

# DIALOGUE BASICS

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## **THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE**

*It's never enough just to tell people about some new insight. Rather, you have to get them to experience it in a way that evokes its power and possibility. Instead of pouring knowledge into people's heads, you need to help them grind a new set of eyeglasses so they can see the world in a new way. John Seely Brown*

Leaders must consider new responsibilities for dialogue. The first responsibility is to suspend the need to tell others how to think or feel. Leaders have the power to convene and create opportunities for discovery. And leaders have the potential to bring together the kind of diversity that is essential to generating new thinking. Diversity is defined as diverse stories, mindsets and methods for doing. Diversity can also be experienced as contrary opinion. Change leaders attract dissenting perspectives to generate greater potential for new thinking. To do so they must suspend the impulse to share with others their own insightful way of seeing or to hold their way of thinking as being more true than that of others.

The next responsibility is to hold a diverse group in a generative conversation before attempting to take action. In today's culture, action is held as the ultimate responsibility and accomplishment of leaders. Groups often skip over the hard conversations by trying to attain agreement on action. This must be resisted. Shared values are essential and to create and surface shared values trust is essential. Each person does not need to have the same mindset to create new ways of thinking, but collective trust through the development of shared values can underpin diverse mindsets.

Lastly, leaders are often the voice of change. How does a leader identify the collective capacity for change? Uncover the language and descriptions that generate shared inspiration. The language of inspiration is the language not only of change but also of motivation to take action. This language, when found in groups, represents an opportunity for change. Effective leaders find the vision, the inspiration in the group, not in self. Affective leaders are passionate in communicating and expanding this language; they are committed to engaging and inspiring others in the dialogue of change.

## **NEW THINKING FOR NEW SOLUTIONS**

*"We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."  
Albert Einstein*

Generating new thinking is essential for leaders. When confronted with a clear need for change, eight out of ten organizations change leadership in order to create change. Why? One explanation for this phenomenon is that the very thinking that leads to success can become an obstruction to seeing new opportunities. Individuals become ensnared in their mindset, their way of looking at problems and solutions. Instead of realizing the need for new thinking, leaders will rely upon new techniques for improved execution. Unfortunately, new techniques cannot improve upon limited insight.

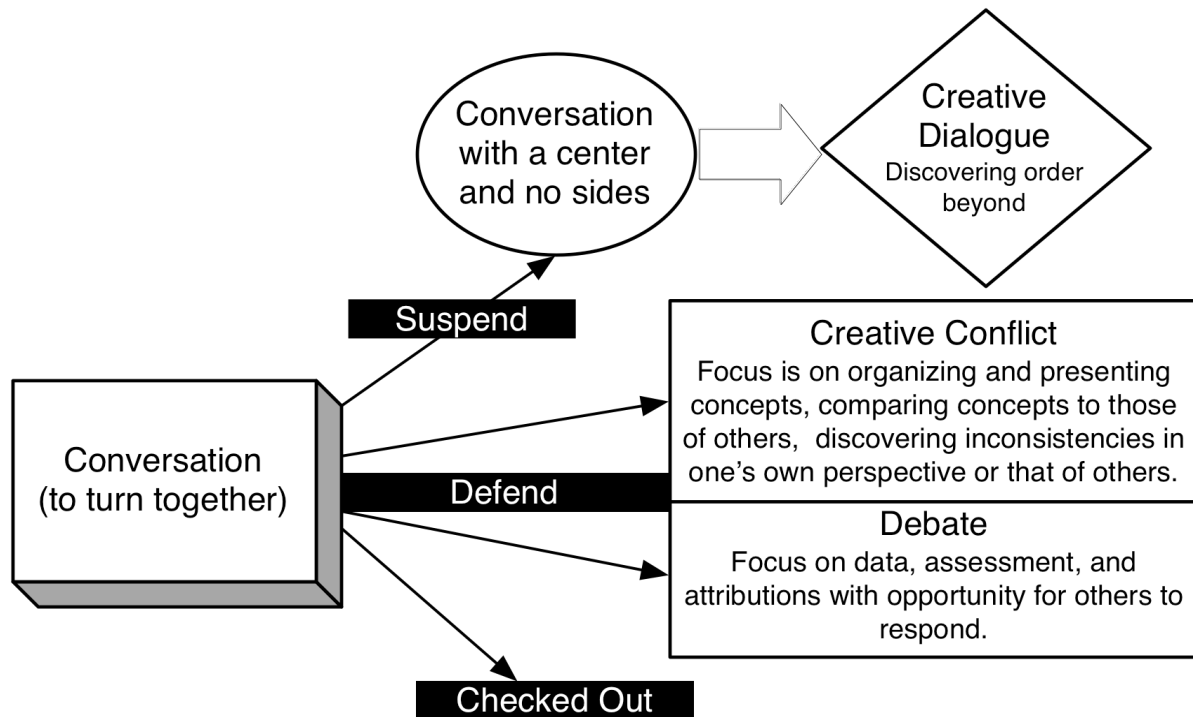
Dialogue, as conceived by theoretic physicist David Bohm and others, explores how leaders can renew their thinking in an ongoing way and stimulate new thinking in their organizations – the work of changing culture. Bohm promoted dialogue as a conversation that aspires to find the order beyond the current way of thinking – what he termed generative dialogue. In this form,

