

“Dialogue is a deeply relational process where two modes of relating prevail (Buber, 1958). In our relationships with each other we focus both on the data (I–It mode) to make sense of our world, and at the same time we are open to meeting another in a way that deeply understands their experience as if it were our very own (I–Thou mode).”

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# Effective Group Development

## A Paradoxical Approach for Action Learning Facilitators

By Billy Desmond

I noticed in my role as an OD consultant and faculty member of a practitioner Masters program that experienced consultants often lacked awareness of group development and its importance in ensuring individuals and organizational learning is sustained over time. I also recognised that as a practitioner–researcher I often felt uncomfortable with the linear and formulaic articulation of the action learning process. It does not truly reflect the endeavour we as facilitators implicitly know is deeply relational and contextually bound. In action learning individuals choose to come together in the service of each other, their learning, and the benefit of the organization as a whole.

In my own experience of being both a member and facilitator of action learning, I had a hunch that attending to the group functioning seemed to be a critical factor in terms of the action learning effectiveness and efficacy. When working well it seemed individuals mobilized to informed action benefiting the wider organizational context.

From 2007–2010, I conducted a practice-based evidence research activity with groups who were part of a program for consulting and change and with members within a large charity.

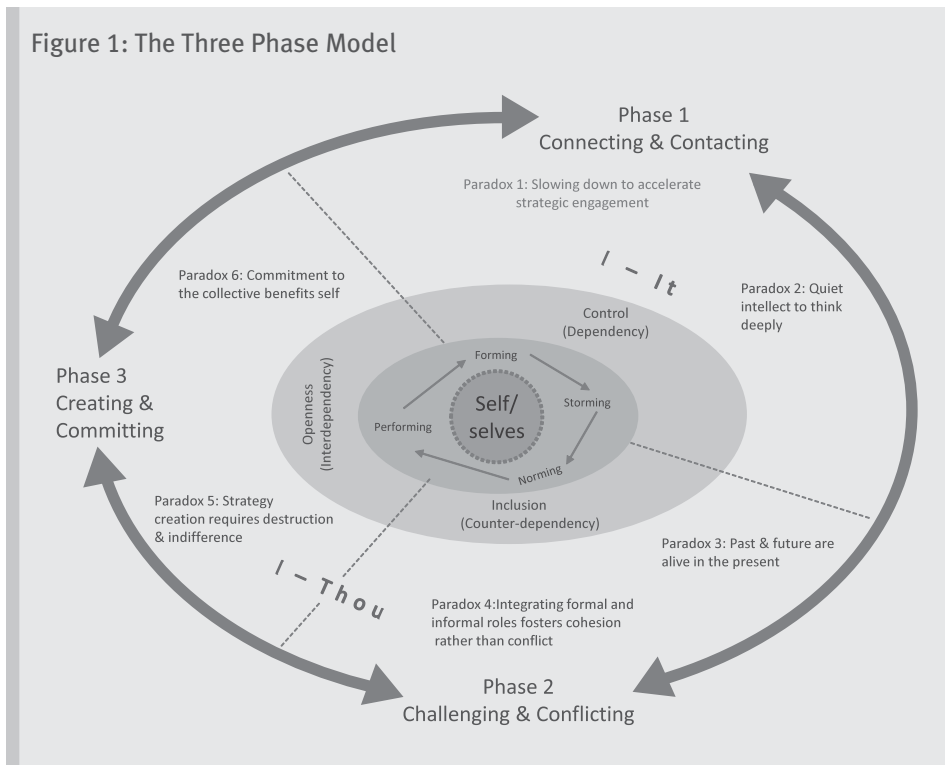
This article shares the findings from the research, outlining how a facilitator may foster the conditions necessary for co-creating a healthy and enriching group development process through each of the three phases of a relational model of group development.

### A Relational Group/Team Development Process

For members of action learning groups, insight, effective decision making, and commitment to action that has honourable intentionality enfolded within occurs through dialogue. Dialogue is a deeply relational process where two modes of relating prevail (Buber, 1958). In our relationships with each other we focus both on the data (I–It mode) to make sense of our world, and at the same time we are open to meeting another in a way that deeply understands their experience as if it were our very own (I–Thou mode). Engaging in dialogue is about ensuring individuals are aware yet cognizant of their role and context to make sense of what is occurring in their organization at the present moment. It is in the realm of a dialogic relationship that people think together, make meaning, clarify intent, and then mobilize themselves and others into action, all the time conversing and changing as they do so.

