

Dialogue and Deliberation

All great changes begin in conversation.

—Juanita Brown



Annual Diversity Celebrations

Waterloo, Iowa, a city with a predominantly white population, experienced an influx of Hispanics, Bosnians, and other immigrants in the late 1990s, creating tensions over housing, jobs, social services, and health care. The City of Waterloo Commission on Human Rights, in partnership with the Cedar Valley Diversity Appreciation Team, responded by organizing community-wide “study circles”—multiple small-group dialogues held in different places throughout the community that culminate in collective action based on common ground. Since 1998, more than 2,000 adults and 600 youths have taken part in study circles on racism and race relations, police-community relations, and prevention of youth violence.

Among other things, Waterloo’s community dialogue effort has led to annual diversity celebrations that help decrease stereotyping of ethnic groups and neighborhoods, improved cultural competence skills of Waterloo police officers, and increased awareness among teachers and public school administrators of the impact of race on teaching methods and student achievement.



The Basics

Dialogue and deliberation are dynamic processes that can build and strengthen relationships, bridge gaps, resolve conflicts, generate innovative solutions to problems, inspire collaborative action, and more.

Dialogue and deliberation processes provide a plethora of opportunities for people to

become more fully engaged in the decision making that takes place in their workplaces, neighborhoods, communities, and increasingly at the national and international levels. The active engagement of people at all levels of a corporation is the backbone of a resilient, successful business, just as the active participation of many people across society is the backbone of a strong democracy.

Dialogue allows people, usually in small groups, to share their perspectives and experiences about difficult issues. It is not about judging, weighing, or making decisions, but about understanding and learning. Dialogue dispels stereotypes, builds trust, and enables people to open to perspectives that are very different from their own.

Deliberation is a related process with a different emphasis; it promotes the use of critical reasoning and logical argument in group decision making. Instead of decision making by power, coercion, or hierarchy, deliberative decision making emphasizes the importance of examining all sides of an issue fairly, collecting and considering the relevant facts, and carefully weighing the pros and cons of various options.

When choices, decisions, or recommendations need to be made, dialogue can lay the foundation for the vital work of deliberation. Engaging in dialogue before deliberation helps ensure that members of a group are open to others' opinions and perspectives, even when they conflict with their own. This leads to a more open and thorough examination of all possible outcomes, resulting in better decision making.

Retaining many of the principles of dialogue throughout the deliberation process also helps ensure that everyone can participate fully and effectively. Establishing ground rules, emphasizing listening, utilizing trained facilitators, encouraging reflection on personal experiences and perspectives—all of these dialogue techniques help ensure that everyone has a real voice.

Another well-known process for grappling with diverse viewpoints is debate. Comparing dialogue and deliberation with debate outlines the interpersonal and political differences between these processes (table 1).¹

Dialogue and deliberation are increasingly utilized in schools, corporations, government agencies, and communities across the globe to tackle issues and conflicts in new ways that enable people to share power with one another and with community and organizational leaders, instead of ways that leave people feeling overpowered and frustrated; in ways that welcome and validate all perspectives on an issue rather than hearing, once again, from only the most vocal and powerful parties.

People use dialogic and deliberative techniques for public issues ranging from community race relations and school violence to handling nuclear waste buildup or rapid regional development, as well as for conflicts between groups, changes in a workplace, or personal struggles with crises. In organizations, these approaches have been used to address labor-management conflicts and issues crossing organizational boundaries, to explore opportunities in new markets, and in improving relations with key suppliers or customers.

Dialogue and deliberation techniques range from intimate, small-group dialogues to large

| Dialogue and Deliberation | Debate |
|---|---|
| Finding common ground is the goal | Winning is the goal |
| Participants listen to increase understanding and find meaning | Participants listen to find flaws |
| Participants are open to being wrong, and open to change | Participants are determined to be right |
| Participant's point of view is enlarged and possibly changed | Participant's point of view is affirmed |
| The atmosphere is one of safety; facilitators propose, get agreement on, and enforce clear ground rules to enhance safety and promote respectful exchange | The atmosphere is threatening; attacks and interruptions are expected by participants and are usually permitted by moderators |
| Assumptions are revealed for reevaluation | Assumptions are defended as truth |
| There is the possibility of reaching a better solution than any existing solutions | One's own positions are defended as the best solution; other solutions are excluded, and new solutions are not considered |
| Hold that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution | Holds that there is a right answer and that someone has it |

Table 1. Dialogue and Deliberation Versus Debate

televised forums involving hundreds or thousands of participants. A deliberative forum may last two hours, while a sustained dialogue effort can span years. Evolving communication technologies are increasingly used to overcome traditional barriers of scale, geography, and time.

