Understanding patterns of conversations

What will you learn?

Typical modes of communicative interactions in multi-stakeholder collaborations

How stakeholders can move from thinking alone to thinking together

How to observe and balance interaction patterns

What will it help you with?

To improve the quality of conversations in multi-stakeholder collaboration

When is this factsheet particularly relevant?

In all Phases of the **Dialogic Change Model**

Leading Transformative Change Collectively
A Practitioner Guide to Realizing the SDGs

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Stakeholder interaction patterns

Not every conversation between different stakeholders stays constructive and leads to a joint result. Being able to identify unhelpful communication patterns is an important step to improvement. Understanding the conditions for generative dialogue to emerge is a key ingredient for collaborative change.

Four action modes – a model for observing interaction patterns

The model is based on the 'The Four Player Model' of the psychologist David Kantor1 (2012). He developed it after decades of interpersonal communication research, showing that human communication is most effective when all four action modes are present in a dynamic balance.

Transferred into the realm of multi-stakeholder collaboration it shows the behavioral action modes that stakeholders display in the way they interact with each other. It is however, related to the underlying dialogic practices (see **factsheet 9:** Dialogic Competence).

Using the **action modes** as one possible lens to gauge the quality and effectiveness of conversations in multi-stakeholder collaboration helps dialogic process facilitators into process competence for stewarding transformative change. **Collaboration ecosystems** work best with the skillful presence of these four action modes. This can ensure a balance between *inquiry* – seeking to understand oneself, a situation and other points of view – and *advocacy* – arguing for a certain aspect at stake and making oneself understood.
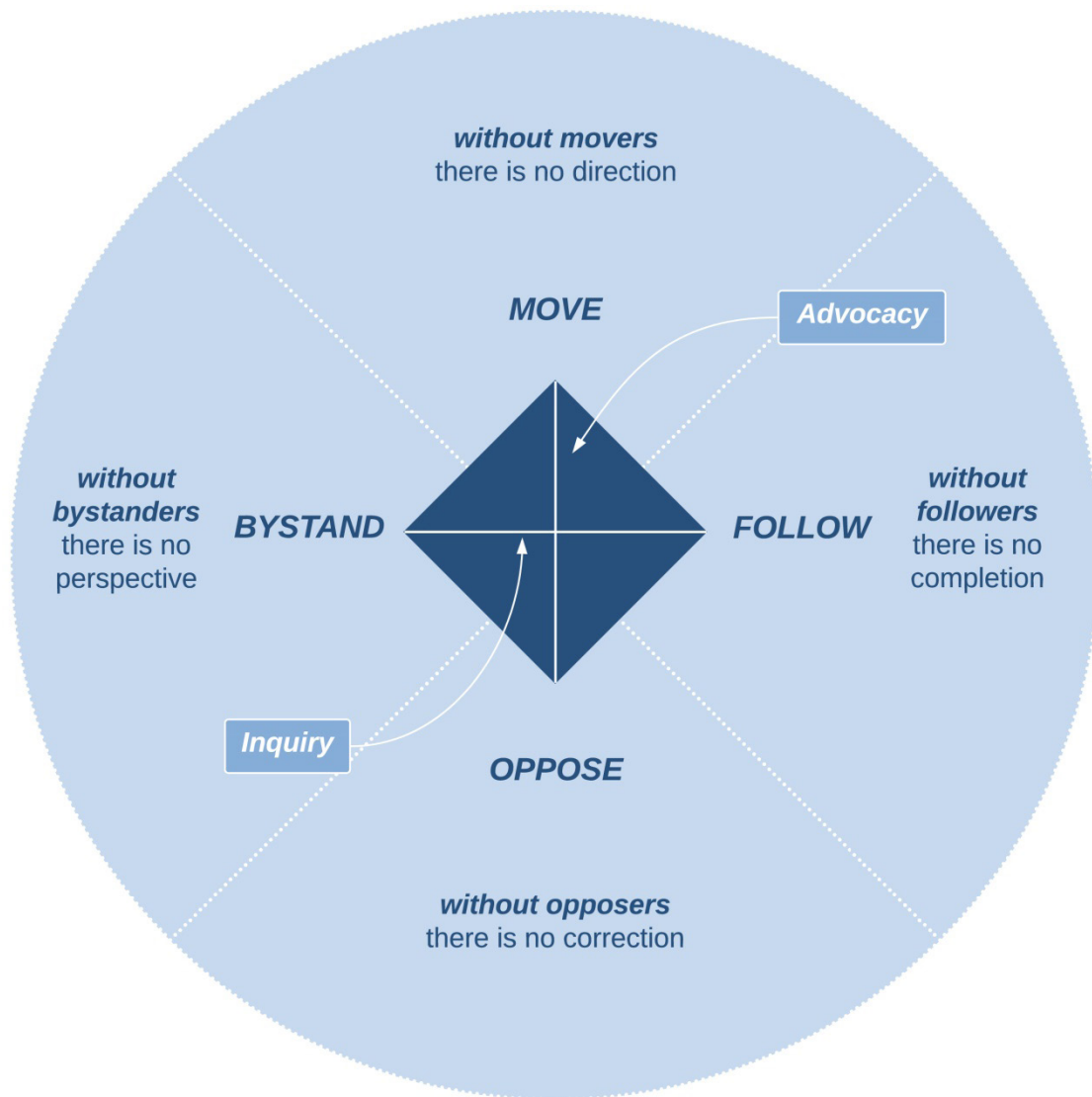
The Four Action Modes
(Inspired by and adapted from David Kantor 2012)

