

# The Magic in Dialogue

## —Engineering the Consolidated Intellect

Imagine sitting around and talking with a few colleagues, friends, or family members – or even a group of interesting people you’ve just met. Whether you’ve known the people in this group a long time or just a short time, eventually you will realize a key fact. You can only be partially aware of how much knowledge each individual person holds inside, and of all the things they’ve learned and experienced in their lives.

But now imagine that – in some miraculous way – everyone in the group can combine all their thoughts, knowledge and experience into the mind of a single person. This person would have on tap all of the group’s collective skills, life lessons and resources, and would be able to combine them in powerfully productive ways. This person would have all the resources of something we could call “the consolidated intellect.”

Wouldn’t that be an amazing force for solving problems? Can you imagine the tremendous thinking power that a consolidated intellect possesses, and all the ways it could generate progress?

In reality, we can create the consolidated intellect. We can do it with any group we might belong to, or any group we might create. Any collection of people with important goals in common. With the thoughts and procedures you’re about to learn in this chapter, you will have the ability to create a unified mind comprised of yourself and your colleagues, or your family, or your friends.

The key to creating a consolidated intellect is the **Dialogue Process**. Gaining skill with the Dialogue Process will also lead you to discover something else that is incredibly important. Here it is: Our conventional ways of holding meetings or brainstorming sessions, end up tapping only a small part of our own intellect – as well as the intellects of others – to all of the issues, challenges, and opportunities that our group needs to address. But this dynamic of limitation gets overturned when we come at those group issues, challenges and opportunities from the space I’m calling Dialogue.

## A Governing Principle—

*Diversity is the wellspring of creativity.*

So far, our exploration of the Target Thinking toolbox has mainly been about Images of Achievement, Strategic Networks, Leadership Advocacy, and Generative Conflict. Along the way we have also referred to, and had you engage in, a few forms of Dialogue. Now we’ll take you more deeply into Dialogue. After reading this chapter, you will not only understand it as a process and discipline, you will also grasp the enormous reach of its power. Let’s enter that territory now.

## I. Understanding Dialogue

Dialogue is one of the most vital tools within Target Thinking. We manifest its power in our dealings with others, and also in our dealings with ourselves. Dialogue is integrally connected with

every aspect of Target Thinking. In his landmark book, *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge speaks about the vital importance of Dialogue in what he calls “team learning.” He tells us that Dialogue has its roots in antiquity, but has today become the essential ingredient for making teamwork happen. I go even further, saying that it is pivotal in every single one of our other individual and collective interactions.

Dialogue is also a dynamic that each of us engages in with ourselves, every time we weigh a thought or a decision. This Inner Dialogue is a kind of self-talk, an extremely important banter we engage in – consciously or unconsciously – every day of our lives.

As we proceed into the world of Dialogue we’ll first look at what Dialogue is and what its implications are whenever we interact with others. Then we’ll move to understanding Dialogue in a context called the Dialogue Process. As soon as you’ve learned those basics, we’ll next look at using Dialogue as a tool for communicating more effectively with others. Finally we will dive into how we communicate with ourselves in the world of Inner Dialogue.

Listening is a vital element in Dialogue. We’ll explore it more deeply. Ultimately, what you learn about listening will give you an exciting way to think about who you are, how you function, how those factors link up with the fundamentals of Target Thinking.

## **What Dialogue Is**

Dialogue, like so much of Target Thinking, took some time to evolve.

I first ran into the idea of Dialogue many years ago, while becoming acquainted with what was then called the Human Development Program. I was looking for something I could use to teach effective listening skills, and there it was. Over time I incorporated the program into my consulting and training. I was astonished at its impact. It was definitely an invaluable tool for teaching listening skills, but it was so much more besides. As I went further with it, it became deeper and the rewards became greater.

Dialogue, I realized, is both a process and a discipline. It is a process when we use it to expand the quality of group or personal interaction. It is a discipline when it becomes our dominant style of communicating with everybody “out there” and with ourselves “in here.” It is at once something we can *do* and something that characterizes *who we are*.

