



## About Dialogue

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These notes provide guidance on what dialogue is considered to be about today and how you can improve your dialogue skills.

*This document is comprised of content from*

- *the book 'Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together', by William Isaacs: published by Doubleday, Random House (1999)*
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialogue>

### What is Dialogue?

William Isaacs, author of 'Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together' describes dialogue as an aperture through which social realities unfold.

*"It is a conversation with a centre, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarisation and into a greater common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people."*

Dialogue is an opportunity to venture into unknowns because it is not about judging, weighing, or making decisions to satisfy preconceived objectives. It is about giving up your agenda and making your standpoint explicit. By doing this, outcomes can be unexpected: learning, creative thinking and reaching agreements (or realising why agreements cannot be reached). Therefore as a participant, you can explore insights into other dialogue participants as well as discover more about yourself.

It is a delicate process. Many obstacles inhibit dialogue and favor more confrontational communication forms such as discussion and debate. Common obstacles that can prevent dialogue from emerging include fear, the display or exercise of power, mistrust, external influences, distractions, and poor communication conditions. A quality dialogue on the other hand, dispels stereotypes, builds trust, and enables participants to be open to perspectives that are very different from their own.

### Dialogue Phases

Phases of dialogue can move from politeness to truth sharing, then from inquiry and further, into a more generative state. Movement through these phases depends much on the 'container': the space in which the dialogue sits. The 'container' is limited only by the capacity of those participating to be able to maintain the three essential elements, or preconditions of dialogue: possibility, energy and safety. Dialogue can be hard work, so pressure in the container can become quite intense, compromising one or more of the elements. If so, the dialogue needs to take a break. Containers are adaptive though as they reflect the collective group 'space'.

## Four Ways of Building Dialogue Capacity

Capacity to partake in dialogue can be increased in four ways: Listening, Respecting, Suspending and Voicing.

### **Listening**

The opposite of listening is memory. If you are listening based on your own perception of the words being said, you will be likely conjuring up memories of what those words mean to you, based on your knowledge and past experiences. Your brain will want to replay reactions that you have learned for those meanings in the past, which in turn block your ability to perceive the intended meaning in the current dialogue. Sometimes we are listening emotionally and the pain of the emotion can trigger powerful feelings. It is easy to respond to those feelings into the landscape of the dialogue itself. Instead you can step back and observe how you feel as you are listening. The source of any difficulties you might be having can provide insights in yourself or in others. Standing still to listen can open into frontiers that you did not realize were there. We can not only listen for meaning and feelings, we can listen to intonation, to energy, to patterns in the context of the whole dialogue as well as to intention.

### **Respecting**

To respect someone is to look for the springs that feed the pool of their experience. At its core, the act of respect invites us to see others as legitimate. We may not like what they say or think but we cannot deny their legitimacy as beings. Respect means honouring boundaries to the point of protecting them. If you respect someone, you do not intrude. At the same time, you do not withhold yourself or distance yourself from them. By doing this you are sending the message that you are allowing them into your 'public' space, i.e. you are open to sharing. On a deeper level this is also sending the message that you are open to receiving and more importantly, that you are open to learning from them. Practicing respect for someone can be difficult if you are overwhelmed by negative emotions triggered by what they are saying. At this like this, try to understand their background, motivations, emotional triggers and cultural norms. Often what someone is saying can be something they would like somebody else to be saying back to them.

### **Suspending**

Suspension means that we neither suppress what we think nor advocate it with unilateral conviction. Rather, we display our thinking in a way that lets us and others see and understand it. At first, this can be compared with how we might feel if we were entering naked into a shopping centre. However, everyone has a body with similar bits. By simply acknowledging and observing our thoughts and feelings as they arise without being compelled to act on them can release massive creative energy. By overcoming our fear to involve others in this process, we generate a deeper connection of trust and understanding than if we had not. Suspending your assumptions can force you to handle a great deal of intensity which makes more space in the 'container'.

## Voicing

Speaking your voice is revealing what is true for you regardless of other influences that might be brought to bear. Finding your voice in dialogue means answering a simple question: What needs to be expressed now? To do this you need to have listened to your internal emotions, to the many images of how you think you should behave but also to yourself. This is genuine expression. It takes courage, determination and self-trust. In between voicings, silence is OK too.

Don't worry – we're not all expected to come out with divine truisms. David Kantor is a clinician in the field of family systems therapy. He theorises that conversations reflect innate structures that only partly stem from the individual's needs. They also reflect the unspoken needs of the group and the situation. To Kantor, people take a stance not because they intend to, but because the conversation needs someone to fill that role. His model, the four player system, shows that dialogue requires four players, roles we can all play:

Movers are initiators. Followers react. Opposers watching this may spot something amiss from this interchange. Finally, a fourth person might then describe what he or she has seen or heard to propose a new way of thinking about it.

- Without movers, there is no direction
- Without followers, there is no completion
- Without opposers, there is no correction
- Without bystanders, there is no perspective.

One of the most common experiences people have in dialogue is that the whole is somehow larger than the parts.

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