



FOSTERING DIALOGUE

Dialogue . . . is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarization and into a greater common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people.

—William Isaacs (1999, p. 19)

There was one moment in the conversation where we created a task for students together using her ideas and it was beautiful. I need more of those moments.

—Emily Manning,
District Instructional Coach, Denton, Texas

Jennifer was an instructional coach in an elementary school in Northern California. For our global communication study, she experimented with Habit 3, Fostering Dialogue. Jennifer read the materials for our project, and then she went deeper, reading David Bohm's essay *On Dialogue*. "The book was fabulous for me," she said, "helping me understand my thought process and how everything connected."

To foster dialogue, Jennifer had to change the way she interacted with others. She committed to withholding judgment, suspending assumptions, asking questions, and listening with empathy rather than telling. She wanted to embrace

dialogue by making sure her own thoughts and words didn't get in the way. She also video recorded her conversations to get a different perspective on how she was doing.

The first teacher who agreed to collaborate with Jennifer was a third-grade teacher with nearly 40 years' experience. At first, the teacher wasn't that interested in coaching; she'd invited Jennifer into to her class for a model lesson once, but that was about it. However, she agreed to collaborate when Jennifer told her about the dialogue experiment.

When they met to talk, they started their conversation by looking at student work and talking about one student in particular who was struggling to see the difference between informational and persuasive writing. To foster dialogue, Jennifer was intent to make no assumptions about her colleague's comments but to simply listen and validate her partner. "I noticed in my head that I kept wanting to make judgments, and I had to tell myself, 'don't go there!' I focused on respecting her opinions and asking questions that would help her talk about her assumptions and what she was thinking about this student in particular. That," Jennifer said, "worked lovely."

In her interview with me, Jennifer said,

I tried to more intentionally paraphrase what she was saying while also asking questions at a deeper level. The principles of dialogue are so simple. Respect them. Be willing to talk about what they are thinking. Maybe help them consider new ways of thinking. It was really delightful.

Jennifer wrote,

Dialogue really helped me live out the respect that I have toward this woman in a tangible way. Her body language softened during the conversation, and at one point tears filled her eyes, sighs of relief seemed evident, and she hugged me as I left, asking me to come again! I'm not sure it gets much better than that!

As a result of their conversation, Jennifer's teacher came up with a new way to motivate her student, and soon after, she emailed Jennifer to tell her the strategy had worked: "Getting the student to write about something that really mattered to him invoked this huge emotion in him and got

him to understand why his writing needed to be more focused on something that he could support with evidence." Soon after, the teacher invited Jennifer to her classroom to see the students' writing and the passion they were writing with. "It was so much fun to see that," Jennifer wrote, "because it was something we figured out together."

Jennifer's teacher continued to grow. She started to see how other kids could benefit from having more of a voice in their learning, and Jennifer told me, the teacher's "excitement kind of took over the whole class after we did this." This conversation along with others Jennifer had with teachers "really showed the power of dialogue." What surprised Jennifer was that although the habit of fostering dialogue helped her be more effective as an instructional coach, the biggest impact was on her personal life. Jennifer told me when I interviewed her:

It is because of dialogue that I understand my husband in a new way. We have been married for 34 years and actually gone through a lot of therapy. For me personally, this has been the first kind of Aha! where I realize what I need to work on. I now know I have to change the stories I have told myself for years. I have to suspend judgment and be a reflective partner to my husband. Personally, I feel like I have grown tremendously. Even in friendships, I realize there are things I need to let go of. So it has been a huge life changer for me. I'm starting to see people as partners, not projects.

What Is Dialogue?

The life change Jennifer experienced was a shift from a top-down approach to communication to a dialogue, and such a shift truly can be life changing. In traditional top-down conversations, the goal is usually to make sure messages are clearly communicated and received—people try to clearly explain their ideas and then try to persuade others to buy-in to what they explain. This is the opposite of a dialogue.

The goal of dialogue, as Jennifer's story illustrates, is to have a conversation where all parties understand, hear, shape, and are shaped by each other's thoughts. Consequently, a dialogue is a learning conversation. As we will explore,

The kind of conversation I'm interested in is one in which you start with a willingness to emerge a slightly different person. It is always an experiment, whose results are never guaranteed. It involves risk. It's an adventure in which we agree to cook the world together to make it taste less bitter.

—Theodore Zeldin
(1998, p. 3)

there are practical and moral reasons for adopting the habit of fostering dialogue.