## **Discussion, Conversation, Dialogue**

It’s important to distinguish Dialogue from two other forms of communication, discussion and conversation.

Discussion occurs when people bring their beliefs, opinions, and ideas to an interaction, intending to either persuade others to adopt them as their own, or else defending them against the beliefs, opinions, and ideas of others. Discussion is basically about the need to be right. It’s a contest, and objective is to win.

Think of all the discussions you’ve had with others. You probably recall that some discussions were fairly benign. Others may have become heated, teetering on the edge of argument – or maybe they even went over the edge. The bottom line is that discussions engage our emotions, so they always have a potential for conflict. Discussion, in fact, is really a low-level form of conflict. Its focus is always based on and driven by what we believe.

Conversations focus instead on the individual or individuals with whom we are conversing. Ideally, our interest in a conversation is on the interests of others. It's like a dance where we are taking care not to step on our partner's toes. Indeed, conversations can involve our emotions just as much as discussions do, but the stakes are not as high. Sad to say, in today's technologically laden and fast paced ways of communicating, conversation is a dying art form. Fewer and fewer people are skilled in the kind of listening that is essential for conversation to thrive. As a result, many interactions that begin as conversations quickly morph into discussions, arguments, or fights. Part of the problem is that we tend to see discussion as essential, but conversation as only desirable, if not completely optional. That's a very limited way of thinking, and also a recipe for poor communication. Truly skilled communicators have a repertoire that includes both conversation and discussion, but that is dominated by Dialogue.

Dialogue is something beyond both discussion and conversation. Yes, it acknowledges our beliefs, opinions, and ideas, but it also has room for those of others. Like conversation, it certainly pays attention to the interests of others, and like both discussion and conversation it can involve significant emotional stakes. What makes Dialogue different is that it can accommodate the different inputs from each individual brings in ways that not only accept diversity but also turn it into an engine for producing incredible results.

This diversity, incidentally, includes much more inclusive than just race, ethnicity, gender, age and things of that nature. It is a whole lot bigger than just beliefs, opinions, ideas, and interests. It includes all these things plus all our experiences, and the whole of our intellect — all our perspectives, cultural awareness, knowledge, and learning.

In Target Thinking we distinguish Dialogue even further from discussion and conversation. We treat it as a process or discipline having rules and structure. These rules and structure give Dialogue its power. I'll gradually take you more deeply into the rules and structure, how they work, and what they can do for you. We'll look at Dialogue from two perspectives. One, Dialogue the process, and two, Dialogue the discipline. As we move along, I'll label the process as the "Dialogue Process" and the discipline simply as "Dialogue" or "the Dialogue Discipline."

## **Roots and Results**

I began thinking about Dialogue because of my interest in promoting better communication, and more specifically, higher quality listening. And it achieved all those results beautifully, every time. But the more I used it the more I began noticing other things were happening. For instance, I could take a small group of total strangers and, by engaging them in the process, could build deep and lasting relationships in a matter of just a few hours. Imagine sitting in a small circle with six to eight people you've never met before and know nothing about. Now imagine that after four or five hours later, after you've participated in perhaps four or five Dialogue activities, you would develop friendships that would last a lifetime. This is exactly what was happening.

I came to realize that this was more than just communication. I began to think of it as Dialogue with a capital "D," and the process as the Dialogue Process. Without question, Dialogue was building communication skills. But it was also building enduring and powerful relationships at the same time. Initially, I believed this was happening through the impact of high quality listening. I figured that these relationships were evolving because people have a deep need to really be heard and listened to, and that the new friendships resulted from having this need met. That was true enough, but there was even more going on than that.

## **Putting Interpersonal Relationships in Context**

All organizations face the challenge of promoting positive, effective interpersonal relations. Organizations are social institutions, first and foremost. Encouraging members or employees to coexist peacefully and to interact flexibly, skillfully, and responsibly, is a basic, inescapable requirement.

Healthy working relationships are built upon positive interpersonal experiences between colleagues. However, organizations generally have no systematic way of helping employees understand each other and get along. The Dialogue Process provides both a great system and an ideal setting.

