

DIALOGUE:

LEARNING TO THINK TOGETHER¹

BY LAWRENCE M. MILLER

We have a crisis of conversation. It is going down hill rapidly and if it continues we may all be left watching ourselves on “Crossfire,” further depleting the gene pool from stress related deaths. Our ability to make effective decisions depends on our ability to listen, to gain understanding, to explore ideas and to consider alternatives while getting beyond preconceptions - in other words, to genuinely engage in dialogue in a spirit of humility and common interest. Wisdom is not achieved through the combat of debate, but from the exploration of dialogue.

In our advanced culture with easy access to knowledge and every resource of technology, it is only common sense that when we make significant decisions we will think deeply; considering not only the immediate effects of decisions, but the secondary and tertiary results, as will any good chess player. Once again, common sense is uncommon.

Whether in our personal conversations with our family or at work, we find it difficult to engage in the effort to think deeply together. We are all in a rush. We rush by our children’s important decisions. We rush by our friends crisis and doubts without stopping to engage them in serious thought. And, at work, we are always in a rush, always measuring our self by how quickly and how many decisions we make, rather than by how well we actually think them through, by the quality of the decision.

Of course, you may say, “but the reality is that I am under pressure. I do have to make decisions quickly and don’t have time to think deeply with others, to dialogue, about every little decision.”

True enough, I say. I would not suggest that you engage in deep dialogue for “little decisions” only big ones. Are there times when this investment in gaining collective wisdom is worth the costs? And, surely you would reply “Yes, I suppose that there are some occasions that are worth that cost.” When we are investing millions, if not billions of dollars, in training and the development of quality improvement, the biggest quality problem in modern corporations is virtually ignored. That is the quality of decision making by senior management groups.

So, then the question is, when is dialogue needed? And what prevents us from engaging in dialogue? And, how do we overcome these obstacles? Much of the literature on dialogue stems from the work of David Bohm², a physicist who thought deeply about the “wholeness” of our

¹ Note: This is an excerpt from a forthcoming book, *The Discipline of Common Sense*. You may download this for your personal reading. However, if you wish copies or wish to make any other use of this document, please contact the author at LMiller@LawrenceMMiller.com.

² Bohm, David. *On Dialogue*. Routledge. London and New York. 1996.

systems. He promoted a form of group dialogue that would lead to self-awareness and insight, but not necessarily decisions or the use of other problem solving tools. I have spoken with a number of practitioners of dialogue groups and, in general, they have conceded that his original form of dialogue is not practical in the business world. Bohm was not a manager and did not have to integrate his ideas with the day-to-day world of getting results that every manager faces. Yet, there is great value in the process he developed and the potential to integrate that with management decision-making in a selective way.

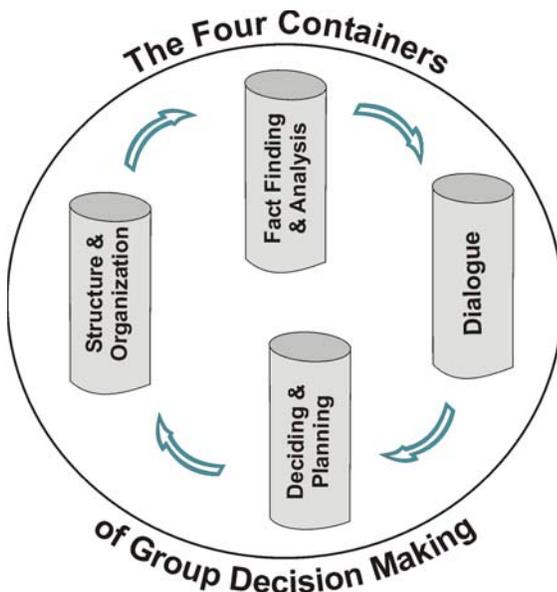
Group decision-making is not one thing. There are steps in the process, different stages that a conversation goes through to arrive at a decision. In each of these stages different modes of thought, different patterns of conversation and different techniques are appropriate. One can think of these as different “containers” that one enters for a period of time. If the members of the group know which container they are in, this can help identify when dialogue is needed.

In the work of groups there is a stage of *structure and organization*. This stage begins before the meeting when you determine the purpose of the group or meeting, the membership, the different roles and responsibilities within the team. This stage also includes understanding the team’s relationship to other groups or individuals. This container also includes determine the agenda and the time to be allocated to each topic. It is very common that groups have problems because of poor structure. They may not have the right people in the room; they may lack the authority to make the necessary decisions; they may not be structured properly within the group with assigned roles and responsibilities.

The second container is that of *fact finding and analysis*. This container may extend over more than one meeting as the members seek information or data relevant to their decision. Within this container, techniques such as cause-and-effect diagrams, histograms, Pareto charts, affinity diagrams and other techniques may be used to seek knowledge of a problem and possible solutions.

