

The Basic Principles of Dialogue

Introduction

What is dialogue, exactly? The papers are full of people who are engaging in dialogue, or should be. And dialogue is a hot topic in today's literature on management. 'Dialogue is the leadership vehicle of the 21st century,' writes Jan Bommerez.¹ According to Jos Kessels, 'there is a reason that the dialogue gets such a high appreciation score in recent research. To many people, dialogue is a surprising experience after the rhetoric violence of public debate, the cynicism rife in the media, or the superficiality displayed on television. Yet it is worrying that in our time, when so many people use the word dialogue, there is such limited ability to have an actual inquisitive conversation.'²



Years ago, that last provocative sentence and our own experiences with dialogue were part of what motivated us to nurture the ability to engage in dialogue in the Netherlands. Our efforts focus on dialogue facilitation training, so we have studied what dialogue really means. Our investigation led us to many forms of dialogue as practised in different parts of the world. We also studied a range of dialogue techniques, among other things by attending training sessions³ and reading books. Above all, however, we engaged in hundreds of dialogues together and experienced how dialogue differs from other forms of conversation.

Dialogue is a term used in the theatre and film industry to denote a conversation between two people. In this article, dialogue refers to a conversation in which around seven participants are arranged in a circle. The general definition of dialogue we use is as follows:

Jointly examining a question by listening attentively, sharing experiences, and reflecting on the insights.⁴

Our research shows that dialogue is based on universal principles. We call these the basic principles of dialogue, which serve as the foundation for the rules governing the dialogue, the role, attitude and behaviour of the dialogue facilitator, formulation of the question, the attitude of participants, and even a dialogic way of life.

We have defined seven basic principles:

1. Equality
2. Inquiry
3. Listening attentively
4. Speaking
5. Being with what is
6. Deferring judgement
7. Slowing down and stillness

This article discusses the meaning and importance of each of these seven basic principles.

1. Equality

Equality is vital in a dialogue, meaning that the contribution of each individual participant is of equal value in a dialogue. Equality is expressed physically when the people who are to engage in dialogue sit in a circle. Everyone sits at an equal distance from the centre, which symbolically represents the question that is being examined. Sitting in a circle also means that each participant can have eye contact with all of the other participants. Sitting at a rectangular table, for instance, imposes a hierarchical relationship because someone sits at the head of the table.

Equality is not always self-evident in organisations because there is usually a hierarchy (the CEO) and seniority (the highly experienced project leader). Or people enter into a discussion because they represent other people (the union leader). In a dialogue, we ask everyone to participate as an individual and share their personal experiences. We ask them to take off the coat, or even the armour, of their position. Speaking from the perspective of your own experience instead of from the perspective of a specific role or position changes the shape of the conversation, simply because people are talking to each other as human individuals.

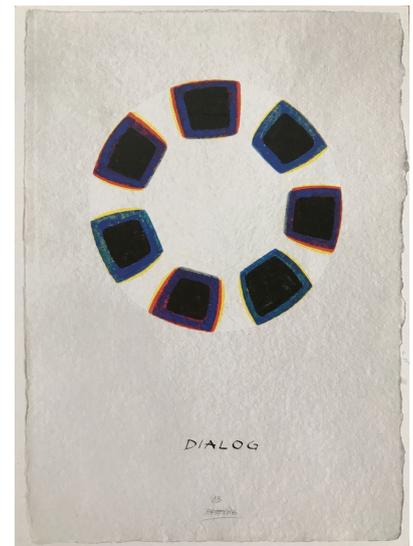
People will only take off their coat or armour if they feel safe. It is important for participants to feel safe in the dialogue. We are so used to not baring our souls or showing our hand that it takes some time to establish equality in a dialogue.

To make everyone feel safe in the circle, a dialogue is based on a number of clear dialogue rules that are agreed upon beforehand. The dialogue facilitator monitors the dialogue and when necessary, reminds participants of the rules. Examples include allowing participants to complete their sentences, ensuring that everyone can say what they want to say, and refraining from finishing each other's sentences. By asking participants to agree to the rules beforehand, everyone takes responsibility for the rules. Where necessary, the facilitator intervenes to restore safety.

Equality is also expressed in speaking time for every participant. A study of how teams at Google function showed that equal speaking time is of fundamental importance to good teams.⁵

2. Inquiry

Inquiry on the topic at hand is the central activity in a dialogue. You are not trying to convince others; instead you are jointly examining a question that was carefully formulated beforehand. The participants take up a position next to each other, as it were, to discover what can be learned from each participant's individual experiences. Every participant adds his or her perspective with regard to the topic. The diversity of the group is leveraged to build an increasingly complete and multi-coloured picture of what you are examining from a diversity of perspectives. What that means is that you are not standing face to face trying to prove yourself right, but rather next to each other to collect valuable information. The question or theme to which the inquiry relates is figuratively, and often literally, placed at the centre of the circle.



