

## What is Dialogue?

Dialogue is a process for talking about tension-filled topics and helps people communicate with one another as they constructively search for creative solutions to challenges/conflict. The word “dialogue” has Latin origins and refers to, “a conversation between 2 or more people across lines of conflict or potential conflict.” “Violent” communication is the opposite of dialogue, an act of disconnection, and simply means using words and non-verbal communication that leads to hurt, pain, confusion, and misunderstandings.

Dialogue aims to build relationships between people as they share experiences, ideas, and information about a common concern. Dialogue can help people generate their own new collective understanding of a situation through exchanges between participants. As people take in more information and perspectives than they had previously, they are able to forge a new and broader understanding of the situation.

Dialogue works best when the people involved are open to learning and changing. The role of the dialogue “facilitator” (mediator or Circle Keeper) is to encourage this type of attitude. Some people discredit dialogue because it requires them to recognize they may be able to learn from people that believe differently. When people believe that they alone hold the whole truth, there is no need to listen to others. Dialogue works best when participants bring curiosity and a sense of wonder about others and a desire to learn more about people and their experiences. It requires humility to recognize that one person or a group does not have the whole truth.

In dialogue, people acknowledge that they can benefit from listening to and learning, talking, and working with others. Participants come to understand that what they believe about an issue is shaped by their life experiences and other factors such as age, class, religion, ethnicity, geography, and gender. Openness to learning from and about others helps to create a space where people can be honest about their similarities and differences. In a dialogue process, participants are asked to respectfully listen, learn, and share their experiences with others.

Dialogue differs from a conversation, discussion, training/education, and debate. In dialogue, communication is fluid and often moves in and out of various modes.

- Conversation: information and ideas flow between people for the purpose of self-expression.
- Discussion: information and ideas are exchanged in order to accomplish a task or to solve a problem.
- Training or education: helps people learn something, usually by transferring knowledge from the trainer to the student.
- Debate: is like a contest in which there are winners and losers.

Dialogue affects 3 distinct parts of our humanity: our intellect, emotions, and spirit.

- Intellect (simple definition.) Dialogue exposes people to different ways of seeing the world and to rethink their understanding and knowledge of an issue, event, or a group of people.
- Emotions (simple definition.) Dialogue prompts greater emotional understanding of others and self. It stirs passion and helps to identify resentments. It helps to expand people's sense of empathy and prompts them to act and take responsibility for their feelings, words, actions, or inactions.
- Spirit (simple definition.) Dialogue fosters a basic level of human caring, which in turn can expand people's sense of connectedness.

How Dialogue Affects Us Individually.

- Personal reflection/clarity. People develop different perceptions of what is true, right, or good through their life experiences. Different "worldviews" can cause disharmony. Successful dialogue results in people having more awareness of how their personal experiences shape their worldview and in turn, how they interpret others, and that no one person can hold the truth for someone else.
- Empathy. People often prefer to be with others they perceive as similar to themselves. The less people interact with people different from themselves, the more they are likely to perceive each other as strong, wrong. Self-righteousness can be toxic. Dialogue allows people to actually understand why those in "different" groups may view reality differently than themselves.
- Increased understanding. Dialogue helps us understand why people believe what they believe. It values both objective facts and personal stories to better understand an issue. Facts are not greater measures of truth than personal stories are. Both are valuable and no one's story is a rationalization or excuse – all labels that Western society places on people trying to open up.

How Dialogue Positively Impacts Communities and Groups.

- Reduced divisions. People often see other people as obstacles to their own goals. Or they see people different than themselves as "less than."
- A sense of community. People in North America lead very independent lives. Dialogue intentionally works at building a sense of community, togetherness, healing, and unity.
- Improved communication patterns. (On and individual and group level.) Dialogue focuses on active listening, honesty, assertiveness, while remaining sensitive to others, following ground rules and identifying common ground. These are the foundation for all conflict mediation and peace building processes.