

FOUNDATIONS FOR A DIALOGUE PROCESS

The different dialogue methods in this collection may seem very diverse and distinct, which means we risk using them as separate and unrelated tools. In this section, we intend to give some perspective that may be helpful in thinking about how these tools are connected, and what is required to design integral processes of change and learning, whether for very small groups of people, or gatherings and processes of several hundred.

These points are aspects which we feel are foundations to be considered for any dialogue process to be successful. They are not prescriptive, but rather areas to consider as you work through your design, making choices about process, flow, and which of the many tools for dialogue and interaction you will make use of.

1. Purpose and Principles

“Clarity of purpose is a sweet weapon against confusion” - Toke Moeller

Within most if not all of the tools that we are presenting, but also beyond them, lies an essential principle of clarity of **purpose**. Before deciding on which tools to make use of, we need to be crystal clear on our intention for bringing together a group of people or initiating a process of change. Sometimes we may find ourselves having begun something without quite knowing why, or for reasons that are inappropriate or external to the particular context and the needs of the people involved.

Before clarifying a purpose, it can be necessary to connect with the need. What is the need that has propelled us to come together? What do we hope to achieve as we respond to it? From a genuine need, a clear purpose can be derived. It's also important to be clear on whether the amount of investment of time and attention we are demanding from participants is in proportion with the importance to them of meeting this need.

The purpose needs to be attractive, but it should not be in the form of too specific, structured, and quantifiable goals. If objectives and expectations are too dominant in the room, this can deter dialogue and openness. Some proponents and practitioners of dialogue emphasise that it needs to be completely open-ended and not attached to specific outcomes, but there is still clarity on why the group is together.

Principles are our aspiration of how we would like to be together as we pursue our purpose. The principles can be used to design and guide the process and the involvement of participants. Even if we simply come together as an informal group for a conversation of a few hours, making a simple set of agreements for how we wish to be together is important. The longer and larger an initiative the more critical working through principles together becomes.

Most of the tools here have a set of principles attached to them, and this is a significant part of what makes them work. Some examples include: “Rotate leadership” (Circle), “Access the wisdom of the minority” (Deep Democracy), “Explore questions that matter” (World Café) and “Whoever comes are the right people” (Open Space).

Often a convener will share (or co-create) the purpose and principles with participants both before and at the beginning of an event or process, and where possible allow for its evolution during the process with the broader group of participants. Ideally the group, not just the convener, should “own” the purpose and principles. Taken as a whole, a clear purpose together with the principles provides a compass helping us to navigate and make decisions about how to move forward.

2. Good Strategic Questions

The power of a good question cannot be underestimated. Good questions are catalytic. They open up the learning field. They stimulate thought processes, curiosity, and the desire to engage with a group, and they are central to what defines and distinguishes dialogue.

Often we arrive with answers and expertise, statements to be discussed, or positions to be advocated or negotiated. But in dialogue, questions are actually in many ways more powerful than answers. Questions pull people toward the future, while answers – while useful of course - are of the past. A question that has meaning to the people involved can ignite the whole process of learning and change. The knowledge that people involved are genuinely needed to bring forth the answers and solutions *collaboratively* changes the entire field of interaction. Where Bill Isaacs describes dialogue as a “conversation with a center, not sides”, that “center” is often created by one or more good questions.

It is an art to identify questions with real power and meaning to a group of people, a community, or a nation. These are questions that can come alive inside of us, as we seek to work with them. The most powerful questions come directly from the field (the hearts and minds) of the people involved.

There might be one or more overriding question/s framing an entire process. During a process we can then continue to work with questions as a powerful tool. Many of the tools here use questions as an integral part of their make-up.

3. Participation and participants

How serious are we about the people we bring together?

So often we bring people together to listen to experts, ask a few questions, and make some comments, and we feel that we have involved them. We may label it a “dialogue”, or a “consultation” but actually only a few people have been heard. In contrast, this dialogue work comes from a deep belief in, and appreciation of, the intelligence and wisdom that is accessible to us from each person we connect and engage with.

Depending on our purpose, different forms and levels of participation will be required. Based on our purpose, who needs to be involved? What do we hope to do and achieve with them? What will each of them be bringing and what will they be wanting to gain? Do we really trust that they each hold an invaluable part of the puzzle we are trying to solve? How do we best involve and engage them?

Many dialogue methods support the work of going from fragmentation to connection and wholeness through *inclusiveness*. As we find ways of connecting and including different voices and parts of a system, surprising and new discoveries can be made.

If time and resources allow, it can make a big difference to interview all or some of the participants in advance of a workshop. This will help you plan, but will also make them recognise this as a process in which their voice is appreciated and get them started thinking about the topic in advance.

