

Mediated Dialogue

See Your Way through Change

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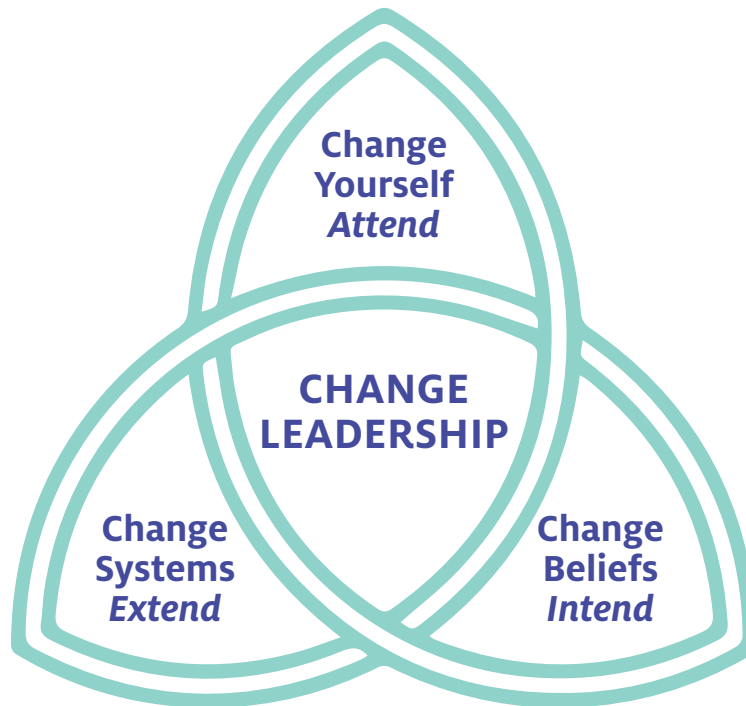
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Cover Photo: Picture from CCL's *Visual Explorer card deck*, a tool used to evoke powerful and revealing dialogue.

Change Leadership Essentials

Changing external structures without first changing internal awareness is mostly folly.
Technical thinking, without conscious awareness, IS the dilemma.

1. **Change Yourself:** *attend* ~ **truth matters**
2. **Change Beliefs:** *intend* ~ **culture matters**
3. **Change Systems:** *extend* ~ **results matter**



This organizational leadership (OL) white paper is the first in a series on the Arts of Transformation, essentials of how-to in our practice of change and transformation. CCL has been a primary pioneer in the practice of change leadership, reforming traditional change methods to be consciously driven through the senior leadership's culture, beliefs, and practices. Our Organizational Leadership Solutions group is also the principle innovator in the new field of leadership strategy.

Our organizational leadership point of view uncovers how consciously and collaboratively building your organization's core capabilities to meet change challenges, requires developing the ability to lead the human side of change initiatives AND manage the operationalization of structural changes throughout the organization. It is a both/and process which ultimately leads to a "change-capable" leadership culture of people aligned to adapt and thrive through endless complex challenges of change, and respond to and implement emerging strategies.

Introduction

In our groups, organizations, and communities, we talk about change.

We initiate change.

We respond to change.

We resist change.

Change is a loaded word.

Change is—almost always—tough.

The beliefs, assumptions, and habits behind how things are done today can be difficult to see and understand. Adapting to change involves some shift in these patterns. Change leadership is about making those shifts. It requires us to have a clear understanding of what is changing and why, and to address barriers to change within society, organizations, groups, or individuals.

While change management takes care of the external aspects of change (the science of projects, communications, and deliverables), change leadership looks after the internal arts of change (the beliefs, vision and imagination that drive motivation and inspiration). In order to balance the technical aspects of change with our human requirements to participate, these arts are needed to achieve the deep dialogue of discovery and learning, collaborative, aligned work across the value chain, and the space and time/headroom to expand, experiment, and grow capability.

The how-to of change leadership—the arts of transformation—are the missing links in most, traditional change-management efforts, but they offer a reliable, unusual way to boost the probability of success.

Leaders and change agents in organizations have a particular challenge of navigating their personal experience of change while, at the same time, making it happen. They are in roles where they must effectively manage the successful implementation of new strategy, structures, systems, or processes and lead others through the ongoing realities of change and transition.

CCL defines leadership in terms of three essential outcomes that take place in the leadership culture's beliefs and practices—Direction, Alignment, and Commitment (DAC)—and we make the case that, collectively, we need new mindsets, skillsets, and toolsets to address the ongoing, complex, interdependent nature of change.

