

Dialogue Fundamentals

What is Dialogue?

Dialogue is distinct from how the word is commonly used to signify debates, discussions, negotiations, and formal presentations with questions and answers. Dialogue is a conversation in which people with various and often conflicting beliefs, values, and perspectives listen mindfully to each other, ask questions to elicit more information rather than to make a point, experience how to include differences, negotiate their social identities, find common ground, and move forward with their own personal growth and work with others to effect social change. Dialogue is a conversation that allows for the transformation of inter-personal relations that can lead to a new shared understanding of and a process for changing a complex societal problem.

Important for a Dialogue

1. Have a clear intention and purpose for the dialogue, e.g., we are coming together to have conversations that matter about the issues that are most important to us. For example, we are coming together to identify how the recent bias incident affects us and what we can do to prevent and deal with such incidences in the future.
2. Pose strategic questions that foster open sharing and focused listening. Strategic questions usually invite participants to:
 - Share their own experiences of a topic and how it has impacted them rather than stating their positions about a topic.
 - Hear information about each other and focus on what each person brings to the group rather than label each other and debate each person's beliefs and opinions.
 - Hear how they are similar and different.
 - Hear information about a topic that may contradict what they believe.
 - Share their assurances and doubts about their own beliefs and positions.
 - Share what is meaningful for them and what they are trying to achieve in their life, work, and society.
 - Gain an understanding of the complexity of a topic and the complexity of other people.
 - Decide upon action that is based on a deeper understanding of a topic rather than just opinion or assumptions about the topic.
3. Establish a safe space where the participants can feel assured that they will not be attacked; they will have the opportunity to risk sharing what they believe and value; and they can talk about difficult issues and conflicts.
4. Encourage the participants to stay curious about each other and stay present to what is happening in the group.

5. Trust the intelligence and wisdom of the group; insights will flow from individuals and ways to move forward will emerge in the group.
6. Foster a process that diverges and converges. The process involves opening possibilities, appreciating many perspectives, experiencing fragments moving to connection, listening for challenges to those connections, recognizing the convergences that emerge; and remembering that chaos is another form of order.
7. Utilize sitting in a circle to encouraging people seeing and hearing each other.

Key Operating Principles for a Dialogue

- **Be willing to have a conversation** rather than make an appeal for one side or the other.
- **Commit to listen** and not to change another person; to understand and not necessarily to agree; to also hear the resistance in the group and hear what can be learned from that resistance.
- **Acknowledge different understandings** of self and other, dignity, integrity, purpose, security, values, beliefs, agency, and who is included/excluded, who to trust, and what is just.
- **Recognize** that social identities and conflicts are collective constructions informed by narratives that people use to differentiate themselves.
- **Move to Action** by finding uncommon ground where the conversation continues and each of the participants moves to action not out of rejection of others in an attempt to assert their particular goals or group identity but out of a different understanding of how other groups, the conflict situation, and they and their own group are perceived, and a willingness to negotiate shared goals that may be outside their individual and group narratives.
- **Reconstruct Relationships** within one's own group and with other groups that can operate with differences and complexity. At the same time gradually reconstruct the beliefs/assumptions, feelings, and behavior that have contributed to fostering prejudice and conflicts.

Working Agreements for a Dialogue Session

Dialogues also benefit from working agreements that the participants commit to follow and the facilitator refers to in order to foster mindful listening and full participation in the group.

Working agreements contribute to establishing the dialogue as a safe space. People have a frame in which they can speak with the likelihood they will be heard and can begin to trust that others will behave in a similar way. The facilitator can also refer to the working agreements when someone is dominating or disrupting the group.

Common Working Agreements

- One person at a time speaks
- Speak for no more than three minutes
- Pause between speakers and before going on to the next question
- Listen to understand and listen with resilience—listening even when you hear something that is hard to hear
- Do not interrupt another speaker except to indicate you cannot hear the speaker
- You can “pass” if you are not ready to speak

Typical formats of a Dialogue: The Five Phases

For a newly formed group to discuss a particular social issue using a focusing process

1. Gather In

The facilitator explains the working agreements and invites the group members to go-around and one at a time introduce themselves to the group. The following are examples of questions that can be asked of the group members:

- What is your name and
 - What is something you would like the group to know about you?
Or
 - What is your interest in this topic?

Then:

- What is something you hope to take away from this conversation?
Or
- What will contribute to your feeling this dialogue was worthwhile?

2. Focus the Dialogue

There is a speaker or panel presentation, a reading, short film, role play, newspaper article, short description of the situation/topic, or photograph/image presented to focus the conversation.

3. Connect with the topic: What is my experience of... (One or two go – arounds)

Sample Questions for responding to the introductory reading, film, etc.

Initial question for first go-around

- What caught your attention and why
Or
- What do you identify with... and how have you been affected personally by this topic?

Second go-around

- When did you wake up to this topic being important to you? What was happening for you at that time?
Or
- How does your experience with this topic affect the way you interact with others and what you assume about them?
Or
- How does this topic influence the work, social, and personal choices you make for yourself?
Or
- What are your particular beliefs and perspective about...

4. Connect with others: What is our experience of...(an open discussion)

Remind the group of the Working Agreements, especially the three minute agreement.

Sample Questions to stimulate an Open Conversation

The following questions can be asked in the order they appear.

