

Understanding The Dialogue

In Search of Cohesiveness

Executive Summary

The Dialogue is a process with its roots in the beginning of western civilization with the prehistoric Greeks that is now employed by those who work in the field of Organizational Development to promote a closer relationship among members of an organization, community or enterprise.

Through a strategy that works to improve the quality of communication by removing or mitigating those issues that impede clear and accurate communications by employing rules that support cooperative discussion, with the intention of creating a sense of common understanding. The process promotes a capacity for recognizing differences as assets, wherein participants can find a closer relationship with one another that improves their effectiveness as members of an organization and increases organizational cohesiveness.

The Dialogue Process

Dialogues are usually conducted with participants in manageable groups where everyone can be seen and heard easily and arranged in a circle. The participants, guided by a facilitator, provide their individual view of the elements and ideas that brought them together. By following the simple guidelines of The Dialogue they contribute their unique perception of the common reality in order to construct their collective identity.

The Rules

There are three simple guidelines for those who participate in The Dialogue:

1. Speak from the first person – from one's own experience.
2. The effort to improve one's ability to listen attentively.
3. Suspending our judgment to better understand what is said.
4. Inquiry – to examine the assumptions that support our differences

From these simple rules the participants learn to act inclusively in the processing of information, question their assumptions, and expand their tolerance of paradox and ambiguity.

Inquiry

The final and perhaps most critical characteristic of dialogue is the use of inquiry. Unlike the three guidelines stated above, inquiry is the essential dynamic of any dialogue. Inquiry allows the collective to expose its common characteristics and pursue the notion of inclusiveness, which promotes cohesiveness.

END OF EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Dialogue is a cooperative, collaborative and creative act by the participants in an enterprise that promotes cohesiveness.

Brief History

The origin of the term dialogue comes from the Greek term *dia-logos*, which means “through the word” or how we are known or understand things through the use of “words” or how we talk about the world (the external world) and ourselves (the internal world). Language (the word) is understood as a way of sharing meaning with one another. Hence the expression *dia-logos*, is a way of sharing meaning with one another *through the spoken word*. It is through this essential conversation that we become aware of ourselves in community, as a collective identity.

The Language of Cooperation

Every indigenous society from the time immemorial has at its roots this commitment to recognize the will and nature of the collective, to know not only who I am but also who we are. Dialogue as a practice, from a myriad of different cultural perspectives. The practice, if not the expression, comes from the very earliest human attempts at cooperation. Language evolves out of the need to cooperate and is most effective in supporting collaborative activity. Communities are formed out of the benefits of cooperation; hence, ‘dialogue’ is a cornerstone of any effort to establish human connection and community.

All this is to say that The Dialogue is an ancient human process. It has long fallen from popular use except in indigenous cultures that still have intimate social structures that value the language of cooperation.

The Dialogue is way of communicating with one another when cooperation is our common purpose. For me, it is the language of cooperation because it has an explicit intent to discover and manage our differences. Whenever we cooperate, working together towards a common goal or purpose, we encounter a realm dominated by our differences.

Positive Sense of Difference

There is a sense of difference in every day communications that frequently implies an adversarial relationship. But, by differences, I mean to imply a sense of variety, a diversity that enhances and strengthens whatever collaborative effort we have undertaken. The Dialogue promotes a deeper understanding of diversity as an asset and attribute of the whole as a *collective reality*.

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Revealing a Collective Reality

The most important role of The Dialogue is to reveal the nature of our differences. In The Dialogue, each of us contributes our unique view of this uncharted land by revealing our own point of view, through our prejudices and assumptions. This is how we define the land between us. Dialogue manages our differences by applying guidelines in our communications with one another, by asking us to suspend our judgment and engage in a Socratic inquiry.

From our individual definitions of reality, a detailed view of our *collective reality* emerges. The Dialogue reveals the whole by accepting and being informed by our unique individual reality.

The Dialogue Paradox

The Dialogue has a critical and seemingly paradoxical quality. It supports the notion that both individuality *and* collective responsibility are essential to the creation of community. It confronts the notion that individuality and communal consciousness are antithetical to each other. The recognition that both qualities must exist in a healthy community is an inherent premise of the dialogue.

In everyday communications, *difference* is frequently interpreted as judgment of *right* or *wrong* or *better than*. Difference inevitably results in judgments based on assumptions that never get tested or revealed for what they really are – based on fear, ignorance or misunderstanding. The Dialogue accepts difference as an inherent aspect of holism.

Differences as Assets

The Dialogue is a way of defining our differences, since each participant will make a unique contribution to defining the space that connects us to one another. The Dialogue does not require that anyone should have to compromise his or her personal integrity. In fact, the integrity of the whole is determined by the integrity of each of its parts.

