What is dialogue?
Dialogue is an approach to and a quality of purposeful talk that involves openness, listening, making meaning and learning together. The intention of dialogue is to seek understanding on an issue or situation from multiple perspectives. As a process of inquiry and learning, dialogue should not be confused with decision-making although it may lead to consensus as the basis for decision. Dialogue processes – whether they are a one-time encounter or a series of meetings – are part of a broader engagement not an alternative to litigation or other processes. “The key component that differentiates dialogue from other forms of engagement is the intention of mutual education and understanding. Dialogue processes – consensus building, collaboration, mediation (assisted negotiation) – are not “alternatives” to legal, legislative, or administrative processes”\(^1\).

Why dialogue?
There are many complex problems facing our communities, workplaces, and governance structures. To respond wisely to these problems requires the input of many, often diverse, voices. Dialogue approaches offer some hopeful ways to relate to one another and how we govern ourselves. We engage in dialogue because the quality of our actions will be better informed, because we care about the web of relationships among us, and because our public life depends on having a standard of public discourse that enables people to express their views freely and to explore their differences fairly.

How is this different from other kinds of talk?
The focus of dialogue is collaboration and inquiry rather than advocacy or debate. Dialogue is not a debate. When you enter into dialogue you are not required to defend or argue your views or to search for flaws in other’s views. You are expected, however, to explain your views. Others are invited to ask questions or pick up on a thread of the ideas presented by the previous speaker.

What is the purpose of the dialogue?
There are many reasons why individuals might seek dialogue approaches:
- To Develop Relationships: To break the ice and develop a climate and capacity for talk due to lack of familiarity or history of conflict or misinformation
- Learning: Allows for getting beyond stereotypes, generalizations or ignorance about others’ beliefs, values, and goals.
- Preparation for Decision-Making: To be more fully informed of the textures and contours of an issue prior to making a determination or as a basis for decision-making

Dialogue offers opportunity for deliberating parties to respond genuinely to the issues at hand and to learn about each other’s assumptions and priorities, and through such a shared learning process, to increase their capacity to act, singly or together. The experience of such thinking together is capable of moving a group from individual intelligence to collective wisdom. And such thinking together requires attention to the particular conditions of dialogue.

**Planning a dialogue**

For genuine dialogue to occur, particular conditions must be present. Participants are asked to suspend their assumptions, to view each other as colleagues or peers, and to let go of job titles and organizational hierarchies. In the early stages, it may be necessary to count on a skilled facilitator to “hold the context” of dialogue. Dialogue is aided by slowing down our responses, asking good questions, and becoming aware of both the substance of the dialogue and process in which it unfolds. Initiating dialogue with stories is also thought to be truly effective as stories have the capacity to capture detail, nuance, and emotion while engaging meaningfully with individuals, organizations, and communities about complex situations of importance. Practitioners of dialogue learn to read the person’s meaning not only through words, but also through gestures, body language, tone of voice, and silence.

**The invitation**

Clarity of purpose of the dialogue and the intended process is essential. Ideally, those who participate in the dialogue share a willingness to the “rules of engagement”. Clarity of expectations and outcomes stated in the invitation will contribute to participants’ sense of trust in the process.

**The participants**

Potential participants must be free to discuss the topic of the dialogue from their personal and professional views about the topic, not simply according to their official or scripted positions.

**The setting**

Speakers or resource people in a dialogue need to be reminded not to play to the audience. The audience needs to be briefed on the key goals of dialogue and reminded of those purposes throughout the dialogue process if necessary. Informality and comfort of the participants will assist in creating a productive discussion. Privacy and an agreement of confidentiality or non-attribution of remarks will also produce a sense of safety and open discussion. This what is referred to in the international community as “Chatham House Rules” in reference to the British organization.

**Preparing the participants**

When dialogue participants understand, appreciate, and respect the goals of a particular dialogue, the quality of the dialogue is improved. Agreements for carrying out the dialogue need to be clarified at the onset. Dialogue, at its best, is like playing a game – it is a creative, spontaneous, and enjoyable interaction between people. But as in any game, it has some general rules and structure.
Dialogue instructions

Dialogue is not a debate. Parties speak for themselves, not as representatives of a group. There are three things to keep in mind:

1. Participants in dialogue require a commitment to candour, to considerate language, and to purposeful listening. Dialogue in a purposeful conversation involves awareness by the group of both the process of their communication and the content of the conversation.

2. The group works first to establish ground rules or norms as a guide for dealing civilly with differences, controversies, and uncertainties, and endeavours to understand and connect through conversation, rather than prove a point or win an argument.

