

Managing (in) Networks

Learning, Working and Leading Together

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Chapter *Dialogue* from the book
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Dialogue

Dialogue is collective thinking¹. Through dialogue, we can get to know other people, build trust, learn together and foster collective understanding. Dialogue is perhaps the most important tool for deeper networking².

The goal of dialogue is not making decisions or developing quick solutions. On the contrary, pressing for decisions and quick solutions can result in even less space to find collective understanding in complex situations. Good dialogue is however a natural part of a broader decision-making process when you want to make sure that the decisions are founded on a broad knowledge base and mutual understanding.

Everyday conversations can rise to the level of dialogue naturally, but too often people only present their own views and do not genuinely listen to each other. Despite good intentions, conversations are often waged at the level of a debate or empty speech. Barriers to shared learning, such as taboos or hidden assumptions, are often left undiscussed.

¹ Isaacs 1993, Isaacs 1999, Bohm 2013, Alhanen et al. 2019, Alhanen 2019

² My favourite advice for a network manager facing difficulties is the following: if your network is having problems and you cannot think of what to do, focus on dialogue.

Steps toward a good dialogue can be understood for instance using the four-field model in Figure 25.

In dialogue, both “we” (the community) and “I” (individuals) are present: this forms the horizontal axis for the model. The conversation can be neutral and declarative or it can be critical and questioning: this forms the vertical axis for the model.

Dialogue, as well as building cooperation, usually arises from neutral and declarative discussion that touches us or the community. This can be called the first step in deepening dialogue and cooperation (Figure 25, field 1).

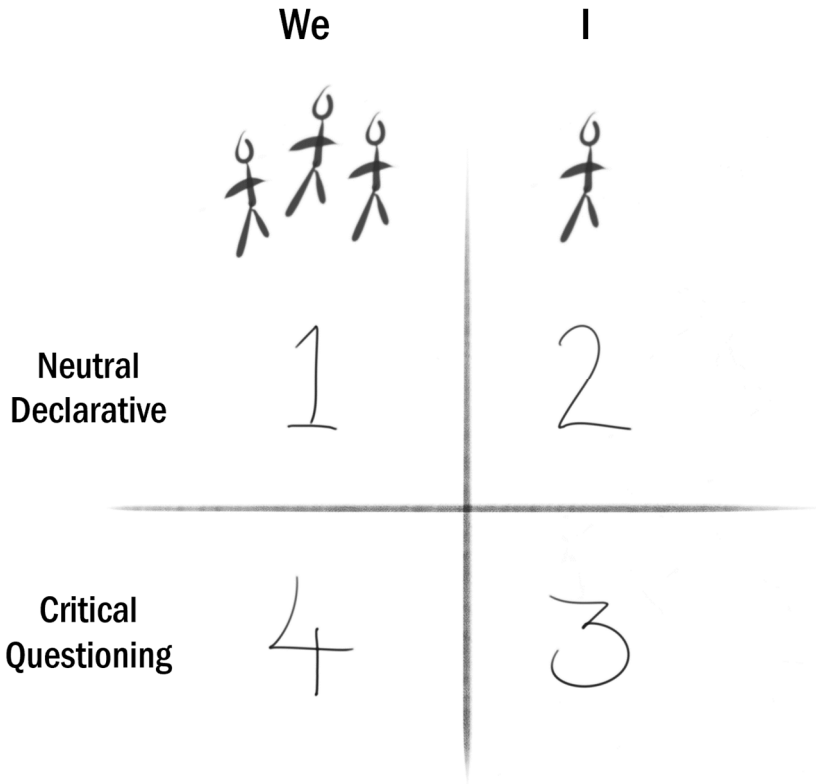


Figure 25. Deeper dialogue (adapted from Isaacs 1999)

Conversations begin in practice by first stating a shared and safe fact. Small talk is usually like this. We can start a discussion about the weather, which is a shared, factual experience for everyone: “What nice weather today” or “What horrible rain, did you get wet too?” In its simplest form, this first step can simply be shaking hands or saying “Hello”, through which we quickly build the communal glue for the “we” stage.

It would be unfortunate and most likely quite boring to stay too long on the first level of small talk. However this first step is still important, because it builds a safe foundation for the next steps.

The next step in deepening dialogue and cooperation is focusing on individual thoughts (Figure 25, field 2). At this stage, the feeling of mutual trust enables bringing up individual thoughts and facts that are known (or presumed) to be neutral and non-threatening for the participants.

Introductions are a typical example of this. I can introduce myself in my networks as “a network researcher and developer”. Usually this kind of basic information is such that others have a neutral reaction to it.

Through discussing neutral, personal facts we can start to notice what sorts of things others consider (or do not consider) neutral. For example my introduction as a network management researcher and developer does not usually awaken strong emotions, but it can be confusing if I also mention that I am an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship can in some situations be (quite justifiably) a threatening fact for some participants, such as in meetings where representatives from public administration are considering what sorts of purchases should be made from the private sector (including entrepreneurs). In these situations the conflict of interest is clear.

