

Basics of Dialogue Facilitation

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1 Introduction to Dialogue Facilitation

“Nobody is as wise as we altogether” – African Proverb

1.1 Defining Dialogue

The modern meaning of dialogue has its origin in antiquity and the Middle Ages. The term is now primarily defined as a conversation between two or more people characterised by openness, honesty and genuine listening. Taken from the Greek *diá* and *lógo*, it can be interpreted as the “flow of words” or “meaning” created by more than one person.

In contrast to the terms “discussion” and “debate”, which focus primarily on the *content* of a conversation, the word “dialogue” places equal emphasis on the *relationship* between the persons involved. Another difference is that “debate” often includes a competitive component to underline the superiority of one opinion, while “dialogue” implies mutual understanding and the aim to identify common ground. In the reality of conversations in and on conflicts, though, the modes of discussion, debate and dialogue will often be mixed and it needs good facilitation skills to make the participants aware of this and help enable them to move between them constructively.



Difference between Debate and Dialogue		
	Debate	Dialogue
Goal/Purpose	The goal is to “win” the argument by affirming one’s own views and discrediting other views.	The goal is to understand different perspectives and learn about other views.
Participants’ approach	People listen to others to find flaws in their arguments.	People listen to others to understand how their experiences shape their belief.
Dealing with others’ views	<p>People critique the experiences of others as distorted and invalid.</p> <p>People appear to be determined not to change their own views on the issue.</p> <p>People speak based on assumption made about others’ positions and motivations.</p> <p>People oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.</p>	<p>People accept the experiences of others as real and valid.</p> <p>People appear to be somewhat open to expanding their understanding of the issue.</p> <p>People speak primarily from their own understanding and experience.</p> <p>People work together toward common understanding.</p>
Role of emotions	Strong emotions like anger are often used to intimidate the other side.	Strong emotions like anger and sadness are appropriate when they convey the intensity of an experience or belief.

Source: Lisa Schirch & David Camp: *The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects*. Good Books 2007, 9.

The essence of a successful dialogue is that it is a face-to-face interaction between members with different backgrounds, convictions and opinions, in which they respect each other as human beings and are prepared to listen to each other deeply enough to inspire some kind of change of attitudes or learning which will contribute to consensus building.¹

¹ For more information on the concept of dialogue and elements of promising dialogue, see Chapter 4 of the Berghof Glossary on Conflict Transformation (Berghof Foundation 2012).

1.2 Good Practices of Dialogue

Dialogue is an essential tool, which has been used for thousands of years to address joint problems and guide collaborative social change. In the course of its long history, many variations of this kind of participatory problem-solving have been developed. Examining these variations makes it possible to identify some good practices, which help create an atmosphere conducive to effective dialogue. These good practices are suitable for direct dialogues as well as for facilitated dialogues with the support of a third party:

- ≡ *Size of the Dialogue groups:* Size of dialogue groups: The very idea of a dialogue is that all of its participants have a fair chance to personally contribute with substantive remarks to the communication. At the same time, this should happen within a reasonable time frame. This means, in most cases, that dialogues in groups with more than 30 participants become rather difficult. In these situations it is advisable to find creative ways to form break-out groups for at least some parts of the dialogue process to enable more participation (see *Example “Big Groups”* opposite). To allow for a lively exchange of perspectives a minimum number of participants, often set at eight to ten persons, should be involved. This minimum, however, depends on the spectrum of different opinions to be taken into account. Some professionals describe a group size between 12 and 25 persons as ideal for in-depth dialogues.
- ≡ *Spaces for dialogues:* A dialogue’s setting and space are often determined by the local conditions and cultural standards. They can range from open-air spaces under a tree in a tropical village to air-conditioned conference rooms in a five-star hotel. Important are the following conditions:
 - ≡ that all participants can have direct eye-contact with each other,
 - ≡ that they can listen to each other easily, and
 - ≡ that there is no hierarchical difference in the seating arrangement between the participants (with the potential exception of a different chair for a chair-person or a VIP-guest).