3. Dialogue reiterates current knowledge, but also creates new understanding. In many settings, however, it appears that this form of genuine inquiry, openness, and willingness to risk certainty is rare.

The use of story to ignite dialogue

Storytelling arises from a universal need to create coherence from complex reality beyond facts and analysis. Storytelling is a powerful entry point or a pathway to dialogue. When a speaker shares a good story, one that brings the complexities of a given topic to light, the story’s resonance connects the participants and leads them to a level of reflection and understanding.

What is the role of the facilitator?

Central to a good dialogue is the involvement of thoughtful individuals with specific skills who appreciate both the interpersonal tools for engagement and understand the stages of a good conversation. Those who facilitate dialogue are facilitating group learning through helping participants understand their motivations and express their interests, while remaining open to each other’s perspectives. Such persons assist others to find their voice and draw them out, they model deep listening, and when speaking, they are able to offer their thoughts in a way that invites reactions and responses. They ask good questions and they appreciate the architecture of a purposeful conversation. And although genuine dialogue is said to be leaderless and non-interventionist, most dialogue encounters require a facilitator in the early stages to hold the context and to provide guidance during particular sticking points.

Like the host of any occasion, the tone set by the opening remarks of the program sponsor and facilitator is critical. An introduction might include something like the following: “We see dialogue as an opportunity for all present (invited speakers, subject matter resource people and other participants) to gain an understanding of the issues, and most importantly, the people behind the issues – their real beliefs, values, goals and fears”.

Facilitating in the round

Facilitating in a round room means there is no front of the room. All seats are equal. For speakers accustomed to presenting at the front of the room, the notion of distributed
power may be somewhat unsettling. Other speakers tell us they find the room comfortable and they feel quite liberated shifting their gaze around the room or simply getting up and moving around the space.

Preparing the speakers
A round room does not instantly transform speakers into dialogue facilitators. Many speakers using the space will benefit from a virtual tour of the Asia Pacific Hall to become familiar with the layout of the seating. The most successful dialogue experiences in the Asia Pacific Hall occur when a well-prepared speaker focuses the attention of the participants of the context of the topic at hand by offering their perspectives and then inviting participants to respond to the topic from their perspectives. What seems to spark dialogue is having a shared context offered through stories and theories as well as compelling questions to explore the contours of the subject at hand. The speaker does not deliver a monologue but is present and actively engaged in framing the parameters of the dialogue.

Listening in dialogue
Respectful and generous listening is at the heart of dialogue. To listen well is to seek coherence and meaning in what another person is saying and to try to draw it out. There are a number of ways to improve listening, which in turn have a significant impact on our understanding, the kinds of relationships we construct, and the way we arrive at agreements through dialogue. There are many exercises for deepening our capacity for listening that involve, for example, learning to pause and breathe and being present in one’s thoughts. According to political theorist Susan Bickford, the presence of listening in democratic communicative interactions is as important an action as is speaking, but frequently undermined and undervalued. Yet, as she points out, when you listen, you are concentrating on the speaker and in that moment you make yourself the background, and the speaker, the figure. Without listening, there is no dialogue. Learning to listen well is a central skill in dialogue.

Qualities of a good dialogue*
There is no recipe for dialogue, but experienced facilitators of dialogue suggest that the following qualities are present in dialogue:

- Informality and comfort, which cultivates conditions for openness and candour
- An opportunity to be heard without interruption
- An assumption that you are speaking honestly without a hidden agenda
- An acknowledgement of the importance of your feelings about the issue
- An opportunity to share your doubts about your position without being labeled weak
- A readiness on the part of others to admit uncertainty, to learn, and to change
- A recognition that difference does not equal hostility

**Ground rules for participating in dialogue***

1. Listen deeply – with head and heart.
2. Acknowledge and honour the diversity of views (avoid group think).
3. Be disciplined in your interventions – keep them relevant and thoughtful.
4. Acknowledge others’ contributions to the discussion before relating your own remarks.
5. Speak only when you have something to contribute, for example, posing a relevant question, presenting a fact, making or clarifying a point, or advancing the discussion to a greater specificity or consensus.
6. Identify the key points of difference.
7. Refrain from distorting the views of others; rather try to restate their position to their satisfaction before presenting a different view.
8. After each agenda item is discussed, ask, “What have we agreed to?” or “What have we understood?”
9. Draw out the implication of an agreement for group policy or action.
10. Thank your co-dialogue participants for their contributions.

*Adapted from the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research’s “Ten Commandments for Dialogue” [Link](http://www.toda.org/grad/oxford/ten_command.html)

Dialogue Programs would like to hear about your dialogue convening experiences. Please contact us at 778.782.7925

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