Conversation as a Methodology for Human Flourishing, Belonging, and Understanding

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Abstract: Despite the subtle differences, the terms conversation and dialogue are frequently used interchangeably. Conversation is an informal exchange of ideas, thoughts, and opinions between two or more people; it occurs in a range of settings from formal to informal, without a specific goal or objective. Conversation is a 'model, method, end and means' (Pattison 2020, 88) of communication. On the other hand, dialogue refers to a more structured and intentional exchange of ideas and opinions between two or more participants with the aim of achieving a specific outcome; it is often more formal and structured. The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the delicate differences between dialogue and conversation and make a case for the use of the less formal methods of conversation in exchanges where human flourishing, belonging, and understanding are sought. This article is in three parts. First, the difference between dialogue and conversations is explored. Second, I introduce Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and its development for use in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) conversations through The Lotus Model Process (Teller 2021, 404) with the seven types of conversation. Third, I present a report on a workshop where DEI topics of cultivating belonging and inclusion were explored by an international organisation. Finally, practice recommendations are made for using conversation as a methodological approach with the aim of creating spaces that enable belonging and understanding to emerge at an individual, team, and organisational level.

Keywords: Conversation, Appreciative Inquiry, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, Psychological Safety

Introduction

As a practitioner-researcher and leadership coach I advocate for the importance of exploring how conversation and good conversation practices (such as how to ask questions, deep listening, and holding space) can positively contribute to governance locally and globally. Having a hopeful intention in this regard is critical to curating

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and embedding human flourishing, belonging, and understanding in interactions that have the potential to transform individuals and organisations. In my work as a practitioner and researcher, the aim is to establish and extend an awareness of the energising and liberating attributes of conversation as a vehicle and instrument of interaction for 'cultural creativity and societal change' (Jenlink and Banathy 2005, 3). Good human governance requires a broad, representative range of voices from the full population of a location to be involved, otherwise the governance is not inclusive and may be accurate based on the voices of those involved, but inaccurate as a representative of the population or community as a whole. By considering the differences between dialogue and conversation, there exists an opportunity to contemplate the formal, curated, and ordered exchanges, compared to informal, incidental, and undisciplined explorations; with the latter often being perceived as more precarious.

The terms 'conversation' and 'dialogue' are habitually used synonymously to describe interactions (usually verbal) between people. Expanding dialogue into a broader conversation addresses several issues in DEI endeavours and can result in defusing possible fear or tension in the interaction before it has commenced: with individuals more prepared; feeling a greater sense of psychological safety; and those involved sensing confidence in participating regardless of role, knowledge, or position. Genuine dialogue is a process of reciprocal interaction where a space for new meaning and understanding is created (Banathy and Jenlink 2005, ix), often asynchronistically. I start this paper by discussing the difference and similarity between conversation and dialogue. I then introduce AI and share an approach that can be used to enable a purpose, values-, and beliefs-oriented conversation regarding DEI, leading to tangible behavioural change. Finally, I present a sample project where the conversational approach advocated for has been used as part of leadership development and DEI advancement in industry.

The Importance of Subtle Similarities and Differences

The subtle and nuanced differences in meaning contribute to greater awareness of how and when to use particular communication methods. The etymology of 'dialogue' means a speech across, between, or through two or more people. The word dialogue comes from two Greek words: 'logos' which refers to 'meaning,' 'knowledge,' 'word'; and 'dia' which means 'through.'[2] Dialogue is a collective communication: it is relational, genuine discourse. It is a disclosing through language as a cultural symbolic tool and conversation as a medium for sharing (Jenlink and Banathy 2005, 5–6). Dialogue 'derives its genuineness only from the con-

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2 https://www.etymonline.com/word/dialogue (Accessed on 23 November 2022)

sciousness of the element of inclusion' (Buber 1965, p. 97 in Jenlink and Banathy 2005, 6). Through dialogue, individuals engage in a shared exploration and construct meaning, actively contributing to an unfolding. It is a creative interaction that allows, or enables, new insights and unexpected ideas to emerge from the encounter. Irish theologian Danny Martin says that in the past dialogue represented something special, it had a 'richer sense' and was 'regarded as a special form of exchange' (Martin 2005, 82). Today, dialogue implies something formal, perhaps curated, a planned interaction with a beginning, end, and conclusion.