Dialogue activities are marvelous testing grounds. They allow people to observe themselves and others in action, and to begin seeing how they contribute to the feelings and performance of others. With this newfound understanding, individuals can realize that being responsible towards others not only feels good, it is also the most valuable and rewarding form of interaction. Gaining this awareness greatly enhances our abilities to get along with and to accommodate others who see the world differently.

In addition, another high-level communication skill – the ability to make accurate interpretations and responses in interpersonal situations – increases significantly. As this skill grows, it contributes to a broad and practical sense of organizational values or ethics. People who possess this ability know where they stand with themselves and others. They can tell what actions truly “fit” a situation, and are aware not only of how others affect them, but also of how their actions affect their colleagues and the organizational culture as a whole.

## **Encouraging Group Interaction**

Relating effectively to others is a challenge that we all face. The Dialogue Process brings out and affirms everyone’s inherent positive qualities and allows participants to gain practice in effective modes of communication. One of the greatest benefits of the process is that it gently forces us to interact. Every Dialogue activity is a real life experience where we share, listen, explore, plan, and solve problems together. As we interact, we learn about each other and we realize what it takes to relate effectively to all the other members of the group.

Through observing how others feel, think, and behave and comparing these observations to our own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, we develop positive interaction skills. We begin to recognize what works best, and what doesn’t work. We identify what others want and need from us in order for the entire organization to achieve its goals. We also come to understand the supreme value of trust.

Our best relationships in life are characterized by trust. As I explored the Dialogue Process further, it became crystal clear that trust was emerging from both the enhanced listening skills and also the very context of the process. It was this growing level of trust, the underpinning of all good relationships, that was creating the new relationships. It was easy then for me to see how Dialogue, relationship, and trust connected with each other. And when I saw that connection, I began to use the process for more than just a tool to enhance communication and relationship building. I focused on using it to build trust.

Just how important is trust? It is the absolute heart of great leadership!

In any organization, leaders have the responsibility of creating and sustaining a culture that allows the organization's members to flourish. When people can reasonably believe that serving the organization will help them toward their own goals, they will consistently give their all. The cornerstone for any such culture is trust. In addition to how important it is for relationship building, trust is also the gauge by which we can measure whether an organization – of any type, in any place – is headed for greatness, on track to reach the full measure of its potential. Or, as described by a highly esteemed author and consultant who happens to be a Distinguished Professor and Founding Chairman of the University of Southern California's Leadership Institute...

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***“Trust is the lubricant that allows organizations to work.”***

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*-- Warren Benis*

As leadership training became more and more central to my consulting interests, I found that the Dialogue Process could accomplish several more things as well. At the heart of every Dialogue Process was a topic. The topic was the focal point of the Dialogue Process. When I began choosing topics that focused directly on awareness, my clients reported rich gains in self awareness and awareness of others.

Most people participating in real Dialogue simply come to know themselves better. In the hurried pace of our daily lives we don't spend very much time discovering ourselves. In the Dialogue Process this discovery happens naturally, inescapably, because all of the other participants begin to mirror who we really are. Moreover, we very naturally learn more about the people with whom we were having Dialogue.

Here are the benefits that had become obvious to me by this point in the evolution of Dialogue Process.

### **Increasing Awareness**

By participating in the Dialogue Process, people gain many opportunities for deeper understanding of their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, as well as those of others. Through regular, rule-guided verbal sharing, they develop an awareness of their feelings, they talk about their responses, and they listen to how others have responded in similar situations. Their ability to evaluate the appropriateness of various behaviors increases.

Pause for a moment here and reflect back on our earlier discussions on feelings.  
*Remember that feelings are information about the nature and quality of things going on around us and in our lives, As such, our awareness and understanding of them is vital to our success.*

By verbally exploring their own experiences in the Dialogue Process, and by listening to others do the same, participants begin to see each person, including themselves, as fully unique. Feelings of concern and responsibility develop as the needs, problems, values, and preferences of others penetrate their awareness.

