

Sustained Dialogue

Overview

The key distinguishing feature of Sustained Dialogue is precisely that it is *sustained*. Over extended periods of time, the same group of people join in consecutive meetings. The underlying assumption behind this is that, in order to address conflictual issues, we need to not just look at the concrete problem to be solved, but at the underlying *relationships* that get in the way. And, changing relationships isn't something that happens in a day, or at a brief workshop or conference – it's a dynamic, non-linear process which takes time and requires commitment from those involved.

Sustained Dialogue was developed primarily by veteran US diplomat Dr. Harold Saunders, inspired by a long career in international affairs and peace processes. Key to the inspiration behind Sustained Dialogue was his work as co-chair of the "Dartmouth Conferences", an unofficial, multilevel, unique peace-making venture between the US and the USSR, started in 1960 and continued over a process of more than 30 years. Over years, the same participants sustained their conversation from one meeting to the next, speaking with an increasing sense of freedom, reaching greater and greater depth, and building trusting relationships and a foundation of shared knowledge. The agenda was open-ended and cumulative, picking out themes and taking them to their logical conclusion, and allowing new themes to arise. In 1992, members of the Dartmouth Conference's Regional Conflicts Task Force decided to draw on their experience to foster dialogue in a national conflict in Tajikistan, and it was through this work that Sustained Dialogue was further elaborated and conceptualised into its current basic model.

While the process was born from situations of conflict and extreme stress, it reflects a more universal pattern of human relationships, and can be used in a variety of community, corporate, regional and national settings. This section is based on writings of Harold Saunders as well as an interview and materials provided by Teddy Nemeroff, who is currently working with IDASA in Pretoria specifically on Sustained Dialogue. Teddy has worked with Sustained Dialogue in a wider range of contexts beyond the international peace-building arena, including on youth issues, local governance, and with universities. He launched the Sustained Dialogue programme at Princeton University which has now evolved into a programme at 10 US university campuses, specifically looking at race relations among students.

Sustained Dialogue is informed by two conceptual frameworks: five elements of relationships and five stages of a sustained dialogue.

Five Elements of Relationships

As mentioned above, the focus of Sustained Dialogue is on the underlying relationships that affect a given problem. Given this focus, it's important to understand what is meant by relationships and what the different aspects of relationship are. The following five components or arenas of interaction make up a definition of relationships. They work in constantly changing combinations.

Identity: The way that participants define themselves including the life experiences they bring to the present moment

Interests: The things people care about, that are drawing them together

Power: The capacity to influence a course of events

Perceptions of the Other: Including misperceptions and stereotypes

Patterns of Interaction: Including respect for certain limits on behaviour

This framework is analytical but also operational in the sense that participants in a Sustained Dialogue will usually be introduced to these elements and will draw on them in understanding

the nature of the relationships that divide them. Sometimes participants can find it hard to talk about relationships, but they become apparent in the dialogues, to both participants and moderators. In that situation, this framework provides a point of reference.

Five Stages of Sustained Dialogue

The Sustained Dialogue process is mapped out in five stages. These stages have been identified, not based on what the creators of the process necessarily would *want* to happen, but rather on what they observed happening as a natural evolution when participants came together in a dialogue sustained over time. It's important to point out that these stages are a kind of idealtpe description and not a recipe. Generally participants will move back and forth between the stages, and will not follow this rigidly. The Sustained Dialogue facilitator also will not push them through the process. Still, this basic pattern seems accurate and provides aboveall a sense of direction for both participants and facilitators to a process that is otherwise open-ended.

Stage One - Deciding to Engage

First a group of participants needs to be convened. A good size for a Sustained Dialogue is 8-12 people. They should ideally be people who are respected community leaders (but not necessarily in official positions), who reflect the key viewpoints of the topic, conflict, or community, and who are willing to come together to listen to one another in an ongoing process. Though Sustained Dialogue is intended and designed to shift *relationships*, the participants will generally be coming together because they are motivated by, and focused on, a particular problem. They don't necessarily see relationships as the heart of that problem from the outset.

Convening an appropriate group of participants can be a difficult and drawn out process. It may be hard to get them to commit the time, to accept the value of the process, or to be willing to engage with others where there is a dysfunctional relationship. Their motivation to join will depend on whether they are the right people to be involved, whether they have a compelling desire to solve a problem, whether they are aware of their common interest and interdependence in solving it, and whether the conveners succeed in communicating the value of the dialogue process.

Once the participants have been identified, Stage One is also the time where they together agree on the purpose, scope, and ground rules of the dialogue. Sometimes the participants actually sign a "covenant" to contract with each other.