From my practitioner–researcher endeavour, a three phase group/team development process emerged that can act as a guide for facilitators in fostering, negotiating, and co-creating the conditions for healthy group/team development and dialogic relating in the here and now. This model is not wholly new; it builds on well defined group development theory (Tuckman, 1965; Schutz, 1958; Lewin, 1952) inter-subjectivity (Storlow et al., 1994) and complexity and process thinking (Stacey, 2003). How individuals configure themselves as a group, with others both in and

Figure 1: The Three Phase Model



outside the organization is historically and culturally bound. This model is also contextually and culturally bound.

The model is not prescriptive, but one to use with discernment, depending on the group, its maturity, and the issues or task being addressed.

The three phases are:

- » Phase 1: Connecting and Contacting
- » Phase 2: Challenging and Confronting
- » Phase 3: Creating and Committing

Each phase is interdependent, dynamic, overlapping, and iterative. Attending to these phases requires group members to experiment and relate in ways that are often contradictory and to develop reflexivity to inquire into their own experience. It is the questioning of their deeply held beliefs and assumptions, and reflecting to make sense of these, which helps to maintain momentum and a sense of group growth and learning. *Figure 1* offers an overview of each phase.

### Phase 1: Connecting and Contacting

The first phase is a Connecting and Contacting process. In this phase individuals are encouraged to connect with each other, acknowledge, and become aware of their environment and emotions. Dependency

is encouraged, which is often antithetical for leaders as it is perceived as a weakness. Individuals' ability to make good relational contact with themselves, each other, and the strategic task at hand is a whole field phenomenon and is a function of the person (thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations) and their environment. Some of the rituals of joining a meeting are important both for maintaining patterns of comfort and trust, while breaking routines offers the potential for a different experience of engagement. It is important that time is given for this phase as it is a place where individuals may first start to experience similarities, allegiances, difference, collaboration, and conflict. It builds on the I-It mode of relating where understanding of roles, context, and objectives are required. It initiates the group process of connecting with each other and starts to model a way of relational engagement that connotes the building of trust and a commitment to both the task and the interpersonal process simultaneously. Attention to this phase is required throughout as the nature of the working relationship changes depending on the context. It is the phase that many groups tend to avoid dwelling in as it initiates the movement from seeing the other as an object to a subject where people are inextricably connected in a person to person relationship.

### Paradox 1: Slowing down to deepen and accelerate team connection with the strategic engagement process

A slow, thoughtful, and attentive starting process is required to ensure pace and momentum is maintained to fully engage in dialogue. Individuals in groups need both holding and containment for safety and trust to be built. These are basic psychological conditions that support people to be in relationship with each other. Failure to do this inhibits individuals' capacity to engage in a meaningful dialogue. This evokes a sense of anxiety, where individuals unknowingly seem to take up particular roles of rescuer, victim, and persecutor as a way of avoiding the associated fears, concerns, and isolation. Such behaviour arising from a lack of awareness lessens the energy available to effectively work on the issues of strategic importance. Environmental conditions and emotional factors need to be considered to create the appropriate level of support for engagement to occur.

### Creating a holding and thinking space

By paying attention to the physical environment we are providing a holding environment which contributes to creating a space that feels psychologically safe. Such a place facilitates exploration and risk taking, to engage with the unknown, or the known but unspoken. Consideration must be given to the location, room, layout, and facilities to ensure that the environment is inviting, quiet, and comfortable. The room is set out in a circle of chairs signifying connection and equality, where the facilitator creates the space to agree to issues such as confidentiality, and a dynamic learning contract. We are of and from our environment (Lewin, 1952; Parlett, 1991), engaged in a mutually dynamic process of both shaping and influencing and being shaped and influenced at the same time. Thus, the environment will influence individuals, their experience of themselves, each other, and the mindset brought to the conversation.

### Providing containment for emotions

Containment is a term used by Bion (1962) and described as a process that enables

feelings to be expressed yet contained to allow them to be integrated as legitimate elements of dialogue. It creates the possibility of “good enough safety” that may encourage a deeper and more authentic level of dialogue. Containment is attained by encouraging the group to engage in a conversation to check in and define what is traditionally called their ground rules. An ongoing process of checking in and hearing how members are feeling in the here and now before working on issues builds an emotional awareness and resilience in the group for the inevitable ruptures that emerge.

