

## HABIT



# 3

*“[When we embrace dialogue], collectively, we can be more insightful, more intelligent than we can possibly be individually.”*



**PETER SENGE**

One of the ways Better Conversationalists align their actions with their beliefs that conversation partners should have autonomy, be heard, and that conversation should be a back-and-forth, life-giving experience is to begin to cultivate the habit of fostering dialogue. Dialogical conversations almost always lead to better outcomes and promote greater learning because dialogue begins with strength and dignity and an intentional focus on others. It does away with top-down, passive power struggles where conversations are merely endured and then forgotten as quickly as possible. Participants in a dialogue all practice listening with empathy and respect for the other person’s views. A dialogical conversation is led by voices determined to keep the conversation open rather than closed. Far from being impossible or a rare occurrence, dialogical conversations can become one of our personal, conversational norms as we begin to practice incorporating this habit.

## Freire's Conditions for Dialogue

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- » Humility
- » Hope
- » Faith
- » Critical Thinking
- » Love

## Practical Reasons for Fostering Dialogue

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The old saying goes that two heads are better than one. Dialogue harnesses the power and creativity of everyone's minds. What keeps people from being willing to tap into such an amazing resource? What is more important: to be the expert at the table or to open up conversation so greater learning and better outcomes can be had?

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William Isaacs provides the following question to help recognize if the conversation we are having is a dialogue or not. Are you experiencing energy, possibility, and safety in your conversations?

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## Moral Reasons to Foster Dialogue

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### **TOP-DOWN COMMUNICATION IS DEHUMANIZING**

The problem with top-down communication is that it forces people to live in extremes: I'm extremely right, you're extremely wrong; I'm the expert, you're not; I have a right to speak, you don't. It's dehumanizing on every side because both winners and losers are isolated. Dialogue is about navigating to the *via media*, the humanizing middle ground where all are welcome, free to think and speak, and are respected. What can you do right now to gauge where you are

on the line of extremes, and, if needed, how can you move to a more central position where dialogue is the norm?

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**ASSUMPTIONS PREVENT US FROM SEEING OTHERS AS WHO THEY REALLY ARE**

Bohm explains that dialogue is difficult because of assumptions we hold about the basic stuff of life (the meaning of life, politics, religion, etc.). Jot down some assumptions you hold and rise to immediately defend. Now think about what it might look like to foster dialogue in the face of those deeply held assumptions.

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**STRATEGIES TO MOVE BEYOND ASSUMPTIONS**

1. Consider Others' Thoughts and Feelings
2. Clarify the Meaning of Words and Concepts
3. Provide Contextual Information
4. Identify your Own False Assumptions
5. Use Stories and Analogies

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Most adults probably aren't going to switch their views on religion or politics, but it is necessary to imagine how you can have dialogue (where people are free to honestly and respectfully speak) despite assumptions. Is it important for you to continue to gain awareness of your assumptions and become a facilitator of dialogue?

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Given that everyone questions everything at some point in time—and they're free to do so as people with their own minds—what would it look and feel like to feel less threatened in a dialogue where others have assumptions different than your own? What do you imagine an honest, yet gracious dialogue would sound like? Are you willing to be as gracious with others and their assumptions as you hope they'll be with you and yours? Are you as willing to let go of your false assumptions as you hope others will be to let go of theirs?

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Letting go of assumptions that are false is one of the most difficult things to do. Consider that reality for a moment. Think about how hard it is for you. Now give that same allowance to another person. This is important work, but it is not easy work. Thought difficult, creating a more equitable and respectful environment is a worthy struggle.

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How can using the strategies of considering others' thoughts and feelings, clarifying the meaning of words and concepts, providing contextual information, identifying your own false assumptions, and using stories and analogies help you move beyond assumption roadblocks to dialogue?

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## Strategies to Foster Dialogue by Balancing Advocacy and Inquiry

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In a dialogue, it is important that everyone speaks. One of the most practical things to gauge is who is doing all the talking. We all know that one person who calls us up and talks non-stop for an hour, and all we have to do is say, “Hmm ... mmm-hmmm. Wow.”

This is not a dialogue. It is an anti-dialogical nightmare that the kind-est endure and the thoughtless foist upon anyone who is willing to put up with it. Sometimes people say about somebody, “Oh, he’s a talker ...” as a nice way of warning, “You’re not going to get a word in edge-wise, and you’re going to be really, really late for your next appointment.” It’s not just that the person doesn’t listen; he never stops talking. Are you a “talker”? Or are you a person who has learned how to balance advocacy (your own voice) with inquiry (actively seeking to discover more about the other person’s perspective)?

### **BE HUMBLE.**

Consider the idea of seeing conversations as a testing ground for your ideas—where you embrace the fact that you don’t really know all there is to know about something. What does that look like?

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### **LISTEN WITH EMPATHY.**

What gesture of empathy can you offer to the other person? A helpful action? An understanding comment? A genuine apology?

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### **OPEN YOURSELF TO NEW IDEAS.**

What does it look like for you to enter into a conversation with the desire to find out if you are wrong? This is not an easy question to answer, so give yourself some time to think this through.

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**SURFACE AND SUSPEND ASSUMPTIONS.**

Knowledge is power, and some of the most important knowledge we need to surface is knowledge about how our assumptions and opinions came to be our own. William Isaacs invites us to “relax our grip on certainty ...” Use the following Root Cause Analysis form to figure out how you came to hold a particular assumption. Is it necessary for you to still hold this position? Is it something that you can release?

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Root Cause Analysis

Use this Root Cause Analysis form to examine how you came to hold certain assumptions or beliefs. Use what you learn to determine if you need to continue to hold this assumption or belief.

Why or how did I come to believe or assume that:

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Why or how did I come to believe or assume that?

