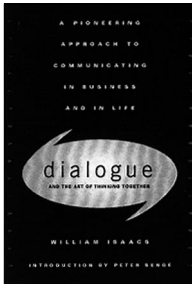




EMPOWERING PEOPLE TO LEARN WITH AND FROM EACH OTHER

BY TAMMI QUEENEY-MORAN



Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together
by William Isaacs

When union steelworkers and management met at the Kansas City, Missouri, Armco plant to renew their labor contract, they found themselves negotiating more than just an agreement. Armco had recently decided to sell the division, and the pressure was on for the union to sign the contract as quickly as possible. Union and management shared a long history of mistrust, stemming from years of perceived mistreatment of union workers by managers. Despite their differences and the enormous pressure they were under to come to an agreement, when representatives from the two groups got together, they were able to communicate about their feelings of anger and frustration in an atmosphere of respect and openness. By following the principles of dialogue to guide their interactions and bridge their differences, the parties were able to overcome political pressures and emotional turmoil to reach a satisfactory agreement. The union ratified the contract, and the company changed ownership.

Unlike the events in the Armco story, the stakes are seldom as high in our own organizations. However, the price of people failing to communicate effectively in the workplace can be steep, including lost customers and revenue, missed opportunities, fragmented efforts, and high employee turnover. This inability to truly listen

to one another is common in meetings, where we often simply discuss the problems we already know exist and end up defending our positions instead of opening ourselves to new options. We think alone, rather than leveraging our collective intelligence. We leave these meetings having confirmed what we already know, but without having gotten to the “real,” underlying issues that could produce lasting change.

In his book, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (Doubleday/Currency, 1999), William Isaacs, founder of the Dialogue Project at MIT, shows the important role that the practice of dialogue can play in our organizations and in our lives. He defines dialogue as a way of thinking and reflecting together, a shared inquiry. Being effective at dialogue involves learning to shift our attitudes about relationships with others from trying to make others understand us to coming to a greater understanding of ourselves and each other. Using many real-life examples, Isaacs illustrates the principles behind dialogue and shows why this kind of approach to problem-solving can be far more fulfilling to us, both as individuals and as a collective, than the traditional fragmented approach we so often find ourselves engaged in.

A Conversation with a Center

The word *dialogue* comes from the Greek words *dia* and *logos*. Together, *dia*, or “through,” and *logos*, “word” or “meaning,” translate to *the flow of meaning*. When we speak in the language of meaning, we express interest in the ideas *behind* what others say instead of defending our own positions and looking for evidence that we are right and others are wrong.

According to Isaacs, through dialogue, we “relax [our] grip on certainty and listen to the possibilities that result simply from being in a relationship with others—possibilities that might not have otherwise occurred.” He refers to “a *conversation with a center, not sides*. [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 our polarization and into a greater common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people.”

In most professional settings, our communications take the form of discussion, in which we seek to come to closure around a particular issue. Although discussion is valuable—and necessary—in certain situations, it is also limiting, especially when used in the initial stages of exploring a problem or issue. By its very nature, discussion tends to force people into either/or thinking, precluding the exploration of different options.

Several years ago, the team building the new Ford Lincoln Continental discovered the limits of discussion. Early in the project, the engineers struggled to meet both the finance department’s cost criteria and the marketing department’s creative vision. Whatever action they took caused one of the two departments to balk. The process of dialogue enabled them to see the challenge: They were trying to build a “Lexus at a Cadillac price,” or a luxury car with a relatively modest price tag. Once the team was able to name the problem, they realized that although what they were trying to do was not possible, other options were. The practice of dialogue let them move beyond polarization to discover new possibilities.

The Practices of Dialogue

Before we can become skilled at practicing dialogue in groups, we must first understand and develop a set of skills within ourselves (see “Skill-Building Questions”). Isaacs names four key practices in this skill set: listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing. Together, these practices bring a sense of wholeness to conversation.

Listening. The capacity to listen is at the heart of dialogue. In our interactions with others, we jump to conclusions all the time. To *really* listen, we must learn to listen not only to others, but also to ourselves, as we make these leaps in judgment rather than actually attending to what is being said. Once we do this, we open ourselves to a whole new form of listening that lets us better connect with the world around us.

Respecting. In order to see a person as a whole, we must learn to respect them and see them as legitimate human beings. This means honoring them, seeing them for who they are as individuals, and accepting what they have to teach us.

Suspending. When someone speaks to us, we can choose either to defend our own beliefs and resist theirs, or we can choose to suspend our opinions. When we suspend our judgment, we neither suppress nor advocate. Instead, we acknowledge and observe without feeling the need to act.

Voicing. Voicing may be the most challenging of all the practices of dialogue. Learning to voice means listening to yourself and asking yourself what needs to be expressed. In speaking your voice, you are revealing what is true for you, regardless of the influences around you.

Isaacs explains that there is an underlying principle beneath each of the above named practices: participation, coherence, awareness, and unfoldment. He says, “These deeper principles inform the way you can use each of the practices described here. So beneath the practice of listening is the principle of participation; behind respecting is the principle of coherence, behind suspending the principle of awareness, and behind voicing, the principle of unfoldment.”

Participation. The principle of participation builds on the realization that individuals are active participants in the living world, a part of nature as well as observers of it.

Coherence. The principle of coherence teaches us to experience the wholeness or lack thereof in a conversation, ensuring that all perspectives are expressed.

Awareness. The principle of awareness focuses on becoming capable of understanding what is happening *as* it is happening.

Unfoldment. The principle of unfoldment encourages us to remain aware of the constant potential waiting to unfold through and around us.

To implement a dialogic change process in our organizations, we must first build infrastructures that support and sustain the four core practices. For example, Ford implemented a series of “learning laboratories” to facilitate *listening*. IKEA held open forums for conversation to enable employees to *voice* their opinions and to *listen* to themselves and each other. Designing new ways for people to interact is critical if we are to change our habits to tap into the possibilities

that can emerge when we pool our collective intelligence.

We face enormous challenges today, in our organizations, our communities, and our personal relationships. Whether our goal is the success of a steel plant or the survival of our planet, if we continue to cling to our old views and fail to not just talk together, but *think together*, we may never reach our desired futures. We need to make the effort to improve our communications because, ultimately, we have no other choice—we can’t solve the complex problems that we face alone. As Isaacs point out, “Almost everyone dreams about the power that could be harnessed by groups of people thinking together. But to access that dream and make it a practical reality today requires that we relight these passions and recall the memory of a unique but deeply familiar kind of speaking and listening.” The principles of dialogue can guide us as we take steps toward achieving this kind of wholeness in our organizations and in our lives. ■

Tammi Queeney-Moran is sales manager at Pegasus Communications.

SKILL-BUILDING QUESTIONS

Listening

- How does this feel?
- How is this affecting people?
- What are the different voices trying to convey?
- What voices are marginalized here?

Respecting

- What is at risk in this situation?
- What is people’s dominant preoccupation?
- Are those who might be impacted by this conversation included?

Suspending

- What leads me to view things as I do?
- What is the question beneath the question?
- What themes, patterns, and links do I perceive underneath what is being said?
- In what alternative ways can I perceive or frame these things?

Voicing

- What needs to be expressed here? By you? By others? By the whole?
- Designed with intention, what purpose would this pattern serve?
- What is animating this conversation, relationship, system?
- What is trying to emerge here?