure out what you can delegate of that big project so you can focus on the parts of it you do best. Then come home and spend tonight listening to music with your honey. Okay?”*

Or, seeing that same wreck of a face with that same glint of fear in its eyes—fear of failing at work—she may have said to herself something more like this:

*“God, you’re getting old! Who’d want a hag like you? And you’re nowhere near done with what you promised you’d finish by Friday. You’re gonna blow it. Well, it’s overtime for you tonight, babe. Stay at that desk till you catch up or they’re gonna to find out just how incompetent you really are!”*

Which of these internal dialogues best serves the organization for which that woman works? Which is more likely to lead to good performance, good collaborative work, good health?

Personnel can be taught the necessity of delegating, or holding employee conferences, or organizing meetings and following up on decisions made, etc. If, however, the ‘voices’ in a person’s head treat her as in that second dialogue, she’ll know she should delegate, etc., but she won’t end up doing it. One thing is to know what one ought to do. It’s another to be a person able to do it.

The two inner dialogues above express complex relationships within the individual. The psychological term for those inner voices is ‘part-objects introjects’; that is, they ‘speak’ for the values, thoughts and models for relationship that we were exposed to while growing up and which we now have adopted as part of our own psychological make-up. In the Voice Dialogue model, these ‘part-object introjects’ are referred to as ‘inner voices,’ representing ‘inner selves’ or ‘sub-personalities.’ It is these which are the focus of the Voice Dialogue model/method, hence its name.

As it focuses on the inner workings of the mind, Voice Dialogue does have much in common with the concerns addressed by psychological therapies. People who assume that techniques of therapy belong only to professionals for use on disturbed people may wonder what role an apparently therapeutic tool has in the work place. Isn’t that an invasion of privacy, or a pathologizing of daily life?

Actually, the knowledge which the world of psychology has amassed by studying people in trouble also provides the foundation for what I like to call

a “User’s Manual for the Human Being”—the basic operating instructions for how well-functioning people can sort out what it means to be a person with a psyche in a society.

The good news is that such User’s Manual basics are relatively easily taught. The bad news is they all too rarely are. Our schools teach us the basic workings of our bodies, our cars, our arts and sciences. Where in our education, however, are we taught the basic workings of the person? When do we study how to handle our inner conflicts, to work through grief, confront anger constructively or develop our social intelligence? Who teaches us techniques for making the best use of our personality quirks and strengths, or, of particular importance, how to treat our own and other people’s vulnerabilities with loving respect? Ironically, it is most often those ‘fortunate’ enough to get into a deep personal crisis and thus into therapy who receive assistance thinking through these basics in any systematic way.

An employee’s increased personal awareness turns out to be an organization’s best friend. Teaching well-functioning people about themselves can help them tackle their tasks, their collegial relationships and to take initiative to change a working environment that isn’t optimal. IF, that is, the focus is directed toward how one’s personal qualities affect performance as a worker.

Doing so is not to examine one’s navel at the company’s expense. Nor is it to focus on the individual while neglecting the context within which she exists. It is simply facing up to the fact that the person who gets up in the morning and says something to herself in the mirror will then go to work and, in one way or another, act on what she heard herself say. That action will have a ripple effect throughout the organization.

Voice Dialogue is among the very best methods for doing this job. It is relatively easy to teach and yet the model has room for all the subtle nuances of life’s complexity. It also works well in conjunction with many other approaches; consultants need not abandon their best loved tools to add this one to their repertoire.

Voice Dialogue was developed by two American psychologists, Drs. Sidra and Hal Stone. It is part of their theory of human functioning called “The Psychology of Selves.” What I’ll do here is give an overview of some of the core concepts in their Voice Dialogue model, and then a bit about their method.

Please remember as you read:

- Drs. Stone have so far written four books on the subject. Obviously, what follows will just be a sketch.
- Drs. Stone didn’t invent how we function as people, they only devised a (very elegant!) model to describe it. Consequently, you’ll recognize aspects that resemble a variety of other descriptive models, such as Gestalt, Jungian analysis, etc.
- What is described reflects ‘normal’ development which presumes a healthy individual born into an adequately functioning family and society, in times of relative peace.

