

The Benefit of Dialogue in Public Management

How to overcome defensive routines and communication breakdowns by making genuine dialogue an integral part of the organizational culture.

DON ZAUDERER

Robert McNamara, in debriefing the Vietnam War with his North Vietnamese counterparts, discovered that the assumptions underlying actions by both the United States and North Vietnam were based on erroneous perceptions of their adversaries. According to McNamara, "If each side had known the truth about the other's reality, the outcome might have been less tragic."¹

Each projected onto the other motivations and intentions that ultimately proved to be tragically wrong. The US leadership after World War II assumed that all communist countries, including the Hanoi regime, served as pawns of a global communist movement led by the USSR and China. This assumption was debunked by Vietnamese scholar Luu Doan Huynh, who maintained that Vietnam was not at all part of the Chinese expansionist game in Asia. He noted that, for anyone familiar with the history of Indochina, this is nonsense.

Hanoi, on the other hand, projected onto the United States a colonial mode of operation not significantly different from that of the French, who had occupied the country for more than a century. Hanoi failed to understand that, unlike the French, Americans were ambivalent about their global role and had no intention of extending their empire into Southeast Asia. Each side felt certain in their assumptions, failed to engage its adversary in genuine dialogue, and carried a defiant and arrogant disposition.

Defensive Routines

Chris Argyris labels these behaviors "defensive routines." By holding onto these mental models, participants can "save face" and justify the strategy and commitments of the past.² Breakdowns in performance can almost always be traced back to the quality of conversation between people involved in policy development and implementation. Vietnam is a dramatic and highly visible example of failed policy based on the inability of parties to engage in genera-

tive conversation. The very same dynamics exist everyday in organizations, as parties to an implementation fail to engage in quality conversations. Whether referring to domestic, global, or defense policy, the ability of well-intentioned professionals to advance the public interest is hindered by defensive routines and the absence of genuine dialogue. This article attempts to better understand the causes of defensive routines and describe the attributes of genuine dialogue and effective collaboration.

What Is Dialogue?

The word dialogue comes from two Greek roots, *dia* and *logos*, suggesting "meaning flowing through." The picture or image that this derivation suggests, according to David Bohm, is of "a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us." This sense of the word stands in contrast to what we normally think of as dialogue—a debate or discussion between people seeking to defend their views against one another. In dialogue, people learn to suspend their defensive exchanges and probe into the underlying reasoning of the other. According to William Isaacs, dialogue is, "Creating a field of genuine meeting and inquiry where people vigorously explore the collective background of their thought, the rigid features of their individual and collective assumptions." He further contends that, "if people can become aware of their tacit assumptions, beliefs, and images through conversation and be rewarded by each other for doing so, then they can develop a strong capability to create important things together." These set of assumptions or mental models often exist below the level of conscious awareness and are often untested and unexamined. The process of dialogue brings our existing mental models to the surface to be examined, refined, altered, and possibly

Don Zauderer is director of the key executive program at the American University in Washington DC.

integrated to create new, shared assumptions among a community of learners. According to David Bohm:

In dialogue, nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if anybody wins. There is a different sort of spirit to it. In a dialogue, there is no attempt to gain points, or to make your particular view prevail. Rather, wherever any mistake is discovered on the part of anybody, everybody gains. It's a situation called win-win—whereas the other game is, if I win, you lose. But a dialogue is something more of a common participation, in which we are not playing a game against each other but with each other. In dialogue, everybody wins.³

Unfortunately, the essence of the spirit of dialogue is not commonplace within or between individuals or organizations. This hinders policy development and implementation in the administration of public policy.

Results of Communication Breakdown

The theory of dialogue suggests that the cause of many breakdowns in performance is rooted in how human beings perceive the world. Individuals learn to divide the world into categories and distinctions. They tend to become almost hypnotized by these distinctions, forgetting that they created them. In the case of Vietnam, the collective hypnotic belief in the domino theory by top government officials blinded them to understanding the nationalistic motive that drove the efforts of the North Vietnamese to reunify the country.

Edgar Schein contends that breakdowns of communication and the understanding between different groups and subgroups within and between organizations is based on "emotional attachments to their culturally learned categories of thought."⁴ People value and protect their assumptions, beliefs, and images as an aspect of their group identity. They often feel that their assumptions are the correct ones and thus make themselves impervious to others' views. Congress, management consultants, customer groups, unions, senior government executives, and professionals in different disciplines all have a specialized language and tacit assumptions that help define their unique culture. Profound misunderstandings are commonplace when a mix of diverse professionals come together to work on problems. These misunderstandings can lead to polarization, stereotyping, isolation, breakdowns in coordination, manipulation, and behind-the-scenes maneuvering that preserve a dysfunctional *status quo* or results in half-hearted implementation of a new initiative.