To reach a deeper level of discussion, participants can reveal information about themselves that helps to build a safe foundation. For instance, I may bring up that I do not mind challenging questions. I also may say that I am not perfect and can handle harsh criticism. This often encourages others to do the same,

which makes it easier for more challenging views to be presented in the group.

Sharing neutral facts is not enough to create especially deep learning. In the third stage (Figure 25, field 3), the mutual trust within the group has become strong enough for the participants to discuss and receive critical thoughts and questions which can be seen as difficult or threatening. Individuals are encouraged to bring forth sharp views or questions for instance based on their own expertise.

This type of discussion can be found in many professional communities in which there might be heavy discussion and even debate in good spirit from which the communities learn. This level of discussion is quite an achievement.

The third level is where individuals dare to bring forth their critical thoughts. One remaining problem is that thinking here is not genuinely collective because the sense of security is more connected to the individuals' thoughts than to shared thoughts.

In practice this can be seen in how the participants bravely bring forth their own thoughts and listen to others' points of view, but ultimately they are not ready to question their own arguments. These discussions can lead to compromise, which does not threaten anyone. Creative solutions that challenge everyone's thoughts are not given much room.

The fourth stage (Figure 25, field 4) can be reached if the participants succeed in challenging their own thoughts and presumptions and letting them go. This is possible if such a level of trust is reached where people are not afraid to show their vulnerabilities.

This leads to a discussion where what is thought together has a more important role than any individual thinking. In this type of conversation, thoughts are no one's own and they are put in a shared basket, and this basket of thoughts is inspected critically together. This way the critique does not threaten anyone in particular and there is no need to get stuck on compromise at the lowest common denominator. Creativity becomes collective.

According to Isaacs¹, in this type of dialogue:

- We genuinely listen to each other
- We talk bravely
- We respect each other
- We suspend our first reactions to inspect situations, meanings and hidden assumptions

Of these features of good dialogue, the first three come to mind easily without having to think about it much. The fourth factor in the list, suspending, is often ignored, even though it perhaps is the most important. Suspending is what opens us up to listening more closely, helps us speak more directly and clearly, and promotes mutual respect.

My definition of suspending has been adapted from Isaacs and with it I mean suspending the first reactions, observing them and bringing attention to them. When we listen and talk reactions come constantly. We cannot help it. Reactions arise from ingrained habits, prejudices and subconscious assumptions.

In conversations, reactions can be noticed as different types of outbursts and verbal or physical expressions, as agreement (“Yes, exactly!”, nodding) or as downplaying (“No one can really think that!”, shaking one’s head).

Reactions arise from our subconscious and we cannot easily turn them off. Although we cannot turn off our subconscious, we can however (try to) stop and suspend the reactions that arise and not act according to them.

The objective of suspending reactions is not to remove or hide them. On the contrary, the objective is to become conscious of them, bring them forward and inspect them together: “Where did this reaction come from? Why did I react in this way? What assumptions, prejudices or habitual thoughts does my reaction reveal? What can we learn from this?”

¹ Isaacs 1999, Isaacs 1993

When the initial reactions are successfully suspended and inspected together, many important steps have already been taken to deepen dialogue and cooperation.

Dialogue exercises

Good dialogue builds shared understanding using an open approach. Key dialogue skills are suspending, listening, asking and brave talking as well as observing and facilitating the dialogue. These skills can be practiced with the following group exercises.

I have prepared these exercises with Galina Kallio and Sini Forssell. With Kallio I was teaching a course called “Dialogues on Corporate Responsibility in Global Economy” at the Aalto University in Finland. With Forssell I developed dialogue in a project funded by the Kone Foundation which examined ecological compensation and nature preservation from an ecopsychology perspective (Forssell 2019).

Suspending with a talking item

In a group of 3 to 15 people, sit in a circle so that you can all see each other. The objective is to practice suspending: the person holding the talking item can speak in peace without being interrupted and others can practice listening.

Choose a theme or question to start with (the subject can develop as the exercise proceeds, and this often happens). When the theme is chosen, choose a talking item, for example a pen or a stick. The main rule of the exercise is that the

person holding the talking item speaks while the others listen. The talking item goes clockwise around the circle.

Try to let the talking item go around the circle at least twice. In my experience, in a group of three, two rounds will take 5 to 15 minutes and in a group of 15 it takes 45 to 90 minutes, depending on how interesting the topic is and how talkative the group is.

Time limits should be set beforehand, because one of the rules of this exercise is that the holder of the talking item can speak for as long as she wants. If someone uses all or most of the time on her own and there is no time left for the others, this is a part of the experience brought by the exercise. For some people time flies whereas for others it goes excruciatingly slowly; this is also a part of the exercise.

When you have gone through two rounds or the time has ended, talk about the experience and think about what you have learned about suspending.

Often the experience is that listening is more difficult than the participants would have thought. Often one's internal voice begins to speak at the same time as another is speaking and therefore it is difficult to focus on the other's words.

There is a new dimension to talking when you have the opportunity to say what you want in peace and no one can interrupt you. It is also possible that someone has nothing to say when it is their turn. Often it is only afterwards the participants notice that during their own turn, they could have opened their own internal and insecure voice boldly instead of trying to think of something smart to say.

