

**UBS Wolfsberg Think Tank
A Brief Overview of Dialogue
Richard Field & David Megginson**

*Hillary Rodham Clinton in her syndicated column observed:
Democracy flourishes when individuals are free to express differing and controversial positions. Democracy flounders when any one person or group proclaims there is only one answer to complex issues...Hate begets more hate and can create a climate of violence in which extremists may get pushed over the edge to bomb buildings or assassinate prime ministers...How do we express our strongest views without resorting to violence in word or deed? That is the question for all of us to answer. (Clinton 1995: 12 Nov. Sec F. p10)*

The Process:

We see dialogue as the crucial process that Hillary Clinton seeks to enable the expression of these strong views without resorting to violence. When we have worked with top teams, typically we would spend an afternoon in dialogue upon a key company issue. Occasionally, most of the day would be spent in such meetings. Initially, the guidelines of Doris Adams of Trinity College (Dixon 1998:117) were used:

1. Speak from your own experience (use 'I' not 'we', 'you' or 'people')
2. Listen to learn
3. Suspend judgement
4. Avoid 'cross talk'
5. Give up advice giving and problem solving
6. Let silence create spaces for reflection

These were soon found to be too 'passive' so they were replaced by our adaptation of Deborah Flick's (1998:36) interpretation of the differences between debate and dialogue:

Debate:

Premise: Only one right answer

Goal: To win, be right, to sell

Behaviours: Listen judgementally

Think more than listen

Accept nothing

Enquire: Interrogate

Question to challenge

Advocate; Assert/Justify own position

Attitude: Evaluating

Critical

'Doing' Debate:

- Trivialise

- Challenge so called 'facts'
- 'Not enough data/inadequate'
- Demand more proof
- Ignore them/change subject
- Discount what they say
- 'So what! That happens to everybody'

Dialogue:

Premise: Multiple valid answers and perspectives

Goal: Understand others from their point of view

Behaviours: Listen – True for speaker

- To understand more deeply
- Without judgement
- Reflect not react

Enquire: Question to clarify/understand

Question to explore assumptions

Advocate: Offer ideas as yours only

Explore alternatives

Attitude: Open and curious

'Doing' Dialogue:

- Relax and quiet the mind
- Listen without criticising
- Anticipation!
- 'Help me to understand...'
- Ask clarifying questions
- 'How did you arrive at your perspective?'
- Let story emerge
- 'Let me repeat back to you what I think you said...'
- 'How does that work?'

Teams adapted these criteria, and other processes that we have used, including behaviour analysis, to build their own processes, for example, this was sent to us by a chief executive from one company where we have worked as his method for progressing dialogue:

Service Centre Co:

Process

1. Social catch-up
2. Relax and quieten – breathing or just sitting quietly
3. Review learnings
4. Clarify the question
5. One minute – reflect and prepare
6. Agree output
7. Agree methodology and timeframe

8. Dialogue – continuously summarising and checking understanding
9. Capture decisions and actions – identify action-owner and timescale for completion
10. Check the output answers the question
11. One minute – capture and reflect

Repeat from 4 for each item.

12. Review next Agenda – strategic issues – big decisions only
13. What went well/Could do better/Actions
14. Reds and Blues

Behaviours

Initiate	Propose	Build	
React	Support	Disagreeing	Defend/Attack
Clarify	Seek Info	Give Info	Test Understanding Summarize

Bringing In Shutting Out

(Chair can control meeting using shutting out, bringing in and summarizing)

Ask for builds – not counter proposals

Aim for better than one build to every fourth proposal (i.e. Amplifier style not Filter style)

Ask fewer simple questions and do more **testing understanding** – “**by that do you mean?**”

Group are low reactors therefore they talk too much and too long
Chair must not move on just because there is no reaction – must get support or disagreement

“**Are you comfortable with that?**”

“I feel” not “I think”

Ground Rules

There are many valid answers and perspectives – All contributions are equally valued

Be open and curious – Listen and understand with empathy and without criticising

Reflect not react – Absence of coercive influences –

Let the story emerge – Bring assumptions into the open

PT - July

One of the keys to the effectiveness of these processes has been to identify what the question needing answering is, and what the outcome of the dialogue needs to be.

Recently, Employment Co began to find even their own process restricting, so we gave them a range of opportunities: from positivist ‘decision-taking

methods' to post-modernist 'chaotic conversations' with no agendas or outcomes expected. What was interesting was that they found that they needed structure to achieve their outcome, perhaps because they are in the 'storming-norming' stages.

Finally, whatever the process used, Tuckman's four stages of team development (Forming, storming, norming and performing) seems to be relevant – and perhaps just as importantly, the teams can identify and relate to which stage they are at.

References:

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