As The Dialogue assumes the existence of the whole, however, it reveals each participant's differences as aspects of that whole, not simply an isolated quality of that individual. Therefore, the essential contribution of participants in The Dialogue is to define their differences, coming first to understanding of their own point of view and then, through listening, to the perceptions of the collective. By taking a holistic view of the collective – rather than seeing it as an assembly of disassociative pieces – they discover a way to make differences an asset, an aggregate of qualities shared by everyone in a cooperative enterprise.

I like to think of differences as an uncharted land that lies between us, an area that separates us, known only from its edges. For example, my view is from where I am, how I know myself, the assumptions I make about the nature of reality. I know – or assume I know – where my difference begins, but I have very little understanding of what lies beyond, the unexamined assumptions that constitute the no-mans land between us, where the knowledge of myself ends and the novelty of your identity begins.

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The Personal Investment

For The Dialogue to be successful, each participant must contribute his or her unique sense of reality. In The Dialogue, each of us contributes our unique perception of this shared reality we call ‘differences.’ As the participants in The Dialogue share their perspective, they give definition to the space between them, each gaining an understanding of the common space they collectively occupy, the whole.

In defining the whole, we resolve the conflicts and inconsistencies. We have the opportunity to question the assumptions that feed and support our conflicts. Only with an honest understanding of our differences can we accurately define our collective reality. The Dialogue allows us to share with one another our individual integrity and experience our contribution as an aspect of the whole. While The Dialogue serves the collective it is predicated on a desire for personal transformation.

Uniqueness Integral to Unity

The Dialogue is a strategy for exploring the immense uncharted land of our differences. By questioning our assumptions, our little known and often-feared differences come into view, exposed for what they are.

The Dialogue also provides a ‘language’ that allows us to manage this *no-man’s land* and define it as ours. This is at the heart of all Socratic *inquiry*, a search for questions that expand our understanding.

We never have to abandon our uniqueness; we simply expose it as an integral aspect of the whole. Each member of The Dialogue becomes a unique aspect of the whole.

Differences are recognized as the diverse facets of a single exquisite jewel. Each difference contributes to the overall integrity of the whole. And each participant discovers the truth of his or her uniqueness as an aspect of the whole.

Exploring Rules of The Dialogue

There are rules for participating in The Dialogue. They are neither many nor complex but it is essential that they be followed if the process is to be successful:

1. Speak honestly from your own identity.

Speaking honestly from your own perspective guarantees the integrity of The Dialogue. A useful guideline is for participants to use the personal pronoun “I” rather than “we” or “us” or “they” or “us” because it includes others who may or may not agree with a personal declaration. The collective consciousness is comprised of the honest and unique identities of the participants. It will be only as valid and honest as the people who constitute its existence. Consequently, a major aspect of The Dialogue is the discovery of our authentic selves.

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2. Listening carefully.

Listening is the most demanding aspect of The Dialogue. It requires a level of attention that we seldom exercise or need in modern everyday life. We want to try and actually hear what someone has said, not what we want them to say. We need to not only hear the words accurately but what the words mean to the speaker. By doing so, we expand our own meaning of what is being said. We have to learn to overcome the impulse to listen to our own thoughts rather than what is being said. This is neither simple nor easy; it takes practice to be good at listening.

3. Suspend Judgment.

The mind is extraordinary in its ability to make judgments; it's what it does best. Our minds are well practiced at making such distinctions and, often, going one step further to interpret differences as right or wrong, good or bad, etc. In order for The Dialogue to succeed, we need to put aside these judgments and treat different points of view as information without assigning them values that block our acceptance. These value judgments have to be suspended, put aside long enough for us to explore these other points of view. One way to suspend the judgments we make is to treat what we hear as information, data that must be collected for its own sake. In short, it is important to overcome the impulse to judge others on the basis of their unique point of view just because it isn't ours.

4. Inquiry.

The preceding three characteristics or guidelines provide the framework or scaffolding that hold a dialogue together as a form. Inquiry is the predicate of a dialogue – the strategy for introducing the dynamic aspects of dialogue. Inquiry serves the impulse towards inclusiveness; the critical examination of assumptions; the revealing of prejudices and the inferences and supports the suspension of judgment. Ask yourself, why do I disagree? Ask first, "What are my assumptions?" Then, inquire as to other assumptions. Inquiry survives on love in which we help one another examine our assumptions.

The Facilitator

The Dialogue requires *facilitation* because the natural conversational habits we all have encourage us to revert to familiar ways of communication with one another. Therefore the obvious role of the Facilitator is to help the participants follow the three rules of participation and promote inquiry, as participants become familiar with the dialogue process. Beyond keeping the rules, there is a need – gently and subtly – to keep participants working together and to keep everyone engaged in the process.

