

**At Play in the Field of Meaning:
Facilitating Dialogue**

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Our purpose is really to communicate coherently in truth, if you want to call that a purpose.

--David Bohm

Abstract

Dialogue, as envisioned by David Bohm and advanced by The Dialogue Project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, offers inviting prospects for certain groups. Bohm suggests that facilitators are useful at the outset, and then should work themselves out of a job, leaving the group to manage its own work. This paper, and the IAF Facilitator Forum it supports, address the question of what facilitators could learn and introduce to a group committed to dialogue.

What's the problem?

As facilitators we work in a world that frustrates most of us, along with the groups that ask for our services. We know the frustration our clients feel about trying to work effectively in groups because we have those same experiences ourselves.

Reflect on a time recently when you were a participant, rather than a facilitator, and see if this sounds familiar:

In a typical group, communication doesn't work the way we want it to. We often feel we only speak a distorted portion of what we intend, and certainly others only hear a screened-down, twisted version of what we meant. We put out ideas and when they don't get a warm reception, we feel frustrated. Then we defend our ideas in ways that keep us from seeing other possibilities. We take part in meetings and feel overwhelmed by the extent to which other people seem to be pushing their views or their constant agendas. We figure if we are going to have any of the action, if we are going to prevail at all, we had better act as others do -- grab the floor and don't let go.

The result is that many times the talk in groups has a combative quality. We find people debating (which has a root meaning "to beat down"), or, at best, discussing (which shares a root meaning with *percussion* and *concussion*, and means "to shake apart"). No wonder people despise working in groups and feel they are floundering and failing in a cold world that seems disjointed and alienating.

The theoretical physicist and leading thinker about dialogue, David Bohm, uses powerful, helpful terms to describe some of the problems in communication. People relate to each other in ways that are *fragmented*. In groups, our thoughts are *incoherent* — not organized — and they skitter off into directions we never intended. People’s thoughts are active, and people make use of experiences and memories to produce a sense of hard fact and invincible truth called *assumptions*. Most people are unaware of how their thoughts operate, however, or even *that* they are operating, so people get stuck and lose opportunities to allow new understandings to develop. Bohm says, “...thought is very active, but the process of thought thinks that it is doing nothing — that it is just telling you the way things are....thought produces results, but thought says it didn’t do it. And that is a problem”

Facilitators as well as participants experience a lot of these communication problems, both in groups we facilitate and in our own work groups, when we are participants. In order to facilitate dialogue, it is important to introduce some of the core ideas David Bohm developed, not as “rules,” but as possible new frameworks a group can use to work against common problems of communication in groups. The next five sections address some of these key points.

How does dialogue address the problem?

Dialogue stems from two important root words, *dia*, which means “through,” and *logos*, which means “the word,” or “the meaning of the word.” Dialogue offers the opportunity for people to talk together in ways that reveal the field of meaning hidden behind the usual tacit assumptions. In a profound way, dialogue, over time, allows us as facilitators and participants to see what drives thoughts, how we defend our thoughts, and the ways our assumptions limit our ability to think our way together to new meaning. Dialogue opens the way for a group of people to construct a new kind of shared understanding that has less fragmentation, and greater wholeness.

Dialogue, as envisioned by David Bohm, and as elaborated by The Dialogue Project at MIT (directed by William Isaacs), makes it possible for a group of people to learn how to think together. This “thinking together” goes beyond the notion of an ideal group with members who can easily collaborate to share information, build a shared picture of a problem, consider potential solutions, and make good joint decisions. Dialogue involves discovering together the fundamental assumptions people use to make their judgments. Once surfaced, those assumptions become part of the shared domain of work. They become more malleable, and it becomes possible to consider alternatives, soften positions, and recognize a deep, human level of shared work. One valued result can be mutual respect and what Bohm calls *impersonal fellowship*. In other words, it is possible, through dialogue, for people to be less alone and to work with others in a way that brings more of themselves into play.

Many (but not all) people find this satisfying. They get a sense of the possibilities for connection, not in a therapeutic sense, but in the sense of sharing a framework for thinking and producing new knowledge and insights together. They realize some of the potential for communication that is

coherent rather than incoherent. Bohm explains the difference with an analogy that compares ordinary, incoherent light with a laser's coherent, powerful, focused waves. He says coherent communication "would be coherent not only at the level we recognize, but at the *tacit level*, at the level for which we have only a vague feeling. That would be more important." (1996, p. 14)

One of the most significant and encouraging aspects of dialogue is the framework it offers for dealing with conflict and controversy. Once people have learned the skills of dialogue, a difference in opinion, even a strong one, serves as a clue, a "porthole" into the river of meaning rather than cause for entrenched combat. A person who discovers that her views antagonize another person in the room has the opportunity to work both reflectively and actively to discover what is behind their differing views. The whole group can help, not by figuring out who is right or who "wins," but by contributing to a deeper understanding of the meaning each person's views reflect. In fact, Bohm suggests that difference and conflict are essential for developing insights into the patterns of meaning created by all the people in the dialogue (and, by extension, society). Through seeking to understand what it is that another person did not understand or accept about one's own views, one can develop important new insights. Through expressing these insights, and through their accumulation and increasingly coherent organization, a group of people can find themselves thinking and talking together at a deeper, richer level.

