



Norval Morris Project Action Plan "Promoting a Healing Environment in Corrections"

Research In Brief

Dialogue Practice and Training

SUMMARY/OVERVIEW

The word dialogue has an origin in the Greek "dia-logos", which literally translates to "through the word." The various definitions of dialogue today speak to the feature of a conversation involving two or more people and the desire to achieve a resolution of some issue or interest through the dialogue process.

For corrections leaders wishing to bring people together to explore mutual interests and to identify ways to solve problems, transform conflict into productive conversation and determine collaborative approaches – there are a number of dialogue methods and processes that can be used to instill a culture of open conversation and problem-solving. Dialogue techniques have been used informally and formally across business, academia and community-building for centuries, but have not enjoyed a formalized understanding as a "practice" until the last 40 years.

"Dialogue is concerned with providing a space within which attention can be given to the act of thought. It allows a display of thought and meaning that makes possible a kind of immediate mirroring back of thought and the less dynamic structures that govern it. It creates an

opportunity for each participant to examine the preconceptions, prejudices and the characteristic patterns that lie behind their thoughts and opinions... belief and feelings – along with roles we tend to habitually play."¹

Training staff to convene and work together in dialogic settings encourages a climate of engagement that looks openly at each participant's needs and interests and honors the belief that everyone – from the supervised population up to the Commissioner - has a contribution and a valid point of view. Leaders who honestly employ dialogic methods, and who are consistent in modeling respectful dialogue, build an environment that values supportive and encouraging relationships and allows critical thinking to prevail.

STRATEGY DESCRIPTION

In the 1970's quantum physicist David Bohm observed that our beliefs shape the realities we evoke, and thus the state of the world required humanity to attend to a different form of dialogue. Bohmian dialogue flows from an elegant and simple principle that by creating opportunity for groups of 20 to 40 people to have robust dialogue around current events, issues of concern and topics of significant interest – we can

strengthen our understanding and ability to work together. Bohm's colleagues and followers have since developed additional groundrules, structures and tools to use to guide the dialogue. Yet, across all of this process development, there remains a core sense that dialogue is the product of the convened group and should not be managed with a rigorous set of rules.

1) Dialogue is shared exploration towards greater understanding, connection, or possibility.

Increased trust is part of the process, and trust in the process itself, leads to the expression of the sorts of thoughts and feelings that are often kept hidden. The dialogue process is dynamic and fluid – and if any participant feels a concern for how the dialogue will be managed – this concern should be taken up and worked in the dialogue. All issues of interest to the participants - regarding both content and process - is on the table during the dialogue.

2) Dialogue seeks to harness collective intelligence.

Groups seeking to create

and sustain a dialogue practice begin by framing their intent for the dialogue and key issues to be explored. The ultimate goal of the dialogue should be an identified center of meaning, interest and passion that leads to collective action. Dialogue is not about developing opposing positions and win/lose frameworks.

3) Dialogue in Existing Organizations

Building a dialogue practice is valuable to an existing organization to increase engagement and enrich the work force creativity. Establishing authenticity in the practice may be hindered by the current state of conversation, acquired practices and norms, perceived power in roles and relationships, and pre-existing hierarchy. Staff

DIALOGUE EXAMPLE Prison Dialogues

Peter Garrett, a dialogue facilitator and practitioner in England has been hosting dialogues in maximum security prisons for over 14 years. His process brings the offenders, staff, counselors and outside interest into the group. The Prison Dialogues provide a setting where genuine healing can occur and where prisoners can come to grips with their experiences, their emotions and their situation and has produced what some are defining as unprecedented change.² The diversity of participants in the dialogue also fosters in the offenders a sense of belonging to a slice of humanity that may be bigger than what they have previously perceived.

See: www.prisondialogue.org for more information

may fear saying something that may be perceived as critical, or that may reflect unfavorably upon them. Creative and intentional modeling of the practice by leadership, and ongoing utilization of dialogic tools to assure that staff buy-in and utilize the practice will be required to establish new norms.²

COMPONENTS OF DIALOGUE PLANNING & PRACTICE

David Kantor's Four Player System

Family systems clinician David Kantor developed a model that serves as an instructive tool for participants and organizations initiating dialogic processes.

