

Four Dimensions of Dialogue

DIALOGUE IS A WAY TO CREATE TRUST AND BUILD NEW POSSIBILITIES for a community. It is deeply needed in our world. Competitiveness and self-interest have made it difficult to truly hear each other. We find it hard to deal with divergent opinion or contested evidence. As a result, our conversations tend to mimic our civic life of disconnection.



Addressing complex issues requires that we come together as a community and build understanding. People need a variety of opportunities to talk with each other in safe environments and create connection. But dialogue takes time. It can challenge core assumptions tied to our very identity. Dialogue often involves a development or progression through various stages of intensity. By beginning with less intense engagement we can build the trust needed for deeper levels of exploration and collaboration.



Coming Together

The decision to reach out and engage is the first and most important step. This initial dimension carries hope and excitement. In it is the seed of possibility – the makings of a new beginning. But in its shadow lurks the prospect of conflict. But, coming together can open us to multiple ways of knowing. It can spark genuine curiosity about the root of difference.

There are no fixed “rules” for dialogue that ensure connection or understanding. Nonetheless, developing certain skills and capacities is helpful. These include, but are not limited to, approaching each other with



empathy and openness, practicing attentive listening and respecting confidentiality. At this stage, there is a danger of reverting to other forms of communication such as advocacy, debate or deliberation. All of these pit ideas against each other. Dialogue is different in that it seeks understanding and involves a willingness to push beyond the discomfort with differences and uncertainties. There is no leader, no specific agenda, and no decisions to be made. This sense of openness may at first be difficult for participants.

Remember, the goal is greater understanding not a strategic plan. Participants should start by looking for safe and neutral spaces where they can explore together and, most importantly, begin to build trust.

Focusing on Relationships

Dialogue involves exploring the different perspectives that makes up a community. The community is accepted as a given. The goal is understanding in a way that allows us to have relationships with each other even when we disagree about something. This is fundamentally

different than starting with a focus on a particular idea or belief and trying to build a community around that.

When we put an idea at the centre, the tendency is to see the other as an object or as a means to an end. Conversations will likely remain shallow and defenses high. When we start with an acknowledgement that we are a community and that we need to understand each other in order to live well together, we move from what Martin Buber called an “I-it” relationship to an “I-you” relationship.

Feelings of resentment, or even anger, may be experienced at this stage. Keeping the focus on relationships will help. This means continuing to apply the skills we started to learn in the first stage. It also involves practicing suspending judgements long enough to truly understand perspectives. Having participants come together as fellow citizens rather than in professional roles or as representatives of interests is especially important in the early days of engagement.

Questioning Together

Asking a question opens the space for possibilities. Or as Hans-Georg Gadamer says, “To be able to question means to want to know, and to want to know means to know that one doesn’t know.” Questions have the power to take the conversation to new depths.

It is not a simple thing to ask a question. We so often use questions with didactic or rhetorical intent – to test or lead someone to the knowledge that we already “possess.” In dialogue, questions spring from curiosity and mutual exploration. Recognizing that we don’t know is the first step to growth. It opens up the opportunity to think together. Asking “good questions” can create the space to look at a concept from different angles and can lead to a deeper understanding of that concept.

People need time to explore different perspectives within their community. Closed questions, those that elicit short factual responses, do not provide much opportunity for people to explore these different perspectives. Open questions, on the

other hand, stimulate thinking, open up possibilities and are essential for dialogue. Spending time exploring open questions together builds mutual understanding and provides the foundation of community.

Acting Together

Not all dialogue leads to consensus or action. Success can be as simple as creating the environment for people to talk and think together. When we take time to explore the values, perspectives, and experiences that make up the community, new possibilities emerge. This new awareness helps individuals and groups make better decisions.

Dialogue nurtures the environment for good decision-making. But dialogue is not simply the first step in the deliberation process. One might say, dialogue precedes, underpins and permeates deliberation.

Dialogue is not just an activity we engage in to make a decision. It is a way of being with one another. It is an ongoing cultivation of curiosity.

Better understanding of values *within* the community leads to better decisions *for* the community.