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***Dialogue is about what we value and how we define it. It is about discovering what our true values are, about looking beyond the superficial and automatic answers to our questions. Dialogue is about expanding our capacity for attention, awareness and learning with and from each other. It is about exploring the frontiers of what it means to be human, in relationship to each other and our world. --Glenna Gerard, 1995.***

***Dialogue is a foundational communication process leading directly to personal and organizational transformation. It assists in creating environments of high trust and openness, with reflective and generative capacities. One might think of dialogue as a revolutionary approach in the development of the following organizational disciplines: continuous learning, diversity, conflict exploration, decision making and problem solving, leadership, self-managing teams, organizational planning and alignment, and culture change.--Linda Ellinor , 1996***

## DIALOGUE: SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

David Bohm traces the roots of Dialogue to the Greek "dia" and "logos" which means "through meaning." One might think of Dialogue as a stream of meaning flowing among and through a group of people, out of which may emerge some new understanding, something creative. Dialogue moves beyond any one individual's understanding, to make explicit the implicit and build collective meaning and community.

It is often useful to contrast Dialogue with discussion. In Dialogue we are interested in creating a fuller picture of reality rather than breaking it down into fragments or parts, as happens in discussion. In Dialogue we do not try to convince others of our points of view. There is no emphasis on winning, but rather on learning, collaboration and the synthesis of points of view.

Dialogue slows down the speed at which most groups converse by employing deeper levels of listening and reflection. Another important aspect of Dialogue is its open-endedness. This means letting go of the need for specific results. This does not mean there are no results from Dialogue; in fact there are many. However, in releasing the need for certain predetermined outcomes, important issues can be allowed by surface which often go undiscovered in agenda-based meetings. The result is often a deeper level of understanding and new insight.

A final important aspect of Dialogue is that it creates a community-based culture of cooperation and shared leadership. It moves groups from the dependency, competition and exclusion often found in hierarchical cultures to increased collaboration, partnership and inclusion.

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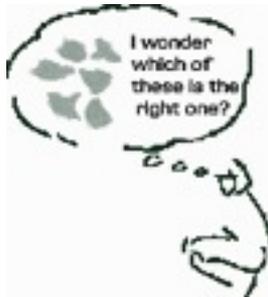
## DIALOGUE CONTRASTED WITH DISCUSSION

It is often useful to contrast Dialogue with a more familiar form of communication, discussion. Discussion has the same Greek root as percussion and concussion, *discus*, meaning *to throw, fragment, shatter*. David Bohm likened discussion to an activity where we *throw* our



opinions back and forth in an attempt to convince each other of the rightness of a particular point of view. In this process, the whole view is often fragmented and shattered into many pieces.

The intentions of dialogue and discussion are quite different and are contrasted below.



## **Dialogue**

To inquire to learn

To unfold shared meaning

To integrate multiple perspectives

To uncover and examine assumptions

## **Discussion**

To tell, sell, persuade

To gain agreement on one meaning

To evaluate and select the best

To justify/defend assumptions

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## THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF DIALOGUE

### **Skill Building Blocks and Guidelines for Dialogue**

The building blocks and behavioral guidelines outlined below are concepts that form a scaffolding for Dialogue. Like the scaffolding used in construction to aid in the initial stages of building, they are meant to help provide an environment conducive to unfolding the dialogical process.

Rather than a set of rules, you might think of them as reminders of the level of attention which lies at the core of Dialogue. Attention to our thinking, our feelings, our communication, assumptions and judgments. Attention to the unfolding meaning of the group, the spirit of inquiry and the pauses for reflection that lead to learning and understanding.

Held lightly, these guidelines and building blocks will help you enter into Dialogue. Held too firmly, they will trap you in just one more structure and limiting system. Dialogue is a living process and requires the willingness of all participants to be open to letting go of the known in order to discover new perspectives and understanding. As one writer so eloquently put it, "We must be prepared in each moment to give up (our ideas of) who we are to discover all we may become."

So, by all means use these guidelines to help you begin your exploration of Dialogue, and in each moment, be prepared to release them and let your attention guide you to the next level of learning.

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## FOUR SKILL BUILDING BLOCKS

### **Suspension of Judgment**

Of all the building blocks, suspension of judgment is the foundation for Dialogue, and perhaps, the most challenging. Our normal way of thinking divides, organizes and labels. Because our egos become identified with how we think things are we often find ourselves defending our positions against those of others. This makes it difficult for us to stay open to new and alternative views of reality. It is hard to listen when we are engaged in a heated battle about "who's right and who's wrong!"

When we learn to suspend judgment, to "hold our positions more lightly", we open the door to see others' points of view. It is not that we do away with our judgments and opinions - this would be impossible. We simply create a space between our judgment and our reaction, and thus open a door for listening.

Suspending judgment is also a key to building a climate of trust and safety. As we learn that we will not be "judged" wrong for our opinions, we feel freer to express ourselves. The atmosphere becomes more open and truthful.

