

Association of Scottish Community Councils



Dialogue

Facilitation Tool Kit

Introduction

For a group that wants to explore its own consensus process in depth and to bring out the maximum of group creativity, dialogue is an excellent vehicle. It is a great way of going to the heart of the matter, but not quickly. This technique requires time and a contemplative attitude within a group. While it's certainly not for everyone, if there is the right mix of people and a trained facilitator, we have seen groups take conversations to completely new levels and develop ideas that would have never been possible.

Definition

A flow of thinking and conversing among individuals in a group.



Essentials

In the 1970's David Bohm, a physicist, and Patrick de Mare, a psychiatrist, brought to prominence a traditional meeting format referred to as "dialogue." It is a means of communicating in great depth and sincerity among a group of individuals who share a common interest in knowing more about themselves, their potentials together, and where their mutual creativity might lead. Dialogue is not discussion or a debate of issues. It requires participants to be open and step back from rigidly held opinions.

Dialogue can be used for any subject. When a group meets, there are no preconceived personal agendas, imposed outcomes or objectives.

In the beginning there are sometimes frustrations with this technique. One reason is that dialogue is based on slowing down the thought process of a group in order to examine it. To do that, dialogue puts an emphasis on silence. Groups are encouraged to repeatedly stop talking and pause for reflection. From this contemplative silence new thoughts are generated. It takes time and practice to improve this technique.

Key principles of dialogue:

- Suspension: the willingness and act of putting any and all personal ideas, opinions, judgments, impulses, etc. before the group to consider.
- Speaking: giving voice to the deeper feelings associated with a topic in a responsible manner; a willingness to join the group in verbal exploration.
- Listening: hearing what others and you have said.

- Inquiry: openness to explore the origin, meaning and consequences of topics, actions, positions that are 'suspended' before the group.
- Respect: willingness to hear and understand the positions of others and to assist them and the group as a whole in the overall process.

How to Use It

1. Set up the experience

More people will mean a greater diversity of thought. Let them know ahead of time, either through written materials or verbal explanations, what the meeting will entail. The meeting should last approximately two hours. Have chairs arranged in a circle to emphasise equality of all participants, as well as openness to any and all contributions.

2. Describe the ground rules

Instruct participants at the beginning of the meeting about what dialogue is and is not. All individual titles, labels, hierarchy must be set-aside during the gathering in order for dialogue to work effectively. Everyone must feel free to speak her or his mind openly and honestly, and likewise to be silent and reflective. Finally, remind everyone that there is no pre-set agenda or objective other than the exploration of the group awareness itself, in the anticipation of group coherence and creativity.

3. Launch a topic

Either have the group choose a topic from a pre-determined list or open the floor for a suggestion. Participants are asked to reflect on the topic and begin commenting on it. If necessary, remind participants to refrain from speaking directly to the one who proposed the topic or who just offered an opinion; this is not a debate and no one should feel he or she has to defend himself or herself.

4. Lead from behind

The task of the facilitator/Chair is to witness and ensure the open flow of thought and the development of the maximum opportunity for creativity. Use meeting techniques such as eliciting participation from each person, steering control and manipulation away from one or a few participants, encouraging mutual respect, etc.

While dialogue flows back and forth, the facilitator/chair may want to offer observations of the group thought process and consensus and offer guidance. For example, if a discussion or debate is emerging, or if polarisation is causing rigid positions and cutting off effective exploration, gently bring the group back to its shared sensibilities. Remind participants they need to "dis-identify" with opinions, ideas, and positions and to let go of ego attachments. The facilitator/Chair, or anyone in the group, can encourage the participants to take risks, to be spontaneous, and open, and to explore beyond what they might be accustomed to in other types of groups or meetings.

5. Wrap it up

It is up to the facilitator who is observing the time and the energy of the group to suggest an ending point. At this point the facilitator may then summarise the ideas and topics explored during the meeting or decide not to suggest any conclusions. Set a meeting time and place for the next gathering and adjourn. Notes taken during the meeting may be distributed but this is not a requirement.

Use It If.....

- You have a longer time frame that can incorporate multiple meetings and an introspective beginning.
- You are interested in exploring group dynamics and in enhancing the quality of everyone's involvement with one another.
- You want to enhance general creativity among a specific group of people.

Do Not Use If....

- You have a limited time schedule with deadlines fast approaching.
- Your group wants to work solely with established agendas, goals, objectives, specific outcomes, and pragmatic expectations.
- You know the participants are not of a philosophical temperament or the situation is not conducive to a contemplative approach.

