

How do you communicate when you're having trouble communicating?

If you're like most HR and training professionals, you've been dealing with the changing demographics in your organization and the resultant challenges to effective collaboration and communication. These workplace transitions raise important questions that HR and training departments are tasked with answering. How should we communicate in a world where differences in perspective, experience, job function, culture, gender, age, and a myriad of other factors often lead to distrust, misunderstanding and reduced productivity? How can we build bridges across our differences to make our organizations more effective (and better places to work)?

The answer to these questions lies in skills that have been practiced for hundreds of years – but that most modern organizations are not familiar with. We can all benefit from learning the tools of dialogue - how you communicate when you're having trouble communicating.

Dialogue was used by ancient civilizations, but was not recognized as an important communications tool for contemporary organizations until it was rediscovered and promoted by the noted University of London physicist David Bohm. More recently, social scientist Daniel Yankelovich has outlined a practical guide for transforming conflict into cooperation in his 1999 book "The Magic of Dialogue". Leading organizational thinkers have embraced dialogue as a powerful skill set for building teams and strengthening leaders. There are varying approaches to the use of dialogue. I have adapted much of my understanding of this powerful communications tool from the work of Viewpoint Learning, an organization founded by Dan Yankelovich and my brother Steven Rosell.

To understand dialogue it helps to look at what it isn't. Dialogue isn't a conversation, because there are specific rules for how you carry out a dialogue that don't apply to normal conversation. It isn't negotiation, because you're not trying to arrive directly at a decision or agreement. Most importantly – it isn't a debate. Contrasting debate and dialogue can be very instructive.

Debate vs. Dialogue

In a debate, each side believes its position is right and the other position is wrong. In a dialogue, all sides accept that valuable information may come from more than one source. We're trying to understand each other's positions.

In a debate, you listen for what's wrong with the other side's arguments so you can counter with why your position is right and theirs isn't. In a dialogue, you listen for what's right in the arguments of others, to better understand why they believe what they do and to see what you can learn from different perspectives.

In a debate, you defend your point of view and criticize other perspectives. In a dialogue, you examine all points of view to see what you can learn. You suspend your judgment and try to see things in new ways.

In a debate, the goal is to win. In a dialogue there is no winner or loser. The goal is to understand.

When to use Dialogue?

Dialogue is not a universal communications tool to be used for all occasions. It is not what you would use if simpler, less structured approaches are working fine. In fact, dialogue is the option of last resort – it's what you use when nothing else seems to be doing the job.

In our diverse workplaces, dialogue can be especially effective in building respect between groups who may be having challenges working effectively together. The nature of the difference doesn't really matter. Whether you have different racial or ethnic groups, people of different generations or genders, the dialogue process is fundamentally the same. A dialogue can take place between two people or an entire workgroup. It can happen with or without a facilitator (though a facilitator can make the process more effective – especially with larger groups).

In most cases, it's best to hold a dialogue away from the work environment. A separate meeting space or off-site location takes people out of their usual setting making it easier to let go of pre-conceived judgments and prejudices and to suspend status differences.

Six Basic Rules of Dialogue

To simplify the process, I've elaborated 6 Basic Rules for Dialogue. These are...

1. Be open and suspend judgment – don't disparage other points of view.
2. Keep dialogue and decision-making separate - dialogue precedes decision-making, negotiation or action.
3. Speak for yourself, not as a representative, and treat all participants as peers.
4. Listen with empathy - acknowledging you have heard others and that you care.
5. Look for common ground – identifying areas where you agree.
6. Search for and disclose hidden assumptions - especially in yourself.

We can group these rules into 3 categories – suspension, listening, and discovery.

In dialogue we suspend judgment, decision making and status.

By suspending judgment I mean we temporarily let go of the stories we've told ourselves about other individuals or groups and allow ourselves to open up to the possibility that we may not know everything we need to know to make the best possible decisions. For this reason, we also suspend decision making until after the dialogue process. The hope is that through the dialogue we will better understand other positions and points of view, making decisions (if that's what's called for) better informed. We suspend status because if people are concerned about power differences, they are less likely to share their true beliefs for fear of some negative consequence. When the dialogue is over and it's time to make a decision, status needs to be reasserted since those who are ultimately accountable for the decision need to have the authority (and responsibility) to make it.

In a dialogue we listen with empathy in order to better understand what is behind different positions and perspectives.

To do this we listen actively, confirming we understand what's been said by reflecting back what we've heard. We don't listen in order to formulate a response. That is how you listen in a debate or negotiation. In a dialogue the goal is not to convince others of your perspective; it is to understand the various positions and points of view. When you listen with empathy, it's important to show that you care. People are more likely to be open and honest if they feel safe in the dialogue. They are not likely to be forthcoming if they feel that others in the process are indifferent to their beliefs, values or feelings.

A dialogue is a process of discovery and disclosure.

We ask questions to clarify what we are hearing and to make sure we understand. In the process, hidden assumptions are often uncovered. It is here that dialogue becomes most powerful. These assumptions are often at the root of misunderstandings and distrust. Uncovering them can open a workgroup to new levels of understanding and respect, often pointing the way to new possibilities or options. This can facilitate a search for common ground, leading out of the dialogue process and into decision making. The results are often remarkable.

Dialogue works. This is true in our workplaces, our homes, and our communities. If you haven't included dialogue as part of the communications skills you promote and support in your work environment, I encourage you to give it a try.

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