What are the ingredients of dialogue?

David Bohm seemed reluctant at times to specify ways dialogue should be conducted, because he saw the danger that people would then convert those instructions into assumptions, portraying (and limiting) them as if they represented manifest truth (Dixon, 1996). Instead, Bohm suggested that, beyond a few minimum conditions, people interested in dialogue should figure out together how to make it work. In the spirit of suggestions, then, rather than hard-and-fast truth, here are some of the components of dialogue in a group setting:

- It takes place face to face.
- It is voluntary.
- It happens with a group large enough to make it impossible for any one person to take into account all the "sore spots" of the other people in the room; at the same time the group is small enough that people can sit in one circle and still hear each other without microphones. In most conditions, this means about 20-40 people.
- The first task is for people to talk together and learn together about dialogue and what it makes possible.
- There are no leaders; all participants are equal in the dialogue.

- Dialogue may begin with a facilitator, but the facilitator should work her/himself out of a job after awhile. The facilitator then may or may not become a member of the group, depending on circumstance and group preference.
- In the ideal, there is no topic. People develop the topic or topics as they talk. In the real sense, most dialogues take place among people who have some shared interests that are likely to be the focus of the work in the early stages.
- Dialogue unfolds over time. Bohm suggested that meeting regularly for a year or two might be about the right duration. If people meet less, they may never develop the skills and the insights to get to the structure of meaning behind their thoughts. If they meet longer, they may turn their new understandings into a form of “hard truth” and re-develop a rigid attachment to them.
- Dialogue involves some new “moves” that people learn and apply in order to have the talk function at a developmental level. One of the most important of these is *suspension*. Bohm suggests that when a participant has a reaction (“That’s unbelievably dumb,” for example) to something someone in a group says, she can learn to suspend initial responses. Eventually, working with others, she can even learn to suspend the assumptions that cause the reactions.

When people suspend, they notice the thought or judgment that arose, but take no action on it. Significantly, part of suspension applies to oneself as well as to other people -- Bohm advises people to notice their “charged” reactions but not to pass judgment on themselves for having the reactions in the first place. Suspension means recognizing these reactions in an open, non-judgmental way, and then not acting upon them. Suspending is one of the ways people create the time and the perspective to learn about their own assumptions, as well as those of others.

- At first, the talk in a dialogue is from one person to another person, not from one person to the whole group. This may change over time.
- There may be silences; silence is useful in dialogue in many ways. It is an obvious aid to suspension and reflection.
- William Isaacs (1993) identifies six initial guidelines for people committed to carrying out dialogue:
 - ▶ Suspend assumptions and certainties
 - ▶ Observe the observer
 - ▶ Listen to your listening
 - ▶ Slow down the inquiry
 - ▶ Be aware of thought

- ▶ Befriend polarization

At its most basic, dialogue involves people sitting together, sharing ideas through speech, seeking new ways to understand and make sense of a flow of meaning they generate together.

What is dialogue not?

Dialogue, in the vision developed by David Bohm, is not what we may think it is.

- It's not just for two. Many of us mistakenly think that *dia* refers to the number two, and that dialogue happens only between two people in a dyad.
- Dialogue is not therapy or an encounter group, though eventually people may bring aspects of their personal lives and their deep feelings into dialogue sessions.
- It is not a decision making venue, though it may set the context for good decision-making.
- It is not debate, negotiation, or discussion.

Finally, dialogue is not an appropriate tool for every situation, not a cure-all. It cannot work when differences in rank or status are expressed so aggressively that the group's intention to foster equity among participants is overcome. Dialogue will fail if management requires it. It cannot be used as a training vehicle to transmit information about specific processes and procedures to people who need to know. It is usually inappropriate for tight deadlines.

What are some of the difficulties with dialogue?

Although dialogue is a way to address some kinds of work, it can create its own difficulties. The difficulties arise primarily because dialogue counters some of the habits people have built for working together. Most of these habits are so ingrained that people are unaware they exist or could be changed. Most of the difficulties can be summed up in one word: *frustration*. The frustration arises from many sources, even when dialogue is a well-chosen strategy for a particular group and situation. Here are some specific examples of difficulties with dialogue:

- People are in the habit of wanting a product, and dialogue produces shared understanding and a sense of shared meaning instead.
- People are used to having work structured in familiar ways, with specific tasks, leaders, roles and deadlines. The absence of these familiar structures in dialogue settings can cause anxiety and distress.