The third container is that of *dialogue*. Dialogue is the process of seeking meaning and understanding. It is a process that requires patience, silence, finding your voice, and the search for what is important. This stage is almost a meditation, a period of reflection on the subject in order to see things in a different way by getting beyond assumptions that block alternative perspectives. .

Finally, there is the container of *deciding and planning action*. It is useful to separate decision



making from the previous steps. Often members of teams jump right to “here is what we should do” when they have not gathered any facts, even considered where the facts might be or who might have them, and have certainly not considered their meaning or importance. Decision making requires a different mental process than either fact finding or dialogue. Neither fact finding nor dialogue involves judgment of any kind, but learning and exploration. Decision making does require identifying alternatives and making judgments as to the best course of action. When you know that you have gathered the facts and considered their meaning you feel prepared to make sound judgments. This container also, and very importantly, includes developing an action plan that specifies by whom, what and when things will be done.

One understanding of conversation in a group is to think about the group as a number of different people, individuals with different perspectives or ideas, each member of the group sharing his or her ideas and the group deciding which idea is the best and moving forward with that idea. With this understanding each individual is thinking alone, forming his or her own ideas and opinions and then attempting to convince the others of the value of those ideas.

Another understanding of group conversation is to consider that the group is thinking as one system, one organism, or one collective mind. With this understanding the individual members are not so focused on their own ideas, they are focused on learning and exploring an issue and its meaning. They are less focused on convincing others to accept their ideas. They are not trying to “win”. When thinking together the members are interested in encouraging and supporting the ideas of others because those ideas become their own. The objective is to create “collective wisdom”, to find the best answer for the group, with no concern for whose idea it is.

It may be useful to define our terms.

Conversation will be used to describe all interaction among a group of people in their effort to reach understanding or a decision regardless of the quality or nature of that interaction.

Debate is a conversation in which the parties assume opposing positions at the outset and view the goal of the conversation to be the victory of their position over that of their opponent.

Discussion is a conversation in which the goal is to reach a decision that both parties can accept and which may represent a compromise or combination of positions previously held by the parties.

Dialogue is a conversation that explores the meaning and nature of an issue in an effort to create insight and understanding on a deeper level. Dialogue seeks to gain the insight of all parties and create collective wisdom, unity, or a new way of looking at an issue.

It may be helpful to visualize how we communicate with others. The following triangle illustrates the mental framework from which we engage in conversation. In most conversations, particularly those conditioned by current culture in Western societies, people are thinking about their own ideas and how to persuade the other person to accept their ideas. Unfortunately, the other person is doing the same. This defeats the opportunity for shared understanding and may result in

conflict. When we are in our own corner, thinking alone, we are in a win-lose posture, searching for victory for our position at the cost of defeat for the other person.

Think of the shaded area of the triangle as the locus of thought, from where you are thinking. At the bottom of the triangle we are in our own corner, thinking alone. The bottom of the triangle



represents debate, an all too common mode of discourse in our culture. Any night on America's talk shows you witness the culture of debate, not dialogue. "Crossfire, from the left comes the liberal, from the right comes the conservative, and may the best person win!" It is interesting to examine the conversation and ask whether the two combatants ever share a thought, ever acknowledge that the position of the other could be valid or worth considering. Most often the two protagonists are listening carefully with an eye to disagreement. This guarantees that neither can learn from the other. The very act of learning, of accepting or appreciating the ideas of the other, would be regarded as an act of weakness or defeat.

When we are trying to win a debate, to have our ideas victorious over the ideas of another, we listen to the other with an ear to exclude and label ideas in a way that makes them unacceptable. During the time of the second Iraq war in 2003, a member of the country music group the Dixie Chicks spoke out against the war. A conservative talk show host commenting on this said to a guest "well you have to understand that these Hollywood types really hate America and all that it stands for." This interpretation of a very young woman's position against the war is exactly the kind of listening and response that destroys the democratic process which relies on dialogue to form understanding and consensus, rather than the victory of one group at the expense of humiliating another. The young country music star was not a "Hollywood type," but was from Texas, the home

of the President, and could never have had the thought of hating her country. But by labeling her in this extreme way, by creating black and white distinction between good and evil, it eliminates any possibility of understanding what her view actually was or why she held it. It also creates the environment in which anyone attempting to understand this person's views is likely to be attacked for being soft, for consorting or comforting those who "hate America" and surely no good American would want to be in that position.