PRACTICAL REASONS FOR FOSTERING DIALOGUE

Dialogical conversations are better conversations because they lead to better outcomes. Traditional top-down conversations result in one of two things, and neither promotes learning. First, top-down conversations can be active or passive power struggles where different participants try to impose their ideas onto the rest of the group. During active power struggles, two or more people fight it out, so to speak, trying to persuade others through their rhetoric and strength of conviction that they have the right idea and that others should adopt their idea. David Bohm, whose essay *On Dialogue* (1996) is a seminal document in the history of ideas about dialogue, describes this kind of conversation as being like a ping-pong game, “where people are batting the ideas back and forth and the object of the game is to win or to get points for yourself” (p. 7).

During passive power struggles, people simply surrender to the loudest or strongest voice without fighting. This often happens when one person has more power than others, such as when a principal and teacher discuss the teacher’s evaluation. Often, passive power struggles are conversations that are endured and quickly forgotten. The person at the end of the top-down conversation non-verbally communicates that he understands and agrees, but inside he knows he doesn’t plan to do what he is being told to do.

Top-down conversations also fail to produce results when participants focus on avoiding conflict rather than speaking the truth. During conflict-avoidance conversations, participants recognize that conflict might lead to hard feelings, so they spend more time keeping conflict at bay than they do saying what they think. When people say anything that might be slightly contradictory, they share their ideas tentatively or more often keep their thoughts to themselves.

Everyone in conflict-avoidance conversations works to keep surface harmony, even though, at the same time, they may also feel frustrated that they are unable to say what they think. At their worst, conflict-avoidance conversations, whether one-to-one or in groups, are frustrating and boring

since people do not feel comfortable speaking up. If you find yourself feeling bored and disengaged during a conversation, chances are you are experiencing a conflict-avoidance conversation; people you're talking with are likely counting the seconds until it is over.

A dialogue is a better conversation. During dialogue, participants listen with empathy, and they respect and encourage others' views. Consequently, during dialogue people say what they think, but they do it in a way that encourages open rather than closed conversation. William Isaacs, in *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (1999), provides a simple question we can ask to see if we are experiencing dialogue: "Is there energy, possibility, and safety here?" (p. 244). If not, we are probably not experiencing dialogue.

MORAL REASONS FOR DIALOGUE

There are clear benefits when groups of two or more people come together and learn how to think together. As Peter Senge wrote in *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization* (1990), when we embrace dialogue, "collectively, we can be more insightful, more intelligent than we can possibly be individually. The IQ of the team can potentially be much greater than the IQ of the individuals" (p. 239). There are obvious practical reasons for engaging in dialogue, but perhaps even more compelling are the moral reasons for dialogue.

The fundamental problem with traditional top-down models of communication is they always involve people imposing their messages onto others. Consequently, during top-down conversations, some people never get to speak. When we silence other people—as Martin Buber, Paulo Freire, David Bohm, and many others have explained—we fail to recognize them as fully alive, complete human beings. A top-down conversation turns others into objects, things—receptacles for our ideas, not partners. This is why, Bohm (1996) writes, "If somebody doesn't listen to your basic assumptions you feel it as an act of violence" (p. 53).

Dialogue involves respecting others and seeing them and their ideas as legitimate and responds to our universal, profound longing to be heard, to be validated, and to feel connected with others. Top-down conversation divides us, but dialogue, because it involves real listening and open,

When dialogue is done skillfully, the results can be extraordinary: longstanding stereotypes dissolved, mistrust overcome, mutual understanding achieved, visions shaped and grounded in shared purpose, people previously at odds with one another aligned on objectives and strategies, new common ground discovered, new perspectives and insights gained, new levels of creativity stimulated, and bonds of community strengthened.

—Daniel Yankelovich
(1999, p. 16)

I think the biggest success I have encountered while working on dialogue is the joy I have found in having great dialogue with another person. I usually went into conversations with “the desire to be right” attitude. Growing up in a military family and having three brothers, I think I felt like I had to prove everything I believed in or wanted to do. Taking a step out of my selfishness in communicating and truly focusing on being humble, suspending the assumption that my way was the right way and genuinely listening to the person made the dialogue go smoothly, and I wasn’t thinking of the next thing I was going to say as I was listening. I really felt like I built trust approaching the dialogue in this way.

