

Dialogue, Identity, and Diversity

by

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Dialogue has been defined by organizational theorist William N. Isaacs as a *sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions, and certainties that compose everyday experience*. Distinct from ordinary discussion, in which participants negotiate shared agreement through the process of dialectical debate, dialogue provides a means to explore meaning in a radically different way. Entering dialogue, participants make a conscious attempt to suspend their assumptions, explore together, and focus on both individual and group learning. To realize these aims, most varieties of dialogue rely on explicit, commonly agreed upon ground rules to guide conversation. These ground rules are negotiated by the group before entering dialogue. Sample ground rules include: "Suspend Assumptions," "Focus on the Learning," and "Honor the Speaker." A ground rule that works particularly well when the topic involves diversity is an experiential one: "Insofar as possible, speak from your experience of the subject, and not from theories or abstractions."

In recent years, the term dialogue has come to be associated with the work of theoretical physicist David Bohm and popularized through the work of organizational learning practitioner Peter Senge. But it is important to recognize that dialogue is a much older art and in fact may be as old as the art of conversation itself. As Isaacs puts it¹: "Dialogue is an old term. Some evidence suggests that human beings have gathered in small groups to talk together for millennia;

¹ Isaacs, William, "Taking Flight: Dialogue, Collective Thinking, and Organizational Learning," *Organizational Dynamics*, Autumn 1993.

to claim this is a new art is a mistake. Indeed, it is because dialogue is, at its core, very natural to human beings that there seems real possibility for its use in modern settings."

Dialogue holds promise for diversity interventions because of the technique's power to unfreeze preconceived viewpoints on subjects such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. Providing an opportunity for unfreezing -- particularly in a peer-to-peer, nonconfrontational environment -- is critical, as individuals tend to approach these subjects with biases and preconceptions and are highly resistant to top-down training. By asking participants to share their experiences (the hallmark of the Diversity Circle Dialogue method), participants build common ground beyond the walls of abstractions and theories.

To fully understand the potential of dialogue as a diversity intervention, it is useful to understand why conversations about diversity frequently degenerate into unproductive debates or exercises in intellectual one-upmanship. Often, these types of conversations get frozen because those engaged in conversation are looking at the subject from different angles. One conversationalist might view the subject from an individual lens, in which individuals are seen as individuals *qua* individuals, divorced from their group affiliation. Another might view the subject from a group or system lens, in which individuals are seen as members of groups, which hold positions of dominance or subordinateness based on such factors as race, gender, class and sexual orientation.

In this type of conversation, neither conversant can free him or herself from the prison of his or her convictions long enough to fully hear what the other is saying. Dialogue, by slowing down the process and encouraging the conversationalists to approach the subject without preconceptions, creates the necessary conditions for mutual inquiry and learning.

Since 1991, the Diversity Circle dialogue method has been used by a range of institutions for a variety of purposes, some diversity related, some not. Some organizations which have utilized the method include AT&T, the American Association of University Women, Creighton University, Hoechst Celanese, Pennsylvania Protection and Advocacy, Princeton University, and the New Jersey Supreme Court Task Force on Minority Concerns. The method has been used as an ongoing community building exercise by a citizen group, a regular pre-meeting activity of a diversity task force, a means of building vision statements, as a conflict resolution tool, and as an alternative to traditional focus groups. The method also frequently has been combined with other methods.

For further information about the Diversity Circle dialogue method, contact Lewis Associates at 609-397-9777 or send e-mail to Joello@aol.com.

References

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