By contrast, conversation is conceivably more 'about connecting with life through others' (Martin 2005, 72). The word 'conversation' has its root in the Latin word 'con-vertere' meaning to 'turn with' (Martin 2005, 72) and means 'to live, dwell, live with, keep company with'.[3] It is described as an 'informal interchange of thoughts and sentiments by spoken words' (Martin 2005, 72), suggesting something casual, incidental, even playful. Conversation can result in change as 'we see things differently, we understand better what is going on; we co-create as we participate in the emergence of new meaning' (Martin 2005, 72), a transformation of sorts as the exchange happens 'in between' (Pattison 2020, 87). Retired British practical theologian Stephen Pattison describes conversation as 'commonplace and ordinary – everyone can engage in them' (Pattison 2020, 88): it is informal, and is a process that can happen accidentally with no agenda.

As I am proposing that there are both distinctions and similarities between conversation and dialogue, it is helpful to draw on a suggestion by Martin, who asserts a distinction between 'dialogue' and 'Dialogue' (with a capital D). He describes 'Dialogue' as 'a new conversation that is deliberate, intentional, and skillful; that will take place between individuals and communities, across sectors, across gender, race and creed' (Martin 2005, 83). The use of the capital D to describe it as a 'proper noun' creates a careful emphasis on the 'deliberateness implied and the skills that must be (re)learned' (Martin 2005, 83), indicating that there is something uncomplicated, innocent, and harmless about these conversations. This description of Dialogue is similar to Pattison's explanation of conversation with both Martin and Pattison suggesting that it is something available to all, is skillful yet requires no skill, creates something new, is co-created voluntarily, is playful, energising, storytelling; unstructured and waiting to unfold, emergent, willingness to listen and to give, and creating something new (Martin 2005 and Pattison 2020). Dialogue is 'profoundly important, creative, ignored, and [a] deeply subversive activity that needs to be acknowledged' (Pattison 2020, 88); it is about thinking together with the aim of moving

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3 https://www.etymonline.com/word/conversation (Accessed on 23 November 2022)

towards a mutual understanding (Martin 2005, 84). This is very much how I would describe what is necessary for human flourishing, belonging, and inclusion.

I describe communication encounters between people as conversation because it 'is accessible all the way down' (Pattison 1989, 87). Conversation is available to all regardless of cognitive, experiential, or demographic difference or similarity (Zaidi 2022a, 84). It exists without hierarchy, can be utilised by all groups and individuals, and is itself the 'beginning and end' with those involved 'celebrating and participating in the living perichoretic relational flow of conversations' (Pattison 1989, 87). It is for these reasons that conversation can be an effective tool in DEI and human flourishing related work.

The invitation to study conversation as a 'model, method and means' (Pattison 2020, 88) provides the opportunity to consider the essence and approaches used in conversation as a device for eliciting human flourishing, belonging, and understanding; and this communication is central to examining governance for the human future. Documenting my experience as a leadership coach and facilitator later in this paper, I explore how conversation can be used to progress inclusion and belonging by applying an adapted AI approach.

Having explored some of the differences and similarities between dialogue and conversation, I now discuss the contribution deploying conversation as a method can bring to governance for the human future in DEI undertakings.

Conversation as an Approach to Curating an Inclusive Governance for the Human Future

As we seek to create a more equitable and sustainable governance for the human future, involving a full, representative range of voices and opinions is critical. Since 2020 there has been an increased awareness of the range of complex and interconnected challenges facing the world, from climate change and economic and health inequality to social conflict and political polarisation. Tackling these volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous challenges requires multiple manoeuvres, including a collective effort that takes account of the perspectives and experiences of diverse communities.

There are many benefits from taking an inclusive and varied stance to all aspects of governance, particularly governance for the human future. Creating structures that include people from diverse backgrounds and experiences brings in different epistemic perspectives to policy and strategy making, without being derailed by discussions of epistemic advantage or disadvantage. Diversity of thought can lead to more creative and effective approaches to complex problems (Reynolds and Lewis 2021);

and diversity of experience and demographics further broadens the field for potential solutions to problems and challenges. Furthermore, inclusive governance can foster greater trust and cooperation among diverse groups, ultimately leading to more sustainable and equitable outcomes (OECD 2015). Inclusive governance structures and discussions can also help to reduce social tensions and conflicts between different groups, promoting greater understanding and tolerance by virtue of expanded participation. Adopting DEI as a principle in governance can disseminate human rights and dignity at all levels. Organisations that value diversity and promote inclusive decision-making processes send a powerful message internally and externally (to the organisation) that every person has inherent worth and should be treated with reverence and self-worth.

