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# A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths

## Using Dialogue to Overcome Fear & Distrust at Work

Annette Simmons

AMACOM

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## INTRODUCTION

Sometimes the only safe place for dangerous truth is in the bathroom... *after* checking for feet, of course.

Only then it is safe to talk. After the meeting, after everyone has said exactly what they were supposed to say, agreed to the action plan, and allocated tasks with due dates, comes the real truth:

"What a waste of time!"

"I'm not taking *that* back to my people they've got to be kidding!"

"Don't worry about it. It will fall apart long before your piece is due."

Sometimes the meeting is debriefed like a play: "How about when Mark did that 180-degree flip? I thought I was gonna die! He will agree with anything she says," or "Can you believe they still won't face the fact that Amy can't do the job?"

It never occurs to us that we are wasting each other's time (and our own) by not telling the truth *in* the meeting rather than after it. Even when this thought does occur to us, we have many reasons why telling the truth just won't work.

Why not? Why can't we tell the truth? It's *dangerous*, that's why.

It's dangerous for many reasons. Most of those reasons have to do with wanting to keep our jobs. But at what price? Holding back the truth means holding back other things, such as enthusiasm and commitment. Why can't we create a place safe enough where we *can* tell the truth where we *want* to tell the truth?

It would have to be a very safe place. People would need to trust one another, and they would have to care enough to take the risk. They would need to believe the result was worth the risk. They

would have to want to learn from each other, even if it meant admitting their own ignorance, fears, and shortcomings. And they would have to throw the politically correct suck-up routine in the trash where it belongs. Never happen?

I don't think we have a choice. If information and knowledge are now the most important raw resources we have, then we have to start doing a better job of getting it to the people who need it. Bottlenecks in our informal information systems squeeze the flow of knowledge down to a trickle, creating a drought of creative ideas and good decisions. If we are to remove the bottlenecks, we need to understand that the barriers to this vital flow of information are in our minds, not in our technology.

Eight years ago, I stumbled upon a process called "dialogue" in Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline*. From there I studied William Isaacs's Dialogue Project at MIT, Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard's work with The Dialogue Group, the work of quantum physicist David Bohm, M. Scott Peck's work on community building, and contributions from many, many others. I embraced the idea that we can apply a formal process to create a place where it is safe enough to tell each other the truths safe enough to say what needs to be said. In 1994, I wrote my thesis on dialogue. To satisfy my personal quest to pump a little authenticity back into the workplace, I used my thesis as an opportunity to develop a process and experiment with innovative methods and techniques. My goal was to find a process that would radically change the norms of a group so that people could increase their capacity to face dangerous truths head-on and address the apparently unsolvable and definitely undiscussable issues that were tearing them apart.

My first efforts resulted in a baptism by fire. It isn't easy to get people to have a real dialogue. They are avoiding the truth for what they consider to be damn good reasons. But once I did get people to take the risk, the results were beyond my wildest expectations. When a group faces the facts, drops the pretense, and tells the truth, the euphoria of rising to the occasion connects the group and fills everyone with energy. That euphoria is addictive. Facilitating dialogue is very gratifying work.

My hope is that your efforts will go beyond my research and my experiments. I don't want anyone to get the impression that I think there is a "right" way to do dialogue. There are many paths to



dialogue. This is not intended to be the definitive step-by-step guide to dialogue. It is one guide, not *the* guide.

I can only provide a series of snapshots of dialogue (taken from my particular view). There are oversimplifications and gross generalizations. It is up to you to shade in the contours and terrain specific to your application. In the spirit of dialogue, I encourage you to consider the assumptions that guide your approach to facilitation. I suspect that many of your old assumptions won't fit. I also invite you to reflect on what drives your desire to take groups to such a deep level of conversation. Taking a group to a place where people face dangerous truths is not a decision to be taken lightly. This can become, in the words of a workshop participant, "intense facilitation."

The book is written in three parts. In the first part, I dialogue about dialogue. I walk all the way around the concept of turning dialogue into a formal process, what it might look like, feel like, taste like. There is enough information to give you a chance to decide whether you think it is a good idea or not.

Part Two introduces a clear structure and a step-by-step "recipe" for dialogue. The clarity is false. Dialogue is too complex for a recipe. I don't expect you to follow this recipe. In fact, I beg you not to follow it word for word. To me, it is like cooking. When I cook, I consult up to three recipes as a starting point. Then I may toss all three aside and concoct my own that fits with what I have in the pantry and the guests who are coming over. It's the same with dialogue. This recipe is offered as a starting point. If you are the kind of person who likes to "see" someone do it first, there is a simulated example of this recipe in the Appendix. It is presented not as a script to memorize, but to stimulate your own ideas.

