DIALOGUE: THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE THINKING

BY WILLIAM ISAACS

"There is a beginning to dialogue, but I do not think there is an end"

—President of a local Steelworkers Union

The way people talk together in organizations is rapidly becoming acknowledged as central to the creation and management of knowledge. According to Alan Webber, former editor of the *Harvard Business Review*, conversation is the means by which people share and often create what they know. Therefore, "the most important work in the new economy is creating conversations" ("What's So New About the New Economy?," *Harvard Business Review* Jan.-Feb. 1993). Dialogue, the discipline of collective learning and inquiry, is a process for transforming the quality of conversation and the thinking that lies beneath it.

The Power of Dialogue

Complex issues require intelligence beyond that of any individual. Yet in the face of complex, highly conflictual issues, teams typically break down, revert to rigid positions, and cover up deeper views. The result: watered-down compromises and tenuous commitment. Dialogue, however, is a discipline of collective learning and inquiry. It can serve as a cornerstone for organizational learning by providing an environment in which people can reflect together and transform the ground out of which their thinking and acting emerges.

Dialogue is not merely a strategy for helping people talk together. In fact, dialogue often leads to new levels of coordinated action without the artificial, often tedious process of creating action plans and using consensus-based decision-making. Dialogue does not require agreement; instead it encourages people to participate in a pool of shared meaning, which leads to aligned action.

Over the past year, The Dialogue Project at MIT has been conducting a series of practical experiments to create dialogue and explore its impacts. While it is still at an early stage, we have witnessed moving and, at times, profound changes in the individuals and groups with which we have worked. For example, labor and management representatives from a steel mill have discovered dramatic shifts in their ways of thinking and talking together. In a recent presentation by this dialogue group, one union participant said, "We have learned to question fundamental categories and labels that we have applied to each other."

"Can you give us an example?" one manager asked.

"Yes," he responded, "labels like management and union."

This particular group has transformed a 50-year-old adversarial relationship into one where there is genuine and serious inquiry into "taken-for-granted" ways of thinking. The steelworkers, for example, recognized that they had far more in common with management than they had previously realized or expected. "We quit talking about the past," said the Union President. "We didn't bring any of that up, all the hurt and mistrust that we've had over the last twenty years." Another steelworker noticed that the category "union" limited him as much as it protected him. "It's important to suspend the word 'union,'" he said.

In another setting, we brought together major health care providers for a city—hospital CEOs, doctors, nurses, insurance agents, technicians, and a legislator—to create a microcosm of the healthcare system. This group has been inquiring into some of the underlying assumptions and forces that seem to make this field so chaotic.

In one session, participants confronted the collective pain felt when assuming responsibility for all the illnesses of a community. One senior physician said, "I am struck by my schizophrenia: the difference between how I treat my patients and how I treat all of you." This dialogue has begun to surface the underlying

sources of counter-productivity inherent in the healthcare system. In the past, people have sought self-protection against such pain, but this has led to costly isolation, misplaced competitiveness, and lack of coordination.

Dia • logos

Dialogue can be defined as a sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions, and certainties that structure everyday experience. The word "dialogue" comes from two Greek roots, *dia* and *logos*, suggesting "meaning flowing through." This is in marked contrast to what we frequently call dialogue—a mechanistic and unproductive debate between people seeking to defend their views. Dialogue actually involves a willingness not only to suspend defensive exchange but also to probe into the reasons for it. In this sense, dialogue is a strategy aimed at resolving the problems that arise from the subtle and pervasive fragmentation of thought (see "Fragmentation of Thought" below).

Physicist David Bohm has compared dialogue to superconductivity. In superconductivity, electrons cooled to very low temperatures act more like a coherent whole than as separate parts. They flow around obstacles without colliding with one another, creating no resistance and very high energy. At higher temperatures, however, they began to act like separate parts, scattering into a random movement and losing momentum.