The steps in a dialogic or deliberative program vary greatly depending on the purpose of the program, the process used, and the resources available. Typical steps using *both* dialogue and deliberation include:

PREP WORK

Get to know the issue, the affected stakeholders, and the participants. Prepare participants by providing background materials, issue guides presenting diverse viewpoints, and details on the process.

INTRODUCTIONS

During the event, facilitators introduce themselves and the process. Participants feel welcomed and appreciated, having been prepared for what's ahead.

ESTABLISH/PRESENT GROUND RULES

Also known as “agreements,” ground rules are the backbone of most dialogue and deliberation processes. Ground rules such as “listen carefully and with respect,” “one person speaks at a time,” and “seek to understand rather than persuade” create a safe space for people with different views and experiences. Adhering to ground rules that foster civility, honesty, and respect is what makes dialogue different from adversarial debate and back-and-forth discussion.

SHARE PERSONAL STORIES AND PERSPECTIVES

Hearing from everyone at the table is a key principle in both dialogue and deliberation. Dialogue begins by hearing each participant’s personal stories and perspectives on the issue, asking “How has this issue affected your life?” rather than “What do you think should be done about this issue?” Stories open people to each other’s humanity, engendering trust, establishing a sense of equality, and enabling them to consider the issue from perspectives other than their own. This is especially important when participants have different knowledge or experience with the issue, or when some participants are not comfortable talking about contentious issues in “mixed company.”

EXPLORE A RANGE OF VIEWS

Exploring a balanced range of viewpoints is vital in dialogue and deliberation. In groups without a variety of perspectives on an issue, issue guides presenting three or four divergent views are sometimes used so that participants can explore and critique the primary viewpoints—even those unpopular with the entire group. This step prepares them to answer, “Where is the common ground?” and “What should we do about this?”

ANALYSIS AND REASONED ARGUMENT

Deliberation is characterized by critical listening, reasoned argumentation, and thoughtful decision making. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, says that “Deliberations aren’t just discussions to promote better understanding. They are the way we make the decisions that allow us to act together. People are challenged to face the unpleasant costs and consequences of various options and to ‘work through’ the often volatile emotions that are a part of making public decisions.” The previous steps lay the groundwork for this difficult step.

DECIDE ON ACTION STEPS OR RECOMMENDATIONS

If a dialogue and deliberation process does not transition to action of some kind, participants may feel unsatisfied and frustrated. Participants want to understand how their work makes an impact—or how they can make an impact themselves. The process and purpose shape the form that actions take. Holding more dialogue groups in their workplace or community, making policy recommendations to a chief executive officer or an elected official, and self-organizing to implement their solutions are examples (figure 1).

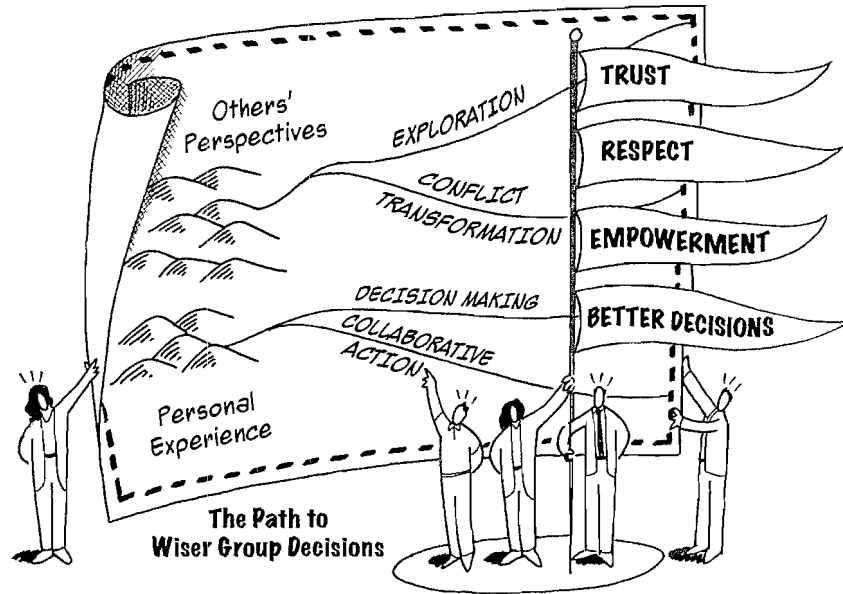


Illustration by Christine Valenza

Figure 1. The Path to Wiser Group Decisions

These steps support participants in creating the collective wisdom essential for sound, achievable decisions and policies, and the common ground essential for effective, sustainable action.

