THE PROCESS OF DIALOGUE: CREATING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

BY EDGAR H. SCHEIN

Consider any complex, potentially volatile issue—Arab-Israeli relations; the problems between the Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians; the U.S. deficit, healthcare costs, or labor/management relations. At the root of such issues, you are likely to find communication failures and cultural misunderstandings that prevent the parties involved from framing the problem in a common way and dealing with it constructively.

We clearly need ways of improving our thought processes, especially in groups where finding a solution depends on people first reaching a common formulation of the problem. Dialogue, a discipline for collective learning and inquiry, can provide a means for developing such shared understanding. Proponents of dialogue claim it can help groups reach higher levels of consciousness, and thus to become more creative and effective. The uninitiated, however, may view dialogue as just one more oversold communication technology.

I believe that in addition to enhancing communication, dialogue holds considerable promise as a problem-formulation and problem-solving philosophy and technology. It is a necessary vehicle for understanding the cultures and subcultures in which we live and work, and organizational learning will ultimately depend upon such cultural understanding. Dialogue thus becomes a central element of any model of organizational transformation.

If dialogue is to become helpful to organizational processes, it must be seen as accessible to everyone. In order to demystify dialogue, therefore, I'd like to focus on the process—how to get started, and how and why dialogue often breaks down—while exploring some of the issues that groups must address if they are to create an effective dialogue process.

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Dialogue vs. Discussion

To understand the different phases of the dialogue process, I have found it helpful to draw a road map based on Bill Isaacs' basic model (see "Ways of Talking Together," p. 2). The diagram maps different forms of conversation in terms of two basic paths—dialogue and discussion.

One basic question that all groups must face before entering into dialogue is, "How do we know whether discussion and/or debate is more or less desirable then dialogue? Should we always go down the dialogue path?" I would argue that discussion/debate is a valid problem-solving and decision-making process *only* if one can assume that the group members understand each other well enough to "talk the same language." Such a state of shared understanding, however, probably cannot be achieved unless some form of dialogue has previously taken place. The danger in premature discussion is that the group may reach "false consensus": members assume they mean the same thing in using certain terms, but only later discover subtle differences in meaning that have major consequences for action.

Dialogue, on the other hand, is a basic process for building common understanding. By letting go of disagreement, a group gradually builds a shared set of meanings that make much higher levels of mutual understanding and creative thinking possible. As we listen to ourselves and others, we begin to see the subtleties of how each member thinks and expresses meanings. In this process, we do not strive to convince each other,
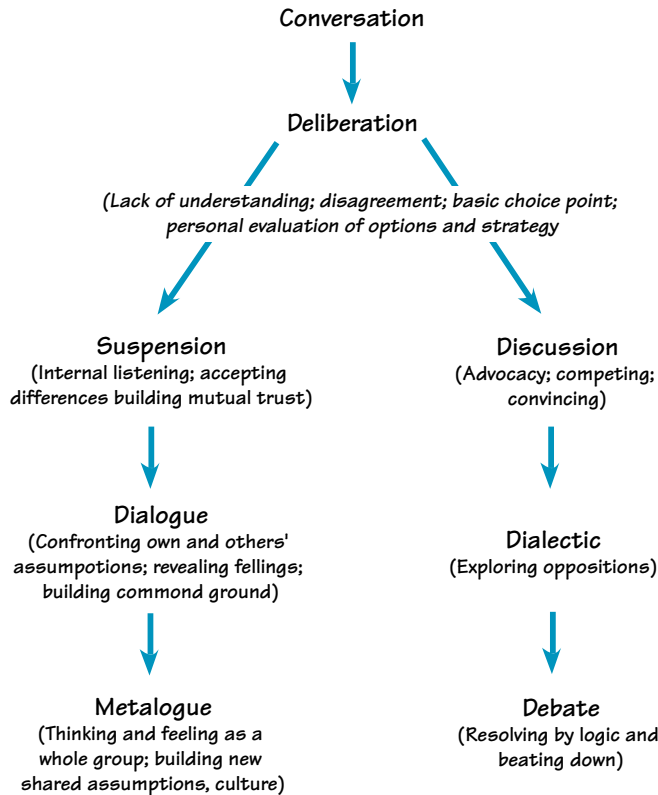
but instead try to build a common experience base that allows us to learn collectively. The more the group achieves such collective understanding, the easier it becomes to reach a decision, and the more likely it is that the decision will be implemented in the way the group meant it to be.

Getting Started

In the groups that I have observed, the facilitator started by arranging the setting and then describing the concept of dialogue. The goal is to give the group enough information to understand dialogue sufficiently to begin the conversation. Next, small group discussion and reflection is used to link dialogue to past experiences of "real communication" (see "Role of the Facilitator: Setting the Context," p. 3). This introductory session has several objectives which frame the session and allow a more effective dialogue to occur:

• Make the members feel as equal as possible. Having the group sit in a circle neutralizes rank or status differences in the group, and conveys the sense that each person's unique contribution is of equal value.