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It is vital for such a dialogic inquiry to be based on personal experiences. You ask everyone to share an experience that is relevant to the topic. Not opinions or abstractions, but a contribution based on what each participant has experienced. This is a bit of a change since we are used primarily to expressing our opinions. And it is the essential difference between dialogue and other forms of conversation.

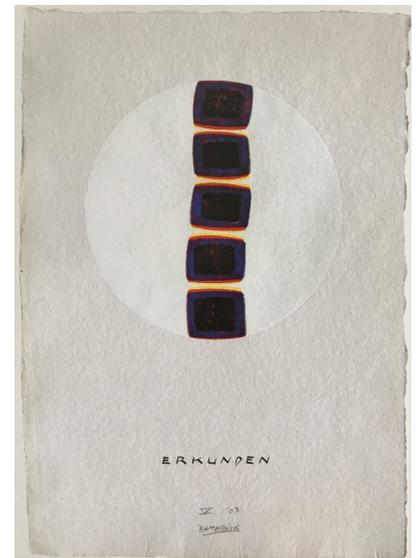
If people share their personal experiences, we stimulate them to be as concrete and factual as possible. Where? With whom? What happened exactly? This allows the other participants to empathise with how it must have been for the other person. Participants put themselves in the other's shoes, opening their hearts to each other as it were.⁶ This aspect is why people often experience a dialogue as completely different. They are surprised at how easily they come to feel connected to other people in the dialogue – regardless of whether they are strangers or colleagues with whom they have been working for years and now see from an entirely different side. We believe that the emphasis on personal experiences in the inquiry is key here.

A dialogic inquiry is also characterised by the presentation of an open-ended question – one to which everyone can contribute their own perspective beyond simply saying: 'Yes, I recognise that' or 'No, I don't think so'.

In many dialogues, we also work with an open-ended question that is formulated in a positive way. There is a big difference in the mood of a discussion depending on whether the question is: 'How do we avoid losing customers?' or 'How do we make sure customers want to stay with us?'. The first question requires the participants to solve a problem and often leads to a phase in which people might become defensive or start to explain why it was not their fault that a customer left. The question invites people to determine how something happened and sometimes also whose fault it was.

An appreciatively formulated question asks the participants to examine what is going well and why. You investigate what you want more of, what you long for, and how you imagine the future to be. This way of asking and examining questions is based on the concept of Appreciative Inquiry, a successful change management movement developed by David Cooperrider in the nineteen eighties.⁷

A final important aspect of the principle of inquiry is that free space should be available.⁸ Free space means that every participant in the dialogue is open and willing to discover something new. That you are open to looking at a topic with different eyes after the dialogue has ended. That you enter into it with an open mind and have the courage to 'not know' for a while. It is especially important for dialogues within organisations to confirm in advance that there is free space to discover new things. Does the board want to engage in dialogue about its concept vision with its employees and customers to confirm what it has conceived, or do they want input for their vision and are they willing to reformulate that vision on the basis of what was said in the dialogue? If there is no free



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space, dialogue is not the right form of conversation because there is no real wish to examine the topic.

3. Listening attentively

In a dialogue, listening takes precedence over speaking. It is a perfect occasion to listen to what others have to say. Listening attentively seems self-evident, something you probably learned when you were young and do without even thinking about it. Yet we say 'seems self-evident' here, because listening attentively is quite a challenge to many people. We devote much more attention to learning to speak than to learning to listen attentively. This becomes clear in consultative meetings, where we often spend more time on what we want to say in response to someone else than on trying to truly understand the other. In your next meeting, why not keep track of how often arguments are presented as opposed to questions asked?⁹ You could also check how many open-ended questions are presented compared to closed questions (which are really arguments in disguise). There is an Irish tradition that you should speak half as much as you listen, since you have just one mouth and two ears.



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Listening attentively means that being quiet inside; there is space to hear what the other is saying and you are interested in what others have to say. Simply put, listening attentively works best when you are unprejudiced and interested. You can monitor yourself to see whether you really want to hear the other when you listen. And if you find that you are distracted, you can decide to refocus your ears. Ears are a highly complex and interesting organ, by the way. Not only are they able to hear something (text); they can also determine where the sound comes from, both spatially and emotionally (vibrations in the voice). We often hear and see what is not being said, what is written between the lines.

