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Dialogue vs. Discussion

By [Graeme Nichol](#)



Have you ever sat in a meeting where everyone is busy giving their point of view and trying to prove why they are right? Where no one is actually listening or trying to understand other individuals' points of view. The alternative meeting format is where everyone listens to and agrees with the meeting leader. No one contributes or adds ideas, they are just compliant.

In my experience most meetings are either one or the other. But when you think about it, what is the point of most meetings? Meetings are usually held to make decisions. The outcome that most people would want from the meeting is that the BEST decision is made, not that any decision is made, or another sub-committee is formed but that a decision that delivers results is made. Then we move on.

So as we hustle from meeting to meeting being very busy, achieving nothing in the way of measurable results, we land up with yet another sub-committee. All because we have lost the art of dialogue. So, the question is; what is the difference between dialogue and discussion?

DISCUSSION - Discussion is the way that most people communicate. During discussion we present our ideas and everyone analyzes and dissects them from their different points of view. The purpose of discussion, though, is to make sure you win, or that your point of view is the one that is accepted. During the discussion you will support your idea and give your points more strongly until, eventually, others agree with you. You want to prove that you are right, and the most knowledgeable, as does everyone else in the discussion. Great! With everyone trying to win the argument, no decision is ever made and we eventually need to form a sub-committee to decide. Or the CEO, or team leader, uses his or her divine autocratic right and decides for the team.

DIALOGUE - Dialogue on the other hand is an exploration of ideas. It is not a new form of communication but is the way the ancient Greeks and many so called 'primitive' societies are seen to explore ideas. During dialogue everyone works together contributing towards the idea. Remember the team is greater than the sum of the parts; therefore more is achieved from the dialogue as each person's ideas add to the last. In a dialogue no one is trying to win. They are trying to learn and create. They suspend their individual assumptions and explore ideas and issues. It is a free flow of ideas where participants continue to think and watch themselves think. The great physicists Heisenberg, Pauli, Einstein and Bohr described the conversations they had with each other. As we know from history their conversations (dialogue) changed traditional physics because what they could achieve as a group exceeded what each could do as individuals. Interesting? So who is 'primitive' now?

How do you get your team to dialogue? There are 3 conditions needed:

Everyone must suspend their assumptions. Dialogue comes to a grinding halt when someone digs in their heels and says "this is the way". They need to suspend their assumptions to really see where the truth lies. Suspending one's assumptions is not easy, as often they are so deep seated that we don't even know that they are assumptions! Instead, we take them for being the truth.

Team members must be thought of as colleagues and equals. If you manage to think of others as colleagues you will interact as colleagues. Team members will feel less vulnerable and less likely to either want to dominate the discussion or not say anything at all. Thinking of everyone as colleagues can be difficult in a hierarchical workplace environment. Can



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...y position and talk to everyone else as an equal or do they like their
...nsure that ALL assumptions are suspended. This means questioning
...are also important in keeping the dialogue moving. As a team gets
...d.

You are closer to achieving dialogue when your team meetings are filled with questions. Questions indicate an attempt at understanding. Sit back in your next meeting and see how often a question is asked. No questions = no dialogue.

Teams can enter dialogue if everyone knows what is expected of them in advance and if they truly want the results created through dialogue. Dialogue is playful conversation and everyone must be willing to play with new ideas. Who says you can't have fun and grow at the same time?

I hope you can achieve dialogue in your teams. Since we became aware of the difference and have been trying to practice dialogue we have really had some amazing insights into our business and what we do. We have achieved a whole level of new understandings.

Who knows, maybe there is something amazing that your company could achieve if you all just put your heads together. $1 + 1 = 3$ makes a lot of sense!

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Graeme Nichol has worked on 4 continents and in 117 unique businesses gaining experience in manufacturing, transportation, agriculture, communications, banking, direct marketing, consumer goods and retail amongst others. He has significant management experience and consulting experience, including Business strategy, project management, change management, big six consulting, team productivity, business productivity and quality improvement, ERP implementations.

Arcturus Advisors works with businesses and teams that are struggling to formulate a strategic plan that delivers bottom line results. Using tried and tested planning systems that have achieved results internationally for 20 years we ensure that you transform your business through focus, alignment and accountability.

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