If any of the four action modes are entirely missing or they are constantly out of balance over time, collaboration ecosystems will become imbalanced. Dissatisfaction will arise, results will not be achieved, crises will become more common, and mistrust will spread. All four action modes – in a dynamic balance - are necessary to move the collaboration process along and get to results that all stakeholders can own.

- Without **movers**, there is no **direction**.
- Without **followers** there is no **completion**.
- Without **opposers**, there is no critical thinking and **correction**, and
- Without **bystanders**, there is no **perspective**, and no breakthrough to new solutions or a deeper understanding.

Action mode: Move

The action mode move shows up in the form of people making proposals, initiating something, suggesting solutions, or pushing decisions. Its underlying intention is the setting of *direction*. If stakeholders, or institutions in the stakeholder landscape are weak in this action mode, other stakeholders might dominate them.

If, in a collaboration ecosystem, one stakeholder (group) is constantly in 'move' mode, e.g. pressing for fast decision-making or wanting to control outcomes, the multi-stakeholder collaboration will become unbalanced, because other stakeholders feel that the direction is influenced by one actor. They will withdraw, disengage, or oppose. If, however, stakeholders lack this action mode, it is time for dialogic process facilitators to find out why: there might be fear to express opinions, or a lack of organizational capacity voice their standpoints.

Questions to ask to reveal the presence or absence of the action mode 'move' are:

- Do stakeholders express their perspectives and points of view?
- Are all stakeholders as engaged as they should be?
- Are we getting things done?

Action mode: Oppose

The action mode oppose has as its underlying intention *correction*. It hints to the unsaid or unseen, and reminds powerful stakeholders of what they neglect or ignore. It often brings a different way of seeing things to the surface and to the attention of all stakeholders. Unheard or ignored, it can turn into fierce opposition. If continuously ignored, this may turn into violent opposition. In multi-stakeholder collaboration, this action mode in its mild form is reflected in any action that seeks to counteract stakeholder positions, suggests different routes to take, blocks the process, or threatens to exit the collaboration ecosystem.

If there is among collaborating stakeholders a continual pattern of move/oppose prevailing, progress is blocked. If the moving stakeholders will overrun the opposer, the multi-stakeholder collaboration is doomed to fail. Hence, in dealing with opposition it is important that dialogic process facilitators learn to inquire into the underlying intention of correction. Communication can become compromised in a collaboration process, if too little understanding is shown for others' opinions. This can result in threats of leaving the collaboration ecosystem, public attacks on the people or strategies that had been agreed, or a subtle undermining of the initiative's progress.

Questions to ask to reveal the presence or absence of the action mode 'oppose' are:

- Are all stakeholders' points of view adequately acknowledged?
- How can be assured that even critical points of view are brought to attention?

Action mode: Follow

The action mode follow aims at consensus, integration, and is most often shown through confirming addition or agreement. Its underlying intention is *completion*. Without this action mode multi-stakeholder collaborations cannot succeed, as consensual agreements are the cornerstone of success.

However, if a continuous pattern of move/follow develops in a collaboration ecosystem, this might be detrimental to the overall process in the long run. It is time to ask whether all important aspects are truly being addressed. Move/follow patterns seem to be effective and fast in the short term, but they usually lack the different perspectives and corrective views necessary for quality decision-making. In dealing with premature consensus or completion dialogic process facilitators need to deliberately explore differences. On the other hand, if agreements cannot be reached, dialogic process facilitators must question if the interest in a common goal has been verified in the first place. Informal talks should be used to determine

if criticism regarding certain issues has been withheld and if these issues need to be brought up again in the agenda.

Questions to ask to reveal the presence or absence of the action mode 'follow' are:

- What gives confidence that agreements reached are sound and sincere?
- What needs to be explored, if agreements cannot be reached?