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Why or how did I come to believe or assume that?

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Consider the statement, “To balance advocacy with inquiry, we need to suspend our assumptions. This doesn’t mean we give up our opinions; it just means we don’t make the point of conversation our own point.” Do you find this helpful?

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**QUESTIONS THAT ENCOURAGE DIALOGUE**

- » What do you think the \_\_\_\_\_ suggests?
- » What leads you to believe\_\_\_\_\_?
- » What are some other ways we can look at that?
- » What are we uncertain about?
- » What is your hope for \_\_\_\_\_?
- » What if nothing happens?

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**EXAMPLES OF A THIRD SIDE**

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1. Video
2. Data
3. Forms (such as Better Conversations reflection forms)
4. Questioning Routines

**Dialogue Structures**

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Dialogue structures are ways of organizing how people interact so they will likely engage in dialogue.

- » Brainstorming
- » Affinity Diagrams
- » Nominal Group Technique
- » deBono’s Six Thinking Hats
- » Owen’s Open Space

**BRAINSTORMING**

Brainstorming is a dialogue structure familiar to most. First described by Alex Faickney Osborn in his book *Applied Imagination* (1953), brainstorming is a simple process where a group of people lists ideas or thoughts about a particular topic. Brainstorming is a free activity, but two rules are basic to effective brainstorming: (a) Focus on quantity: During brainstorming, a group should try to

come up with as many ideas as possible, the more ideas the better; (b) Withhold criticism so that people feel free to generate more ideas, and more innovative suggestions. If participants aren't worried about how good or bad an idea is, they will be more likely to make suggestions. Evaluation of the ideas can occur after every idea has been listed.

#### **AFFINITY DIAGRAMS**

The idea of brainstorming was adapted by Japanese anthropologist Jiro Kawakita, who created affinity diagrams. Affinity diagrams are frequently used in collaborative group activities. The affinity diagram process involves three steps. First, all participants pick a topic to be discussed and write down their ideas on sticky notes. Second, they affix all their post-it notes to the white board or a wall in the room where they are meeting. Then, usually without talking, they sort the sticky into groups that are related. Affinity diagrams allow a large amount of information to be generated and organized very quickly.

#### **NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE**

Nominal (in name only) group process involves groups of four to six. Everyone involved will be working on a written statement of the problem to be addressed. Each person spends about five minutes writing out his or her ideas about or responses to the problem. Once everyone has done this, small groups are formed and each member contributes one idea to be put on the chalkboard or chart tablet. The process continues around the group until all the ideas are on the chart. No ideas are eliminated at this point, but clarification may be asked for. If there are time constraints, the whole process can take place in a group setting, going round robin. Participants then rank their top three choices and the facilitator circles the ideas with the most votes.

#### **EDWARD DE BONO'S SIX THINKING HATS**

de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats* (1985) expands the traditional idea of a devil's advocate or court jester; that is, a person whose role is to point out alternative viewpoints with respect to whatever is being discussed. deBono suggests six different perspectives, defined as different thinking hats, which represent different perspectives people can take during discussions. DeBono's six hats are: (a) white hat, focussed on data, empirical evidence, and facts; (b) red hat, focused on emotions, intuition, and gut responses; (c) black hat, focused on identifying what could go wrong with a plan; (d) yellow hat, focused on all that is good about a topic of discussion; (f) green hat, focused on creatively exploring a variety of options related to whatever is









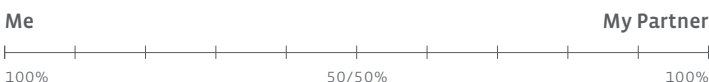
**LOOKING AT:**

# Foster Dialogue (1 of 2)



Complete this form after you have recorded a conversation in which you tried to engage in dialogue. You can complete it while watching or after watching the conversation.

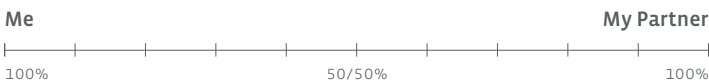
Put a mark on the line to indicate who did most of the talking in this conversation:



Is there anything you can do to ensure both partners contribute equally to the conversation next time?

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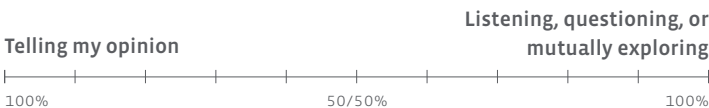
Put a mark on the line below to indicate what percentage of the time you were talking in this conversation:



Is there anything you should do next time to enable your partner to speak more?

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Put a mark on the line that indicates how much of the time you were telling your opinion in the conversation:



Is there anything you should do next time to change the way you ask questions?

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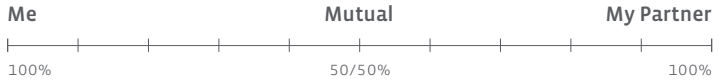


**LOOKING AT:**

# Foster Dialogue (2 of 2)



Put a mark on the line that indicates to what extent the outcome of the conversation was one that you proposed, your partner proposed, or was mutually constructed:



Is there anything else you can do to make your next conversation more of a dialogue?

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**LOOKING AHEAD:**

# Foster Dialogue

Identify a future conversation and use this form to help you gain insights that will help you foster dialogue.

What is your opinion?

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What are your conversation partner's needs?

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What words do you need to define with your partner?

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What contextual information does your partner need to understand what you are talking about?

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What stories or analogies can you use to make this conversation clearer?

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Are you willing to:

- not have your opinion accepted?
- admit you're wrong?
- listen most of the time—giving everyone equal opportunity to talk?
- look for disconfirming evidence?
- suspend your assumptions?
- identify a devil's advocate?

What else can you do to encourage dialogue?

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