Particularly when discussing tough issues, people act more like separate, high-temperature electrons. Dialogue seeks to help people attain high energy and low friction without ruling out differences between them. Negotiation tactics, in contrast, often try to cool down interactions by bypassing the most difficult issues and narrowing the field of exchange to something manageable. They achieve "cooler" interactions, but lose energy and intelligence in the process. In dialogue, the aim is to create a special environment in which a different kind of relationship among the parts can come into play—one that reveals both

FRAGMENTATION OF THOUGHT

Fragmentation of thought is like a virus that has infected every field of human endeavor. Drawing in part upon a worldview inherited from the 16th century (which saw the cosmos as a giant machine), we have divided our experience into separate, isolated bits. Nowhere does this fragmentation become more apparent than when human beings seek to communicate and think together about difficult issues. Rather than reason together, people defend their "part," seeking to win over others.

Recent developments in quantum theory and cognitive science indicate that this reductionist perspective is a fictitious way of thinking. The discovery of what Neils Bohr called "quantum wholeness" suggests that, at the quantum level, we cannot separate the observer and the observed. For example, light can behave like a particle or a wave depending on how you set up the experiment. What you perceive, in other words, is a function of how you try to perceive that reality. As physicist David Bohm put it, "the notion that all these fragments are separately existent is evidently an illusion, and this illusion cannot do other than lead to endless conflict and confusion."

high energy and high intelligence.

The Practice of Dialogue

The pivotal challenge lies in producing dialogue in practical settings. Dialogue poses a paradox in practice. While it seeks to allow greater coherence among a group of people (note this does not necessarily imply agreement), it does not impose it. Indeed, dialogues surface and explore the very mechanisms by which people try to control and manage the meanings of their interactions.

People often come to a dialogue with the intention of understanding their fundamental concerns in a new way. Yet in contrast with more familiar modes of inquiry, it is helpful to begin without an agenda, without a "leader" (although a facilitator is essential) and without a task or decision to make. By deliberately not trying to solve familiar problems in a familiar way, dialogue opens a new possibility for shared thinking.

One story illustrates the power of this kind of exchange. In the late 1960s, the dean of a major U.S. business school was appointed to chair a committee to examine whether the university, which had major government contracts, should continue to design and build nuclear bombs on campus. People were in an uproar over the issue. The committee was somewhat like Noah's ark: two of every species of political position on the campus. The chairman had no idea how to bring all these people

together to agree on anything, so he changed some of the rules. The committee would meet, he said, *every* day until it had produced a report. Every day meant exactly that—weekends, holidays, everything. People objected, but he persisted.

The group eventually met for 36 days straight. Critically, for the first two weeks, they had no agenda. People just talked about anything they wanted to talk about: the purpose of the university, how upset they were, their deepest fears and their noblest aims. They eventually turned to the report they were supposed to write. By this time, they had become quite close. In the corner you might have seen two people conferring who previously had intensely clashing views. To the surprise of many, the group eventually produced a unanimous report. What was striking was they agreed on a direction, *but for different reasons*. They did not need to have the same reasons to agree with the direction that emerged.

Levels and Stages of Dialogue

Dialogue requires creating a series of increasingly conscious environments in which a special kind of "cool inquiry" can take place. These environments, which we call "containers," can develop as a group of people become aware of the requirements and discipline needed to create them (see "Initial Guidelines for Dialogue"). A container can be understood as the sum of the assumptions,

shared intentions, and beliefs of a group. These create a collective "atmosphere" or climate. The core of the theory of dialogue builds on the premise that changes in people's shared attention can alter the quality and level of inquiry that is possible.

The evolution of a dialogue among a group of people consists of both levels and stages. They tend to be sequential, although once one moves through a stage, one can return to it (see "Evolution of Dialogue"). Passing through a level usually involves facing different types of individual and collective crises. The process is demanding, and at times frustrating, but also deeply rewarding.

1. Instability *of* the Container

When any group of individuals comes together, each person brings a wide range of tacit, unexpressed differences in paradigms and perspectives. The first challenge in a dialogue is to recognize this, and to accept that the purpose of the dialogue is not to hide them, but to find a way of allowing the differences to be explored. These implicit views are often inconsistent with one another. Since we generally deal with inconsistencies in rigid and mechanistic ways, the "container" or environment for dialogue at this stage is unstable.

Dialogue begins with conversa-tion (the root of the word means "to turn together"). People begin by speaking together, and from that flows deliberation ("to weigh out"). Consciously and unconsciously people weigh out different views, agreeing with some and disliking others. They selectively pay attention, noticing some things, missing others.

