

# DIALOGUE GROUPS

*A Practical Guide to Facilitate  
Diversity Conversation*



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MEDICINE BEAR PUBLISHING  
BLUE HILL, MAINE  
USA

## CHAPTER 2

### DEFINING THE PRINCIPLES OF DIALOGUE

*"Dialogue comes from the Greek word dialogos. Logos means 'the word' or in our case we would think of 'the meaning of the word.' And dia means 'through'—it doesn't mean 'two.' A dialogue can be among any number of people, not just two. Even one person can have a sense of dialogue within himself, if the spirit of the dialogue is present. The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a 'stream of meaning' flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which will emerge some new understanding. It's something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It's something creative. And this shared meaning is the 'glue' or 'cement' that holds people and societies together."*

— David Bohm, *On Dialogue* (1990)

#### What is Dialogue?

David Bohm, a quantum physicist and a philosopher, devoted the last years of his life to exploring the issue of collective thinking and communication. On May 11, 1984, he was a member of a group that gathered at a small country hotel in England for a weekend seminar consisting of lectures and discussions. In the beginning, people were expressing fixed positions which they were tending to defend. The process of dialogue led to development of friendships among group participants, which in turn freed individuals from focusing on defending their own assumptions and opinions. It then opened up the possibilities for the participants to discover their shared meaning. People were no longer primarily in opposition; rather, they were participating in the discovery of common meaning that was constantly

transformed in the process of the dialogue. A new kind of mind thus began to come into being, based on the development of this common meaning. Bohm documented this watershed event in his book *Unfolding Meaning*, in 1985, describing the weekend seminar as “the awakening of the process of dialogue itself as a free flow of meaning among all the participants.”

In a transcript of his seminar on Dialogue (1990), Bohm contrasts the word “dialogue” with the word “discussion,” which contains the same root as “percussion” and “concussion,” meaning to break things up. He contends that people mostly engage in discussion rather than dialogue, thus depriving them of the possibility to discover their shared meaning. A great deal of what we call discussion is not really serious dialogue because there are all sorts of nonnegotiable, undiscussable things that block deep, honest, heart-to-heart communication. People coming from different backgrounds typically have different basic assumptions and opinions, which are the result of past experiences that are programmed into their memory. Over time, these assumptions and opinions become so dear to them that, consciously or unconsciously, they view them as part of themselves. So when they are challenged, people will defend their assumptions and opinions with an emotional charge.

Bohm also points out that the concept of dialogue is not new. There have been many traditions of dialogue used by the ancient Greeks, by the Native Americans in their tribal councils, and by Quakers in their spiritual practices. For example, the American Indian tribe would gather in a circle without a leader. They simply talked and talked, seemingly to no purpose, and they made no decisions. There may have been some wise men or wise women, especially the older ones, who were listened to a bit more than the others. The meeting went on, until it finally seemed to stop for no apparent reason and the group dispersed. Yet after that, everybody seemed to know what to do, because they understood each other so well. Then they would get together in smaller groups and do something or decide things. Apparently, a shared meaning emerged while they were talking, giving the group directions by which to proceed.

## How Dialogue Differs from Discussion and Debate

A frequent question regarding dialogue is how it differs from debate and discussion. Table 2-1 is a succinct summary of how they differ. As is evident in the table, there are distinct qualitative differences among dialogue, discussion, and debate.

### How “dialogue” differs from other forms of communication



#### Discussion

Present an idea  
Seek answers  
Sell, persuade, enlist  
Share information  
Solve a problem  
Give answers  
Achieve preset goals



#### Dialogue

Listen without judgement  
Listen with TING  
Learn different perspectives  
Broaden one's perspective  
Find places of agreement  
Allow for differences  
Bring out areas of ambivalence  
Explore thoughts and feelings  
Express paradox & ambiguity  
Unfold individual meaning  
Make the implicit explicit  
Articulate the unspoken  
Discover collective meaning  
Build relationships