In a sense, the facilitator is an 'advocate' for the collective identity and for the integrity of the group as a whole. A good facilitator is always moving things forward without interfering with its direction.

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Eventually, with experienced participants, the facilitator becomes less and less intrusive as the participants take more and more responsibility for their participation and the integrity of the “whole.”

More Than a Rule-keeper

It would be deceptive to reduce facilitation to ‘keeping rules’ with the Facilitator as an arbitrator of orthodoxy. Successful facilitation requires the development of certain deftness. Rule keeping is only a part of the facilitation process; moving the process along is equally important to the success of The Dialogue.

Let me remind you that The Dialogue has, as its core purpose, the creation of community. It is not so much a problem-solving tool (although problems will arise that have to be solved) as it is a technique for making the consciousness of the collective available to itself. The Dialogue is a process that develops better communication skills that are critical to the building of community, group cohesiveness and stronger, more effective organizations. The Facilitator always has that objective in mind and is responsible for the collective health of the group.

A Living Process

The Dialogue is a discovery process in which the participants are searching for their collective identity and the role each plays in developing the consciousness of their collective or community. Dialogue is at its core improvisational. It is like an improvisational orchestra with the facilitator as conductor.¹

The Dialogue is a living process and recognizes that mastery comes from constant practice. Participating in The Dialogue provides a base upon which continuing growth can be built. Every dialogue is unique; dialogues are never the same because the quality and texture of The Dialogue depends completely on the makeup of the participants and the quality of the facilitation.

Multiple Forces at Play

There are several dominant forces at play when facilitating The Dialogue. On one hand, there is a need to serve the integrity of The Dialogue. At the same time, there is a need to provide guidance in observing the rules of The Dialogue.

Intruding on the process too frequently can slow things to a crawl and turn a spontaneous interactive process into a lecture. On the other hand, without sufficient guidance, the process can easily degenerate into some vague form of *discussion* in an attempt to pander to a lot of runaway egos. There is a calculus between these forces that the facilitator is responsible for mediating.

¹ The facilitator acts as a proxy for the consciousness of the collective until the collective becomes self-conscious and then the facilitator can come another participant.

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Becoming a Facilitator

Moving between these two forces requires a certain agility, like dancing or surfing. And, just as in dancing or surfing, once the basics are in place, continuous practice is the best way to gain experience.

Training to be a Facilitator starts by becoming conversant with the guidelines and, then, learning how to help apply those guidelines effectively within the context of an actual dialogue. The guidelines are fairly simple but applying them to The Dialogue equitably – without supporting your own hidden agenda or in some way attempting to control the outcome – requires a certain finesse. In truth, facilitating the dialogue is more of an artistic performance, somewhat akin to directing a symphony orchestra, encouraging each performer to bring their best to the collective effort while integrating each into a comprehensive whole. This can only be gained with practice and honest self-examination in the context of actual sessions of The Dialogue. Often working with other facilitators in Socratic dialogue will produce a common reservoir of understanding and experiences that benefits the efforts of all.

Creating a Collective Consciousness

I often ask participants in The Dialogue to envision themselves a part of some larger being or personality – that their real existence is larger than the one they are currently experiencing. To describe it, I use terms and phrases like ‘a higher consciousness’ or ‘an identity that incorporates all the personalities in the room, a collective consciousness that they all share with one another.’

Participants are then asked to join in giving form to that larger sense of themselves. The form will be constructed out of their experiences. The process we use is The Dialogue that I have just described. If the rules are followed, participants will see what they create out of their collaboration.

With the experience of being a part of a larger identity comes a new and expanded personal power to dispel our feelings of vulnerability and isolation. We begin to feel that we are *collaborators* and not alone in the enterprise of life.

The notion of a collective consciousness is not as wild-eyed and speculative as it appears on the surface. If a group is comprised of individuals who are conscious then it is not unreasonable to posit that the group could be collectively conscious. The difficulty is in manifesting that quality in certain ways. That is, how could we understand and sense the collectiveness of the group’s consciousness? Could they think together? Could they share their thoughts and conclusions for the common good of all? Could and would they think and act comprehensively? There are lots of things that presently keep us from acting comprehensively, at a level of cohesiveness that would demonstrate an unprecedented level of effectiveness. Collective consciousness suggests a level of intimacy in the collaborative process that realizes a greater effectiveness; one in which the traditional inhibitors to collaboration are greatly diminished.