As DEI initiatives have become more important in recent years, organisations have adopted programmes that seek to create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace. However, many of these programmes fail (Caprino, 2023) and are seen to be tokenistic by some (Fastcompany 2020). A significant obstacle to successful DEI conversations is that they, by their very nature, can be difficult and uncomfortable due to discussing sensitive topics related to race, gender, and identity. This awkwardness can lead to avoidance of these conversations or topics, which can hinder progress toward creating a more inclusive workplace – any initiatives undertaken result in little or no tangible change. Many organisations wishing to embark on these discussions do not have a clear understanding of what DEI means or how to achieve it; they may not have the necessary resources or expertise to implement effective DEI initiatives; they may not have buy-in from leadership, may struggle with accountability, or may view it as a human resources project.

This lack of understanding and commitment can result in ineffective or symbolic DEI endeavours that do not lead to meaningful change and may in effect cause additional resistance. Another reason for a lack of effectiveness in many DEI initiatives is that organisations struggle to acknowledge the systemic barriers and biases that contribute to the inequities in the workplace. This includes implicit biases in hiring and promotion processes, lack of representation and inclusion of marginalised groups in leadership positions, and unequal distribution of resources and/or opportunities. Acknowledging these matters requires a deeper understanding of the structural and systemic nature of discrimination and a commitment to systemic change. The multiple challenges that individuals, teams, and organisations face when wishing to curate or participate in DEI conversations can be exponentially enriched with a willingness to engage in unscripted conversations.

The Use of Conversation as a Method and Methodology

Leadership coaches and facilitators use conversation as the primary process to curate a safe space for clients and organisations within which to grow, develop, and flourish. Unsurprisingly, as a leadership coach, I use conversation in my organisational work in the area of DEI and belonging, and as a research methodology.[4] The notion of a 'critical conversation' provides a helpful entry point to reflection and provides a methodological approach for critical conversation.[5] Pattison's description of conversation as a 'shy, slightly illicit activity... [where] as a researcher I never found anything out, and only found things in. But, more accurately, I find things in between. And in between is the precise location of conversation' (Pattison 2020, 87) draws out the power and potential of conversation. This description describes a shift in participant understanding of the actual process, resulting in a heightened awareness of the simplicity and capacity of a simple intentional interaction. When leading DEI facilitations in organisations, obtaining and then sustaining the 'buy-in' of the 'gatekeeper' is as important as maintaining that of the participants for the possibility of the exchange to remain.

Approaching conversations as 'commonplace and ordinary' and 'hidden in plain sight and unattended through all aspects of our lives' leads to a recognition that 'conversations... are our main work' (Pattison 2020, 88) – the work of humanity. The word 'ordinary' has been used by practical theologians in different ways. British Black liberation theologian Anthony Reddie describes 'ordinary' as essentially 'working class' (personal correspondence, March 20, 2021). Theologian Jeff Astley (2002) explains that 'ordinary theology' implies '*non-scholarly* and *non-academic*' (56, italics original). Pattison explains that by 'ordinary', 'I mean that people have conversations very frequently and without fuss in everyday life' (personal correspondence September 20, 2021). These subtle differences highlight that everyone's experience is 'ordinary to them' and validates the contribution to be made by all. It is sharing this ordinariness that creates understanding and awareness of different perspectives and brings together potentially disparate people. Conversation is 'unbiddable, under-determined and under-defined..., slipper[y]... It's informal, commonplace, democratic, ordinary, and open to all' (Pattison 2020, 91) and anyone wishing to be involved can, and should, be.