Tacit Assumptions

Even though senior executives have a lot of power and authority, they often have great difficulty getting their programs implemented. They complain that their visions are not understood, that goals seem to change as they are communicated down the hierarchy, or that their subordinates "screw up" because they don't really understand what they want. Efforts at communication and videotaped messages sent to everyone are ineffective because people still hear different things "down the line." The preoccupation with defending their own tacit assumptions blinds people to a

critical examination of their underlying thought patterns as well as those of their collaborators.

A government information technology manager was having trouble with his boss and his staff. His subordinates would tell him about problems that needed to be solved in the computer laboratories, hoping that he would be able to acquire the resources to solve the problems. The manager would bring the issue to his boss, who frequently argued that other priorities were more important. The manager then would never report back to his subordinates, believing that revealing the truth would be an act of disloyalty to his boss. This set of events was repeated time and time again, demoralizing the lower level staff.

The manager's consultant asked him why he kept using the same approach, even when it was not generating results. The exploration led to him to discover that he held the tacit assumption that preserving the traditional hierarchy and command and control management was the only option available to him. Working with his consultant, he then began to think about reorganizing his group into "joint responsibility teams," with cross-functional groups working on specific problems. These groups would struggle with discovering the best technical solution and determining the financial costs, implementation plans, as well as a strategy to influence the senior manager to fund their requests. The manager found that his boss began to say "yes" more often, possibly because his actions were exposed for all to see. This new option was made available to the manager only when he became aware of his tacit assumptions about adhering to his own "command and control" mode of operation.

Presuppositions of Genuine Dialogue

Four Principles of Martin Buber

How can participants in dialogue create a context of openness and support for generative conversation? The distinguished philosopher Martin Buber provides valuable insight on this question.⁵ Buber reminds us that skill is not enough to achieve genuine dialogue. Rather, dialogue presupposes the presence of individuals who fully "intend" to encourage deep reflection and inquiry.

Buber's first presupposition is what he calls making present. By this he means the intention to listen deeply in order to discover another person's reality. In his words, "imagining means that I imagine to myself what another person is at this very moment wishing, feeling, perceiving, thinking, and not as a detached content but in their very reality, that is, as a living process in this person." Making present also implies a conscious intention to discover what the other participants are actually saying, instead of hearing what one participant expects the others to say.

Buber's second presupposition is called confirmation as a person. It is hard to imagine constructive dialogue taking place when one or more parties consider the other unworthy as a person. His "acceptance of otherness" implies that individuals "unreservedly accept and confirm them in their be-

ing as a person.” Dialogue, if conducted properly, takes place in the context of the parties respecting each other’s individuality. Anything less will probably result in defensive posturing which inhibits authentic participation.

Candor is Buber’s third presupposition of effective dialogue. Candor is saying what is on your mind. Speaking candidly can only happen in an environment where people do not fear being harmed, embarrassed, or injured—not necessarily in a physical manner, but in the sense of losing stature with other participants. To achieve this level of trust, participants may need to engage in intense team building focused on creating a psychological contract that enables participants to feel safe in the dialogue process. Participants need to trust that they will be listened to, that confidentiality will be maintained when appropriate, and that their reputations will be preserved, even when their line of reasoning is shown to be flawed.

Buber’s fourth category is called overcoming semblance. In Buber’s words, where the dialogue is fulfilled in its being, between partners who have turned to one another in truth, who express themselves without reserve, and are free of the desire for semblance, there is brought into being a memorable common fruitfulness which is to be found nowhere else.

What was Buber saying? The moment one attempts to create an assumed or unauthentic appearance, the dialogue has ended. Such a person may be misrepresenting his or her motives, deceiving by saying things the other person would like to hear, or manipulating by using words or phrases that create the impression that the two participating in the conversation share common values.

Participants in conversation often withhold their true thinking and refrain from saying what they know others do not want to hear. Such actions are often perfectly reasonable and are based on observations of what has happened to others that dared to be candid. Such actions, while politically sound, may create the illusion of unity where none really exists. The lack of genuineness will at best bring a short-term fragile unity that will likely unravel in subsequent conversations and transactions. If we want to employ the skills of dialogue, we first have to create safe environments and “unlearn” the tacit skills that undermine genuine reflection and inquiry.

Peter Senge and Fred Kofman add another dimension to dialogue. They contend that fostering dialogue and learning takes place in an organizational culture of freedom, equality, and respect: freedom to speak candidly without concern for retribution, equality in the sense that everyone’s ideas will be listened to, no matter what position or status they hold in the organization; and respect in the sense that participants assume they have something of value to learn from the other party(s). The absence of any one of these conditions hinders the development of genuine dialogue.