***Paradox 2: Individuals are encouraged to quiet the mind and attend to their sensory and somatic experience to enable them to think well together***

I noticed that when leaders access with awareness all aspects of themselves in the encounter with others, thinking well together occurred. It is the capacity for developing emotional intelligence that sets successful leaders apart from others (Goleman, 1998). This is the ability of leaders to make strategic decisions based on a felt, gut, intuitive knowing, as well as their intellectual knowing. Inviting leaders to become aware of the whole of themselves; their thoughts, intentions, feelings, sensory experiences, bodily sensations, supports a different quality of connection and contact. I observed that most group members take little time to pay attention to their own thoughts, feelings, and body sensations in the here and now. There are ever increasing demands placed on leaders in fast-paced and changing environments. I noticed that many individuals (sometimes including myself) arrive preoccupied with thoughts from their last conversation, pressing business issues, personal concerns, and anxieties about what to expect. They are physically present but have not quite arrived and landed to be wholly present. There is a sense of not being in their bodies, only in their heads. “Presence involves bringing the fullness of oneself to the interaction” (Jacobs, 1995, p.220), a quality to be developed for addressing business issues well.

Yet, when people converse at the

outset I often experienced a light headiness as intellectualizing was rampant. Inviting members to participate in a focusing activity enabled a different quality of energy to emerge from the group or team as they work. A simple focusing exercise enabled individuals to become aware of thoughts, feelings, and in particular their bodily sensations that they arrived with. This process heightens awareness and individuals feel more present and enlivened for the ensuing task. This process also challenges duality thinking dominant in our business world that has an emphasis on separating experiences such as mind/body, inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion, and individual/team. Attending to the whole person presents the potential for a more ecological way of thinking (Day & Powers, 2010) that includes both somatic-expressive and intellectual ways of knowing at the same time.

In a typical focusing process I would invite individuals to close their eyes and slowly talk people through a process of becoming aware of the rhythm of their breathing, and then invite them to attend to their thoughts and to notice any they are pre-occupied by. They are then encouraged to note these and let them go. Next, people are invited to check what they are feeling and to note this and let it pass. Following this, they are invited to feel the support of the chair and to scan their body and notice any tensions they may be feeling, pay attention to this and name the feeling. As it ends, I invite people to slowly come back to the room and open their eyes and then make eye contact with each person around the room and to note their thoughts and feelings as they do so.

**Phase 2: Challenging and Confronting**

By this phase I observed there was usually sufficient level of connection established among individuals. There is an unconscious intra-psyche robustness that enables both individuals and the group as a whole to ascertain the degree of difference that is tolerable. In Challenging and Confronting, individuals and the group grappled with issues of power, autonomy, influence, control, and authority. The aim is to heighten awareness among members

of their responsibility (i.e., ability to respond) and to explore the mutuality of relationships through explicit or implicit behavioural norms. Individual group members experience dilemmas and tensions such as: a desire to be different yet not wanting to be excluded; a time to own one’s authority while fearful of reprisals; a desire for autonomy while wanting to belong; and competition for leadership to control while remaining a co-equal member in the group.

During this phase individuals are encouraged to challenge assumptions, express difference, voice concerns, questioning each others’ competence and authority, while being reminded of the joint endeavour of a strategic dialogue. From the research I noticed this is a time when anxiety, anger, fury, isolation, vulnerability, and self-righteousness can prevail. Individuals modify their way of relating to avert being excluded or reprimanded for the perceived or experienced differences. Acknowledging such processes as part of a group process legitimizes the inter-personal dynamics and also pre-configures the acceptance and value of diversity as well as similarity. Also, it challenges individuals who have often been rewarded for their individualism, independence, and invincibility with the perspective that we as humans are social meaning making beings. It is the beginning of the group developing a reflexive capacity where previously held assumptions, beliefs, and ways of behaving are examined in the here and now.