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4 For more see Pattison 2020 and Elizabeth Jordan (2019) Conversation as a tool of research in practical theology, Practical Theology, 12 (5), 526-536, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2019.1635743

5 For more detail see 'Some Straws for the Bricks' (1989) where Pattison sets out the 10 steps for a (theological) critical conversation, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13520806.1989.11759678

Knowing that the 'essence of [something] you cannot predict or guarantee' (Pattison 2020, 89) is embedded within the exchange requires a deep trust (with oneself, the process, and other participants) before the interaction can take place when using conversation as a method. Facilitating a space where 'the possibility of wandering, meandering, even doubling back… flows unevenly and at different speeds [like a river] as it goes along and encounters gullies, bends, and obstacles in its path' (Pattison 2020, 89) provides comfort in the discomfort of not knowing. Participants and facilitators experience tension from sitting with the polarity of confronting realities about self and system, conscious and unconscious biases, work as individuals and as a collective, and the unknown opportunity given in the field of the facilitation, where we might meet.

> 'Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
> there is a field. I'll meet you there.
>
> When the soul lies down in that grass,
> the world is too full to talk about.
> Ideas, language, even the phrase 'each other'
> doesn't make any sense.' (Rūmī 1995, 35)

The opportunity for a convening that 'potentially involve[s] transformation, however slight, for those involved' (Zeldin 1998, 2) is presented in the extract of Rumi's poem above. Every interaction in this space can create change if one is willing to surrender to the unknown. At the same time, it is important to 'not push for results' (Pattison 2007a, 261–89, in Pattison 2020, 89) and to allow what naturally emerges. Creating a space for participants to share the results from what can be perceived to be a private experience has been compared to sharing holiday photos (Pattison 2020, 90). The suggested intimacy and varying perspectives of what is shared and experienced draws our attention to trust and individual subjectivity – factors the facilitator is aware of in the curation of any DEI conversation. The documentation of personal journeys through a written reflexive practice and sharing conversational insight (not the content per se, which is private to the individual interactions) creates the space for further reflection with others. The resultant new knowledge creates opportunities for extending relationality with others and expanded awareness of self and other. It takes genuine courage and curiosity to engage in this work. Yet when the proposed conversational AI model is deployed, we discover the space for allowing and encouraging deep, messy, challenging conversations to take place; and a sense of humanity and mutual understanding is created.

I will now summarise what AI is and then describe what and how I use this to facilitate belonging, understanding, and inclusion in DEI work.

The AI Model

The conversational method of 'Appreciative Inquiry' (AI) (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) enables individuals, teams, and organisations to become learning groups where 'learningful conversations balance inquiry and advocacy... where we are open to the influence of others' (Senge 1990, 9). It supports shifting from 'entrenched mental models' (Senge 1990, 203) to building a shared vision that 'fosters a long-term orientation and an imperative for learning' (Senge 1990, 344). In its essence AI is about changing attitudes, behaviours and practice through appreciative conversation, exploration, and relationality. Developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva at Case Western Reserve University, USA, in the 1980s, AI has been used to facilitate organisational change with strengths-based interactions that construct a positive, expanding, generative shared future (Cooperrider et al. 2008, VI–VIII). The focus on strengths enables one to identify improvements and unlock new insights that may act as doors to new opportunities, knowledge, and progress. The inquiry invites a move from using strengths to perform to utilising them for transformation, with the aim of the investigation to 'locate, highlight, and illuminate the life-giving forces of an organisation's existence' (Cooperrider et al. 2008, XI). AI practitioners advocate for a collective inquiry into what is best so that one can imagine what could be in five phases of definition, discovery, dream, design, and destiny. Each phase has a key question of exploration.

Having a clear answer to the question 'What is the topic of inquiry?' enables the AI to have a clearer focus, a definition and allows the AI process to start effectively. Developing the inquiry question in a pre-AI meeting with key stakeholders present results in a sharper articulation of the intent behind the inquiry, which can then be shared and considered openly. This avoids the inquiry becoming dominated by unarticulated agendas. In the discovery phase the question of 'what gives life' enables participants to appreciate what is. This part of the AI is concerned with exploring the past and present relating to the inquiry topic. The discovery stage considers the strengths of previous approaches and what conversation partners may choose to continue with (or leave behind). In the next phase the opportunity to dream of 'what might be' successful in the future is considered. Through an exploration of the stories uncovered in the discovery phase the opportunity to create a compelling, memorable, and ambitious picture of the desired future is available with themes identified that are considered at the next part, the design stage. In the design phase, participants in the inquiry co-construct 'how it can be.' The opportunity to be expansive and create images of a preferred future occurs in this part with all possibilities available for discussion. Finally in the destiny phase, participants investigate 'what might be' with a view to empowering, learning, improvising to create sustainable change (Cooperrider et al. 2008, 36–48).