dialogue is seen as the foundation for transformational learning, a process whereby diverse groups come together and take seriously the challenge of generating new thinking.

These notes provide some insight into conditions and concepts that promote generative dialogue. The notes are intended to supplement our conversation and to give you ways of reflecting upon your conversations, both within you ALF class and in your work.

## ***CONDITIONS THAT PROMOTE GENERATIVE DIALOGUE***

### **1. PATTERNS OF CONVERSATIONS**



Conversation literally means to turn together. These forms of discussion can become destructive, constructive and generative. The above diagram considers how one's personal stance, or way of participating in a discussion, can significantly effect the collective potential.

#### **Disengage/Checked Out**

Mindlessness, drifting off in thoughts that are totally unrelated to the context of the conversation, is pervasive in many meetings today. Leaders, bombarded by endless numbers of meetings, often turn to "multitasking" during meetings. Perhaps even more common is a kind of disconnect that can be seen when a topic of discussion leads one to loose interest. Participants know when leaders are not engaged in a conversation. Participants sense when their statements are not important or that their participation is merely a part of a process. There is no hope for dialogue without engagement.

#### **Defend**

Convincing others of the rightness of one's position is another common stance of participation in a conversation. Each individual brings a way of seeing, what we call a mental frame, to a

conversation. This mental frame is grounded in experience, reasoning and values. Often, however, we may be unaware of just how important or powerful our mental frame is until confronted by contrasting opinions. In these situations, emotions can begin to increase and reflexive defensive responses are engaged. As opposing opinions are tugged back and forth a conversation can significantly move from discussion to debate. While debates have value in reducing problems and analyzing information, they are not as effective in generating new solutions.

## **Suspend**

Letting go yet staying in - the skill of being aware of our own mental frame **and** aware of how we are experiencing and being open to the thinking of others - this is the concept of suspending.

In his text, On Being Certain: Believing you are right even when you are not, medical doctor and neurologist Robert Burton helps us to consider how the experience of being perfectly rational can be an emotional, not rational, state of mind. *“Despite how certainty feels, it is neither a conscious choice nor even a thought process. Certainty and similar states of ‘knowing what we know’ arise out of involuntary brain mechanisms that, like love or anger, function independently of reason”*

In his text, How We Make Decisions, Read Montague builds on this understanding of how the mind functions. *“We are on a kind of personhood treadmill; we must constantly monitor ourselves, question our ideas, and probe our reasoning to test whether important parts of ‘us’ have become automated, no longer susceptible to new ideas, new data, and new events in the world.”*

In her book, Mindfulness, Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer describes a series of skills or capacities that provide a framework for thinking about the mental work of suspending. She describes “mindfulness” as the state of being:

- Open to novelty.
- Alert to distinctions.
- Sensitive to different contexts.
- Aware of multiple perspectives.
- Oriented to the present.

## **2. CONVENING POWER OF LEADERS**

All change engages relationships and power. Relationships are what create the infrastructure of a community. Putnam describes these relationships as social capital and categorizes them as being bonding or bridging relationships. Bonding relationships are those we have with folks who are like us. Bridging relationships represent the kind of social capital created across boundaries, the relationships that folks may not have but that are essential to embracing diversity. When leaders are effective in community work they are found to have built the kind of social capital needed to bridge differences by building relationships with diverse others. Therefore leaders must have the capacity to convene diversity in order to bridge differences and create changes in how power is held and used in a community.