The model stems from Kantor's observation that people take stances in conversation not because they intend to, but because someone needs to fill that role. His research points out that participants in a healthy dialogue all play one of the four roles during the process – and people may shift from role to role. By using Kantor's model, we can attune to hidden imperatives and build our intuitive ability to predict how the conversation "wants to play out."

Kantor identified four fundamental kinds of action within a group:

MOVER: participant in conversation who initiates an action, makes a suggestion, posits an idea

FOLLOWER: participant who says "I agree, or that sounds right to me..."

OPPOSER: participant who proposes an alternative or points out the flaw of the first proposal... disagrees agreeably

BYSTANDER: a participant with one foot in and one foot out of the process – who overviews what has happened, provides perspective to the dialogue

Any system that silences or disables any of the Four Players is broken...and would hint that the dialogue is in trouble. It is vital that all four perspectives are active so information from any participant does not go underground. The quality of the dialogue is greatly influenced by the degree to which the four "players" are present.

Each position has a dialogue practice that corresponds to it:

MOVER: quality of truthfulness and voice

FOLLOWER: represents listening and reflecting

OPPOSER: offers respectfulness

BYSTANDER: challenges other players assumptions

INQUIRY and ADVOCACY

In his paper on Dialogic Leadership, William Isaacs also provides an overlay of Argyris and Schon's distinction between "inquiry and advocacy" as applied in dialogue. In Isaacs illustration, he suggests that an individual modeling leadership in dialogue comes to understand that advocacy is part of the work of the Mover, but it is not a role that should dominate in a dialogue. More beneficial is the attitude of "inquiry," where participants move the dialogue while playing as Opposers and Bystanders.

CLIMATE OF THE DIALOGUE

"Balanced action in dialogue consists of the way people in conversation make their point of view, combined with character and being present. When all of these elements are present and in balance, dialogue is possible."³ At the heart of the art of thinking together is the exploration of underlying

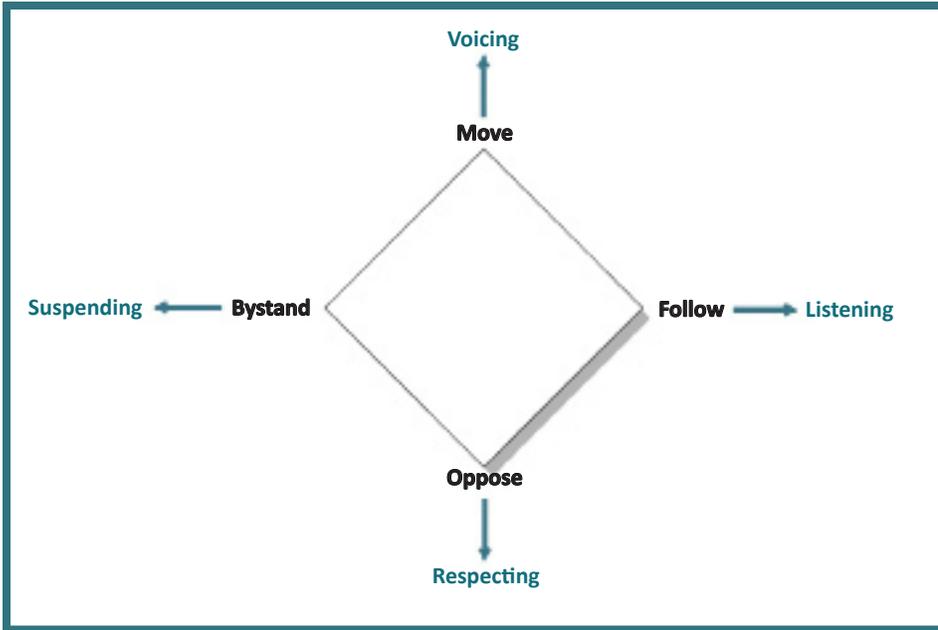
motives and intentions of the people concerned. The central spirit behind the approach is forgiveness – a stance that looks at the motives of the persons intent – regardless of how their actions appear. Quality of authenticity is at the core of the dialogic state. It cannot be faked.

overview of the work taking place in the dialogue exercise. Concentric Circles is a technique derived from a number of long-standing group conversation processes, including: Native American talking circles, “Socratic Circles,” and the Samoan Circle or Revolving Conversation.⁵ Each practice

creative transformation can take place.”³

The container of dialogue is a setting in which the intensities of human activity can safely emerge. The active experience of the people in the dialogue, participating in listening, respecting, suspending and speaking their voice – shapes this container. The container is the setting in which it is possible to hear one another and speak safely together.

