



A Dialogue Reader

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing

There is a field.

I will meet you there.

— Rumi

Dialogue and Community-Building

by Glenna Gerard and Linda Teurfs

Suppose that we were able to share meanings freely without a compulsive urge to impose our own view or to conform to those of others and without distortion and self-deception. Would this not constitute a real revolution in culture and therefore eventually in society?

-- David Bohm, *Changing Consciousness*, 1992.

THE SCIENCES OF THE 20TH CENTURY have brought us a profoundly new vision of how the universe works. Individual parts have definition and meaning only by virtue of the relationships between them. It is no surprise then that we find dialogue and community building at the forefront of organizational change efforts. Both are about creating cultures based on understanding relationships -- relationships between people, structure, processes, thinking, and results.

For organizational change to be lasting, a shift of mind or change in consciousness has to take place. Because we are talking about cultural change, it has to happen at both the individual and group levels. Without such a shift, no restructuring effort will produce the kind of lasting change we are seeking.

Popularized recently through the work of the late David Bohm, dialogue is a group communication process aimed at exploring the nature and power of collective thinking and how it shapes the culture of a group. When we learned that one of dialogue's primary purposes is to affect a transformation in collective consciousness, we recognized its potential in the area of organizational change. While Bohm was working at a more global or societal level, we were interested in how it might be introduced specifically into organizational settings. We were not alone - Peter Senge devoted the better part of a chapter to dialogue in his book *The Fifth Discipline*.

Over the last several years we have explored dialogue in a variety of settings. We are seeing that it can serve as a bridge or how-to for community building and organizational transformation. Dialogue can help organizations create climates that lead to greater collaboration, fluidity, and sustainability. Its practice can provide the environment and skills necessary for creating a cultural shift toward high levels of trust and open communications, heightened morale, and alignment and commitment to shared goals.

THE WORD DIALOGUE stems from the Greek roots " dia " and " logos " and means " through meaning. " It is a communication form for discovering the shared meaning moving among and through a group of people. " Shared meaning " forms the basis of culture. Dialogue involves becoming aware of the thinking, feelings and formulated conclusions that underlie a group's culture or way of being with each other.

Although new to modern-day organizational practices, dialogue has been around a very long time. It can be traced to the works of ancient Greece (for example, *The Dialogues of Plato*) and to forms of communication used by Native Americans and other indigenous peoples. Aspects of dialogue can be found with in Quaker spiritual and business practice, and in counseling models such as that of Carl Rogers, as part of certain Eastern meditation

practices and in the philosophical works of Martin Buber.

What is it about dialogue that gives such hope and evokes growing interest today? A fellow participant in dialogue once said, “ Dialogue is about creating sacred space through conversation. “ That’s a pretty powerful statement. Thinking about what values most cultures hold sacred -- such as respect, trust, love, family, life, and the pursuit of happiness -- it does convey the power and potential of dialogue. Dialogue is about creating an environment that builds trust, encourages communication with respect, honors and values diversity as essential, and seeks a level of awareness that promotes the creation of shared meaning (culture) that supports individual and collective well-being.

One useful way to describe dialogue is by contrasting it with discussion, a much more familiar form of conversation. The roots of discussion are the same as those of percussion and concussion, signifying “a breaking apart” or “fracturing” into pieces. The intent of discussion is usually to deliver one’s point of view, to convince or persuade. Since points of view may differ widely, discussion often leads to divisiveness and polarization in groups. Opinions tend to be rigidly held on to and defended.

In contrast, dialogue asks us to “ suspend” our attachments to a particular point of view (opinion) so that deeper levels of listening, synthesis and meaning can evolve within a group. The result is an entirely different atmosphere. Instead of everyone trying to figure out who is right and who is wrong, the group is involved in trying to see a deeper meaning behind the various opinions expressed. Individual differences are acknowledged and respected. What emerges is a larger, expanded perspective for all -- what Bohm called an “impersonal fellowship,” a term he took from the work of Patrick De Mare’s *Koinonia* .

Dialogue informs and builds alignment without the need to pursue a specific outcome. Bohm often spoke of being struck by stories of hunter-gatherer tribes that came together frequently to talk without any agenda. In their day-to day activities everyone knew what to do, what decisions to make. Bohm believed that it was during these seemingly aimless talks, that individual members of the groups became informed by the shared meaning they developed. Their alignment was a natural outgrowth of the shared meaning they created. In refining the application of dialogue for the business environment, we seek to create a modern-day equivalent.

THE “TECHNOLOGY” OF DIALOGUE as we have conceived it for organizational settings consists of four main skill components we call building blocks and a set of guidelines. We will first describe these skills and guidelines and then describe how they work to enhance the day-to-day functioning of a group and lead to a transformation of its culture.

