

Chapter 2

What Makes Dialogue Unique?

On public television's *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, the last few minutes are often devoted to a segment the producers describe as "A Dialogue with David Gergen" in which Mr. Gergen interviews someone currently in the news. What distinguishes this segment from other television interviews is that Gergen's questions show that he has actually read the book or article the guest has written, thereby enabling him to make intelligent comments. This is a refreshing change from television as usual, but it is not "dialogue" in the sense that I and other practitioners use this term.

As I write these words, I have on my desk before me a number of books and articles with the word "dialogue" in their title. In most of them the reader would be hard put to distinguish these so-called dialogues from other forms of conversation. There is nothing that sets them apart. Some feature intelligent and insightful exchanges of views, but, once again, dialogue is used as a generic term to describe two people talking with each other.

If you ask a half-dozen people at random what dialogue is, you will get a half-dozen different answers. Until recently,

even specialists did not distinguish dialogue from plain-vanilla conversation, discussion, debate, or other forms of talking together. Here and there isolated practitioners such as Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt saw special qualities in dialogue when done properly, but the concept remained alien to mainstream American thought until the 1980s, when thinkers from a variety of fields began to rediscover its distinctive virtues.

Since then the topic of dialogue has gained astonishing momentum. In recent years more than two hundred independent community initiatives have brought groups normally isolated from one another together to address issues of concern to the community through dialogue. Organizations such as the Healthcare Forum have identified dialogue skills as essential to effective community leadership. At MIT, William N. Isaacs founded the Dialogue Project, dedicated to the practice of dialogue in the business community. There are dozens of similar projects and centers in the nation. Dialogue now crops up as an important subject in such diverse fields as leadership, management, philosophy, psychology, science, and religion.

UNSCRAMBLING THE FOUR DS

When specialists use “dialogue” in a highly precise fashion at the same time when most people don’t bother to differentiate it from general conversation, the result is semantic confusion. One is never quite sure how the word is being used or what dialogue is.

My guess is that the semantic confusion will not last long. As the idea of dialogue catches on (as it is now doing), the need to clarify its meaning will grow apparent and its distinc-

tive character will become more widely recognized. This has happened with other specialized forms of conversation. Reflect for a moment on jury deliberations, diplomatic negotiations, psychotherapy, conflict resolution panels, T-groups, quality circles, organizational teaming, board meetings, workshops, and conferences. Initially, all of these forms of talk were launched with only a vague idea of the special purposes they could serve. Yet all have now been codified and formalized in varying degrees in the interest of capturing their unique capabilities.

This has not yet happened with dialogue. Most people continue to use the Four Ds—Dialogue, Debate, Discussion, and Deliberation—interchangeably. This habit of speech makes the skill requirements of dialogue needlessly complicated. The skills needed for dialogue are not esoteric or arcane. Indeed, most are obvious, such as learning to listen more attentively. The complication lies in the confusion that must be cleared away before the skills can be addressed and mastered. It is as if the task were to erect a tent in a part of a forest covered with underbrush, old roots, and stumps of trees. Putting up the tent may be less onerous than clearing a space for it.

AREAS OF CONVERGENCE

Fortunately, there is a great deal of agreement among practitioners on how to distinguish dialogue from other forms of conversation. The most revealing distinctions are those that contrast *dialogue* with *debate* and *discussion*. (Deliberation—the fourth “D”—is a form of thought and reflection that can take place in any kind of conversation.)

Debate

All practitioners of dialogue emphasize that debate is the opposite of dialogue. The purpose of debate is to win an argument, to vanquish an opponent. Dialogue has very different purposes. It would be inconceivable to say that someone “won” or “lost” a dialogue. In dialogue, all participants win or lose together. It defeats the idea of dialogue to conceive of winning or losing. Those who practice dialogue have come to see that the worst possible way to advance mutual understanding is to win debating points at the expense of others.

