

CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

A Brief Orientation
to
Dialogue

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The Greek roots of dialogue, "dia" and "logos," translate as "through meaning." One might think of dialogue as a stream of meaning flowing among and through a group of people, out of which may emerge some new understanding, something creative. Dialogue moves beyond any one individual's understanding, making the implicit explicit and building collective meaning and community.

Dialogue slows down the speed at which most groups converse by employing deeper levels of listening and reflection. Another important aspect of dialogue is its open-endedness, which requires participants to let go of the need for specific results. This does not mean there are no results from dialogue; quite the opposite tends to be true. However, in releasing the need for certain predetermined outcomes, important issues can be allowed to surface that often go undiscovered in agenda-based meetings. The result is often a deeper level of understanding and new insight.

A final important aspect of dialogue is that it creates a community-based culture of cooperation and shared leadership. It moves groups from the independence, competition and exclusion often found in hierarchical cultures to increased collaboration, partnership and inclusion.

DIALOGUE CONTRASTED WITH DISCUSSION

It is often useful to contrast dialogue with a more familiar form of communication, discussion. Discussion has the same Greek root as percussion and concussion, *discus*, meaning *to throw, fragment, shatter*. Some have likened discussion to an activity where we throw our opinions back and forth in an attempt to convince each other of the rightness of a particular point of view. In this process, the whole view is often fragmented and shattered into many pieces.

In dialogue we are interested in creating a fuller picture of reality rather than breaking it down into fragments or parts, as happens in discussion. In dialogue the point is not to convince others of our points of view. There is no emphasis on winning, but rather on learning, collaboration and the synthesis of points of view.

The intentions of dialogue and discussion are quite different and are contrasted below.

Dialogue

To inquire in order to learn
To unfold shared meaning
To integrate multiple perspectives
To uncover and examine assumptions

Discussion

To tell, sell, persuade
To gain agreement on one meaning
To evaluate and select the best
To justify/defend assumptions

BUILDING BLOCKS OF DIALOGUE: FOUR SKILLS

Rather than a set of rules, you might think of the following as reminders of the level of attention which lies at the core of dialogue: Attention must be paid to our thinking, our feelings, our communication, our assumptions and our judgments. Attention must be paid to the unfolding meaning of the group, the spirit of inquiry and the pauses for reflection that lead to learning and understanding.

1) Suspension of Judgment

Of all the building blocks, suspension of judgment is the foundation for dialogue, and perhaps, the most challenging. Our normal way of thinking divides, organizes and labels. Because our egos become identified with how we think things are we often find ourselves defending our positions against those of others. This makes it difficult for us to stay open to new and alternative views of reality. It is hard to listen when we are engaged in a heated battle about who is right and who is wrong.

When we learn to suspend judgment, to "hold our positions more lightly," we open the door to see others' points of view. It is not that we do away with our judgments and opinions - this would be impossible. We simply create a space between our judgment and our reaction, and thus open a door for listening.

Suspending judgment is also a key to building a climate of trust and safety. As we learn that we will not be judged to be wrong for our opinions, we feel freer to express ourselves. The atmosphere becomes more open and truthful.

2) Assumption Identification

It is probably obvious to most of us that our assumptions play a large role in how we evaluate our environment, the decisions we make and how we behave. Yet, it is just this aspect of our thinking that we consistently overlook when we seek to solve problems, resolve conflicts, or create synergy among diverse people.

Why do we overlook the obvious? Perhaps because our assumptions are transparent to us. They are such a built-in part of our seeing apparatus that we do not even know they are there. We look right through them.

Our failure to look at underlying belief systems can lead to disappointing results. When we examine the underlying assumptions behind our decisions and actions, we reach to the causal level of problem solving. We are able to identify where there are disconnections in our strategies and take more effective actions. By learning how to identify our assumptions, we can explore differences with others, work to build common ground and consensus, and get to the bottom of core misunderstandings and differences.

3) Listening: Key to Perception

The way we listen has much to do with our capacity to learn and build quality relationships with others. When we are able to suspend judgment and listen to diverse perspectives, we expand and deepen our world view. It is the act of listening that allows for integration and synthesis of new insights and possibilities. When we listen deeply we are willing to be influenced by and learn from others.

In dialogue, listening also involves developing our ability to perceive the meaning arising both at the individual level and within the group. What assumptions are we hearing, which ones are shared?

4) Inquiry and Reflection

Inquiry and reflection are about learning how to ask questions with the intention of gaining additional insight and perspective. Through this process we dig deeply into matters that concern us and create breakthroughs in our ability to solve problems.

By learning how to ask questions that lead to new levels of understanding, we accelerate our collective learning. Such questions often begin with "I wonder...", "what if....", "what does xxx mean to you?" As we ask these questions and listen, we gain greater awareness into our own and others' thinking processes and the issues that separate and unite us.

By creating pauses to reflect, we learn to work with silence and slow down the rate of conversation. We become able to identify assumptions and reactive patterns and open the door for new ideas and possibilities.

BEHAVIORS THAT SUPPORT DIALOGUE

Suspension of judgment when listening and speaking. When we listen and suspend judgment, we open the door to expanded understanding. When we speak without judgment we open the door for others to listen to us.

Respect for differences. Our respect is grounded in the belief that everyone has an essential contribution to make and is to be honored for the perspective that only they can bring.

Role and status suspension. Again, in dialogue, all participants and their contributions are absolutely essential to developing an integrated whole view. No one perspective is more important than any other dialogue is about power with, versus power over or power under.

Balancing inquiry and advocacy. In dialogue we inquire to discover and understand others' perspectives and ideas and we advocate to offer our own for consideration. The intention is to bring forth and make visible assumptions, relationships and gain new insight and understanding.

Focus on learning. Our intention is to learn to from each other, to expand our view and understanding, versus evaluate and determine who has the "best" view. When we are focused on learning we tend to ask more questions, try new things. We are willing to disclose our thinking so that we can see both what is working for us and what we might want to change. We want to hear from all parties so that we can gain the advantage of differing perspectives.

This piece was excerpted and abridged from the writings of Glenna Gerard and Linda Ellinor of The Dialogue Group; see <http://www.thedialoguegrouponline.com/>.