- Finally, the model is descriptive of 'states of being' which are made up of so much more than words. They are constituted by emotions, fantasies, talents, dreams, etc. Each of these has its own 'wave-length,' its own mood, its own—to borrow a word from Eastern philosophies -'energy.' Were I speaking this article to you instead of writing it, my own personal emanation, my body language, facial expressions, voice modulations, etc., would 'embody' what I'm talking about. I ask you to supply that part of the teaching as you read. Feel if you can sense the 'energy' connected to the various states of being described.

## WHO IS SPEAKING WHEN YOU TALK TO YOURSELF? THE VOICE DIALOGUE MODEL

We begin at the beginning, with vulnerability, the condition in which we are all born. No other animal is so dependent on their caregivers for such a long time, both physically and emotionally, as are we human beings.

Thus, among our many early childhood developmental tasks is the gradual invention of strategies for becoming autonomous. We can say that we are building 'defense mechanisms' or constructing 'armor' or even, developing a 'personality': whatever we call it, we must develop the personal power to protect our vulnerability. And well we should. Those children who remain psychologically undefended may end up in institutions of total care. To live in the world means, in part, to acquire tools for gaining personal mastery.

### BECOMING POWERFUL

And what sort of strategies do we develop to gain mastery over our vulnerability?

**Inner Pleaser:** A child learns, for example, to perceive what the world wants of her and then provide it. Mommy and Daddy are looking into the cradle and suddenly their baby's face contorts: What was that? A smile! A delicious rush of warmth streams from the parents toward their child. Then comes that fateful day when, for the first time, the baby contracts those same facial muscles in just that way, only this time, on purpose. She will then have performed one of her first empowering acts of mastery: she will have made herself less vulnerable by controlling those around her. She has pleased them, given them what they wanted, her smile, so that they in turn will give her what she not only wants but physiologically and emotionally needs, their loving contact. This ability to intuit what people want and then provide it is at the core of empathy, without which cruelty would reign. It is not an exaggeration that without this capacity to adapt to the environment, our entire species would die out.

**Inner Pusher:** As our little girl grows older, if her universe is not to be limited to her parents' lap, she'll need enough drive and persistence to explore the world. She'll need the drive to dare take not just a first step, but, when that one leads to a bruising fall, a second step, and then a third until, finally, she can walk. No drive, no achievement. Not just for her: without the drive toward achievement, there would be no such thing as society.

She'll also need an **Inner Critic** internalizing the criticism she receives

so that she can eventually warn herself that stoves are too hot to touch, traffic too dangerous to run out into, and other people too tender to punch. She'll need a conscience to tell her when she's done wrong. In fact, being unable to admit one is at fault may be a sign of psychopathology. Throughout history, people with a deficient capacity for self-criticism have been known to tyrannize society.

An **Inner Rational Mind** will help her analyze events and make sense of her world rescuing her from superstition and chaos.

Unless she has an **Inner Warrior** to help her say 'no' and make it stick when someone tries to hurt her, she will remain very much at the mercy of the world.

And so on. There are an infinite number of ways to gain mastery. Some strategies, including those just named, are common to us all. Others are specific to the times and culture in which we grow up, it's perspective on religion, ethics, gender roles, etc. Still others are unique to one particular individual, perhaps even the result of inborn temperament, part of that person's uniqueness, of what comprises a recognizable personality.

Orchestrating this cast of heavy-weights, however, must be an **Inner Rulemaker**, helping us choose which of these strategies for gaining mastery and protecting our vulnerability we ought to specialize in, what face is most appropriate to present to the particular world into which we were born. To put it another way, our **Inner Rulemaker** tailors the contours of our personality so that we develop what, in the Voice Dialogue vernacular are called, 'primary selves.' These are the specific traits we end up emphasizing, while carefully toning others down. We tend not to notice our 'primary selves' because we just think that's who we are; as we grow up, and with the help of our **Rulemaker**, we come to take our sense of identity from these 'primary selves'.

