Does Democratic Dialogue in Hierarchical Organizations Result in Work Fit for Humanity?

There is a growing interest in dialogue in organizations to bring greater humanity, voice, agency, and productivity. The first three are acknowledged by Paulo Freire (2018), an educator working in Brazil in the 1950s, who taught peasants to read and brought them together in dialogue to instill a sense of voice and agency within them. He encouraged them to make a difference in the world and to create a different world. The peasants had been so long in positions of servitude that they had come to view themselves as lesser beings than their overlords. Freire writes, “Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it.” Naming the world is to have agency, to act upon it, rather than be subject to it. Dialogue also has the potential to increase productivity by taking advantage of all the intelligence in the workforce to address the increasingly complex problems organizations face.

When Harold Clark, the new Director for The Virginia Department of Correction, was appointed in 2010, he determined that what was needed within the Department of 13000 employees was a “Healing Environment.” He held a set of norms in support of a Healing Environment, which he wanted to infuse throughout the Department:

* prisons should be a place of healing - the healing environment is for the prisoners and also for the staff who come to work each day, often with baggage of their own
* the purpose of a prison is not to punish, but to keep the public safe from those incarcerated, while they learn how to function as good citizens
* everyone deserves a second chance
* everyone should be held accountable for their actions
* people, whatever they have done, should be treated with dignity and respect
* all voices deserve to be heard

The vehicle he chose to imbed those norms was dialogue. He contracted consultants to teach dialogue, initially to his executive team and then to all 13,000 employees. In addition to training employees in dialogue, the Director put in place new processes where dialogue was used:

* He expanded the Executive team from 6 to 28 for broader representation. The Executive team meets monthly in dialogue to address problems and changes within the Department. The Director opened the meetings to all employees to bring their concerns and join the conversation. 20 to 40 employees regularly participate these meetings.
* He established a joint monthly meeting of the Wardens of the 46 prison facilities and the Chiefs of 60 Probation and Parole units to increase cooperation between incarceration and release and again made it an open forum for employees to attend and bring concerns.
* He established Learning Teams, each of 15 participants, attended monthly by employees at all levels to practice dialogue and identify and discuss issues and problems they faced in their work.
* He required every unit within the system to hold two Working Dialogues monthly. During Working Dialogues, the unit’s policies and procedures are changed in response to the problems within the unit. Working dialogues bring together individuals from all levels who impact the problem under discussion to understand the problem thoroughly and then identify solutions. Although Unit Directors retain the right to say whether the solution will be implemented, that right is rarely evoked. After solutions have been implemented the initial group reconvenes to determine if the problem has been sufficiently addressed.
* He provided additional training in dialogue for 235 employees to serve as Dialogue Practitioners. They facilitate the Working Dialogues and Learning Teams, provide dialogue training to new hires, coach supervisors in dealing with employees, and coach employees who have concerns about their supervisors. The Dialogue Practitioners serve to pass any concerns from these processes up the chain of command.

There is evidence from employee surveys and the improvement in VADOC's recidivism rate that employees speak more openly and honestly with each other within Working Dialogues and Learning Teams. Sergio Escobar, a Records Manager and a Dialogic Practitioner at VADOC says, “It's funny *how being a Dialogue Practitioner has opened so many doors within the institution. It is amazing that we have become not just Dialogue Practitioners but ambassadors of a safe container. People have come to me with things they don't want everybody to know. In a safe container, you are able to gather the information and pass it to where it needs to be passed on. It's made VADOC a better place to work.”*

While in Working Dialogues and Learning Teams, employees are better able and more comfortable expressing disagreement. Outside of those formats, some employees remain careful about saying anything negative about a supervisor that might get back to that leader. The hierarchical structure leaves in place the competition for promotion and salary, which can reduce the open exchange of information. Employees speak about and to leaders by their titles, such as "Warden Jones" or "Director Clarke," while being referenced by those leaders by their first names. Offices for managers and leaders are of a different caliber than employees. Employees are assigned specific job tasks by their supervisors. Employees are instructed on how their work is to be conducted and are judged on their performance by supervisors. Decisions made by the Executive Team members and the Pardon and Parole Chiefs are visible to those who attend the meetings; however, that does not preclude Executives, Decision Chiefs, Wardens, and Supervisors from making decisions about promotion, salary, and work tasks.

Hypotheses:

* Implementing democratic dialogue in hierarchical organizations allows employees to voice their concerns and suggest improvements to work problems and their work life. When dialogue is implemented, employees experience a more favorable culture and work life.
* The fundamental purpose of hierarchy is to remove agency from subordinates and place it with their superiors. That purpose contradicts the purpose of dialogue, which is to accord agency to individuals. Members of VADOC lack the opportunity to design how to perform their work, determine with whom they need to work, and establish their own work hours. Implementing democratic dialogue does not change how decisions are made in a hierarchical organization.