The ideal seating arrangement is a circle with one row, the second best one with two or maximum three rows. In case that this is not possible, any arrangement which allows easy eye-contact among all participants is better than a “theatre” arrangement. In some cases the “cabaret” solution with round tables can be useful, but then it will be necessary to rotate the sharing of tables.
- ≡ *Refreshments:* Participants usually appreciate it when the organisers or hosts provide some refreshments within the dialogue room like water, tea or coffee.
- ≡ *Time management, sessions & breaks:* Most dialogues are organised in the shape of conferences, seminars or workshops that are structured into consecutive sessions with breaks in-between. Each culture has its own standards with respect to punctuality, the lengths of the sessions and the breaks. Facilitators should act in accordance with these standards. Breaks should be taken seriously and shortening them to make up for prolonged sessions should be avoided. They serve important functions for trust and relationship-building, can be used to clarify misunderstandings and sometimes offer opportunities for sorting out deadlocks. (Some dialogue experts have even described a particular method of dialogue organisation, the “Open Space Method”, as a kind of “permanent coffee break”.)

Further reading

Juanita Brown & David Isaacs (2005). *The World Café: Shaping our Futures through Conversations that Matter.* Oakland/California: Berrett-Koehler.
Harrison Owen (2008). *Open Space Technology: User’s Guide.* Oakland/California: Berrett-Koehler.
 Marike Blunck et al. (2017). *National Dialogue Handbook. A Guide for Practitioners.* Berlin: Berghof Foundation.

1.3 Dialogue Facilitators

Demanding dialogues – for example a sustained dialogue with a large group of participants – are in most cases facilitated by persons who have no direct stakes in the outcome or who are obliged to stay neutral, impartial or multi-partial with respect to the issues. This can be the case when persons belonging to one or the other dialogue or negotiation party are asked to form a joint facilitation team, a procedure which, for example, has been widely used in the ceasefire talks in Myanmar. Many professionals with experience in dialogue facilitation argue that a good facilitation team should consist of insider and outsider facilitators. On the one hand, it is useful to have persons with deep knowledge of the history, culture and personality dynamics of the situation – the insider facilitators. It can, on the other hand, be just as important to have some distance to the situation and to bring new perspectives into the discourse – abilities held by outsider facilitators.

The best solution for demanding dialogues is, therefore, a mixed team of facilitators. Further, the facilitators should, if possible, establish an effective mechanism of peer-to-peer-consultations to support each other in their work.

The basic requirements for dialogue facilitators include the following:

- ≡ *Neutrality/multi-partiality:* Facilitators are brought in because the parties see the need for someone who has no decision-making authority to support their efforts in finding a common solution in a fair manner. Their role is sometimes described as “neutral” (with respect to the issues at stake) and/or as “impartial” or “multi-partial” (i.e. with either equidistance or the same empathetic openness to all parties).
- ≡ *Strong listening, reframing & summarising skills:* Facilitators need to be able to listen carefully during all phases of the process, to summarise long statements and occasionally reframe statements put forward in an aggressive language that makes it difficult for others to open up to the message. Sometimes, they may also have to mirror statements which indicate a strong emotional reaction in the speaker, but which are articulated only in passing or in more modest words – here, the facilitator may do well to amplify the emotional message.
- ≡ *Formulating good questions:* An effective dialogue process is one in which participants open up to each other and move towards a broader and deeper understanding of each other. This requires asking questions that encourage them to share the background and underlying needs, fears and interests of their statements and proposals. Particularly helpful are “circular questions”, which focus on the context and the perspectives of outside persons (→ see Chapter 3b *Facilitation Tools*).
- ≡ *Personal integrity and awareness:* Good facilitators combine personal integrity with a strong awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses as facilitators. Facilitators are often the focus and the projection-surface of what is going on in the group. It is important that facilitators are aware of this and know how to handle the implications. One basic way of ensuring that one is able to do so is to work in mixed facilitation teams. Ideally, one team member will be able to observe group dynamics and facilitator-group-dynamics and to talk through difficult situations arising in daily or ad-hoc debriefing sessions.
- ≡ *Understanding the group development as a dynamic and holistic process:* Good facilitators are aware that ups and downs are normal phenomena in group settings. Moments of hard confrontation and of mutual avoidance are often less due to personal traits. Rather, they are an expression of the group’s struggle with its efforts to generate a commonly agreed outcome.

