

# the WATERCOOLER

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## Accessing Genuine Dialogue

The word “dialogue” has often been used, and frequently over-used, to refer to “meaningful” conversations. We need however a more nuanced understanding of this term. Dialogue is useful in some situations, but not in all. Dialogue can for instance be a potent catalyst for enabling leaders to create novel solutions to tough problems, or integrating large amounts of complex information into a coherent picture. It can help people face and make a tough strategic choice, one that has large risks; or help a team come to terms with uncertainty and find a shared direction. It is less helpful (or necessary) for solving routine, or familiar or well-understood problems.

Clearing up misconceptions about dialogue can enable us to be more proficient with it. For instance we may assume



that dialogue as the art of talking and thinking *together* means agreeing, but that is not so. It means creating an environment and atmosphere where you can actually hear the source of the thinking behind the words, including your own. It is less about agreeing, and more about shared listening in such a way as to hear unanticipated possibilities. In some cultures when people chant they know how to create remarkable “overtones” – simultaneously producing both a basic note and a higher frequency sound, perceived as clear, flute-like or bell-like tones above the timbre of the voices. Dialogue can let us hear the overtones – the insights we create beyond what anyone individually can produce.

Please turn to page 10

Continued from page 1

One of the constraints to dialogue comes because people react with well-worn habits of thought and rigid, dug-in positions. When the stakes go up, the familiar routines come out. Most of us go into meetings able to predict what others will say, mentally rehearsing how the conversation will go before it begins. This is because we know people (including ourselves) are on autopilot, operating from memory. Not much creativity leaks out in such cases.

Dialogue's roots tell us that dialogue is about the "flow of meaning": *dia* means through and *logos* is "word" or "meaning." Dialogue is meaning moving through oneself, or through a group of people, enlivening and changing them. This points to a core requirement for dialogue – the shift from an extractive to contributive mindset. Most people try to take some value from a conversation. Instead, we need to think about how what we add could be a *gift* to the people involved. Creativity requires an orientation in giving, not taking.

## True Thinking

How do we create an atmosphere of true dialogue? Perhaps surprisingly we achieve this by learning to think. There are two dimensions to this process: the processing of existing ideas which exist in memory, and perception and creation of new ones. Most of the time we spend mentally is in the former domain. In dialogue we seek to make room for the latter. Thinking moves more gently, less rapid fire, more like water flowing than fireworks and sparks. It requires incubation, gestation. Thinking doesn't mean processing existing ideas, or extracting meaning, but letting a flow move through oneself. It means being in a dialogue with more subtle levels of *oneself*. We have the idea that the "clash" of difference produces insight. In fact this produces sparks, but not sustained fire. The rhythm of true thinking connects you to insight, which is the passionate rearrangement of existing ideas.

Ultimately dialogue lets us go beyond collaboration – literally working together – to find a new level of shared understanding about what it means to create together. It can open us to a shift in *identity* – to let us discover that we are more than *who we thought we were*. This is the deeper secret of dialogue – it opens a window into the source of deeper creativity that emerges from being who we really are. From this place an entirely new level of action emerges.

When we are in dialogue we are creating, not just talking, and as we do this, a different form of identity emerges, like the overtones in a chant. This level of experience is quite impactful, and not quickly forgotten. A change in meaning, at this level, produces a change in being. Dialogue is not in this sense a mere sharing of ideas, but a breaking into a new state of experience.

## A New Way to Lead

The discovery of genuine dialogue opens much more than new ways of talking together; it lets us discover new ways to lead. Many of us are finding that trying to navigate the volatility and uncertainty evident on every hand with old maps and familiar methods simply no longer works. We need a new way of orienteering, of finding our way. We need a new kind of dialogue with our worlds. After many years of experimenting with dialogue, I have found that a new approach to leading in times like these has become more apparent:

1. Leaders must personally become aware of *how their internal thoughts and actions impact the world* around them. We must learn to work with the invisible. What goes on in you impacts what goes on out there with others. While this may sound obvious, few pay attention to it, or more, do anything about it. This is the centerpiece of a new approach to producing a generative shift in effectiveness.
2. We must seek to understand and *build alignment around the potential* in any situation, and not just focus on what we can see. This is about focusing on what we *want*, not what we think is doable. It requires true dialogue – to discover and declare it. This is not fantasy management. It is about creating the new instead of merely reacting to the existing. We often dare not articulate the potential we sense, for fear of being seen as foolish or impractical. As a result we never create it.
3. Leaders must also learn to *create safe environments*, which we call "containers," where it is possible to speak and think together. The dominant cultures in most organizations do not permit this. Most professional settings are ritualized, rigid and quite unsafe. They prescribe some forms of engagement, and rule out others. Working to fit in, people do not bring all of themselves to the table. It becomes dangerous to discuss or admit to error, or uncertainty, or

doubt; to do so is often professional suicide. It can in some cultures be equally difficult to challenge mediocrity or declare a passionate purpose. New creative action comes only as we expand the bandwidth of what we can accept and what we can seek.

4. We need to learn to *transform our memory* and habits of how we once thought to function. Organizations are often caught in patterns of habitual reactions. Organizational muscle memory reasserts itself in the face of change. Only by becoming conscious of these taken-for-granted ways of working, and practically trying to function differently, can we rewire ourselves and our systems, gain access to new insight, move past our jaded perspectives and breathe fresh air.
5. Finally we must *cross the threshold of thinking to acting and living* from it. We can't just have the insight; we need to live it and be it. A new way of leading requires a shift from the inside out in attitude, thought and action.

While all this may seem a tall order, there are simple ways to begin. Start by asking yourself these questions:

- What is it I really want to create?
- What's the finest I could offer of myself in this situation regardless of how I feel about it?
- What is getting in the way of my doing this?
- What is at risk for me if I really achieved what I can imagine?
- What is at risk for me in imagining it at all?

Ask these just for yourself or as a group. However, know that the answers are meaningless until *each individual asks them first for themselves*. Without individual leaders, there can be no collective leadership. If you take these questions seriously, you can succeed. While no one can do it for you, you can be inspired to act – and then inspire others through your genuine example. 🌱

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*Continued from page 3*

Our success so far is all a result of changing habits. We all publicly committed to establishing the behaviors, and we're making progress in holding each other accountable to them. We've all stumbled – and we've pointed it out in a constructive way. We talk about getting a "yellow card" when we deserve it, and we laugh about it and start over. We revisit the rules before and after meetings and check how well we followed them.

As we continue to dialogue about our opportunities, we're getting better at the technique and also at accelerating the delivery of new and better solutions to our customers that improve *their* business performance. By discovering the resources, knowledge, and skills where another unit can help, new and even better solutions for our customers have become apparent.

Eventually, we'll launch this to the rest of the organization. We have a lot of work ahead in terms of defining our future state and engaging our leaders in making it a reality. With their input, we'll modify our visualization tools to better communicate where we're going.

When we started this new technique of thinking and talking together, we wanted to use the skills and processes of one unit to benefit another to make it "go faster" – not to re-invent the wheel. Now, with a collective view, we see even more opportunities to move our growth agenda forward faster. 🌱

*Bill Rudolph was named president of The Rudolph/Libbe Companies, Inc., in April of 1998 and Chairman in May of 2004. The Rudolph/Libbe Companies is the parent company of Rudolph/Libbe Inc., GEM Industrial Inc., and Rudolph/Libbe Properties.*