Table of Uses

Dialogue and deliberation are flexible processes serving a variety of purposes. They can resolve conflicts; influence policy; empower organization or community members to solve a problem; encourage healing after a crime, a crisis, or a layoff; or simply increase awareness of an issue.

Identified by experts in the field, four main “dialogue and deliberation streams”—or ways of utilizing these processes—fulfill four distinct purposes (tables 2 and 3).



| Dialogue and Deliberation Stream | Intention/Purpose | Key Features | Important When . . . | Examples of Issues |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| <i>Exploration</i> | To encourage people and groups to learn more about themselves, their organization or community, or an issue, and discover innovative solutions | Suspending assumptions, creating a space that encourages a different kind of conversation, using ritual and symbolism to encourage openness, emphasize listening | A group or community seems stuck or muddled and needs to reflect on their circumstance in depth and gain collective insight | Strengthening democracy, planning for the future, understanding a community of practice, transforming an organization's culture |
| <i>Conflict Transformation</i> | To resolve conflicts, to foster personal healing and growth, and to improve relations among groups | Creating a safe space, hearing from everyone, building trust, sharing personal stories and views | Relationships among participants are poor or need to be established. Issues can only be resolved when people change their behavior or attitude, expand their perspective, or take time to reflect and heal | Political polarization, crossing organizational silos, race relations, value-based conflicts, healing after crises or trauma |
| <i>Decision Making</i> | To influence decisions and policy, and to improve public knowledge | Naming and framing, weighing all options, considering different positions (deliberation), revealing common values, brainstorming solutions | The issue is within a single entity's sphere of influence | Budgeting, land use, health care, social security |
| <i>Collaborative Action</i> | To empower people and groups to solve complicated problems and take responsibility for the solution | Using D&D to generate ideas for organizational or community action, developing and implementing action plans collaboratively | The issue/dispute requires intervention across multiple entities, and anytime collective action is important | Regional sprawl, institutional racism, youth violence, responding to crises, bringing new products to market |

Table 2. Dialogue and Deliberation Streams Based on Organizer's Purpose

| Exploration | Personal and Group Transformation | Working Through the Issues | Collaborative Action |
|--|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bohmian Dialogue • Conversation Café • Council process • Open Space • World Café | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Conversations, Project dialogues • Sustained Dialogue • Victim-Offender Mediation • Web Lab's Small-Group Dialogue | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21st Century Town Meeting • Citizen Juries • Consensus Conference • Deliberative Polling • National Issues Forums | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciative Inquiry • Future Search • Study Circles |

Table 3. Frequently Used Dialogue and Deliberation Methodologies in Each of the Streams



Getting Started

Because dialogue and deliberation programs are used for a variety of reasons, their organization varies greatly. The basic steps for organizing and convening such a program appear in figure 2.

Here are some guiding principles to consider when organizing any dialogue or deliberation program:

INCORPORATION INTO A LARGER ENGAGEMENT EFFORT

Dialogue and deliberation are powerful forms of engagement that motivate participants to stay more informed on issues of concern and increase a sense of connection, even to those with views and experiences different from their own. Isolated dialogue and deliberation processes can make an impact, but are most effective when they are part of a larger engagement effort.