#### Debate

Advocate one perspective  
Search for flaws in logic  
Judge other viewpoints inferior  
Stress disagreement  
Present a “right” position  
Defend one's own position  
Win the argument



Table 2-1. Comparison of dialogue, discussion, and debate  
(Source: Bohm, 1990; Teurfs & Gerard, 1994)

Special attention should be focused on the final points in each category in Table 2-1. To dialogue is to build relationships, to discuss is to solve a problem or achieve a goal, and to debate is to win an argument, which means a win/lose position. It is also interesting to note that the Dialogue column is longer than the others simply because dialogue touches upon intellectual, emotional, psychological, and attitudinal aspects of the participants. As for discussion and debate, we need only to engage our intellect without the test of our emotional maturity and psychological well-being. To put it simply, dialogue involves our total being—body and soul.

Since the primary objective for establishing dialogue groups is for participants to learn about differences and to develop appropriate behaviors to interact with one another in an increasingly multicultural cultural work place. To accomplish this objective, it is necessary for group members to explore cultural and other differences as well as to discover their own prejudice and assumptions about others in front of a group. Creating a safe environment and devising an effective communicative process are two critical factors for the dialogue group members to achieve this objective. Dialogue, therefore, is an ideal communicative process to remove misperceptions and stereotypes so often present among people who are different from one another.

In addition to knowing the principles for dialogue and the distinctions between dialogue and other forms of communication, such as discussion and debate, a set of conditions and guidelines described below will further clarify in more concrete terms on how to engage in dialogue.

### Dialogue Principle: A Learning Attitude



#### Suspend Your:



- ⊕ Assumptions
- ⊕ Judgement
- ⊕ Roles & Status
- ⊕ Need for specific outcome

## Conditions and Guidelines for Effective Dialogue

In order to have real dialogue in a group of people, certain conditions must exist in the group and certain skills must be developed by the participants (Bohm, 1985 & 1990; Gerard & Teurfs, 1993 & 1994; Hannigan, 1994; Huang-Nissen, 1996; Ross, 1994; Senge, 1990). Ten important points to consider are listed below and discussed separately in the following paragraphs.

1. Act as colleagues.
2. Create an empty space.
3. Listen without judgment.
4. Suspend assumptions.
5. Postpone agenda and goals.
6. Focus on learning.
7. Inquire and reflect.
8. Observe self.
9. Respect and value differences.

**1. Act as colleagues**—The differing roles and status that participants in a dialogue group have in the organization from which they are drawn should not be carried over into the operation of the dialogue group. Consciousness of roles and status in a dialogue group creates a hierarchical situation with regard to authority and power, which often inhibits genuine dialogue. By granting all participants in the group equal status as colleagues, they no longer need to be concerned with their positions in the organizational hierarchy.

This kind of collegial atmosphere creates a positive tone in the group to offset any feeling of vulnerability that dialogue may bring. Group members can then express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions without constraints. Since there is less need to prove a position in the organizational hierarchy, participants are more likely to view different perspectives as simply different and not better or worse. (Senge, 1990).

**2. Create an empty space**—We can't be open to learning if our space is filled with our own assumptions and opinions. J. Krishnamurti said, "The cup has to be empty to hold something." (cited in Bohm, 1990, p. 11). Therefore, we must have an empty space in our mind to allow new ideas and thoughts to enter. The purpose of dialogue is to go beyond any one individual's understanding. In dialogue groups, participants explore complex and difficult issues from many points of view and many people's experiences. By holding an "empty space," we will be able to open ourselves to new perspectives and new ways of seeing the world.

