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Next Practice
from Imagination Lab

Creating the Context for Dialogue

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Dialogue is a mode of communication that enables management teams to turn differences in viewpoints into opportunities.

Patricia *(Divisional Manager of an international manufacturer) initiates:*
"I've been telling you for some time already that we need to be more *customer-focused*. I've prepared three scenarios. I'd like to get your views on these before we decide."

Ron *(Sales Representative) responds:*
"Okay, but you've got to make it quick. I have another meeting starting in two minutes."

Patricia *continues:*
"Well, the first route is to establish an integrated customer..."

Frank *(Head of Marketing, Asia) interrupts:*
"...relationship management system, right? We've tried that and it didn't work. What are your other ideas?"

Patricia *trying another tack:*
"Well, then there is the option to run a large scale survey on our target group to find out whether..."

Ron *jumps in:*
"Look, Patricia, why don't you just send us an email with your ideas and recommendation, and we'll take it from there."

Ron grabs his mobile telephone and rushes out of the conference room.

Most of us are regularly involved professionally in difficult group discussions where a decision of some kind must be made followed quickly by action. This need for closure is driven by what some sociologists have called 'time poverty'. Experience tells us, however, that rushing into action can sometimes cause us to miss alternative perspectives and with those, new opportunities. While still getting to the necessary closure, what are more effective ways to achieve *understanding before agreement*?

Discussion or Dialogue?

In many aspects of organizational life, we tend to coordinate our actions with colleagues through discussions that seek rapid decision-making. Discussion tends to be a non-reflective, competitive mode of conversation, which aims at reaching closure by winning the argument. An extreme variant involves "talking tough", whereby – like Ron in the above example – the exchange becomes a competitive and confrontational mode of interaction.

By contrast, dialogue is a reflective, non-confrontational mode of conversation whose purpose is to generate an understanding as a prerequisite to making a decision. It involves identifying and exploring diverse perspectives on the issue at hand. While discussions are full of assertions, assurances, and directives – dialogue is characterized by surprises, doubts, attentive questions and suggestions.

	Discussion	Dialogue
Attitude of participants	Advocating one's own viewpoint, providing answers	Curiosity, listening to others, raising questions
Objective of conversation	Closure; agreement on a single view	Openness; understanding different views
Speech gestures	Assurance, confidence, assertions, directives	Surprise, doubt, requests, suspended judgement, suggestions

Organizational culture researchers have highlighted how people operating in groups may develop their own subcultures consisting of distinct language, assumptions, and worldviews. As the opening vignette indicates, differences between departments, professions, personalities, backgrounds, and roles can be difficult to handle. It is therefore crucial to reveal the underlying assumptions implied in a statement made in a discussion. Dialogue holds promise in building the necessary bridges.

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Dialogue – Is it for me?

By no means does everything have to be subject for dialogue. Like Socrates, the founding father of Western philosophy, did in the market place everyday 2500 years ago, dialogue is appropriate when you want to address fundamental questions. The trick is to avoid that differences in viewpoints about such a fundamental question prevent an open and honest exchange. If you already have the answer and you do not depend on anyone else, maybe you don't need to dialogue. But if you care about what others think, dialogue helps. Dialogue produces a shift from individual to collective thinking. When we allow for *joint* investigation, deliberation and learning to emerge, agreement on subsequent action can be fast.

Dialogue or Discussion		
1. Dealing with a fundamental question?	❑ yes	❑ no
2. Engaging in collective thinking?	❑ yes	❑ no
3. Developing shared understanding?	❑ yes	❑ no

If you answered these three questions with "yes", *dialogue* is an appropriate mode of conversation.

Benefits of Dialogue

Research being carried out by the Imagination Lab indicates thats dialogue can enable team members to bring out and distil the benefits of varying viewpoints. In our work with management teams, we have experimented with alternative techniques and formats to create the context for dialogue and thereby capitalize on viewpoints raised in conversation that are often otherwise missed. Dialogue brings forth three typical benefits:

- It provides an opportunity to reveal our own and others' assumptions through a process of *attentive inquiry*, making these intelligible to each other.
- It *invites people to differ* and be prepared to consider that other viewpoints can be valid.
- It *develops a shared language* through practice that can be used in subsequent conversations to generate deeper insights.

Staging Dialogue

Obviously, no one can be forced to engage in dialogue. Nevertheless, contexts can be created that facilitate the emergence of this mode of conversation. Studies at the Imagination Lab point to three primary means to create the conditions for dialogue:

1. Select a safe space.
   Dialogue calls for a safe conversational space in which people can openly express their thoughts and feelings. The area dedicated to holding safe conversations must be different from everyday conversational venues and routines. This safe space can be further enhanced by ensuring symmetry in terms of seating, relatively equal speaking time for all participants, and inclusion of all voices.

2. Give participants ownership of the agenda.
   Agenda-setting is an integral part of dialogue. Conversations that actively invite participants' views on what should be talked about encourage people to become cognitively and emotionally involved. An open agenda does not necessarily mean a complete lack of structure. But actively co-designing the agenda can enhance the sense of ownership that participants feel about the conversation, thereby increasing their commitment to the outcomes.

3. Listen
   Good conversations depend as much on listening as talking. Managers can contribute to dialogue by acting as role models – resisting the impulse to immediately respond and lead the conversation, showing instead an attentive, appreciative orientation to others' inputs. By giving others more airtime, we can simultaneously reflect on *how* they themselves listen and understand, and then contribute to the conversation in a more robust manner.

Conclusion

There is no shortcut to achieving shared understanding. But if we succeed in creating the conditions for dialogue, the benefits can be immense. Dialogue provides us with opportunities to reveal and reflect on the assumptions that underlie our thinking, to render visible and consider different viewpoints, and to collaboratively develop a shared language that will help us in developing understanding before agreement.

The ideas in Next Practice represent the collective interests of the Imagination Lab Foundation research team. Contact Claus Jacobs (claus@imagilab.org) if you are interested in the topic of this issue.

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Established in 2000, Imagination Lab Foundation is a non-profit research foundation that conducts research on play, imagination and emergence as it relates to life, primarily in organizations.

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