

ENGAGING IN STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

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Talking about the future direction an organization or collaborative group should take is a challenge at the best of times. Figuring out what to do tomorrow involves intelligent, dedicated, and caring people sharing their ideas, passions -- and their biases.

Building Common Ground

The challenge is to build common ground on which everyone can stand and see a clear path forward. Common ground is not about full agreement about everything. Rather it is that *place* where we understand one another and from such understanding have built a way forward together, where there is sufficient agreement on a common aspiration or agenda to do so.

This is not easy to do amongst a diversity of players from across different sectors who work in various organizational cultures and who carry mandates, strategies, and rules that are provided to them by their respective organizations.

Diversity of Perspective is not enough. Inclusion must occur.

Each participant in a significant change initiative is being asked to combine their mandates in a manner that achieves collective change while being respectful of one another. We all know that big change requires diversity at the table, but diversity is only effective when inclusion occurs, when everyone is helping everyone to get to that common ground.

All of us have experienced and valued the generation of ideas that evolve out of talking together, sharing perspectives, making suggestions, challenging one another, and so



forth. No doubt this is the kind of experience we all desire when we talk together about critical issues and opportunities.

Avoiding Pitfalls

It is also likely that all of us have experienced unsuccessful group sessions. There are a lot of reasons why that happens; some of them are:

- ✓ Participants become overly positional and end up arguing or debating more so than working together to craft the best solution or strategy.
- ✓ There is an inequity of participation, where a few people dominate the conversation.
- ✓ Participants allow personal differences and past frustrations with one another to get in the way of collaborating to achieve the larger aim.
- ✓ The group strays off track, becomes immersed in tangential conversations and at the end of the day falls short of accomplishing what they set out to do.
- ✓ People come unprepared to participate as per the agenda or wish to promote an entirely different agenda.

Think about your own experiences and what has happened in the past to make a meeting or a strategy session less successful than you thought it could have been and then make a personal commitment to foster a convivial environment for crafting change and direction together.

About Strategic Dialogue

Dialogue is a practice developed by David Bohm and others that focuses on the “shared exploration towards greater understanding, connection, or possibility.” Suggested guidelines for dialogue are:

We talk about what’s *really* important to us

Sometimes we jump around in discussions, allow ourselves to meander to tangents that keep us from what the group really needs to discuss and figure out. It is important to find the balance between staying on topic and allowing flexibility in the exchange. What a group talks about should be determined by the group, not just one or two individuals.

We *really* listen to one another

We see how thoroughly we can understand each other’s views and experience. Active listening means asking questions and helping others get their ideas out. Too often we are formulating our response to what someone is saying while they are saying it. Bohm would argue our attention on the speaker should include actively seeking the meaning she or he is trying to convey before we speak on the topic we wish to speak on.

We say what’s true for us without making each other wrong

Diversity is good. We need varying opinions. In fact, learning depends on differing perspectives and constructive criticism and exchange. Positional arguments however tend to focus on who is right and who is wrong. In dialogue, we seek to speak our truth while accepting and encouraging the truth of others. We do not have to convey our truth AND also make others feel that their truth is wrong.

We see what we can learn together by exploring things together

Often in discussions we do not stop to ask what the group has learned or gleaned so far. Where are we in the discussion? What, if anything, has changed in our collective thinking so far? Also, the concept of “exploring together” implies an understanding that we are not all starting with answers or the right answers but are open, through inquiry and discussion, to find a better way, a better idea, and a common aspiration of action.

We avoid monopolizing the conversation

We make sure everyone has a chance to speak or contribute. Some people talk more than others, and sometimes people use their voice to silence others. If inclusion of diverse perspectives is valued, then hearing the voices of all involved should be encouraged by the group. This requires discipline. No facilitator can muster up your own discipline.

We create a safe place for difficult exchanges

Fostering major change in community work invariably involves individuals and their organizations changing what they do and often how people within organizations think and act. This will not be accomplished by finger wagging or polarizing exchanges.

Imagine if your group could master these guidelines. The quality, range, and depth of the exchange would increase, more would get done, and your group will be primed for moving forward together.

Tamarack tools are for everyone. If you wish to share this tool with others, please do so.

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