***Paradox 3: The past is alive and the future unfolds in the here and now of the present moment***

Memories of the organization’s history, as well as their own personal experience of groups, their personal and professional history and their hopes and aspirations are carried in all individuals. Individuals are a fractal of the whole organization and the context within which they reside at this moment in time. The “lifetimes of heart, mind, and experience” (Wheeler, 2009, p.6) each individual brings to the conversation are part of the situation. I noticed when group members were addressing important strategic decisions

where several, often conflicting views were held, they often appeared to seek simplified solutions for complex issues. I also noticed an apprehension arising in me, a quest for knowing and a rushing that if pursued would result in seeking a premature solution. When I inquired it seemed that familiar patterns of conversations were re-enacted where the leaders escaped into the past or engaged as if the future was already realized. Reflecting on the past is comforting, often engaged under the auspices of lessons learned, but it appears to often be an escape from the reality of today and the responsibility placed upon the group to make choices for the future. It seems that confronting to heighten awareness of their contact quality and ability to connect and interact with new aspects of the context is where meaningful change is achieved. Inviting individuals to speak in the present tense and remain close to their collective experiences minimizes the desire to avoid reflecting on the current issues. Working with “what is” helped unlock novel ways forward.

Facilitating an action learning session with a group from the same organization who were in the midst of a change process, I noticed an increasing anxiety, my stomach churned, my heart seemed to be racing, and I felt a pain of loss experienced as heaviness in my body. The group members were hesitant. I noticed a depressing bodily experience as I listened to their avoidance of working in the here and now. I confronted the group and informed them of what I thought we had co-created. This resonated with much of their experience. Hence, I encouraged the group to stick with the task, the differences that emerged, and the anxiety of not knowing, I instructed that all dialogue was to be spoken in the first person and present tense. The purpose of such language is to firstly add energy and enliven the dialogue. Even though an event may have occurred in the past, the re-telling of the experience and the meaning ascribed in the now will be different from when it originally occurred, hence new learning can be attained. Secondly, it is to model the language of responsibility and ownership and evokes in individuals a heightened awareness of what they are

doing, saying, experiencing, and whether their argument is sufficiently compelling and in the interest of the whole organization or is primarily of self-interest. Once the group experimented with this process, there was an increased awareness of their different felt experiences, where conflict was surfaced and energy for dialogue, while increasing feelings of apprehension, shifted the de-pressing lethargy.

***Paradox 4: Increasing awareness of the multiplicity of formal and informal roles fosters cohesion, rather than rupture and fragmentation in group***

Group members hold a multiplicity of roles both professionally and personally, such as: leader, executive, professional expert, manager, mentor, colleague, friend, partner, parent, and child. In each of these roles, individuals have different sources of power in which they are more or less willing to take up with authority. I frequently noticed and experienced leaders’ limited awareness of the power they hold by virtue of their gender, sexuality, race, class, role, position, and duration in the organization. Sometimes this impacted their ability to question their assumptions and suspend judgement to be open to new perspectives.

It seems for some their identity is so aligned to a particular role that they lack the flexibility and adaptability in choosing with awareness how best they can meet, connect, and remain in contact with another whose views may be polar opposite. When this occurs, they become stuck and may resort to familiar patterns of behaviour and communication such as: talking over each other, delaying decisions, using positional power, reverting to the past, or imagining the future.

Additionally, in groups there are roles (group roles) that are unconsciously taken up and are a function of the group’s needs rather than merely a function of the person’s life context. Every group requires a multiplicity of group roles as well as functional roles to work effectively. Some of the group roles ascribed over time include: intellectual, nurturer, witness, rebel, and artist. The intellectual questions, challenges, and unearths assumptions. Nurturers use emotional language, are outgoing,

caring, diplomatic, and invite others to participate. Witnesses are reflective, observant, and notice how people relate when working together. The rebel is provocative, blocking, resisting, withholding, and retains what is difficult to let go. Artists are energetic, spontaneous, and adaptable; and they may be seen as holding the creative and lateral thinking expertise.

Such roles invoked in individuals, often out of awareness, have a purpose in teams and groups. However, when the roles become fixed and ascribed to a particular individual rather than a function of the group to accomplish their work it can lead to stultified contact, fragmentation of dialogue, and rupture of the relational bond between members. Leaders/ facilitators need to notice and intervene to comment on the process. This may feel risky as it can invoke shame in self or others. Trusting the ability of the group to self organize and adopt a multiplicity of roles while working with this process releases energy. Inclusion of diversity builds internal support among group members where implicit assumptions can be addressed, shame is minimized, and satisfaction is experienced. This has significant benefits when working on strategic tasks as it enables robust, respectful, and expansive dialogue rather than diminishing, avoiding, and manipulating that can lead to poor decision making.

