



Compass Tool Path:

Tool / Collaboration Ecosystem / Design Collaborative Interventions

Dialogic Competence

What will you learn?

That Dialogue is a dynamic process that requires a delicate balance of inquiry (seeking new understanding) and advocacy (seeking to be understood).

What different dialogue practices exist and how to bring them into a dialogue

What will it help you with?

To move towards a communicative pattern of 'thinking together' instead of 'thinking alone'

To understand dialogue patterns and therefore to recognize and solve conflicts

When is this factsheet particularly relevant?

Throughout all 4 Phases of the **Dialogic Change Model**



For an in-depth understanding of making collaboration work, please view our open access publication

Kuenkel, P., Kuehn, E., Stucker, D., Williamson, D.F. (2020)

Leading Transformative Change Collectively
A Practitioner Guide to Realizing the SDGs



Understanding the dialogic practices



Collaboration initiatives bring actors with different perspectives and diverging interests together. Structured listening to the concerns of different stakeholders is key. Dialogic competence means understanding when advocacy is needed and when inquiry will move the conversation forward (see **factsheet 8: Understanding Patterns of Conversations**).

High-quality dialogues save time: common ground is achieved more easily, decisions are made faster, agreements are reached in less time-consuming ways. People who are skilled in dialogue do not withhold their positions, or subject themselves to false compromises. They simply know that **collective intelligence** emerges in respect for difference and acknowledgement of people as people.

Dialogue is a dynamic process that requires a delicate balance of inquiry (seeking new understanding) and advocacy (seeking to be understood). Inquiry needs the skills of listening and the ability to suspend judgment: only then can one gain a deeper and newer understanding of an issue, a stakeholder position, or a way forward.

Advocacy requires the courage to speak one's voice or to speak on behalf of others, to convey a purpose and defend a course of action, and, at the same time, to underscore one's position or criticism of other positions while respecting difference.

Every conversation or communication process is a co-creative process with participants individually and collectively holding the responsibility for the outcome. No matter how difficult or stuck a conversation seems to be, there exists an underlying coherence of the situation.

Advocacy that is conducive to dialogic conversations reveals one's thinking behind the expressed view.

- It illustrates the point of view with concrete examples that allow others to follow the line of thoughts.
- It mentions the interpretations of a situation and makes assumptions explicit.
- It makes clear what is expected to change in individual or collective behavior.
- It speaks from the heart and explains why this particular issue is so important for the person.

Inquiry that is conducive to dialogic conversations genuinely asks for other people's point of view.

It inquires into the thinking process of people: why have they come to believe this or to advocate this or to feel this?

- It tries to suspend premature judgments as much as possible and looks for the value in the other stakeholders' arguments or feelings.
- It searches for coherence beneath conflicts and explores what is missing.

Balanced **advocacy** and **inquiry** are effective in helping participants of a multi-stakeholder collaboration to see the whole picture and the best possible way forward.

There are four genuine dialogic practices that, if consciously kept in an overall dynamic balance, ensure high-quality dialogues. The more these are in balance in a conversations, the more likely will collective intelligence emerge.



Figure 3.1: The Dialogic Practices
(Source: Inspired by and adapted from Isaacs 1999)

Dialogic practice #1

Voicing

In multi-stakeholder collaborations it is important to ensure that all voices – those of weaker stakeholders and those of more powerful stakeholders - are heard sufficiently. Preventing stakeholders from voicing their points of view inevitably leads to mistrust, disengagement, and lack of commitment.

Voicing means more than just assertive speaking.

- It is the ability to express one's concerns, ambitions, intentions or objectives with a voice from the heart, acknowledging that not everybody sees things in the same way.
- It assumes that one's competence, intention, and view can not only bring things forward, but also stall them.
- It is built on the premise that every contribution, if authentically expressed, facilitates the emergence of collective intelligence.
- It requires the ability to listen, because listening encourages speaking.



Stakeholders are often not aware that the way we speak influences the way others listen and the way others listen influences the way we speak. If others are genuinely listening, a speaker can speak more freely, more authentically.

It is important to also be aware of the dysfunctional side of voicing: at times, stakeholders dominate others, or engage in fake talk, intrigues, and non-transparent communication, etc. If that happens, it is an indicator of an emerging dysfunctionality in the *collaboration ecosystem* and time to reflect on how to get stakeholders back into a field of genuine dialogue.

Dialogic practice #2

Listening

The quality of listening enhances not only the quality of talking, but also the quality of thinking. Good listening slows down thinking and enables us to suspend our judgments. Nancy Kline (1999) has developed an elaborate approach towards creating what she calls a better thinking environment, based on the experience that the quality of the attention a person gives to another person who is speaking positively influences the quality of thinking and the authenticity of speaking.