**3. Listen without judgment**—Another critical skill for members of a dialogue group is the ability to listen without judgment. This is easier said than done, simply because all of us have had a lifetime of training or conditioning to judge and to evaluate based on our experiences. For most people, it has become an

automatic reflex, and we judge or evaluate constantly and unintentionally. To listen fully to another person, our automatic judgment reflexes can interfere with effective listening, which in turn may distort what is actually said. To engage in real dialogue, we need to be able to listen actively and deeply. When the participants in dialogue groups are encouraged to listen without judgment, provocative topics that would otherwise become sources of emotional discord become discussable. More important, they become windows to deeper insights. (Senge, 1990)

**4. Suspend assumptions** — As a result of our life experiences, all of us bring a set of basic assumptions about the meaning of life, how the world operates, our own self-interest, and the interests and welfare of our loved ones. Since these assumptions have been developed over a long period of time, we are not often conscious of them. However, when others present assumptions different from our own, or when others challenge our assumptions, we often become threatened and feel the need to defend our assumptions. (Bohm, 1990; Teurfs & Gerard, 1993; Senge, 1990; Storti, 1994)

By suspending assumptions, we temporarily put aside our own assumptions in order not to let them interfere with our ability to listen to the assumptions others hold. We neither believe nor disbelieve the assumptions others present; we do not judge them as good or bad, we simply try to understand what they mean. Dialogue groups provide a forum for revealing individual assumptions. By being open to learning about everyone's assumptions and opinions, we can then appreciate all the meanings, allowing a shared meaning to emerge.

To suspend our assumptions also means to hold them in front of us for constant questioning and observation. By suspending assumptions, dialogue group participants are able to see their own assumptions more clearly when they are contrasted with other's assumptions.

**5. Postpone agenda and goals** — As noted earlier in this chapter, David Bohm learned that groups of people discover collective meaning and shared meaning only when they are unencumbered by the limitations of an agenda or predetermined purpose or outcome. An agenda or predetermined outcome sets up a whole host of expectations. When these expectations are met, individuals may stop exploring a deeper understanding of the issues, and thus they are unlikely to turn up emergent future issues. Ultimately, people in dialogue groups do achieve their agenda, purpose, and a great deal more.

**6. Focus on learning** — A dialogue group is created to provide opportunities for the participants to learn about the perspectives and experiences of others. It is not a forum to prove who is right or wrong; nor is it appropriate to convince others of one's perspectives. As described earlier, we tend to identify with our assumptions and opinions as a result of our past, and it is extremely easy to slip back into the habit of defending our positions. Placing emphasis on learning, therefore, serves to remind the participants constantly of the purpose for being in a dialogue group.

**7. Inquire and reflect** — To explore fully and deeply the meaning between, behind, and beyond what mere words can express, we need to ask open-ended questions. Inquiry opens the door to take in more information, ideas, feelings, and thoughts. However, inquiry requires deep listening, concentration, and reflection upon what has been heard without immediately offering a response or reaction either in words or thought processes. One way to achieve this state of deep inquiry and reflection is to go slowly and be comfortable with silence. (Gerard & Teurfs, 1993).

**8. Observe self** — A dialogue group allows the participants to look at issues from many points of view. Individuals thus gain special insights through the reflections of other participants of the group. In dialogue, people develop a new kind of sensitivity that goes beyond what we normally recognize as thinking. David Bohm believes this sensitivity lies at the root of real intelligence, and that collective learning is vital to the realization of the full potential of human intelligence. As the participants explore issues collectively and deeply, they encounter a rare opportunity to observe their own thinking process through the mirror reflections of other group members. Through the dialogue process, the participants become observers of their own reactions and feelings, thus increasing their self-knowledge as a consequence.

**9. Respect and value differences** — Of all the qualities, skills, and conditions necessary for effective dialogue, perhaps the most difficult to develop is the ability to respect and value differences in other people. Many people view such differences as unknown and unfamiliar. It is inherently human to be threatened by the unknown and to be uncomfortable when faced with the unfamiliar. To respect and value differences requires a degree of inner security so that one is not afraid of the unknown.

Moreover, one must also possess a sufficient level of curiosity and sense of adventure to take the risks required to discover and learn about the unknown and unfamiliar. Then, one must take a further step to be able to see the value in differences.

Therein lies the ultimate challenge to all of us. To value differences means to let go of our preconceived notions about differences. It means an ability to allow different perspectives to enter into our world view, thus enhancing and enriching ourselves.

Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard (1998) offer another perspective on the issue of diversity. "Diversity is about identity. When our diversity is not valued, we are not valued. When I perceive your diversity as a threat to me, it becomes unlikely I will be able to value it." (pp. 276-277) Can we really value the diversity in others if we have not accepted our own dimensions of diversity? How can we gain enough inner security in order not to be threatened by the diversity in others?

Beyond a very important issue of identity which we all prize highly, there are other dimensions of diversity in each one of us that are worth exploring and discussing in our dialogue groups. Oftentimes conversation about diversity tends to focus on race, gender or national origin since these factors are most obvious to our eyes and ears in our initial encounters with others. In focusing narrowly on the dimensions of diversity in all of us, we miss a whole range of rich history and experiences of people from whom we can learn so much. Therefore, dialogue group members are encouraged to broaden the topic of diversity to include as many dimensions and as their curiosity and imagination would allow, and then take a step further to delve in deeply into individual life experiences regarding differences.

## Listening with Ting



Listen with your ears  
to hear the word, the tone, and the pitch



Listen with your mind  
to understand,  
to analyze, and  
to broaden perspective



Listen with your eyes  
to see the facial expression,  
to read the body language, and  
to look at the "window of the soul"



Listen to your heart  
to feel the emotions  
to empathize  
to respond

## Listen with TING

Listening deeply and thoroughly is fundamental to effective dialogue. Drawing from my background as a Chinese person and my learning about effective intercultural communication, over the years I have devised yet another skill and quality to enrich the communication process. In addition to listening without judgment, we need to evoke capacities beyond our cognitive ability. TING, a Chinese word for listening, has a written form composed of several parts, each of which can be a word in itself. These words, which are essential to deep and thorough listening, are ears, mind, eyes, and heart. (Huang-Nissen, 1996)

When we listen with our EARS, we not only listen to the words spoken, but we also listen to the tone and the pitch in which they are spoken. When we listen with our MIND, we listen to understand and to analyze, using our intellect. When we listen with our EYES, we keep our eyes open to see the nonverbal expressions of the speaker, to discern the underlying emotions unexpressed by mere words. Finally, we

must also listen with our HEART because the engagement of our heart brings out our capacity for empathy, sympathy, and compassion. Therefore, listening with TING is the ultimate (KING) in listening, through which the speaker and the listener can reach a sense of ONENESS with each other. Figure 2-2 shows the Chinese written word TING for listening.



Fig. 2-2. Listening with TING

Research shows (Bohm, 1985 & 1990; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Gerard & Teurfs, 1993 & 1994; Hannigan, 1994; Ross, 1994; Senge, 1990) that when people develop the capacity for real dialogue between and among themselves, they are able to develop creative methods of problem solving and realize a deep sense of community. The ten conditions, qualities, and skills described above are ideals and principles that people joining dialogue groups can strive to achieve. The dialogue group experience in four organizations indicates that the participants have derived benefits from applying these principles in both their personal and professional lives.

## Listening with TING

by Sally Huang-Nissen

Chinese word for Listening  
(pronounced TING)

- EARS** *Please listen to me!*  
Listen to me with your EARS  
Not just to the words I use (for they may not have been well chosen)  
Listen to the tone and pitch of my voice  
The high and the low, and the catch in my throat.
- MIND** *Please listen to me!!*  
Listen to me with your MIND (your intelligence)  
Interpret my words beyond mere dictionary definitions  
Attribute my intentions without prejudgment, and  
Discern accurately the depth of my meaning.
- EYES** *Please listen to me!!!*  
Listen to me with your EYES  
See the expressions on my face,  
Note the other non-verbal cues, then  
Peer deeply into the window of my soul.
- HEART** *Please listen to me!!!*  
Listen to me with your whole HEART  
Feel the intensity of my emotions  
Be kind to my fragile vulnerability, and  
Resonate with your sense of compassion, your humanity.
- KING** *Please listen to me!!!!*  
(Queen, Ultimate) Listen to me with your full power as a KING (or a QUEEN), the ultimate  
Give me your attention as if I were wise and have something to say, and  
Allow me the opportunity to make a contribution.
- ONE** *Please listen to me!!!!!!*  
(One-ness) When you listen to me with TING (your ears, mind, eyes and heart)  
You present me with the ultimate gift of yourself,  
Opening the possibility of mutual respect, caring and sharing, and  
My hope of One-ness with you, so...