One of the central experiences is that time flows differently: the talking item makes it possible to suspend in a way that allows more time for both listening and talking.

Presenting and observing appreciative questions

In a group of 3 to 6 people, sit in a circle so that you can all see each other. The objective is to practice presenting and observing appreciative questions.

There are three roles in this exercise: the speaker, asker and observer. Go through three rounds so that the roles change between rounds and everyone can try each role.

Each round has 1 or 2 speakers, 1 or 2 askers and 1 or 2 observers. Use 10 to 15 minutes on one round with a 5-minute reflection after each round. Three rounds can take 45 to 60 minutes.

The task of the asker is to be interested in the speaker's thoughts and to ask questions which help the speaker speak. The objective is to ask open questions instead of asking leading ones. The task of the asker is to listen to what the speaker wants to say instead of presenting their own thoughts as questions.

The task of the speaker is to think and speak about the chosen theme with the help of the asker's questions.

The task of the observer is to silently observe the interaction between the asker and speaker and finally share their observations with the speaker and asker. The observer should make notes to support their observations.

After each 10 to 15-minute round, use about 5 minutes to go through the experiences and observations before switching roles. First present and discuss the observer's observations and then discuss the speaker's and asker's experiences.

When all three rounds and the reflections have been completed after 45 to 60 minutes, discuss what this exercise as a whole can teach. This final discussion is especially important if you have done this exercise in a bigger group which you have divided into groups of 3 to 6 people for the exercise.

At this stage the experiences of the small groups are discussed together in the bigger group.

The final discussion can take as long as is needed. During this discussion you should ask at least: What did it feel like to ask open questions? How could the asker be more genuinely interested in what the speaker has to say instead of letting their own thoughts bring out questions? What did it feel like to speak and be asked questions? What did it feel like to observe? What could we learn from the different roles and this exercise as a whole?

The role of the speaker is often seen as rather simple in this exercise. You only need to think and speak about your own thoughts. Talking for ten or fifteen minutes can feel like a long or a short time. Some people speak without being asked questions and others need more help from the asker. Often the experience of the speaker is enjoyable, because for once, you feel like you are being heard. Sometimes the speakers feel that it is difficult to talk, especially if the theme is not very interesting or they have not had time to think about their thoughts beforehand.

Speaking can be practiced by bringing forth one's own internal voice without muting it: how bravely can you speak? If you feel that speaking is frustrating or you feel like there is nothing to say, you can express this.

The role of the asker may seem to be more difficult than that of the speaker or observer. Forming open questions is not that easy and the questions easily become loaded. It is easier to stick to one's own thoughts than to be genuinely interested in what the speaker is thinking.

Openness can be increased by asking about the speaker's experiences and assumptions: "What experiences do you have connected with what you just said?" or "How have you come to that conclusion?" Sometimes leading questions are needed if the speaker is stuck and has nothing to say. In this case, the speaker can be given more ideas to think about.

It is challenging to choose when to ask something, because asking at the wrong time can harmfully interrupt the speaker's train of thought.

The observer's role is often felt to be rewarding, because it gives the opportunity to get to know how the speaker thinks and to learn from the asker's way of asking questions. Sometimes observing is felt to be challenging, when one's own internal speech starts to disturb the listening or if the observer is accustomed to actively participating in discussions instead of observing.

Observing dialogue and developing it together

The community can develop its shared dialogue skills better when dialogue is observed and developed *together* instead of someone facilitating dialogue *on behalf* of the participants.

Form a circle in your group. Choose a topic for the discussion to start off with. There can be any number of participants in the discussion.

Choose observers from the group so that around one third of the group are observers and the other two thirds participate in the discussion. If there are for instance 15 participants, then 10 of them will discuss and 5 will observe. There are three rounds in the exercise and during these the roles change so that everyone will be an observer for one round and will participate in the discussion for two rounds.

The task of the observers is to observe the discussion from two points of view: to evaluate the content and quality of the dialogue. The observers thus inspect what is spoken and how it is spoken. The task of the others is to strive for as good dialogue as they can — there are no other rules for the discussion.

Choose a total duration for the exercise and divide this time into three equally long discussion rounds. If you have

over 2 hours to spend on this exercise, it would be good to reserve time for a small break as well. If you have 2.5 hours, this could be divided into three rounds of 45 minutes with one 15-minute break or with two 5-minute breaks.

During each discussion round, first the discussion is held and it is observed, and before the following round, the observations are discussed. If one round takes 45 minutes, this could be divided into 30 minutes of discussion and observation and into a 15-minute analysis. After the analysis, the observers are switched and the next round can start.

In the analysis stage, the observers first give their observations then these are discussed. In the discussion, at least the following questions should be addressed: What types of observations were made of the contents of the discussion? How could the content be improved? What was observed of the dialogue? How could dialogue be developed? Then the next round can start.

The analysis of the third round is also the final discussion for the whole exercise. During this, the whole exercise is discussed and we can think about what was learned about content and what was learned about dialogue.

The outcome of this exercise is often diverse. Each time it is different so that something new is always learned about the content of the discussion as well as of dialogue. This exercise can also be used as a method for the network's continuous learning.