



## Guidelines for Dialogue

*Greek: "dia-logos" -- to see through to meaning*

### **WHAT IS A DIALOGUE?**<sup>1</sup>

The act of dialogue is intentionally seeking to understand by listening deeply, inquiring and advocating in order to uncover meanings, reveal assumptions and walk in another person's shoes. It is a process of seeking new ways to understand each other and create a shared sense of meaning through conversation. It is distinct from debate which is by definition a "contention by words or arguments; a regulated discussion of a proposition between two matched sides; the process of arguing opposite sides of a question; usually assumes a right or wrong answer." Dialogue is about inquiry and learning, sharing our perspectives and beliefs, and broadening our understanding of the different perspectives and beliefs among us. The objective and result of dialogue is shared meaning, not influence to a certain outcome.

Developing wisdom, which consists in the capacity to sustain a dialogue with people who hold different ethical or philosophical points of view from one's own, is the essential moral virtue without which no peace or balance is possible in the world.

--Yasuhiko Genky Kimura

### **GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE**<sup>2</sup>

#### **Listen actively and without judgment**

Listen intently to what is said and listen to the feelings being expressed under the words. Listen to yourself as well as others. Affirm the rights of others to hold their perspectives by listening intently, and avoid prepping your rebuke when listening to another. Be aware of and set aside your judgments.

#### **Practice self-focus (speak from the "I" position)**

Speak your truth, expressing your thoughts, feelings and experiences by making "I" statements rather than "you," "we" or "one." In our language, it is very common to use you instead of I. As you pay attention you will see how much more powerful using "I" statements will be-- speaking only for yourself, not for a community as a whole, not for the person sitting next to you.

#### **Disagree but do not shame, blame or attack**

Disagree with each other; it is absolutely okay to. One of the necessary ingredients for differences to be expressed and valued is that people let go of the need to be, think or act the same. Asking someone to feel shame for what they believe to be true, blaming someone for his/her experiences or for thinking or feeling the way he or she does, attacking each other, because of anger or feeling offended because of another's perspective, all undermine continued effective dialogue. Please be open to disagreements on perspectives and do so respectfully.

#### **Accept messiness and practice non-closure**

Be messy and realize that complex issues will not be resolved in one dialogue. You don't have to have your statements worked out before you start talking or have any answers--your perspectives and thoughts are

<sup>1</sup> From The Center for Dialogue, Brevard, NC (828-877-3815)

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from several sources, including VISIONS, Inc. Guidelines ([www.visions-inc.com](http://www.visions-inc.com))< OpenSource Leadership Strategies' guidelines and materials from The Center for Dialogue in Brevard, NC (828-877-3815): Guidelines for Supporting Dialogue (taken from Thomas Gordon's, *Leader Effectiveness Training*, and Glenna Gerard and Linda Teurfs', *Introduction to Dialogue, A Journey of Collective Learning*) and Touchstones (prepared by Sue Jones with help from Gwen May and the writings of Parker Palmer, Marianne Novak Houston, Marcy Jackson, Judy Brown and The Dialogue Group)

enough. A common fear is that you will offend someone—but we are here to learn from one another and get as much as we can into the dialogue. Please accept both yourself and others being disorganized in their thoughts and share as openly as possible. And, know that learning comes from the process of delving into complex perspectives, issues and identities, a process that is never ending.

### **Focus on your learning**

Your intention is to learn from others, to expand your view and understanding, not to evaluate the other or to determine who has the “best” view. We ask that you verbalize your thoughts, feelings, opinions and ideas openly and listen actively to others so that you may learn. Ask questions for clarification, be curious. Avoid giving advice and attempting to change anyone else’s beliefs or behavior.

### **Maintain confidentiality**

In agreeing to maintain confidentiality it will be much safer to share your thoughts, perspectives and ideas. We must agree that nothing that is said here is shared elsewhere and that nothing that is shared is used against each other either, in any way. In addition, it will be important when you see each other outside of this context to respect that people may or may not want to discuss issues raised here after they leave.

### **Practice both/and thinking**

Look for ways in which ideas fit together and avoid setting up an either/or process or a competition between ideas. One does not have to be false to make the other true. It is quite possible that both are true. Being able to accept that two seemingly contradictory views of the world could both be true is challenging and important, as we know people experience realities differently for quite authentic reasons.

### **Practice inquiry and discovery vs. perfection**

We are engaged in a process of inquiry and discovery together. Perfect ideas, ways of being, perceptions, knowledge are all unattainable. Our task is to engage authentically in an ongoing journey and always remember it is both a collection of individual, diverse journeys as well our group experience. Be conscious of allowing discovery to emerge for yourself and others through an inquiring approach.