An Example for Reframing

In one dialogue process facilitated in the Southern Caucasus, two groups were planning to meet on neutral territory in Austria. Painstaking preparation had gone into drawing up mutually agreeable participants' lists. On the eve of the meeting, when one of the delegations had already arrived, word transpired that an un-vetted participant was going to arrive with the other delegation who proved deeply problematic for the group already there. They threatened, and saw no alternative, to walking out. After long hours of nightly discussions with the facilitation team, a face-saving way of reframing the meeting was discovered: rather than a dialogue session – with all its political implications – the meeting was framed as a study seminar, hence making the presence of the afore rejected delegation member less problematic and allowing the meeting to go ahead.

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2 How to Design Dialogues

2.1 Ground Rules of Dialogue

To ensure a common understanding of the way the dialogue will be organised and facilitated, it is important to agree on a joint set of ground rules with all participants. This should be done at the very beginning of the first dialogue session and should be explicitly confirmed by all participants. These ground rules should be disseminated in written form, so that participants and facilitators can refer to them whenever necessary during the dialogue process. It is also possible to add new ground rules at a later stage, for example on speaking time in case too many lengthy comments by few people provoke impatience or withdrawal by others.

Ground rules for dialogues relate to three basic categories:

1. The mode of mutual interaction and communication in the dialogue sessions.
2. The way in which information from these sessions is shared outside (particularly the understanding of confidentiality)
3. The practical aspects to ensure effective sessions (→ see Chapter 1.2 *Good Practices of Dialogue*).

Sometimes, the rules for decision-making, i.e. to reach a consensus at the end of a dialogue process, are also called ground rules.

With respect to the first category, *interaction and communication*, the following ground rules can be helpful:

- ≡ Dialogue means to listen to, to understand and to avoid interrupting other participants.
- ≡ Dialogue means to remain open-minded to the perspectives of other participants.
- ≡ Dialogue means to separate what we hear from other persons from our judgement on why this person makes a certain statement. Many misunderstandings are based on the temptation to interpret the motives why someone makes a statement.
- ≡ Dialogue means to focus first on interests and needs instead of solutions. Many dialogues fail because the participants rush too early to conclusions and solutions.

3.4 Dialogue Planning Checklist

This checklist can be useful for the preparation of a dialogue session, as a sheet for observers during the dialogue, or for the debriefing of the facilitator team after a dialogue session. In order to fulfil its potential, dialogues should always be thought of and planned as more than one-off events, however.

Preparing the dialogue

Facilitation team

- ≡ Is our facilitation team well balanced, multi-partial, do we have insiders/outsideers?
- ≡ Do the team members know and trust each other?
- ≡ Are we aware of each facilitator's strengths and weaknesses?
- ≡ Is our team well prepared for the conflict(s), we are dealing with?

Dialogue's framework conditions

- ≡ *Purpose*: Is the dialogue's goal and the intended outcome clear to all?
- ≡ *Target group*: Are all relevant stakeholders involved in the dialogue?
- ≡ *Group size*: Did we define the number of participants to be invited?
- ≡ *Setting*: Is there a suitable space, where the dialogue can take place? Is it preferable to hold the dialogue in a neutral location outside the country/region as opposed to in the country/region?
- ≡ *Language*: If a dialogue is held between groups requiring (consecutive or simultaneous) translation, are we making sure to integrate the translators into the facilitation team (and to allow for additional time in holding the dialogue)? In case the dialogue is held in a shared language which is however mastered to different degrees, are we making sure that participants feel free and encouraged to clarify issues? Is one member of the facilitation team prepared to act as liaison person with the translators and technicians?
- ≡ *Matters of protocol*: Are we attuned to the specific religious and cultural requirements of the different participants and well prepared to accommodate these? (For example, in Christian settings it may be expected that the facilitator invite a priest to say opening or closing prayers; practicing Muslims may request that female participants are accompanied by a male family member who should be seated discreetly in the background; also, there may be need to prayer rooms and prayer times need to be factored into the schedule; Buddhist monks must eat before noon, so that the organisers must make sure to provide some food in the dialogue venues; etc.)
- ≡ *Timing*: Do we know when it is possible to schedule dialogue sessions with the target group? Are we prepared to accompany the dialogue over time and through multiple sessions?

Logistical arrangements

- ≡ *Appropriate dialogue space*: Are all participants able to establish eye contact and listen to each other easily? Is the seating arranged in a non-hierarchical way (with potential exceptions where culturally or personally necessary)?
- ≡ *Room for smaller groups*: Are there smaller rooms/spaces for breakout groups?
- ≡ *Refreshments*: Is there an arrangement for refreshments?
- ≡ *Invitation*: Are all participants invited timely?
- ≡ *Confirmation*: Do we have a list of confirmed participants?

Agenda setting

- ≡ Is there sufficient time for discussion and for breaks, which are an important part of the dialogue process? Do we have some flexibility and time buffers in the agenda?
- ≡ Does the agenda reflect a clear process design with trust-building measures at the beginning before discussing potentially contentious issues?

Facilitating the Dialogue

Ground rules

- ≡ Do we have a clear procedure for developing and agreeing on ground rules for the dialogue?
- ≡ Do all participants agree on the set of ground rules?
- ≡ Are the agreed rules disseminated or displayed for all in a written form?
- ≡ Do we refer to them whenever necessary during the dialogue process?

Dialogue phases

Phase 1

- ≡ Do we give all parties the opportunity to share their perspective on the issues?
- ≡ Do we write down interests and needs, instead of positions?
- ≡ Do we regularly summarise statements, thereby acknowledging the parties without offending other parties?

Phase 2

- ≡ Do we encourage the sharing of perspectives?
- ≡ Do we use tools that acknowledge the underlying feelings, concerns, fears and needs of all parties and encourage mutual understanding (e.g. open ended and circular questions, reframing, mirroring)?

Phase 3

- ≡ Do we generate inclusive options?
- ≡ Do we use brainstorming tools and encourage a broad spectrum of creative alternatives; without immediately evaluating the options?

Phase 4

- ≡ Do we carefully evaluate all options?
- ≡ Do we have criteria most suitable with respect to a reasonable consensus?

Consensus building

- ≡ Do the participants agree on the type of consensus they would like to achieve?
- ≡ Is the consensus achieved written down and disseminated or displayed for all?

Managing Difficult Situations

- ≡ Are we prepared to engage with escalating disputes and threats of hostilities or even violence?
- ≡ Are we prepared to engage with expression of strong feelings (crying, leaving the room, etc.)

Self-care & care for facilitation team members

- ≡ Are we taking care of ourselves and of the members of your facilitation team?
- ≡ Do we recognise our own limits?
- ≡ Are we taking breaks seriously?
- ≡ Do we work together to handle difficult situations?
- ≡ Do we value our achievements and the contributions of every team member?

Continuing the dialogue

Debriefing & Preparing next steps

- ≡ Have we planned enough time for debriefing?
- ≡ What worked well, what will we do differently next time around?
- ≡ Which steps need to be taken by whom until the next dialogue meeting/session?