

Ground-rules for Creative Dialogue

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Creative Dialogue is a unique form of conversation that aims to produce two valuable results:

- Mutual understanding among participants, and
- Recognition of new possibilities that make sense of differing viewpoints.

Creative Dialogue is not discussion, debate, or persuasion. Discussion aims to air differing viewpoints, but does not hold participants accountable for mutual understanding or the discovery of new possibilities. Debate aims to offer arguments for one's own point of view and to critique other viewpoints using logic and evidence. Persuasion attempts to bring others into agreement with one's own viewpoint. Neither debate nor persuasion seeks compassionate understanding of the viewpoints of those who differ. A fundamental assumption underlying Creative Dialogue is that we can understand more together than we can separately. Each participant in a Dialogue brings a piece of the “truth” to be added to the perspective of others.

The following ground-rules prove useful for getting results through Creative Dialogue:

- When others speak, listen to understand, not to agree or disagree.
- If you don't understand the viewpoint of another, ask questions of clarification (not a challenge) before offering your own point of view.
- When you speak about a difference you have with another, first say what you agree with, and then how you understand their point of view. Ask if you have understood them, when they confirm that you to, offer your own viewpoint.
- If you are tempted to repeat yourself, or to withdraw, because others don't seem to understand, first check your understanding of the others viewpoint. (Very often, when you feel misunderstood is an indicator that the other feels misunderstood as well.)
- When everyone agrees mutual understanding is present, look together for new possibilities. If you see a new way of understanding the situation, express it and ask if others see it too.
- Explore new commitments for action that may now be possible.

David Bohm *On Dialogue*

DIALOGUE comes from the Greek *dialogos*: *Logos* means “the word”, or in our case we would think of “the meaning of the word”, and *dia* means “through” (not two - a dialogue can be among any number of people; even one person can have a sense of dialogue with himself or herself if the spirit of the dialogue is present).

The image this derivation suggests is of a *stream of meaning* flowing among us and through us and between us - a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which will emerge some new understanding, something creative. When every body is sensitive to all the nuances going around, and not merely to what is happening in one's own mind, there forms a meaning which is shared. And in that way we can talk together coherently and think together. It is this *shared meaning* that is the “glue” or “cement” that holds people and societies together.

Contrast this with the word “discussion”, which has the same root as “percussion” and “concussion”. Discussion really means to break things up. It emphasizes the idea of analysis, where there may be many points of view. A great deal of what we call “discussion” is not deeply serious, in the sense that there are all sorts of things held to be non-negotiable, untouchable, things that people don't even want to talk about. Discussion is like a ping-pong game with people batting the ideas back and forth in order to win the game.

In a dialogue there is no attempt to gain points, or to make your particular view prevail. It is more a common participation, in which people are not playing a game against each other but *with* each other. In a dialogue, everybody wins.

This statement was taken from physicist David Bohm On Dialogue. Translated and edited by Phidea Fleming and James Brodsky from a meeting with David Bohm. To order write David Bohm Seminars. Box 1452, Ojai, CA 93023