

DIALOGUE TOOLS

Dialogue is the capacity of members of a group to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine thinking together.¹ According to Senge and Ellinor & Gerard, dialogue involves gathering and unfolding meaning that comes from many parts, as well as inquiring into assumptions, learning through inquiry and disclosure, and creating a shared meaning among community members. The two dialogue tools discussed below are [Left Hand Column](#), and [Balance Advocacy and Inquiry Protocols](#).

Left-Hand Column

The left-hand column is the basic premise that during conversations there are actually two conversations taking place. One conversation is explicit. This conversation consists of the words that are actually spoken throughout the exchange between two or more persons. The other conversation consists of what the individuals are thinking and feeling but not saying. The term "left hand column" is derived from an exercise designed to explore what is not said, but thought about, during the course of a conversation. This "tool" offers a way to actually study our conversations so that we can re-design them to be more effective at creating the results that we wish to create.

People need an introduction to this tool before you can begin using it effectively as a community. Here is an exercise you can use to introduce it to the CoP.

Step 1: Choosing a Problem. Select a difficult problem you've been involved with during the last month or two. Write a brief paragraph describing the situation. What are you trying to accomplish? Who or what is blocking you? What might happen? Examples include:

- The rest of the organization is resisting, or you believe they will resist, a change you want to implement
- You believe your team is not paying much attention to the most crucial problem

Step 2: The Right-Hand Column (What was said). Now recall a frustrating conversation you had over this. Take several pieces of paper and draw a line down the center. In the right-hand column, write out the conversation that actually occurred. Or write the conversation you're pretty sure would occur if you were to raise this issue. The discussion may go on for several pages. Leave the left-hand column blank until you're finished.

Step 3: The Left-Hand Column (What you were thinking). Now in the left-hand column, write out what you were thinking and feeling, but not saying.

Step 4: Individual Reflection: Using your left-hand column as a resource. You can learn a great deal just from the act of writing out a case, putting it away for a week, and then looking at it again. As you reflect, ask yourself:

- What has really led me to think and feel this way?
- How might my comments have contributed to the difficulties?
- Why didn't I say what was in my left-hand column?
- What assumptions am I making about the other person or people?
- How can I use my left-hand column as a resource to improve our communications?

Step 5: Discuss in pairs or a small group. The pairs or small groups review one or more of the left-hand columns written in step 3. The conversation should focus on exploring the assumptions behind both speakers' words, discussing alternative ways in which the participant could have conducted the conversation so that he/she would have been more satisfied with the outcome.

Balance Advocacy and Inquiry Protocols

This tool is adopted from the Fifth Discipline Fieldbook² and the contributors are Rick Ross and Charlotte Roberts. In order to have more productive conversations it is helpful to consider the balance between quality inquiry and quality advocacy. The concept is that in order for clarity of meaning and understanding to emerge from a conversation the participants must continually balance quality inquiry with quality advocacy. In most situations, there is an imbalance towards advocacy and very few quality inquiries are made.

Four protocols are detailed below. These are:

1. [Protocols for Improved Advocacy](#)
2. [Protocols for Improved Inquiry](#)
3. [Protocols for Facing a Point of View with Which You Disagree](#)
4. [Protocols for When You're at an Impasse](#)

1. Protocols for Improved Advocacy: Make your thinking process visible.

What To Do

- State your assumptions, and describe the data that led to them
- Explain your assumptions
- Make your reasoning explicit. Explain the context of your point of view that will be affected by what you propose, how they will be affected, and why.
- Give examples of what you propose, even if they're hypothetical or metaphorical.
- As you speak, try to picture the other people's perspectives on what you are saying. Publicly test your conclusions and assumptions.

What To Say

- "Here's what I think, and here's how I got there."
- "I assumed that . . . "
- "To get a clear picture of what I'm talking about, imagine that you're the customer who will be affected . . . "

What To Do

- Encourage others to explore your model, your assumptions, and your data.
- Refrain from defensiveness when your ideas are questioned. If you're advocating something worthwhile, then it will only get stronger by being tested.
- Reveal where you are least clear in your thinking. Rather than making you vulnerable, it defuses the force of advocates who are opposed to you and invites improvement.
- Even when advocating: listen, stay open, and encourage others to provide different views.

What To Say

- "What do you think about what I just or "Do you see any flaws in my reasoning?" or "What can you add?"
- "Here's one aspect which you might help me think through . . ."
- "Do you see it differently?"

2. Protocols for Improved Inquiry:

What To Do

- Gently walk others down the ladder of inference and find out what data they are operating from. Use non-aggressive language, particularly with people who are not familiar with these skills. Ask in a way that does not provoke defensiveness or witness
- Ask others to make their thinking process visible
- Draw out their reasoning. Find out as much as you can about why they are saying what they're saying.
- Explain your reasons for inquiring, and how your inquiry relates to your own here because . . . "
- Compare your assumptions to theirs.
- Test what they say by asking for broader contexts, or for examples
- Check your understanding of what they have said. Listen for the new understanding that may emerge. Don't concentrate on preparing to destroy the other person's argument or promote your own agenda.

What To Say

- "What leads you to conclude that?"
- "What data do you have for that?"
- "What causes you to say that?"
- Instead of "What do you mean?" or
- "What's your proof?" say, "Can you help me understand your thinking "
- "What is the significance of that?" "How does this relate to your other concerns?"
- "Where does your reasoning go next?"
- "I'm asking you about your assumption concerns, hopes, and needs.
- "How would your proposal affect?"
- "Is this similar to?" "Can you describe a typical example?"
- "Am I correct that you're saying...?"

3. Protocols for Facing a Point of View with Which You Disagree:

What To Do

- Again, inquire about what has led the person to that view.
- Make sure you truly understand the view.
- Explore, listen, and offer your own views in an open way. Listen for the larger meaning that may come
- Out of honest, open sharing of alternative mental models.
- Use your left hand column as a resource.
- Raise your concerns and state what is leading you to have them.

What To Say

- "How did you arrive at this view?" "Are you taking into account data that I have not considered?"
- "If I understand you correctly, you're saying that..."
- "Have you considered?"
- "When you say this, I worry that it means . . . "
- "I have a hard time seeing that, because of this reasoning . . . "

4. Protocols for When You're at an Impasse:

What To Do

- Embrace the impasse, and tease apart the current thinking. (You may discover that focusing on "data" brings you all down the ladder of inference).

What To Say

- "What do we know for a fact?"
- "What do we sense is true, but have no data for yet?"
- "What don't we know?"
- "What is unknowable?"
- "What do we agree upon, and what do we disagree on?"

What To Do

- Ask what data or logic might change their views.
- Ask for the group's help in redesigning the situation.

What To Say

- "Are we starting from two very different sets of assumptions here? Where do they come from?"
- "What, then, would have to happen before you would consider the alternative?"
- "It feels like we're getting into an impasse and I'm afraid we might walk away without any better ideas that will help us clarify our thinking."
- "I don't understand the assumptions underlying our disagreement."

The quality of a conversation is often determined by the attitude of the people engaged in the conversation. If your intent is to learn, then your statements and questions will likely have high quality. If your intent is to "win" the conversation, that is have your point of view

Footnotes:

¹ Bennet, D. (1998) *IPT Learning Campus: Gaining Acquisition Results through IPTs*.

² Senge, Peter, et.al. (1994), *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday.