

THE POWER OF AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE

George Kohlrieser

We've all had superficial conversations about the weather or the canapés at a party, but what is the difference between a dialogue and a conversation? By definition, a dialogue is never superficial—it is always a shared inquiry in which the participants seek greater understanding of each other and the truth. The ability to engage in dialogue is a key skill required by leaders for building and maintaining relationships. Leaders who neglect this ability do so only at great risk to the health of their organizations.

I first discovered the power of dialogue as a young psychologist working for the Police Department in Dayton, Ohio. On one assignment, I accompanied the police to the hospital to deal with an agitated man who had been brought to the hospital with a stab wound inflicted by his girlfriend. While I talked with this man, he suddenly grabbed a large pair of scissors and took a nurse and me hostage, saying he would kill both of us. For two hours we pursued a dialogue focused on him,

his life-threatening injuries, and the care required to keep him alive. “Do you want to live,” I asked him, “or do you want to die?”

“I don’t care,” was his answer. I then asked, “What about your children losing their father?” He visibly changed and began to talk about his children rather than about his anger at his girlfriend and the police. In the end, he agreed to put the scissors down voluntarily and allowed the nurse and surgical team to treat him. And with tears in his eyes he thanked me for reminding him how much he loved his kids. In those moments I discovered the power of bonding and dialogue in even the most dangerous situations.

Seeking a Greater Truth

Dialogue is much more than plain conversation. Dialogue is the seeking of a greater truth. In dialogue we experience ourselves as bonded to the person with whom we are speaking, making understanding and meaning

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flow beyond words. Shared meaning is the glue that holds people and organizations together. Good dialogue involves talking with our body, emotions, intellect, and spirit. Listening is a crucial element of effective dialogue.

To have an authentic dialogue it is necessary for the participants to be in a mind-set of discovery. Such discovery, however, takes work, and it is often easier, especially in a business environment, for people to get into a debate or an argument, either seeking the right answer or to prove a point.

Dialogue is about shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting. It is not something you do *to* another person; it is something you do *with* another person. It requires a shift in mind-set about what the relationship with the other means. The focus is on understanding the other person, not only on making them understand you. Dialogue is an exchange in which people think together and discover something new. It is the seeking of greater truth. The depth of dialogue brings the participants to a different level, where they come to a deeper understanding of each other.

In a dialogue, we want to keep a connection with the person to whom we are speaking. True dialogue also involves questioning and sharing doubt, as opposed to debating. Debating is when we keep looking at the issue that is most important to *us*, which can easily lead to disagreement. In times of constant change and increasing complexity, we need to take into account our growing interdependence, and dialogue takes us there. Dialogue is an important means of developing a culture of collaboration, and creative dialogue can also be used as a means to search for new ideas, ultimately leading to innovations

in any field. Perhaps most important, dialogue is key to resolving differences and conflict.

Here is an example of true dialogue. Whole Foods CEO John Mackey was heckled at an annual meeting by an animal rights activist. In an effort to quiet the activist but avoid a scene, he agreed to a personal dialogue with the shareholder. In the end he discovered some key weaknesses in his company's policies regarding animal products and became a firm proponent of many of the activist's positions. At the same time, he converted an opponent into a vocal advocate for Whole Foods. His turnabout has been celebrated by the press and like-minded customers, and the Whole Foods brand has only become stronger as a result of Mackey's ability to engage in dialogue.

The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth

In reality, no one person has "the truth," but when people believe they already know everything, they derive no benefit from dialogue. One can have only a perception, an interpretation, or a subjective part of the truth. To move beyond subjectivity, leaders must have the skills to engage in dialogue, to decide, and to act, all the while bearing in mind that one needs to know when to *limit* dialogue. The ultimate question is whether all viewpoints, especially opposing or minority opinions, have been heard.

Many people have no idea how to express themselves in a dialogue, and someone unable to build a positive bond may speak with words that carry fear, anger, or sadness. How can you tell when someone is doing this? It shows up, quite simply, in behavior and words, and comes out as coercion, aggression, anxiety, low energy, and detachment. People unable to build a positive bond are argumentative; they interrupt without listening, defend, and think ahead, and the end result is that dialogue is blocked. For others, talking becomes a habit, a ritual rather than a personal exchange. When we are actually aware and thinking while talking, something different happens beyond just reporting a memory or repeating memories to fill in silence. Thinking is about seeing something new, and seeing the potential or the possibilities.