We could write volumes about that single sentence, but this paper is about just one, simple but powerful art of transformation called **mediated dialogue** that can help you see and lead change in new ways.

Mediated dialogue uses thought-provoking, tangible images—visual objects, to facilitate reflective, insightful conversation—and change the way we talk about change.



What is Mediated Dialogue?

Dialogue is a special kind of conversation in which a deeper level of meaning and shared understanding is intended—and required. The use of images can enhance and focus (“mediate”) otherwise difficult conversations.

We often describe the process of mediated dialogue as “*putting something in the middle.*”

Pictures, postcards, photos, even small mementos, become the focus—the thing in the middle—that allows conversations to shift from familiar and predictable to revealing and powerful. Putting images in the middle of the conversation taps into the whole brain, invites interpretation beyond routine facts, and is a very positive way to get different perspectives on the table.

Getting Started

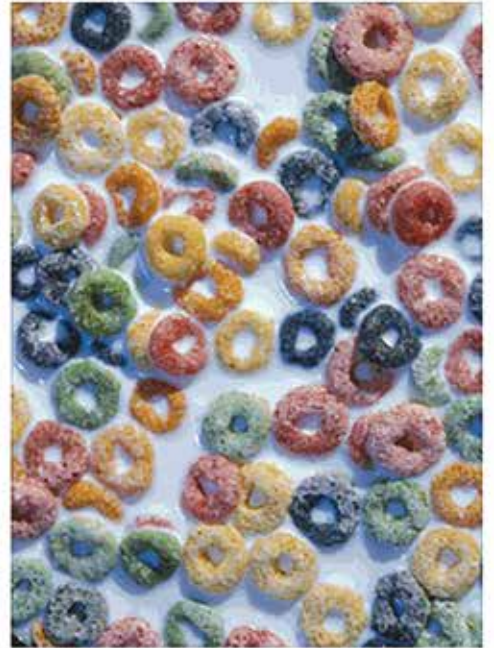
Mediated dialogue begins with each person choosing an image; considering its meaning; and sharing insights, thoughts, and feelings with others. Each image also becomes the focal point for inquiry, observation, reaction, and meaning making by others in the group. The result is greater clarity about a complex or fraught topic and a deeper understanding of the people involved or affected.

This may seem theoretical, vague, or touchy-feely, but we've seen the process work (almost without fail) with people across industries, cultures, ages, and experience. Even the most linear, logical, and pragmatic personalities (think military generals, engineers, scientists, and Type-A professionals) appreciate mediated dialogue as a way to cut to the heart of issues and uncover multiple right answers to daunting questions.

In leading change or dealing with issues that will require change, mediated dialogue helps to surface concerns. It helps people identify opportunities and

obstacles, address unspoken realities, and create shared understanding that will guide the path forward. Such was the case with Memorial Hospital, a regional healthcare center in the United States that was under pressure to transform itself in the face of competition and changing demographics.

CCL was engaged to help the management team create and implement a leadership strategy for the organization. The work began with a multi-day retreat with the top executives and 25 directors. Much of this retreat was about discovery: baseline data gathering and interpretation in support of long-term strategic thinking. In our facilitation, we alternated data feedback and analysis (climate surveys, interview data, and business operations data) with sense making and dialogue. We used **CCL's Visual Explorer** (a packet of 216 diverse and interesting images) to move the conversation from analysis to dialogue.



We asked each person to think about a simple set of focal questions and write in their journals: *What stands out for me in all the data? Where does the data suggest we need to pay more attention as a leadership group?*

Next, they browsed the Visual Explorer images spread around the room. We asked each person to choose one image (privately, silently) that represents what they have just been writing and thinking about. Then, they wrote down what they literally saw in the image, what the image meant to them, and why they chose it.

The mediated dialogue began in groups of four or five. The person who talked first in each group described the image itself, then how it related to the focal questions. Each person in the group then responded to that image, exploring the content as well as possible meanings, emotions, or metaphors. When the first person finished, the next person repeated the process, until everyone in the group had shared their image. The dialogue continued in free form, and we ended the session with brief reports from each of the small groups.

