

BEST



PRACTICES

VOL. 10 ISSUE 1

FOSTER DIALOGUE

See if this sounds familiar:

While working with a group...

- ◆ You only say a fraction of what you are thinking.
- ◆ You sense that others only hear a twisted version of what you meant.
- ◆ When your ideas are not warmly received, you feel frustrated and defend those ideas in ways that keep you from seeing other possibilities.
- ◆ You make immediate judgments about other people's comments without really listening.
- ◆ You feel overwhelmed by the extent to which other people seem to be pushing their own views and agendas.
- ◆ You respond by pushing your own ideas, even when you haven't thought them through.

With all this drama beneath the surface, it's no wonder talk within groups often has a combative quality. Yet work groups can do better by beginning to communicate in an integrated, open way through *dialogue*.

At its most basic, dialogue involves people seeking new ways to understand each other and create a sense of collective meaning. As envisioned by quantum physicist and leading thinker David Bohm, dialogue makes it possible for a group to discover together the fundamental assumptions they are using to form their judgments. Dialogue also allows a group to create a shared framework for thinking and working together.

This issue of *Best Practices* introduces some of the core ideas Bohm and his followers developed about dialogue. We present these not as "rules," but as possible new frameworks a group can use to work towards a new culture of communication.



- DEBATE:**
"to beat down"
- DISCUSS:**
"to shake apart"
- DIALOGUE:**
"through the meaning of the word"

& Roberts & Kay, Inc. presents *Best Practices*, a publication highlighting progressive strategies for the private and public sectors.

THE PROCESS



Rona Roberts and Steve Kay will conduct a half-day facilitator forum entitled "At Play in the Field of Meaning: Facilitating Dialogue" at the International Association of Facilitators annual conference in Toronto, Canada, April 28-30, 2000. For details about the session, please contact us at rki@robertsandkay.com, or contact IAF at www.icacan.ca for full conference information.



How does dialogue address the problem?

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 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.

Since people need to figure out together what will work, it's tricky to prescribe specific "how-to" procedures that will always work. In the spirit of suggestions, then, rather than hard-and-fast truths, 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

RESOURCES

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

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

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

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

Schein, Edgar "On Dialogue, Culture, and Organizational Learning." *Organizational Dynamics* (1993a), 40-51.



Best Practices
is a publication of

Roberts & Kay, Inc.
250 Campsie Place
Lexington, KY 40508
(606) 231-8308
rki@robertsandkay.com
www.robertsandkay.com

Rona Roberts & Steve Kay,
Publishers and Editors

Kristin Houlé,
Production and Editing

Comments and letters welcome.
© 2000

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 topic of the work in the early stages.

What enhances 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 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

When the conditions are good and people are ready, dialogue can be a way to find the deeper meaning in a group's work.

SUSPENSION

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 "moves" is *suspension*. Bohm suggests that when a participant has a reaction to something someone in a group says ("That's unbelievably dumb," for example), s/he can learn to suspend that initial response. When people suspend, they notice the thought or judgment that arose, but take no action on it. Eventually, working with others, one can even learn to suspend the assumptions that cause the reactions.

Significantly, part of the suspension mechanism 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 even these mildly negative self judgments, and then not acting upon them. Suspension hinges on openness, which creates a new climate that may promote new ideas. It is one of the ways people create the time and the perspective to learn about their own assumptions, as well as those of others.

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.

Learning about David Bohm's vision of dialogue has made an impact on us here at RKI. Since our earliest days, designing and facilitating structured conversations — which we called “dialogue” — have been main features of our work.

Our first major public project in 1984, for the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, involved designing conversations — and then teaching volunteers to facilitate them — on what Kentuckians wanted their schools to do. About 20,000 people participated at more than 150 locations around the state. Later, we designed *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* for the Prichard Committee. Several hundred school/ community groups have completed this structured “starter” conversation, with more sessions happening each year.

We are convinced of the value of structured conversations such as these, and we work on them steadily. At the moment, for the Partnership for Kentucky Schools, a business consortium linked with The Business Roundtable, we are helping to design a structured conversation on students' readiness for work. Students, parents, employers, and educators are the expected participants. In addition, for the Study Circles Resource Center in Connecticut, we are working with two colleagues from the western United States on a study aimed at discovering the best practices community coalitions can use to foster dialogue on issues, particularly racism.

“Pure” dialogue, as developed and nurtured by David Bohm, intrigues us because it offers more flexibility, and it aims for different results. We have begun using pure dialogue in situations where people need more than just a way to start talking — they need to learn how to understand something together in a different way. We view pure dialogue as an important addition to the repertoire of joint learning strategies for many kinds of groups. We are eager to work with businesses and organizations that want to bring the power of pure dialogue into their work.



250 Campsie Place
Lexington, KY 40508 USA
www.robertsandkay.com

Presorted Std.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Lexington, KY
Permit No.
809

Dialogue: A Deeper Kind of Talk