



On Dialogue

Dialogue comes from the Greek word dialogos. Logos means "the word," or in our case we would think of the "meaning the word." Dia means "through" - it doesn't mean two. A dialogue can be among any number of people, not just two. Even one person can have a sense of dialogue within himself, if the spirit of dialogue is present. The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which will emerge some new understanding. It's something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. And this shared meaning is the "glue" or "cement" that holds people and societies together.

▪ David Bohm, **On Dialogue**

Conversation is informal talk in which participants share information, anecdotes, and opinions to learn from one another or simply to enjoy one another's company. When conversation takes on an organized purpose, to either deepen understanding or make a decision, individuals that understand the importance of two ways of talking deliberate and choose to engage in either dialogue or discussion. Deliberation's Latin root *deliberare* means to weigh, assess, or ponder.

This choice is available to individuals only when they have mental road maps for ways of talking, and conscious intention. Many individuals default to the Western cultural habit of polarizing discussion. Under these circumstances, individuals tend to listen to find gaps in the thinking of another speaker, rather than to understand their thinking. When individuals understand that they have more than one way of talking available to them, they can choose to pursue the path of dialogue or to follow the path of discussion. Professional Conversation develops understanding, so it calls for extensive practice of dialogue.

Dialogue is one of the most ancient forms of human communication. Our tribal ancestors gathered around their fires crafting humanity and community with stories, songs, and conversations. By learning the processes of dialogue we restore the patterns of our elders and embrace habits still practiced by indigenous peoples across the planet.

Many of these communication and thinking patterns were set aside during the development of western culture as the early Greek philosophers and later European thinkers shaped language and listening models for logic, reasoning, and persuasion. These habits of mind molded our culture as we now know and experience it, producing the technological, social, and political structures that make us who we are today.

The physicist David Bohm brought consciousness to dialogue in its more modern form, promoting it as an intentional communication process to develop deeper forms of collective thinking. He combined knowledge of quantum physics with understandings influenced by his work and association with the Indian philosopher, Jiddu Kreshnamurti. Bohm sought patterns of thought in individuals and patterns of thought in society. From his studies with Kreshnamurti, he learned the value of observing his own internal stream of consciousness

and extended this to the value of observing the ways in which collective thought unfolds during purposeful conversations.

Bohm's work influenced the work of William Isaacs and his colleague, Peter Senge, at the MIT Center for Organizational Learning. Isaacs calls dialogue a conversation with a center, not sides. Dialogue requires one to be fully committed as a listener to understand others, and to be fully committed as a speaker to be understood by others. Like a magnetic field, the practice of dialogue gives a shape and structure to a spirit of sustained collective inquiry within and between people.

Within this container, we find the psychological safety to talk about the hard-to-talk-about things that matter. To craft this container requires a blend of internal and external quiet so we can hear ourselves, hear others, can hear ourselves hear others. "Our conversations organize the processes and structures which shape our collective future (Isaacs, 1999)." This thinking together is a value and an outcome in itself. The process is also the product.

By embracing the processes and patterns of dialogue, we do not deny other habits of mind. Dialogue is an important addition to individual and group repertoire. It extends personal and collaborative capacities by supporting speaking and listening behaviors that link people and ideas. This collective search seeks connections, not fissures; wholes, not parts; multiple perspectives, not a dominant point of view. At the most fundamental level, dialogue is a process of listening and speaking to understand each other's ideas, assumptions, beliefs, and values. To understand others does not imply agreement or disagreement with their viewpoints. Dialogue seeks and explores the layers of meaning within ideas.

Dialogue is first a listening practice. When we "listen to our listening" we notice whether we are internally debating with the speaker, reviewing our mental catalog of related information and experience, or composing a response. Noticing these common internal processes permits us to switch them off so that we can hear others without judging.

Suspension is an internal skill that is central to dialogue. To suspend judgment, group members temporarily set aside their own perceptions, feelings, and impulses. Suspension also requires developing an awareness of our own assumptions and beliefs, and purposely "hanging them from the ceiling," in the open for consideration by all group members.

The purpose of dialogue is shared understanding. This is the foundation of conflict resolution, consensus, and professional community. Recommendations made, then not implemented, as well as decisions that do not stay made are often the result of individuals feeling left out and/or having their ideas discounted by others. Dialogue gives voice to all parties and all viewpoints.

Dialogue illuminates and clarifies misunderstandings when underlying values and beliefs are brought to the surface for consideration. Alignment is often present at this level; it is at the action and solution level that opinions may differ more significantly. Working from a foundation of shared understanding, individuals can more easily and rationally resolve differences, generate alternatives, and make wise choices as they move toward decision, recommendation, and action.