The building blocks involve learning a new way of being together and of interacting. They involve skills that overlap and interweave in various ways. Often for one to develop, the others need to be practiced.

Suspension of Judgment. Because our normal way of thinking divides things up and creates what seem like ultimate “ truths’, it is difficult for us to stay open to new and alternative views of reality. Our egos become identified with how we think things are. We find ourselves defending our positions against those of others. We close ourselves off from learning and do harm to our personal relationships. We can get into heated battles about who’s right and who’s wrong.

When we learn to “ suspend judgment “ we are able to see others’ points of views. We are able to hold our positions “ lightly “ as though they were suspended in front of us for further consideration. It is not that we eliminate our judgments and opinions -- this would be

impossible even if we tried. In dialogue we become more open to other ways of viewing the same thing. Later, we may discover whether our original perspective is still acceptable or needs to be expanded or changed.

Suspending judgment in this way is the key to building a climate of trust and safety. As others learn that they will not be “judged” wrong for having their opinions, they feel free to express themselves fully. The atmosphere becomes increasingly open and truthful.

Identification of Assumptions. The opinions and judgments we hold are usually based upon layers of assumptions, inferences, and generalizations. When we do not look at the underlying belief system behind our judgments, we all make important decisions that lead to disappointing results. Unable to figure out why we don't get the results we want, we may try adjusting our actions (based on the same unexamined assumption set) and still not get the results that we want.

It is only when we are willing to peel away the layers of assumptions, that we can see what might be giving us trouble: some incomplete or “incoherent” thought.

By learning how to identify our assumptions, we are better able to explore differences with others. We can build common ground and consensus, getting to the bottom of core misunderstandings and differences. We have found assumption identification to be extremely useful in understanding and working with diversity and conflict in groups.

Listening. Listening is critical to our ability to dialogue. Of the communication skills most often taught in schools: reading, writing, speaking, and listening; listening usually gets short shrift. For this reason, it is often overlooked and taken for granted. In this skill area we focus on how the way we listen impacts how well we learn and how effective we are in building quality relationships. Going far beyond active listening techniques, we focus on developing our capacity to stay present and open to the meaning arising at both the individual and collective levels. Bohm likens the mind to a quickly turning wheel. It is only when we slow it down that we can perceive the individual spokes. We bring attention to slowing our pace down so that we can listen and perceive at ever more subtle levels (this goes hand-in-hand with inquiry and reflection). We also work on overcoming typical blocks in our ability to listen attentively and to stay present.

Inquiry and Reflection. It is through the process of inquiry and reflection that we dig deeply into matters that concern us and create breakthroughs in our ability to solve problems.

Our problems cannot be solved at the same level at which they were created.

-- Einstein

By learning how to ask questions that lead to new levels of understanding, we accelerate our collective learning. We gain greater awareness of our own and other's thinking processes and the issues that separate and unite us. By learning how to work with silence and slow down the rate of conversation, we are better able to identify reactive patterns and generate new ideas. It is this aspect of dialogue that can lead to what Bohm calls a more “subtle state of mind” -- leading to a perception of common ground and a sensitivity to the subtle meanings around us.

EACH TIME A GROUP comes together to dialogue they commit to a common set of guidelines. These can be thought of as norms. As they are practiced over time, they become integrated at a tacit level of understanding. As the group matures, they may no longer be explicitly necessary (except as reminders).

A good way of introducing the guidelines is to first provide a demonstration. This is probably due to the natural way we learn to communicate -- through the modeling we receive as children. We have found a short video presentation to be effective. It gives groups a "feel" of dialogue before they try it. After a demonstration the group can then be asked "What makes this different from other forms of conversation?" By generating the guidelines themselves, the group can take ownership of them.

Essential guidelines for dialogue include:

Listening and speaking without judgment

Acknowledgment of each speaker

Respect for differences

Role and status suspension

Balancing inquiry and advocacy

Avoidance of cross-talk

A focus on learning

Seeking the next level of understanding

Releasing the need for specific outcomes

Speaking when "moved"

THROUGH THE PRACTICE of dialogue, community is created and organizational culture transformed in three ways: behaviourally, experientially, and attitudinally.

Through ongoing practice with dialogue, participants learn how to be with each other differently. They practice skills and guidelines that encourage new norms. The more often they are practiced, the more dialogical communication is used beyond the practice sessions -- leading to the actual state of community.

Dialogue sets up the conditions of community. While groups new to dialogue will not be in full community when they first start out, the atmosphere induced by dialogue has the "experiential feel" of community. Individuals, thus begin to pick up at a tacit level what a culture based on community principles feels like. They incorporate it at an intuitive level.