This type of discourse hardens the corners of the triangle and is the exact opposite of dialogue. Debate creates discomfort with opposing views and attempts to lower the stature of anyone who holds those opposing views. Dialogue creates a zone of comfort for others to contribute without fear of being assaulted or insulted. In debate generalizations are used to label a point of view in a manner that discounts its consideration ("that's typical of you liberals"). In dialogue questions are used to uncover the true meaning of another person's contributions ("if you are in favor of paying teachers more, how do you feel that could be funded?") In debate you look for the error in the position of another. In dialogue you look for what may be learned from or helpful in the ideas of another. Debate suffocates intellectual inquiry; dialogue fuels intellectual inquiry. Debate creates or hardens distance or alienation between the parties, dialogue creates connections, appreciation and unity.

When to Practice Dialogue, Discussion or Debate

You are driving in your car and your child shout "Mom, there's a McDonald's. Can we get a Happy Meal?" Should Mom now enter into a deep and meaningful dialogue about why the child really wants a Happy Meal, or the true understanding of a Happy Meal? I think not. Mom will probably, and correctly reply, "No, it is almost dinner time and we will be home soon." End of discussion and hopefully with no debate.



Our lives are filled with simple decisions and our concern is often for efficiency and not depth of meaning. In team meetings at work, much of the time may be spent reviewing numbers, brainstorming a cause or solution to a specific problem, or deciding who will fill in for someone who will be absent next week. These decisions do not require in-depth dialogue.

Dialogue should be employed for questions of significance. Why are we organized the way we are? Are we genuinely meeting the current and future needs of our clients?

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Are we assisting each other in the development of our personal capabilities? Are we doing the best we can to make this an enjoyable and fulfilling place to work? Why do we do this work at all? These are important questions and they are not matters of just choosing “A” or “B”. Rather, they are issues with several levels of meaning and possible action. These are the types of issues around which we should engage in genuine dialogue.

Dialogue is more appropriate when there is a great degree of shared purpose. Purpose has always united people. Every general knows that the worst army to lead is a standing army, one that lacks an enemy. Standing armies turn inward and fight among themselves. The moment there is an external enemy the army unites and forgets their internal differences. Understanding this principle it is common for national leaders to look for an external enemy to unite their people and forget their internal divisions and difficulties.

The degree to which we lack common purpose is the degree to which we are likely to remain at the bottom of the pyramid, focused on our self, in pursuit of our individual needs. If we are focused only on our personal needs our conversation will tend toward debate, and we will remain motivated to win all we can.

As we achieve common purpose the nature of our motivation and conversation changes. We move from simply trying to win to teaching, sharing, understanding, learning, and serving as we move up the pyramid to a condition of genuine dialogue. Imagine a congress in which every representative had no self interest, no concern about his or her election, no concern about winning any personal or party victory. Rather, every member was focused on only one purpose, the collective, shared good of the country. In a true attitude of service, they would seek deep understanding and meaning, striving to make decisions that would be in the best interests of the country. No one’s name would be on any bill. Or, all their names would be on every bill. The entire spirit would be transformed, the quality of decisions would accelerate, and the country would benefit.

Dialogue can be a frame of reference. Once the team understands the potential of dialogue and its tools, a team member may recognize that we are engaged in a debate when we should be engaged in a dialogue. It is helpful to simply ask “shouldn’t we have a dialogue on this issue for a while?” This will trigger a different thought pattern in all the members of the team.

Failures at every level of the organization, from the CEO to the first level, are often the result of the failure to recognize when genuine dialogue is needed.

One of the more amazing realities of recent corporate history is the much discussed collapse of the Enron Corporation. This failure can be described in many ways - a failure of corporate ethics, poor strategic judgment, or outright stealing. But, how did this happen? The Board of Directors of Enron was highly regarded as a model of Board structure and composition. Only two insiders served on the Enron Board. No corporation could have had a more financially competent and experienced board. The list included a former Stanford University Dean who was an

accounting professor, the former CEO of an insurance company, the former CEO of an international bank, a hedge fund manager, a prominent Asian financier, and an economist who is the former head of the U.S. government's Commodity Futures Trading Commission. These were all extremely smart and competent individuals and all financially sophisticated. Yet the members of this board have all claimed to have been confused by Enron's financial transactions and claim not to have understood the financial statements.³ They were all thinking alone.

How could this group of experienced and respected individuals look over a corporation whose books were so complicated and confused that no analyst could figure out where the money was coming from or where it was going, and thousands of deals were being done that amounted to little more than a shell game of moving money and accounting entries around to give the appearance of profits where there were none? Why didn't they inquire?

Jeffrey A. Sonnenfeld writing in the Harvard Business Review⁴ said "We need to consider not only how we structure the work of a board but also how we manage the social system a board actually is. We'll be fighting the wrong war if we simply tighten procedural rules for boards and ignore their more pressing need – to be strong, high-functioning work groups whose members trust and challenge one another and engage directly with senior managers on critical issues facing corporations."