This awareness of how diversity brings enhancement is a major ingredient in the creative process. Differing preferences, positions, and points of view — which otherwise would frequently be the seeds of confrontation and conflict — contribute to a rich pool of shared knowledge. And it is all accomplished through Dialogue — through *words*.

Words are the only tool we have for systematically turning our attention and awareness to the feelings within us, and for describing and reflecting on our thoughts and behaviors. The effective use of words is the first step in developing the ability to grasp feelings that were previously unspoken, and to understand the connection between feelings and behavior. As they continue to practice Dialogue, individuals become more and more adept at making these connections. This knowledge in turn develops the capacity to evaluate alternatives and to think before and during actions.

This awareness of self and others – coupled with powerful listening that takes place in Dialogue – made it possible for trust to take hold and strong new relationships to develop.

## **Developing Individual and Group Awareness**

Our emotional and intellectual lives are so complex that we would be devastated if we couldn't discuss our experiences with one another. This holds true for even the most shy people among us. When we engage in self-observation and contemplation, and then share our thoughts and feelings at a level that's beyond superficiality, we develop self-awareness. We come to understand ourselves by looking inward and recognizing how we feel, think, and behave in response to people and events around us. When we listen to others do the same — all in an environment of safety — we expand our understanding of others.

Used regularly, the Dialogue Process, coupled with specifically chosen discussion topics, provides us with frequent opportunities to observe ourselves and others in action, and to begin seeing how we contribute to the culture of the organization. We become real people to each other. Even someone with whom you thought you had nothing in common is likely to surprise you by exposing an underlying humanity that erases bias, stereotypes, superficial differences, and leads to mutual respect.

## **Achieving Mastery**

*Have you ever gone through a highly charged situation, then afterwards wished that you'd said or done something differently? The biggest reason for this is that when we find ourselves in such situations, our emotions start interfering with our cognitive abilities. Rather than being able to keep our thinking detached from the situation, we see our abilities to stay in control being diminished. We say that we were "caught up in the situation."*

*Here, then, is another huge reason to develop Dialogue as your style of communicating.*

*In addition to increasing awareness, the Dialogue that occurs in the process can help you master that brief moment of clarity just before the situation is about to turn volatile — that instant on the threshold of likely conflict, just before the cognitive mind is engulfed by pre-programmed and often unproductive responses from the emotional mind. Two things happen when you achieve this mastery. First, you not only recognize but also learn how to extend that pre-conflict cognitive moment. Second, you also enjoy a liberating self-confidence that comes with knowing that any situation, no matter how volatile, can be consciously managed.*

*Dialogue Process topics may address human relations competencies as well. Topics related to including others, assuming and sharing responsibility, offering help, behaving assertively, and*

*solving problems all bear directly or indirectly on the quality of our interactions. In addition, the Dialogue Process is a wonderful tool for encouraging cooperation. As equitably as possible, the structure of the process attempts to meet the needs of all participants. Everyone's feelings are accepted. Judgments are suspended. The Dialogue Process is not another competitive arena, but is guided by a spirit of collaboration. When participants practice fair, respectful interaction with one another, they benefit from the experience and are likely to employ these responsible behaviors in other work (and personal) situations.*

## **The Birth of The Consolidated Intellect**

As I continued using the Dialogue Process and exploring its possibilities, I discovered that by paying even more attention to the topic being used, I could direct the Dialogue. As I did so, I found that I could create topics that focused on an issue or an opportunity. For example, if enhancing the quality of collaboration on a team was an issue, the topic might be "Something Significant I've Learned About Collaboration." As simple as this may seem to be, when participants go to their own experiences with collaboration, share them, and are listened to, ideas begin to emerge that no individual had thought of before. This might seem difficult to grasp, or even believe, but the proof is in the doing. And the doing has always produced the same consistent results. We'll look deeper into how topics work in the Dialogue Process later, but for now, understand that something big was beginning to happen.