—Nicole Patton,
Instructional
Coach, Heartland
AEA, Johnston, Iowa

creative conversation about topics that matter, unites us. For these reasons, Paulo Freire (1970) writes that “dialogue is an existential necessity” (p. 77).

Top-down communication not only dehumanizes those who are silenced, but it is also dehumanizes those who win conversations. People may get their way, but because they don’t know what others think and feel, they miss the chance to connect with them. Top-down communication isolates the winners as much as it isolates the losers. Paulo Freire refers to dialogue as a mutually humanizing conversation. Top-down conversations, then, can be understood as mutually dehumanizing.

Why Dialogue Is Difficult

Since dialogue builds relationships and improves thinking, why isn’t it a more common form of interaction? The answer is simple: Dialogue is not easy to foster. We fall prey to the habit of top-down communication in large part because it appears to be easier. The only problem is that it is also usually unsuccessful. With some effort we can adopt the habit of dialogue, but to do this, we have to understand what we are up against.

One reason why dialogue is difficult is that we are entrapped by our taken-for-granted assumptions and opinions about reality.

Bohm (1996) explains:

Everybody has different assumptions and opinions. They are basic assumptions—not merely superficial assumptions—such as assumptions about the meaning of life; about your own self-interest, your country’s interest, or your religious interest; about what you really think is important . . . And these assumptions are defended when they are challenged. People frequently can’t resist defending them, and they tend to defend them with an emotional charge. (p. 8)

Our assumptions make a mess of communication for at least two reasons. First, we interpret what others communicate through our assumptions, and that interferes with our ability to listen. I see this in conversations about best teaching

practices all the time. For example, if one teacher works from the assumption that teaching should be constructivist and another works from the assumption that teaching should involve direct instruction, the two teachers might struggle to come to a shared meaning about what is best for students. Real dialogue, then, is only possible when people surface and critically analyze their assumptions.

The second issue is that people, often unconsciously, hold on to their assumptions very tightly. Our assumptions can provide us with a worldview, a sense of right and wrong, and a way of making sense of our professional and personal lives. Often our assumptions are tightly tied to our life's work, our loyalty to other people, and our spiritual or etymological beliefs. For that reason, when our assumptions are challenged, our beliefs about friends, work, right and wrong, God, our very existence seem threatened. No wonder people bristle when they are asked to rethink their assumptions.

Consider a classic, complex interaction: conversation during Thanksgiving dinner in the United States. Since our assumptions are tied to emotions and moral perspectives on life, a simple topic like gun control can touch on people's beliefs about freedom, patriotism, and God—and bring the whole dinner table discussion to a crashing halt. Some topics can be so uncomfortable that they simply become undiscussable. And yet, as David Bohm (1996) writes, "Love will go away if we can't communicate and share meaning" (p. 41). Adopting the habit of fostering dialogue is not easy, but it is essential.

How to Foster Dialogue

A dialogue is a back-and-forth conversation during which all members of the conversation hear and learn what others are saying and where all members share what they are thinking. A dialogue is much more than simply taking in information. In fact, if all we do is listen to others—and there are certainly times when that is what we should do—we are not engaging in dialogue. In a dialogue, all participants are actively involved in creating meaning and thinking together. All participants hear and understand

I am carrying these practices into conversations I have with my children, which is really making for some great conversations with them. When I talk to them and not judge what they say and truly listen and treat them as equals in the conversation, I find that they share more with me. I love the quote from David Bohm, “Love will go away if we can’t communicate, and share meaning. . . . However, if we really communicate, then we will have fellowship, participation, friendship, love, growing and growth.”

—Nicole Patton,
Instructional
Coach, Heartland
AEA, Johnston, Iowa

what others have to say, and they also clearly share what is on their minds. As Chris Argyris has explained in *Action Science* (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985), dialogue involves equal parts advocacy and inquiry.

Emily Manning, who participated in our global communication study, wrote on her reflection forms that the project helped her become more aware of how she balances conversation during dialogue. “I notice,” she wrote, “when I’m overtaking a dialogue and when I’m more balanced. Thoughtful questions that open dialogue are helpful.”

ADVOCACY

People cannot “think together” with us if they do not understand what we are thinking and saying, so to engage in meaningful dialogue, we must clearly articulate and advocate for our ideas. There are at least five strategies we can employ to do this: (1) consider others’ thoughts and feelings, (2) clarify the meaning of words and concepts, (3) provide contextual information others need so they can understand what we are sharing, (4) identify our false assumptions, and (5) use stories and analogies to help ideas come to life.