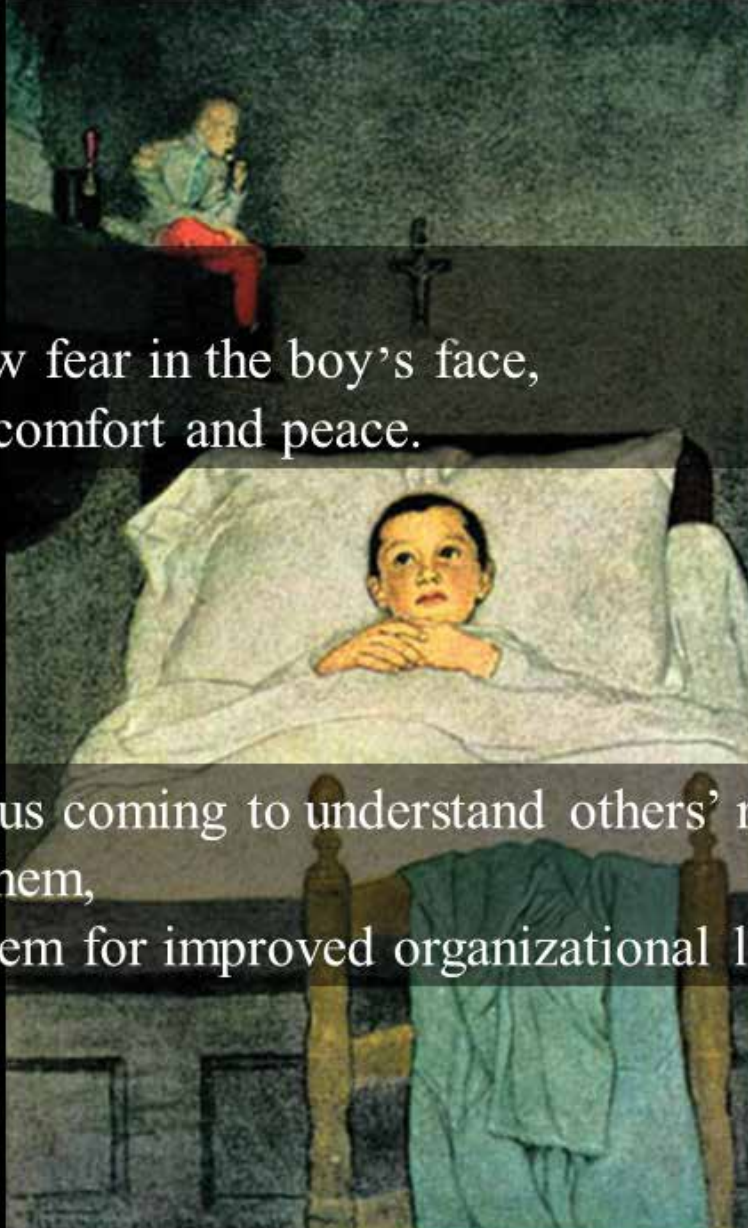
An important theme emerged: fear—many people were afraid of the consequences of not achieving key objectives. Many were afraid of the effects of rapid change and the challenges of increased market competition. Their level of anxiety and defensiveness was high.

The use of the Visual Explorer images helped the topic of fear to be introduced and explored through visual imagery and metaphors, bypassing the awkward and direct conversations that are hard to start by initiating them indirectly through these mediated images that introduce the ideas in a natural, calm flow. For example, one group saw fear in the eyes of an image of a young boy and related this to fear they feel at work.