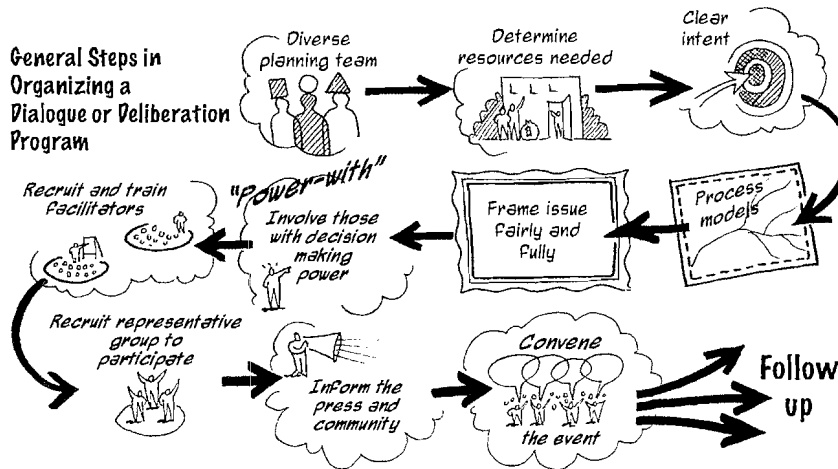


Illustration by Christine Valenza

Figure 2. General Steps in Organizing a Dialogue and Deliberation Program

What is the relationship between the community (or organization, region, nation, etc.) and the topic? What is the culture in terms of engagement in general? Are groups already trying to address this issue? Are others considering dialogue as a way to resolve this conflict? Are there groups or leaders who have supported dialogue or deliberation in the past?

INCLUSIVITY

Effectiveness increases when those with different backgrounds, ethnicities, positions, abilities, education levels, and ages are involved. When planning, recruiting participants and facilitators, and developing background materials—during the program and when following up—inclusivity is a guiding principle.

OPENNESS TO AN UNKNOWN OUTCOME

Setting an intention—improving productivity in an organization, or improving relationships or policy in a community—focuses the work, but defining specific outcomes hinders creative possibilities and sets the process up for failure. Trust that the process enables the participants to reach the best outcome for their organization or community.

COLLABORATION

People are more invested when they participate. Work as collaboratively as possible at all stages of the planning.

TRANSPARENCY

To trust what's happening, people need to see how it works. If labor representatives don't have visibility into the corporation's profit and loss drivers, they may suspect that something is being hidden, and withdraw from the dialogue sessions. If participants do not know who is revamping a state's health-care system, they may suspect that powerful stakeholders (e.g., pharmaceutical companies) are behind the initiative, and distrust its intentions. Open and accessible flow of information about how decisions are made, who is involved, how the process works, and what happens with the results is vital.

Roles, Responsibilities, and Relationships

Dialogue and deliberation programs can be initiated by schools, corporate executives, newspapers, community groups, government officials, activists, student leaders, and others. The key is for the initiating person or group—before going public or making important decisions—to build a diverse coalition representing key positions or groups related to the issue.

Commitment from planning group members is key, especially from those with ties to traditionally underrepresented groups and those with power in the community or organization. Tapping connections to ensure that all groups have a voice and preparing those in power to participate with mutual respect is part of the work.



Trained facilitators are almost always key in a successful dialogue or deliberation program. Although simple, small-group dialogues in coffee shops may require just an hour of phone training, other formats may require a weeklong training or facilitators with substantial experience. A single facilitator may be required for a sustained living room dialogue group on Jewish-Muslim relations, while dozens of facilitators may be needed for an organization-wide dialogue on strategic planning, and hundreds may be recruited for a daylong deliberative event to transform a city's health-care system.

The facilitation role varies greatly depending on the program's purpose and the methodology used. Facilitators may simply keep people on track—making sure participants understand what's happening, keeping the conversation flowing, and ensuring that people's needs are met. More often, facilitators also remind people of the ground rules—when an individual dominates the conversation, for instance. Often, they attend to participants' body language and subtle emotional expressions, to who is and is not speaking, and to emerging themes and areas of agreement in the discussion.

When a dialogue addresses a charged issue, facilitators sometimes reflect the main points back to participants so that the speakers feel heard and understood, and other participants hear the same content from a more neutral (less angry, etc.) voice. The skills for such mentally demanding tasks require adequate training, preparation, and support.

The role of participants also depends on multiple factors. Sometimes they attend meetings or read background materials before the event. They may participate in surveys or polls both before and after a deliberative process. They may rotate facilitation or just come in from the street and rest while talking to a few people about an issue of common concern.

All participants adapt to a new process that may not seem natural at first. They are encouraged to take risks and speak honestly and openly to people they may not know. They are also expected to develop skills in expressing themselves and listening to others in a respectful, civil manner about issues usually argued or debated.

