

Dialogue:

The Power of Understanding

By Dr. Ann McGee-Cooper and Duane Trammell

How often does a heated argument disrupt a meeting and polarize those present? Have you ever wished for the magic to be able to open minds closed by personal bias? And do you ever find yourself unable to get someone else to understand your point of view or feel that your boss is being unreasonable?

One of the most effective team building tools of servant-leaders is the ability to build dialogue skills. In times of fast change, learning to leverage the enormous benefits of different perspectives is essential. But, building a diverse team only brings benefit if these differences can lead to a broader, richer perspective. Dialogue, a very different way of communicating and benefiting from differences, can be an essential path toward achieving this goal.

The Meaning of Dialogue

The root of the word, dialogue, comes from two Greek words, dia, which means, "through;" and logos, which is usually translated, "word." William Isaacs, in his book, *Dialogue*, calls



dialogue a "flow of meaning." This flow of meaning occurs in the context of a relationship among the people gathered to talk. In ancient days, the Greeks used to gather in the polis to converse about current issues. This "talk" became the fountain from which their self-governance flowed.

Dialogue is the opposite of debate, a verbal "fight," the goal of which is to win an argument by besting an opponent. The focus is on listening for flaws in the "opponent's" argument rather than listening to understand something new or from a different perspective. Ego is typically at the center of this win-lose conversation.

Dialogue: The Power of Understanding

Dialogue is also different from discussion, the "breaking apart" of issues, individuals or situations to gain agreement. Discussions tend to be fast-paced, persuasive conversations in which one person tries to convince the other of a point of view or solution. Ego, control and power over others are often at the forefront of this style of talking.

The first and most difficult task of dialogue involves parking the ego and listening with an open spirit. From this receptivity can come questions which lead to understanding.

- "What is it you see that I don't?"
- "How do you see this differently and why?"
- "Please help me understand from your perspective."



To ask these questions requires that one no longer need to have the best or last answer. Expanding one's understanding becomes more important than being right or getting one's point across. Dialogue is a communication skill essential to achieving a consensus decision. It is based on the idea that the IQ of the team can, potentially, be much higher than the IQ of the individuals. What keeps our thinking about an issue at a lower level is worrying about "defending" our position rather than attempting to explore meaning from another person's viewpoint. The purpose of dialogue is to go beyond any one individual's understanding.

When in dialogue, an issue or decision is capable of constant development and change. Dialogue is reserved for complex, difficult issues where it appears there are no easy answers.

To learn this valuable team skill, we find it best to use a current business issue that is troubling the group and use dialogue to gather insights. The first step is to set aside time to learn to listen to and share differences in a different way. William Isaacs describes it as building a "container" strong enough and safe enough to hold our true differences. This is done over time by testing our ability to trust each other with those deeply held beliefs, which so often are not expressed. Making it truly safe to disagree respectfully and honestly on core issues is not easy. But as this happens, something very powerful begins to emerge within the group.

The Tools of Dialogue

Some tools we have found to be very helpful include the following:

1. Lead the group in collecting core issues essential to the team's success. Or the beginning topic list might focus on core issues on which there may be strong disagreement.
2. Once you have a working list, begin to practice asking good questions to invite a deeper understanding of some of the issues. We don't recommend stopping to answer these questions at first. Staying focused on learning to ask questions which take you deeper will focus your dialogue at a much more beneficial level. For example, instead of beginning with "We need to reduce headcount to increase profits." You might ask, "What might be some unintended consequences of reducing head count?" "What other ways

might we increase profits and decrease overhead?" "How might we involve our people in reducing overhead and increasing profits?"

3. We find it useful to stop from time to time to reflect on the process. Here are a few good questions for personal reflection.
 - "Did you learn anything new?"
 - "Were you able to park judgment of others and the need to be right in order to understand in new ways?"
 - "Did you ask any clarifying questions?"
 - "Did you slow down when you strongly disagreed with what someone else was saying and ask yourself what are they seeing that I don't see?"

Recently, we facilitated a dialogue session for a Fortune 500 Company that had undergone a merger. Trust issues between executives had surfaced on several occasions. When we started the dialogue, one person stated, "This is a dead issue. We resolved that six months ago. It's time to move forward."