Was the Board of Directors, or the senior management team, engaging in dialogue? Were they thinking deeply and understanding the meaning of the facts presented to them? Of course they were not. Rather there was a classic case of "group think" in which even the most analytic managers did not question the surface facts presented to them, did not dig deep to understand how and why the numbers presented could make sense. Perhaps it was the simple fact that each person around the table had so much respect for the other that they were saying to themselves "Well, if it makes sense to him, it must make sense." Perhaps this was a case in which a "court jester" was needed, someone to ask the absurd questions, someone who could display complete lack of respect and ask "why", "how could that be", or ask other members of the Board to explain themselves where the money was coming from.

Over and over again in corporate and government history, there are cases of major decisions that completely overlook a simple fact, leading to extremely costly decisions. One petroleum company I was consulting with admitted to me that they had invested approximately one billion dollars drilling for oil in a land locked African country. When they finally found oil, someone asked the obvious question, "How are we going to get it out of the country?" Incredibly, there was no possible way to transport the oil to market. One billion dollars had been wasted because no one had asked an extremely obvious question. These were smart people. How does that happen?

³ "What Makes Great Boards Great", Sonnenfeld, Jeffrey A. , Harvard Business Review, September, 2002, p.108.

⁴ J. A. Sonnenfeld, Harvard Business Review, September, 2002, p.106.

Systems thinking became the topic of much conversation during recent years. Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline*⁵ is about the creation of the "learning organization" and at the center of that discipline is systems-thinking. The most costly system problem in our corporations is the system of conversation, the system of how we share information, consider information, and seek meaning in information. The system to which most managers and executives have become accustomed does not dig deeply, does not seek genuine meaning or significance in information, and often fails to uncover important facts or opinions that will determine the performance of the organization. When you realize that in the knowledge economy, processing information and making decisions is the core function of almost every organization, the cost of this failure is huge.

How do we develop the ability to engage in dialogue? What skills do we need to develop? The following are the common sense tools or skills that will help us engage in dialogue. Simply stating them is a start, but not sufficient. Managers and teams need skill development, training, that develops the habits of dialogue.

1. Practice Deep Listening:

When you walk into a debate your mind is set on convincing the judges or audience of the superiority of your point of view. You plan your "arguments" and voice those arguments in the most convincing manner possible. Your tone of voice conveys confidence if not certainty in the correctness of your argument. The purpose of a debate is not for the parties to engage in learning. Rather it is to convince the audience that one participant has a superior position and has most skillfully argued that position.

When the motive of a conversation is to search for meaning and to learn there can be no thought of winning or losing. There is no external audience to convince in a dialogue. You are the audience, the team is the audience, and the purpose is to gain knowledge and meaning and this does not result from authoritatively arguing pre-packaged positions. It derives from listening and reflection.

There are many levels of listening. Of course, there is the simple act of being quiet and tuning in to the voices of others. But there is also the capacity to listen to what is really going on, to listen to the story behind the words and faces. Each pained expression tells a story. Each deep sigh tells a story. Each expression of impatience tells a story. At times it is worth inquiring as to the nature of that story. Sometimes it is valuable to simply seek insight by imagining the story that each person has to tell.

Some time ago I fancied that I would become a "real" writer. I read a wonderful book, "On Writing" by Ernest Hemingway, a compilation of his letters to his editor, Charles Scribner. In

⁵ Senge, Peter. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday-Currency, 1990.

addition to bemoaning his own trials and tribulations as a writer, he spoke of the awareness required of a writer. He said that a writer is always writing, always forming characters and imagining possibilities. When sitting in an airport awaiting his plane, the writer is studying the face of the old woman across from him and imagining the life she has led, imagining who she is going to visit, and what it must mean to her to visit this person. The writer can develop an entire story by just staring at this person and imagining the meaning of her wrinkles, the cause of the worried look on her face, or the reason why her shoes don't seem to fit quite right.

According to Hemingway the writer is a writer, not because he or she knows grammar or sentence structure, but rather because of the capacity of observation and imagination. Consider the young person walking through the airport with earphones on listening to his latest CD. Is he observing anything? Is he imagining the story on anyone's face? And, isn't his life that much poorer for the inability to imagine the story told by the rushed walk of the young woman toward her plane or the story told by the old man on the park bench staring for hours straight ahead.

Dialogue requires the listening of the writer, the ability hear the voice of the other person, to listen to their story, to take pleasure in the details that give meaning to each story.

As you listen to another, go beyond what they are saying to imagine their story. How does their story affect the members of their family? How do they feel in this situation? What do they imagine about their own future? Where does their story go from here? Ask them about their story. The meaning is in the story.

