

# **UBS Wolfsberg Think Tank**

## **Dialogue, questioning and listening – source notes**

### **Dialogue guidelines**

*Doris Adams of Trinity College (Dixon 1998:117):*

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

*Are these too passive for you?*

### **Dialogue principals**

*Deborah Flick (1998:36)*

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:**

*Deborah Flick (1998:36)*

- Relax and quiet the mind
- Listen without criticising!
- '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?'

*Are these better?*

### **What is dialogue?**

*From Yankelovich (1999)*

**Definition** from Webster's English dictionary: 'Seeking mutual understanding and harmony'.

The word dialogue derives from two Greek words: 'dia' meaning through...and 'logos' signifying word or meaning...David Bohm's interpretation is: words and meanings flowing through from one participant to another.

Three distinctive features differentiate it from discussion. When all three are present, conversation is transformed into dialogue. When any one or more of the three features are absent, it is discussion or some other form of talk, but it is not dialogue:

1. **Equality and the absence of coercive influences** – all participants must be treated as equals. Mixing people of unequal status and authority does not necessarily preclude dialogue, but it makes it more difficult to achieve. Dialogue becomes possible only after trust has been built and the higher-ranking people have, for the occasion, removed their badges of authority and are participating as equals. There must be mutual trust before participants of unequal status can open up honestly with one another.
2. **Listening with empathy** – the gift of empathy – the ability to think someone else's thoughts and feel someone else's feelings.
3. **Bringing assumptions into the open** – the level of tension will be reduced and there will be better mutual understanding

The unique nature of dialogue requires that participants are uninhibited in bringing their own and other participants' assumptions into the open, where, within the safe confines of the dialogue, others can respond to them without challenging them or reacting to them judgementally.

### **What is not dialogue?**

It is not...an instrument of decision making, which always involves considerations of power and interest – issues that interfere with dialogue. And it is not a negotiating device that seeks agreement leading to action...some of dialogue's most striking successes...have occurred because dialogue preceded, and was sharply distinguished from, formal negotiations.

The other three of the four 'd's' :

- Debate - the opposite of dialogue. The purpose is to win an argument, to vanquish an opponent.
- Discussion – sounds like 'percussion'!
- Deliberation – which is a form of thought and reflection that can take place in any kind of conversation

### **Strategies for dialogue:**

1. Err on the side of including people who disagree
2. Initiate dialogue through a gesture of empathy
3. Check for the presence of all three core requirements of dialogue – equality, empathic listening, and surfacing assumptions non-judgementally – and learn how to introduce the missing ones.

4. Minimise the level of mistrust before pursuing practical objectives
5. Keep dialogue and decision-making compartmentalised – this may take great self-discipline if you are eager for closure
6. Focus on common interests, not diverse ones
7. Use specific cases to raise general issues
8. Bring forth your own assumptions before speculating on those of others
9. Clarify assumptions that lead to subculture distortions
10. Where applicable, identify mistrust as the real source of misunderstandings
11. Expose old scripts to a reality check
12. Focus on conflicts between value systems, not people
13. Be sure that trust exists before addressing transference distortions
14. When appropriate, express the emotions that accompany strongly held values
15. Encourage relationships in order to humanise transactions.