With well-focused topics, participants were also able to focus on the realities of their lives or the realities of the organization of which they were a member. This was in addition to the other benefits and growth inherent in every Dialogue Process session. They were bringing to bear their individual experiences and understandings to produce other tangible results with the group-created phenomenon that I began calling "the consolidated intellect." These results included such exciting things as higher levels of strategic thinking, ideas for new products and services, and new frameworks for accomplishing tasks and producing results. At this point, Dialogue was producing results that had direct impact on the bottom line – in addition the benefits of building less tangible but extremely valuable things like skills, awareness, and capacity. All this was accomplished because, with Dialogue, we could consolidate the intellects of all those who were participating in the process.

I believe you can now see that Dialogue can have enormous impact. I was producing powerful results in my consulting. As I used Dialogue Process more and more, people began requesting that I use it not just to create the results I was looking for, also to teach it as a means of enhancing collaboration, communication, and producing results *they* were looking for. People were asking me to institutionalize the Dialogue Process.

## **Enter Peter Senge**

Somewhere during this time I found myself reading Peter Senge's book, The Fifth Discipline. I was very excited to find another voice describing the real power of Dialogue. For many years I had used the process to produce the results I've already mentioned, but was amazed when Senge suggested that the collective IQ of the group could be greater than those of the individuals participating.

Reading this was pivotal. How many times had I witnessed spectacular results generated by Dialogue Process groups? It was always something at which I marveled. What I hadn't understood until then was the power of the consolidated intellect. Each participant was bringing the full measure his or her intellect to the Dialogue Process group, but the consolidated intellect as a whole was greater than the sum of what each individual brought to the process. An amazing synergy came from this consolidated intellect. There was a perceivable gap between the sum of individual intellects and the whole of the consolidated intellect. This gap was the new knowledge being created as people engage themselves in Dialogue. Dialogue was unlocking the door to knowledge creation!

There were so many benefits within Dialogue that until then I hadn't seen that the greatest one of all was knowledge creation. For years, I had been focused on skill development, relationships being born or growing, and awareness being created. Even later, as I saw solutions being found to complex issues and ideas and plans for capitalizing on opportunity emerge, I didn't realize that I was also seeing consolidated intellect being unleashed and knowledge being created.

## **The Power of Dialogue**

Before we get into the specifics of just what the Dialogue Process is, let's take stock of the realities we create by using and participating in the process.

### **General Outcomes**

Every Dialogue Process generates growth and development in the following areas, regardless of its specific focus. These relate to the development and expression of intrapersonal and interpersonal excellence. They include:

- Opening avenues of communication while building communication skills in general and listening skills in particular
- Creating new relationships and to enhance those that already exist
- Encouraging and fostering high levels of group interaction
- Building trust
- Developing awareness of self and others
- Developing positive interaction skills
- Producing the medium in which the consolidated intellect develops
- Generating knowledge creation

This is an impressive list of outcomes. Alone, in and of themselves, they make the Dialogue Process a powerful tool. But when they are combined with the focus provided by the topic, the Dialogue Process also begins to produce tangible results that build the bottom line.

### **Specific Outcomes**

Every Dialogue Process has a topic. When we shape the topic to focus on a specific outcome or task we more fully engage the consolidated intellect, bringing knowledge creation to bear on the specific results we're looking for. This is the magic. This moves the Dialogue Process into the realm of organizational outcomes. Whether it's promoting strategic thinking, shaping a corporate future,



planning a vacation with your family, or designing a product or service, or any other pursuit, the Dialogue Process brings the full measure of your individual and collective resources into the process.

## **Dialogue—The Process**

Now you're ready to learn the process itself. As a first step, it's important to make some distinctions.

Dialogue can be applied in three different settings.

Dialogue can be used as a formal process that brings out the very best in any team or group. In this interpersonal realm, Dialogue is a unique small group process that's available to anyone who convenes a group of any type, or to any group that comes together to achieve anything at all. Whatever the hoped-for outcome, Dialogue paves the way to its realization. It is one of the consummate tools of the Target Thinker, and in group settings it provides a structure that becomes an operating context for the group.

Second, Dialogue is a discipline that we can assume in communicating with others in less formal settings, and as an alternative to conversation or discussion. In this setting we use Dialogue because we have a particular outcome that we want to achieve, and it requires the best input we can acquire from those with whom we are communicating.