As group members experience the effects of dialogue, a profound shift takes place at the belief and attitude level. This comes about as a byproduct of the incorporation of new modes of behaviour and learning the "feel" of what being in community is like. Attitudes of rigid individualism give way to attitudes of collaboration and partnership. Beliefs strengthen around the "value of the group as a whole."

We can think of dialogue as though it were a practice field (a term coined by Senge) for building community. Once a group has had the initial introduction to dialogue's building blocks and guidelines, it is ready to begin. The more often the group comes together in dialogue, the faster it learns how to create and sustain itself in community.

Each group will have various ways and times of coming together for meetings. What is most essential at this beginning stage is that a regular routine be established according to the normal operation of the group. For example, if a group typically meets every other Monday for two hours, they might decide to dialogue for one hour before the start of these meetings.

It is also important that the head of the group and/or organization be aware of and be supportive of the transformative potential inherent in the process. A leader who is not

willing to let go of position, rank and authority during the sessions will stymie and undermine the building of community. Ultimately, the leader will need to be able to support the vision of “ shared leadership “ both during and outside of the sessions, if community is to be built and sustained.

WE BEGAN OUR WORK with dialogue in hopes that it would allow us to work at deeper, more transformative levels with our clients; that by helping groups and organizations think and communicate differently, we could help them create lasting change within their cultures. We have not been disappointed.

David Bohm maintained that if we could become conscious of our thinking process we might be able to create a different kind of culture, one based on a holographic view of the universe. Such a culture would bridge the needs of the individual and the collective leading to increasingly deeper levels of community and adaptation to the environment. Two important challenges for us have been how to best facilitate people’s ability to participate in dialogue and then how to help them continue the practice and experience all of the possible ways it can enhance the group.

Through introducing groups to the building blocks and guidelines and by encouraging them to continue in their practice of dialogue, we are beginning to observe enhanced functioning in practical, day-to-day ways. We are also observing changes taking place in the cultures of these groups. There are signs that dialogue has a ripple effect within organizations in which it is introduced. In other words, it can become contagious.

For David Bohm, the purpose of dialogue was to consciously create cultures more in line with a relational, holographic universe. While Bohm, together with other new science theoreticians, has provided us with models, the hands-on work of organizational transformation remains. We believe that through the practice of dialogue, the fear of the unknown can become less paralyzing. Dialogue can provide us with a clearer pathway to making the organizational changes we so desire.

by Glenna Gerard & Linda Teurfs

edited from “*Dialogue and Organisational Transformation*”

<http://www.vision-nest.com/cbw/Dialogue.html>

Dialogue and Debate

- Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.
Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.
- In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.
In debate, winning is the goal.
- In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning and find agreement.
In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.
- Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.
Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.
- Dialogue reveals assumptions for re-evaluation.
Debate defends assumptions as truth.
- Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.
Debate causes critique of the other position.
- Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.
Debate defends one's own positions as the best solution and excludes other solutions.
- Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.
Debate creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right.
- In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.
In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.
- Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.
Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.
- In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.
In debate, one searches for glaring differences.
- In dialogue one searches for strengths in the other positions.
In debate one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.
- Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.
Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationship and often belittles or deprecates the other person.
- Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.
Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.
- Dialogue remains open-ended.
Debate implies a conclusion.

— adapted from material prepared by the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR)

- **Dialogue is characterized by:**

suspending judgment

examining our own work without defensiveness

exposing our reasoning and looking for limits to it

communicating our underlying assumptions

exploring viewpoints more broadly and deeply

being open to disconfirming data

approaching someone who sees a problem differently not as an adversary, but as a colleague in common pursuit of better solution.

Dialogue	Debate
Participants speak as individuals about their own unique experiences and uncertainties;	Participants tend to represent a group with a specific opinion;
The atmosphere is one of safety; and promotes respectful exchange;	The atmosphere is threatening, attacks and interruptions are expected;
Differences between individual participants are revealed;	Differences within the group are set aside or denied;
Participants listen to understand, and gain insight into the understandings of others;	Participants listen to refute other ideas, questions are often rhetorical challenges or disguised statements;
New information surfaces;	Statements are predictable and offer little new information;
Success requires exploration of the complexities of the issue being discussed;	Success requires simple impassionate statements;
Participants are encouraged to question the dominant public discourse, to express fundamental needs that may or may not be reflected in the discourse, and to explore various options for problem definition and resolution.	It operates within the constraints of the dominant public discourse, which defines the problem and the options for resolution; it assumes that fundamental needs and values are already clearly understood.

The Art of Conversation

by Peter Senge

IT WAS ONLY A FEW generations ago that, as people grew older, they did so with the idea that personal maturation had a lot to do with developing one's abilities in "the art of conversation." Although this was a fairly recent time, it seems very distant to us today. It was a time when the pace of life was different. It was a time when, with the day's work done, people sat and talked. It was a time when oral tradition was still alive, and the telling of old stories had not yet passed from day-to-day living. It was also a time when life and relationships still revolved around making meaningful and simple connections with one another.