To maintain that inner picture of ourselves, we have to deny any feelings, desires or actions which contradict that self-image, those traits our 'primary selves' reject. Those impulses we call our 'disowned selves.' When they pop up, for example, one fine evening when we're out with the staff and have had a little too much to drink, we say, "Oh, I don't know what made me do that! I just wasn't myself. I'm not like that!"

Fortunately, human beings specialize in different 'primary selves'. One person in the office ends up taking charge of firing us up to exceed last year's results, another takes on the role of making our environment cozy, someone else is best suited to warning us when our department is headed for trouble, yet another makes sure the accounts balance or thinks up strategies to beat the competition at its own game, etc. We need all of us to make a team, all our varying individual strengths and ways of having power in the world.

Each of us can, however, get too specialized and overdo one or another of these 'primary self' strategies for gaining mastery:

A person who takes too much of his self-image from having a strong **Inner Pleaser** may end up exhausting himself by striving too hard to please others. Living up to everyone else's expectations may alienate him from his

own deepest longings and talents, often a factor in burn-out.

If he has an over-developed **Inner Pusher**, he may drive himself in goal-oriented workaholism, pursuing the kind of success that kills. In that case, he'd better be prepared for complaints from his co-workers that he's working them too hard and from his family that he's abandoned them. And look out for heart disease.

If he gives too much weight to his **Inner Critic**, he may become so acutely judgmental that nothing he or anyone else accomplishes is ever good enough. To see how killing that can be for creativity, just think of the way critical remarks can paralyze a brainstorming session. There has even been found a correlation between extreme self-critical perfectionism and a tendency toward suicide.

If he allows his **Inner Rational Mind** to do all the thinking, he risks becoming a pedantic, predictable bore, without fantasy or humor, with exhaustingly little capacity to relax, play or utilize his intuition.

He may rely so chronically on his **Inner Warrior** that he sees enemies everywhere, fights first and asks questions later, creating the very dangers he hoped to prevent. At its extreme, this is war.

Yes, mastery is necessary, but there is something called too much of a good thing.

## BEING VULNERABLE

Each of our specialized competencies is designed to distance us from our vulnerability, but is vulnerability really only bad, only something to be distanced from?

Its bad reputation is certainly not without grounds. Beneath our socialized armor lie aggressions, greed, passions without conscience. Just visit a day care center teeming with three-year olds if you want to see how brutal our most primitive, unsocialized impulses are when unchecked. Beneath the armor are also our emotional responses to old and new trauma, our terrors, wounds, losses, shocks, failures, disappointments, all our unexamined emotional baggage from childhood on up. If you've ever met a person who is too vulnerable and too poorly defended against these—that lady in the office who bursts into tears if you so much as correct her spelling, who is afraid of almost every kind of challenge—then you know how difficult unbridled vulnerability can be, not just for the vulnerable person herself but for those around her as well. No wonder so many prefer to err in the direction of being too tough rather than too tender.

However: There's a high price to be paid for going too far in girding our soft underbellies. It's common knowledge by now: if we ignore our vulnerability the unintegrated pain does not just go away. Rather, it wreaks havoc with the equilibrium we like to think we have. Not only social alienation but also illness, physical as well as mental, may result from locking away our feelings behind carefully tended 'civilized' appearances.

Something even more sad may result if we base ourselves too exclusively in the quest for mastery and power. If we are busy avoiding one kind of vulnerability—that is, pain—the avoidance acts as a kind of cork in the

bottle, preventing us from pouring out all the other types of vulnerability, the delicious kinds. We need to take off our armor, or at least loosen it a bit, if we want to play, or laugh. We can't be spontaneous if we're locked into our mastery positions. If we aren't able to tolerate our vulnerability, we can't think associatively, or dream, or be poetic, or romantic, or creative. We certainly can't be erotic if we're busy protecting ourselves, neglecting our own desires, being critical, or competitive. We simply must be vulnerable if we want to love. And nothing makes us feel how vulnerable we are as does being loved. In fact, without access to our vulnerability, we can't have any kind of intimacy at all, not even the social kind that humanizes the workplace and improves job satisfaction.