Participants may also be expected to commit to changing their behavior based on what they learned, or they may be encouraged to take responsibility for part of a collaborative change strategy. They may be expected to consider unfamiliar viewpoints in an open, empathetic way, or a logical, thorough way, and they may be asked to make choices based both on values and reasoning.

Conditions for Success

Since dialogue and deliberation processes help people learn more about themselves or an issue (Exploration), resolve conflicts and improve relations among groups (Conflict Transformation), improve knowledge and influence policy (Decision Making), and empower people to solve complicated problems together (Collaborative Action), the keys to success differ based on purpose.

If a deliberative process is helping participants set priorities for their organization or town's budget, for instance, then the managers or elected officials who approve the budget must commit



to acting on its outcomes. If a series of dialogues are planned in a workplace to encourage people to talk about issues of mutual concern, involving those in power is less important to success.

There are several conditions for beginning any dialogue or deliberation process:

ADEQUATE TIME TO DO THE PROCESS JUSTICE

Although some processes require just a single two-hour session, most complex issues require multiple meetings over several days—especially if resolving long-standing conflicts or taking action is involved. Match participant, organizer, leader, and decision maker expectations for outcome with a realistic time frame, and be sure participants know what they are committing to ahead of time.

THE LINK TO ACTION AND CHANGE IS CLEAR FROM THE START

Regardless of the program's intent, people should be prepared for how their participation may change things, or change them. Will they influence policy, increase their knowledge, change how they view people different from themselves, take action on the issue? Different processes produce different outcomes, and participants should be told ahead of time what kind of outcome to expect.

ADEQUATE RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE

Organizations may have lofty goals and enormous passion and energy, but if the resources are not available, their project is at risk. Consider the resources needed before investing in a project. Will you need to rent space or high-tech communication equipment? Will you need to pay or train facilitators? Will you need to pay a consultant, a coordinator, or other staff? Do participants need child care, food, translation equipment, or even transportation? How will you publicize your program, develop and print materials, or support action outcomes?

THE ISSUE IS TIMELY

If an organization is considering entering a new market in the next fiscal year, timeliness means that employees are engaged with plenty of time to impact the decision. On the other hand, a dialogue in October 2005 that is focused on improving race relations should not embrace a theme of "The Aftermath of Rodney King" or "Deconstructing the O. J. Simpson Trial." What is in the hearts and minds of people now? A timely issue helps get people in the door, enlivens the conversation, and increases the likelihood of personal or collective action.

THE PROCESS IS ORGANIZED BY A NEUTRAL PARTY

Ensuring that participants, decision makers, and other stakeholders trust the dialogue or deliberation process is an important but difficult task. Establishing a diverse planning group that shares power helps. If a known environmental activist wants to spearhead a community-wide

dialogue on conserving her town's natural resources, for instance, working side by side with loggers and corporations serves the project well.

PARTICIPANTS' NEEDS AND CONCERNS ARE AT THE FOREFRONT

Finally, keep one question in the forefront: "What's in it for the participants?" No matter how important the issue, how impressive the process, and how many human and financial resources are available, people simply will not show up if their hopes and concerns are not addressed.



Theoretical Basis

Although dialogue and deliberation processes are currently enjoying a renaissance and many new techniques have been developed recently, dialogic communication has been used for information sharing and decision making in indigenous cultures for centuries. Deliberation originated when the ability to consider different options rationally developed.

DIALOGUE SCHOLARSHIP

Four prominent scholars impacted dialogue in its current form: Martin Buber (1878–1965), Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), David Bohm (1917–1992), and Paulo Freire (1921–1997).

Martin Buber was a Viennese Jewish philosopher and religious leader whose philosophy of dialogue emphasizes the importance of relationships. Buber held that genuine dialogue is an essential building block of community. The "I-Thou" perspective one has during genuine dialogue—viewing others as people similar to and closely related to ourselves rather than as objects or the means for achieving goals—enables people to achieve a meaningful connection, allowing them to both change the other and be changed by the dialogue.

Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of "dialogism" emphasized the power of discourse to increase understanding of multiple perspectives and create myriad possibilities. Bakhtin held that relationships and connections exist among all living beings, and that dialogue creates a new understanding of a situation that demands change.

Celebrated Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire, who is known for his impact in the development of popular education, advanced dialogue as a type of classroom pedagogy. Freire held that dialogic communication allowed students and teachers to learn from one another in an environment characterized by respect and equality. A great advocate for oppressed peoples, Freire was concerned with praxis—action that is informed and linked to people's values. Dialogic pedagogy was not only about deepening understanding; it was also about making positive changes in the world.