2. Practice Inquiring versus Acquiescing:

Groups in a closed system are likely to be extremely accepting of the views of its members, particularly when those views are expressed by the person in power or expressed framed in the legitimacy of their ideology. This acquiescence avoids the intellectual inquiry, the asking of questions that are the fundamental tool of learning. Members of the Enron board acquiesced and failed to inquire. But even the CEO, Ken Lay, who claims not to have known what was going on, acquiesced to his subordinates.

In a group of political conservatives someone might say "Well, as we conservatives all know, the more we can reduce taxes the better." In a group of political liberals someone might say "You know we have to reign in the power of corporations." And in both groups everyone nods their heads approvingly, demonstrating their acquiescence. Such statements create an assumption that then stifles creative thought. What if one said - "How can we increase the power of corporations to provide better health benefits to their people?" Is this coming from a liberal or conservative view or is it just an open door to think in a different and possibly creative way. Dialogue requires questions that escape from the assumptions of ideological views. Otherwise, rather than inquire into the meaning of things, the members of the group will simply acquiesce to the "politically correct" point of view.

Questioning is the foundation of science. Without questioning there would be no science or human progress. Inquiring minds, questioning minds, seek meaning, significance and underlying truths. The ability to ask questions, to ask the simple question “why?” is the first skill of acquiring wisdom. There is no more important member of a group than the person who recognizes when it is important to ask “why?” It is not at all unusual for groups to be headed off in a direction that no one questions, but neither can anyone explain why they are headed in this direction. Jerry Harvey, in *The Abilene Paradox*⁶, tells a wonderful story about a family sitting on the porch one evening, in the sweltering heat of west Texas, and someone asks what’s for dinner? Someone then mentions a restaurant down the road in Abilene. Somehow they end up in the car, with no air conditioning, the dust blowing through the windows and everyone miserable, when Ma asks Pa, “Why the hell are you dragging us to Abilene anyway?” To which Pa says, “I ain’t draggin’ you anywhere, you wanted to go to Abilene.” “Did not” replies Ma. It turns out that no one in the car wanted to go on this trip. And the question comes, how did they end up on the road to Abilene when no one wanted to go in the first place?

As Jerry Harvey, a college professor, tells it, he was sitting in his office one day when an attractive young woman student came into his office sits down and looks rather depressed. Dr. Harvey, concerned professor that he is, asked “What’s wrong, you look rather depressed?” And, she replies, “Well, you’d be depressed too if next weekend you were marrying someone you didn’t love.” To which he naturally responded, “Well, why are you marrying someone you don’t love.” And she explained, “Well it was a moment of passion, and I couldn’t say no, it would have broken his heart. And, he told his folks, and they called mine, and the wedding got planned, and I can’t say no now. I just couldn’t do that to him.”

The next day Dr. Harvey was sitting in his office and a young man came in and sat down, looking rather depressed. The ever empathetic Dr. Harvey asked, “What’s wrong, you look rather depressed?” And, he replies, “Well, you’d be depressed too if next weekend you were marrying someone you didn’t love.” To which he naturally responded, “Well, why are you marrying someone you don’t love.” And he explained, “Well it was a moment of passion, and I couldn’t say no, I would have broken her heart. And, she told her folks, and they called mine, and the wedding got planned, and I can’t say no now. I just couldn’t do that to her.”

Witness a young couple “on the road to Abilene.” Well, how do people get on the road to Abilene, on a course that they don’t either support or don’t know why they are going there in the first place? This is how a billion dollars got spent drilling for oil in a country with no way to ship the oil to a market. This is how the entire board of the Enron Corporation ended up in Abilene. Even country Presidents and their countries get on the road to Abilene.

3. Practice Suspending Judgment:

⁶ Harvey, Jerry. *The Abilene Paradox*. Jossey-Bass, New York, 1988.

A judgment is something that comes “down” at the end of a “trial.” If a judge or jury entered a trial with a judgment already in their mind we would suggest that they be disqualified. We ask judges and juries to suspend judgments, to hear all sides, to reflect and to consider alternative explanations

When we make decisions in groups, or seek understanding and learning, we are often hindered by our tendency to judge quickly. There is an unstated value in our culture that rewards quick decision making. This is a natural remnant of the military culture of command. On the battlefield the officer was required to make judgments quickly in order to win a victory or save the lives of his men. Dialogue or consensus decision making would not have survived the demands of the battlefield where victories were often won by fast and decisive action and strict and uniform obedience by the troops. The military did not want soldiers to ponder the “meaning” of their actions or to seek “deep understanding.” They could do that for the rest of their lives, but not while the bullets were flying.

Perhaps because the military was, for most human history, a male domain, it is entirely possible that men came to associate the ability to make decisions quickly with “manliness.” While delaying, pondering, considering alternatives in a reflective manner, may have become more associated with woman. However it evolved, it is certain that men in particular find the ability to make decisions quickly an attractive characteristic and associate delay with weakness. We are therefore, quick to judge.