Of course, these simple practices go back for a very long time.

Few practices seem to lie more at the heart of human communities than talking and telling the old stories. As far as I know, no indigenous culture has yet been found that does not have the practice of sitting in a circle and talking. Whether it be council circles, or women's circles, or circles of elders, it seems to be one of the truly universal practices among humankind. As commonly expressed in Native American Indian cultures, "You talk and talk until *the talk* starts."

The very word *dialogue* and its etymology invites us to contemplate this ancient knowing. The ancient Greeks were perhaps the last western culture to have preserved this idea in the advent of the agricultural revolution, emergence of city states, and modern ways of organizing society. For the Greeks, *dia .logos*, flow of meaning, was seen as a cornerstone of civic practice, inseparable from self-governing. The polis or gathering place for governing, the root of our modern politics, was nothing but a physical space that designated and enabled the conversational space required for true self-governing. The capacity for talking together constituted the foundation for democracy, far more fundamental than voting. As one ancient Greek philosopher noted, "When voting started, democracy ended."

In a sense we are running an historic social experiment today. We are experimenting with whether or not a society can hold itself together without the core process that has always bound societies, the process of conversation.

Goethe once called conversation "the most sublime of experiences." I have come to conclude that there is a deep hunger in the modern world for meaning and the core practices whereby human beings make meaning together. We may not go back to living in tribes. But we have an insatiable desire to live lives of dignity and meaning, and when we discover ways to do this, there is a quiet sigh of relief. We have found our way. Now we must move along it.

by Peter Senge

edited from his foreword to "*Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*" by William Isaacs

On Dialogue

by William Isaacs

DIALOGUE CAN INITIALLY be defined as a sustained collective inquiry into everyday experience and what we take for granted. The goal of dialogue is to open new ground where people can become more aware of the context around their experience, and of the processes of thought and feeling that created that experience.

As we practice dialogue, we pay attention to the spaces between the words, not only the words; the timing of action, not only the result; the timbre and tone of a voice, not only what is said. We listen for the meaning of the field of inquiry, not only its discrete elements. In short, dialogue creates conditions in which people experience the primacy of the whole

A TEAM OF PEOPLE sit in a circle on a stage, talking with intensity. In this form of intimate theater, they are both the performers and the audience. They are arguing, because they do not agree, but there's a quality of engagement about their argument. They listen intently to each other's language, rhythms, and sounds. The silences between statements seem as striking as the words. Every time someone says something, a texture changes subtly; something new has been seen. Everyone knows that everyone in the group has seen it, and that it represents more than just one person's model of the truth. As the people in the circle continue to talk, the sense of meaning they share grows larger and sharper. They begin to gain unprecedented insight into their fundamental views. No one can muster this form of thinking alone, and even in a group it takes a willful desire to build a context for thinking together. It takes a practice like dialogue.

Dialogue is not merely a set of techniques for improving organizations, enhancing communications, building consensus, or solving problems. It is based on the principle that conception and implementation are intimately linked, with a core of common meaning. During the dialogue process, people learn how to think together-not just in the sense of analyzing a shared problem or creating new pieces of shared knowledge, but in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility, in which the thoughts, emotions, and resulting actions belong not to one individual, but to all of them together.

As theorist David Bohm has pointed out, when the roots of thoughts are observed, thought itself seems to change for the better. People can begin to move into coordinated patterns of action, without the artificial, tedious process of decision making. They can start to act in an aligned way. They do not need to work out an action plan for what everyone should do, any more than a flock of birds taking flight from a tree, in perfectly natural order, requires planning. Each member of the team simply knows what he or she is "supposed" to do (or, rather, what's best to do), because they all fit into a larger whole.

At the Dialogue Project at MIT, we have begun to learn how to nurture this process in diverse settings-including an entire health care community in the Midwest riddled with competitive antagonisms, a group of South African professionals and leaders, a steel manufacturer (GS Technologies) with a history of severe labor/management problems, and a group of urban leaders in a major U.S. city. We have sought to translate 100 years of dialogue theory into practice, and to extend that theory, for the first time, so that reliable action can be built upon it. This has turned out to have exceedingly practical applications. As Margaret Mead put it, "Small groups of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

FROM OUR EXPERIENCE at the Dialogue Project at MIT, we propose below the outlines of a theory that describes the development of dialogue over time. Our theory suggests that there are a variety of stages to the evolution of the dialogue field or container, and that the emergence of each phase involves skillful choices and the navigation of crises for both individuals and the collective. The phases we have found are:

1. *Instability of the container*, during which members are concerned with safety and trust in the dialogue context; we link this to an experience of an “initiator crisis”. which, when moved through, leads to