Visualize a small group of neighbors, some of whom are liberal in their politics and others who are conservative, having a conversation about improving standards for schools. The conversation starts civilly. All have children in school and know how important education is for the future of their children. As neighbors they share a number of communal concerns, education being among the most important. They are searching for answers to difficult and troublesome questions.

Just as they are beginning to develop a common understanding of the obstacles schools face, one of the liberals in the group attacks the conservatives’ endorsement of vouchers for school choice on the grounds that it undermines the tradition of public education in the United States. One of the conservatives in the group then responds by attacking a variety of liberal school reforms that, she argues, have sacrificed quality of performance in search of an unattainable ideal of equality.

A tone of hostility has now crept into the conversation. Those who have been attacked grow defensive. They marshal their arguments to beat down the opposition. They have stopped listening for understanding; they are now listening to detect soft spots in the others’ positions so that they can

controvert them. It all happens so quickly and automatically that no one notices that there has been a shift from conversation to debate. One thing is certain: no dialogue can take place.

The accompanying table is adapted from the writings of Mark Gerzon, one of our most gifted practitioners of dialogue. It contrasts the differences between debate and dialogue and shows how practitioners distinguish between these two forms of conversation.

DEBATE VERSUS DIALOGUE¹

<i>Debate</i>	<i>Dialogue</i>
Assuming that there is a right answer and you have it	Assuming that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can craft a solution
Combative: participants attempt to prove the other side wrong	Collaborative: participants work together toward common understanding
About winning	About exploring common ground
Listening to find flaws and make counterarguments	Listening to understand, find meaning and agreement
Defending assumptions as truth	Revealing assumptions for reevaluation
Critiquing the other side’s position	Reexamining all positions
Defending one’s own views against those of others	Admitting that others’ thinking can improve on one’s own

DEBATE VERSUS DIALOGUE (*continued*)

<i>Debate</i>	<i>Dialogue</i>
Searching for flaws and weaknesses in other positions	Searching for strengths and value in others' positions
Seeking a conclusion or vote that ratifies your position	Discovering new options, not seeking closure

Discussion

That debate is the opposite of dialogue is clear. Where discussion fits in is less clear—and more important. For it is in the distinction between discussion and dialogue that the distinctive quality of dialogue is best revealed.

It is useful to start with a *nondifference*: the erroneous assumption that serious conversation between two people is a dialogue but that if a larger group is involved it is a discussion. This artificial distinction mirrors a confusion about the literal meaning of the word “dialogue.”

I recently came across a book titled *Carl Rogers: Dialogues*.² It presents a series of conversations the eminent psychologist held with outstanding scholars, including Martin Buber. Since the word “dialogue” is featured in the book’s title and since some of the world’s most noted practitioners of dialogue are involved, one would expect to find genuine dialogues. Clearly, that was the message the editors conveyed in the title they chose for the book.

I found the conversations between Dr. Rogers and others interesting and provocative but did not initially see why they were called dialogues. They were largely interviews that Dr. Rogers conducted in the presence of an audience, with Rogers interpolating his point of view from time to time (like

the interviews David Gergen conducts with his guests on the *NewsHour*). The clue to why they were called dialogues came at the end of Dr. Rogers’s interview with Martin Buber. In his concluding remarks, the moderator, Professor of Philosophy Maurice Friedman, said to the audience, “We are deeply indebted to Dr. Rogers and Dr. Buber for a unique dialogue. It was unique in my experience . . . because you (the audience) took part in a sort of *triologue* and adding me, a *quadralogue*”³ (emphasis added).

Professor Friedman is making the common but mistaken assumption that dialogue literally means “two-sided.” But dialogue has nothing to do with the number two. The word “dialogue” derives from two Greek words: *dia*, meaning “through” (as in the word “diaphanous,” meaning “to show through”) and *logos*, signifying “word” or “meaning.” David Bohm, one of dialogue’s most original practitioners, interprets its etymological roots as suggesting words and meanings flowing through from one participant to another. Emphatically, dialogue is not confined to conversations between two people. In fact, some writers on the subject believe that dialogue is best carried out in groups ranging from about a dozen to two dozen people.⁴ It is ironic to see the word “dialogue” incorrectly used in describing a conversation between Rogers and Buber, both eminent theorists of dialogue.