A significant critique of AI is the emphasis on the positivity and strengths aspects of individuals, groups, organisations which may lead to a lack of critical analysis and a failure to identify and address systemic issues. Two qualities of appreciative inquiry are necessary in order to achieve AI's transformative potential: "(a) a focus on changing how people think instead of what people do, and (b) a focus on supporting self-organising change processes that flow from new ideas" (Bushe and Kassam 2005, 161) AI's focus on celebrating success and ignoring negative experiences can also lead to the erasure of marginalised voices and perpetuate existing power structures. However, the approach of co-creating a discussion with an inquiry approach where all possibilities can be explored is useful in the space of DEI. This invites an adaptation to use AI in DEI projects.

Using AI in DEI Conversations

As a research-practitioner with the aim of creating spaces for individuals to fully be themselves, I am constantly investigating and developing existing tactics, strategies, and methods to fit the ambition of the research or organisational project. The significant and subtle difference is that often in DEI projects knowledge is handed over to attendees through a lecture format with minimal (or ineffective) discussion relating to how this new knowledge and material applies to the individual, team, or organisation. This diminishes the opportunity for behaviour change and reduces the long-term alignment of wellbeing with DEI aspirations. Therein lies a missed opportunity for senior leaders at a time when significant effort, time, and money is being invested with the ambition of creating real change in the DEI agenda, and simultaneously boosting wellbeing.

In my experience commissioners of DEI initiatives are procuring behaviour change because of increased intellectual, emotional, psychological, and embodied understanding. When allowed careful AI event design, planning and facilitation supports increased psychological safety before, during, and after the experience. A team effort by all those involved assists those leading the intervention to adjust and be flexible to the needs of the moment in the experience, rather than merely imparting information which may be intellectually understood, but not experientially received. When several conversations are convened as part of an intervention, behaviour change becomes more possible, probable, and predictable because participants are more open and curious about the perspective of others – they are viscerally changed as their knowledge of reality expands. It is for this reason alone that the demographic, experiential, and cognitive range of the facilitators and participants is acutely important in DEI explorations.

Adapting AI to take account of DEI requires a nuanced and sympathetic under-standing of the ways that power and privilege operate within organisations and the broader societal context of the organisation. Experienced South African AI facilitat-or, Tanya Cruz Teller, developed an AI model incorporating an appreciative leader-ship and inclusion approach. 'The Lotus Model Process' has four components: 're-new – engendering a positive sense of self; relate – connecting with others; co-create – generatively visioning a desired future together; and resolve – committing to heartfelt actions' (Teller 2021, 404). Echoing the earlier descriptions of conversation and Dialogue, Teller describes the work of inclusion as a 'call to action [that] re-quires perseverance and resilience' (Teller 2021, 408).

Individual psychological safety is necessary to feel able to change (Schein and Bennis 1965 in Edmonson 1999, 354) and requires interpersonal trust and mutual respect (Edmonson 1999, 354). The 'shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking' (Edmonson 1999, 350) is required for this work to be truthful. These factors are significant, given the complexity of DEI discussions, and can be consciously cultivated by facilitators. Bringing specific attention to psy-chological safety, nurturing deep integrity and trust, and allowing the full somatic experience to be represented, as well as the intellectual one at the start of any facilita-tion, enables the group to create its own 'terms of engagement'. This subtle shift raises participant self-awareness and leads to an emergence of shifting behavioural patterns or mindsets. All AI events require significant preparation for participants to be fully present with a degree of certainty that their contribution matters and to be confident in sharing their perspective. Lord Alderdice's invitation to explore the question 'What is the other guy right about? If I recognise this, then I can be open to identifying what within me I need to change' (spoken in the opening remarks of the Dialogue Society symposium leading to this publication) offers the opportunity for DEI-related understanding and change.