Dialogue works against the habits that promote isolation and the sense of vulnerability that tends to follow isolation. The preoccupation with the need to be right that narrows the range of options available to the decision making process. The simple shift in thinking towards a full investigation of the available

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options through formal inquiry that allows the group to “hold” a broad range of possible and paradoxical options open for consideration; an egotism that disconnects one from the group.

The guidelines associated with The Dialogue process are designed to help the participants overcome the very impulses and modern habits that tend to isolate members of a collective enterprise. These modern habits of industrial life are not always seen as “bad” or counter-productive. But they don’t always serve the needs of the common needs of the group even though they are often treated as attributes. Being competitive, goal oriented, intolerant of ambiguity, fearful of diversity (differences) and driven by efficiency are all qualities that have a place in the corporate culture. And even if we might not admire them in others we know that they often serve individual success.

Accepting Diversity

We (I) often disagree with our (my) enemies but the lack or presence of compassion invokes a level of judgment that seems at this point inappropriate. Anger and encompassing feeling of ill-will and negative assumptions (as well as other negative responses) often get swept up in our (my) response to a view inconsistent with the one we (I) currently hold. All of this is within the desire to be "right" or to affirm a personal world view that supports my very identity. Therefore, can mean or symbolize a threat to my very existence not just my ideology or spiritual cosmology. I can easily become embroiled in deeply held, even subconsciously maintained, ideas and assumptions that I honestly consider "reality" but never question or consider openly.

I am not always capable of sorting this out for myself, or the groups I facilitate, but I do this work to get at these issues through inquiry. So first I have to reveal what inquiry is as a practice within dialogue. First I try to look at the assumptions within my own reasoning that support my "world view". What is real as experience and how much is assumption contributed by the natural cognitive process to substantiate experience with mind created or retrieved thoughts or ideas. (Sounds great but is infinitely more complex if we are to believe the neurophysiologists) So I turn to my colleagues in the dialogue to help me look at what is assumption and what is experience. (I play this role for others when I am facilitating.) Not to discard either but to gain a better understanding of my contribution to the conflict of ideas and assumptions that we are confronting. Often this effort is intertwined with a similar effort on the part of my opponent (hopefully). They are also trying to see where and why we disagree and gain a better understanding of our discontinuities.

Inquiry, by my understanding, is the effort to reveal and examine our assumptions with the intention of gaining a better understanding or higher level of consciousness of our different sense of reality, not to ameliorate them or deny our essential integrity but to raise our consciousness about our differences. Inquiry presupposes and accepts differences, often passionately held, as critical and essential to a diverse worldview. Dialogue is an effort to accept those differences (and sadly, often the behaviors they generate) as unavoidable and an aspect of the very nature of the universe.

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There is another element to dialogue that is seldom talked about and only obliquely referred to in previous posts. That is the notion of agape, the force that holds the collective together - our love for one another. The brain even substantiates this sense of empathy in the mirror neuron constructs and behaviors. For me, a sense of affection, which is irrational and often difficult to maintain is critical to Dialogue (as I practice it) and demand most of my attention as a facilitator (and participant). I'm trying to understand my self, to be self conscious of my bias and prejudice that I hide from myself in my assumptions. No other practice works as well.

We can have differences and even act differently out of our differences and still understand and even accept our common relationship as human beings with common goals and ambitions that transcend our differences. We might find even value in our differences if we could only understand them as aspects of a diverse reality rather than opposed worldviews.

Dialogue (as I practice it) is a search for greater understanding and a higher conscious relationship with a diverse world, not a moral struggle or an ethical pursuit. It is a search for inclusiveness in a world increasing intolerant of diversity. It most assuredly is not a search for consensus. I might also add that violence in thought or action (behavior) is a symptom not a cause. Let's address the causes first.

Learning Organizations

There is a big difference between individual success and organizational success. In the words of R. Buckminster Fuller, "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts." Organizational success is comprehensive and far exceeds the aggregate of individual successes, and that does not imply the suppression of the individual effort. Dialogue promotes the integration of the individual effort into the comprehensiveness of the whole. It promotes cohesiveness and the capacity for self-consciousness. And only self-conscious organizations can learn.

For over a decade the holy grail of Organizational Development has been the creation of the "**Learning Organization.**" Peter Senge defines a fifth discipline for the so-called "learning organization", is David Bohm's notion of dialogue. Literally, an organization that is capable of learning is also capable of transformation. So high that it would be able to transform itself in response to changes in its environment. Not just able to develop new products and capture new markets but capable of consciously reinventing itself. The Learning Organization would have to be thought of as more organic than mechanical, able to integrate experiences and capability into reality – it must be able to think as a precursor to learning with learning as an act of transformation that requires self-consciousness. **Dialogue** as defined in this document is a process that can result in an organization that learns with constituents that learn.