

## Practice of Dialogue

*Suppose we were able to share meanings freely  
without a compulsive urge to impose our view  
or to conform to those of others and without distortion and self-deception.  
Would this not constitute a real revolution in culture?  
-- David Bohm, *Changing Consciousness*, 1992*

"Dialogue" comes from the Greek "dia-" = "through" and "logos" = "the word, the meaning." David Bohm suggests the original meaning of dialogue was "meaning passing or moving through . . . a free flow of meaning between people in the sense of a stream that flows between two banks."

In this sense, dialogue stands in contrast to discussion, which comes from Latin "discutere" = "to smash apart." English gets "concussion" and "percussion" from the same root. Many discussions are closer to advocacy battles than processes of consciously sifting through and examining different perspectives. However, "skillful discussion," using inquiry skills and collaborative reflection, is an excellent tool for coming to agreement, making decisions, and the like.

As William Isaacs writes in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, "In skillful discussion, you make a choice; in a dialogue, you discover the nature of choice. Dialogue is like jazz; skillful discussion is like chamber music."

Dialogue is also different than debate, which comes from Latin "dis-" = "apart, against each other" and "battere" = "to fight, beat." Please see [Dialogue and Debate -- One Comparison](#) from the CIP Knowledge Web.

Dialogue is a central discipline for organizational learning because it facilitates collective thinking, learning, and communication. It is not the only useful conversational practice, but it's an essential one because it is so different from our usual habits of thought and communication.

Dialogue creates the opportunity for coherent, collective thought instead of fragmentation, because it is a way to step back and consciously *notice* how we are thinking and feeling. Then we can begin asking questions about the deep sources of those thoughts and feelings.

- What are our deeply held beliefs?
- What are the assumptions from which we're operating?
- What are our mental models of what's going on and being considered, and where did those models come from?
- What images and metaphors pervade our language?
- What is happening inside us as well as in the team or group?

- Are we even looking at the same data?
- Are we thinking in the moment or from memory or projection?
- What is the quality of our listening -- to ourselves and to each other?
- What is the collective field and meaning we are creating together?

In Dialogue we slow down the action so we can *observe* it and understand more clearly how we create meaning individually and collectively.

Theoretical work on Dialogue during this century comes from three main sources. Martin Buber used the term in 1914 to describe a mode of exchange between people in which there is a true turning toward and a full appreciation of the other as a genuine being. In the 1980s psychologist Patrick DeMare suggested that large "socio-therapy" meetings could help people understand and alter the cultural meanings within society and thus help heal mass conflicts. Physicist David Bohm focused on the nature of thought and suggested that collectively attending to the process of thinking as it arises would help surface our tacit assumptions, opinions, rules for managing differences, and the like.

## **Generative and Strategic Dialogues**

Some Dialogue practitioners make the distinction between "strategic" and "generative" dialogues. In both forms we release on the need for outcomes and instead engage in collective inquiry and the process of meaning making.

A strategic dialogue has a topic or focus. Its purpose is to explore that topic and the underlying assumptions we hold about it. It's not to make decisions or choices but rather to listen for deeper understanding and insight, which may lead to further inquiry.

It begins with "double-loop" learning in which we are surfacing and inquiring into the mental models we hold about the topic. As we examine our assumptions, values, and reasoning behind our actions and choices, and explore the ways we reason defensively (in response to perceived threats), we begin to understand how our thinking and feeling is shaped and filtered.

A generative dialogue has no topic or focus. All material arises from the group, in the moment. Its purpose is to learn about the processes of thinking, feeling, and dialogue themselves.

It begins with "triple-loop" learning in which we are going further to become more conscious of the context from which assumptions and beliefs arise. As we observe thought in action, we can observe how we are making our observations

and even ask who is observing? We are inquiring into the nature of thought itself.