In a local government senior leaders’ session, I raised the group’s awareness around the role of gender, race, sexuality, and hierarchical power and its impact on their organizational issues. I noticed that the absence of attending to the obvious manifested as meandering around issues. Yet, when discussing a sensitive issue the two most senior staff were watchful and cautious. The conversation that ensued was not comfortable but it did unlock energy. There was liveliness in the room when individuals were beginning to inquire into their deeply held assumptions and beliefs about the vestibules of power in the group.

Being curious about the group and encouraging regular review and exploration of group process in the here and now was an aspect of facilitating in this phase of group development. Avoidance inhibited accessing the potential of the whole group,

leading to fragmentation in relationships, limited engagement, and lost opportunity for sense making.

### Phase 3: Creating and Committing

This group development phase emerges when there is sense of interdependency and confidence in each other. It is by engaging with and working through the issues from the confronting and challenging phase that purposeful, thoughtful action is truly realized. The conditions for interdependency are fostered between each other in working with their diverse understanding of the unfolding issues, where difference, conflict, and challenge occurred. Addressing issues of power, roles, and emotions in the here and now of emergent conversations provides the support for taking higher interpersonal and intrapersonal risks required in the creating and committing phase.

This phase conveys a way of relating and conversing that Shaw associates with the edge of chaos concept where “a complex network paradoxically experiences both stability and instability...[and] spontaneous emergence of new patterns of meaning...occur” (2002, p.93).

Here individuals engaged in a process of creating, which denotes that they also destroy at the same time. They are committing to action, which may also mean they will fail or break promises in doing so. It is in this capacity of leaders to live with paradox that new meaning emerges from conversations that both had a direction and none. In this phase the work has energy, pace, and a clear sense of purpose. Individuals experience a felt sense of being on a joint endeavour with a collective responsibility. Persons exhibit a higher level of self-disclosure of their thoughts, feelings, sensations, and intuitions. It is a phase where I–Thou mode of relating is prevalent with individuals open for authentic meeting with others, where new possibilities emerge in their contact. Some core elements of Lewin’s (1951) group dynamics are manifest during this stage, as the group demonstrates a consistency in its work together and takes responsibility for its own progress.

### *Paradox 5: Creating and committing to activity are not one off events but ongoing processes that also involve destruction and indifference.*

Individuals are engaged in generative dialogue as an ongoing co-created process. The group has developed the capacity to contain anxiety, while understanding how difference and sameness create a tension where new insight and actions may be realized. Individuals become genuinely engaged with strategic questions as a lived reality in the here and now of the dialogue, while not being invested in any particular outcome – a process of creative indifference (Friedlander, 1918, cited in Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993). This act of creative indifference requires a letting go, destruction of all the preconceptions, proposed solutions, and surrendering to the here and now, from which new ideas emerge. Such an act is often antithetical to group members and particularly leaders who are expected to be all knowing.

When this phase of group development is dwelled in, issues are experienced by encouraging participation and contribution from various communities both inside and outside the group. Action is taken. Individuals and groups from the wider field are included. Engaging the wider field in a participative process requires individuals and in particular leaders to own their authority, take up the role assigned to them, and at the same time engage in dialogue to co-create meaning that clarifies strategic direction. Commitment to ongoing experimentation in the organization is then required. When something new is tried, such as a different kind of conversation, it disturbs what was there before and creates something different. The difference created is unknown and knowing only emerges in the doing. It requires repetition to maintain momentum, as alongside commitment, disappointment occurs, hopes and promises remain unfulfilled. What differentiates a group functioning at this phase is that they are capable of demonstrating compassion and a commitment to dialogue, particularly holding an I–Thou attitude and way of being and working.

In an action learning session one member of the group (the client) was

struggling with board members and this appeared to be projected onto the group in their work with him. I suggested an experiment, where he selected members of the group to be his board members. I then invited him to sit outside the process and notice what he saw, heard, and felt while all members had a conversation as if they were the board members in the here and now. At intervals, I paused the process for these role participants to share their experience, for observers to say what resonated with them, and then to hear the client’s experience and learning. It heightened awareness of the projection of his insecurity. It enabled the client to exert his autonomy within the I–Thou meeting between him and other group members. He committed to having a different quality of conversation with the board members.