Acknowledging that not all communication is empowering and co-creating the frame of reference for a conversation permits participants to evoke a deeper under-standing of each other in a reduced period. For example, when an organisation seeks to convene their first DEI-based inquiry the existing strength within this topic (or current sense of self) is often minimal. As a facilitator I offer that one of the primary purposes for the initial inquiry is to map the current landscape and future vision. The development of an effective strategy and implementation plan will evolve from simply continuing the conversation. Persisting with the conversation is in and of itself progress, given the sensitivity of the subject and its personal nature for some organisations. Creating a platform where innovative and/or experiential behavioural change can occur, rather than hastily procuring 'off the shelf' solutions, is an effect-ive response to the DEI challenges present in organisations and systems today.

Reflecting on my thirteen years of practice in DEI leadership training and coaching, I have identified seven types of conversation: with self (through thoughts or writing); one-to-one conversations with one other person; in a triad where there is a speaker, listener and observer; in a group; through video; using the written word; and through audio (e.g., podcast, voice notes or video listened as audio). Each of these conversations has varying degrees of depth of communication shared and receipt of information that can range from 'words imparted' to 'information transferred.' Sharing the range of what can be (or not be) understood helps participants to acknowledge and recognise the potential delivery of what they seek to communicate. Exploring this in the early part of an inquiry helps to deepen trust and extend psychological safety to conversations where people may be uncomfortable to wander, make mistakes, and open up to their own (and others) vulnerability. The heightened awareness of the range of communication opportunities, methods, and comprehension increases options and decisions regarding what conversation type is most appropriate for any scenario.

An additional factor generated by identifying the 'seven types of conversation' is the range of depth of communication for the person sharing and the person(s) receiving it. Words exchanged in an intellectual, matter-of-fact way appear to convey a message, and exploration of nonverbal communication adds depth to the words exchanged – even in text – with nonverbal cues embedded within (Burgoon et al. 2021, 5), even in virtual communication. The cues of 'body, face, voice, appearance, touch, distancing, timing, and physical surroundings [which] all have a part in creating messages, with or without anything being said' (Burgoon et al. 2021, 5) represent so much and can aid comprehension, or result in misunderstanding (Burgoon et al. 2021, 7). If human communication is the 'process of creating meanings between people through the exchange of signs' (Burgoon et al. 2021, 7) paying attention to the verbal, nonverbal, and somatic nature of communication is critical to obtaining a broader understanding of what is being offered and received. Therefore, the combination of Teller's Lotus Model Process of AI and the use of the seven types of conversation assists in expanding the influence of DEI discussions in any setting.

A Sample Conversation for Human Flourishing, Belonging and Inclusion

I now turn to how conversation can be used to cultivate belonging and inclusion by sharing the experience of working with one organisation where The Lotus Model Process and seven types of conversation were used to 'open the conversation' in DEI. The commissioning client is the director of an English office leading 100 staff of a global finance organisation. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, staff returning to the workplace reported a reduction in belonging and connection, an increased sense of

loneliness, alongside a reported sense of lack of inclusion and diversity (confidential client reporting). Employees with one or more 'protected characteristic'[6] felt that DEI had historically been ignored or given 'lip service.' They reported that their experience of working from home was psychologically safer, which contributed to difficulties in going back to the office. The leadership team were made aware of these challenges and commissioned 'unconscious bias' DEI training in 2021. In early 2022, the employee satisfaction survey report showed 24% reduction in loyalty to the firm, and 18% reported a reduction in satisfaction at work. The unconscious bias training did not have the desired effect, with no reported change in the employee satisfaction survey. Following this, the leadership team commissioned an intervention to explore DEI through the lens of belonging, understanding, identity, leadership, and difference.

Given the sensitive nature of such an intervention (and the previous financial and time investment), it was important for the client to ensure that any activities would move the discussion forward and enable people to feel safe in participating. A half-day, in-person AI experience was undertaken for the organisation with a two-month lead-in consisting of short weekly communications inviting participants to review carefully curated content. These 'email conversations' enabled participants to feel more able to enter the room and be active participants in discussions with strengthened vulnerability and unfiltered openness. The full range of 'seven conversations' were applied leading up to and during the experience.