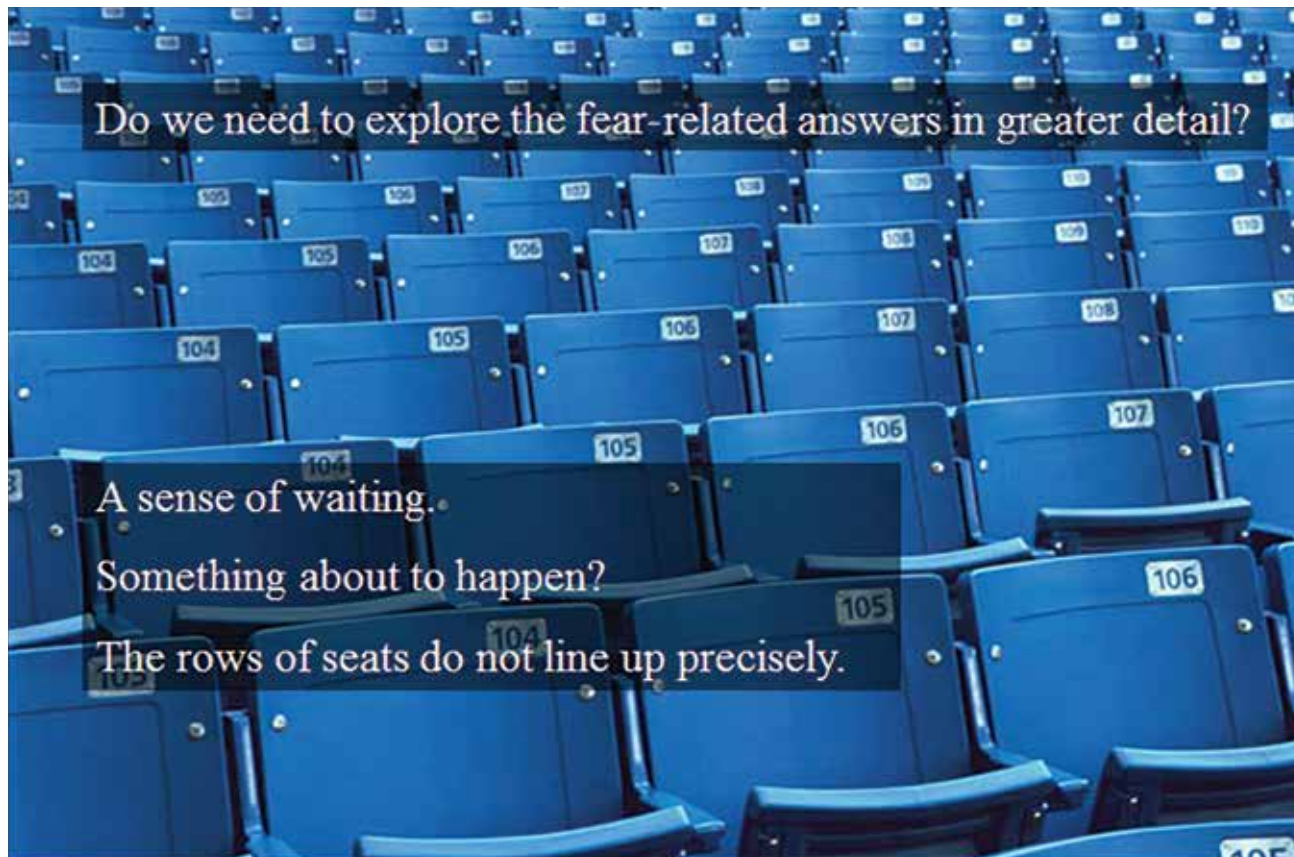
Paradoxes.

My group saw fear in the boy's face,
While I saw comfort and peace.

Difficulty in us coming to understand others' realities
and respect them,
and utilize them for improved organizational leadership.



Another group found rows of empty numbered seats in a stadium to be an ominous metaphor of the possibility for empty numbered beds in their hospital:



Afterward, we created a slide show with each person's selected image, overlaid with a sample or two of related text from the dialogue. These slides were played back to the same group during our next meeting. This reminder re-centered the group around key thoughts from the dialogue as they moved into further reflection and action planning.

More Inquiry, Less Advocacy

Much of ordinary conversation is driven by explicit or implicit advocacy for a particular point of view, and with very little questioning or reflection. *Dialogue* is a kind of conversation that shifts the balance to inquiry.

Instead of conversations and meetings focused on making a case, persuading and deciding, effective dialogue (especially applied to tough, complex dilemmas) is 90% inquiry and just 10% advocacy. The best proportion of inquiry to advocacy changes with the circumstance—but almost always, the inquiry is lacking to begin with. Rather than driving an opinion, dialogue involves collaborative inquiry into these opinions and their underlying assumptions. In this way the group gains deeper understanding, greater clarity, more options, and multiple right answers.

We define dialogue as: Inquiry and Advocacy

- **Inquiry:** question, observe, and reflect
- **Advocacy:** conclude, advocate, and decide

Effective Dialogue

Questions

Ask each other: why, what, how, what if?

Observations

Pay attention to facts, senses, feelings

Reflections

Interpretations, hunches, assumptions, imagination



Decisions

Conclude, advocate, decide

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How Does Mediated Dialogue Help with Change?