Stage Two - Mapping Relationships and Naming Problems

This is where the conversations actually begin. Stage Two is first a process of naming the issues – telling stories of personal experiences, venting grievances, downloading or "dumping" all the concerns, letting it all out, and clearing the air. Towards the later parts of this stage, participants will start to map the problems and the related underlying relationships out in a more structured way and they will identify a few major issues they want to focus on in a deeper exploration.

Stage Three: Probing Problems and Relationships

At the end of Stage Two and beginning of Stage 3, the character of the conversation shifts. "Me" becomes "We". "What" becomes "Why". Participants shift from speaking "to" each other to speaking "with" each other. The group is finding patterns and explanations, making connections, and developing concepts. They are more interpretive and analytical at this stage, probing the dynamics of the underlying relationships causing their problems, and identifying broad possible ways into changing those relationships. The group is now focusing on some narrower or deeper issues or leverage points in the system, bearing in mind the connections to the other issues that were mapped in Stage Two. They are arriving at the insights that will drive their choices for action. They are also accessing their individual and collective will to enact change, and coming to a sense of direction.

“I would as a white student talk about interacting with a black student, and how it was uncomfortable. A black student would tell a story about how a white student treated them. Stage Three would be where someone would say ‘maybe our experience is similar’. ‘Maybe in my story, the way I felt is like how the white person in your story felt.’ This is where we are getting into each other’s shoes.” – Interview with Teddy Nemeroff

Stage Four: Scenario-building

While the group has been primarily focused on problems until this point, they really step into a positive solution space now. They work out what practical steps they and the wider community need to take in order to change troublesome relationships and to overcome obstacles to their agreed direction. If the dialogue is related to the political level, they will suggest steps to be taken in the political arena, and may relate to actions needing to be taken by influential players beyond the dialogue group. If it is at a more local or organisational level, the dialogue group may be focusing more on designing its own direct actions. These may be collective or individual.

The use of the word “scenarios” to describe this stage in Sustained Dialogue is quite different from its use in our section on scenario-planning. A Sustained Dialogue facilitator could choose to do an actual scenario-planning process in this stage, but the stage is really about defining scenarios in the very broad sense of simply, options for action and possible ways forward.

Stage Five: Acting Together

In Stage Five the shift is from talking to action and the previously inward focus is redirected outward. The participants are now either working out how to put their suggestions in the hands of those who can implement them, or going out to implement their activities themselves. The nature of this action depends greatly on the subject of the dialogue, the level of influence of members, the level of risk involved, and the specific context in which it is taking place. This may be the conclusion of the process, or it may be that the participants now start addressing a new issue or return to one of the issues that was raised earlier in the dialogue and not followed up.

As stated earlier, these five stages are not linear, but there are some patterns even in the non-linearity: a genuine and effective Stage Three will typically depend on the group having gone through Stage Two, so it would generally not happen that a group skips from Stage One to Three. They may oscillate back and forth quite a bit between Two and Three though, and then jump to Stage Four when ready.

In Stages Three-Five especially the difference between the diplomatic/ political level work with Sustained Dialogue and the more community/ youth level work is apparent. There is a lot of diversity in how these stages play out in different processes, and Sustained Dialogue takes a healthy open-ended approach to that variety.

As the group moves through the five stages, they will usually increasingly take ownership of the process, and at times will easily self-manage it. It’s important to have a facilitator guiding them through it, who understands the needs of the group and who is able to recognise the five stages and help the transitions to happen without pushing the group into a new stage prematurely. The style of facilitation and the degree to which the facilitator intervenes will vary greatly from dialogue to dialogue. At times, the facilitator may not need to say anything at all. At other times s/he may be intervening much more directly, in a more workshop-style form. This depends on the characteristics of the dialogue group and what elements of relationship are at the forefront at any given time.

Applications

Sustained Dialogue is being applied in several distinct types of settings. Hal Saunders and the Kettering Institute focus on its effectiveness in conflict resolution at a political or societal level. In addition to the extensive work in Tajikistan they have applied it in

Azerbaijan/Armenia/Nagorno-Karabakh, in the Middle East and elsewhere. Teddy Nemoroff's work at Princeton as mentioned has led it to being used on about 10 university campuses in the US, primarily focused on improving race relations. Meanwhile, IDASA with Teddy are now applying it in both urban and rural areas in South Africa and Zimbabwe.

IDASA is also working on training moderators for the groups. The training is always run alongside an intervention and so is very action-learning oriented. In KwaZulu-Natal currently 9 villages are running their own Sustained Dialogue process.