• Give everyone a sense of guaranteed "air time" to establish their identity in the group. Asking everyone to comment ensures that all participants will have a turn. In larger groups, not everyone may choose to speak, but each person has the opportunity to do so, and the expectation is that the group will take whatever time is necessary for that to happen.

• Set the task for the group. The group should understand that they have come together to explore the dialogue process and gain some understanding of it, not to make a decision or solve an external problem.

• Legitimize personal experiences. Early in the group's life, members will primarily be concerned about themselves and their own feelings; hence, legitimizing personal experiences and drawing on these experiences is a good way to begin.

The length and frequency with which the group meets will depend upon the size of the group, the reason

for getting together, and the constraints on members. The meetings that I participated in at MIT were generally one-and-a-half to two hours long and occurred at roughly two-to-three-week intervals.

After watching various groups go through a first meeting, I often wondered how the second meeting of each group would get going. I found that the best method was to start by asking *everyone* to comment on "where they were at" and to go around the circle with the expectation that everyone would speak. Again, what seems to be important is to legitimize "air time" for everyone and to imply tacitly that everyone should make a contribution to starting the meeting, even though the content of that contribution can be virtually anything (see "Check-In, Check-Out: A Tool for 'Real' Con-

versations," May 1994).

Deeper Listening

As a conversation develops in the group, there inevitably comes a point where we sense some form of disconfirmation. Our point is not understood, or we face disagreement, challenge, or attack. At that moment, we usually respond with anxiety and/or anger, though we may be barely aware of it. Our first choice, then, is whether to allow that feeling to surface and trust that it is legitimate.

As we become more aware of these choices, we also become aware of the possibility that the feeling might have been triggered by our *perception* of what the others in the group did, and that these perceptions could be incorrect. Before we give in to anxiety and/or anger, therefore, we must determine whether we accu-

WAYS OF TALKING TOGETHER

Conversation

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Deliberation

(Lack of understanding; disagreement; basic choice point; personal evaluation of options and strategy

Suspension
(Internal listening; accepting differences building mutual trust)

Discussion
(Advocacy; competing; convincing)

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Dialogue
(Confronting own and others' assumpotions; revealing fellings; building commond ground)

Dialectic
(Exploring oppositions)

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Metalogue
(Thinking and feeling as a whole group; building new shared assumptions, culture)

Debate
(Resolving by logic and beating down)

The facilitator has a choice about how much theoretical input to provide during a dialogue session. To determine what concepts to introduce when, I have drawn a road map of the dialogue process based on Bill Isaacs' model, which describes conversation in terms of two basic paths—dialogue and discussion.

rately interpreted the data. Were we, in fact, being challenged or attacked?

This moment is critical. As we become more reflective, we begin to realize how much our initial perceptions can be colored by expectations based on our cultural learning and past experiences. We do not always accurately perceive what is "out there." What we perceive is often based on our needs, expectations, projections, and, most of all, our culturally learned assumptions and categories of thought. Thus the first challenge of really listening to others is to identify the distortions and bias that filter our own cognitive processes. We have to learn to listen to ourselves before we can really understand others. Such internal listening is, of course, especially difficult if one is in the midst of an active, task-oriented discussion. Dialogue, however, opens up the space for such reflection to occur.

Once we realize that our perception itself may not be accurate, we face a second, more fundamental choice—whether actively to explore our perception by asking what the person really meant, explaining ourselves further, or in some other way focusing specifically on the person who produced the discon-firming event. As we have all experienced, choosing to confront the situation immediately can quickly polarize the conversation around a few people and a few issues.

An alternative choice is to "suspend" our feelings to see what more will come up from ourselves and from others. What this means in the group is that when I am upset by what someone else says, I have a genuine choice between (1) voicing my reaction and (2) letting the matter go by suspending my own reaction. Suspending assumptions is particularly difficult if we perceive that our point has been misunderstood or misinterpreted. Nevertheless, I have found repeatedly that if I suspend my assumption, I find that further conversation clarifies the issue and that my own interpretation of what was going on is validated or changed without my having actively to intervene.

When a number of members of the group begin to suspend their own reactions, the group begins to go down the left-hand path toward dialogue. In contrast, when a number of members choose to react by immediately disagreeing, elaborating, questioning, or otherwise focusing on a particular trigger that set them off, the group goes down the path of discussion and eventually gets mired in unproductive debate.

Suspending assumptions allows for reflection, which is very similar to the emphasis in group dynamics training on observing the "here and now." Bill Isaacs suggests that what we need is *proprioception*—attention to and living in the moment. Ultimately, dialogue helps us achieve a state in which we know our thoughts at the moment we have them. Whether proprioception is psychologically possible is debatable, but the basic idea is to shorten the internal feedback loop as much as possible. As a result, we can become conscious of how much our thoughts and perceptions are a function of both our past learning and the immediate events that trigger it. This learning is difficult at best, yet it lies at the heart of the ability to enter dialogue.