In the context of leading change, mediated dialogue proves particularly valuable in what CCL calls the “Discovery” stage. Change leadership begins with understanding the context. Key questions include: *What is the need for change? Will it be evolutionary or revolutionary in nature? What is the scope? What is the urgency? What communities, stakeholder groups, and change agents need to be taken into consideration? Who are the people leading the change? What is the change strategy? What is the level of alignment and commitment?*

The Discovery stage also is a time to explore the change leadership skills of key players. Effective change leaders address the impact of change on

themselves (*How do I deal with change? What is my role as a change leader?*); on others (*How do I understand and respond to the different perspectives, feelings, and responses people have to change while achieving alignment to organizational aims?*); and on the organization and external stakeholders or markets (*How do I lead change in the context of the larger picture?*).

Getting at these collective and individual questions isn’t an easy or automatic process for most people. Mediated dialogue helps people explore, construct, and express their views, and its effectiveness is tied to several factors, including:

- **Mediated dialogue reduces anxiety and defensiveness.** Mediated dialogue can help lower personal defenses (such as avoiding embarrassment or fear of exposure). It also helps counter the organizational-level defenses (i.e., maintain the status quo, don't question the hierarchy, etc.) attempts to block learning, promotes honest discussion, and enables creative conversations. The practice of *putting something in the middle* can reduce perceived threats by temporarily shifting the focus away from the object as the people involved and to the focus as the surrogate “object” in the middle. By engaging a group with an “objective” focus the people can more easily move into subjective territory—that is by using such objects, undiscussables can become more discussable, and individuals can begin to risk deeper engagement with each other about territory they share in common.
- **Mediated dialogue overcomes the awkwardness of “empty space.”** People are given a focal point and a process, which jump-starts conversation. The typical approach to dialogue facilitation involves creating “empty space” for conversation, but in practice that can easily become intimidating rather than inviting and safe. People struggle to come up with the “right” thing to say, or the most vocal person or most authoritative person fills the void and directs the discussion.
- **Mediated dialogue is user-friendly.** Conducting a mediated dialogue session is fairly simple. It does not require a lot of up-front explanation. For those participating in the conversation, the process is easy to grasp and going through the process comes naturally. Almost everyone becomes engaged when they realize that the images are the means to an insightful conversation about a topic that matters to them.
- **Mediated dialogue initiates collaboration.** Images in the middle help people connect across all kinds of boundaries including differences in spoken language and national culture. It helps people connect across organizations and societal stakeholders, hierarchies and functions, expertise and experience, silos and partnerships in order to initiate collaborative, interdependent work processes across the value chain.

How Do I Do It?

Mediated dialogue is extraordinarily adaptable, and can take place in large groups, or small; with people who know each other well and with those who have just met; with detailed planning or to meet an in-the-moment need; in formal or informal settings. We have even seen a blind man participate by hearing descriptions of the images, asking questions, choosing one, and engaging the metaphors verbally and through the mind's eye. In doing so, he lead and shared equally alongside others in the group.

The objective is to enable members to understand a complex topic from a variety of perspectives.

Before facilitating a mediated dialogue session you'll need a selection of postcards, photos, images from magazines. You can use CCL's Visual Explorer or other Explorer tools (see information at the end of the paper). Don't worry about having the "right" images—what matters is having a wide range of choices and then deciding how to frame the discussion.

Think clearly about the change challenge or complex idea you need to address in your team, organization or societal situation, and consider the context of the session. The topic can be almost anything of critical interest to the group. Frame the topic in terms of a question, or a pair of questions such as:

- What are our strengths? What are our weaknesses?
- What is our greatest challenge? What will it look like to solve this challenge?
- What does leadership look like now in our organization/in our city or country? What will leadership need to look like if our change is to be successful?
- What beliefs and behaviors will help drive the change?
- What is getting in our way?
- What stands out in the data we just reviewed?
- What are we missing, neglecting, or underestimating?
- Where have we been? Where are we going? To what do we aspire?
- What problem are we trying to solve? What will our company look like if we solve it?

With the group, you'll want to give a brief rationale for doing the activity; you don't need to describe it as mediated dialogue, simply as a visual thinking tool to help the group look at an issue or a starting point for discussion. Introduce the issue and framing question to the group, give an overview of the process, address questions, and then begin. The process will vary according to your group and setting, but you can follow this basic script:

Write about it. Take a few minutes to think about the question. What's your perspective on the issue? Write down your thoughts—bullet points, journaling, whatever works for you.