Third, Dialogue is a process that we all ought to be using in the communications we have with ourselves. In this solo setting, Dialogue is a discipline for those times when our self-communications are casual and informal, but it can also be elevated to a formal process when vital outcomes are at stake and we want to engage all our unconscious resources. Using a variation of the formal Dialogue Process with ourselves is an integral part of crafting a compelling Image of Achievement.

I mentioned earlier that Dialogue is distinguished from discussion or conversation by having rules and structure. Without these rules and structure, formal Dialogue cannot exist. We'll establish them in a moment, but for now let's expand our understanding of Dialogue. William Isaacs, head of The Dialogue Project at MIT tells us that. "The word *Dialogue* comes from two Greek roots, *dia* and *logos*, suggesting, "meaning flowing through." Dialogue, then, is the vehicle by which we produce shared meaning. As a discipline, the process of Dialogue greatly facilitates collective learning and inquiry by improving both the quality of conversation and the thinking that supports it.

The elusive opportunities and complex issues with which today's organizations are dealing require the information and the creativity from many minds, not just those brought to bear by a single individual. Yet in the face of challenges like these, people often cling to rigid positions, and groups tend to factionalize or completely break down. The unfortunate result is watered-down compromises and tenuous commitment to goals.

By contrast, Dialogue doesn't require compromise; it doesn't even require agreement. Instead, it encourages people to participate in a pool of shared meaning. Although it can be a problem-solving technique, Dialogue is also something beyond. It is a means of exploration that can lead to enlightened action. It is a mechanism that promotes the development of the consolidated intellect, a synergy of what individuals bring to the process that delivers knowledge creation. It makes knowledge materialize that no single participant possessed before. The collective body of knowledge grows. As all the participants call forth and apply the knowledge they possess, they are able to create new knowledge.

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*Einstein said that imagination is more important than knowledge. I would suggest that this be extended as follows: Imagination is more important than knowledge because without imagination we cannot apply the knowledge we possess, and without applying this knowledge we have no hope of creating new knowledge.*

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As you will see, in the Dialogue Process as members talk about a specific topic they also follow an established procedure and adhere to a few basic rules. Topics may relate to issues, tasks or opportunities currently being dealt with by the organization as a whole, or their purpose may be to facilitate the growth of the group by encouraging sharing, awareness, self-disclosure, mutual acceptance, and positive interaction. The Dialogue Process is elegant yet simple; equally effective when used as a problem-solving, challenge facing, idea generating, knowledge creating tool or a teambuilding strategy. As you will see later, it also is the basis for the conversations we engage in with ourselves.

The value of Dialogue is recognized in most organizations. However, what is often mistaken for Dialogue is simply varying forms of discussion. Witness the frequency of meetings, the constant flow of information that builds reservoirs of questions, reactions, and alternative views — the rumors, prophecies, and lunchroom debates.

When this discussion is random, certain people tend to get left out. Some are shy or insecure, others introspective, still others just too busy. Even scheduled or structured discussions open to everyone frequently end up excluding the least verbal, least assertive members of a group. What makes the Dialogue Process unique is that its structure, procedure, and rules assure that every individual gets equal time, equal consideration, and equal respect. Since the most creative ideas and solutions are just as likely to come from the unassertive as the outspoken, the entire organization benefits.

## **A Medium for Dialogue**

The Target Thinking Dialogue Process offers a contained but highly suitable venue for developing Dialogue. The process is built on the notion of diversity and of developing pools of shared meaning. In each 20-minute session participants suspend judgment, listen to divergent points of view, build trust and rapport, and generate ideas and insights in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Aside from the length of sessions, a major distinction of the process is this: Initial communication centers around a specific topic, but follow-up discussion can range quite freely.

## **Going Deep Into the Dialogue Process**

With everything you've read so far, you might expect the Dialogue process to be very complex. Actually, it's quite straightforward and simple. But we're still going to go into some depth so that you can have even more appreciation for Dialogue. So let's get to it.

