

What is dialogue? Some perspectives...

Dialogue: roots are the Greek words *dia* and *logos* meaning “through” and “words” or “meaning”, perhaps flow of meaning.

Chris Argyris; from his work in organisational learning

A set of “interaction practices” he calls “model II skills”, including:

- actively inquiring into others’ views and the supporting reasoning
- advocating one’s own view and reasoning in a way that encourages others to inquire into it
- publicly acknowledging inferences and the data on which they are based so that others may probe the validity and relevance of them

Dialogue is balancing advocacy and inquiry, where advocacy means speaking what you think, speaking for a point of view, and inquiry means looking into what you do not yet know, what you do not yet understand. It also means seeking to discover what others see and understand that may differ from your point of view.

Nancy Dixon; Dialogue at work

- Dialogue is developmental, it is a learning conversation, a conversation in which people come to a new way of perceiving a situation and make new, previously un-noticed connections.
- Dialogue affirms the person-to-person relationships between those involved in the conversation and acknowledges their collective right and intellectual capacity to make sense of the world. Dialogue has the potential to alter the meaning each individual holds and, by doing so, is capable of transforming the group, the organisation, society.
- Participants in dialogue make manifest that which has been taken for granted, hold assumptions up for examination and, when warranted, construct new joint meaning which they test with reasoning.

“Dialogue is a relationship...I seriously question whether more technique is necessary”.

Deborah Flick: From debate to dialogue, the understanding process

Dialogue is a process where you seek to understand the other person from their point of view, to walk in another’s shoes. It’s a conversation where the stance is curious and open and the focus is “What’s new? What’s of value? What can I learn?” and “staying with our differences”.

The goal of dialogue is to understand the other person from their point of view, whereas the goal of other forms of conversation is to win, to be right, to sell, to persuade, to convince.

William Isaacs; Dialogue and the art of thinking together

Comparing dialogue and discussion: Discussion is “about making a decision”; it seeks to close off alternatives, to achieve an end. Dialogue is “about exploring the nature of choice”; it seeks to open possibilities, to see new options and to select amongst alternatives.

Isaacs distinguishes between two forms of dialogue:

- Reflective Dialogue, which explores underlying causes, rules and assumptions to get to deeper questions and framing of problems; and
- Generative Dialogue, which enables unprecedented possibilities, new insights and a re-ordering of knowledge

Dialogue so much more than a “better conversation, it is “a conversation with centre, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channelling it toward something that has never been created before.”

“Dialogue is a conversation in motion”

Amanda Ridings; from writings that might become a book

Dialogue is, fundamentally, about communicating, about listening, about seeking to understand, about speaking your own truth in a way that acknowledges the different way that others will see or experience things. It’s about “roomy” conversations, conversations with space enough to breathe, to think, to be silent, to respect difference, to select words that convey your intent as well as you are able, at that moment, in those circumstances.

At its heart, dialogue is about finding ways to keep a conversation open, exploratory, alive and present, with engagement and participation from all the people that need to be included in the conversation. It tends not to be a conversation in a hurry; it’s a conversation that evolves, that grows through a sense of connectedness between the people involved. The conversation is “held” collectively by the participants; there is no-one chairing, facilitating, managing or leading. When the conversation completes, there is often a palpable shared sense that what needs to be said has been said, heard and included. Nothing more needs saying and the conversation is, in some way, “resolved” as a piece of classical music resolves in its conclusion. There can be a moment of stillness, as if something that has been in gentle movement has now come to rest.

I have a sense that dialogue has a rhythm that can’t be forced. You may set out to engage in an open conversation, a dialogue, about an important issue, and yet be constrained by time, space or circumstances into a debate, a finely honed argument, a discussion or a quick exchange where a “deal” is done on what is required to meet the needs of the situation, the organisation or the boss.

Although you may have missed an opportunity to get a better shared understanding of the issue (which might have felt good), it may be that the conversation that took place and the result that was agreed was fit-for-purpose; it was “good enough” for the circumstances. Then again, it may be that the “deal” was a short-term fix and a deeper conversation generating a greater shared understanding would have better served the longer term, or the bigger picture or the wider community.