

## Practising dialogue

In *Practising dialogue* I examine the role and power of holding a conversation based on dialogue in contrast with a discussion or a debate.

It's through dialogue that people work together to create shared understanding; and thereby harness diversity, collective knowledge and fresh insights to enhance problem-solving and decision-making. Whereas, in discussions and debates the focus is more narrow and the intent is usually to arrive at one point of view as expeditiously as possible.

The word *dialogue* is derived from the Greek *dia logos*, which means through meaning. In contrast, *discussion* has its origins in Latin where the intent was to disperse – or smash apart – the other party. The summaries and chart that follow explain the distinction in these two very different modes of conversation.

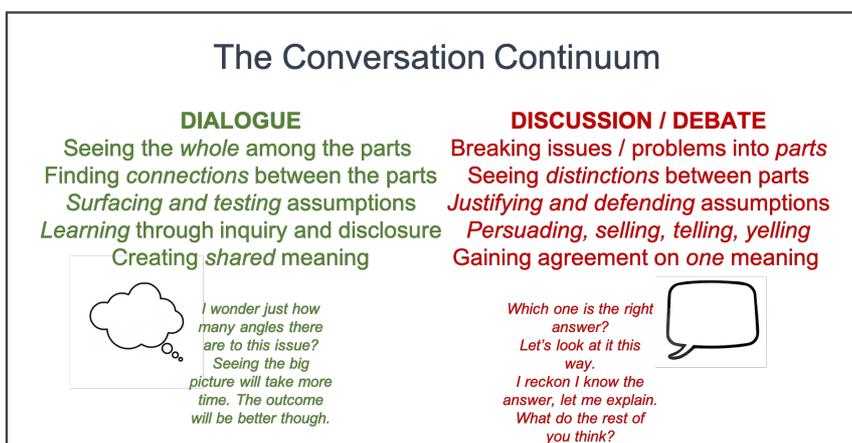
When participating in a *dialogue*, people:

- ✓ ask to hear what all involved think; and have to say;
- ✓ listen deeply, e.g. '*What makes you say that?*'; especially when they disagree with one another;
- ✓ seek to identify each other's assumptions about issues by asking for clarification, e.g. '*Please tell more about that*';
- ✓ speak in a measured way and use silence, i.e. pauses, to allow others to take-in and reflect on what's being said; and
- ✓ try to reconcile how the different perspectives fit into a bigger picture.

In a *discussion*, however, people tend to:

- talk over one another in striving to be heard, with other left saying little or nothing;
- advocate their singular position without adequately listening to others, other than to collect data to score points for their contention or to disprove others';
- express, often pejorative or judgemental, comments such as '*You must be joking!*';
- speak quickly and emphatically with few pauses to allow others to process or join in; and
- make quick decision that enable immediate action.

Don't misunderstand, I do *not* mean that dialogue is good, and discussion is bad.



They are different and the challenge is know when to engage dialogue and when to discuss.

In general in business, we hold too many 'discussions' in our desire to 'get on with it' and make a quick decision or find the 'right' answer. This may be entirely appropriate in some circumstances but should not be the default position. All too often, dialogue would have provided a richer exploration of options,

deeper insights into the pros and cons and a better all-round outcome, one to which everyone is committed.

## How to practise dialogue

The saying '*practice makes perfect*' is certainly true of dialogue. Given most of us have learned the art of discussion and use it most of the time, learning to practise dialogue requires lots of conscious effort, takes time and needs constant reinforcement.

Using dialogue, changes our behaviour – and this will be noticed by others in a positive way. The changed behaviours included being more respectful of difference, more reflective and coming across as more authentic. You dig deeper into your own and others' assumptions and don't ignore your inner voice that's saying there may be another, better way. Conversations go deeper and working collaboratively becomes easier and more enjoyable. There are five skills at the core of truly productive dialogue.

**Suspend judgement.** Suspending judgement in dialogue is *not* about *not* judging – that's not possible! Rather, it's about being aware of what our judgements are and not allowing them to block out what the others are talking about. To practise suspending judgement, you need to put yourself in a neutral position so that you can be a 'witness' to what others in the group are saying. This gives you space to listen, as I explained in my post on [Controlling your emotions](#).

**Listen.** The great author [Stephen Covey](#) wrote '*First Seek to understand, then to be understood*'. In our Western culture, we tend to listen to others from the perspective of our own values and personal interests. We say to ourselves '*What does this mean to me?*' rather than '*What am I am hearing from the others that has meaning for them?*' One of the most effective ways to listen for collective meaning is to ask, '*What's the bigger picture that makes sense of all these different perspectives and opinions?*'

**Reflect.** Reflection is the capacity to think systematically about ideas before forming judgements or making decisions about them. To reflect we need to observe events patiently, make links between them and connect with our feelings about what's happening. One way to do this is to mirror back to the others what you think you are hearing; by using your own words and checking for meaning you enrich your and the group's understanding.

**Assumptions.** Assumptions, whether conscious or unconscious, prevent us from being fully creative by narrowing our perspective. All too often, we don't stop to surface our assumptions about causality or consequences. This means we gloss over deep insights that would have led to making better decisions and securing stronger buy-in for more effective implementation.

**Inquiry.** Inquiry is the means by which we uncover assumptions and the mental models that guide our actions and the eventual outcomes. Inquiry is also the doorway to discovering new possibilities. My post on [Curiosity](#) dives deep into the importance of this leadership trait and the power of deliberately developing executive curiosity. Inquiry begins with using open-ended questions that start with 'what', 'how' and 'tell me more', rather than simply asking for a 'yes' / 'no' answer. Finally, inquiry can only flourish when you suspend judgement.

## Conclusion: Practising dialogue

It's fair to say, once you have established dialogue as a way of conversing in the teams and groups within which you work, powerful energies are released, and everyone feels empowered – including you.

## More on this topic

- ✓ My post [How to influence others](#) explores how to influence others by using advocacy and inquiry.
- ✓ The book on which this post is based [Dialogue at Work: Skills for Leveraging Collective Understanding](#) by Glenna Gerard and Linda Ellinor.