Listening is actually a very active activity although we often see it as passive. The activity lies in dealing with the internal disruptions that occur continuously while you are listening. Thoughts arising, reactions you want to utter, questions you have, opinions that present themselves... All of it invisible activity that you have to handle while listening. And every time, you have to find your way back to that quiet inside and your willingness to understand the other.

Listening attentively also has another side, which is the receiving end. It is wonderful and special when someone listens to you attentively, when you feel heard. When the other asks questions that help you tell all of your story. This is what happens in a dialogue. Every participant is listened to attentively, is granted the space to be heard, and in this way contributes to answering the question around which the dialogue evolves.

In his book *Theory U*, Otto Scharmer introduces four levels of listening. Becoming aware of these levels can help you strengthen your ability to listen. He speaks of:

1. Downloading: listening to confirm what you already know
2. Factual listening: listening to add new facts to what you already know

3. Empathic listening: listening and gradually being able to put yourself in the other's shoes, understanding and respecting the other
4. Generative listening: listening to what is said between the lines.

Why not keep track of the listening levels at which you are active for a couple of days?

4. Speaking

While dialogue is more about listening than about speaking, clearly we cannot have a dialogue without exchanging words. Speaking in a dialogue demands a certain level of consideration from a participant. In the first place, you are placing your words in the centre in a dialogue. Everyone speaks and shares personal experiences that relate to the question that is to be examined. Because we assume that everyone listens attentively, it is not necessary to repeat one another. Not having to repeat someone else's words breaks through a habit we tend to have. In the second place, it is an art not to say more than is needed. It requires you to pay attention to, and focus on, what you are saying. In the third place, a dialogue demands a respectful attitude from all participants. From the perspective of equality, every participant's contribution is valuable and qualifying statements about what other people say are unnecessary – either in a positive sense ('I agree entirely'), or in a negative sense ('What you say is incorrect').



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In terms of technique, it makes sense to take some time to experience/feel what you really want to say before you speak up in a dialogue. What do you want to give voice to? What part of what you want to say contributes to answering the question at the centre of the circle?

In a dialogue, there is much less emphasis on reacting to one another. In the first part of the conversation, you want to collect as many different perspectives on the question as possible. You want to leverage the diversity of the participants to paint a multi-coloured picture, as it were, before drawing conclusions or jointly establishing what new insights (or questions) emerged from considering each participant's contribution to the inquiry. Responding to each other can make this more difficult because there is a risk of starting to pursue a certain course early on in the dialogue. After all, a dialogue is about participating and 'participating'. By the latter we mean to say that every participant in the dialogue expresses him or herself, contributes his or her own experiences, and takes his or her own possible contribution to the dialogue seriously instead of minimising it. This probably makes total sense to people with an extraverted personality, but it is really important for more introverted people to realise this. In a dialogue, you cannot just listen attentively – your contribution is always valuable, even if it leads to new questions, constitutes a summary, or consists of doubt.

Often the person most skilled at deferring judgement voices what is going around in the group but has not yet been said. Vocalising what is going on in the group is a very valuable contribution to the dialogue and often causes the discussion to deepen. It is often this kind of moment of which

participants say, in retrospect, that from this point onward the dialogue really started *being about something* and people started to feel committed to each other.

5. Being with what is

The fifth basic principle that we defined is about acceptance. A great deal happens in a dialogue, with a lot of going on inside the participants as well. You hear things that give rise to questions or are completely new to you, vocalise thoughts that may not yet have settled, or feel uncomfortable because nothing at all happens for a little while – there is a silence. In a dialogue, we invite you to just ‘be with this’: to respect what is and is happening. Just like listening, this is not a passive activity but rather an active one. It is an activity that may not be truly visible on the outside but it can be felt on the inside.

What ‘being with what is’ requires from participants is openness and receptiveness, in terms of both what is happening and the outcome of the dialogue. It also requires full presence – you are here with your full attention and register what happens inside you and in the group. We ask you to take yourself completely seriously, to not make yourself bigger or smaller than you are. As such, this principle may represent the most important attitude-related aspect of dialogue.