Blocks to Dialogue

We have all met people who, when asked for the time, tell us how to make a watch; or when asked for direct feedback, give us generalized platitudes; or when presented with a problem, dismiss it as not important. These are all blocks to dialogue. Blocks are ways to stop the discussion and thereby rupture the bonding process inherent in real communication. All too often, however, we are not aware of blocks that can interfere with dialogue. Whether voicing a statement or a question, the responder needs to link directly to what preceded. That way, it is possible to follow (or trace back) the exchange sentence by sentence to the point at which any block intrudes. One of my favorite expressions when people do not answer a question directly is to say gently, “That’s a great answer, but to a different question.” Most times, the other person does not even remember the question. My research shows that in organizations, about 70 percent of communication is filled with blocks to dialogue. This reflects a major problem in communication and indicates why many meetings take so long without adding any value. In dialogue, bonding is strong. When dialogue is blocked, bonding is limited or broken.

Dialogue can stumble by running into any of four primary blocks: passivity, discounting, redefining, and overdetailing.

Passivity

This occurs when a person displays and uses language of withdrawal or nonresponsive behavior. The focus of the person is on self-inhibition rather than on engaging in problem solving. For example, Mary says to Tom, “I am angry that you are late for our meeting.” Tom, looking scared and detached, does not respond. So Mary gets increasingly uncomfortable and continues, saying,

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“What were you doing?” and Tom keeps his passivity and says, “Not much.” Silence itself is not necessarily passivity when used constructively for reflection or adding impact. When silence is used to avoid a response, it is passivity.

Discounting

When people say something to deflate, inflate, disrespect, or put down another person or themselves in some way, they are discounting. For example, the husband offers to take the children to school and the wife says, “You can’t. You don’t know where your head is, much less where the school is.” Or a six-year-old wants to take care of the plants in the house and the parent replies, “You can’t water them because you are too young.” It can also include attacks such as, “You are really stupid. Don’t you have a brain?” The words “Yes, but . . .” are usually a discount of whatever was said before. In organizations, managers and team members alike may fill conversations with discounts, thus blocking any chance of a useful dialogue.

Redefining

This block involves changing the focus of the transaction by manipulation to avoid something that may be uncomfortable or emotional. It might be a form of defensiveness to maintain an established mind-set about oneself, other people, or the world. Jacqui Schiff, Ken Mellor, and others called this “forcing your frame of reference on someone else.” The stimulus and the response refer to different issues. If this is allowed to run its full course, the dialogue shifts focus away from the point being discussed. Participants appear to talk past each other rather than with each other, or they simply go in circles. The original point may even be forgotten. For example, Mike says to a colleague, “Did you leave the confidential report at the photocopier?” Paul responds, “What time was it left there?” Or Mary asks, “Are you upset with me?” And Geraldine says, “What do you mean by upset?” What is missing in these exchanges is the linking of thoughts.

Overdetailing

Simply put, the speaker gives too many details, overwhelming others with so much information that the im-

portant point is lost or hidden. For example, someone asks where the hospital is, and the answer is a detailed explanation of the history of the city. Overdetailing is common in business, where many leaders give presentations that have far too many slides and far too much detail for any one person to reasonably assimilate. When asked why they make things so complicated, they respond that that is just the way things are. The speaker and the listener both have a responsibility for helping each other know the important points in the transaction.

Dialogues can also run into six secondary blocks, which may or may not occur in conjunction with one of the primary blocks just described. These include being too rational, being too emotional, overgeneralizing, theoretical abstraction, lack of directness, and lack of honesty.

Blocks to dialogue are significant on two levels. First, they break the flow in content or subject matter. Second, they rupture the fundamental emotional bonding needed in dialogue. The basic reason people block dialogue is to keep themselves or others at a distance through a disrupted or limited bond. People who block dialogue often have trouble making attachments, staying engaged, and maintaining bonding in the relationship. Blocking dialogue is usually a habit, sometimes learned in the family. It is perfectly possible, however, to rewire the brain and learn to speak effectively, directly, and without blocks.

Overcoming Blocks to Dialogue

By recognizing when people are using blocks to dialogue, leaders can reduce meeting times dramatically and, even more important, bring enjoyment back to meetings. How many meetings do you attend that are filled with blocks to dialogue? Consider how these meetings would look if effective dialogue replaced all the blocks.