## **Dialogue Building Blocks**

In Glenna Gerard and Linda Teurfs' work with Dialogue, they have identified four building blocks or overlapping and interwoven sets of skills:

- suspension of judgment
- identification of assumptions
- listening
- inquiry and reflection

## **Surfacing and "Suspending" Judgments and Assumptions**

A key practice in Dialogue is surfacing and then "suspending" assumptions and judgments. "Suspend" comes from Latin roots that mean to "hang up," like hanging clothes on a clothesline. Suspending assumptions and judgments is not putting them in abeyance, but rather holding them up in front of us for conscious examination and exploration.

How often are we mindful of the assumptions and judgments from which we operate, make choices, and act in the world?

In Dialogue we begin to see others' points of view and become more open to new ways to perceive and think about the situation. We realize our judgments about how we think things are is not necessarily the "truth." Each person's comments are seen as "true" in their own right, and our challenge is to see how they fit together into a coherent pattern.

In exploring our underlying beliefs, assumptions, inferences, and generalizations, we can begin to explore our differences with others and discover where there is common ground.

## **Listening**

Listening is essential to Dialogue, not just to others but also to ourselves and our inner processes. This goes far beyond basic active listening for understanding to deeply reflective and mindful listening.

The Chinese characters which make up the verb "to listen" tell us something important:



As Krishnamurti reminds us in ["Listen..."](#) we can truly listen and learn only when we are giving someone (or something) our undivided attention.

In Dialogue, we also listen for the larger meaning that is emerging from the honest, open sharing among our different perspectives.

### **Inquiry and Reflection**

In Dialogue, we ask questions to reach new levels of understanding. We inquire together to make our thinking processes visible to ourselves and others, rather than assuming that we automatically know what is meant or intended. We inquire to learn, rather than to make points or to confirm our own assumptions. We inquire from a place of genuine curiosity and wondering. Focusing on penetrating questions opens the way for seeing things with new eyes. As Sherrin Bennett and Juanita Brown write, "*Inquiring* into our most critical challenges and simultaenously *noticing* the way we think about them has the potential to yield insights which neither can do alone."

Reflection is also necessary for learning and creating meaning. We step back and look again at what is happening, how we think about it, and what it means to us now. We learn to work with silence and slow down the conversation so we can pay attention to our internal processes and patterns. Reflection allows us to turn things over in creative ways and improve the quality of our thinking together.

### **Shift Happens**

Dialogue requires shifts in how we are and how we relate to others and the world. As William Isaacs points out, we must shift from:

certainty to uncertainty  
arrogance to humility  
competence to vulnerability  
knower to learner

hearing to listening  
foreground to background  
fragmentation to wholeness  
disembodied observer to mindful participant

As thought is attended to and observed, it changes. The challenge is how to attend to how we know, think, feel, and act collectively. Dialogue creates a setting for where we can practice collective mindfulness.

### **Some Resources on Dialogue**

"Dialogue: The Power of Collective Thinking," by William Isaacs, in *The Systems Thinker*, April 1993, included in the printed *CIP Readings*. It includes some good examples of the use of dialogue in organizations.

"Taking Flight: Dialogue, Collective Thinking, and Organizational Learning," by William Isaacs, in *Organizational Dynamics*, Autumn 1993

"Dialogue and Organizational Transformation," by Glenna Gerard and Linda Teurfs, in *Community Building: Renewing Spirit & Learning in Business*, New Leaders Press, 1995

"Mindshift: Strategic Dialogue for Breakthrough Thinking," by Sherrin Bennett and Juanita Brown, in *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace*, Productivity Press, 1995

"Dialogue: Capacities and Stories," by Judy Brown, in *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace*, Productivity Press, 1995

Sections 52-56 in the "Team Learning" chapter (pp. 351-385) in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*, by Peter Senge, Charlotte Roberts, Richard Ross, Bryan Smith, and Art Kleiner, Doubleday, 1994. Section 55, "The Cauldron," is a participants' account of the use of dialogue to explore intractable differences between labor and management at GS Technologies, a steel manufacturer in Kansas City.

"On Dialogue," by David Bohm, David Bohm Seminars, 1990

"Learning From Online Dialogue," by Greg Kramer and Terri O'Fallon, sent to all CIP members via e-mail, August 1996