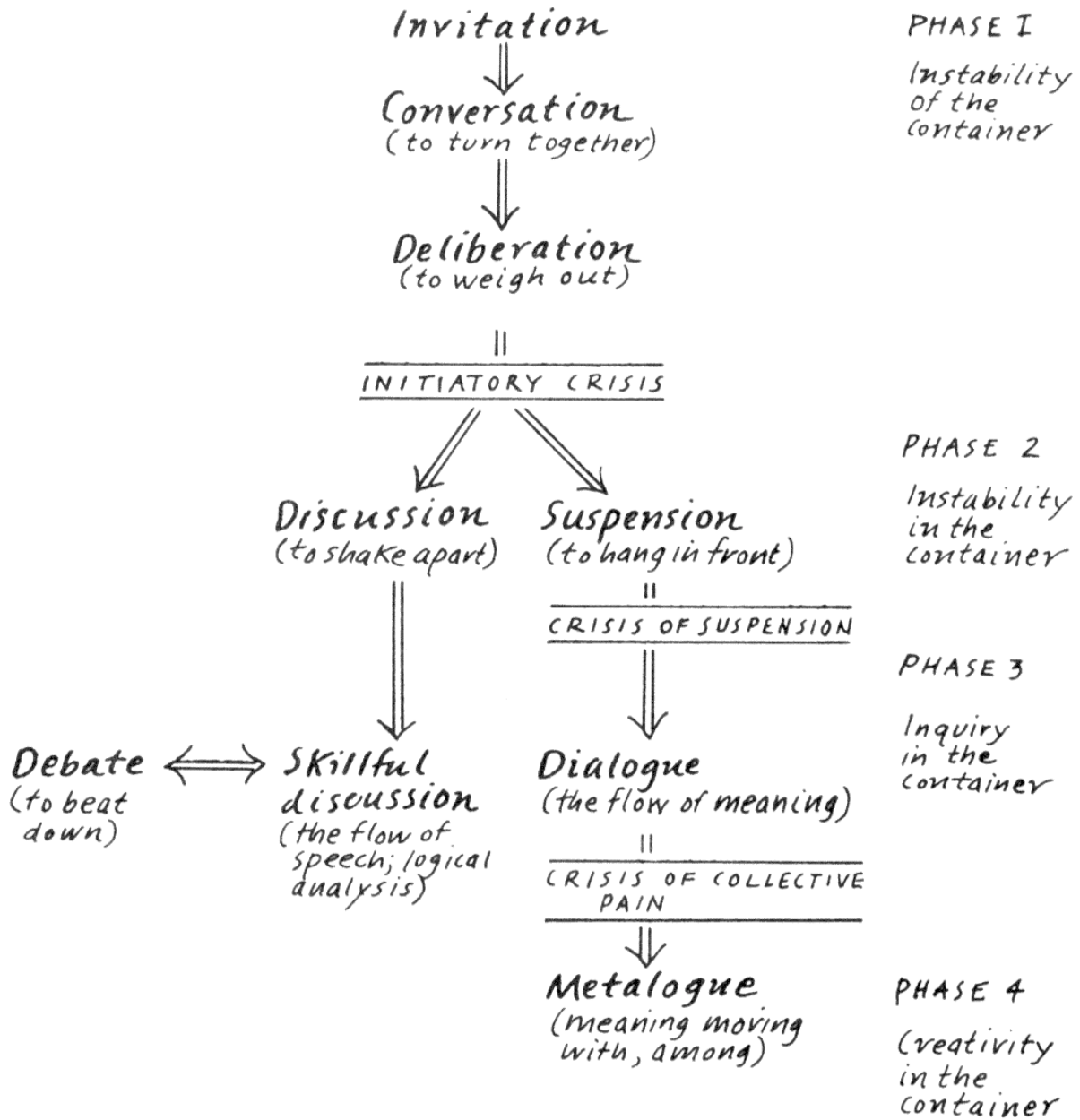
2. *Instability in the container*, in which members struggle with polarization and conflict springing from fragmentation, or the clash of personally held beliefs and assumptions; a “crisis of suspension” results as members fail to “sign on” to each others’ ideas. leading to first attempts to suspend personal assumptions publicly, leading to

3. *Inquiry in the container*, in which participants are able to inquire into polarization and foreign ideas, without “voting” or otherwise taking divisive action on the group’s fragmented knowledge; given these new skills and collective activity, the group begins to experience a “crisis of collective pain” as the depth of disconnection is held by the group. This opens the possibility for

4. *Creativity in the container*, in which members begin to think generatively, and new understandings based on collective perception emerge.

