Words Matter! Introducing & Using Dialogue Strategies In Public Policy Debates

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"Dialogue", as we use the term, refers to a set of communication skills that promote sharing of perspectives, information, and values in a manner that leads to mutual understanding rather than debate. These skills include careful listening; use of open questions to elicit thoughts, feelings and concerns; acknowledging and understanding what was said before responding; and focusing forward.

1. Dialogue: When And How To Use It.

True dialogue should be distinguished from debate (argument over positions), discussion (characterized here as polite conversation over information or positions with no real engagement), or deliberation (a careful evaluation of the available alternatives leading to a choice). Too often parties in a public process dive into debate and become increasingly at odds as each attacks a position that may not even be clearly understood. Or they leap to deliberation on a set of predefined alternatives, without exploring the differences in ways that could lead to the identification of a new set of more productive options. Neither of these approaches is a particularly effective or efficient way to craft policy.

Group dialogue is difficult because each person thinks and processes information in unique ways. As a result, misunderstandings and conflicts often arise as individuals work together. These can be more easily avoided or resolved when individuals have a common framework for identifying, analyzing, and working through differences. "Framework" is not the same as a process. By "framework" we mean a set of definitions, principles, and collaborative approach that taken together provide a structure that helps the parties navigate through difficult issues. Dialogue can be used to create such a framework at the outset of a public process.

Where conflicts involve more than differences in information (as most do), an effectively structured dialogue can help dissipate emotions and build trust between the parties. Dialogue can also help the parties surface and then resolve differences in values, expectations, or interests, that may underlie positions and demands. Dialogue is more likely than debate or discussion to help group members gain a greater understanding of each other—their different communication needs, perspectives and interests,—and to reach a mutual understanding of the work that needs to be done. Although deliberation may well be needed at some point in the process, dialogue is likely to generate a better and wider set of options for deliberation and for this reason should generally precede and be separated from the deliberative stage.

Dialogue can most effectively be used to assist in policy development if it is introduced in different stages that are carefully defined and separated. For example, a dialogue on "understanding the concern" can both introduce people to the dialogue process and help give those guiding policy development initial insight into the range of thoughts, emotions, interests, and information needs of the different audiences they will be working with. By keeping a focus on understanding the concern or issue, partisan debate can be minimized.

> *Example*: "At this stage we are reviewing your thoughts and concerns regarding (broad policy issue x). We are not here now to talk about solutions, although we

will note any ideas that are shared. We will look at information and evaluate options at later stages of the process. Today we are trying to better understand why each of us is here and involved. So as we go around the room, I'd like you to focus on that topic – what interests or concerns or experiences brought you here today?"

Dialogue also can be used to help define the process itself – to refine expectations, set ground rules, and identify needs. During subsequent stages of a public engagement process, dialogue is an ideal tool for exploring both qualitative and quantitative data and for generating and defining a wide array of options.

2. Understanding Different Approaches and Preferences.

Much has been written on how "political allegiances" affect how people receive or accept information or ideas that differ from their own position. Less attention has been paid to physical differences in how individuals process information or approach problem solving. Differences in learning styles (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic), temperament (cool to spirited, introvert or extrovert), thinking style preferences (analytical, procedural, intuitive, imaginative, etc.), and other factors all affect how individuals receive and process different types of information, how they talk about a matter, and how they hear—or filter—what is said by others.

For example, referring to the "Whole Brain™" model for thinking style preferences which we often work with, a person with an A quadrant preference might begin to tackle a problem by making an outline and gathering data, while one with a preference in the B quadrant might begin by organizing materials or listing procedures, one with a C quadrant preference might begin by forming a team and building relationships, and one with a D quadrant preference might begin by brainstorming a list of ideas. These are all normal approaches, although different. Often different parties and individuals have strong feelings about what needs to be discussed first, or at all. You can find out more about our work with the Whole Brain model and structuring dialogues at www.buildingdialogue.com .

3. Identify Patterns that Get in the Way.

People often send clear signals about what is appropriate to them—for example, details or ideas, relationships or data—and the type of feedback or type of product they are looking for. If you are aware of, and look for, these signals you are better able to think strategically in ways that will lead to better communication and better relationships, and better able to respond. For example, referring to the Whole Brain™ illustration above, if you are aware that different thinking style processes are resulting in conflict over how to approach an issue, you can use the Whole Brain™ framework to set an agenda that ensures all will be heard and that the dialogue will unfold in an orderly way. For example: D: "Where do we want to be? Why?"; A: "What would help us get there?; C: "Who needs to be involved or will be affected and how?"; B: "How would we go about implementing this approach?" How a dialogue is structured can greatly impact both the speed and efficiency of the process, as well as the participants' perception of fairness. We can provide training that helps you to recognize common communication patterns, identify mismatches in thinking style preferences, and learn new ways of redirecting or helping parties change these patterns in order to allow for more productive discussion.