Consider Others’ Thoughts and Feelings. When we understand our conversation partners’ thoughts and feelings, we have a much greater chance of communicating clearly because we can position what we say in a way that responds to our partners’ major concerns. For this reason, Habit 1, Demonstrating Empathy, is an important part of advocating for our perspective. One of the first thoughts we ask when we are communicating should always be, “What are others’ needs and emotions with respect to our topic?”

Clarify the Meaning of Words and Concepts. As I write this, I am a father of a two-year-old, and it is one of the great joys of my life to watch and listen as Luke learns to talk. Just a few weeks back, Luke, riding his little tricycle, turned to me and spoke his first sentence: “Watch this, Dad!” Each new word and phrase opens up the world more and more to Luke, and language is helping him describe what he sees, wants, and doesn’t want. And Luke’s use of language makes it easier and easier for him and me to actually talk about

what is going on in his mind. The more words that Luke and I both understand, the more we communicate.

The same is true for communication between adults. Words are imperfect, and miscommunication often arises when the participants in a conversation assign different meanings to words. For that reason, it is very important to clarify the meaning of the words we are using before we get too deep into a conversation. We can't have a dialogue if we aren't talking about the same things.

A simple example might be helpful. I often hear groups of educators talk about the importance of student engagement, but when they start to converse, it becomes clear that people define engagement differently. Conversations can spiral downward as people struggle to communicate their ideas to others who misunderstand what's being said. When groups of teachers learn Phil Schlechty's definitions of engagement, for example, their conversation can take off. In *Engaging Students: The Next Level of Working on the Work* (2011), Schlechty distinguishes between (a) authentic engagement, (b) strategic compliance, and (c) retreatism. When a group of educators comes to a shared understanding of the concept of engagement by adopting and understanding Schlechty's terms, they can start to have clear and meaningful dialogue.

Provide Contextual Information. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2012), *context* "is the part or parts preceding or following a passage or word . . . helping to reveal its meaning." Context is additional information that we need to understand what we are talking about or, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* says again, "ambient conditions [or] a set of circumstances" that can help us understand whatever is being communicated.

When we are sharing our thoughts, ideas, and feelings, it is important that we provide a context for what we are sharing. For example, if a teacher is sharing her opinion on what is best for a particular student, she might enhance understanding and the opportunity for dialogue by sharing what she knows about the student or by sharing her own experiences with the options being discussed. When everyone shares the same contextual information, there is a much greater chance that everyone will be able to think together.

To speak a true word is
to transform the world.

—Paulo Freire
(1970, p. 75)

Identify Your False Assumptions About Knowledge. Our false assumptions about what we know (false clarity) or about what our conversation partner knows (the curse of knowledge) can also make it difficult for others to understand what we say.

False Clarity. A major reason we might be unclear is we assume we know more about a topic than we actually do. We think we are being clear, but in truth we either don't have or fail to communicate a depth of knowledge about a topic that we think we have. I have watched many hours of video of coaches describing teaching strategies with great confidence. Unfortunately, despite their confidence, the coaches often describe those strategies superficially, overlooking essential information, or even making statements that are incorrect. Many of those videos, I must admit, were of me.

The Curse of Knowledge. In *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (2007), Heath and Heath write about the "curse of knowledge," to which we can fall prey when we learn about something. The authors write that

once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. Our knowledge has cursed us. And it becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can't readily re-create our listeners' state of mind. (p. 20)

Use Stories and Analogies. A final way to be more clear is to use stories and analogies. Stories serve numerous functions: They enable us to shape or structure the general chaos of personal experience; they convey truths too simple or too complex to be stated outright; they help us make sense and meaning of memories and experiences; they prompt us to wrestle with problems and create our own meanings; and they connect us with larger ideas and, perhaps most importantly, to each other.

A story, at its best, provides others with insight into the tacit dimensions of whatever is being discussed. Stories connect us with others who know and have experienced similar events. Good stories remind us of our humanity.