Action mode: Bystand

The action mode bystand has as its underlying intention the bringing in of a different *perspective*. It is more than just observation, but an active search for perspective and collective wisdom, often as an attempt to inquire into the situation and into the interests of participating actors, or to describe observations that can take the conversation forward. When this action mode is missing, participants in multi-stakeholder collaboration lack the ability to look from a distance and assess their joint progress. But if well-developed, regular reflection becomes part of the process.

If a stakeholder group's tolerance for differences of opinion is low, or if it has little patience for dealing with different opinions or mindsets, it can be difficult to create an atmosphere of mutual respect. Dialogic process facilitators can positively influence such a situation by demonstrating respect and tolerance and by assuring that all opinions are heard and respected. If too many stakeholders passively observe as bystanders and do not partake actively, the collaboration ecosystem cannot become successful.

Questions to ask to reveal the presence or absence of the action mode 'follow' are:

- How can be assured that different points of view are respected?
- What needs to happen so that passive stakeholders turn into active and engaged participants?

Shifting interaction patterns

From thinking alone to thinking together

Multi-stakeholder collaborations become successful with conversations, meetings, and events, which help people to exchange views, plan together and evaluate progress. The way such gatherings are designed and facilitated helps **collective intelligence** emerge. It has an enormous impact on their success, and subsequently on the results of the collaborative process.

Meetings take place in structures some of which are visible, like room arrangements or agendas (see **factsheet 10**: Conducive Space) and others are only felt subjectively, but are not necessarily visible for everybody. These could be atmosphere, moods, undiscussables, memories, injuries, mistrust or trust, or hidden agendas. Both visible and non-visible structures influence the flow of communication between people. They determine more of the course of a meeting, the content, and the results then we are likely to believe.

Thinking together is a skill which stakeholders can learn.

On the path to a form of communication that enables people to enter new grounds and create an atmosphere of trust and empowerment there are different stages.

Stage 1: Serial monologues

Meetings can be dominated by one or a few people speaking, while others stay silent and their contributions get lost or they utter their views one by one without really making reference to the preceding speakers.

This communication pattern can be described as **serial monologue**. People are eager to speak and to get their viewpoint, a suggestion, or a solution across. A chairperson usually tries to bring order into the emerging chaos with a speakers list. Often, the communicative effect is that people make up what they want to say and then wait for their turn to speak. They concentrate on what they want to say, not on listening what others express.

In such a conversation, the underlying and unquestioned mental model is that individual intelligence is most important and able to convince others. Weaker stakeholders, most often, do not feature in the competition for airtime. The flow of communication is polite but usually disconnected and does not further the emergence of collective intelligence. The facilitative role of a chair is reduced to that of a traffic cop, by restricting airtime and making sure everybody on the list will be able to speak. People tend to think alone. Often, such meetings are time-consuming, leave people with the feeling they have not expressed their views sufficiently, and do not easily achieve outcomes.

Stage 2: Debate

If tension rise, the form of communication may develop into a debate.

In the communication pattern of a **debate** people are eager to speak and to get their viewpoint, a suggestion, or a solution across. A chairperson usually tries to bring order into the emerging chaos with a speakers list. Often, the communicative effect is that people make up what they want to say and then wait for their turn to speak. They concentrate on what they want to say, not on listening what others express.

Although participants become more forceful, more reference is made to each other. Yet, a debate can get stuck in the opposing views of people, or may even turn into verbal brawling. Often, a win-lose situation emerges with the stronger party or those with better arguments coming out as determining the direction. The more the conversation gets stuck in opposites, the more time is wasted, and those participants who are not directly involved get bored. Themes get repeated and sometimes such the debate needs to be stopped by a chairperson.

Debates unearth differences, but they do not necessarily further **collective intelligence**, because, most often, the lines of argumentation remain mutually exclusive. These are the type of conversations where people usually come to the conclusion that they need an outside facilitator.

Stage 3: Guided conversations

If meetings become unproductive, people usually suggest a facilitator.

Most stakeholder meetings, therefore, become **guided conversations**. The presence of a facilitator allows people to become aware of structures and patterns. Particularly in cases where very different mental models or belief systems juxtapose each other, the facilitator can create the possibility for new perspectives to be considered. A guided 'cross-model-conversation' can then take place, when a facilitator ensures that airtime is given to opposing opinions or weaker voices.

Because of the facilitation, even undiscussables might come to the surface and can be brought out in a safe framework. Such conversations allow people to generate a collective view of reality and go beyond their individual limited perspectives. The flow of communication arrives at a new quality that can be felt in the room, and people are usually more content with the results of such meetings.

Multi-stakeholder collaborations can work with this form of communication when there are skilled facilitators available.