The Practice of Dialogue

The conditions outlined by Buber, Senge, and Kofman simply set the stage for individuals to reason together in

dialogue. But the actual process of dialogue involves the skills of reflection and inquiry. Reflection implies a slowing down of one’s thinking processes to focus on the tacit assumptions, beliefs, and images of others. Edgar Schein uses the term suspension to refer to, “letting our impulses rest for a while to see what more will come up from ourselves and from others. By suspending, we begin to see the basis and subtleties of how each member thinks and expresses meaning.”⁶ To accomplish this, participants need to constrain the impulse to jump in and score debating points. Instead of debating, they should attempt to reflect on the distortions and biases that filter their own cognitive processes.

One manager, during a dialogue, looked deeply pained when adversaries disagreed with his position. When asked about the reason for his obvious discomfort, he revealed that his positions are premised on strong ethical, even spiritual principles that guide his focus and actions. When encouraged to reveal these principles, he talked about the importance of fairness, honesty, customer focus, and creating something larger than yourself in your work. He related these to his position. When others began to reveal their “theories-in-use,” he found himself thinking about how to refute these principles and became aware that his defensiveness around his own principles made it difficult for him to truly hear where others were coming from. To enhance his effectiveness in dialogue, he needs to unlearn the impulse to protect his own mental model and instead learn to listen intently to his partners in conversation. Suspension, then, involves an intense form of listening: listening to your own frame of references, biases, beliefs and those of your partners in learning.

Active Inquiry

The second stage in dialogue is engaging in active inquiry with another individual(s). At this stage, participants probe to confront their own and others’ assumptions, beliefs, and images of reality. Two forms of questions can be utilized at the inquiry stage of dialogue: questions about one’s own thinking and questions about someone else’s thinking. The following table provides examples of both forms of questioning.

The Metalogue Phase of Dialogue

This form of questioning helps all parties discover their tacit assumptions and evaluate the usefulness of these assumptions as a guide to action. When this form of engagement takes place, participants will eventually evolve into what Edgar Schein calls the “metalogue” phase of dialogue. In the metalogue phase participants think and feel as a whole group, and build new shared assumptions and a new common culture.⁴ The types of questions posed at this stage focus on integrating thoughts such as the following:

This level of dialogue requires humility, a softening of our certainties, and allowing ourselves to learn and change in the company of another. Through mutual reflection, dialogue begins to clarify the places where our assumptions are

Table 1: Engaging in Active Inquiry

Questions About One's Own Reasoning

Do you see any flaws in my reasoning?
 Here's one aspect you might help me think through. here?
 Do you see it differently?
 Here's what I think and how I got there.
 I assumed that...
 I came to this conclusion because...

Questions about Another's Reasoning

What leads you to conclude that....?
 Can you help me understand your thinking?
 What data do you have for that?
 How do you connect the data with the conclusion?
 What belief or assumption underlies that position?
 This is what I infer about what you have said.
 Do you think it is valid?

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flawed, and where mutual learning might strengthen policy implementation.

Leadership and Dialogue

It is the responsibility of leaders to create the culture and environmental context for a free exploration of ideas on policy implementation. Dialogue at the executive level offers the prospect of better positioning the organization to design and execute public programs that are more effective and efficient. Edgar Schein, however, also encourages executives to engage in dialogue across hierarchical lines because different strata operate with different assumptions. Even beyond the different strata of the organization are many other stakeholders who are involved in the implementation of policy: unions, management consultants, legislative bodies, citizen groups, associations, and interest groups. Genuine dialogue with these stakeholders can serve as a

tool for creating higher quality decisions and developing a more unified commitment to cooperate in the implementation process.

Should dialogue be used in all circumstances? Probably not. There are situations when time constraints or the nature of the political climate point to the use of a legal or public relations approach. Dialogue is an option. It can be utilized in specific circumstances to enhance mutual understanding and collaborative problem solving. When such an opportunity occurs, attempts at dialogue should occur, even when the conditions are imperfect. According to David Bohm:

...even if people are not ready to be completely open; and even if people are clumsy in their reflection and inquiry, they should still have dialogue in a more limited way, doing what they can to discover the tacit assumptions of the participants.

Just the process itself of questioning in good faith might improve reflective thinking and effective action. David Bohm also reminds us that dialogue is an invigorating process that can strengthen personal connections among a community of learners. As rapport improves, so does the ability of stakeholders to collaborate in constructive way to advance the public interest. The key to a successful implementation of policy may be nothing more than the ability of collaborators to listen and learn from each other. ■

Table 2: Questions at the Metalogue Stage

What do we sense is true, but have no data for yet?
 What don't we know?
 What is unknowable?
 What do we agree upon, and what do we disagree on?
 How might we integrate and refine our assumptions
 What have we helped each other become aware of?
 Which of your assumptions am I drawn to?
 If we place our assumptions side by side, can we reinvent a new set of assumptions that would provide a stronger foundation for action?

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NOTES

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4. Schein, Edgar H. Autumn. 1993. "On Dialogue, Culture, and Organizational Learning." *Organization Dynamics*.
5. Buber, Martin. 1965. *The Knowledge of Man*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
6. Schein. *ibid*.