Although stories seem top-down, in reality they are not. A story does begin with one teller, but it only truly becomes

real when listeners hear it and make it something personally meaningful to them. Stories provide clarity, but they also leave room for others to apply the story to their own circumstances. A person creates and tells a story, and listeners, in partnership, re-create the story in their minds. As Richard Stone (1996) commented, listening to a story can be as creative an act as telling one:

When you hear my story it is transformed into a tale that feels intimately like your own, even palpably real and personal, especially if you repeat it to another . . . After a few tellings, it no longer matters from where these anecdotes and tales originated. They take on a life of their own, permeating our experiences. (p. 57)

When I was reading to prepare for writing this chapter, I had a meeting with my colleagues at the Kansas Coaching Project at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. In that one-hour meeting, I hastily ignored almost all of these strategies, which led to a predictable outcome.

We were in the midst of writing a research proposal to study a statewide instructional coaching project. When I came to the meeting, I knew we had a lot of things to accomplish, but I was excited to sit down with the team and bang out the steps of the project.

We only had an hour, so I asked if it was okay if I laid out what I saw as our next steps, and after writing up my ideas on the whiteboard, I asked for everyone's feedback on how we could break down each component of the proposal. I was pretty confident we would have an action plan worked out quickly.

The group, however, wasn't as quick as I had hoped to list action steps. In fact, they had a lot of questions. How many coaches would the project serve? How many districts would be involved? What would we use for our measures? What are our research questions? These questions could be worked out eventually, I thought, and I was frustrated that the team was so slow to break down the details of the plan.

The team also wanted to explore many other finer points of the project. They wanted to know how often we'd interact with the district leaders responsible for coaching the coaches, whether we'd ask them to share video of

themselves coaching, and whether the coaches of coaches would actually be coaches. Then they shared a plan they had put together, which had been emailed to me but I hadn't read, that took the project in another direction.

As we moved along, I got more and more frustrated, and I'm sure my teammates did too. I came to the meeting expecting to engage in dialogue around an exciting project. I was enthusiastic and excited about working with a team of researchers that I truly respected and who have taught me a great deal. By the end, I just wanted the meeting to end. My enthusiasm had turned into compliant resignation. "Why don't you just do what you want, then," I mumbled, and from that point on, I just counted the minutes until the meeting was over.

Looking back, I can see several reasons why this meeting ended up being an anti-dialogical disaster. Certainly a major reason was I had failed to employ many of the strategies described above. We did not have a shared understanding of terms, nor did I give any thought to what my partners might need or feel. What probably would have been most helpful, however, would have been for me to provide contextual information for everyone so that we could indeed engage in dialogue. If we had taken time at the start to confirm everyone's understanding of what we were doing, and if everyone had had time to get a clearer understanding of our project, we might have been able to have a meaningful and helpful dialogue rather than a conversation that, thanks to my impatience, pretty much ended up wasting everyone's time.

INQUIRY

In a dialogue, we must say what we think. However, advocacy without inquiry is anti-dialogical; it leads to a competition of wills where the loudest or most aggressive arguer wins. Dialogue is a partnership activity in which two or more people communicate not to win, but to achieve mutual understanding. As William Isaacs (1999) has written,

Advocacy means speaking what you think, speaking from a point of view. *Inquiry* means looking into what you do not yet understand, or seeking to discover what others see and understand that may be different

from your point of view . . . balancing advocacy and inquiry means stating clearly and confidently what one thinks and why one thinks it, while at the same time being open to being wrong. It means encouraging others to challenge our views, and to explore what might stop them from doing so. (p. 188)

There are several strategies you can employ to encourage inquiry. Among the most powerful are (a) be humble, (b) listen with empathy, (c) open yourself to new ideas, and (d) surface and suspend assumptions.

Be Humble. If I know it all, then I don't need to foster dialogue. Dialogue is a back-and-forth conversation that enables mutual learning, and there is no need for me to learn when I know it all already. This is why Paulo Freire (1970) writes that "dialogue cannot exist without humility" (p. 79). When we embrace Habit 3, *Fostering Dialogue*, we humbly let go of the notion that there is only one right answer—our answer!—and instead, we choose to see conversation as a testing ground for ideas. A dialogical conversation is something we co-construct with others so everyone in the conversation can learn and grow.

In *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling* (2013), Edgar Schein writes that humility, "in the most general sense, refers to granting someone else a higher *status* than one claims for oneself" (p. 10). As I see it, in dialogue, humility has a slightly different meaning—it is the willingness to not be right. When we are humble, we clearly communicate our ideas, but we do so provisionally; we embrace the opportunity to find out we are wrong simply because we would rather learn than win.