It's in our vulnerability that our humanity lies.

### KNOWING THAT YOU KNOW: *The Aware Ego*

Too much mastery spells rigidity, too little brings chaos. Too much vulnerability is dangerous, too little is tragic and lonely.

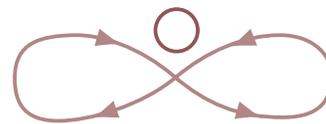
What we really need is the right amount of everything. We need a place to stand within ourselves from where we can embrace and develop our strategies for gaining mastery AND have access to our vulnerability, utilize our primary selves AND be conscious of the sides of us we tend to disown. We need to know how to protect our boundaries consciously AND how to open them up on purpose. We need a way to choose which sides of us to utilize when, and with whom, and to what degree. In short, we need to supersede our dualities to encompass the whole of our impressive repertoire for being a human being.

Both/and not either/or.

That's a tall order. It requires, and here is the central concept in the Voice Dialogue model: an **Aware Ego**, a sort of CEO for the psyche, a capacity to first get an overview and then consciously orchestrate a response.

We can draw it this way:

### *Aware Ego*



<i>both</i>	<i>and</i>
<b>VULNERABILITY</b>	<b>POWER</b>
Longing	Pleaser
Grief	Pusher
Tenderness	Critic
Fear	Perfectionist
Playfulness	Warrior
Associative Thinking	Rational Mind
Erotics	Patriarch
Beach Bum	Competitor
etc.	etc.

The fulcrum in this drawing is the point of dynamic balance called the Aware Ego. If our sense of self is grounded there, and if we have contact in both directions, we can be an active witness to our own lives. We do not need to take our self-image from a narrow selection of inner capabilities while disowning all the other ones. Instead, the sense of 'I' resides in the whole of us, our apparent strengths as well as our so-called weaknesses, embracing those facets of ourselves we feel safe with and the ones we might like to pretend we didn't have. We may both know, and know that we're knowing. We may feel and simultaneously know what it is we're feeling and how it relates to the whole spectrum of all our other feelings. This witnessing awareness is the capacity that makes all that possible.

Of course, let's not kid ourselves that we'll ever really achieve complete awareness of our internal landscape. As Jung said, every apparent peak of consciousness is actually just the foothill to another mountain of unconsciousness yet to climb! Even if ultimately limited, however, consciousness can make quite a difference.

## VOICE DIALOGUE AT WORK

Let's take an example: It's Monday morning and George shows up at work—half an hour late:

*"Late! Again! I better start right away on those department statistics I said I'd have ready by Wednesday. But I don't want to do that job now. It's so boring! I know — I'll start by designing the cover for the report, something colorful. What a lazy bum I am, always wanting to play, never wanting to work. Why did I ever say I'd do this stupid job anyway? Well, it'll make the team happy. And besides, this way I'm the one with control over the budget."*

Most of us can recognize these inner 'voices':

- **Pusher:** "Get to work! Do that report!"
- **Rebellious Child:** "No! I don't WANT to!"
- **Creative Child:** "I want to draw a pretty cover!"
- **Inner Critic:** "Lazy bum!"
- **Pleaser:** "If I do the dumb job, maybe the team will like me."
- **Inner Competitor:** "If I do it, I'm in control. Information is power!"

George, it seems, has let his Inner Competitor, Inner Pusher and Inner Pleaser define his job description, taking on too much work that doesn't inspire him. As he doesn't confront that larger issue, his Inner Rebellious Child takes over destructively, making him late and sabotaging his work, all in an unsuccessful effort to make room for his Inner Creative Child. Then, of course, his Inner Critic attacks him for being lazy and irresponsible. All this is going on beneath George's awareness and consequently out of his control. It's as if two polar sets of impulses were warring and George stands paralyzed between them. Can you recognize the 'energy' in this way of being? This is an example of what it looks like to be functioning without the benefit of the Aware Ego.