Each of the stages of the dialogue process seems to contain certain critical elements and forces. It is important to state that there is a similarity of this model to other group development models, and some important differences. Primary among these is that the emphasis in group models is typically on the nature of the interpersonal interactions among the people in the group. In dialogue the emphasis is on the nature of the thought processes that underlie what is appearing in the group, the quality of the individual and collective reasoning, and the quality of their collective attention. One does not in dialogue, for instance, seek to “give feedback” to others; instead one is asked to reflect on one’s own impulses and projections -- to listen to oneself in essence. Inquiry into the nature of the collective pattern is encouraged, from a stance grounded in one’s own experience.

Evolution of Dialogue



Dialogue — a Proposal

by David Bohm

DIALOGUE, AS WE ARE CHOOSING to use the word, is a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. It enables inquiry into, and understanding of, the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals, nations and even different parts of the same organization. In our modern culture men and women are able to interact with one another in many ways: they can sing dance or play together with little difficulty but their ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to them seems invariable to lead to dispute, division and often to violence. In our view this condition points to a deep and pervasive defect in the process of human thought.



In Dialogue, a group of people can explore the individual and collective presuppositions, ideas, beliefs, and feelings that subtly control their interactions. It provides an opportunity to participate in a process that displays communication successes and failures. It can reveal the often puzzling patterns of incoherence that lead the group to avoid certain issues or, on the other hand, to insist, against all reason, on standing and defending opinions about particular issues.

Dialogue is a way of observing, collectively, how hidden values and intentions can control our behavior, and how unnoticed cultural differences can clash without our realizing what is occurring. It can therefore be seen as an arena in which collective learning takes place and out of which a sense of increased harmony, fellowship and creativity can arise.

Because the nature of Dialogue is exploratory, its meaning and its methods continue to unfold. No firm rules can be laid down for conducting a Dialogue because its essence is learning - not as the result of consuming a body of information or doctrine imparted by an authority, nor as a means of examining or criticizing a particular theory or programme, but rather as part of an unfolding process of creative participation between peers.

THE WORD “DIALOGUE” derives from two roots: “dia” which means “through” and “logos” which means “the word”, or more particularly, “the meaning of the word.” The image it gives is of a river of meaning flowing around and through the participants.

Any number of people can engage in Dialogue - one can even have a Dialogue with oneself - but the sort of Dialogue that we are suggesting involves a group of between twenty and forty people seated in a circle talking together. Some notion of the significance of such a Dialogue can be found in reports of hunter-gather bands of about this size, who, when they met to talk together, had no apparent agenda nor any predetermined purpose. Nevertheless, such gatherings seemed to provide and reinforce a kind of cohesive bond or fellowship that allowed its participants to know what was required of them without the need for instruction or much further verbal interchange. In other words, what might be called a coherent culture of shared meaning emerged within the group. It is possible that this coherence existed in the

past for human communities before technology began to mediate our experience of the living world.

As a microcosm of the large culture, Dialogue allows a wide spectrum of possible relationships to be revealed. It can disclose the impact of society on the individual and the individual's impact on society. It can display how power is assumed or given away and how pervasive are the generally unnoticed rules of the system that constitutes our culture. But it is most deeply concerned with understanding the dynamics of how thought conceives such connections.

It is not concerned with deliberately trying to alter or change behavior nor to get the participants to move toward a predetermined goal. Any such attempt would distort and obscure the processes that the Dialogue has set out to explore. Nevertheless, changes do occur because observed thought behaves differently from unobserved thought. Dialogue can thus become an opportunity for thought and feeling to play freely in a continuously engaging movement. Topics of a specific or personal nature will become entwined with areas of deeper or more general meaning. Any subject can be included and no content is excluded. Such an activity is very rare in our culture.

PURPOSE AND MEANING. Usually people gather either to accomplish a task or to be entertained, both of which can be categorized as predetermined purposes. But by its very nature Dialogue is not consistent with any such purposes beyond the interest of its participants in the unfoldment and revelation of the deeper collective meanings that may be revealed. These may on occasion be entertaining, enlightening, lead to new insights or address existing problems. But surprisingly, in its early stages, the dialogue will often lead to the experience of frustration.

A group of people invited to give their time and serious attention to a task that has no apparent goal and is not being led in any detectable direction may quickly find itself experiencing a great deal of anxiety or annoyance. This can lead to the desire on the part of some, either to break up the group or to attempt to take control and give it a direction. Previously unacknowledged purposes will reveal themselves. Strong feelings will be exposed, along with the thoughts that underlie them. Fixed positions may be taken and polarization will often result. This is all part of the process. It is what sustains the Dialogue and keeps it constantly extending creatively into new domains.

In an assembly of between twenty and forty people, extremes of frustration, anger, conflict or other difficulties may occur, but in a group of this size such problems can be contained with relative ease. In fact, they can become the central focus of the exploration in what might be understood as a kind of "meta-dialogue", aimed at clarifying the process of Dialogue itself.