How can we define diversity in this context? Scott Page in his book, The Difference, gives a very functional description of the kind of diversity that seems to make a difference in dialogues. He states that there are three forms of diversity: Mindset, Analysis and Change. In each of these three domains we have beliefs (often not easily changed) and values (more pliable in dialogue as they

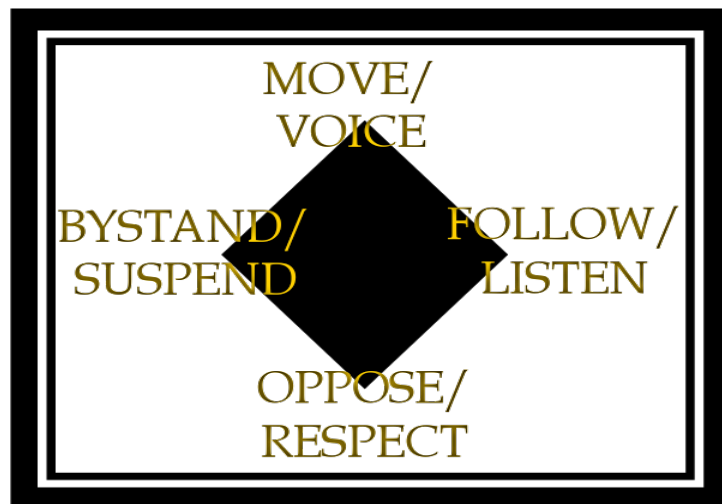
are defined or clarified by context) that influence how we project ourselves and how we receive others in dialogue.

- Mindset is the way we have come to look at the world – how we make sense of the world around us. We learn this from the earliest times in our life from family, friends, culture and society. Our mindsets are very powerful forces in our thinking and yet their influence can remain hidden.
- Analysis is the way we come to see truth about things in the world. While this can also be cultural and social it can be strongly influenced by education and work-life.
- Change references our way of looking at how change occurs. Does it come from the heavens, from the application of logic, from brut force, from compromise? Depending on how we have experienced life we develop very strong feelings about how change can occur. This sense is very important in leaders. How does a leader see the role of leadership in change? What is the role of citizens, of government?

The dialogue with the least tension and learning is the one where there is the least diversity. The most difficult yet productive dialogue is the one with the greatest diversity. Diverse groups can outperform experts as long as they can figure out how to dialogue together. If a group cannot negotiate the tensions of seeing things differently, then participants will regress to politeness. If they can move through the tension, they begin to generate new thinking.

### **3. PARTICIPATION THAT PROMOTES DIALOGUE**

Family systems expert, David Kantor, developed a model for exploring the characteristics of a constructive conversation. He describes 4 specific kinds of activity that exist:



1. MOVE - without movement you cannot have purpose or a sense of direction.
2. OPPOSE - without opposition you cannot have correction or the deepening of reason.
3. FOLLOW - without followership the group will never develop the capacity to think collectively.
4. BYSTAND - without attention to what is happening both in the group and outside the group you can never have perspective.

Kantor's model emerged from the observation that a conversation with all four of these activities in play creates the foundation for a quality dialogue. Individuals do not take on a specific role or activity; they are attentive to the needs of the conversation and can engage any of the four parts in order to enhance the dialogue. It is therefore important for individuals to develop skills in each of these areas. To facilitate a dialogue is to consider what the conversation requires to move forward. The model helps us to view the needs of the conversation through each of the four perspectives. In

this way, we can consider ways to shift the language of the conversation by having the capacity to speak from any of these four perspectives.

#### **4. PERSONAL PRACTICES THAT ENHANCE DIALOGUE**

We can further enhance our capacity for dialogue by developing practices that can improve our skills in each of Kantor's four characteristics of a dialogue. The previous diagram presents the skills associated with each of the characteristics.

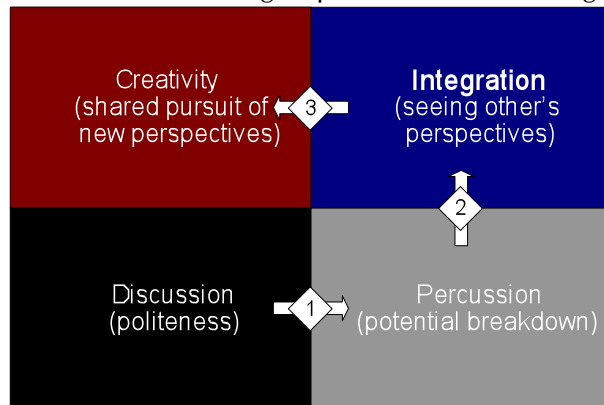
- To give **voice** is to name the potential that is unfolding within the group and within one's self; to see what is possible; to affirm and help bring together what is being created; and to provide others an opportunity to participate.
- To **listen** is to actively seek awareness of the frame of reference and foundation for another's perspective. In listening we ask questions that expand and explain the perspective of the other.
- To oppose effectively one first demonstrates **respect** by actively working to develop deep understanding of the other person. Having a clear representation of what is being said by others allows one to identify contrasts in conclusions that are being reached and to offer new data or ways of thinking that expands awareness.
- To **suspend** is to hold open for review; to be aware of what is going on in the group and in one's self. By suspending we inquire into our own assumptions and the unspoken assumptions that may exist in the group.