The thoughtful experiments of renowned physicist David Bohm sparked the beginnings of a movement toward more dialogic communication and decision making in organizations and businesses. Drawing from quantum physics and the theory of relativity, Bohm posits that individual knowledge is based on limited experiences and assumptions, and that only through dialogue—gaining an understanding of all of the different parts of an issue—can one begin to see

the whole picture. Bohm practiced dialogue without facilitation or fixed topics, emphasizing deep inquiry, suspended assumptions, and collective intelligence. Bohmian Dialogue took off when Peter Senge praised Bohm's dialogues as a powerful tool for "learning organizations" in his organization development tome *The Fifth Discipline*.

DELIBERATION SCHOLARSHIP

Although the practice has waxed and waned even in recent history, the ideal of a "deliberative democracy"—that public policy decisions are reached through informed discussion among citizens—has been a basic tenet of democracy since its inception in fifth-century Athens.

Today's emphasis on public deliberation in governance is often traced to two scholars who both advocated for deliberative democracy about 40 years ago, Jurgen Habermas (1929–) and John Rawls (1921–). Habermas advanced the idea of a public world built upon mutual communication and reason. Habermas's concept of "communicative action" emphasizes utilizing all the ways humans think and use language to understand one another and plan for common action.

With his seminal book, *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls revived the idea of basing political thinking and action on moral argument. He held that the moral judgment of ordinary people is essential for good political deliberation. He supported the practice of providing the public with clearly articulated alternative views and options so that people could couple rigorous thinking with personal values to make wise choices.

The current focus on participatory governance arose after decades of devolution and decentralization of policy making and planning from the federal to state and local levels. The burden on communities to tackle contentious, complex social problems and policy issues has grown exponentially, and dialogue and deliberation processes are increasingly recognized by scholars, public officials, and community leaders as effective in addressing these "wicked problems" while strengthening the capacity for future problem solving and decision making.

Public deliberation is a cornerstone of democratic governance, and deliberative practice has long been a subject of scholarly research. A variety of present-day scholars—social capitalists, community developers, public administration theorists, ecologists, and political scientists—support the premise that a new movement toward increased citizen involvement in governance is evolving. They hold that efforts increasing dialogue, deliberation, and collaboration are increasing civic capacity in the United States and abroad; civic capacity that is required when communities take change efforts into their own hands.

These scholars are not alone in paving the way for today's practice of dialogue and deliberation. President Clinton's Dialogue on Race initiative in the late 1990s emphasized the importance of emotional as well as intellectual work—especially when addressing issues of inequality. The pioneering efforts of intergroup dialogue educators have brought social justice education into college classrooms across the country. Experiments in community engagement conducted over the years by organizations like the Study Circles Resource Center, the Kettering Foundation, the Center for Deliberative Polling, and *AmericaSpeaks* have exposed thousands of people to the power of deliberative dialogue. Government agencies have instituted policies ensuring public

input is factored into their decision-making processes. The implications of recent technological innovations that enable people to talk openly, weigh options carefully, and make decisions together online are just beginning to be explored.



Sustaining the Results

Several strategies can ensure that the benefits of a dialogue or deliberation program are retained.

SUSTAIN THE DIALOGUE

While a single group may meet five or six times and agree to act together, the opportunity for many more groups to experience the process amplifies its effect. Even if hundreds of people participate in a single dialogue and deliberation process addressing racism in their community and transitioning from talk to collaborative community action, racism will not be eradicated. The community can benefit significantly from more dialogue, deliberation, and action.

One way to sustain dialogue is to continually engage on issues of concern. An organization may choose to host a monthly labor-management Bohmian dialogue open to all employees. A public engagement consortium in a metropolitan area may organize Conversation Cafés on political polarization in their city one year, National Issues Forums on health care the following year, and Study Circles on urban development the year after that. The more people become part of the decision-making process, the more they increase their collective capacity to solve their problems, fostering a sense of pride and connection to their organization or community.

SUSTAIN THE ACTION

When a dialogue or deliberation program generates collaborative action, time and resources devoted to supporting action teams and task forces is best included in the planning. Encouragement, support, and advice, as well as fundraising and public relations all support outcomes.