Part Three describes seven facilitator skills but they go beyond skills. They encompass the underlying personal qualities that help you encourage others to dialogue. It takes a special state of being to take a group to dialogue. When you read these sections, you will see what I mean. The last chapter is designed to provide a transition from the false clarity of "this is how to do it" to the real-life experiences you will encounter on your own path to dialogue. I share with you the experiences and opinions of several other people who have successfully forged their own paths to dialogue. As we review what they think it takes to facilitate dialogue, we abandon our temporary illusion of clarity and rejoin a more realistic and complex



world where the answer to the question, "How do you do it?" is "It depends."

Finally, I believe you must hold two basic philosophical assumptions to facilitate dialogue. The main one is that people are basically good. If you think people are bad at the core (e.g., greedy, exploitative, mean), there is no point in dialogue. Dialogue only reveals what is at the core. For me, the greatest payoff of dialogue has been to watch over and over again a group's revelation of how "good" it really is. During dialogue, the "bad" falls away like unnecessary armor.

If you believe that people are good, then the second philosophical assumption is easier to put into practice. No one can or should try to control the process of dialogue. We may facilitate but never direct or control. Dialogue is completely unpredictable. To impose a desired outcome is to corrupt the process. Dialogue is like dance. No one owns the concept. No one invented it. Too much critique will shut it down or stunt the creative process. We reinvent it every time we do it. And, yes, sometimes it looks and feels a little awkward but it always brings out the best in us and makes us feel alive.

PART 1  
DIALOGUE DEFINED

## Chapter 1

### Why Dialogue?

*Between falsehood and useless truth there is little difference. As gold which he cannot spend will make no man rich, so knowledge which he cannot apply will make no man wise.*

SAMUEL JOHNSON

#### Shooting In The Dark

In one survey, 93 percent of people have admitted to lying regularly at work.  
*1 Ninety-three percent!*

If we want better communication, don't you think this is a good place to start?

We don't simply need to improve the flow of information at work. We need to improve the quality of the information that is flowing. People aren't telling the truth. And it corrupts our systems. It distorts feedback loops. Low-quality information breeds low-quality relationships, low-quality processes, and surprise, surprise low-quality products and services.

How often do you tell the truth at work? A better question might be, how often do you believe what you hear? Most of us do not out-and-out lie. We simply hide behind partial truths; prepolished, politically correct routines; or sins of omission that distort perceptions and fracture an organization's ability to adapt.

We end up basing important decisions on a series of doctored opinions, data, and information each delivered with a missing piece or an accumulating "spin." How can we expect to meet our deadlines, keep our customers happy, or ensure quality with bad data? Engineers call it stacked tolerance. When a tiny tolerance of plus or minus a

thousandth of an inch stacks up, the combined effect can destroy the integrity of a system. Every piece is just a little off "true," and the result is that the group of pieces, as a whole, ends up a lot off "true." In terms of communication, we might even say the group ends up discussing falsehoods instead of the truth.

We run the risk of building our strategic plans, allocating our resources, and making other major decisions based on faulty information. Sounds like a recipe for failure, doesn't it? We can't make good decisions if we aren't telling each other the truth. And how in the world can we build a team that works well together when we can't even talk to one another?

Too many people think it is futile to speak the truth at work. They think that to be honest and authentic is to commit career suicide. They believe that only a fool would "call it like it is." And so they compromise. They keep quiet about "delicate" issues. They avoid the touchy points. And soon enough, subjects that are undiscussable exceed the discussable. All that is left are the inane, superficial, and repetitious details that monopolize our workplace conversations. If you've ever sat in a meeting that was a complete waste of time, you were probably surrounded by people unwilling to speak the truth.

### Thinking New Thoughts

It is time to rewrite old rules that filter out the disturbing yet vital truths. What a wasted resource! Those truths, considered dangerous, actually have the power to challenge our workgroups to think new thoughts and generate new ideas. We need to build a safe place where these dangerous truths can surface. We need to make it okay to question, wonder, and reflect. Only then can our organizations begin to achieve the level of responsiveness and foresight necessary for long-term success in today's business environment. Our mills of creativity require the grist of truth telling to produce new ideas, innovative products, and ingenious shortcuts to accelerate delivery times. Half-truths only inspire half-hearted efforts and mediocre results. It is the genuine exchange of meaningful truth that gives birth to enthusiasm, passion, and excellence. It is the experience of genuine dialogue that can transform and develop the full extent of a group's potential into reality.

Dialogue has the power to change a group of strangers into friends and a collection of individuals into a team. Dialogue builds

