

A guide to developing dialogue and inquiry skills

Introduction

The following explains the difference between dialogue and discussion or problem solving, the role of defensive routines and the importance of questions in facilitating dialogue. Dialogue and discussion have different goals – both are important. However we typically need to spend more time in dialogue before we jumping to the more familiar and comfortable problem solving and solution space.

Dialogue

- Involves the free and creative exploration of complex issues, a deep listening and the suspension of one's views?
- Its purpose is to go beyond any one individual's understanding
- Requires suspension of one's views
- Where we regard each other as colleagues
- Recognises that conflict is a central and necessary element – as we all hold different views and ways of seeing things

The key is to manage dialogue so views are held 'gently' and inquire into others views with the goal of learning.

Discussion

Different views are presented and defended/justified with the goal of finding the best view and course of action. By itself, discussion creates a sustained emphasis on winning, so it is important to problem solve. The role of discussion is to bring what emerges from the dialogue into the spotlight for making decisions.

- *In discussion decisions are made, in dialogue complex issues are explored*
- *Discussions converge, dialogues diverge*
- *Discussion draws on skills of advocacy, dialogue on skills of inquiry*

Thus discussion follows dialogue: it is a process for confirming decisions and strategies. The challenge is to maintain a balance between the two.

Defensive Routines

Defensive routines are the entrenched habits we use to protect ourselves from embarrassment and threat and therefore discomfort and anxiety that comes with exposing our thinking – we fear people will find errors. Common defensive routines include:

- Blaming others,
- Distancing the problem or person,
- Confusing our needs/reactions with others,
- Assuming things,
- Killing ideas,
- Mixing messages,
- Colluding in creating undiscussables
- Constantly seeking clarification.

These work against the use of effective dialogue. We can recognise them when people are doing them and not reflecting on their own assumptions, inquiring into each other's thinking and disclosing their thinking to encourage others to inquire. When you notice these things happening in dialogue it is helpful to name them and offer a way forward.

Listening and inquiring - asking questions

Remember that active listening means being engaged, present, noticing and inquiring. Questions are central to this. They invite others in to help the other person find their own meaning and answers, open them up so they are able to solve their own problems or be more receptive to assistance. They communicate that you really want to understand and focus on their concerns to achieve good outcomes and they enable the person you are listening to have a bigger speech bubble than you do. This does not of course discount your concerns and needs.

To do this requires you to

- Moderate and balance ego
- Contain your anxiety and the desire to control outcomes
- Be aware of and examine your intentions and the tendency to judge
- Be patient and willing to give people time to respond
- Be assertive

Strategies for active listening when facilitating

1. *Attend to the person physically* - maintain good eye contact and attentive body language/posture of involvement. Don't overdo it
2. *Attend psychologically* - check your intentions, don't try to fake interest - being present to the other registers on the face and in the body and it will be detected

3. *Actively encourage the person* - engage, interact encourage dialogue, ask questions occasionally to elaborate and clarify (too many too often feels like an interrogation), provide minimal encouragements (ask for examples to illustrate, use prompts eg tell me more, I see, go on, and?)
4. *Respond to the whole message* – by reflecting both content and feelings, paraphrasing or summarising
5. *Check understanding* – by asking if you have understood this correctly once you have paraphrased/summarised
6. *Summarise to demonstrate understanding*, keep things on track and re-direct when necessary
7. When someone is angry, frustrated or experiencing a problem with another participant or the process *deal with the feelings directly first*. Reassuring, judging, criticising, trying to persuade with logic, interpreting intentions, suggesting solutions and distancing yourself from them can act as roadblocks

Questioning and probing skills

We need to be conscious of the purpose and intent of our questions, whether it focuses on the perspectives and concerns of the speaker or the listener and how they serve the task ie whether they are fit for purpose. This will help us determine when to ask a question, what kind of question is best and in what circumstances

1. *Open questions* – provide space for the speaker to offer and explore her thoughts without being tightly constrained by the speaker's categories. They are invitational, promote open dialogue, learning and exploration eg *can you tell me what you consider to be this project's key strengths and any weaknesses?*
2. *Closed questions* – direct the speaker to give a specific, short response, often requiring a yes or no response eg *do you consider this project a strong one? eg do you think this is a fundable project?*
3. *Clarifying questions* – usually open they restate the speaker's remarks to check accuracy of understanding and sometimes an opportunity to expand eg *you've mentioned that the project has a number of strengths such as is that correct and is there anything else you wanted to add to that?*
4. *Leading questions* – a question that subtly or otherwise directs the speaker's response in a particular way eg *what's wrong with the project?* Should be used minimally and when the need for such specific information fits the purpose eg *what are your concerns about this project?*

Sample questions and probes

The following table provides some sample questions to help you engage in dialogue, probe for understanding and learning and not go too quickly to problem solving or providing solutions. They also enable you to reflect on situations so you can understand what occurred, make sense of why and how, figure out what worked well and less well and identify what you might do differently. So they support reflective practice and action learning.

The following table provides some sample questions to help you genuinely inquire, to engage in dialogue and not go too quickly to problem solving or providing solutions. They also enable you to reflect on situations and action learning tasks so you can understand what occurred, make sense of why and how, figure out what worked well and less well and identify what you might do differently.

What Questions	So What Questions	Now What Questions
<p>What I wonder about this is</p> <p>Tell me more about that</p> <p>What I don't know about this is</p> <p>I wonder what the relationship between this issue and issue "X" is?</p> <p>What I don't understand about this is ...</p> <p>I think "Y" about this issue and what I also want to know is</p> <p>If I imagine the future looks like "X" then what will that mean for this issue?</p> <p>I wonder what this issue would look like if I look at it from perspective "Y"?</p> <p>What does the client/the partner think about this?</p> <p>What data haven't we gathered about this?</p> <p>I am making these assumptions about the issue and I want to know What other assumptions we are making about?</p> <p>Who else do we need to ask?</p> <p>What other sources might we consult?</p> <p>Who else might know something about this?</p> <p>What obstacles/constraints exist for this issue?</p> <p>What are the underlying values and motivations in this issue?</p>	<p>What did I find out that I didn't know?</p> <p>How does that change my view of the issue?</p> <p>What more data might this mean we/I need to get?</p> <p>What was I surprised about?</p> <p>What new insight have I gained?</p> <p>What new understanding have I gained?</p> <p>What does this new data tell me about how things might need to change?</p> <p>What concepts/theories might help us make sense of this?</p> <p>How does our new data add to what we know?</p> <p>What are the implications of what we now know?</p>	<p>What is one action that would move me forward?</p> <p>What will help us get me the front foot?</p> <p>What is one change I might make?</p> <p>What is one risk I could take?</p> <p>What do I want to do?</p> <p>What do I need to do?</p>