- What have you heard that has stirred some feelings for you?
- What are some of the themes you heard in what people have said?
- As you experience this topic and what others have said are there things you are uncertain about or conflicted about?
- What are the “grey” areas for you about this topic?

Participants can also ask questions of each other and ask to have something explained.

Half way through the time for open discuss, the facilitator can ask:

- What can we say are the various perspectives on this....?
- What and who do we think are influencing thiscontinuing?
- If this situation does continue what do we expect will be the outcome?
- What would help change this situation?

The facilitator may want to capture the comments on flip chart paper as the participants speak. This will help people to stay focused on the conversation. There could be separate flip chart sheets for: “perspectives on the situation,” “factors influencing the situation,” “concerns,” and “options” (see Howard, et al., 2005).

5. What does this mean: So What?

Sample Questions for a go-around

- How has your perspective on the topic changed?
- What more do you need to know about this topic?

Or

- Based upon what we have said today, what do you think is most important to do?
- What will you do as a result of this conversation?

Additional question that could be used

- How did you think you contributed to this dialogue?

For an Ongoing Group to Discuss a Social Issue

1. Gather In

The facilitator explains the working agreements and invites the group members to go-around answering the two following questions:

- What concern(s) are you bringing into the group today that you need to name in order to be present to our conversation?
- What is something you hope to take away from this conversation?

2. Connect with the topic: What is my experience of (the topic)(One or two go – arounds)

Sample Questions

- How have you been affected personally by this topic?
- How does your experience with this topic affect the way you interact with others and what you assume about them?

Or

- When did you wake up to this topic being important to you? What was happening?

Sample Questions if the group wants to talk about social identity issues: race, gender, class:

First round

- What are some key events in your life story that helped shape who you are?
- Or
- When did you first become aware of how other people perceive you? And how did that relate to how you saw yourself?

Second Round

- How do you experience the group you identify with being misperceived by others?
- What do you wish others knew about the group you identify with?

3. Connect with others: What is our experience of...(an open discussion)

Remind the group of the Working Agreements, especially the three minute agreement.

Sample Questions to stimulate an Open Conversation

- What did you connect with in what other people said?
- Or
- What have you heard that has stirred some feelings for you?

The following questions can be asked in the order they appear

- What are some of the themes you heard in what people have said?
- As you experience this topic and what others have said are there things you are uncertain about or conflicted about?
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4. What does this mean: So What?

Sample Questions for a go-around

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- What more do you need to know about this topic?

Or

- Based upon what we have said today, what do you think is most important to do?
- What will you do as a result of this conversation?
- What is something important you will take away from this conversation?

Questions for the ongoing life of the group

- What challenges do you anticipate as you communicate what you learned here to the people or networks with whom you tend to discuss these issues? How do you think you can deal with those challenges? What kind of support would be helpful and from whom?
- What support would you like from others in this group to achieve what you want to do?
- What topics or questions would you like this group to address at the next meeting?
- If this is an ongoing conversation about one topic: what aspect of this topic do we want to pursue next time? [At a later meeting they could have a group conversation about what action they want to take as a group]

Another possible group process could be to pursue a participatory action research project to deepen their knowledge about the topic and build connections in the community. Then, the members of the group bring the result back to the group for analysis, deeper conversations about the topic, and action planning.

Facilitating

A Facilitator:

- Is a guide to help people move through a process together, not the source of wisdom and knowledge. That means a facilitator is not there to give opinions, but to draw out opinions and ideas of the group members.
- Focuses on *how* people participate in the process of learning or planning, not just on *what* gets achieved
- Is neutral and rarely takes sides
- Helps a group clarify its goals, each person's role, the process that will be used, and guidelines (working agreements for interaction)

Important skills for a facilitator

- Stay curious and deal with every event in the group as an opportunity to learn
- Listen rather than focus on yourself
- Listen for common ground, themes, the unspoken, and the power positioning in the group
- Pay attention to the needs of the group
- Have a sense of process/progression for the conversation (the advantage of strategic questions)
- Maintain a safe space
- Help the group stay focused: summarize what you have heard, use the flip chart to gather comments; use the meeting agreements; use a “parking lot” for suggestions/concerns that can be discussed later
- Help to distinguish and synthesize comments and ideas; I hear you (or us) saying...
- Make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak
- Intervene when someone is attacking another member of the group
- Check assumptions, your own and others
- Watch for:
 - Agenda questions—people asking questions as a way of getting their ideas and objectives into the group discussion
 - Comments/judgments disguised as “helpful advice” or summaries of what has been said
- Avoid Triangulation
- Watch for deflections: changing the topic, talking something to death
- Hold the anxiety of the group rather than giving into it
- Instead of reacting to something that happens in the group, reflect then respond

Sources of Dialogue Techniques

Bojer, M., Knuth, M., & Magner, C. (2006). *Mapping Dialogue*. Johannesburg, SA: Pioneers of Change Associates.

Herzig, M., & Chasion, L. (2006). *Fostering Dialogues Across Divides*. Watertown, MA: Public Conversation Project.

Howard, P., Galarneau, T., Perez, J., & Shaw, D. (2005). Integrating Open Space Technology and Dynamic Facilitation. *Participatory Learning & Action*, 53, December, 2005, pp. 68 - 73

National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation <http://ncdd.org/>