- Dialogue sessions can be plodding or boring at times. Though this is natural in dialogue that takes place across time and may be a necessary stage in building shared meaning, it can be difficult to persuade people to continue when things have not gone particularly well for awhile.
- The amount of time dialogue requires can seem untenable in workplaces and other settings. This is true both of individual dialogue sessions and of the continuation across months or years.
- People in dialogue groups play out their familiar roles as dominant or passive communicators, and frustrate each other and the rest of the group in the process. In time, and with good fortune, these patterns can be observed, named, added to the unfolding system of discovered shared meaning — and possibly even changed.
- Habits of competitive conversation can make suspension difficult; even quieter people begin to feel that they must put ideas out to the group because others are holding forth. Anxiety and competition crowd out the group's ability to discover new ways of talking and working together.
- Some people have expectations that a dialogue group will support their particular interests. They are bound to be disappointed.

Dialogue is not a perfect form of communication that should be practiced in every situation. Even when it is the right tool, it does not guarantee group contentment. Most groups, in fact, will have to persist and *make shared meaning* of the difficulties that arise as they learn and practice dialogue.

What are ideal conditions for dialogue?

Dialogue does not always succeed. It has a better chance when certain conditions are present:

- Enough time for each session
- Enough commitment, resources, and freedom to continue the sessions across time for a year or two
- A willingness among participants to explore together
- A sense that other methods would not work in this case
- Widely shared willingness to learn some shared language and common principles at the outset, and then try them out

- An appreciation of discovery, exploration, and insight
- Facilitation in the right amounts, at the right time

How do facilitators do their work with a dialogue group?

In much of the first work on dialogue, facilitators have been extensively involved both as guides and as co-explorers, seeking to understand what works and how it works. Bohm is specific, however, that dialogue should not need permanent facilitation. In a sense, Bohm's vision is that dialogue should become self-guided work.

Facilitators are natural scouts for useful processes, however, and will be the channels for introducing many groups to dialogue in situations where no one would otherwise have known to consider it. This role requires the facilitator to be teacher, coach, and perhaps trainer, most intensely at the outset, and less frequently as people in a dialogue group develop their skills.

In our half-day Facilitator Forum at IAF 2000, the presenters will begin by describing some of the central concepts. Then we will use dialogue itself to explore the facilitator role in dialogue. We will not circumscribe the conversation too closely by specifying a narrow topic. We will suggest near the end of the session that we devote a short period to reflection specifically on the effectiveness of dialogue as a learning and discovery tool for facilitators.

Useful sources

Bohm, David (1996) *On Dialogue*, Edited by Lee Nichol. New York: Routledge.

Dixon, Nancy (1996) *Perspectives on Dialogue: Making Talk Developmental for Individuals and Organizations*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

Isaacs, William N. (1999) *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life*. New York: Currency.

_____ (1993a) Taking Flight: Dialogue, Collective Thinking, and Organizational Learning. *Organizational Dynamics*, 24-39.

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The presenters

In 1983, Rona Roberts co-founded Roberts & Kay, Inc. (RKI), a firm dedicated to advancing democratic practices in workplaces and communities. Most of Rona's facilitation practice involves helping people find things out, figure things out, work things out, or talk things through. She particularly enjoys facilitating egalitarian processes such as dialogue and open space technology. She delights in facilitating focus groups, and spends an increasing percentage of her time teaching others — particularly middle school and high school students — to facilitate and manage focus group inquiry. You can benefit from what Rona has learned about this by downloading *Turn Up the Volume: A "Students Speak" Toolkit* from the Toolroom at www.robertsandkay.com. In her civic life, Rona concentrates on efforts that build community, cultivate artistic expression, and address racial divisions. She is secretary of the Martin Luther King Neighborhood Association, Inc. in Lexington, Kentucky. Rona served as a volunteer in the U.S. Peace Corps, and is a native of Monticello, Kentucky, USA.

Steve Kay is a founding partner of Roberts & Kay, Inc., a firm with a 16 year history of supporting democratic practices in workplaces and communities. Since 1975, Steve has facilitated hundreds of public and private meetings, retreats, conferences, and planning sessions for clients in three sectors. Steve provides ongoing facilitation for a statewide coalition seeking common ground on education issues and for a citizens' advisory board for a Superfund Cleanup site. Steve's civic work includes providing technical assistance and facilitation services for the Board and Executive Committee of the Humanitarium: A Center for Culture and Diversity and for monthly meetings of his local government council district. Steve is a native of Lawrence, Massachusetts.