us from one another and from those we serve and manage. The new sciences tell us that the speed and complexity we are presently experiencing will only increase in the future. They tell us, too, that the only way we will be able to meet these challenges is to figure out how to unleash the full creative potential found within our human systems. The secret appears to be found in paying more attention to the quality of relationships and to the underlying culture and collective thinking patterns that help us get our work done. This is the promise of creating and sustaining cultures of collaboration and partnership through dialogue.

As dialogue is practiced over time, we discover 1) greater levels of authenticity showing up, 2) better decisions being made, and 3) improved morale and alignment forming around shared work. More personal initiative and leadership are exercised outside of the formal hierarchy. As people begin to see more of the whole of what’s being accomplished together, they each see where he/she can add more value. People stop waiting for someone else to tell them what to do.

3

WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

"I give a meaning to the word 'dialogue' that is somewhat different from what is commonly used. The derivations of words often help to suggest a deeper meaning."

David Bohm
On Dialogue

Like a river that has no beginning and no end, there is no single clear definition of dialogue. Where aspects of it have sprung up in the past it has usually led to cultures that honor and respect individuals and the relationships that unite everyone into families and communities. The Greek roots of dialogue are dia (through) and logos (meaning). Although this definition may sound obtuse, it is the meanings that we share that form the very basis for understanding one another at all. It is also the root of our culture—all those ways of doing things, artifacts, symbols, and words and language—that tie us into a common heritage.

Dialogue helps us bridge the increasing diversity found within modern organizations today. It is through the exploration of meaning that we learn who each person is and how we can work together appropriately. Reflect back on a time when you may have been with people from a foreign country and didn’t understand what was going on around you. You probably felt like an outsider, a bit in the dark and left out of things. Not only might you have experienced a language barrier, but a whole range of cultural meanings separating you from the
others. Even if you spent a very long time with these people, studying their language and customs, you might still have felt like an outsider. This is because you have not been a part of their "meaning pool" or cultural experience over any significant period of time. Although an extreme example, this is the basis of what it feels like to be a part of a minority in any organization today where you have not grown up a member of whatever forms the majority. Dialogue can help us move beyond cultural stereotypes and develop a sense of shared meaning because then we learn who one another is authentically.

It's helpful to compare the roots of dialogue with the roots of a more commonly found form of conversation in organizations today—discussion. This comparison helps us understand dialogue by understanding what it is not. We generally do not find either pure dialogue or discussion in normal conversation; you might think of them as two poles of a conversation continuum. Although we tend to move between both, we usually are unaware of when we do so. We can improve the quality of our communication just by becoming more conscious of when and where to employ each one.

A Contrast with Discussion

The roots of discussion are the same as the roots of percussion and concussion. All three connote a fragmenting or shattering. The other root of discussion, "discus," connotes a disc being thrown against a wall and breaking apart. So, in contrasting dialogue with discussion, we can say that dialogue is about gathering or unfolding meaning that comes from many parts, while discussion is about breaking the whole down into many parts.

Think about the focus of attention in some of the meetings you have attended lately. Were people trying to learn from one another so that they could see what was going on from a larger perspective, or were they trying to justify, explain, or defend their personal perspective? When the underlying dynamic in a meeting is to learn and expand what is known about something or to generate new perspectives from the views of many, the conversation tends toward the dialogic end of the continuum. And, conversely, when the dynamic is about finding one solution or the best alternative among many, it tends towards the discussion end.

Let's look at the characteristics of what we might label as pure dialogic communication or pure discussion and its close, more extreme cousin, debate:

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**The Conversation Continuum**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialogue</th>
<th>Discussion/Debate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeing the whole among the parts</td>
<td>Breaking issues/problems into parts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing the connections between</td>
<td>Seeing distinctions between the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the parts</td>
<td>parts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiring into assumptions</td>
<td>Justifying/defending assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning through inquiry and</td>
<td>Persuading, selling, telling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disclosure</td>
<td>Gaining agreement on one meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating shared meaning among</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>many</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main question to ask yourself when you are wondering if the conversation is more dialogic or more discussion-based is whether the main intention of those taking part in it is to push towards closure and choose one perspective; or, if it is to primarily learn from each other and build shared meaning that includes all perspectives. When there is a strong push for a conclusion or to find one solution, people tend toward discussion. When there is no push for a conclusion or a solution, people find it safer to offer differing views without any need to justify "rightness," and it will have more of a dialogic flavor.

