

What We Mean by "Dialogue"

The word "dialogue" is used in many different ways. At the Public Conversations Project, this is how we have come to think about the "dialogue" that we hope to foster across differences of worldview, ideology, and identity.

What it is

It is a conversation in which participants take as their primary goal to pursue mutual understanding. Over time, as participants pursue this goal, they often decide to pursue other goals. For example, dialogue groups sometimes decide to become better informed together, or to build consensus about ways that they can act on shared values while continuing to have significant areas of disagreement. What they decide to do together may not have been predictable before the dialogue; in fact, it may have been unthinkable.

What it is not

It is distinct from debate; in fact, participants often agree to set aside persuasion and debate so that they can focus on mutual understanding. Dialogue is also different from mediation, conflict resolution, and problem solving; however, it lays the foundation for constructive engagement in those and other processes. At PCP we often work with "hybrid" processes that combine dialogue and other types of conversation but we strive to maintain clarity about the goals of the conversation in particular phases of the work.

What it takes

While dialogue can occur spontaneously, when groups are in polarized conflict or otherwise stuck and unable to collaborate effectively, dialogue is most likely to occur when particular practices are used that support the goals of the dialogue. Such supports are: 1) an explicit agreement to pursue mutual understanding, rather than debating or rushing into problem solving; 2) making communication agreements that will help participants to avoid old fruitless patterns of conversation; 3) posing well-crafted questions that surface new information and challenge limiting "narratives"; and 4) using structures for reflecting, speaking and listening that interrupt old, reactive patterns, and make space for new connection and inquiry. (See the "Elements of a Container for Dialogue" Handout.)

As meeting designers and facilitators, we do not engage with the substantive issues being discussed; our task is to help the participants honor their agreements and reach their shared goals. In support of the participants "owning" the conversation, being prepared for it, and



building capacity for future conversations, we typically engage with them in collaborative planning of the dialogue.

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From Old to New Conversations: Characteristics

	Divisive Debate	Carefully Planned Dialogue
Purpose/Intention	<p>No shared purpose with each other; aim to win, persuade, belittle the other</p> <p>(Perhaps) a stated intention to be civil, but little or no contextual support for it</p> <p>A sense of inevitability about the quality of the conversation</p>	<p>Shared purpose <i>at least for the conversation and relationships</i></p> <p>Articulation of intentions regarding the quality of the conversation</p> <p>A proactive preventive approach to blocking the old and supporting the new</p>
Emotional Field	<p>Fear and anxiety</p> <p>"Caught up" and disempowered</p> <p>Concern about unfairness, power imbalance</p>	<p>Safety and clear expectations</p> <p>Choice and agency</p> <p>Equal respect and opportunity to contribute</p>
Relational Patterns	<p>Demeaned and deficient</p> <p>Strategic secrecy, manipulation</p>	<p>Respected and appreciated</p> <p>Transparent motives and agendas</p>
Conversational Qualities	<p>Listening to rebut</p> <p>Quick, reactive predictable speaking, little learning</p> <p>Questions are challenges</p> <p>Being cornered</p> <p>Assertions with certainty</p> <p>Labels, code words</p> <p>Speaking as a representative to energize the "base" and persuade the undecideds.</p>	<p>Listening to understand</p> <p>Reflection, "fresh" speaking, new learning</p> <p>Questions arise from curiosity and seek understanding</p> <p>Sharing of uncertainties</p> <p>Being free to pass</p> <p>Unpacking of meanings</p> <p>Speaking personally and privately to people in the room to be better understood</p>
Ways of Presenting and Perceiving	<p>"Thin" narratives about self and other; group representation, stereotyping and projection</p> <p>Selective attention to "data"</p>	<p>"Thick" narratives about self and increasingly about the other; rich personal stories; "owning up"</p> <p>Side by side learning, broadening of perspectives</p> <p>The polarized system as</p>



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	"System Blindness" (Barry Oshry)	Externalized Problem (Michael White)
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From Old to New Conversations: Core Practices

1) *We learn about the old conversations and about participants' hopes for new conversations.*

Before convening a dialogue we talk with potential participants and others to learn about what has and hasn't been constructive in the past and what hopes and purposes would motivate participants to try something new.