At this point people face the first crisis and choice of the dialogue process, one that can either lead to the further refinement and evolution of the dialogue environment, or can lead to greater instability. This "initiatory crisis" occurs as people recognize that despite their best intentions, *they cannot force dialogue*. People find they cannot comprehend, much less impose coherence, on the diversity of views. They must choose either to defend their point of view, or *suspend* (not *suppress*) their view and begin to listen without judgment, loosening the grip of certainty about all views (including their own).

2. Instability *in* the Container

A recognition of this "initiatory" crisis begins to create an environment in which people know they are seeking to do something different. At this point, groups often begin to oscillate between suspending views and discussing them. People will feel the tendency at this point to fall into the familiar habit of analyzing the parts, instead of focusing on the whole.

At this stage, people may find themselves feeling frustrated. Others may defend their views despite evidence that they may be wrong. They may make definitive statements about what is or is not happening, but fail to explore their assumptions or other possibilities. They may see their behavior as a function of how others think and act, and discount their own responsibility for it. Normally all this is either taken for granted or kept below the surface. But in dialogue we deliberately seek to make these general patterns of thought observable and accessible and surface the tacit influences that sustain them.
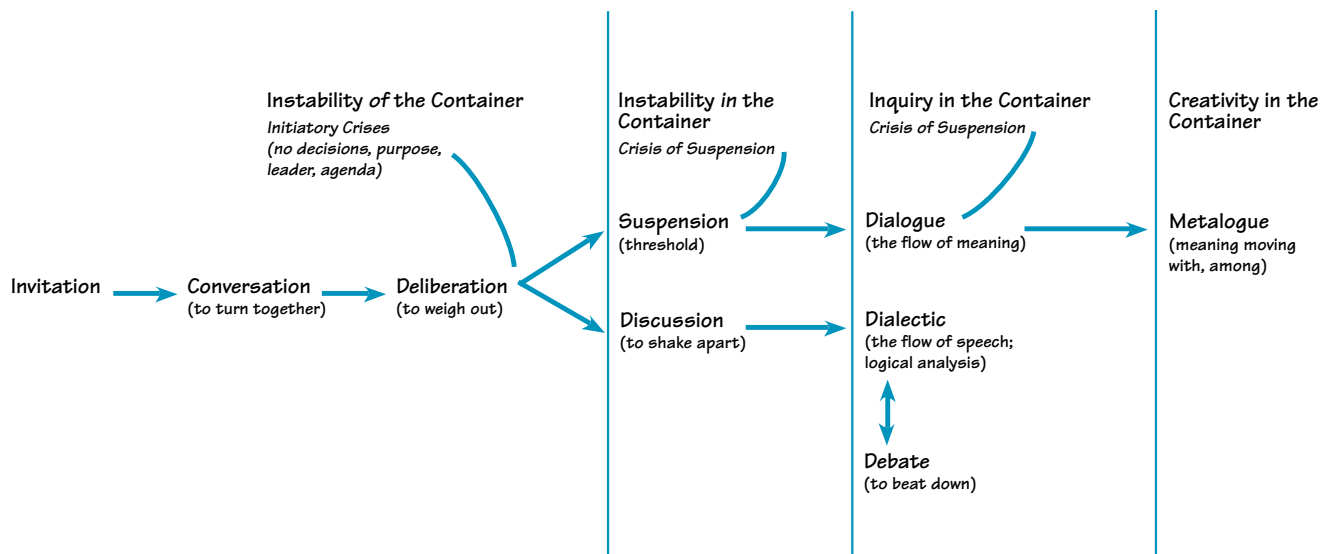
At this point in the dialogue people begin to see and explore the range of assumptions that are present. They ask: Which are true? Which are

INITIAL GUIDELINES FOR DIALOGUE

- Suspend Certainties
- Listen to Your Listening
- Slow Down the Inquiry
- Be Aware of Thought
- Maintain Peripheral Attention

ATTRIBUTES OF THE DIFFERENT SECTORS

Invitation → Conversation (to turn together) → Deliberation (to weigh out)

Instability of the Container
Initiatory Crises
(no decisions, purpose, leader, agenda)

Suspension (threshold)

Discussion (to shake apart)

Instability *in* the Container
Crisis of Suspension

Inquiry in the Container
Crisis of Suspension

Dialogue (the flow of meaning)

Dialectic (the flow of speech; logical analysis)

Debate (to beat down)

Creativity in the Container

Metalogue (meaning moving with, among)

false? How far is the group willing to go to expose itself? This leads to a second crisis, namely the "crisis of suspension." Points of view that used to make sense no longer do. The direction of the group is unclear. Some people experience disorientation or perhaps feel marginalized and constrained by others. Polarization occurs as extreme views become stated and defended. The fragmentation that has been hidden is appearing, now in the container.