If nothing intervenes, poor George will most likely have a very stressful

week. Not only will he do uninspired or even sloppy work on those statistics, but he will also get little use out of his ample creativity. Instead, he may be in a foul mood, picking an argument with a colleague he's felt breathing down his neck. Will he get that job done on time? Will he end up calling in sick, or maybe actually becoming sick?

George could have really listened to each individual 'inner voice' that Monday morning, letting them speak out, one at a time. He might then have discovered not only that each one had something important to say but also that this inner conflict actually started long ago:

- His **Pleaser** might remember how his father, whom he admired, beamed with pride every time George won a wrestling match but showed no interest in his artwork. So George put aside his artistic talents, even though he himself got great pleasure from using them.
- His **Inner Creative Child** might have contact with the longing that George had pushed far away from his memory, a longing both for artistic creativity and for a more imaginative, intimate and less performance-oriented kind of contact with his father.
- His **Pusher** and **Competitor** might explain how their domination of George's personality, even today, does result in impressive achievements, but at the same time has served to keep him safely distracted from these inner longings.
- The urge to create is so strong, however, that his **Rebellious Child** is going to keep fighting hard and angrily to make sure creativity isn't forgotten, whatever the cost.

George can now see why he takes on competitive jobs that don't really satisfy him and then begins to sabotage his own performance, and he can use this information to update his choices. His more developed Aware Ego can now help him value both his those 'primary selves' he's used to utilizing AND the selves that lie impatiently latent, undeveloped.

How will this translate into action at work? George knows enough about his own motivation to discuss a redefinition of his job description with his boss. If he arranges to have more tasks delegated to him in which his creativity is taken seriously (at last!), he might find himself less resistant to also doing the more structured assignments. Ironically, George might end up getting more of the status he so desires because he can now employ an even broader range of his talents. In the meantime, someone else on the team might actually enjoy doing the statistical job George dislikes and might even have felt resentful when George took on that important assignment. Thus, not just George but also his whole department might stand to gain from his increased insight into the internal processes behind his behavior.

Yes, developing consciousness of one's inner feelings is very much what psychotherapy is designed to do: that which is unconscious or subconscious is brought to awareness so that it may be sorted out rather than just acted out. Yet notice how 'normal' and familiar such a process is. It isn't necessary to be sick in order to get even healthier.

## EMBRACING IT ALL

Thus, the goal of the Voice Dialogue model is to strengthen the Aware Ego so that it can: **Contain the tension of opposites**. Notice, I did not say to resolve the tension of the opposites. Containment seeks to make room in the same heart for the contradictions and complexities that are involved in being alive.

When, with an Aware Ego, we contain the tension of our internal contradictions, we become free to take our self-image from the totality of our inner cast of characters rather than from a select few. As a result, our behavior grows less rigidly habitual. Paradoxically, we also become more responsible; we can decide consciously what to do about our various 'disowned' impulses since we can recognize them before they jump out and make trouble. We may even find we're having a lot more fun and accomplishing things we never thought possible.

It's exciting to discover that identity is not a single, fixed point but rather a dynamic process of continual development, a medley of unending potentialities.

## THE ART OF TALKING TO ONE'S SELF: THE VOICE DIALOGUE METHOD

Although one can sort out these 'voices' on one's own, it is difficult to shed light on one's own blind spots. Thus, the Voice Dialogue method consists of one person interviewing the 'inner voices' of another, helping the parts to express what's on their mind and heart, speaking one at a time rather than interrupting one another constantly, as they tend to do in the daily inner life of the mind. The person being interviewed gets to experience those inner energies as different states of being, each one with its unique life memories, functions and opinions. She gets to map her internal terrain and then, afterwards, her Aware Ego gets to make better informed decisions.