Each Dialogue Process has two parts. In the first, a topic is presented and participants take turns sharing to that topic. This is referred to as the Sharing Phase of the process. After the Sharing Phase, there is a general discussion that's facilitated by one or more questions designed to draw out conclusions, questions, or new thoughts relative to the original topic. This second part is called the Discussion Phase.

Life is full of rules, and the Sharing Phase of the Dialogue Process is no exception. However, they are fairly simple. Group members usually learn the rules of the Dialogue Process activity quickly, and learn to take these rules very seriously. They are neither difficult to follow nor a threat to anyone's personal style. In fact, by assuring safety, equality, and inclusion, the rules of the Dialogue Process actually remove many hidden roadblocks to productivity and enjoyment.

In a group's first few activities, it helps to take a minute to go over the rules. Once the process is smoothly operational, stating the rules is usually no longer necessary – but it is wise to have everyone keep them in mind. The behavior of the group demonstrates the presence of the rules with striking clarity. Here are those rules, with some explanation of how to apply them.

### **Rules of the Dialogue Process Sharing Phase**

- Everyone is allowed a turn to speak.
- Speak or pass — the choice is yours.
- Listen to the person speaking without interrupting or probing.
- Respect all comments and suspend judgment.
- Share the time equally.

#### **Everyone is allowed a turn to speak.**

Whatever the group makeup, every member is given the opportunity to speak to the topic. You'll notice that the rule says, "a turn." This implies that everyone is entitled to one turn at this point in the process, and not multiple turns. The reason for this seeming limitation is that the process is designed to provoke thinking at this point more than it is to create a forum for expression. As everyone takes his or her turn, two things happen. First, what is being shared is coming from each person's experience, knowledge base, and personal frame of reference. This means that a personal stake is being created. Second, as each person shares, everyone else in the group begins to connect with what is being shared from the perspective of their *own* knowledge or experience. This results in strengthening of the group, while evoking each person's creative juices as they begin to tap into long-term memory. In addition, having only one turn reduces the thinking clutter that arises when we have to consider what we're going to say next. This enhances the quality of the listening that is taking place. Another thing to keep in mind is that this rule means that you will never be coerced or pressured to speak, but your turn is there for you to take if you want. One more thing to bear in mind is that there is no proscribed order in which sharing takes place. Anybody may go first, and once they have shared the space is open for whoever would like to go next.

#### **Speak or pass — the choice is yours**

Not being pressured or coerced into taking your turn means that you can pass if you'd like. You may not have anything to contribute, you may feel uncomfortable sharing, or you may simply not feel that your thoughts have come together sufficiently to be shared. That's okay and because the sharing is done in a random order, you can continue to focus on what others are sharing because you don't have to worry that it's about to be your turn. This rule is significant because it makes the process a safe place to be and pares down any perceived risks in sharing, particularly when the process is first being experienced. One very important thing to point out here is that even when you

choose not to share, your mind is engaged in the process of thought. Your reticular has been primed, just as have those of all the other participants. Again, we prefer to engage the mind rather than the mouth in this phase. More will be said about this when we talk about leading the process.

### **Listen to the person speaking without interrupting or probing**

Listening means really listening, not mentally rehearsing what you are going to say, not daydreaming. It is also important to not interrupt or to ask questions. What another person is sharing is theirs, and if we interrupt or probe we are making two mistakes. We're trying to lay claim to what is being said, and we are interfering with that person's train of thought, and thereby the thinking going on in the entire group. This rule is the most critical relative to empowering the Dialogue Process and needs to be carefully observed. Remember that one of the distinctions between discussion and Dialogue is that no one has a personal agenda in Dialogue. Whenever you interrupt or ask questions in the sharing phase, you are declaring that your personal need to know or agenda is more important than the collective interest or agenda of the group. What's more, questions and interruptions will probably downgrade the Dialogue into discussion, so all the benefits that Dialogue produces can disappear. The simplest thing to do is to hold questions or comments until the Discussion Phase where they are appropriate; moreover, most questions you have, no matter how pressing they may feel, will probably get answered in the course of the sharing. Because the stakes are so high with this rule, the leader must point out any time it is violated.