For example, in an ongoing dialogue with a group of labor and management representatives from a steel mill, the "same old kind" of conflicts emerged. Some participants felt helpless and defeated, others went "ballistic." Yet they did not walk out. They stayed to explore the ways in which they had all contributed to the unproductive dynamics. Likewise, in the healthcare dialogue, suppressed conflict, anger, and long-time simmering "myths" about one another began to surface.

To manage the crisis of collective suspension, everyone must be aware of what is happening. Rather than panic, withdraw, or fight, people may choose to inquire. Listening here is not just listening to others, but listening to oneself. And people may ask: Where am I listening from? What can I learn if I slow things down and inquire?

Skilled facilitation is critical at this point. The facilitator, however, is not seeking to "correct" or impose order on what is happening, but to show how to suspend what is happening to allow greater insight into the order that is present. The facilitator might point out the polarization and the limiting categories of thought that are rapidly gaining momentum in the group.

3. Inquiry in the Container

If a critical mass of people stay with the process beyond this point, the conversation begins to flow in a new way. In this "cool" environment people begin to inquire together as a whole. New insights often emerge. The energy that had been trapped in rigid and habitual patterns of thought and interaction begins to be freed.

When we facilitated a dialogue in South Africa, people began reflecting on apartheid in ways that surprised them. They were able to stand beside the tension of the topic without being identified with it. Similarly, in the healthcare dialogue, it was at this point that people began to discuss their status as "gods" and stopped blaming others in the "system" for the difficulties they saw.

As people participate, they also begin to watch the session in a new way. One participant from a group of urban leaders in Boston compared it to seeing the inside of their minds performing together in a theatre. People become sensitive to how habitual patterns of interaction can limit creative inquiry.

This phase can be playful and penetrating. Yet it also leads to crisis. People begin to feel the impact that fragmented ways of thinking has had on themselves, their organizations, and their culture. They sense their isolation. Such awareness brings pain—both from the loss of comforting beliefs and by exercising new cognitive and emotional muscles. The "crisis of collective pain" is the challenge of embracing these self-created limits of human experience. It is a deep and challenging crisis, one that requires considerable discipline and collective trust.

4. Creativity in the Container

If the crisis of collective pain can be navigated, a new level of awareness opens. People begin to sense that they are participating in a pool of common meaning because they have sufficiently explored each other's views. They still may not agree, but their thinking takes on an entirely different rhythm and pace.

At this point, the distinction between memory and fresh thinking becomes apparent. People may find it hard to talk together using the rigid categories of previous understanding. The net of their thought is not fine enough to capture the subtle and delicate understandings that begin to emerge. People may find they do not have adequate words and fall silent. Yet the silence is not an empty void,

but one replete with richness. Rumi, a 13th century Persian poet, captures this experience:

"Out beyond ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing
There is a field
I will meet you there
When the soul lies down in that grass
The world is too full to talk about."

In this experience, the world is too full to talk about; too full to use language to analyze it. Yet words can also be evocative—narratives that convey richness of meaning. Though we may have few words for such experiences, dialogue raises the possibility of speech that clothes meaning, instead of words merely pointing towards it. I call this kind of experience metalogue, meaning "moving or flowing with."

Metalogue reveals a conscious, intimate and subtle relationship between the structure and content of an exchange and its meaning. The medium and the message are linked: information from the process conveys as much meaning as the content of the words exchanged. The group does not "have" meaning, it is its meaning. Loosening rigid patterns of thought frees energy that now permits new levels of intelligence and creativity in the container.

Dialogue is not intended to be a problem-solving technique, but a means to explore the underlying incoherence of thought and action that gives rise to the problems we face. It balances more structured problem-solving approaches with the exploration of fundamental habits of attention and assumption behind traditional thinking. By providing a setting in which these subtle and tacit influences on our thinking can be altered, dialogue holds the potential for allowing entirely new kinds of collective intelligence to appear. ◘

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