We applied the dialogue tool of questioning assumptions. The group saw the assumptions as: (1) The issue is dead (2) The issue was resolved six months ago, and (3) It is time to move forward. They began to build a larger container of information that shed a different perspective - compensation was not equal for the two merged parts, ideas were not listened to from one part, and disparaging comments were constantly made by one part to another. In a short time, it was clear that the issue was not resolved and that trust had not been established.



A second example of dialogue came about after two women were relieved of their positions in a community organization and replaced with men. A series of dialogue days with key community opinion leaders was set up to explore this action. At the first meeting, the men rejected the idea that they tended to "take over" meetings. The dialogue facilitator asked the group to notice out of the 20 men and 20 women there, nine men had spoken and no women. The nine men had taken up 50 minutes of airtime. Using the "being open to influence" part of dialogue, the men were asked to invite women to share and to listen to understand. By the end of the first day, both men and women agreed that gender bias was alive and well and had been a major factor in the disharmony among these local community leaders.

High Performance Teams

High Performance Teams distinguish themselves from ordinary teams by supporting each other and working together to create a safe "container" for surfacing and resolving tough, contentious issues. Instead of taking the role of a by-stander or taking sides, interdependent partners listen for ways they can help deepen mutual understanding and benefit from the value of clashing opinions and polarized views.

Dialogue:
The Power of Understanding



Here are some of the distinguishing characteristics:

1. When tempers flare and voices get loud (or other signs of polarizing behavior), partners listen and look for opportunities to help build bridges of respectful understanding.
2. Restating a strong, even toxic statement to clarify meaning in a respectful manner can be very helpful. For example, if I heard, "That is a gene pool that just won't make it! We need fresh blood with the talent to compete in today's markets." I might say, "What I hear you saying is that you are deeply concerned that our current employees may not have the skills and experience to compete. In your opinion the need is so urgent and the skill gap so great that the only reasonable solution is to bring in fresh talent. Am I understanding you clearly?" Notice that I carefully restated the meaning while eliminating the polarizing part of the declaration.
3. What you want to avoid is sweeping issues under the rug or indicating that it's not acceptable to surface strong differences. If surrounding partners will not take sides but rather begin to help clarify meaning, calm emotions and introduce respect for differences and all parties, these behaviors can shift the group from a combative debate to a more constructive level of thinking collaboration.
4. Yet another tactic is to simply call a time out. "Sounds like we each have some strong differences which need to be aired and considered thoughtfully. Let's agree to take a time out, calm down, search for the value in each other's position and begin when we feel ready to collaborate rather than compete."
5. Sometimes it makes sense to simply attempt to clarify the different points of view and then agree to sleep on it and come back with thoughts about ways we might integrate the best of each position.
6. If you honestly believe one person is using bullying or intimidation, you might suggest, "Would you be willing to slow down and give your friend an opportunity to share his/her views?" Or, "Does

If two people get into a shooting match, a third party can step in with something like this. "It sounds like you both have very strong opposing ideas. Let me see if I understand each of your positions and then let's look for any common ground. Let's work together to take your strong emotions and search for ways to broaden our thinking into a third right answer or some other creative way to capture the best of each perspective."

Dialogue:
The Power of Understanding

anyone feel intimidated besides me? I can participate more comfortably if we slow down, lower our voices and agree to use more respectful language."

7. Posing good questions is yet another good strategy to open up thinking and slow down polarization. "Does anyone besides me sense that minds are made up and this is more about power than sharing insights? If so, how can we restate our views to make it safe for others to participate? What might be personal bias? Where are our blind spots?"

As a team begins to learn to balance the moments when anyone gets "out of bounds" and call us safely back in ways that protect our dignity, people will begin to risk surfacing true differences, decisions will become richer and more creative, and there will be a great deal more ownership of all that happens. As this process grows, it becomes very contagious. A modest investment in practice can yield a handsome payoff. Leaders give a powerful and precious gift to all team members by devoting the time to grow dialogue skills and personally modeling these in daily communications.

Seminars and additional resources are available from Ann McGee-Cooper and Associates, Inc. 214 357-8550 or visit us at AMCA.com