What, then, is the difference between dialogue and discussion? Three distinctive features of dialogue differentiate it from discussion. When all three are present, conversation is transformed into dialogue. When any one or more of the three features are absent, it is discussion or some other form of talk, but it is not dialogue.

1. Equality and the absence of coercive influences. Practitioners agree that in dialogue all participants must be treated

as equals. Outside the context of the dialogue, there may be large status differences. But in the dialogue itself, equality must reign. In genuine dialogue, there is no arm-twisting, no pulling of rank, no hint of sanctions for holding politically incorrect attitudes, no coercive influences of any sort, whether overt or indirect.

Subtle coercive influences are often present in discussion, and when they are they undermine equality and, hence, dialogue. The Rogers/Buber interview illustrates how nuances of inequality can creep into conversation. Carl Rogers claimed that he was able to engage his patients in genuine I-Thou dialogue because he empathized so totally with his patients' thoughts and feelings. But to the surprise of the audience, Buber rejected Rogers's inference. He pointed out that the relationship between Rogers and his patients is inherently unequal because patients come to Rogers looking for help but are, for their part, unable to offer comparable help to him. Under these conditions of inequality, Buber states, it is misleading to think that genuine dialogue can take place. What Buber calls dialogue between I and Thou cannot occur in the context of an unequal doctor-patient relationship. Therapy may be possible, but dialogue has nothing to do with therapy.

Mixing people of unequal status and authority does not necessarily preclude dialogue, but it makes it more difficult to achieve. Dialogue becomes possible only after trust has been built and the higher-ranking people have, for the occasion, removed their badges of authority and are participating as true equals. There must be mutual trust before participants of unequal status can open up honestly with one another. Buber did not maintain that Rogers could not engage in dialogue with people who happened to be his patients *outside* the therapeutic relationship (for example, on an issue of concern to the community); he simply said that dialogue was not possi-

ble within the constraints of the formal doctor-patient relationship.

People in positions of authority easily deceive themselves into thinking they are treating others as equals when they are not doing so. In the film *First Knight*, King Arthur is presented as a person of truly noble character. He proudly displays his Round Table, designed so that it lacks any special place of privilege at the head of the table for himself. He presents himself as just another knight among knights. Yet each time a decision is made at the Round Table, it is in fact Arthur who makes it or influences it unduly. There is no ambiguity about who the boss is. The Round Table may symbolize equality of standing, but the reality is otherwise.

A round table is an apt symbol for dialogue because it implies that dialogue cannot take place at the table except among equals. But as the film (inadvertently) makes clear, it takes more than a piece of furniture to create the kind of equality needed for dialogue to flourish.

2. Listening with empathy. Practitioners also agree that a second essential feature of dialogue is the ability of participants to respond with unreserved empathy to the views of others. In the example of neighbors discussing school standards, if both the liberals and the conservatives in the group were less eager to fight for their convictions and more eager to grasp the other's viewpoints, they might have been able to understand where their neighbors were coming from and why they felt the way they did.

The gift of empathy—the ability to think someone else's thoughts and feel someone else's feelings—is indispensable to dialogue. There can be discussion without participants responding empathically to one another, but then it is discussion, not dialogue. This is why discussion is more common

than dialogue: people find it easy to express their opinions and to bat ideas back and forth with others, but most of the time they don't have either the motivation or the patience to respond empathically to opinions with which they may disagree or that they find uncongenial.

3. *Bringing assumptions into the open.* Theorists of dialogue also concur that, unlike discussion, dialogue must be concerned with bringing forth people's most deep-rooted assumptions. In dialogue, participants are encouraged to examine their own assumptions and those of other participants. And once these assumptions are in the open, they are not to be dismissed out of hand but considered with respect even when participants disagree with them.

