

Frequently Asked Questions about Dialogue

What does it mean to hold a Dialogue session?

“Having a Dialogue” and using Dialogue skills are two different things. *Having a Dialogue* means that you gather people together to practice the skills and follow the guidelines. There’s no agenda and no outcome intended. There’s no problem to solve. The purpose is to build relationships and understanding by creating a safe space where people can talk about what’s meaningful to them and share their stories. It’s a powerfully satisfying experience, but it doesn’t look like getting work done. A team that takes the time to do this on a regular basis, say once a month, over a period of time becomes a much stronger team because they understand and trust each other so much more. However, you can practice Dialogue *skills* in any meeting or conversation, even those in which rapid decision making is the goal.

How can I use Dialogue skills in day-to-day meetings?

Dialogue skills give you a great advantage in everyday meetings.

- Try suspending judgment as you listen to others’ contributions. Assume that you may not already know everything you think you know and that there’s something to learn from everyone’s contributions. See what happens, how much better you understand each other, how much you learn, and how much better decisions you make when you can listen that way.
- When someone says something that is in strong disagreement with your opinion, use inquiry to find out why they believe the way they do. Remember that they may be starting from a different set of assumptions than you hold.
- Notice how your listening is affected by how what someone else says affects your own feelings of self-worth. When you find yourself feeling really strong about something, wonder what is the impact on you of what they’re saying. It will help you be better at suspending your opinions and really hearing what the other has to say.

Notice that in many meetings, people make their points again and again because they don’t feel heard. If you can demonstrate real listening and understanding, work may actually get done *more* quickly.

Doesn’t Dialogue take too much time to be practical at work?

Actual Dialogue sessions take time and typically produce only intangible (but important!) outcomes. But you can use the skills of suspending judgment, identifying assumptions, and inquiring at any time in any meeting or conversation where there are differences of opinion, where people are taking sides, where you find yourself feeling sure about your opinion or perhaps even threatened by

someone else's opinion. Whenever you find yourself thinking that someone else is stupid, that's a great sign that Dialogue skills will help you be a better colleague and contributor.

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Does everyone else at the meeting need to know Dialogue for me to practice it effectively?

It's not uncommon for people to feel that the conversation will not go well if they are the only ones being "dialogic." Certainly if you are the only one who decides to slow down the conversation, you will simply never get a chance to speak. But the benefits of your inquiring about differences of opinion and about underlying assumptions do not depend on others in the room doing so too.

If, with your new-found Dialogue skills, you notice that others in the room are holding tightly to their judgments, notice in what way that, too, is a judgment (on your part!) and see if you can let go of that as well. I recommend that you focus as much on your own practice as possible and don't worry about anyone else in the room. View others and their difficulties with judgments with as much compassion as you can.

Dialogue Skills

Suspend Judgment
Identify Assumptions
Listen
Inquire
Reflect
Speak from Awareness

Guidelines for Dialogue

Sit in a circle
Speak to the center
Be mindful of the periphery
Suspend judgment, certainty
Hold the space for difference
Listen with respect
Slow down the inquiry
Speak from awareness

Dialogue Resource Websites

<http://www.publicconversations.org/pcp/index.asp>
<http://www.thataway.org/dialogue/org/org7.htm>
<http://www.muc.de/~heuvel/dialogue/>
<http://www.duversity.org/ideas/dialog.html>

<http://www.uia.org/uiadocs/contract.htm#reminder>

<http://www.uia.org/uiadocs/levelweb.htm>

http://www.muc.de/~heuvel/dialogue/dialogue_proposal.html