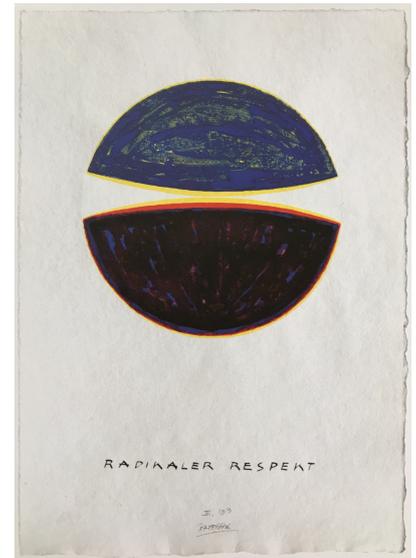
Being with what is also means respecting what is happening. Quite often, emotions like anger or sadness come to the surface in a dialogue because we open up space for sharing personal experiences. The moments in which a participant experiences these emotions are valuable and demand respect. We invite participants to allow these emotions to be, to feel them instead of pushing them away. Silence is a good response to emotions. Not a consoling hand on one’s arm, an offer to step away for a bit, or a joke to lighten the tension. It is best if you are able to allow the other that moment of feeling because you know that emotions will fade away fairly soon.

The same is true of silences, which are important and meaningful. So do not fill them up with words immediately. Allow participants a moment to assimilate what has been exchanged and may yet be said in that moment of quiet.

6. Deferring judgement

Many things go through our minds when we are talking. We are very alert and our brain engages in countless assessments within microseconds. The speed at which we make those assessments may be vital, in traffic or nature for instance. But usually they are less urgent than they seem initially.

In meetings and discussions, such assessments or judgements might even disrupt the flow. A first impression of another person might prove inaccurate. A judgement regarding yourself might make you less effective. Unthinkingly accepting a oneliner might make you fearful. For that reason, we invite each other to defer judgement in a dialogue. To stretch the time between observing something and your response to it, as it were. We do not ask you not to judge because judging is



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useful and practical. We do ask you to take in new information, ruminate on it for a while, and examine what your thoughts about it are.

As a result, we create space to discuss more complex matters, too, matters that might be taboo. Every contribution is allowed in a dialogue. This is based on the assumption that there are always multiple perspectives and there is no absolute truth. There are facts, however, which is why we stimulate the exchange of personal experiences because these approximate facts most closely. And there may be universal values.¹⁰ Often, however, multiple personal truths exist simultaneously when you examine a question. This assumption of multiple perspectives is a basic principle and, in contrast, frequently renders dialogue about religious topics and matters of principle difficult because many religions and worldviews are based on the premise of an absolute truth. As such, they are generally (virtually) unable to allow multiple perspectives.

It helps to grant yourself space to not know in order to stay away from judgement. To enter into a dialogue with a clean slate, that free space we talked about earlier. It takes some practice to achieve but is definitely worthwhile.

A second method to stay away from judgement is to ask yourself what the facts are, or to help the other to establish the underlying facts by asking ‘What happened exactly?’ and ‘What made you come to that assessment?’ A great way to help you do this is the ladder of inference developed by Chris Argyris. The ladder stands in a pool of facts. On the first step of the ladder, we select data. The selected data are interpreted on the second step, and our conclusion is drawn on the third. All this within the space of a second, heavily influenced by the context (pregnant women see more pregnant women). Chris Argyris invites you to step down the ladder or help your dialogue partner step down the ladder to find the underlying facts.

7. Slowing down and stillness

Finally, dialogue is virtually always (on every continent and in every tradition) a form of conversation for which time is made. A dialogue with seven participants requires at least two hours, for instance, which compared to other conversations means that time needs to be freed up to create space. Space to slow down, to achieve a state of quiescence, and to think together.

What happens when we are quiet? What bubbles up when we slow down? What subtleties can be observed when we become peaceful inside? In this sense, dialogue has an energy that differs in an essential way from a debate or discussion. It is not necessarily better, but completely different nonetheless.

In addition to taking time, being willing to allow silence is an important skill. Restraining yourself from filling up a silence if you feel uncomfortable, from responding immediately when something is said. A participant recently defined the role of the dialogue facilitator as ‘the skill of restraint’.



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A talking stick can be useful because only the person holding the talking stick is allowed to speak, and it sometimes takes a while before the talking stick is in your hand (once again). What is interesting here is that what you wanted to say initially often seems less relevant after all, a few minutes later. It teaches you to stretch the time between impulse and response, and something new tends to emerge in that space. An introverted team member starts to speak, for instance, and presents a new perspective, or you can submit a point more relevant to the examination by combining input and listening between the lines.