As sensitivity and experience increase, a perception of shared meaning emerges in which people find that they are neither opposing one another, nor are they simply interacting. Increasing trust between members of the group - and trust in the process itself - leads to the expression of the sorts of thoughts and feelings that are usually kept hidden. There is no imposed consensus, nor is there any attempt to avoid conflict. No single individual or sub-group is able to achieve dominance because every single subject, including domination and submission, is always available to be considered.

Participants find that they are involved in an ever changing and developing pool of common meaning. A shared content of consciousness emerges which allows a level of creativity and insight that is not generally available to individuals or to groups that interact in more familiar ways. This reveals an aspect of Dialogue that Patrick de Mare has called

koinonia, a word meaning “impersonal fellowship”, which was originally used to describe the early form of Athenian democracy in which all the free men of the city gathered to govern themselves.

As this fellowship is experienced it begins to take precedence over the more overt content of the conversation (sic). It is an important stage in the Dialogue, a moment of increased coherence, where the group is able to move beyond its perceived blocks or limitations and into new territory, But it is also a point at which a group may begin to relax and bask in the “high” that accompanies the experience. This is the point that sometimes causes confusion between Dialogue and some forms of psychotherapy. Participants may want to hold the group together in order to preserve the pleasurable feeling of security and belonging that accompanies the state. This is similar to that sense of community often reached in therapy groups or in team building workshops where it is taken to be the evidence of the success of the method used. Beyond such a point, however, lie even more significant and subtle realms of creativity, intelligence and understanding that can be approached only by persisting in the process of inquiry and risking re-entry into areas of potentially chaotic or frustrating uncertainty.

DIALOGUE IS NOT discussion, a word that shares its root meaning with “percussion” and “concussion,” both of which involve breaking things up. Nor is it debate. These forms of conversation contain an implicit tendency to point toward a goal, to hammer out an agreement, to try to solve a problem or have one’s opinion prevail. It is also not a “salon”, which is a kind of gathering that is both informal and most often characterized by an intention to entertain, exchange friendship, gossip and other information. Although the word “dialogue” has often been used in similar ways, its deeper, root meaning implies that it is not primarily interested in any of this.

Dialogue is not a new name for therapy-groups or sensitivity training, although it is superficially similar to these and other related forms of group work. Its consequences may be psychotherapeutic but it does not attempt to focus on removing the emotional blocks of any one participant nor to teach, train or analyze. Nevertheless, it is an arena in which learning and the dissolution of blocks can and often do take place. It is not a technique for problem solving or conflict resolution, although problems may well be resolved during the course of a Dialogue, or perhaps later, as a result of increased understanding and fellowship that occurs among the participants. It is, as we have emphasized, primarily a means of exploring the field of thought.

Dialogue resembles a number of other forms of group activity and may at times include aspects of them but in fact it is something new to our culture. We believe that it is an activity that might well prove vital to the future health of our civilization.

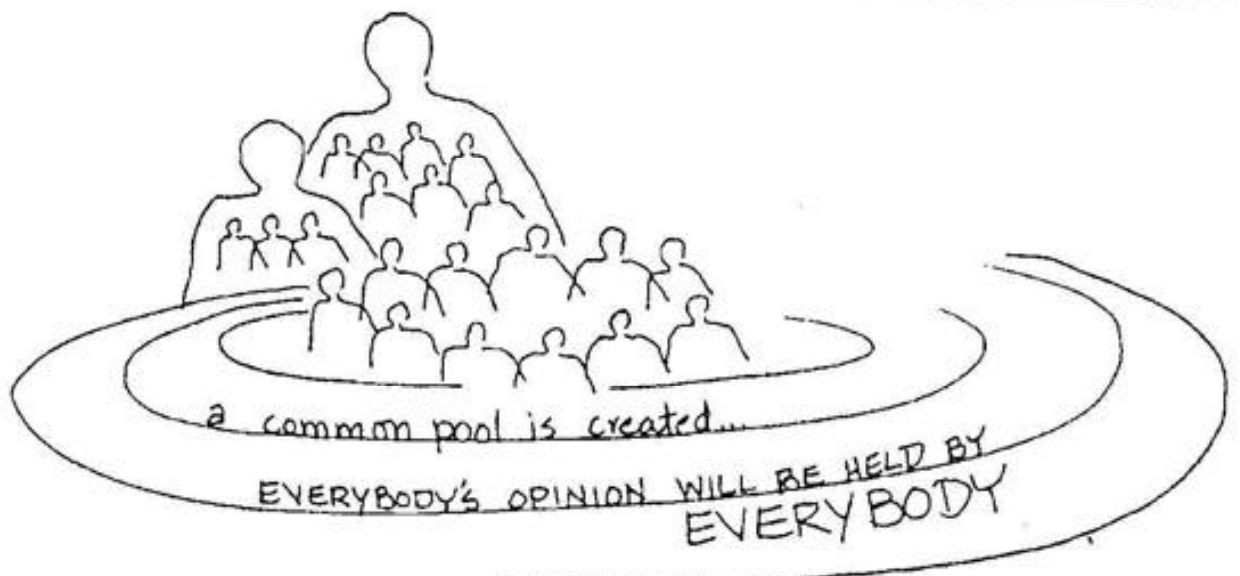
SUSPENSION OF THOUGHTS, impulses, judgments, etc., lies at the very heart of Dialogue. It is one of its most important new aspects. It is not easily grasped because the activity is both unfamiliar and subtle. Suspension involves attention, listening and looking and is essential to exploration. Speaking is necessary, of course, for without it there would be little in the Dialogue to explore, But the actual process of exploration takes place during listening - - not only to others but to oneself. Suspension involves exposing your reactions, impulses, feelings and opinions in such a way that they can be seen and felt within your own psyche and also be reflected back by others in the group. It does not mean repressing or suppressing or, even, postponing them. It means, simply, giving them your serious attention so that their structures can be noticed while they are actually taking place.