How then do we become humble? Is it possible to be "really great" at humility? Maybe we need a simple approach to get started. At a minimum, we should strive to keep our self-centeredness and pride under control, like a lion-tamer with a whip keeps the wild beast in its cage. We may never approach Mother Teresa's saintly humility, but we can at least become aware of how our pride and our desire to be right can block our ability to learn.

We can use our imagination to gain perspective on why we should be more humble than we are. First off, when we honestly consider our achievements, we might see that our

Learning to inquire together about what matters is some of the most significant work I can imagine. Our isolation, our investment in positions and roles, our defense of our own limits, fuel the condition of thinking alone. Dialogue represents a new frontier for human beings—perhaps the true final frontier. In it we can come to know ourselves and our relatedness to the whole of life.

—William Isaacs
(1999, p. 48)

accomplishments are only possible because of the ideas, support, and inspiration we've gotten from others. Also, if we really think about it, we should see that self-centeredness is an unattractive personal trait and our lack of humility can make it difficult for others to respect us. Maybe we can't totally alter our world orientation, but we can learn to put things in perspective. Ironically, when we stop being selfish, good things (more learning and success) will happen.

Emily Manning wrote on her reflection form that when she was working with a first-year teacher, she had to remind herself the new teacher still had knowledge and opinions that she needed to hear. "I need to work on my questioning," Emily wrote, "and really be mindful of the fact that even though she's brand new, she has ideas and opinions to offer. I need to provide more space in our conversation so that we can construct together."

If a major purpose of conversation is learning, the last thing we should be doing is confirming our own conceptions and misconceptions by solely seeking others who see the world the same as us. After all, if we are certain we know it all and don't need to learn, then we are almost certainly wrong.

Listen With Empathy. In Chapter 3, I described why listening with empathy is important and outlined some simple strategies we can all use to become better listeners, so I won't go into great detail here. Listening with empathy makes it possible for us to better advocate for a position, as I explain above, and is even more helpful for promoting inquiry. Indeed, every book or article I read about dialogue identified listening and empathy as essential habits. The back-and-forth sharing of dialogue is only possible when we hear and understand what our conversation partner says.

When Marisol Audia experimented with dialogue for our study of communication skills, she had to learn to take time "to really understand" her conversation partner. "I had to be patient with my conversation partner," she wrote, "and I had to think before responding. I usually have to fill the silence in a conversation since it can make me feel uncomfortable, but when I practiced dialogue, I truly wanted to understand my partner." Marisol also reflected,

“I am not as reactive when I hear something that I don’t like. I take time to pause and think before asking and answering questions. I am learning to be quiet.”

Daniel Yankelovich in *The Magic of Dialogue* (1999) writes that sometimes we can foster dialogue with what he refers to as “a gesture of empathy” (p. 82), that is, some small action we take or comment we make that communicates that we genuinely understand how a person thinks and feels. Such a gesture could be a helpful action, a truly understanding comment, or an apology. Yankelovich writes:

The fact that gestures of empathy often come as a surprise tells us something about our society. In our transactions with one another, we are so used to wearing defensive armor that expressions of empathy are unexpected—and disarming. And since disarming is an indispensable prerequisite to dialogue, a gesture of empathy is the quickest and easiest way to start a dialogue. (p. 82)

William Isaacs in *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (1999) sees listening as essential for learning and dialogue. Isaacs suggests we need to clear our minds and develop “an inner silence” (p. 84) so that we can truly hear others. He also writes that we need to actively listen not just to what people say but “listen for unspoken voices” (p. 298) and try to identify emerging concepts or themes that may not be articulated but which seem to be at play.

Open Yourself to New Ideas. To foster dialogue, you need to be open to what others have to share with you. This means that you value what others have to say or that, as Paulo Freire says, you have faith that others hold within them wisdom, knowledge, ideas, and gifts. As Freire writes (1970), “Faith in [people] is an *a priori* requirement for dialogue; the dialogical [person] believes in other [people] even before . . . meeting them face to face” (p. 79).

To be open is to adopt a learning mindset. Rather than entering into conversations intent to prove that we are right, we enter into conversations with the desire to find out if we are wrong. We can do this by seeking out

One lens that can reduce the temptations to blame and increase respect is to listen to others from the vantage point that says, “This, too, is in me.” Whatever the behavior we hear in another, whatever struggle we see in them, we can choose to look for how these same dynamics operate in *ourselves* . . . We may be tempted to say that a given behavior is all “theirs” —I do not have anything like that in me! Maybe so. But the courage to accept it as not only “out there,” but also “in here,” enables us to engage in the world in a very different way.