Dialogue is intended to achieve profound understanding, to find new meaning, to explore new and creative solutions, and to create collective wisdom among a group. In order to achieve these things it is essential that we participate in a period of suspended judgment. We agree to control our thoughts like a jury awaiting all the evidence, to withhold judgment.

One of the best qualities of a leader is humility. Contrary to the television image of the charismatic leader, most corporate executives who achieve sustained superior performance are not the demanding cheerleader. Rather, they are patient, and behave with humility. Jim Collins, in *Good To Great*⁷, documents leaders who possess this quality of humility. He describes “*Level 5 Leadership: We were surprised, shocked really, to discover the type of leadership required for turning a good company into a great one. Compared to high-profile leaders with big personalities who make head-lines and become celebrities, the good-to-great leaders seem to have come from Mars. Self-effacing, quiet, reserved, even shy – these leaders are a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. They are more like Lincoln and Socrates than Patton or Caesar.*”⁸

⁷ Collins, Jim. *Good to Great*. Harper Business, New York: 2001

⁸ Ibid. pp. 12-13.

Humility is being open to the ideas of others. Humility is the ability to learn and change course when the evidence points in a different direction. Humility is the capacity to suspend judgment and listen to the voices of others.

Humility and suspended judgment are most important when it comes to how we present our ideas to the group. It is important to listen to yourself as you present an idea. Is it presented as a gift to the group for their consideration? Or is it presented as your judgment that you are now asking others to approve? Or is it presented as an argument that should be “right”? If it is the latter, you have attached your ego, your self worth, to your ideas. You will then, naturally defend your idea. If, on the other hand, you present your idea as a gift to the group with the intention of letting go, allowing the group to then take ownership and do with it as it wishes, you will then allow yourself to observe its transformation, its merger into the stream of thought and wisdom of the group. Rather than the joy of seeing “your” idea adopted as the best idea, it is possible to gain joy from seeing your idea contribute to the shared ideas that become the “group’s” final decision or point of view.

4. Avoid Dismissive Categorizing

We seek order. Order makes sense out of things. We therefore seek order in conversation. Are we at the beginning or end? Is the conversation hostile or friendly, intelligent or dumb, interesting or boring? There are a hundred ways that we can categorize people, comments, or entire conversations. How we categorize contributions to conversation will have an impact on our ability to enter a meaningful dialogue.

When we hear a comment we do not like, one that differs from our understanding or point of view, we may have a tendency to place that in a category, or place the entire person in a category.

Imagine that you are meeting with an administrative office team and you are discussing how the team feels learning and development can be improved. A young woman who has been employed for only a couple of months speaks up and says, with some hesitancy and emotion in her voice “I thought people would be more friendly when I first came to work here. I thought it would be more fun and people would help each other more.” The manager of this group, somewhat uncomfortable with this expression of personal feelings and emotion may think to himself, “Well, she just said that because she is young and inexperienced.” By placing the young woman and her comment in the category of “young and inexperienced” it alleviates his need to deal with her comment in a meaningful way. He can now move on to listen to comments he may find more comfortable.

By categorizing this comment and the person, the issue is likely to receive little serious consideration. Regardless of the potential value of this comment, and the meaning behind the comment, the young woman will now feel more alienated because she has exposed herself, taken a risk by offering something of her own feelings. If her expression is ignored or dismissed, she is much less likely to offer her true feelings in the future.

How else could the manager have responded? Without judging the comment as true or false, the manager could have expressed appreciation and looked for the value or truth in her comment. For example, he could have said, "I know that it is important when you first come to work that you feel that people want to help you succeed. It is always a bit scary starting a new job. And, I think you are making the point that we learn well, when we help each other, whether we are new or old on the job." By acknowledge the truth or value in the young woman's comment he has created a unifying bond, the opposite of alienation. This appreciative comment will make her more comfortable and more likely to contribute in the future.

Every night on television we are bombarded with examples of dismissive categorization. "Well, that's because you're a racist!" Well, that dismisses anything you may have to say! No need to seek any further understanding. Or, "You liberals (or, right wing extremists) always say that and that's why this country is in trouble!" It seems that most of the evening talk shows are a shallow monologue by opposing parties, never acknowledging any validity in the views of the other and continually categorizing the opponent to dismiss their views. This is the opposite of dialogue. (Just because two people are delivering monologues, does not make it a dialogue.) It only serves to reinforce the views of those who "know how those people think."

