

The Power of Dialogue

By Scott London

It's a sad fact that while most of us spend a sizeable part of our lives communicating with others — in face-to-face conversations, over the phone, in committee meetings, via e-mail and social networks — we seem more separate and disconnected than ever.

The trouble with much of what passes for communication today is that it's all crosstalk. It's a din, not a dialogue. We fire salvos of information across the Internet, or shoot each other text messages, or blog or Twitter about ourselves. But is anyone paying attention? And if they are, do they catch our drift?

Genuine understanding seems to be the exception rather than the norm in everyday communication. We speak *at* each other, or *past* each other. We speak different conceptual languages, hold different values, embody different ways of seeing the world.

Much of the time, we're not even listening to each other at all. The dialogue is a monologue. We fire salvos of information across the Internet, or shoot each other text messages, or blog or Twitter about ourselves. But is anyone paying attention? And if they are, do they catch our drift?

The trouble with much of what passes for communication today is that it's all crosstalk. It's a din, not a dialogue.

The noisy chatter reflects the fact that we don't really know how to engage one another in authentic conversations. We simply haven't learned the skills of listening closely to each other, of engaging in meaningful exchanges, and of finding shared sources of meaning. We lack the know-how and the tools.

As we move into times of accelerating change and deepening uncertainty, we need to get smart about how to talk to one another. We need to be able to overcome differences, find common ground, build meaning and purpose, and set directions together. We need to be able to think together as groups, as teams, as committees, as communities, and as citizens.

The way to do that is through dialogue. The word *dialogue* is often contrasted with *monologue*, as if it were a two-way, rather than a one-way, process. But that's misleading. Dialogue is a contraction from the Greek words for *through* and *words*. It suggests an activity aimed at eliciting meaning.

The Greeks may not have invented dialogue, but they introduced the idea that individuals are not intelligent on their own, that it's only by reasoning together that they are able to uncover the truth for themselves. The Greeks understood that if two or more people are unsure about a question, they can accomplish something together they can't do on their own. By questioning and probing each other, carefully dissecting and analyzing ideas, finding the inconsistencies, never attacking or insulting but always searching for what they can accept between them, they can gradually attain deeper understanding and insight.

That's what dialogue is: a form of discussion aimed at fostering mutual insight and common purpose. The process involves listening with empathy, searching for common ground, exploring new ideas and perspectives, and bringing unexamined assumptions into the open.

When done well, the benefits can be extraordinary. Long-standing stereotypes can be dissolved, mistrust overcome, and visions shaped and grounded in a shared sense of purpose. People previously at odds with one another can come into alignment on objectives and strategies. New perspectives and insights can be gained, new levels of creativity stimulated, and bonds of community strengthened.

While dialogue is often confused with other forms of discourse, it belongs in a distinctive category of its own. Unlike debate, it doesn't involve arguing for a point of view, defending a set of assumptions, or critiquing the positions of others. Unlike negotiation or consensus-building, it's not a method of reaching agreement or arriving at decisions. And unlike discussion, it can only emerge when participants trust and respect each other, suspend their judgments, and listen deeply to all points of view.

The process is also distinct from deliberation which is not so much a mode of communication as a form of thought and reflection that can take place in any kind of conversation. Such dialogue is aimed at finding the best course of action. Deliberative questions take the form "What should we do?" The purpose is not so much to solve a problem or resolve an issue as to explore the most promising avenues for action.

The process of dialogue is more important than ever today for a number of reasons. For one thing, the confrontation between different cultural traditions and worldviews requires some process by which people can communicate across differences. For another, the fragmentation of society into a myriad of subcultures based on profession, status, race, ethnicity, political loyalty, etc., make it necessary that people find a pathway to common ground. A third reason is that traditional authority structures are falling away.

Dialogue is the most effective response to these developments because, on the one hand, it allows people to span their differences and forge shared frames of reference and, on the other, it gives those formerly excluded from decision-making an opportunity to participate in the process of finding common ground and establishing priorities for action.

But dialogue is not always easy or straightforward. It can run aground in a thousand subtle ways. Effective dialogue requires that all the participants have equal standing, that they listen with respect and empathy, and that ideas and assumptions explored openly and without judgment.

Effective dialogue typically follows some basic ground rules:

- The focus is on common interests, not divisive ones
- The dialogue and decision-making processes are separated
- Assumptions that can lead to distortions of certain points of view are clarified and brought into the open
- People are encouraged to reveal their own insights and assumptions before speculating on those of others
- Concrete examples are used to raise general issues
- The process focuses on conflicts between value systems, not people
- When appropriate, participants are encouraged to express emotions accompanying strongly held values
- Participants err on the side of including people who disagree
- They encourage relationships in order to humanize transactions
- They minimize the level of mistrust before pursuing practical objectives.