### **Key questions for coaches**

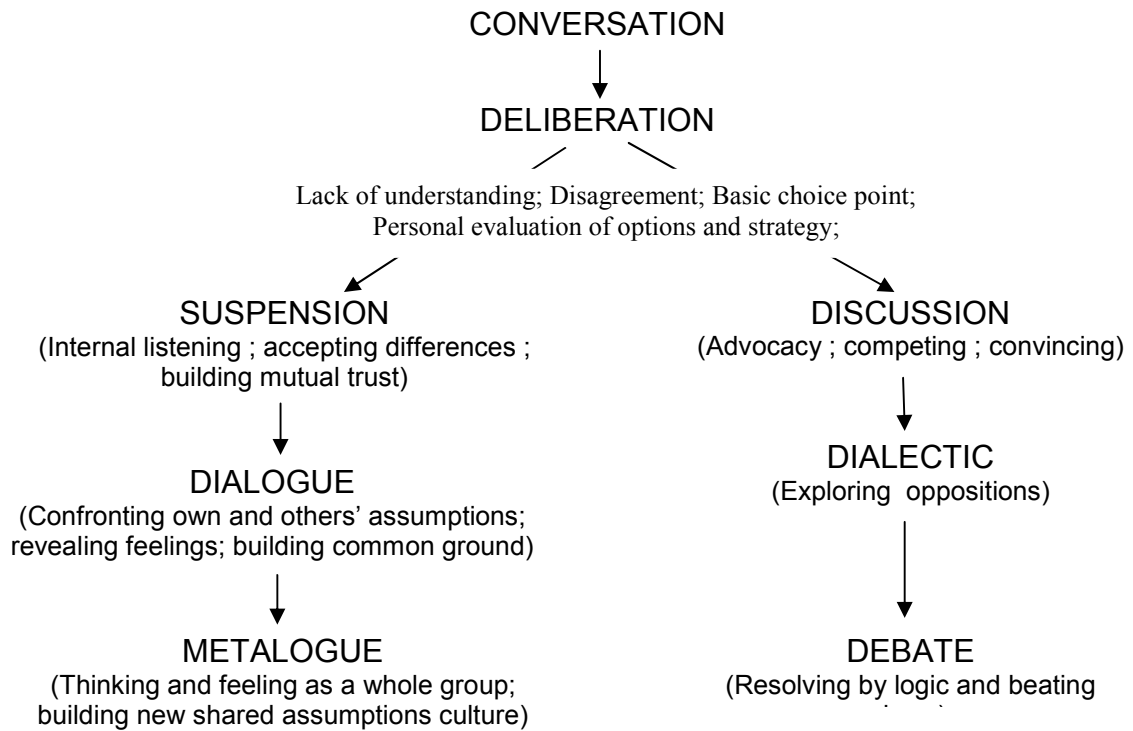
*Clutterbuck D & Megginson D*

What do I want from the coaching relationship?

- Should I focus on the high ability/high motivation members of my team or on the poor performers?
- Am I putting as much effort into establishing a progress plan for each relationship as into setting goals through appraisal?
- What sort of a role model am I for learning?
- How open can I be about *my* coaching needs?
- How do I get feedback on my performance as a coach?
- How can I ensure people in the team coach each other?
- How can I ensure my direct reports ask for coaching?
- How can I demonstrate the benefit/value of coaching to my direct reports/my boss/myself?
- How do I ensure positive stretch (tasks with high learning potential) and avoid negative stretch (overload of work, from which there is little potential for learning)?
- How do I ensure *coachees* are genuinely committed to the goals agreed with them?

### **References:**

- Bohm D (2000) *On Dialogue* London + New York: Routledge
- Dixon N M (1998) *Dialogue at Work* London: Lemos & Crane
- Flick D L (1998) *From Debate To Dialogue: Using the Understanding Process to Transform Our Conversations* Boulder, Colorado: Orchid
- Clutterbuck D & Megginson D (2004) *Techniques for coaching and mentoring*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann
- Shaw P (2002) *Changing Conversations in Organisations: A Complexity Approach to Change* London + New York: Routledge
- Yankelovich D (1999) *The Magic of Dialogue* London: Nicholas Brealey



Source Schein 1993

*"In dialogue, people gradually learn to suspend their defensive exchanges and further, to probe into the underlying reasons for why those exchanges exist... probing into defences is not the object of dialogue...it is to establish a field of genuine meeting and inquiry from which creativity can emerge.. this kind of exchange entails learning to think and speak together, for the creation of breakthrough levels of thought" (Isaacs 1993)*