Group Dynamics

The dynamics of "building the group" occur parallel to the process of conducting the dialogue. Issues of identity, role, influence, group goals, norms of openness and intimacy, and questions of authority all have to be addressed, though much of this occurs implicitly rather than explicitly. The group usually displays all of the classical issues that occur around authority vis-à-vis the facilitator: Will the facilitator tell us what to do? Will we do what we are told? Does the facilitator have the answers and is withholding them, or is he or she exploring along with the rest of us? At what point can we function without the facilitator?

Issues of group growth and development have to be dealt with if they interfere with or confuse the dialogue process. The facilitator should therefore be skilled in group facilitation, so that the issues can be properly sorted into two categories: those that have to do with the development of the dialogue, and those that have to do with the development of the group. In my own experience, the dialogue process speeds up the development of the group and should therefore be the primary driving process in each meeting. A major rea-

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ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR: SETTING THE CONTEXT

The role of the facilitator can include the following activities:

- Organize the physical space to be as close to a circle as possible. Whether or not people are seated at a table or tables is not as important as the sense of equality that comes from sitting in a circle.
- Introduce the general concept of dialogue, then ask everyone to think about a past experience of dialogue (in the sense of "good communication").
- Ask people to share with their neighbor what the experience was and to think about the characteristics of that experience.
- Ask group members to share what aspects of such past experiences made for good communication and write these characteristics on a flip chart.
- Ask the group to reflect on these characteristics by having each person in turn talk about his/her reactions.
- Let the conversation flow naturally once everyone has commented (this requires one-and-a-half to two hours or more).
- Intervene as necessary to clarify, using concepts and data that illustrate the problems of communication.
- Close the session by asking everyone to comment in whatever way they choose.

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son for this acceleration is that dialogue creates psychological safety and thus allows individual and group change to occur, assuming that some motivation to change is already present (see "Containment").

The group may initially experience dialogue as a detour from or a slowing down of problem solving. But real change does not happen until people feel psychologically safe, and the implicit or explicit norms that are articulated in a dialogue session provide that safety by giving people both a sense of direction and a sense that the dangerous aspects of interaction will be contained. If the group can work on the task or problem using the dialogue format, it should be able to reach a valid level of communication much faster.

Task vs. Process

Once a group experiences dialogue, the process tends to feed on itself. In several cases, I have been in groups that chose to stay in a circle and continue in a dialogue mode even as they tackled concrete tasks with time limits. I would hypothesize, however, that unless a dialogue group is formed specifically for the purpose of learning about itself, it eventually needs some other larger purpose to sustain itself. Continuing to meet in a dialogue format probably does not work once members have mastered

the basic skills. The core task or ultimate problem, then, is likely to be the reason the group met in the first place.

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The best way to think about dialogue is as a group process that arises initially out of the individual participants' personal skills or attitudes. Dialogue is, by definition, a process that has meaning only in a group. Several people have to collaborate with each other for dialogue to occur. But this collaboration rests on individual choice, based on a certain attitude toward how to get the most out of a conversation and on certain skills of reflection and suspension. Once the group has gained those attitudes and skills collectively, it is possible to have even highly time-sensitive problem-solving meetings in a dialogue format.

Most people have a general sense of what dialogue is about and have experienced versions of it in their past relationships. Therefore, even in a problem-solving meeting, a facilitator may suggest that the group experiment with dialogue. In my own experience, I have found it best to introduce early on in a meeting the idea that there are always assumptions

behind our comments and perceptions, and that our problem-solving process will be improved if we get in touch with these assumptions. Consequently, if the conversation turns into too much of a discussion or debate, I can legitimately raise the question of whether or not the disagreement is based on different assumptions, and then explore those assumptions explicitly. Continually focusing the group on the cognitive categories and underlying assumptions of conversation is, from this point of view, the central role of the facilitator.

One of the ultimate tests of the importance of dialogue will be whether or not difficult, conflict-ridden problems can be handled better in groups that have learned to function in a dialogue mode. Because severe conflicts are almost always the result of cultural or subcultural differences, I would assume that initial dialogue in some form will always be necessary. Dialogue cannot force the conflicting groups into the room together, but once they are there, it holds promise for finding the common ground needed to resolve the conflicts. ◘

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CONTAINMENT

Bill Isaacs describes the need to build a container for dialogue—to create a climate and a set of explicit or implicit norms that permit people to handle "hot issues" without getting burned (see "Dialogue: The Power of Collective Thinking," April 1993). For example, steelworkers participating in a recent labor/management dialogue likened the dialogue process to a steel mill in which molten metal was poured from a container into various molds safely, while human operators were close by. Similarly, the dialogue container is jointly created, and then permits high levels of emotionality and tension without anyone getting "burned."

The facilitator contributes to this by modeling behavior—by being non-judgmental and displaying the ability to suspend his or her own categories and judgments. This skill becomes especially relevant in group situations where conflict heats up to the point where it threatens to spill out of the container. At that point, the facilitator can simply legitimize the situation by acknowledging the conflict as real and as something to be viewed by all the members, without judgment or recrimination or even a need to do anything about it.