***Please Listen to me with all of Yourself!!!!!!***

## Barriers to Dialogue

A great deal has been written about what dialogue is and what qualities, conditions, and skills are necessary for dialogue between two people or in a group situation. Our experience in dialogue groups has shown that there are barriers to dialogue on issues of diversity. These barriers are anxieties, anger, “us versus them” mentality, and victimization. “Every person lives... with anxiety in relation to known and unknown threats to his being... Our anxieties cause us to make and to attempt to find affirmations of our own being... Such concern... makes it difficult to both speak and hear openly and honestly.” (Howe, 1963, p. 25) When we are hurt or angry, it is most unlikely for us to be open to another point of view because we are too preoccupied with our own emotions.

One of the objectives for core groups in Digital Equipment Corporation established by Barbara Walker (1986) was personal development to empower and devictimize oneself. Barbara said, “... the us-vs-them mind-set results in our being overly focused on learning more about them, whoever that may be, than about ourselves, a major impediment to enhancing our own self-empowerment.” (Walker, 1986, p. 33) By stripping away our “victimhood,” we will be able to let go of the *us-vs-them* mentality so detrimental to building a shared community.

## Defining a Dialogical Person

The principles for dialogue and the optimal conditions necessary for genuine dialogue described above are skills and qualities most people do not automatically possess but can be acquired through personal and interpersonal development. Briefly described above are some of the challenges we may encounter on the road to achieving maximum learning through dialogue groups. Perhaps bringing the dialogic qualities into personal level can further clarify the growth process for individuals who wish to take full advantage of their participation in dialogue groups for personal development at both cognitive and emotional levels. In *The Miracle of Dialogue*, Reuel Howe (1963) describes the qualities of dialogical person. (Howe used the pronoun “he” in his text. However, this gender reference can also refer to a female person.) He is a person “in communication with his environment and open to the communication that environment offers, environment in this sense includes both people and things.” Four specific qualities of dialogical person excerpted from *The Miracle of Dialogue* (pp. 69-83) are detailed below.

1. He is a *total, authentic* person. He responds to others with his whole being, not just part of it. He is able to listen with his heart as well as with his mind. He is really present. He is able to learn as well as to teach, to accept love as well as to give love. He is not defensive in his relations and does not waste his energies in protecting and defending himself. He sees the one before him as a person he may be able to help rather than as an individual to be manipulated.
2. He is an *open* person. He is a person who is known first by his willingness and ability to reveal himself to others, and second by his willingness and ability to hear and receive the revelations of others. In addition, he is open to the meaning and influence of the dialogue itself.
3. He is a *disciplined* person. He is able to assume responsibility for himself and others, and is also able to accept the opportunities as well as the limitations offered by relationships with others. He holds himself to his own part of responsibility and leaves others free to respond and initiate as they will.
4. He is a *related* person. He responds to others and is therefore responsible for maintaining the structures of human relationships.

This chapter summarizes the theoretical underpinnings for dialogue and points out the rich benefits that genuine dialogue can bring about. The principles and conditions for dialogue are not always easy to cultivate especially faced with the barriers to communication described above. Rather than side-stepping these barriers, dialogue groups can provide an appropriate forum for participants to explore these issues, thus helping them gain a deeper level of self-knowledge and an awareness about the anxieties that others hold. Dialogue group, therefore, is an ideal learning laboratory for group members to learn about issues of diversity and develop the skills so necessary for effective communication in the work place becoming increasingly multicultural.

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*“I have noticed so often that if people dare to reveal their innermost concerns, their reality, if they speak from heart to heart, there is perfect understanding. All barriers fall away and communication is so easy.”*

— Dalai Lama  
*What Does It Mean To Be Human?*