



Healthcare Rx – Part V
Encouraging Dialogue: How to Engage Others in Meaningful Conversations
By Marty Jacobs
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Ever walk away from a conversation with someone with that feeling of déjà vu? You've had that conversation before and it never seems to go anywhere. Although humans have been communicating through dialogue for thousands of years, we still struggle with communicating effectively. Some of those challenges include avoiding difficult conversations, having conversations that run in circles, trying to talk with someone who dominates the conversation, or just plain disinterest in the conversation at hand. Creating meaningful dialogue, however, is a cornerstone of learning organizations, so it behooves us to improve our dialogue skills.

Before delving into the topic at hand, let's first review some key concepts already covered in this series that help set the stage for encouraging dialogue:

- Creating a safe environment sets the stage for productive conversations, particularly around sensitive issues.
- Identifying and challenging assumptions enables us to think outside the box and recognize our own contributions to the current reality.
- Balancing advocacy with inquiry helps us balance our passion for our own ideas with understanding and appreciating new and different ideas.
- Practicing skills of reflection gives us the opportunity to look at the organization, others, and ourselves in a different light and learn from our past.
- Practicing skills of inquiry helps us develop empathy and a greater understanding of those around us.

All of these skills and concepts are critical in creating conversations that matter. So let's explore more about what we mean by dialogue.

Dialogue vs. Discussion

Dialogue is the process of exploring complex issues and is expansive in nature. The goal of dialogue is to discover new learning and insights, rather than to come to some sort of conclusion. There are three basic conditions for dialogue (*The Fifth Discipline*, p. 243). The first is that participants must literally suspend their assumptions. That does not mean throw them out but to

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hold them up for all to examine. Doing so opens possibilities for new learning. The second condition is that all participants must see each other as colleagues. This is often hard to accomplish in hierarchical organizations, but it is essential for the creative process to be able to leave positions and power outside the room. Individuals need to feel comfortable honestly examining assumptions without regard to an individual's status within the organization. The final condition for dialogue is that there needs to be an outside facilitator who holds the context. It would be too easy for any group to slip back into old habits. Ultimately, as the team becomes skilled at dialogue, the facilitator can hand over the reins to team members.

Discussion, on the other hand, is used to weigh options and narrow the focus to the point that a decision can be made. It often takes the shape of two sides arguing a particular point of view, with one side winning and the other losing. The goal of discussion is closure. It is this form of discourse with which we are most familiar. Skillful discussion is a step in between dialogue and discussion. It shares the goal of finding closure on an issue but does so using skills more often reserved for dialogue. Those skills include examining one's own assumptions and balancing advocacy with inquiry. The intent is to come to a win-win decision.

It is important as a learning organization to consider these different options: each one serves its purpose. The trick is to find the right match for the given situation. It is also equally important to come into a conversation with the right mindset, if you're intending to engage someone in a dialogue or discussion.

Mutual Learning vs. Unilateral Control

People in general have a tendency to make judgments about their current situations. Nothing wrong with that – it helps us analyze the situation. However, if your intent is to engage in conversation, then a judging mindset can backfire. In *The Skilled Facilitator*, Roger Schwarz outlines the differences between the unilateral control model and the mutual learning model. He argues that approaching conversation from a learning mindset, rather than a judgmental perspective, will ultimately be more effective.

The unilateral control model is based on the assumptions that we understand the situation and the other person does not, that winning is the goal, that we are right and others are wrong, and that if we keep complete control of the conversation, we'll be successful. Therefore, someone who engages in unilateral control will only advocate their own position, will keep their cards close to their chest, won't ask others about their perspective, and is often looking for ways to save face. The results are often misunderstanding, mistrust, defensiveness, limited learning, and reduced effectiveness.

The mutual learning model, on the other hand, operates on the assumptions that we do not have all the answers and therefore, we need to be open and compassionate in our conversations as we learn together. In doing so, we test assumptions, share all relevant information, explain our reasoning, and work together to come up with a solution. The results are increased understanding, reduced conflict, increased trust, and ultimately sustainable solutions.

