



Toolkit Page 146

Dialogue Tips

Dialogue is exploration. It is a way of communicating that seeks to make known people's thoughts, feelings, assumptions, and beliefs. It is an exploration into unknown terrain. We learn about others in the process, and are able to test our assumptions about them and their views. In addition, we often begin to learn more about ourselves as we attempt to articulate what we believe.

Dialogue differs from ordinary conversation in that it follows mutually agreed upon rules. These rules of engaging provide a structure for the dialogue. And, as people show that they are willing to abide by these rules, a sense of trust and safety emerges making it easier to explore topics that may have once been taboo.

It may seem paradoxical, but fully exploring differences often builds relationships. Dialogue builds common ground as we learn more about who we are in relation to each other. We strip away projections and assumptions and begin to see behind the façades we all erect to protect ourselves.

Dialogue can create a base that allows for decisions that respect the interests of all sides. But the dialogue process is not decision making. When we make decisions, we become advocates for our own positions. Advocacy inhibits our desire to listen. (Dialogue can be combined with decision making as long as the two processes are kept separate.)

The structure of dialogue is especially helpful in situations in which people have difficulty listening to or respecting each other. It has been used effectively in marriage counseling, conversations on race relations, abortion, and between unions and management.

Dialogue is hard work. It takes discipline. But, it is the only effective way I know to build bridges between people when tensions are high.

HOW TO USE DIALOGUE

One of the most difficult aspects of building trust (or dealing with resistance) is accepting the fact that other sane and right-minded people may see the world differently than you.

The Common Ground Network for Life and Choice used an interesting exercise to get people to begin a dialogue on abortion. They asked people to tell their stories how they came to believe what they believe. Think about it. How can we argue with another person's story? We can argue with their viewpoints, but not with their stories.

Often these stories began to dissolve barriers. People began to see the person behind the position. Hearing another's story helps us see the world from her vantage point. Although we may have made different choices, we begin to see why she made the choices she did.

Here are some things that can allow this approach to work.

Joint Planning

Both sides have to agree not only to take part but to help organize the event. The planners (not the Common Ground Network) created goals for the meeting and select facilitators.

Ground Rules

People must agree to abide by certain rules of conduct in the meeting:

- Speak for yourself.
- Maintain confidentiality (some people are willing to take part but don't want others to know they were at the session).
- Do not make inflammatory comments.
- Do not attempt to convert others.
- Respect others.

These ground rules let people know that it will be safe to speak. These ground rules create a boundary, a DMZ, where it is safe to walk.

Start Easy

People need to feel safe in the meeting. They began with such simple questions as, What are the risks in being here today? This is not an insignificant question, but it is fairly easy to address. As opposed to a silly get-acquainted icebreaker, this question gets people talking personally right away.

Subsequent questions got more difficult: What is the heart of the issue for you? What's a question you've always wanted to ask the other group? (This exchange would take place only after groups had shown they could listen to and respect each other.)

Room to Talk

People met in groups of four (two pro-choice, two pro-life) with a facilitator to discuss issues. This ensured that people got a chance to talk. They believed that larger groups ran the risk of having a few dominant people take over. Also, in larger groups there is a strong tendency to want to look good in front of our own buddies.

Room to Explore

Goals for the initial meetings ("workshops") are usually framed as opportunities to explore the issues. CGN wisely avoids suggesting too quickly that these dialogues turn into action planning. When that occurs, it is too easy for people to begin trying to sell their plans. This builds walls, not common ground.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Chris Argyris created a Ladder of Inference that is a good model to keep in mind as you engage in dialogue. (See the Fifth Discipline Fieldbook by Peter Senge et.al. for more on this model. It is a fairly old book by business book standards but is still thoughtful and practical.)

Starting at the bottom, the ladder looks like this. *We observe things, we select what to pay attention to, we make meaning and assumptions of what we see, draw conclusions, adopt beliefs, and take actions.*

Bill observes a meeting of executives and middle managers. He selects the relationship between executives and managers to pay attention to. He notices that the executives are doing all the talking in this meeting that is supposed to be a chance for everyone to talk about critical issues. He starts to make meaning from what he sees. He assumes that executives don't care about managers' opinions. He draws the conclusion that executives must think the middle managers are slow and don't get it. Bill adopts a belief that it is unsafe to speak in meetings with executives. So, he takes the non-action of keeping quiet or deflecting the subject when called on.

Bill may or may not be correct in his thinking, but he has no way of knowing, unless he tests his assumptions and finds out what truly led the executives to do ninety percent of the talking.

We tend to engage people at the upper rung of this ladder. Action meets action. We make meaning regarding the reasons why they say or do what they do. In other words, we guess at what's on their lower rungs. When we are in strong disagreement with someone else -- Level 2 and Level 3 situations -- it is common to guess wrong. So each action provokes the other person to take another action. It is war. Neither side listening. No chance of gaining agreement because no information is coming in to let us know if there is even a place where we might agree. In Level 3 relationships, this usually is a chronic condition. Our minds are made up. We think we know why they do what they do. And what they do is wrong.

Dialogue can change that. It isn't easy. It isn't fun. It takes commitment and time. The purpose of dialogue is to help all parties begin to understand how the others make meaning. In other words, dialogue helps us understand what's on the lower rungs of the ladder.

Dialogue is at the heart of almost all effective change strategies. And it is actually quite simple: it brings people together who may never have had occasion to talk to one another. By working together, they begin to see that those other people are just as dedicated and concerned about the issues facing the organization as they are. They become human in each other's eyes.

Next Steps

Use a trained facilitator to lead the dialogue. It is too easy to get hooked by what people are saying. You need someone who is not biased and is skilled at making people play by the rules.

© 2010 Rick Maurer. Rick uses his Change without Migraines™ to advise organizations on how to lead change effectively. He is author of many books including *Beyond the Wall of Resistance*. In 2009, he created the Change Management Open Source Project, a free resource for people interested in change in organizations. You can access the open source project as well as many free articles and tools from his web site: www.rickmaurer.com