Can We Talk? The Power of Dialogue

One cry heard often at Board and staff meetings is the need for more and better communication. What are people really asking for? A different kind of communication that is a real exchange, a meeting of persons in which greater understanding of each other and shared truth emerge. The kind of understanding we seek is an understanding that is big picture, root cause, mutual and timely. If we fail to achieve this kind of communication at our Board and staff meetings, we risk the health of our ministries because shared meaning holds people and organizations together.

The assertion here is that the quality of an organization is directly linked to the quality of conversations of the people in the organization. Our ability to talk and think together is vital. To improve the quality of our ministries requires improving the quality of our conversations.

There are different types of conversation as depicted below.

Range of Conversational Forms			
Raw Debate	Polite Discussion	Skillful Discussion	Dialogue
More Conversational			More Attuned

While there is a time and place for debate and discussion, they do not produce the deeper level we seek. As conversation moves along the continuum, it becomes more attuned to a shared meaning of reality.

The intention in skillful discussion is usually to make a decision or reach agreement or identify priorities. People engaged in skillful discussion move from the traditional form of discussion in which one advocates one's own point of view toward a balance between advocating one's point of view and inquiring about the other's point of view. This yields greater understanding of the reasoning and assumptions behind both points of view.

Dialogue takes one more step: one suspends one's own assumptions to understand a bigger picture of reality than one's own. The intention in dialogue is to explore, discover or gain insight and to improve the quality of collective thinking and interacting. This results in the emergence of a shared reality, a greater sense of unity and the ability to act in collaboration.

What Is Dialogue?

Dialogue signifies a "flow of meaning." Dialogue is shared inquiry that surfaces ideas, perceptions and understanding that people do not already have. It is an approach to organizational interaction, an important means of developing a culture of collaboration and a way of resolving differences.

The physicist David Bohm identified these differences between discussion and dialogue:

"You have dialogue when you explore the uncertainties and questions that no one has answers to. In this way you begin to think together - not simply report out old thoughts. In dialogue people learn to use the energy of their differences to enhance their collective wisdom."

Dialogue	Discussion	
Starts with listening	Starts with speaking	
Is about speaking with	Is about speaking to	
Focuses on insights	Focuses on differences	
Is collaborative	Is adversarial	
Generates ideas	Generates conflicts	
Encourages reflection	Encourages quick thinking	
Encourages emergence	Encourages lock-in	

In contrast, in discussions people frequently hold onto and defend their differences. This approach can often devolve into debate which ends up with winners and losers. We seek exchanges between partners in a vital, living relationship that bring out people's untapped wisdom and collective insights. We seek greater truth and deeper understanding.

What Skills Are Needed for Dialogue? Dialogue requires four main skills.

1. Suspension of Judgment

It is difficult for us to stay open to new and alternative views of reality. Because our egos become identified with how we think things are, we need to learn to silence our own interior narratives and hold our positions lightly – as though they are suspended in front of us for further consideration later. This allows others to express themselves fully and freely without fear of judgment or retaliation.

2. Identification of Assumptions

The opinions and judgments we hold are usually based on assumptions, inferences and generalizations that are to a greater or lesser extent unexamined. By learning how to identify our assumptions, we are better able to explore differences with others. We can find common ground on which to build.

3. Listening

The way we listen impacts how well we learn and how effective we are in building quality relationships. Listening, not just hearing, requires comprehension, minimal distraction and disciplined focus on the person speaking. We need to develop our capacity to stay present to the conversation and remain open to the meaning arising at both the individual and collective levels. We must intentionally slow our pace down so we can listen and perceive at ever more subtle levels. We learn to welcome longer silences between speakers to allow time to absorb what is said.

To listen deeply takes ongoing training and personal mastery. Deep listening takes in body language and the emotional climate. It entails understanding one's own intentions. Am I listening intently to prepare my response or to grasp the perspectives of the person in a way that creates a bond of understanding between me and this person?

Deep listening for the speaker feels kind and meaningful. It engenders a powerful interaction, a stronger relationship and mutual understanding with the listener.

4. Inquiry and Reflection

It is through the process of inquiry and reflection that we dig deeply into matters that concern us and create breakthroughs in our ability to solve problems. By learning how to ask questions that lead to new levels of understanding, we accelerate our collective learning. Questions keep dialogue moving. We gain greater awareness of the issues that separate and unite us. We reach common ground that can generate new ideas.

What Are Blocks to Dialogue?

Blocks are ways to thwart discussion and rupture the bonding process inherent in real communication. There are four primary blocks: passivity, discounting, redefining and overdetailing. Passivity occurs when a person uses withdrawal language or non-responsive behavior. Discounting occurs when someone puts another or themselves down in some way. Redefining changes the focus of the conversation to avoid something. Overdetailing is providing too many details so that the point gets lost in the barrage of information. Other forms of blocking include being too rational, being too emotional, overgeneralizing, lack of directness and lack of honesty. Awareness of these blocks through careful listening enables us to intervene and return to dialogue.

What Does This Mean for Organization Leaders?

Effective leaders know when to speak, when to listen and when to be silent. Leaders who engage in dialogue consistently uncover the hidden creative potential in any situation. They have the abilities to "(1) evoke people's genuine voices, (2) listen deeply, (3) hold space for and respect as legitimate other people's views, and (4) broaden awareness and perspective."²

Conclusion

Dialogue is not right for all situations. Urgent matters require quick and decisive responses. We need however to invest ourselves in dialogue with each other so that we have a foundational relationship of understanding, a common ground, a treasury of collective wisdom and insight that enables us to address the big questions facing our sponsored ministries in the most creative, inclusive and effective manner possible. We must develop a culture of collaboration and communities of learning grounded in respect, openness and trust for the good of our ministries. Dialogue is necessary and powerful.

Resources

David Bohm, On Dialogue

William Isaacs, Dialogue: The Art Of Thinking Together

George Kohlrieser, "The Power of Authentic Dialogue," Leader to Leader, No. 42, Fall 2006, 36-40

Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook

Brady Wilson, "Quality Linked to Conversation," www.refresher.com

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