Turn to the images. Without talking, browse through the images and choose one that reflects or relates to what you are thinking and feeling about the question. Don't over-think it. If you are drawn to an image and aren't sure why, it's OK. (Depending on the setting, images may be spread around a room, grouped at tables, or placed in stacks for people to sort through. If the group is doing a comparison or paired question, instruct everyone to pick an image for each question.)

Look closely. Once you've selected your image, pay attention to what you actually see. Look at the details. What is there? Write down as much as you can to describe the image.

Talk about it. With your partner, team, or group, describe your image. First tell them what you see. Then talk about why you chose that image. At first, the image is all yours—the others need to simply listen. After a few minutes, you ask others what they see in the picture. Each person will then repeat the process.

Consider So what? and What if? What did you learn from the images and the process of talking about them? How was it helpful? What was surprising? What was commonly shared? What were key differences? What if you used these insights as you addressed the problem or challenge? What will you do now?

If you're working with multiple small groups, allow time for each to share a theme or insight with the group as a whole. Keep track of common themes, thorny issues, and energizing ideas. These become fuel for further conversation and action related to change, and the leadership needed to make change happen.

To keep the conversation and insights going, consider posting images up for all to see during the remainder of the session, in another shared space (physical or digital). Capture images and notes on a slide show or other summary to serve as a reminder of what happened. Allow people to keep the images they chose. Often, they become attached to them as symbols of an important conversation and a guide for the future.

Once the "media" have done their job as conversation catalysts, the ongoing dialogue becomes the carrier of the insights, energy, and method of change decisions and actions. In dialogue, the nature of connection between people shifts from me to us. What before was "listen to my idea" moves to "let the best idea(s) win."

In dialogue, the differences in dilemmas to manage versus problems to be solved become apparent. In dialogue, both/and thinking becomes the norm and everyone gets smarter—together.

Conclusion

In this paper, we've described how pictures or photos are used to mediate dialogue. Much of our experience is in corporate or training environments, with an emphasis on individual and organizational leadership development. But, along with our many CCL colleagues and partners, we've introduced "putting something in the middle" to people in diverse places around the world.

Visual Explorer has been part of youth leadership programs and in schools in the United States, India, Afghanistan, Kenya, South Africa, and Ethiopia . . .

In programs to empower women leaders from Myanmar, Libya, and India . . .

In workgroups and communities dealing with complex challenges such as cross-cultural workplaces, climate change, civil war, agricultural practices, delivering healthcare, and economic development.

When people experience and understand the basics of mediated dialogue, they are able to adapt the process for various contexts:

A team leader who experienced a Visual Explorer session at an annual off-site strategy session replicates it on a smaller scale with his team and returns to the process periodically as the strategy is implemented . . .

A vice president incorporates images into her one-on-one meetings with direct reports that she is mentoring in the succession program . . .

A CEO realizes "putting something in the middle" would help move forward a complex and contentious strategy process on his team. He facilitates a session during a meeting with the board and his team.

The commonality among all these uses or frames for mediated dialogue is change. Something is changing: in our society and communities, in organizations of all sizes and types, in our teams and groups, and in ourselves.

Leading change inherently involves conflict and conversation—and often difficult conversation. These conversations can be made less challenging and more valuable when images are used as a focal point and mediator.



Mediated Dialogue: Try CCL's Leadership Explorer Tools

Leadership Explorer™ tools support creative, more collaborative conversations in leadership, learning, and life.

Visual Explorer is used regularly by CCL to facilitate, or mediate, dialogue. The set of more than 200 photographs and art prints are available in postcard, playing card, and letter sizes.

CCL's Leadership Metaphor Explorer and Experience Explorer may be used in the same way, but with a different focus for the conversation. New to the series are Values Explorer, Boundary Explorer, and Wisdom Explorer.

Learn more about each of the Leadership Explorer tools and how they can help you solve complex problems with creative leadership at <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/tools/index.aspx>

Parts of this article were adapted from:

Palus, C. J. & McGuire, J. B. (2015). Mediated dialogue in action research. In H. Bradbury (Ed.) *The SAGE handbook of action research, 3rd Edition*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications. 691–699.

Suggested Reading

Palus, C. J., McGuire, J. B., & Ernst, C. (2012). Developing interdependent leadership. In *The handbook for teaching leadership: Knowing, doing, and being*. Snook, S., Nohria, N., & Khurana, R. (Eds.). Sage Publications with the Harvard Business School. Chapter 28, 467–492.

Palus, C. J. & Horth, D. M. (2002). *The leader's edge: Six creative competencies for navigating complex challenges*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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