### **Assumption Identification**

Identify means "to recognize, to pick out from your surroundings, to feel one with." Assumptions are "those things which are assumed or thought to be". So to identify assumptions is to recognize, or identify, that which we think is so.

It is probably obvious to most of us that our assumptions play a large role in how we evaluate our environment, the decisions we make and how we behave. Yet, it is just this aspect of our thinking that we consistently overlook when we seek to solve problems, resolve conflicts, or create synergy among diverse people.

Why do we overlook the obvious? David Bohm would say because our "assumptions are transparent to us". They are such a built-in part of our seeing apparatus that we do not even know they are there. We look right through them.

Our failure to look at underlying belief systems can lead to disappointing results. When we examine the underlying assumptions behind our decisions and actions we reach to the causal level of problem solving. We are able to identify where there are disconnects in our strategies and take more effective actions.

By learning how to identify our assumptions, we can also explore differences with others, work to build common ground and consensus, and get to the bottom of core misunderstandings and differences.

### **Listening: Key to Perception**

Take a minute, right now, to ask yourself for your personal definition of listening. Think about that activities you identify with listening? How do you know you are listening? Being listened to? What does listening feel like? How could your listening be enhanced?

The way we listen, has a lot to do with our capacity to learn and build quality relationships with others. When we are able to suspend judgment and listen to diverse perspectives we expand and deepen our world view. It is the act of listening that allows for integration and synthesis of new insights and possibilities. When we listen deeply we are willing to be influenced by and learn from others.

In Dialogue, listening also involves developing our ability to perceive the meaning arising both at the individual level and within the group. What assumptions are we hearing, which ones are shared? Listening for shared meaning informs us about the culture we live in, and presents us with the opportunity to make choices about our decisions and actions (rather than moving unconsciously, on auto-pilot.).

### **Inquiry and Reflection**

Inquiry and reflection are about learning how to ask questions with the intention of gaining additional insight and perspective. Through this process we dig deeply into matters that concern us and create breakthroughs in our ability to solve problems.

Inquiry elicits information. Reflection permits the inspection of information and the perception of relationships. The combination of reflection and inquiry enables us to learn, to think creatively, and to build on past experience (versus simply repeating the same patterns over and over again).

By learning how to ask questions that lead to new levels of understanding we accelerate our collective learning. Such questions often begin with "I wonder...", "what if...", "what does xxx mean to you?" As we ask these questions and listen, we gain greater awareness into our own and others' thinking processes and the issues that separate and unite us.

By creating pauses to reflect, we learn to work with silence and slow down the rate of conversation. We become able to identify assumptions and reactive patterns and open the door for new ideas and possibilities.

### **Interlocking Building Blocks: Weaving the Dialogue**

Each of the building blocks is an integral part of the Dialogue. They are living parts, which, like the organs of our bodies, constantly work to support the form they are part of. In each moment, the building blocks weave both the context within which the Dialogue unfolds and act as catalysts to support the unfolding itself. The more consciously we use them, the more they help

us to enter into and sustain the Dialogue.

And, all the skills are interrelated. For example, as we begin to draw aside the curtains of our judgments, we develop the capacity to speak and listen without the automatic coloring of past thought patterns. We become less reactive, more aware of the assumptions through which we filter our observations. Choosing to suspend these assumptions, we may experiment with expanding the horizons of our perceptions, increasing the number of points of view available to us. By creating space to reflect on what we are perceiving, seeking the next level of inquiry, opening up our senses and listening deeply, with the intention to discover and understand we enter into Dialogue.

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## BEHAVIORS THAT SUPPORT DIALOGUE

**Suspension of judgement when listening and speaking.** When we listen and suspend judgment we open the door to expanded understanding. When we speak without judgment we open the door for others to listen to us.

**Respect for differences.** Our respect is grounded in the belief that everyone has an essential contribution to make and is to be honored for the perspective which only they can bring.

**Role and status suspension.** Again, in dialogue, all participants and their contributions are absolutely essential to developing an integrated whole view. No one perspective is more important than any other Dialogue is about power with, versus power over or power under.

**Balancing inquiry and advocacy.** In dialogue we inquire to discover and understand others perspectives and ideas and we advocate to offer our own for consideration. The intention is to bring forth and make visible assumptions, relationships and gain new insight and understanding.

We often tend to advocate to convince others of our positions Therefore a good place to start with this guideline is to practice bringing more inquiry into the conversation.

**Focus on learning.** Our intention is to learn to from each other, to expand our view and understanding, versus evaluate and determine who has the "best" view.

When we are focused on learning we tend to ask more questions, try new things. We are willing to disclose our thinking so that we can see both what is working for us and what we might want to change. We want to hear from all parties so that we can gain the advantage of differing perspectives.

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## SUGGESTED READINGS

If you would like to do further reading about dialogue and related areas we suggest the following.

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