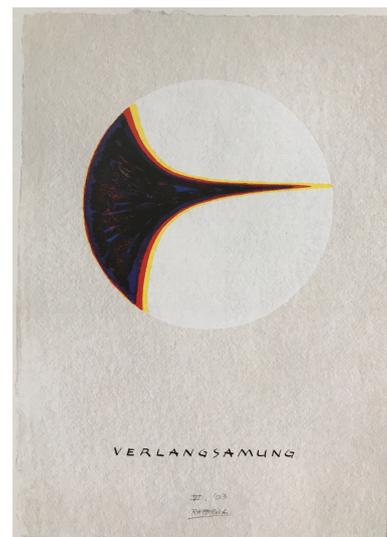
In the fast pace at which everyday life is moving, we almost seem to have lost the ability to make time for a good conversation. The great thing, however, is that there is a business case for it (to use the contemporary terminology). We have seen countless examples in which deceleration led to acceleration.¹¹ It asks a team to merge differences in (organisational) culture, interests and objectives into an interactive synergy. And to keep one person or party from dominating, people from pulling back from the substance of the dialogue or being excluded in the different stages of collaboration. A team that truly takes time to get to know each other (talents, underlying values, motivations, allergies, interests) at the outset will reap the benefits in the execution of the project or strategic collaboration. They communicate more efficiently, leverage talents more effectively, lose less energy due to irritations, are less likely to duplicate work, and are less plagued by absenteeism due to illness. We find this to be true in our own collaboration within *Leerweg Dialoog* (Dialogue Learning Pathways), which is fairly effortless. We often take time to examine possible disruptions together immediately.

In conclusion

As we already mentioned at the beginning of this article, we believe that these seven basic principles constitute the foundation of dialogue. Every conversation in which you can bring these seven principles to bear will have a quality quintessentially different from what you may be used to at this point.

The basic principles also represent the foundation for defining the question, the attitude of the participants and dialogue facilitators, and the rulebook for the dialogue. We generally implement the rulebook established by the Stichting Nederland in Dialoog (Netherlands in Dialogue Foundation), which translate the basic principles to behaviour, as it were:

- Allow the other to tell his/her story
- Appreciate the story, defer judgement
- Speak from your own perspective, no generalities ('I experienced' instead of 'people say')
- Make sure that every participant is offered the space to speak
- Allow silences
- Treat each other with respect and kindness



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We wish you every success in engaging in dialogue and would be pleased to meet you at a training at some point in the future.¹²

Renate van der Veen & Olga Plokhooij
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Translation Dutch to English by Iris de Voogd.

The article is illustrated with images by the German artist Werner Ratering (1954-2017), who recently passed away. He evolved a beautiful series of images representing aspects of dialogue.



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¹ Jan Bommerez, *Door de bomen het bos zien*, Uitgeverij Multilibris, 2016, Almere, p. 242.

² Conversation between Roos Nabben and Jos Kessels, *Vlinderlijke eenvoud* part 1, Art. 1 and *Nieuwe Maan*, 2008, Amsterdam, p. 25. (download on [Leerwegdialoog.nl](http://leerwegdialoog.nl))

³ Training has included: Nederland in Dialoog for dialogue based on Appreciative Inquiry; World Dialogue Foundation for talking circles; Arab Educational Institute Centre for the Read, Reflect, Communicate and Act method; Het Nieuwe Trivium for Socratic Dialogue; Oikos/Corrymeela for Dialogue for Peaceful Change and Academie voor Organisatiecultuur for Deep Democracy.

⁴ Definition formulated by Leerweg Dialoog - <http://leerwegdialoog.nl>

⁵ [What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html>: On the good teams, members spoke in roughly the same proportion, a phenomenon the researchers referred to as 'equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking'. On some teams, everyone spoke during each task; on others, leadership shifted among teammates from assignment to assignment. But in each case, by the end of the day, everyone had spoken roughly the same amount. 'As long as everyone got a chance to talk, the team did well,' Woolley said. 'But if only one person or a small group spoke all the time, the collective intelligence declined.'

⁶ Otto Scharmer speaks of an 'open heart' and 'open mind' to engage in a dialogue. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U*, SoL, 2007, Cambridge MA.

⁷ More information about David Cooperrider can be found at <http://www.davidcooperrider.com/>.

⁸ The concept of 'free space' is derived from Jos Kessels. He wrote a book with this title with Erik Boers and Pieter Mostert, in which they advocate the creation of free space that offers a certain autonomy from results and objectives, as well as adequate time to examine the question in peace.

⁹ You can read more about achieving this balance in Chris Argyris, *Reasons and rationalizations: The limits of organizational knowledge*, Oxford University Press, (2004), Oxford.

¹⁰ A really good dialogue question in and of itself.

¹¹ Sue Canney Davison on Leading and Facilitation international teams in *Cross-Cultural Teambuilding*, Mel Berger (1996), London: McGraw-Hill.

¹² The Leerweg Dialoog website contains more information about training sessions: <http://leerwegdialoog.nl>.