The primary question of inquiry was 'How might we cultivate belonging and inclusion in (company name)?' Participants reported that it was the initial 'conversation with self' which enabled them to be more vulnerable before the group meeting. A range of conversational styles was deployed during the event; these enabled individuals to relate and connect with each other. Multiple check-in points were provided during the event with facilitators speaking one-to-one to each person with the aim of putting participants at ease and to check-in on how they were feeling. The group were invited to co-create and generate a range of visions before identifying a shared desired future agreement. All of this provided the foundational principles that directed the rest of the conversation and enabled participants to generally be in the same place emotionally, intellectually, and psychologically, despite the potential for discomfort. Opportunities for individual, small group, and plenary discussion continued throughout the experience as discussions moved towards the resolve phase with commitments made. Noting that silence can mean a participant feels un-

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6 Based on the UK Equality Act 2010, which defines protected characteristics as age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, 'race', religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

able to be heard, anonymous sharing through tools such as Padlet and Mentimeter[7] were provided. The gentle questioning, asking, and listening approach results in engaging with difficult matters in a safe way.

An approach of 'modelling the behaviour' was identified alongside some strategic changes that could be considered over the course of the next twelve months. As the discussion moved deeper into the resolve phase – unexpected conversation, dialogue, respect, and understanding of each other emerged. Multiple points of connection were created between people who were carers, responsible for young children, had English as a second language, and a range of sexuality, gender, religion, and ethnicity.

To explore the best of 'what is', time and space was allocated for participants to acknowledge and appreciate themselves, draw out learning opportunities from others' perspectives, and be comfortable with being uncomfortable – they related with each other in a stronger manner. Initially several individuals did not want to participate in this discussion and felt that it was a 'human resources initiative'; they displayed resistance to the topic and project and said that being told it was 'mandatory' by the leadership team, further increased their opposition. The process of experiential learning and careful facilitation resulted in participants reporting greater awareness of DEI (98.6%) and positive behaviour change (98.4%), even among those who were hesitant initially.

Three weeks after the event, participants reported a greater consciousness of the challenges faced by some marginalised individuals within the organisation. Further still, some felt they were able to move from a place of resistance to one of less resistance, even advocacy in DEI elements important to individuals. Attendees reported an 8.5/10 satisfaction with the experience, and an 8.6/10 regarding recommending others to attend. One attendee found the discussion very challenging and was given further support via the organisation – highlighting the importance of carefully curated spaces for DEI conversation. Those who reported ratings of 7 and 8 out of 10 (rather than 9 or 10 out of 10) expressed frustration at how challenging the experience was for them personally. My team and I were pleased that all those expected to attend were there and stayed throughout the event despite their complexities and personal challenge. Horizons were broadened.

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7 Padlet is an online collaborative tool that allows users to share and organise information in a virtual board; and Mentimeter is a real-time interactive tool that enables audience engagement through live polls, quizzes, and word clouds.

Discussion

Conversation is a reciprocal communication tool and is accessible to all in one way or another. The intention participants have in a conversation will become clear during the interaction by the words used, the vocal tone, physical embodiment of the language, the quality of listening, and how the space is held by those involved. Furthermore, what is unsaid is particularly relevant in DEI conversations – through using a modified version of AI this is factored in. Rather than an AI that is purely positive in its strengths focus, The Lotus Model Process enables a discussion incorporating power dynamics, self, and systemic challenges, as well as a strengths emphasis. For highly complex topics such as DEI the use of conversation has the potential to be pivotal in unlocking understanding, providing insight, and expanding impact. However, it can also be detrimental if not undertaken correctly. There needs to be a clear intent for the conversation, and when this aim is shared with other participants, and developed alongside them, it enables a deeper sense of psychological safety, lessens uncertainty, and enables superior progress; and removes the intervention from being a 'tick box' exercise to one that generates change. All these possibilities are further enhanced when the opportunity to co-create the purpose of the AI is presented before the start of the inquiry. The 'issue' being discussed (or question being considered) requires naming; yet sometimes even naming the issue in DEI work can 'cause resistance [to] engaging conversations regarding substantive aspects of oppression and inequitable distributions of power' (Alston-Mills 2012).

When respectful exchange takes place in which similarity and difference is discussed, human flourishing and wellbeing expanded, and where diverse conversational styles are used, individuals are able to be fully present in the same space and meet people where they are. Highly sensitive or emotionally charged subject matter relating to a person's sense of being, which may normally evoke an internal fight, flight, or freeze response linked to previous negative experience or past association (Kozlowska et al. 2015, 264) and can become a major impediment to meaningful exchanges, is now able to be explored delicately and respectfully. Overcoming real relational barriers by using conversation as a method where participants become advocates for themselves, allies for others, having an agreed ambition, and becoming collective ambassadors in 'the work' (Zaidi 2022b, 40) amplifies human flourishing and connectedness as demonstrated in the example shared. The possibility of embedding behavioural change in DEI is increased.