### **Respect all comments and suspend judgment**

Not only do all members have the right to be heard and listened to, they also have the right to receive equal acceptance and respect. So do their contributions. Our goal is to create a pool of shared meaning. This means that everyone has to suspend his or her beliefs and judgments. For more expansive thinking to take place, room must be made to accommodate every possible perspective. That's why this rule is vital. By choosing to be inclusive, we become open to having our knowledge base expanded, to becoming more creative, actively contributing to the process, developing or improving skills, and generally receiving all the benefits Dialogue can deliver. When we fail to observe this rule, we diminish the extent to which our reticulars are engaged, and we tend to remove ourselves from active participation. Yes, we may be there physically, but our mental involvement is diminished. With the listening rule, failure to observe compromises the group and the whole process. Failure here only affects the participant who's having difficulty with the rule.

### **Share the time equally**

Since time is usually limited, members are expected to mentally calculate about how much time they have to share. No one is going to interrupt you in the activity; therefore it is your responsibility to stop so that the next person can have his or her turn. In most cases as groups embrace the process; managing time around the length of sharing tends to take care of itself. That's because another skill begins to develop. When it comes to the oral language part of communication, saying a lot with few words is highly effective. This desirable brevity is a natural outcome of the Dialogue Process. Even the most verbose tend to become more focused and articulate as they engage in more and more Dialogue.

## **Leading the Dialogue Process**

Every Dialogue Process has a leader, and leadership is shared. In other words, one member at a time acts as the leader or facilitator as this responsibility rotates, but the person taking that role voluntarily changes from one activity to the next. The leader is also a participant, but has a few other things to do beyond just sharing. Because this formal state of Dialogue is a process, we get more efficient and produce greater results the more we participate and practice. This goes for being both a participant and the leader/participant. No one is pressured to lead in the beginning; however as you will see, shared leadership is one of the natural outgrowths of the process.

It is the leader's responsibility to introduce the topic, and to ensure that the group adheres to the Dialogue Procedure and follows the rules. The leader accepts an extra measure of responsibility for being aware of time constraints so that the entire process can be completed without curtailing anyone's right to speak. As you will see next in the discussion of the procedures, it is also the leader's job to wind up the Sharing Phase of the process and to introduce the questions that will begin the Discussion Phase. When closing the Sharing Phase, the leader needs to ensure that everyone who wishes to share has had a chance. If, as the leader, you notice that one or more of the group has not shared, you simply ask if anyone else would like to share. If no one responds you can move on to the Discussion Phase.

As was mentioned a few paragraphs ago, the leader may also have to step in when rules are being violated. This is especially true if a participant begins to interrupt or probe when another is sharing. All the leader has to do is remind the person of the rule and point out that there will be time enough in the Discussion Phase for questions or comments. From time to time a leader may want to begin the Dialogue Process by taking time to refresh the rules and ask how everyone is doing with them. Just remember that the rules drive the outcomes of the Dialogue Process as much as the procedure does.

## **Giving Dialogue a Structure**

The procedure that governs the circle does more than just give it structure. Each step is designed and sequenced to engage the participants in building the consolidated intellect, in moving toward knowledge creation, and in delivering all the other benefits that emerge from participation. This structure is also the arena in which the rules govern the behaviors of the participants. Although each participant has a responsibility for supporting the structure by adhering to the rules and procedure, it is the leader who oversees this part of the process. These procedures govern the flow of the sharing phase and then set up the discussion phase, which culminates the process.

## **Procedure of the Dialogue Process**

- Make sure all members understand the ground rules.
- Introduce the topic or state the objective.
- Elaborate if the topic needs clarification.
- Allow time for members to share their thoughts.
- Discuss and summarize conclusions and insights.

This structure provides the container for the rules to have their affect. It is now a simple matter to have the process become an integral part of the larger collaborative structure or to maove the process t a place where it can be used to guide the communications of individuals with others and individuals with themselves. The results are always the same.

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