Isaacs continues: if there is no discernable container; there can be no dialogue.



⁴Kantors Four Player Model

HAROLD’S CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

In adopting the practice of Dialogue during his career in Corrections, Commissioner Harold Clarke has had success with the practice of utilizing what Garrett and Isaacs have described as “Concentric Circles.”

Concentric Circles is a role-play practice in which the dialogue practitioners are asked to sit in one of two or three circles. The inner circle is the role of “voice” and only individuals occupying an inner seat are able to speak during the exercise. The next circle is that of Follower or Opposer, and individuals in these seats are tasked with listening and preparing for their time in the inner circle, once the seated speakers move. Added seats are provided around the inner two rings of seats for the Bystanders. These participants are actively listening and developing their

places emphasis on the interest of:

- Assuring that only one person is speaking at a time;
- That no other person in the group may speak a second time before everyone has contributed once, and;
- The important role played by an audience that is listening to the process.

As Commissioner Clarke explains, the process assures that we free up voices that might not speak up in a traditional meeting setting – and constrain those voices who might feel the need to dominate.⁶

CREATING THE CONTAINER

“[The] Container is the circle that holds all... and a setting where

**“Is there - energy, possibility, safety... here?”
If so, then dialogue sets out to clarify and expand the container...”**

The dialogue process allows the participants to create containers that are capable of holding their personal experience in rich and complex ways – making legitimate many approaches and styles. Isaacs offers a question to help determine whether the setting is prepared for dialogue. Extracting from the work of Joseph Chilton Pearce, he offers: “Is there - energy, possibility, safety . . . here?” If so, then dialogue sets out to clarify and expand the container in which a conversation might take place.

Containers can expand and take more pressure from the dialogue, and become safer. This potential is explored in William Ury’s “Getting to Peace,” in which he determines that we create communities of peace by developing settings in which the community establishes norms for how we converse and raise issues.⁷ Thus, the participants in the dialogue become the container. Protecting the boundaries of the container requires a willingness to raise things – to test them – to grow a

set of norms for how challenging interactions are handled. Transformative leaders play an important role in shaping the container. Leaders who demonstrate their own willingness to raise and discuss challenging information in the dialogue make the process valid for their colleagues.

PRINCIPLES OF DIALOGUE

- Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.
- In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.
- In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.
- Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.
- Dialogue reveals assumptions for reevaluation.
- Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.
- Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.
- Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: openness to being wrong and an openness to change.
- In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.
- Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.
- In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.
- In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions.

- Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.
- Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.
- Dialogue remains open-ended.



HOW DIALOGUE IS USED

STRENGTHEN COLLABORATION: By practicing the tenets of Dialogue, individuals discover and build new relationships. The more positive and real these relationships- the more likely the participants are to launch more shared enterprise.

BUILD TRUST: As the practice of Dialogue strengthens, the participants learn that they are each accountable to both the process and commonly defined goals and objectives. Sustained dialogue across the life of an enterprise should produce a result that allows participants to "trust the process" and begin again together.

CULTURAL CHANGE: Organizations that switch from "chaired meetings" to the richer form of participatory dialogue evidence a shift in thinking about their potential. This shift also builds and strengthens the container for more exploration, more testing of alternatives and more positive interactions and outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

Building a practice of Dialogue in your organization in part requires an act of faith in both the maturity of your staff and the health of the organization. Having strict agendas for how we discuss information and how we conduct our meetings implies an inability of a group of people to lead themselves. Utilizing the Dialogue techniques and practices identified promotes independent thinking and allows people to speak for themselves about the issues for which they may have concerns.

Assuring that your organization has a Dialogue-based session on a regular basis keeps this skill set fresh and allows your staff to experiment and be creative inside of the "container" provided.

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