Co-creating interventions that can open DEI conversations and develop into a longer-term strategy requires sensitive planning and time. Participants should be made aware that the inquiry includes participants with multiple views, often at various points on the spectrum of opinions. By giving clear instructions, messages are

shared and understanding unlocked; when the space is appropriately curated, even in profound disagreement, there is respect and trust. The results from the final resolve phase of the inquiry are continuously influenced by information from the renew, relate, and co-create phases. In the example shared, there was unexpected content that emerged from the conversational nature of the dialogue, and improved understanding and amplified mutual respect happened asynchronistically, some of which could not be captured in a survey or report – 'it just happened' as one participant said.

I propose that belonging and understanding emerge, identity is developed, leadership is demonstrated, and difference respected through these explorations. Consequently, human flourishing advances due to the affirmative interactions that take place in the process. This progressive understanding of complex issues and advancing of empathy towards one another can happen in small and large groups. The initial DEI event shared in this paper was repeated by the organisation four times in one year and led to the development of a global cultural competence, wellbeing, belonging, and inclusion strategy – a policy that the organisation reviews every six months. My aim in sharing this experience is that it is possible to know that 'within conversation lies otherness, difference, in-betweenness, togetherness and ultimately friendship and exploration of relationships of all kinds. This is the human condition and opportunity' (Pattison 2020, 92) and from that we find purpose and place in self and system.

Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to show that conversation (or Dialogue with a capital D) can be used as an approach in DEI facilitation to create vulnerable, open, honest, uncomfortable conversations leading to superior conversations and interventions. Each discussion and interaction between participants moves the awareness and consciousness of psychological safety, belonging, and understanding forward. I reported on a sample event with an organisation that had previously undertaken unconscious bias training which they reported as being ineffective and even regressive. The leadership team sought behavioural change in DEI, and as a result of the belonging and wellbeing-focused DEI intervention my team and I facilitated, they eventually created a strategy that championed a real sense of belonging and inclusion. A very significant opening of the conversation was undertaken. Viewing conversation as a method opens up the ability for people to be able to celebrate and participate in the living relational flow (Pattison 2020, 87) and discuss real-world issues in a way that can result in 'deep, profound change quite quickly' (participant reporting). The relational flow of conversation using both Teller's Lotus Model Process and the 'seven types of conversations' affirms conversation as 'consensus-building generative dialogue'

which is focused on a 'large array of issues and events that become the action agenda of [participants'] lives' (Banathy and Jenlink 2005, 429).

Exploring the precise location of a conversation can make it accessible to all regardless of cognitive, experiential, or demographic difference (Zaidi 2022a, 84) and make it transformative. Using conversation as a methodology in DEI work enables us to progress much further than merely having a conversation where information is imparted with no acknowledgement and/or the real problem not discussed. However, the combination of The Lotus Model Process and seven types of conversation presented here has the essence of something that cannot be predicted or guaranteed but 'it really empowers everyone to speak... without worrying about someone differing with me' (Teller 2021, 406). Different ways of thinking and exploring are seen by some as potentially threatening – demonstrating vulnerability and invincibility at the same time makes it a very effective change-making activity for all involved. In conclusion, I have described that open, honest, uncomfortable conversations can lead to the articulation and identification of what a team or organisation is actually seeking in relation to DEI conversation, strategy, and project implementation.

This paper provided insights that can be used by organisations and scholars seeking to deploy conversation as a method for accessing and expanding human flourishing and wellbeing in environments where participants or leadership wish to address difficult subjects and topics including identity, race, socio-economic mobility, gender, sexuality, and disability. It is important to note that the use of conversation as a methodology for human flourishing, belonging, and understanding requires a bespoke modification for each conversation and interaction, allowing for collaborative tension. The use of The Lotus Model Process and seven types of conversation provides a way forward for now. The simplicity of using conversation as a method lies in the complexity of its implementation alongside the realisation that curating space for dialogue to take place requires meaningful commitment from all involved.

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