If you are able to give attention to, say, the strong feelings that might accompany the expression of a particular thought - either your own or another's -- and to sustain that attention, the activity of the thought process will tend to slow you down. This may permit you to begin to see the deeper meanings underlying your thought process and to sense the often incoherent structure of any action that you might otherwise carry out automatically. Similarly, if a group is able to suspend such feelings and give its attention to them then the overall process that flows from thought, to feeling, to acting-out within the group, can also slow down and reveal its deeper, more subtle meanings along with any of its implicit distortions, leading to what might be described as a new kind of coherent, collective intelligence.

To suspend thought, impulse, judgment, etc., requires serious attention to the overall process we have been considering -- both on one's own and within a group. This involves what may at first appear to be an arduous kind of work. But if this work is sustained, one's ability to give such attention constantly develops so that less and less effort is required.

by David Bohm

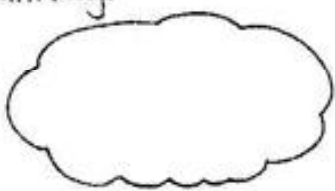
From his 1991 paper "*Dialogue — A Proposal*" by David Bohm, Donald Factor and Peter Garrett



people suspend their OWN opinions...

DIALOGUE:
an OPPORTUNITY...

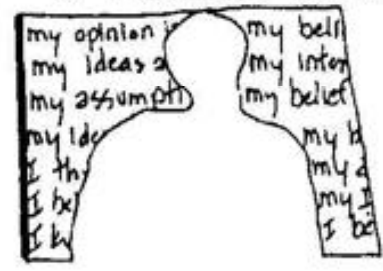
...to notice my own thinking.



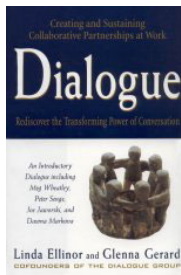
to explore what I DON'T KNOW



to transcend SELF



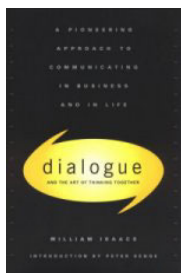
Dialogue Reference Material



Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation

by Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard

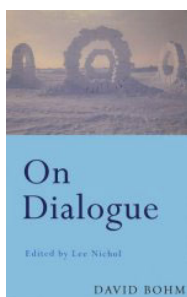
Publisher: John Wiley & Sons; ISBN: 0471174661; (March 1998)



Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life

by William Isaacs, introduction by Peter M. Senge

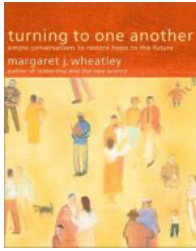
Publisher: Doubleday; ISBN: 0385479999; (September 14, 1999)



On Dialogue

by David Bohm, Lee Nichol (Editor)

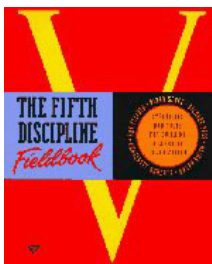
Publisher: Routledge; ISBN: 0415149126; 1 edition (December 1996)



Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future

by Margaret J. Wheatley

Publisher: Berrett-Koehler ; ISBN: 1576751457; 1st edition (January 9, 2002)



The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization

by Peter M. Senge (Editor), Art Kleiner (Editor), Charlotte Roberts, Rick Ross, Bryan Smith

Publisher: Currency/Doubleday; ISBN: 0385472560; (July 1994)