Clearly the mutual learning model will garner more success, if the intent is to truly learn. Knowing that we often jump to conclusions and act on them as a form of habit means we need to first recognize when we are doing this and then practice stepping back to a more open frame of mind.

Positions vs. Interests

As mentioned earlier, most of us have experienced conversations that run in circles. What is going on and how do we stop the cycle? It really comes down to focusing on interests rather than positions. Your position is the solution you want for a particular problem, and as many of you already know, we often jump to solutions too quickly without exploring the nature of the problem. Your interest, on the other hand, focuses on an outcome and what really matters. Positions are defined by “how,” whereas interests are defined by “why.”

Positional arguments are often mutually exclusive – they are no win situations. Exploring interests, however, typically reveals areas of agreement that can be leveraged for a mutually agreed upon solution. An example that is often used to illustrate this concept is that of two children arguing over who gets the last orange. A parent (undoubtedly having lost all patience) finally cuts the orange in half and hands a half to each child, to which one child wails, “But I wanted the juice to drink!” The other child chimes in, “And I wanted the rind for a cake I’m making!” Hmmmmm....maybe a little too heavy handed? The point is, of course, that if the parent had taken some time to explore interests, he or she would have discovered a very simple and satisfying solution.

When you find yourself in one of these endless arguments, here are some questions you can ask yourself to help you break the cycle:

- Why do I want this solution?
- What do I care about? What outcome do I want?
- What, if anything, am I willing to give up?
- What, if anything, do I consider non-negotiable?
- Why does the other person want his or her solution?
- What does the other person care about? What does he or she want for an outcome?
- Where is there agreement?
- What other options might there be to solve this problem?

The idea of focusing on interests rather than positions is another spin on mutual learning vs. unilateral control, and it uses skillful discussion to get you beyond the same old argument.

So let’s apply these concepts of skillful discussion, mutual learning, and focusing on interests to a specific scenario:

A policy from senior management at ABC hospital states that staff are not allowed to have cell phones at work. Many of the staff refuse to follow the policy

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and conceal their cell phones. One nurse manager says if she ever catches one of her staff with a cell phone, she takes it away for a week. The leadership is concerned about loss of productivity and potential violation of HIPPA regulations. The staff are concerned because they want to be accessible to family in emergencies. *

Very often organizations develop policies in reaction to specific situations with good intentions but without realizing the real impact it will have on their employees. In the above scenario, it would make the most sense for leadership and staff to sit down and ask questions with the intent to learn more about each other's interests. It's important that the conversation begin by focusing on those interests and not jump to solutions too soon.

Setting the stage for this conversation will be critical. If there is any possibility that the conversation could become heated, here are some things to consider that will defuse emotion and help everyone listen to each other:

- Spend time planning the meeting, giving thought to establishing rapport, using an approach that engages all participants, and having a plan for follow up.
- Set some ground rules at the beginning of the meeting.
- Spend time checking in with each person, if the group is small.
- If the group is large, break the group down into smaller groups of 4-5 diverse individuals to discuss the issue and then have them record ideas on sticky notes that go up on a wall.
- Keep the discussion focused on outcomes; don't rehash history.
- Consider using a neutral third party to facilitate the discussion.
- Record agreements and follow up with everyone.
- Take a break if things appear to be getting out of hand.

Ultimately, the solution to the situation exists amongst the participants. When everyone engages in meaningful conversation, new ideas emerge. Collective wisdom is far superior to individual ideas.

Next topic in the series: systems thinking.

**Thanks to Beth Boynton for developing this example.*

Resources:

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most, Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen, and Roger Fisher, 2000.

Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In, Roger Fisher and William L. Ury, 1991.

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The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization, Peter M. Senge, 1990.

The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Peter M. Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard B. Ross, and Bryan J. Smith, 1994.

The Skilled Facilitator, Roger Schwarz, 2002.

The Skilled Facilitator Fieldbook, Roger Schwarz, 2005.

Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) (<http://www.solonline.org/>).

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