Part of the beauty of the Voice Dialogue method is that the person doing the interviewing learns at least as much as the person being interviewed. He learns to listen actively, non-judgmentally, empathetically and analytically, all at the same time. He trains at recognizing shifts in mood and feeling, and in formulating working hypotheses about how different aspects of an individual might affect her life and work. In short, the method hones communications skills.

For more detailed information on the Voice Dialogue method, see the reference list at the end of this article.

## HOW CONSCIOUSNESS IMPROVES THE WORK PLACE

Here in Norway, many business and public leaders and their co-workers have received training in Voice Dialogue. Over the years, they have described its positive impact on their work life in ways such as these:

- They've grown better at distinguishing real and current dangers from personal, historical fears. Thus, they become better at making decisions, even unpopular ones. Both the extremes, that of indecisiveness and of rash decision-making, seem to be moderated.

- They've grown better at recognizing and then setting their limits. They are thus less likely to let themselves be exploited or to put others in the position of unwittingly exploiting them.
- They become more adept and creative at delegating.
- They've grown better at expressing themselves more precisely and listening more deeply. Their colleagues often confirm an improvement in their skill as communicators.
- They identify more easily when they or others are becoming defensive, and can more easily sort out why. This awareness of underlying issues reduces the incidence of conflict. When conflicts do arise, it helps make their resolution less difficult.
- They've grown better at organizing their workload, making it both more challenging and more gratifying. As a result, their efficiency and productivity increase. Absenteeism and burn-out are more easily prevented.
- They've grown better at giving and receiving both negative and positive feedback. As a result, they act more responsibly while also feeling more inspired and inspiring to others. Their colleagues tell them the environment they create around them feels safer.
- They've developed insight into a wider variety of human traits and thus work better with people they couldn't relate to earlier. This seems to have a positive impact during employee conferences and when working in teams.
- They've learned to see greater value in contact with their inner life, finding in it enrichment for their work as well as for their relationships.
- They experience their problem-solving skills becoming more creative.
- They've grown a little wackier, have more fun and feel more alive.
- Some say they have always simply 'known' the dynamics Voice Dialogue describes but haven't before had a way of putting them into a structure they could experience directly and utilize practically.

Voice Dialogue training in the context of the job seems also to have had a ripple effect into the private lives of many of the participants. They seem to learn to deepen their personal contact, both coming closer to others and letting others closer to them. As a result (this work is full of wonderful paradoxes), they also feel freer to allow themselves to take space, to enjoy solitude more, doing more of what they might earlier have feared was 'selfish' but which they now experience as just taking better care of themselves. They seem to find that the better they do both of these apparently opposite things—be closer and yet more separate—the better they function as parents, partners, co-workers and leaders.

## SAFETY AND WHAT VOICE DIALOGUE TRAINING IN A WORK CONTEXT IS NOT

Using Voice Dialogue in a work context is a teaching in communications. It is not offering therapy, even if some of the results are therapeutic in nature and even though the model/method works extremely well as a therapeutic tool in the hands of professionals. The courses do require a certain psychic balance and are not designed for people with serious psychological problems.

Safety features, however, are built into the interview method. The Voice

Dialogue technique doesn't only teach people to honor and experience their vulnerability, but also requires them to learn how to put it aside and to protect it. Consequently, the method functions to strengthen the ego and carries little risk of destabilizing psychologically fragile individuals.

Sometimes, as a result of the experience with Voice Dialogue, certain people discover that big personal changes are called for. These changes aren't always easy, though not making them is, in the long run, usually even harder. Some of these people have discovered that they need and want to go even deeper and have contacted a therapist.

### **REMEMBER: WHENEVER YOU GO TO WORK, YOU ARE GOING TO YOUR LIFE**

As the old hierarchical style of leadership yields in favor of flatter organizational structures, the human factor becomes ever more important in making the workplace work. Integrating the psychological component of life into the workplace is an idea whose time has come. And, as a Wise One once said: Life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be experienced.

Please visit:

<http://www.amazon.com/Music-Third-Susan-Schwartz-Senstad/dp/0312266219>