FOLLOW UP ON DECISIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For deliberative processes presenting recommendations or consensus decisions to power holders, periodic follow-up with decision makers helps ensure those recommendations were used. Publicizing the recommendations widely increases the pressure for utilizing the results. The benefit to leadership is recognition for taking people seriously. Ensuring participants feel that their time was well spent increases the likelihood that they and others will participate in the future.

Burning Question

One common challenge of dialogue and deliberation programs is ensuring that participants represent the community or organization and the issue being addressed. Convenors must constantly ask themselves, “Who’s missing?” and “How can we get them involved?”

Given the barriers that often exist in organizations among departments or functions, across levels of the hierarchy, or between labor and management, and given the deep divides in communi-



ties along the lines of race, education, political ideology, religion, economic status, and more, it is nearly impossible for a homogenous planning group to gain the trust and buy-in needed for success.

Reflecting the roles and demographics in your community—race, age, gender, spoken languages, income and education level, political ideology, religion—ensures that, in a way, the entire community is in the room, and that everyone’s voice will be welcomed and heard. It also ensures that participants will hear a range of perspectives and learn from the variety of experiences about the issue.

Thinking about who’s missing in terms of the issue is also vital. For educational issues, recruit students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members not directly involved in education. Think about the different viewpoints on the issue, making sure all “sides” are present.

The most important strategy for ensuring representativeness is establishing a diverse planning group, paying special attention to groups whose voices tend not to be heard. Planning group members do not need to be prominent leaders, but they should be people who are respected and well known.

Some Final Comments

To understand dialogue and deliberation, it is useful to distinguish them from debate, advocacy, and mediation. Table 1 contrasted debate with dialogue and deliberation. These processes also differ from advocacy and mediation.

DIALOGUE AND DELIBERATION VERSUS ADVOCACY

When there is a clear outcome in mind from a process, advocating for a position may be more appropriate than engaging people in dialogue and deliberation. Advocacy focuses on a particular goal, while dialogue and deliberation cannot guarantee that participants will come to a particular conclusion.

An activist whose goal is to shut down a nuclear power plant, for example, may find that participants in a dialogue agree on ways to make the plant safer, rather than taking an action that does not meet the needs of the workers at the plant. A common ground solution may not satisfy someone wedded to a specific outcome.

Although dialogue and deliberation can be used among homogenous groups to strengthen relationships and develop action plans, their real power lies in bringing people with divergent views together to learn from each other and find solutions that work for everyone.

DIALOGUE AND DELIBERATION VERSUS MEDIATION AND NEGOTIATION

Mediation is a conflict resolution process in which a neutral third party helps disputants reach an agreement, settlement, or change in relationship. Negotiation can take place with or without a third party. It is characterized by give and take between disputants in a conflict, and leads to agreements often based on compromise.



Dialogue differs from mediation and negotiation in several ways. Dialogue transforms conflicts and is often open-ended, focused more on increasing understanding and developing relationships than on reaching a solution. Dialogue also tends to occur among groups whose conflict is widespread and not specific only to those in the room (e.g., labor-management relations in an organization versus a conflict over a specific grievance, or poor race relations in a community versus a tenant-landlord dispute over parking). Because of this, if a dialogue process leads to action, it is usually focused on fostering change outside of the group as much as on the group members themselves.

A common misconception about dialogue and deliberation is that these processes are “just talk”—that no real action comes from sitting around and being nice to everyone around you. In reality, dialogue and deliberation are powerful processes that mend long-standing conflicts, harness people’s collective wisdom, generate innovative solutions to intractable problems, and inspire people to act. Dialogue and deliberation enable people to take action in ways that are informed and effective.



About the Author

Sandy Heierbacher (sandy@thataway.org) is the Director of the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD), which brings together those who actively practice, promote, and study dialogue and deliberation. NCDD is a vibrant network of more than 500 people and groups who, collectively, regularly engage and mobilize millions of people across the globe around today’s critical issues. NCDD’s resource-rich Web site and biennial national conferences are popular hubs for dialogue and deliberation leaders.



Where to Go for More Information

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ORGANIZATIONS

The Co-Intelligence Institute—www.co-intelligence.org

The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation—www.thataway.org

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1. Table adapted from a paper by Shelley Berman, based on discussions of the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR), and from the Public Conversations Project's much-used "Distinguishing Debate from Dialogue" table.