Case Example – IDASA Youth Project in Zimbabwe

In a time of deepening crisis in Zimbabwe, youth are a particularly vulnerable group, more at risk to hiv/AIDS, and suffering greatly under the economic collapse and high unemployment. Because of this, they are also more likely to be taken advantage of by political parties. From May 2004 through December 2005, IDASA supported a Sustained Dialogue initiative to empower youth in Zimbabwe in collaboration with the Coordinating Committee of the Organizations for Voluntary Service (COSV), and its Zimbabwean partner the Amani Trust. The intention of this project was to reduce the political exploitation of youth and strengthen their self-reliance, by building relationships, developing a deeper understanding of their issues of concern, and developing actions to improve their lives. The project engaged 120 youth leaders in Harare from across the socio-economic and political spectrum.

The collaboration between the Zimbabwean organisations originally was formed as a media and advocacy campaign, mobilising 14 Zimbabwean NGOs to participate. But as this became an increasingly risky political exercise, they decided to try Sustained Dialogue instead. This shift significantly changed the scale of the project, now reaching only about 120 rather than the intended 1000's. But depth of impact replaced breadth. The project worked strategically with youth leaders who could subsequently make a difference in their communities, and impact could be more easily monitored. Also, rather than the message being defined centrally and broadcast to the youth, the youth defined the issues they wanted to focus on themselves, primarily unemployment and hiv/AIDS.

Eight youth dialogue groups of 15 members each were launched simultaneously throughout the city of Harare. Each had one youth and one NGO activist as co-moderators, who were trained in Sustained Dialogue by IDASA. These moderators held orientation sessions for the participants, where expectations were aligned and discussion topics were selected. The groups launched at two-day overnight retreats, and then they started meeting at monthly half-day meetings at venues in their communities. The groups started out cautious because of the political situation and the sensitivity of the issue of hiv/AIDS, but as they progressed and trust increased, they began opening up to sharing more intimately.

The political climate and events in Zimbabwe made it difficult for the project to function and for youth to make it to meetings. Despite these challenges, the project achieved significant results. It succeeded in creating spaces the youth didn't have, for talking and thinking together about their challenges. Half of the groups managed to engage youth from both sides of the political spectrum while all of them managed to bring in diversity of interests and backgrounds. The youth gained knowledge about the issues, an increased sense of agency, stronger relationships and skills in dialogue and conflict management. This led to increased youth leadership in the communities, mitigation of community conflicts, and youth violence, and the development of plans for addressing community challenges.

Commentary

According to Teddy, there are two questions to be asked. The first is: will dialogue and improved relationships help this situation and is it worth the effort? Convening and sustaining a Sustained Dialogue can be a lot of work. The second question is: is the timing right and how is this going to interact with the context, with what is going on in the outside world? Will it conflict with other processes that are already going on to try and resolve the issue?

Sustained Dialogue is most useful in situations where relationships are dysfunctional, there is a lack of trust, and official processes are not working because the issues are not easily solved in a negotiation-type setup. Sustained Dialogue is not a space for debate or for official negotiations among formal representatives. It is also not a purely interpersonal process, nor is it a skills training. And it is not a quick fix.

The strength of Sustained Dialogue is in its flexibility and simplicity. The open-endedness allows a group to go where it needs to go, and it is important to look not only for the expected impact, but also for the positive unexpected results. The main challenge is that it isn't a ready-made methodology, with a step-by-step guide. The two frameworks – the five elements of relationship and the five stages of Sustained Dialogue – provide a very basic but useful sense of direction and reference point. This means that the process relies greatly on the intuition of the facilitator, as well as his/her skills, personal attitudes and capacities, and contextual understanding. The facilitator needs to be able to respond to a wide variety of situations and to draw on a wide repertoire of possible ways of interacting in the group. Ideally, this repertoire is built up from experience.

Besides the nature of this process as sustained over time, another aspect that strikes us about this process as distinguishing it from most of the others in this collection is the nature of Stage Two and the transition to Stage Three. Venting seems to us to be highly underrated in many processes. The release participants get from letting everything out and getting things off their chest, and the shift that happens when that has been done, can be highly generative.

Resources

Saunders, Harold *A Public Peace Process : Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflicts*

Sustained Dialogue: A Citizen's Peace Building Process – Guide prepared by Teddy Nemeroff

Diving In: A Handbook for Improving Race Relations on College Campuses Through the Process of Sustained Dialogue By Teddy Nemeroff & David Tukey

Empowering Zimbabwean Youth Through Sustained Dialogue by Teddy Nemeroff (case study prepared for UNDP)

www.sdcampusnetwork.org

www.sustaineddialogue.org

www.kettering.org