—William Isaacs
(1999, p. 124)

Dialogue cannot be carried on in a climate of hopelessness. If the dialoguers expect nothing to come of their efforts, their encounters will be empty, sterile, bureaucratic and tedious.

— Paulo Freire
(1970, p. 80)

what Isaacs calls “disconfirming evidence” (p. 99), information that might help us see that what we are advocating is incorrect.

We also should make it easy for others to tell us what they think even if what they think conflicts with our views. When we are dialogical, we should be nonjudgmental, affirmative, and encouraging. All of the Better Conversations Habits can help to create a setting where real dialogue can occur.

Finally, dialogue can only flourish in situations where there are many possibilities. If we have given up and we are just complaining or blaming, we are not engaging in dialogue. A dialogue is a conversation about a better future. Every dialogue can be a hopeful interaction, proof that we believe a better future is possible. When I listen to you, and you listen to me, there is the hope that we can create something new and better . . . that we can advance thought and create a better tomorrow.

Surface and Suspend Assumptions. One of the most important goals of dialogue is for us to become aware of our assumptions so we can judge them. We can’t really be open to learning when we are deeply committed to our own opinions, primarily because we are almost always certain that we are right. Bohm writes:

Opinions . . . tend to be experienced as “truths,” even though they may only be your own assumptions and your own background. You got them from your teacher, your family, or by reading, or in yet some other way. Then for one reason or another you are identified with them, and you defend them. (1996, p. 9)

We defend our assumptions for many reasons. We may want to look strong. Our assumptions might be central to our worldview. Our opinions might be a way of validating how we have lived our lives. Nevertheless, as Bohm has said, “If you are defending a position, you are pushing out what is new” (1996, p. 15).

To be dialogical, as William Isaacs writes, you need to “relax your grip on certainty and listen to the possibilities

that result simply from being in a relationship with others—possibilities that might not otherwise have occurred” (1999, p. 19). To balance advocacy with inquiry, we need to suspend our assumptions. This doesn’t mean we give up our opinions; it just means we don’t make the point of conversation our own point. We accept we might be wrong or right and believe what really matters is learning together. When someone offers a thought that calls into question our opinion, we don’t react with anger; we listen, and often we respond by asking a question.

Getting Better at Dialogue

The volunteers on our project who learned about and practiced Habit 3, *Fostering Dialogue*, reported they became more aware of how they communicated and changed—or at least started to change—the way they communicated after they watched video of themselves practicing dialogue. Emily Manning reported that although she realized she needed to work on questioning, she also noted, “I don’t feel as worried about getting every communication right.” Jolene Konechne wrote that after watching video of herself in conversation, she realized that she “asked a lot of questions that were not genuine but were actually statements in disguise.” Jolene also wrote on her reflection form, “I have become more thoughtful . . . I really think about my questions before each conversation.”

The strategies that support Habit 3, *Fostering Dialogue*, will only become meaningful if people learn them and practice them, especially when they do so while recording themselves in conversation. To help people learn and implement the habit of *Fostering Dialogue*, three forms are included at the end of this chapter.

The *Looking Back: Fostering Dialogue* form can be used to reflect on a conversation and identify one’s assumptions and the assumptions held by others in the conversation.

The *Looking At: Fostering Dialogue* form can be used to analyze whether or not people are engaging in dialogue.

The *Looking Ahead: Fostering Dialogue* form can be used to prepare for a conversation in which one wants to have a dialogue.

I am working on suspending the assumption that I am right, listening authentically to what the other person is saying and really respecting the other person knowing that what they are saying is valuable to them and they deserve to have me hear them . . . I am just really trying to become a better communicator.

—Nicole Patton,
Instructional
Coach, Heartland
AEA, Johnston, Iowa

TO SUM UP

Dialogue is way of communicating where those who are interacting work together to learn from each other and think together. Dialogue is a good idea for practical and moral reasons.

- **Practical:** Dialogue leads to better learning and better outcomes because everyone's brain is involved in the conversation.
- **Moral:** Dialogue is a mutually humanizing form of conversation because everyone is respected and listened to as a fully present human being rather than treated as an object as is the case frequently with top-down communication.

