

How is dialogue different from discussion and debate?

“Dialogue is a foundational communication process leading directly to personal and organizational transformation. It assists in creating environments of high trust and openness, with reflective and generative capacities. One might think of dialogue as a revolutionary approach in the development of the following organizational disciplines: continuous learning, diversity, conflict exploration, decision alignment, and culture change. (Ellinor, L.,1996) (Reference: Dialogue Group (www.thedialoguegrouponline.com))

Dialogue comes from the Greek word, “dialogos” meaning “through the word.” Think about a stream of meaning that flows between and among group members. From this flow of meaning, new understanding emerges (Bohm, 1990). Senge (1990) describes a dialogue as “a conversation with only a center, not sides.” *Discussion* comes from the Greek word “discus” which means “to throw or shatter.” Discussion might be thought of as a process where we “throw” opinions back and forth in an attempt to convince each other of the rightness of a particular point of view. *Debate* is a verbal “fight”, the purpose of which is to win an argument.

Dialogue is a process of creating meaning as ideas flow through a group of people. The result of a dialogue goes beyond any one person’s understanding to create shared meaning in the group. The purpose of dialogue is to learn together, to integrate multiple perspectives and synthesize understanding, rather than convince others that your view is the “right” one. Dialogue is a skill essential to consensus decision-making. When a group engages in dialogue, they go beyond any one person’s understanding. Essential to an effective dialogue are key questions that open up thinking and invite a deeper understanding of issues.

Guidelines for Using Dialogue Effectively

There are specific guidelines for using dialogue effectively. The first guideline is to suspend assumptions. There are two ways in which people are asked to suspend assumptions. First, suspending assumptions can mean putting your own assumptions of what you perceive to be the truth aside so that you are able to truly listen and understand the points of view of others. The second way you can suspend assumptions is to put them out in front of the group for all to see.

The second guideline is to speak the truth as you know it to be. Just like suspending assumptions, in dialogue you are asked to be honest and open about what you believe to be true. Dialogue is most effective when participants are open and honest about what they value and believe. The third guideline is to listen with both ears. Dialogue is not effective when members of the group become more concerned about what they are going to say next than what the current speaker is sharing. Dialogue allows every member of the group to share and expects that everyone listens to what is being shared.

The fourth guideline is to accept silence. When people need time to think and collect their thoughts, sitting in silence is very appropriate. The fifth guideline is to expect to be surprised.

You will likely hear ideas and thoughts that have not crossed your own mind. Other people might have a completely different approach than you do. Dialogue is a powerful process for understanding the perspectives and thoughts of others in the purposeful community.

Skills Needed for Dialogue

Senge (1990), Bohm (1992) and Wheatley (1997) discuss interrelated skills people need in order to effectively participate in a dialogue session:

- Suspend judgment—In order to open our minds to truly listen to others, we must be willing to set our positions and perspectives aside while hearing what others have to say. Be the witness, not the judge. Trust and rapport is increased when we seek to understand.
- Identify assumptions—Identifying deeply held assumptions allows us to understand how they influence our perspectives on issues. By sharing our assumptions with others, we are better able to explore differences while developing shared understanding and deeper connections to one another.
- Listen for understanding--- Intentional listening allows us to find meaning beyond the words actually spoken. By deeply listening we open ourselves to learn from others.
- Inquire without judgment— Ask thoughtful questions to gain both information and deeper understanding of others' perspectives. Open-ended questions that begin with phrases such as, "What if..." invites others to honestly share their thoughts and feelings.
- Reflect on what is being shared--- When we reflect on what another person is saying we increase our ability to learn and think creatively. Individuals should be encouraged to ponder questions like these: "Was I able to set aside judgment of others and the need to be right in order to understand in a new way?" or "What did I notice when someone else disagreed with me? Did I ask myself what they might be seeing that I don't see?"