**When and Why Would Dialogue versus Discussion Be Used?**

Because most conversations include a mixture of both dialogic and discussion-based ways of communicating, it is a good idea to get clear on the different objectives or intentions behind both forms. In this way, you can engage each form, depending on the context in which you find yourself.
For instance, if you were calling a meeting together of your peers from different parts of your organization to talk about a joint problem that has arisen, you might ask yourself the following:

- Am I calling the meeting to figure out what immediate action to take?
- Or, am I calling the meeting to learn from everyone about the nature of the problem?

If it is the former, then people will naturally fall into discussion. If it is the latter, and people are clear that you are not trying to solve the problem at this point, you may notice more of a dialogic quality to the meeting.

What often happens in the above scenario is that since people are not consciously aware of the difference between dialogue and discussion, they will think that they have been called to the meeting for both purposes—to learn about the problem and to take immediate action. The limitation that this assumption imposes is that these two intentions don't mix very well. Like oil and water, they foster different dynamics and lead to very different end results. In most organizations today, if the purpose of a meeting is not made clear at the outset and there is something obvious to be decided, most groups engage in discussion rather than dialogue. Our need for action and immediate decisions make this so.

**Divergent versus Convergent Conversation**

Dialogue encourages an opening up about problems, issues, or topics. Because it expands what is being communicated by opening up many different perspectives, we call it *divergent* conversation.

This is in contrast to discussion or debate that is about *narrowing down* the conversation to one end result. It is trying to come to closure so that everyone knows what to do. Because of this narrowing down, we call this *convergent* conversation. Discussion converges on one point versus dialogue opening to different points.

In most meetings held today in the West, we use convergent, or a discussion-based form of communication. And, when our objective is mainly to converge on the one right answer, we may be missing a large part of the whole picture as depicted below.

We depict the proportions in the following pie chart as we do because it is our strong intuition that if we spent more of our time in dialogic-based conversation first, we wouldn't need to spend as much time in discussion. We would have a larger vision or perspective about whatever it is we are trying to figure out.

Today, the pie is probably reversed with discussion taking up the major portion. Think how often in your experience there is a problem
that has surfaced and everyone is gathered together to figure out what to do. Because the problem seems so menacing and urgent, little time is given to any kind of in-depth look at what is causing it, or how everyone is affected by it. Rather, in the rush to action, a decision is made that only later has to be aborted because it doesn’t get at the root of things.

If a group or a team dialogues about such a problem or an issue first, by the time a solution must be selected, chances are the process will go more quickly. The choice may almost “choose itself.”

Consider the amount of time that you and those you work with spend between the two. Are you constantly trying to rush to a decision and closure about whatever is “up” in your work situation, or do you take more time and explore what is the nature itself of what is “up”? If you reverse the proportions towards the latter, even though it may seem counter-intuitive to you just now, you may find things go a bit more easily in the long run.

TRY THIS: PRACTICE EXPANDING AND FILLING IN THE CIRCLE.

When a problem crops up, rather than trying to figure out what action to take immediately, build a bit more time into your decision-making process. Call a meeting of all those who are affected by the problem (or as many as practical). Tell them that you are not going to make a decision about what to do immediately. Ask them to reflect on what they consider to be the nature of the problem from their perspective and to be prepared to contribute this in the meeting.

When everyone has gathered, open by asking them to take turns speaking about the problem. Let them know that there will be no back-and-forth conversation until everyone has had a chance to speak at least once.