Stage 4: Reflective dialogue

Leading transformative change collectively means to even more productively access the potential for **collective intelligence**. It suggests that stakeholders need to become experts in dialogue.

Reflective dialogues often develop further into **generative dialogues**. Then, new perspectives open up. Now the underlying structures of thinking, as they come to the surface, can be changed. Participants develop a new quality of openness for each other's presence and history. New insights that had not been there before are generated and new themes emerge. A deeper understanding for the coherence underneath contradicting positions develops. People begin to understand patterns of thought and how they are related to actions. In generative dialogue all four action modes are in balance over time.

Stakeholders who get used to generative dialogue experience the flow of thinking together and results achievement as a co-creative process. They notice that **collective intelligence** emerges as people build on each other's contributions. Such kinds of generative dialogues have practical advantages: a conversation leads to collectively owned results in a shorter period of time. Although the brilliance of individual contributions is acknowledged, it becomes less and less important to insist on one's own position. Instead everybody is more interested in finding the optimal solution for the situation by tapping into the collective wisdom.

Stage 5: Generative dialogue

The capacity to reflect together is a prerequisite for co-creative thinking together.

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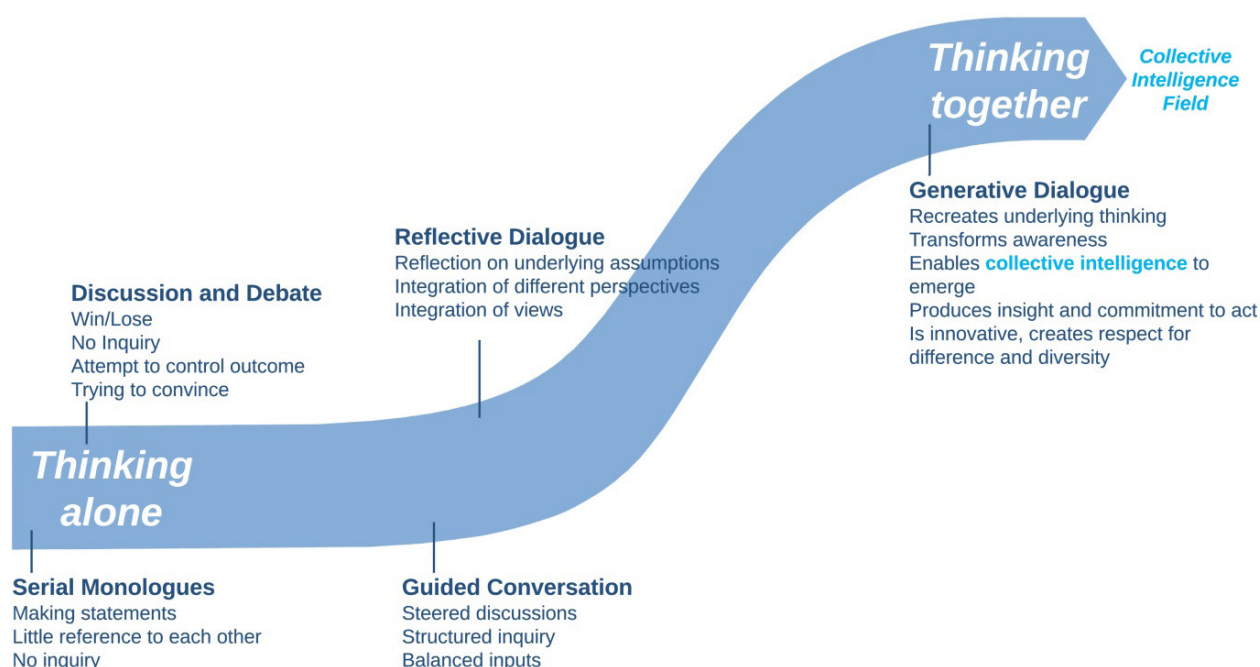

Figure 2: Communication Patterns
From Thinking Alone to Thinking Together (Source: Inspired by and adapted from Isaacs 1999)

Disagreements and conflicting viewpoints belong in multi-stakeholder collaborations because they create a fertile ground for overcoming challenges and finding new solutions. Unquestioned harmony is not desirable. But despite differences in opinions, high-quality dialogues in multi-stakeholder collaborations need to leave serial monologues and debates behind. They need to ensure guided cross-model conversations, and move into reflective and generative dialogue. Dialogic competence of stakeholders (see **factsheet 9**) increases the likelihood that they can achieve transformative change. Therefore, an understanding of the essentials of dialogue as well as facilitation skills belong to the core competencies for initiators of multi-stakeholder collaborations.

REFERENCES

Kantor, D. (2012). Reading the room: Group dynamics for coaches and leaders. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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