2) *We are transparent and clear about goals and expectations.*

Partisans in chronic conflict typically have anxiety-ridden histories that include stories of deception and "hidden agendas." With this in mind, we are transparent about the planning process and we ensure that participants have clear and accurate ideas about what is planned and what will be expected of them.

3) *We engage in collaborative planning and foster participants' ownership of the dialogue.*

Since people in conflict often feel victimized and disempowered, we encourage participants to share responsibility for the quality of the discussion and to "own" the conversation as theirs. Our support for participant ownership begins in our early pre-meeting contacts with participants as we collaborate closely with them in designing and convening meetings.

4) *We attend carefully to issues of trust and credibility.*

In some situations we serve as both facilitators and conveners but in many cases we partner with people or groups who are known and trusted by the participants and willing to sponsor and help plan the dialogue.

5) *We seek and support alignment between the stated purpose of the dialogue and the intentions that participants bring to it.*

Unlike some conflict resolution processes in which specific individuals must participate, in most dialogue initiatives a diversity of perspectives is important but no single individual must attend. Voluntary participation supports participant ownership and commitment.

6) *We ask participants to make communication agreements.*

We propose a set of group agreements that prevent falling into unconstructive patterns of relating. Participants typically consider our proposals before coming to the meeting so their input can be accommodated before the meeting. We attend carefully to issues of confidentiality.

7) *We use structure to promote reflection, thoughtful speaking, and careful listening.*

In the crucial early phases of a meeting, and to a lesser extent in later phases, we use meeting designs that block old reactive, fast-paced patterns of relating and foster reflection and listening

8) *We carefully craft opening questions for the dialogue.*

We assume that spokespersons for various perspectives hold more complex views than their slogans suggest. The opening questions that we pose in dialogue sessions are designed to surface new information that challenge rigid ideas about partisan's beliefs and motives. They often encourage

people to reveal the complexity of their views and to share stories of life experiences that are somehow connected to the views they hold.

9) We facilitate in a manner that is responsive to participants' emerging needs and interests.

Our commitments to collaboration and transparency are evident in the way we facilitate. We engage participants in the ongoing planning process as they move from enhanced understanding and new relationships to the whatever steps that energize them and serve their newly recognized or previously unattainable shared goals, e.g., for consensus building, collaboration and joint projects.

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Typical Phases and Key Questions

PHASE	SOME KEY QUESTIONS
Explore the Proposed Initiative and Decide Whether to Move Forward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is PCP's general approach well suited to the goals of the conveners and potential participants or are other types of processes more appropriate? • Do we, or others, have concerns about timeline, resources, motivation, or "ripeness"?
Map the Situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have potential participants and others experienced conversations about the issues and how to they understand the "stuck places" or barriers to collaboration or conflict resolution? • What assets, resources, or sources of hope will be important for us to know about and support? • What should we familiarize ourselves with in terms of technical issues, nuances of language, related initiatives? • What do they hope will be achieved through the dialogue? • What concerns do they have? • What ideas do they have about what should be planned, who should be involved in planning or convening, ways to build trust, who should be invited and how, special outreach initiatives, etc.?
Work Collaboratively to Develop a Provisional Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What roles will be played by whom? • What should be offered? With what stated purpose? When and where? For example: Should it be a single session, a series of sessions, a full day, or a 2-day retreat? • What should the group size and composition be?
Invite Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What needs to be communicated to participants about the purposes of the dialogue, what they can expect, and what will be asked of them, etc. so they will be prepared, motivated, reasonably trusting of the process, and clear about what the event is, and is not?
Engage with Confirmed Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have they experienced the conflict and what are their hopes, concerns or questions about the meeting? • Do they have feedback about the proposed communication agreements, ideas about questions they'd like to be asked or to ask others, or other ideas?
Finalize the Meeting Design and Facilitate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What structures, questions, and communication agreements will support the participants in achieving their purposes, avoiding what they hope

the Meeting	<p>to avoid, and "meeting each other anew"?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would be helpful to convey to the group (and how) about the hopes, concerns, and thoughts they've shared (without attribution).
Elicit Feedback and Achieve Closure or Plan Next Steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What can we learn about the participants' experiences that will help us to improve our practice and/or better serve them in a next phase? • What next steps, if any, should be taken, e.g., plans for future events or communications?

Elements of a Container for Dialogue