#### **5. SURFACING TENSIONS AND DEVELOPING TRUST**

We use stories to develop the capacity to explore new ways of thinking. Dialogue will often begin with members telling stories that develop an expanse of shared experience/knowledge. Groups must then move to develop shared and broader understanding of the meaning of the stories. Why is that story important to you? What meaning do you take from that experience? How does that experience or story help me to understand what is really important to you? As members of a group begin to move beyond the telling of stories to the exploration of what meaning is behind the stories, members begin to develop a deeper understanding of each other's values. With this deeper understand comes a sense of safety and trust. With a sense of safety and trust individuals can begin to think about the perspectives of others and can begin to think creatively about their shared challenges.

## Flow of a dialogue

Bill Isaacs describes what he terms the flow of a dialogue; the essence of transitional movements that occur as groups move from general conversation to generative dialogue.



Adapted from Bill Isaacs – *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*

Conversations begin from a place of discussion and politeness. They then move into a more evaluative or critical form of discussion where shared understanding becomes the larger goal. In this phase various interpretations of stories and perspectives of an issue begin to arise. It is at this phase where Isaac's states that a group can experience tension that will lead to either a regression back to politeness and discussion or a move up into a more exploratory integrative language. The final transition is for the group to move into a more coherent language of shared commitment to creativity, change, and action.

Each of these transitional flows requires the group to stay together and hold the tension and complexity of the unfolding movement toward greater awareness and participation in learning. Tension is often experienced and the group develops strength and potential in negotiating the tension together. The kinds of tensions often experienced in each transition are:

1. Moving through the desire for comparison to the language of exploring real similarities versus differences. Members move from wanting to feel connected by the common values of stories to exploring the possible differences.
2. Exploring descriptions of new perspectives versus holding the desire to argue and hold to personal explanations is the process of engaging differences. Unfortunately, when conflicting explanations begin to surface, groups often default to expertise. Rather than explore new ways of thinking groups can assume that there is a truth that can be known and that experts possess this truth. This can limit the potential for generating new thinking.
3. Groups that develop trust can feel emboldened to take on the world. Yet, creativity must account for the requirements that systems have to seek stability while at the same time understanding the need to push open opportunities for growth and improvement.

The role of a leader in bringing groups together in dialogue is captured in the need to create and hold these tensions in groups; a concept that is termed building a "container" for dialogue.

"Container" is a word used to characterize the dynamic of holding a group together through the flow of a dialogue. The concept is that as the strength of the container (group) grows so does the groups potential for surfacing deeper issues. So how does the container gain strength and capacity?

Addressing issues that are preventing the deepening of relationships and conversation is an essential method for developing strength within the container. As groups address the real sources of tension trust is gained and opportunities to explore shared meaning can be found.

## **DIALOGUE AND ALF**

Creating a space for social dialogue is a core requirement of democracy. Of unique interest to the work of ALF is the concept of how leaders create change in structures, systems and social groups. John Gardner's reflection on the need for knitting together communities comes to mind:

*In most cities, there is a striving toward new patterns of collaboration - new partnerships - among government agencies (at all levels) and the private sector, profit and nonprofit. Everyone recognizes that municipal government working alone cannot save the city. The most deteriorated parts of the city cannot save themselves. Collaboration is crucial.*

*But it is made more difficult by the existence of diverse segments of the population who don't know one another (and often don't want to). Race creates such divisions. The growing gap between rich and poor poses grave difficulties. We have already noted the rift between affluent suburbs and deteriorating central cities. And there is resentment by many Americans of what they consider to be an emerging professional, executive, academic elite that always appears to be close to the levers of power.*

*In the face of such fragmentation, community building begins with open communication across boundaries. There must be candid and continued discussion in which resentments are pulled to the surface and each group comes to understand the assumptions and concerns of others. THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT Council for Excellence in Government April 1, 1998.*