

Leadership & Dialogue



I first discovered the notion of dialogue about 35 years when I participated in a kind of T-Group at the Grubb Institute in the UK. It subsequently became an integral part of not only my “way of working” but part of me.

The ability to engage in dialogue with others is a key leadership skill in terms of building relationships.

Dialogue is much more than a simple conversation or a discussion or debate, dialogue is about “seeking a greater truth”; it is about getting beyond individual perceptions, interpretations, subjectivity and judgements and coming to a kind of shared understanding and meaning.

Dialogue is about shared inquiry, it’s a way of thinking and reflecting together. It is not something “*you do to*” other people; it is something “*you do with*” other people.

A good example of dialogue is the film “Twelve Angry Men”, one of the jury members is unsure of the verdict and he says that he “just wants to talk”; in fact, what he does (or tries to do) with the other jury members is to enter into dialogue with them. He doesn’t name call, he doesn’t criticise, he doesn’t attack, he is empathetic, he stays focussed, he asks a lot of questions, he accepts his own doubts, and he tries to learn more about the situation from the view points of the others.

Dialoguing is not easy, we all have our “preconceived ideas”, our “certainties”, our “truths” and putting them to one side is difficult.

We are often not aware of behaviours that can interfere with dialogue; here are some common things that we do without thinking:

- we can become so engrossed in our subject that we spend a lot of time talking and do not give others a chance to speak
- as we are so engrossed in our subject, we give so much detail that people can't grasp what is essential
- we discount things that others say that seem unimportant to us and rather than "reformulating" what they, say we "redefine" it to suit our purposes
- in worst case examples we can criticise people rather than dealing with their contributions or ideas
- our desire to "finish" can lead us to flitting between subjects without coming to any real conclusions.

Avoiding the above is not easy, we generally don't do it intentionally and we need to pay attention to our state of being and to how we are talking and listening.

For the being part, I try hard to stay constantly present; although I may have a "mind full" of stuff that could be useful I try to remain "mindful" to what is actually happening "here & now"; avoiding falling into the trap of thinking about what happened last time or what might happen next time.

For the talking part, I use the WAIT principle – Why Am I Talking?

- Is what I'm saying pertinent, useful, necessary, etc?
- Am I taking too long to say what I have to say?
- Am I simply repeating what has already been said?
- Am I giving too much information?
- Am I taking up someone else's time?
- Etc.

For the listening part I use the "4 ears" approach

- Listening to facts – what is actually being said; facts, figures, when, who, how, where, etc.
- Listen to emotions – decoding feelings about what the person is saying; does the person seem comfortable or uncomfortable with what she/he is saying
- Listening to demands – is the person asking for or expecting something not “directly” stated
- Listening to myself – my filters; my preconceived ideas, the fact that I know the person and hence know what they will say, what I’m “levelling” because it is unimportant for me, what I’m “sharpening” because it is important for me, etc.

It’s not easy and we can all “lose it” on occasions; we can momentarily “switch off” and lose the thread, we can get carried with giving “supporting” information, we can listen less to someone because we consider that they don’t know what they are talking about, etc. etc.

Like all skills it needs “purposeful practice” to become competent.

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