5. Look at the Whole System

Insight is often gained by making connections between parts of a whole. Our country, our community and our company, may be described as a "whole system." The ecology is a whole system comprised of numerous interconnected and interdependent parts. One cannot understand the growth of a tree without understanding the larger ecology of the forest, changes in climate, or animal species that depend on the tree for survival. The study of ecology is the study of interconnected parts, or sub-systems of a larger whole system. The economy is a whole system comprised of sub-systems such as the banking system, the transportation system, the taxation system, etc. To study the economy one must study the interconnection of the various sub systems.

It furthers dialogue to think about the topic under discussion as a component of a larger system. If a team is discussing a quality problem, a part they receive from a supplier that has excessive variation from specifications, it may be useful to consider how that problem is related to a larger system. For example, how was the supplier selected? Who selected them? What specifications were they given and was the design of the part a design that led to ease of manufacturing? How often does the supplier receive feedback, how immediate is that feedback and in what form is it given? Do we know to whom that feedback is communicated with the supplier organization? Is it communicated to the workers who make the part? Can we talk to them directly?

Rather than simply focus on the problem in the part itself, the solution is more likely to come from an examination of the whole system that determines the quality of work that goes into that part.

Just as we have a tendency to categorize and dismiss comments by individuals, we have a tendency to fragment a problem and deal with only isolated components of the problem. We do this because it is simply easier. It is easier to say that the supplier “doesn’t care” about us and we should find a new supplier. When we do this we don’t need to go to the trouble of understanding the feedback system, the supplier selection and communication process, etc.

Unfortunately, however, when companies fail to analyze the system and simply dismiss a supplier and find a new one, the problem often reoccurs because the system that was the cause of the problem hasn’t changed.

6. Seek Diverse Input

A group of corporate decision makers who are all engineers, or all finance managers, or who all come from the same industry or corporate culture, are similarly likely to become a closed system. One of the advantages of the push for diverse Boards and diverse management teams is simply because minorities or women, not conditioned to the same corporate culture and assumptions, are more likely to ask the questions that force the group to think about the meaning of what they are doing.

One of the perceptions that causes members of a group to stay in the You-Me corners of the triangle is the perception of the possible contribution of others. It is normal to value the contributions of others who have the same background, training or experience as yourself. If you are trained as an engineer, and the primary work of the organization is engineering, it is normal for you to value the ideas of other engineers. On senior management teams there will typically be several operating managers who are trained and have risen from the area of core competence of the organization, such as engineering. But there will also be a finance manager, a human resource manager, possibly an attorney or others with supportive expertise. The nature of conversation is often prejudiced by the value placed on these areas of expertise, independent of the actual merit of a contribution by a team member.

Some years ago I had the good fortune to be a member of local decision making body of a religious organization in Raleigh, North Carolina. The nine members of this Spiritual Assembly could not have been more diverse. Two young women were doctoral students in clinical psychology. Another was a professor of physics at the same university. Another had completed his doctoral work at Harvard and was currently with the Environmental Protection Agency. I was working in prisons at the time. And then there was James and Marie Brodie. James and Marie were both in their sixties and were African Americans, born and lived all their life in the South. James washed dishes at a restaurant and Marie served as a maid. While other members of the group excelled in their apparent intellect, James and Marie excelled in their constant display of the spiritual virtues of humility, compassion, and service to others.

I was elected Chairperson of this group. The responsibility of the Chairperson was not one of authority, but rather to facilitate the conversation so as to give each member the opportunity to make their contribution. A video tape of the conversation among this group would be a case study in different styles of communication. The young candidates for their clinical psychology degrees had no trouble expressing how they felt on any issue and were quick to do so. The professor, while a bit more reflective, addressed the group with authority. The Harvard graduate was as quick on the draw as anyone and always presented his views with both wit and precision.

I remember on a number of occasions Marie Brodie would have her head down and her eyes closed while the conversation was taking place. The well educated were quick to offer both analysis and solutions to every problem. The group would appear to be ready to reach a conclusion and move on to the next topic while Marie had yet to say a word. As the chairperson, I would then ask Marie if she had any thoughts or feelings on the matter. I remember Marie lifting up her head and opening her eyes, or even with her eyes still closed, saying in her soft voice “I feel that we haven’t considered how this other person will react to this. Maybe we should consider....” And, it turned out that Marie had been listening carefully, but considering the issue from an entirely different point of view, a view that when heard by the rest of the group, often completely turned the conversation in a different direction, to a solution that would never have been discovered were it not for Marie’s soft voice.

When I have told this story I have often felt compelled to say “God bless Marie Brodie” and meant that in the most sincere way. Early on she gave me a gift, the opportunity to learn a lesson about how individuals from very different backgrounds, and apparently very humble circumstances, can contribute wisdom and insight that would otherwise be absent. But I also learned that this wisdom can easily be by-passed or ignored, if one has an ear for only one type of voice. The voice of the Ph.D. candidates is one voice. The voice of Marie Brodie is another one entirely, almost an entirely different language. One must make the effort to tune in, to invite the contribution, to respect the wisdom that may appear from a completely different voice.