To help remove blocks to dialogue, here are four tools you can use:

- *The red card exercise.* I often recommend that organizations or families introduce “block to dialogue” red cards, an idea borrowed from soccer match referees. During a meeting or discussion, anyone who uses a block to dialogue gets a red card from the others. This

technique helps people learn to be conscious of language and to engage fully in dialogue, assuming, of course, that people want to make it easier for others to listen to them.

- *Banning the “Yes, but—.”* One of the most common phrases heard in business conversation is “Yes, but.” Someone offers an opinion on a topic and a colleague interjects with the opening words, “Yes, but.” Next time you are at work, count how many times you hear “Yes, but” in any given day. This is actually a classic case of discounting—one of the four primary blocks to dialogue. It does not mean yes at all. Instead, it is a way to disagree and move away from the previous comment and state a different personal view. It is, in fact, a nice way to say no. It is the classic means of ensuring that people talk in monologues and not in dialogue. Far more effective is to say “Yes, and” or just “And.” This response requires the person to build on the previous point rather than destroy it. Banning the use of “Yes, but” in your organization or your family is a simple yet powerful tool. Sometimes it is helpful to be quite explicit: “Here is what I agree with and what I disagree with.” “Yes, but” reflects a person using the mind’s eye for a negative focus and acting as a destroyer. The opposite, “Yes, and,” uses the mind’s eye for a positive focus and to be a builder.

- *The “Yes, but” exercise.* In many of my courses, we work with people on the “Yes, but” exercise to demonstrate the blocking effect of these words. There are two parts to the exercise. First, invite three people to the front of the room and tell them they have been given the opportunity to throw a party. Their task is to decide what kind of party it is going to be and they have ninety seconds to do it. The only rule is that each person must start speaking with the words “Yes, but.” What happens is that each person has lots of ideas. However, they do not reach any sense of agreement because they are constantly disagreeing with each other and offering a different approach to the solution. Second, ask the same people to repeat the task, only this time they must start each sentence with the words “Yes, and.” The outcome of this discussion is not only that the participants come up with a result and a solution, but the energy and bonding between the people is



George Kohlrieser, author of “Hostage at the Table: How Leaders Can Overcome Conflict, Influence Others, and Raise Performance,” is professor of leadership and organizational behavior at the International Institute for Management Development in Lausanne, Switzerland. He is also an organizational and clinical psychologist, hostage negotiator, international trainer, and consultant who has worked in 85 countries around the world.

greatly enhanced. This simple exercise is a powerful demonstration of how our language can either block our creativity and bonding or enhance them.

- *The four-sentence rule.* The truth is that less is more when it comes to dialogue. Making it easy for people to listen to and understand what you are saying is vital. Therefore, introduce the four-sentence rule into your discussions, team meetings, or large group meetings. Each person speaks in four sentences or less (except, of course, when someone is making a presentation). Keeping to four sentences encourages people to think clearly about what they want to say before they speak, thereby enhancing understanding and dialogue. This rule does not mean you speak only four sentences on all occa-

sions; rather, it means you have the ability to engage in clear and focused interpersonal exchanges. I have seen extraordinary results with this rule—teams’ reducing meeting time by 50 to 70 percent.

Take the time soon to have true dialogue with those around you. Set aside time when you can fully engage with someone else to reach a deeper understanding and learn something new. Choose a setting where you can really listen. It often seems as if listening is becoming a lost art in today’s hectic world. The art of leadership hinges on knowing when to speak, when to be silent, and when to listen. All are part of the essential ability to engage in dialogue. In essence, no dialogue can take place without the accompanying willingness to at times be silent and listen.

Good listeners repeat the message in their own words to ensure that it has been accurately received. The best cure for leaders who lack good listening skills is to get them to agree that they will ask a clarifying question before speaking. This might be to paraphrase what was just said: “Can I just check? Are you saying x, y, or z?” By giving feedback and understanding through listening, we can reflect, understand, and respond in a truly authentic way and demonstrate our engagement in the process of dialogue.

True Leadership

True leadership means dealing with conflict effectively. Dialogue can help resolve everyday issues large and small in the business world. Dialogue creates an atmosphere in which mutual needs are recognized, common interests are understood, and solutions to conflicts are discovered. Everyone, leaders included, must express what they need, want, feel, and think, and also listen to what the others need, want, feel, and think. By learning to recognize and change blocks to dialogue, we can move our conversations into productive, efficient, and respectful dialogues.

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