Listening is much more than not speaking.

- It is the ability to create a space in which people can genuinely express themselves.
- It means being able to recognize and accept another speaker's right to an opinion – even if this opinion diverges from one's own.
- It creates trust and contributes to resilience in multi-stakeholder collaborations.

Attention, driven by deep respect and genuine interest and without interruption is the key to a creating an enabling thinking environment. Cultivating thinking environments in multi-stakeholder collaboration is important throughout all phases of the **Dialogic Change Model**. Most often, the first step in the **engagement** of stakeholders is the deep and authentic listening to their concerns, viewpoints, and ideas.

In the course of building enlivening collaboration ecosystems, this requires not only listening to different actors, but also creating stakeholder events in which these individuals can genuinely listen to each other. The ability to listen to each other in a structured way is the pathway into seeing beyond the interpretations of each stakeholder view into the larger picture and an underlying coherence. This becomes the ground for transformative change. Moreover, once a culture of listening has been established among a group of stakeholders, decisions are made faster, more effectively, and in a more solution-oriented manner.

Dialogic practice #3

Respecting

No multi-stakeholder collaboration can be successful without genuine mutual respect. If stakeholders are not treated with respect, they begin to treat others disrespectfully. In a mature collaboration ecosystem, stakeholders respect others' opinions. Even when they do not share their point of view, they assume that there is an underlying coherence behind the dissent that needs to be explored.

Respecting means appreciating people as people, no matter what they think or do, and even if one entirely disagrees with any of someone else's opinion or perspective.



- It is the ability to see others as legitimate beings.
- It thrives on the willingness to acknowledge the integrity of another person and to reach out to understand their point of view.
- It engenders acceptance of differences as part of a whole.

Respect does not require acceptance and agreement at all stages, but the honoring of boundaries, the understanding of difference and the embracing of diversity. Respect helps stakeholders to endure tensions that are inevitably part of transformative change processes with multiple stakeholders.

Dialogic practice #4

Suspending

Suspending is the route into reflecting while acting, to observe what is happening while it is happening, because it teaches us to observe our thoughts. Suspending is the ability to withhold judgment.

- It means developing the ability to question our own assumptions.
- It means shutting off one's tendency to come to conclusions too quickly.
- It is the ability to notice when judgement sets in.

We all have the tendency to judge others constantly, but developing our capacity to suspend means to hold sufficiently lightly what we are convinced of or which we think is certain. It means acknowledging and observing thoughts without the need to entirely identify with our opinions. The more stakeholders in *collaboration ecosystems* develop this ability, the better their chances of reaching a consensus, establishing constructive communication patterns, and being able to concentrate on problem-solving.

Practicing dialogue



The more stakeholders gain an (often intuitive) understanding of the dialogic practices of *voice, listen, respect, and suspend*, the higher the likelihood that a multi-stakeholder collaboration will move towards a communicative pattern of 'thinking together' – a *generative dialogue* (see **factsheet 8: Understanding Patterns of Conversations**). This stimulates collective **intelligence**, furthers **engagement**, and fosters ideas and **innovation**; it facilitates efficient decision-making processes and encourages the taking of responsibility for **future possibilities**. The dialogic practices connect people with the **wholeness** of a larger story and bring out their **humanity**. Hence, they enhance all Compass dimensions and therefore make an essential contribution to *systems aliveness*. They reflect an inner attitude, as well as an outer ability to engender constructive, solution-oriented communication. The presence of the dialogic practices changes the flow of communication. Consensus is easier to reach, but is built on the naming and respecting of different perspectives.

At the **individual level**, the dialogic practices can be used as self-reflection. Knowing one's own preferred practices combined with the understanding that all practices are required in a dynamic balance to create high-quality dialogues, helps stakeholders assume a learning attitude. If we all become more versatile in all practices, the flow of communications becomes more effective.



At the **group level**, it is equally helpful to take a bird's eye view and observe communication patterns in a group of collaborating actors. Most often, identifying an imbalance between the practices and understanding which practice is missing helps people to bring the missing practice in. This will improve the quality of the conversations. It can even help to overcome conflicts. Becoming versatile in applying the dialogic practices is a capacity initiators and facilitators of multi-stakeholder collaborations need to acquire. Not every stakeholder can and will become a professional facilitator, but it helps to understand the role of facilitation in leading transformative change collectively.

REFERENCES

Isaacs, W. (1999). *Dialogue and the art of thinking together: A pioneering approach to communicating in business and in life*. New York: Currency Doubleday.

Kline, N. (1999). *Time to think: Listening to ignite the human mind*. Ward Lock. London.



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