### *Paradox 6: Increased selflessness and commitment to the collective will unlock energy and pledge to action benefiting both self and the organization*

We are continually influencing and being influenced in relationship to others whether we recognize it or not. Stacey and Griffin (2005) inform us that the individual (mind, emotion, and body) paradoxically form the social while being formed by it at the same time. As a facilitator, how I think, feel, and behave will be influenced by members of the group, as each group member will be involved in a process of mutually influencing each other. This provides the opportunity to alter habitual patterns of behaving and conversing that consider the group and organization rather than the parts (my role, power, or division). It requires a reflexive capacity in the unlearning of facts and ideas that leaders already know from the past and requires the courage to venture together into creating and committing to new ways of working on strategic activities. Here, the group members recognize that that can be both autonomous and interconnected, allowing fluidity in the dialogue as they engage in cycles of action, reflection, experimenting, and further sense-making both alone and together. This will require the members to forgo at least momentary “what is in it for me” and to ask the

question “what is in it for us,” our group, our organization, our diverse communities, society, and environment. This shift from attending to inner machinations of the individual and the group to the outer world of multi-various stakeholders unlocks innovative possibilities.

A senior leader was deciding on an issue of national and international significance for current and future generations. Even though the group was aware of its process, I was attentive to my feelings and bodily sensations. I was aware of containing the anxiety of not knowing and the cusp of excitement as meaning emerged. I slowed the group process down, inviting them to attend to the whole of themselves, their experience of each other, and to consider the experiences of external clients and stakeholders to encourage a collective discernment in decision making. Noticing group process at this phase was all the more important, particularly the energy and the decision making interpersonal dynamics. Energy can be squandered in making premature decisions. The “what is in it for us” invites the group to be authentic and to live with the consequences of choices in relationship not only to one ‘self’ but also in relationship to other stakeholders.

## Conclusion

A healthy team/group development process requires a symbiotic relationship between both the individual and collective at the same time. Individuals need to develop the capacity to be flexible, adaptable, and work with paradox, staying with the complexity of situations. Support is required to prevent individuals prematurely engaging in reductionism and simplification of conversations to diminish their anxiety or as a way of being deemed omniscience and omnipotent. This, I suggest is a lifelong skill requiring individuals to have trust in their mind, emotion, and body ways of knowing. It requires courage and strength to live with inherent paradoxes and uncertainty, while holding hope in discerning a way forward of purposeful action; and while remaining aware and sensitive to the economic, ecological, and equality challenges

our organizations face in a world of depleting resources. Importantly, developing this collective discernment capability within the group fosters the movement from a number of individuals engaging on a task to one of a group cognizant of its difference collectively committing to the task. When this capability is developed the whole group moves forward towards coherence as experienced in contact, connection, challenge, creativity, and commitment. This model offers facilitators an opportunity to enhance the learning, by developing knowledge of group development process, supported by dialogue to genuinely inquire into people’s phenomenological experiences of the issues they hold, and inviting reflection, but also importantly, reflexivity.

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**Billy Desmond, MSc, MBA**, is a gestalt oriented OD consultant, executive coach, and gestalt psychotherapist. He is a member of faculty at Ashridge Business School in the UK, working in the Masters in Executive Coaching and Masters in Organisational Consulting programs. His current interest is in exploring an embodied approach to OD interventions. He can be reached at [billy.desmond@ashridge.org.uk](mailto:billy.desmond@ashridge.org.uk).

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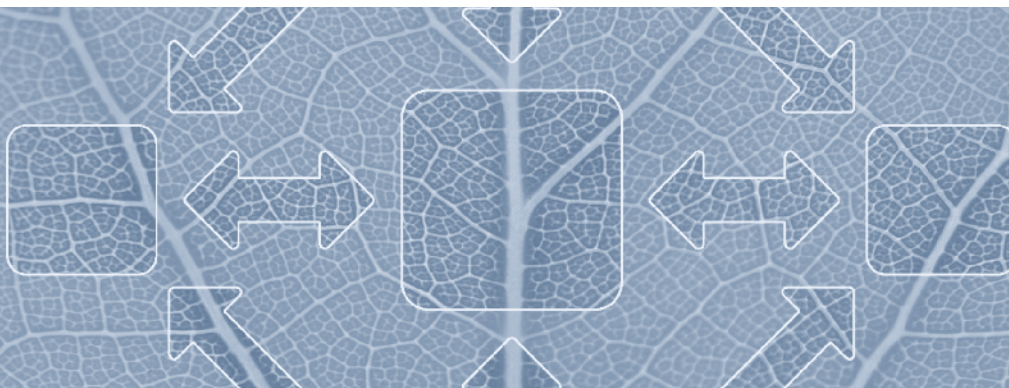
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