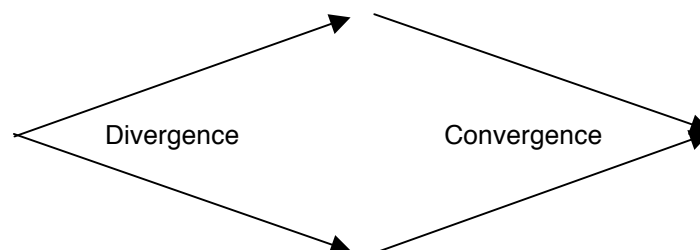
The ultimate level of inclusion is when the participants all step into a role of co-hosts, such that the group’s leadership and facilitation is completely shared. That of course is not possible with processes of thousands, but imagining what that level of involvement and engagement would look like can help us stretch ourselves in making the most of the people who are involved in any given process.

4. Underlying Structure

There is an underlying *rhythm* to most processes of change. Some of the tools and processes we have included here have integrated their own understanding of deep-rooted change in their overall design. However for many of the tools, we need to design a daily rhythm and an overall workshop *flow* paying attention to the underlying architecture that might best serve our intent.

It can help to look at a dialogue process as a story. What is the “beginning”, the “middle” and the “end”? How will people arrive, clarify their individual and collective intentions, agree on how they want to be together and set out on the journey? What will be at the center of their process? How will they close, note individual and collective commitments and conclusions, and prepare to return to where they came from?

There are several models that can help us think through the most appropriate underlying structure of a process. One simple version is the model of divergence and convergence:



The *divergent* phase of a process is a time of opening up possibility. It is about generating alternatives, gathering diverse points of view, allowing disagreement in and suspending judgment. We are often afraid of really opening up, to allow for full divergence to occur, because we are uncomfortable or even fearful of the messiness of too many new and divergent ideas and perspectives. Yet the greater the divergence, the freedom of voicing wild ideas, at the beginning of a process, the greater the possibility of surprising and innovative outcomes.

If divergence is all that occurs, however, we risk facing frustration and lack of positive results. The *convergence* is therefore as important to plan for and design into the process. Convergence is about arriving at, and making explicit, the conclusions, insights, and next steps of the process, and perhaps what the new shared questions are. The two movements of divergence and convergence can happen multiple times during a process or as one pattern. Some tools are better suited for divergence, others for convergence.

Transformative dialogue processes that truly allow for divergence often include a “groan zone” or “grey fog” situation in the middle. The groan zone is that somewhat painful place, where everything is a little too chaotic, unclear and unstructured. Sometimes this is a time of conflict and “storming”, sometimes it’s characterised more by confusion and feeling overwhelmed by complexity or even despairing. It is however also here that innovation and breakthrough has a real chance of occurring. When the group manages to “stay with the messiness” for a little while, and then enter into a process of convergence, they can go through major changes. On the other hand, if divergence is less, and convergence is premature, the potential is lower for major shifts to occur. Kurt Lewin, in his famous theory of change, talks about this as the process of “defreezing” (which involves some anxiety and letting go of one’s old assumptions) followed by “refreezing”.

Different models will highlight different aspects of underlying architecture. Some of our ten methods have an architecture and a flow associated with them. They have a storyline or a set of specified phases they move participants through. For example, we profile the Change Lab process which works with a very specific structure, in broad strokes following the general

principle of allowing initial divergence followed by very clear convergence, with a phase of *emergence* in between. Future Search moves through looking at the past, then the present, and finally the future. Others of the methods like World Café or Circle are less focused on flow and can easily be incorporated as a tool into a variety of processes.

5. The Facilitator

The tools, the design, the process. It is easy to let concerns around these preoccupy us, and yet the most important tool that any one of us have at our disposal as a facilitator is ourselves and our presence. That is not to say that the others don't count. It is simply to state that the importance of the preparation, presence, and state of mind of the facilitator are often neglected. As a convener and host of groups, the facilitator influences the space and the group in visible and invisible ways.

Although much can be planned in advance, a true master will stay present to what shows up in the moment. For dialogue to work, the facilitator should not be getting caught up in a predetermined structure and timetable that has to be followed at all cost. The rule of thumb: *over-prepared, under-structured*, speaks to the criticality of preparation, coupled with the flexibility to respond creatively as the process unfolds in real time. This may sound like *laissez-faire*, but actually requires great clarity, and the ability to listen to the group and the process. This is where the value of purpose and principles shows up strongly: A clear purpose and set of principles that are alive and embodied in the facilitator will enable him or her to improvise and respond with freedom that is rooted in clear direction.

The ability to hold clear and strong the intention and principles of a gathering or process is directly related to how able the facilitator is to be fully present. Some of the most successful facilitators we know take time for a meditative practice, and time to tune into an intention to serve the group before stepping into the facilitator role. To perform well a facilitator needs to develop humility, but also courage to go with the flow. If the facilitator has this kind of confidence and groundedness, they will also gain more legitimacy and trust from participants.

In the last section of this report, on assessment tools, we go further into different qualities a facilitator may embody.

6. Physical Space

Many typical conference-room setups are actually not conducive to dialogue, but we continue to use them out of habit. We worry more about the agenda, and less about the set-up of the rooms or halls. Meanwhile, the physical space exerts an invisible but incredibly strong influence on what can happen in a process.