We can foster dialogue by balancing advocacy and inquiry. To foster advocacy we should:

- Consider others' thoughts and feelings
- Clarify the meaning of words and concepts
- Provide contextual information others need so they can understand what we are sharing
- Identify our false assumptions
- Use stories and analogies to help ideas come to life

To foster inquiry we should:

- Be humble
- Listen with empathy
- Open ourselves to new ideas
- Surface and suspend assumptions

GOING DEEPER

My interest in dialogue started with two books, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), both of which are described in other Going Deeper sections in this book. Senge's book introduced me to David Bohm, a scientist who studied quantum theory (whose doctoral advisor was Robert Oppenheimer and who worked with Albert Einstein) and who wrote one of the most influential books on the topic of

dialogue. Bohm's *On Dialogue* (first published in 1990) was actually a transcript of a seminar Bohm gave on November 6, 1989. The book is quite short, less than 50 pages in some editions, and reads like an essay more than a book; but, *On Dialogue* is wise, profound, accessible, and required reading for anyone interested in dialogue.

William Isaacs was influenced by both David Bohm and his colleague at MIT, Peter Senge. Isaac's book *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (1999) is the most thorough treatment of dialogue that I have read. His book is practical, insightful, and inspiring, and Isaac's writing has influenced my thinking on dialogue more than any other.

Daniel Yankelovich's *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict Into Cooperation* (1999) provides practical and inspiring insight into how to define and foster dialogue. His book is a great start for someone not ready to take on Isaacs' 400 pages of thought and practice.



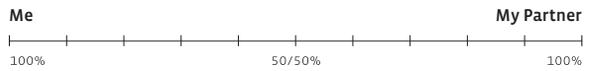
LOOKING AT:

Fostering Dialogue (1 of 2)



Complete this form after you have recorded a conversation in which you tried to engage in dialogue. You can complete it while watching or after watching the conversation.

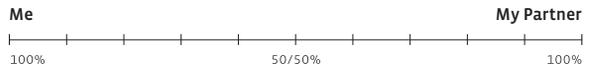
Put a mark on the line to indicate who did most of the thinking in this conversation:



Is there anything you can do to ensure both partners contribute equally to the conversation next time?

.....
.....
.....

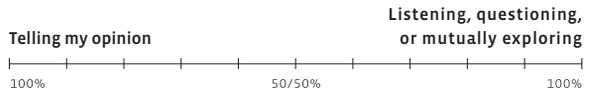
Put a mark on the line to indicate what percentage of the time you were talking in this conversation:



Is there anything you should do next time to enable your partner to speak more?

.....
.....
.....

Put a mark on the line that indicates how much of the time you were telling your opinion in the conversation:



Is there anything you should do next time to change the way you ask questions?

.....
.....
.....



Available for download at <http://resources.corwin.com/KnightBetterConversations>

Copyright © 2016 by Corwin. All rights reserved. Reprinted from *Better Conversations: Coaching Ourselves and Each Other to Be More Credible, Caring, and Connected* by Jim Knight. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, www.corwin.com.



LOOKING AT:

Fostering Dialogue (2 of 2)



Put a mark on the line that indicates to what extent the outcome of the conversation was one that you proposed, your partner proposed, or was mutually constructed:



Is there anything else you should do to make your next conversation more of a dialogue?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....



Available for download at <http://resources.corwin.com/KnightBetterConversations>

Copyright © 2016 by Corwin. All rights reserved. Reprinted from *Better Conversations: Coaching Ourselves and Each Other to Be More Credible, Caring, and Connected* by Jim Knight. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, www.corwin.com.



LOOKING AHEAD:

Fostering Dialogue



What is your opinion?

.....
.....
.....

What are your conversation partner's needs?

.....
.....
.....

What words do you need to define with your partner?

.....
.....
.....

What contextual information does your partner need to understand what you are talking about?

.....
.....
.....

What stories or analogies can you use to make this conversation clearer?

.....
.....
.....

Are you willing to:

- not have your opinion accepted?
- admit you're wrong?
- listen most of the time—giving everyone equal opportunity to talk?
- look for disconfirming evidence?
- suspend your assumptions?
- identify a devil's advocate?

What else can you do to encourage dialogue?

.....
.....
.....



Available for download at <http://resources.corwin.com/KnightBetterConversations>

Copyright © 2016 by Corwin. All rights reserved. Reprinted from *Better Conversations: Coaching Ourselves and Each Other to Be More Credible, Caring, and Connected* by Jim Knight. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, www.corwin.com.

Asking Better Questions