Even in corporate decision making groups, while individuals may appear to be from similar backgrounds, they each have their own personality, some with stronger and some with softer voices; some who are heard frequently and some who require an invitation. For genuine dialogue to occur it is necessary that all voices be heard.

The assumption of dialogue is that the group is seeking the best understanding, the best solution, for the combined interests of the group. This can only happen if the members of the group can learn to look beyond their own filters that differentiate the contributions of one individual over another.

7. Seek Your Authentic Voice

Lawrence M. Miller

To some degree, we all seek to speak in a voice that will produce approval from our audience. It is normal, after all, to seek the approval of our peers or others. However, to discover meaning through dialogue, we must seek the most honest, authentic and genuine self. Do we even know our own voice? Do we know what are our own personal thoughts or feelings on a matter? Do we have the courage to voice those thoughts, simply because they are our honest thoughts or feelings, our true voice? This is not an easy question.

I have known people who almost always seem to be speaking with a reactive voice, a voice that is a reaction to their audience and a voice which they expect to elicit a positive reaction. However, it never quite works. The audience somehow senses an incomplete authenticity, and incomplete honesty, and does not react as desired. The question becomes does this person know her own voice? Does she have the internal courage to listen to her own thoughts and feelings and then give voice to those thoughts and feelings? The inability to speak with an honest, authentic voice, may be the result of fear, fear that one's own voice is not adequate, that one's own ideas are not clever enough or profound enough. However, the paradox is that what is most appreciated by others is not cleverness or profundity, but simple honesty.

I have recently served on the Governing Board of a small private university in Switzerland. The Academic program was supervised by an Academic Council comprised of the resident faculty. I attended the meetings of this Council as the representative of the Administration. To increase participation and unity between students, faculty and administration, a representative of the Student Council was added as a member of the group. The truth was that the academicians had some fears about a student sitting in and listening to their internal debates, often concerning problems that would have impact on the students. They also knew that their own meetings were often much more like debates than dialogues.

A popular professor had decided to leave the university, for a number of reasons, mostly personal. The Academic Council was conducting a meeting about how to explain his departure to the students. The conversation by the faculty expressed a number of rational reasons why he was leaving, and rational explanations for why his departure would not prevent fulfilling course requirements. They seemed to have taken care of the matter when I invited the student to share her feelings, knowing that this professor was a favorite of hers. Until this point she had remained silent.

She had been sitting somewhat slumped down in her chair when I asked for her views. She sat up and then, with her head tilted to one side, and struggling to maintain her composure said with considerable emotion "I don't know...I just feel that the faculty I came here to learn from is abandoning me! I don't know how to explain this." And with this expression her hands were now covering her face as if to prevent others from seeing her eyes, which she feared she could not control.

The group was silent for several seconds as they digested this new voice, the emotion they had not considered at all in their quest for rational explanations. The student had the courage to speak in her own voice, in the voice of honest emotion, without which there could be no honest dialogue. To genuinely understand how to communicate to the students it had to be recognized that the student's reaction was on an emotional level and that demanded recognition by the faculty. Perhaps it would have been easy for the student to remain silent since all of the conversation had been on the level of facts and schedules and qualifications and she had little to contribute to that. But, from the perspective of the student, the customer in this case, the matter was an entirely different one and voicing that entirely different perspective required detached courage, a willingness to speak in a different voice without knowing how it would be received.

The ability to first listen to your own voice, to search for your own authentic thoughts and feelings, and then to honestly express them, is often by-passed in our rush to get through an agenda. William Isaacs, in his book on *Dialogue*⁹ wrote "Finding and speaking one's voice requires first a willingness to be still. Daring to be quiet can seem like an enormous risk in a world that values articulate speech. But to speak our voice we may have to learn to refrain from speaking, and listen. Not every word that comes to us needs to be spoken. In fact, learning to choose consciously what we do and do not say can establish a great level of control and stability in our lives." This is the very hard part of speaking in an authentic rather than reactive voice; it is knowing oneself. It is trusting oneself enough to speak in a genuine voice.

Developing the ability to engage in true dialogue is almost like developing maturity. It is not a simple skill or technique. It is a different level of relationship and communication that some people never achieve. It is the difference between the casual conversation you may have with an acquaintance and the intimate sharing of the most private feelings with one who you love and trust deeply. But it is also common sense that we take the time to think deeply, not all the time, but on occasions when we are considering issues of importance to our self, our team or organization.

⁹ Isaacs, William. *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. Doubleday, New York, 1999. p. 163.