

INCLUSION & DIVERSTIY THROUGH DIALOGUE

Read the following two pages that are excerpted from Peter Senge’s The Fifth Discipline.

Use this summary to observe the conversations that take place on your team. How often are the conversations/meetings characterized by Discussion/Debate and how often are they characterized by Dialogue?

In addition, think about when Dialogue would be more appropriate in order for team members to reach a deeper and more shared understanding.

DISCUSSION/DEBATE	DIALGOUE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team members explaining their ideas in order to win acceptance • Individuals disputing other team members’ thinking • Team members ignoring the assumptions that underlie their thinking • Team members wedded to their own thoughts and points of view • Team members act as though other team members are adversaries • Different points of views lead to conflict • Team members move toward agreement quickly • Conflict that does exist is not seen as productive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team members explaining their ideas to better understand them • Individuals observing and dissecting their own thinking • Team members examining the assumptions underlying their thinking • Team members actually separating themselves from their own thoughts • Team members treat each other as colleagues • Different points of views leads to deeper understanding • Team members comfortable with diverging before agreeing • Conflict is facilitated toward productive ends

An Excerpt From “The Fifth Discipline”

by Peter Senge

The Discipline Of Team Learning: Dialogue And Discussion

.....a significant contributor to the emerging discipline of team learning is a contemporary physicist, David Bohm. Bohm is developing a theory and method of "dialogue," when a group "becomes open to the flow of a larger intelligence." Dialogue, is a very old idea revered by the ancient Greeks and practiced by many "primitive" societies such as the American Indians. Yet, it is all but lost to the modern world.

There are two primary types of discourse, **dialogue and discussion**. Both are important to a team capable of continual generative learning, but their power lies in their synergy, which is not likely to be present when the distinctions between them are not appreciated.

Bohm points out that the word “discussion” has the same root as percussion and concussion. It suggests something like a “Ping-Pong game where are hitting the ball back and forth. By contrast with discussion, the word “dialogue” comes from the Greek *dialogos*. “*Dia*” means through. “*Logos*” means the word, or more broadly, the meaning. Bohm suggests that the original meaning of dialogue was the “meaning, passing or moving though ... a free flow of meaning between people, in the sense of a stream that flows between two banks.” In dialogue, Bohm contends, a group accesses a larger “pool of common meaning,” which cannot be accessed individually. "The whole organizes the parts," rather than trying to pull the parts into a whole.

The purpose of a dialogue is to go beyond any one individual's understanding. "We are not trying to win in a dialogue. We all win if we are doing it right." In dialogue, individuals gain insights that simply could not be achieved individually. "A new kind of mind begins to come into being which is based on the development of a common meaning. In dialogue, a group explores complex difficult issues from many points of view. Individuals suspend their assumptions, yet they communicate their assumptions freely. The result is a free exploration that brings to the surface the full depth of people's experience and thought, and yet can move beyond their individual views.

"The purpose of dialogue," Bohm suggests, "is to reveal the incoherence in our thought." Dialogue is a way of helping people to "see the representative and participatory nature of thought [and]...to become more sensitive to and make it safe to acknowledge the incoherence in our thought." *In dialogue people become observers of their own thinking.*

What they observe is that their thinking is active. For example, when a conflict surfaces in a dialogue people are likely to realize that there is a tension, but the tension arises, literally, from our thoughts. People will say, "It is our thoughts and the way we hold on to them that are in conflict, not us." Once people see the participatory nature of their thought, they begin to separate themselves from their thought. They begin to take a more creative, less reactive, stance toward their thought.

Bohm identifies three basic conditions that are necessary for dialogue:

- 1. All participants must "suspend" their assumptions, to hold them "as if suspended before us"**
- 2. All participants must regard one another as colleagues**
- 3. A "facilitator" who "holds the context" of dialogue.**

Suspending Assumptions. To suspend one's assumptions means to hold them, as it were, "hanging in front of you," constantly accessible to questioning and observation." This does not mean throwing out our assumptions, suppressing them, or avoiding their expression. Nor, in any way, does it say that having opinions is "bad," or that we should eliminate subjectivism. Rather, it means being aware of our assumptions and holding them up for examination. This cannot be done if we are defending our opinions. Nor, can it be done if we are unaware of our assumptions, or unaware that our views are based on *assumptions*, rather than incontrovertible fact.

Seeing Each Other as Colleagues. Dialogue can occur only when a group of people see each other as colleagues in mutual quest for deeper insight and clarity. Thinking of each other as colleagues is important because thought is participative. The conscious act of thinking of each other as colleagues contributes toward interacting as colleagues. Seeing each other as colleagues is critical to establish a positive tone and to offset the vulnerability that dialogue brings. In dialogue people actually feel as if they are building something, a new deeper understanding. Collegueship does not mean that you need to agree or share the same views. On the contrary, the real power of seeing each other as colleagues comes into play when there are differences of view. It is easy to feel collegial when everyone agrees. When there are significant disagreements, it is more difficult.

A Facilitator Who "Holds the Context" of Dialogue. In the absence of a skilled facilitator, our habits of thought continually pull us toward discussion and away from dialogue. This is especially true in the early stages of developing dialogue as a team discipline. We take what "presents itself" in our thoughts as literal, rather than as a representation. We believe in our own views and want them to prevail. We are worried about suspending our assumptions publicly.

The facilitator's understanding of dialogue allows him to influence the flow of development simply through participating. For example, after someone has made an observation, the facilitator may say, "And the opposite may also be true." The artistry of dialogue lies in experiencing the flow of meaning and seeing the one thing that needs to be said now. The facilitator says only what is needed at each point in time. As teams develop experience and skill in dialogue, the role of the facilitator becomes less crucial and he or she can gradually become just one of the participants. Dialogue emerges from the "leaderless" group once the team members have developed their skill and understanding.

Balancing Dialogue and Discussion. In team learning, discussion is the necessary counterpart of dialogue. In a discussion, different views are presented and defended, and this may provide a useful analysis of the whole situation. In dialogue, different views are presented as a means toward discovering a new view. In a discussion, decisions are made.

When a team must reach agreement and decisions must be taken, some discussion is needed. On the basis of a commonly agreed analysis, alternative views need to be weighed and a preferred view selected (which may be one of the original alternatives or a new view that emerges from the discussion). When they are productive, discussions converge on a conclusion or course of action. On the other hand, dialogues are diverging; they do not seek agreement, but a richer grasp of complex issues. Both dialogue and discussion can lead to new courses of action; but actions are often the focus of discussion, whereas new actions emerge as a byproduct of dialogue.

A unique relationship develops among team members who enter into dialogue regularly. They develop a deep trust that cannot help but carry over to discussions.