For example, among African-American and white participants in discussions on subjects such as welfare, white participants sometimes make remarks that some of the African Americans regard as racist. Most of the time, the African-American participants remain silent and do not respond, assuming that it would be futile to do so. Sometimes, however, one says something like "That sounds like a racist comment to me." The white person who made the comment will either bridle silently and resentfully or heatedly deny any racist intent. Either way, an unresolved tension has entered the discussion.

A genuine dialogue on this same issue would unfold in a different manner. Someone might ask the African-American participants if they thought particular comments had racist overtones and why. Participants could then ponder the answers without defensiveness. Or, once the accusation of racism had been made, judgment would be suspended and the group would focus on what assumptions people were bringing to the

dialogue and how they judged whether or not a comment was racist. Once such assumptions are made explicit, disagreement may still exist, but the level of tension will be reduced and there will be better mutual understanding.

David Bohm emphasizes that our most ingrained thought patterns, operating at the tacit level, create many of the obstacles that isolate us from one another. Bohm stresses the link between people's assumptions and their sense of self. He is, in effect, saying, "When your deepest-rooted assumptions about who you are and what you deem most important in life are attacked, you react as if you are being attacked personally."⁵

Arguably, the most striking difference between discussion and dialogue is this process of bringing assumptions into the open while simultaneously suspending judgment. In discussion, participants usually stay away from people's innermost assumptions because to poke at them violates an unwritten rule of civility. If someone does raise them, they must expect to kick up a fuss or to tempt other participants to take offense or to close down and withdraw.

When in ordinary discussion sensitive assumptions are brought into the open, the atmosphere is likely to grow heated and uncomfortable. The discussion may or may not break down. It may later be recalled as a good or bad discussion, but—and this is the key point—it is not dialogue. The unique nature of dialogue requires that participants be uninhibited in bringing their own and other participants' assumptions into the open, where, within the safe confines of the dialogue, others can respond to them without challenging them or reacting to them judgmentally.

It takes practice and discipline to learn how to respond when touchy assumptions are brought into the open without

feeling the need to rush to their defense and either swallow or ventilate the anger and anxiety we feel when others challenge our most cherished beliefs.

Think of assumptions as being “layered” (that is, assumptions exist behind assumptions behind assumptions). The more widely shared they are, the less subject they are to self-examination or to critique by others. Unexamined assumptions are a classic route to misunderstandings and errors of judgment. Dialogue is one of the very few methods of communication that permit people to bring them into the open and confront them in an effective manner.

STRATEGIES FOR DIALOGUE

We now come to the first of fifteen strategies. It is a bedrock strategy; without it dialogue does not exist.

STRATEGY

Check for the presence of all three core requirements of dialogue—equality, empathic listening, and surfacing assumptions nonjudgmentally—and learn how to introduce the missing ones.

In the chapters that follow, I will review a wide variety of successful dialogues. I will look at each from the point of view of what lessons they teach us about meeting these three core conditions and what added strategies they suggest. From this inventory of examples—some spontaneous, others carefully planned—I will abstract fourteen additional strategies for successful dialogue.

Chapter 3

The Billion-dollar Dialogue

I think of it as “the billion-dollar dialogue.” It happened this way.

INVESTING OTHER PEOPLE’S MONEY

On most boards of directors, the choice of committee assignments is left to the preferences of the individual director. Most of the time I choose to serve on a company’s pension committee. I do so out of a interest in investing and also because helping to ensure that people have a comfortable retirement is a socially useful act for a director to perform.

The pension funds of large multinational companies represent huge sums of money. The mandate of the pension committee is to make sure that when employees retire, the money needed to pay their pensions will be there, however long they may live after retirement. In performing their oversight function, the members of the pension committee must balance two goals that often conflict: investing the pension funds conservatively so as to preserve the capital the company needs to honor its commitments to its employees, and investing the