Depending on how much time there is available after everyone has spoken, open the meeting up for comments. Remind the group that the objective of the meeting is to learn about what the problem is about and not to make a decision. If you notice people trying to come to a conclusion, you may have to remind them of this objective. At the end, allow ten minutes to collect the key learnings. If you meet again with the same people for decision-making purposes, bring a copy of these key learnings with you to review before you begin.

Whether you meet to dialogue about a problem or about trying to come up with a new way of doing things to make improvements, you may notice a strong tendency to fall back into discussion or to converge on one solution. In western culture, this is common because of our “results and action-oriented” ethos. It is why it takes a while for groups to catch on. As people become accustomed to the difference in intention between discussion and dialogue, and they see the results they get after engaging in dialogue, it gets easier to maintain dialogue without unconsciously falling back into discussion. Participants learn to monitor themselves as to what conversational form needs to be used depending on the situation and need for a decision.

**Advocacy and Inquiry in Dialogue**

From what we have said so far about the distinction between dialogue and discussion, you might think that advocacy wouldn’t occur in dialogue and that inquiry wouldn’t occur in discussion. But, this isn’t so.

What determines when and how these aspects of conversation show up, is the intention behind their use. In dialogue, advocacy is quite appropriate if it is to offer some perspective for the purpose of the group’s learning. The intention is not to force the group to come around to your perspective as the right one, but rather to build shared meaning. It is just the reverse in discussion, where advocacy is intended to persuade and convince the others that your perspective is the right or best one, not just to add another perspective.

In dialogue, we use inquiry for the purpose of digging deeper into whatever we are talking about. We use it to ask about one another’s assumptions and underlying thinking. We use it to clarify and expand what we know about something. Again, our overall intention in inquiring is to learn more.
Inquiry in discussion is used typically to learn enough about what the others are thinking so that we might better convince or advocate our own position. In this case, our use of inquiry is to gather enough ammunition to shoot down the other’s opinion while elevating our own.

**Other Defining Qualities of Dialogue**

There are many other defining characteristics and qualities of dialogue. We speak more in depth about these in Part II. We list some below to give you a flavor for what is generally present when dialogue is practiced. None of these characteristics in and of themselves makes a conversation a dialogue. Rather, it is all of them combined that give it its unique feel and quality:

- Suspension of judgment
- Release of the need for specific outcomes
- An inquiry into and an examination of underlying assumptions
- Authenticity
- A slower pace with silence between speakers
- Listening deeply to self, others, and for collective meaning

**The Many Faces of Dialogue**

There are many forms and ways in which dialogue shows up in the world today. Some of them are based on the work of David Bohm, and others are not. While we (The Dialogue Group) largely take our inspiration from Bohm, we also recognize and draw from other disciplines and traditions such as Jungian and Gestalt psychology, western philosophy, eastern meditation practice, indigenous and Greek societies, Quaker religious and business practices, and others. And we, along with a host of colleagues and peers, are continuing to evolve new ways to work with dialogue. It is important to note that just as no two conversations are ever the same even between the same people, no two dialogues are ever the same in the same way. Each time dialogue is practiced, groups invent what works best for them.

What we have tried to do in this chapter is to give you a feel for what seems most universal about the many forms that dialogue takes.

Bohm’s ideas have served as a platform for dialogue’s current re-emergence in organizations. While it is not our intention to be inclusive of all those who are introducing dialogue into organizations, we do want to mention the work being done by The Dialogue Project out of MIT. Dr. William Isaacs, its director, has been conducting research, which is meant to advance what is known about how dialogue can be integrated into ongoing organizational practices, particularly in the field of organizational learning.

There are other institutions and organizations that are also doing work with dialogue that go beyond the domain of the organization. Some of the contexts in which dialogue is being explored and practiced are interreligious groups, conflict resolution and mediation work, educational and public domain work, and therapeutic and small-group settings.

What all of these diverse forms of dialogue seem to share is the intention to promote learning, growth, understanding, healing, and renewal of those engaging in it.