The four DIALOGIC PRACTICES

By Peter Garrett

AUTHENTIC VOICE without pretence / finding one’s own true voice
LISTENING without distraction to what is really being said
RESPECT without violation and ensuring things make sense to each other
SUSPENSION without certainty to nurture enquiries into one’s own thinking

However good you are, if you practice you will get better. The atmosphere within which people talk and think together is dependent on the Dialogic Practices. Deepening the practices makes the atmosphere richer and more conducive to thinking well together by making a stronger container.

Dialogue is a mode of talking and thinking together that helps people to find a common understanding and a common purpose. The decisions and actions that result from good dialogue make common sense to everyone involved. Good dialogue requires a set of simple and practical skills that can easily be learned and bettered with practice. In dialogue people express their own views, needs and aspirations, listen to others, agree and disagree with one another, support and challenge each other, become aware of their own assumptions and impact on others, come to appreciate diversity and to accommodate differences in ways that may not have been obvious at first. With the benefit of dialogue it is possible to undertake participatory change with people rather than imposing change by doing it to people. Change of this kind is sustainable over time because it feels right and is based on collective common sense.

The Dialogic Practices are ethical and fundamental to good communication. If they are absent it is not possible to have high quality exchanges with others. They are called Practices because the more you practice them the better you get. The more you understand and use the Dialogic Practices the higher the quality of your encounters with others will be. There are only four Practices and they reinforce one another. They are simple enough to remember and use whilst you are talking with others and you then notice the quality is not as good as you would like it to be.

AUTHENTIC VOICE: The beginning of finding your voice is to speak up. The conversation may not be going so well because you know something that is not being said, and if it were said it would make a difference to how people are thinking and the decisions they are making. As long as you don’t speak up, the conversation lacks your contribution. Once you do speak up, the practice is learning to be more genuine and authentic in what you say. Every person is unique and has a unique perspective which enriches the conversation when they speak up genuinely. Some people say one thing in the room in front of others, and then another thing behind their backs. That gives poor information for the decisions being made, and is also likely to offend people. So the practice of Voice is saying what you think, feel or mean in the room, and feeling comfortable being quoted accurately later as having said it. Sometimes the challenge is doing so when there are more senior people present, but more senior people do need to hear and understand your genuine views and to take them into account in their decisions. Things said with respect will be listened to and will help understanding, whilst things said disrespectfully will lead to reaction and the polarisation of views. The practice of Voice is saying what you think whilst respecting that others may have good reasons for thinking differently. That creates the greatest potential for constructive progress.

LISTENING: The first step with Listening is hearing what other people are actually saying. Generally speaking, people don’t participate as well as they think they do, and are poorer listeners than they believe they are. People tend to listen when they are interested or agree with what is being said, but often get distracted and thereby ignore much of what others say. What many people don’t realise is that their listening affects the speaker and that their lack of listening leads the other person to be less interesting. The more carefully you listen, the easier it is for the other person to speak up and to be genuine and authentic about what they are trying to say. Once you are listening to what is said, the practice is to try to understand what the person really means. The tone of their voice, their choice of words, their level of comfort or discomfort and the things they don’t say are all helpful in understanding what is really meant. As you listen you may helpfully access similar experiences.
in yourself that enrich your understanding, empathy and compassion. In particular, when people are in a very different situation from your own, the practice of Listening requires you to remember that their experience is not your experience, and that each individual has a unique journey through life.

**RESPECT:** Fundamental to Respect is how you see and respond to what is similar and what is different. Some things said by other people are similar to your own views or experiences, whilst other things said are not. Where you agree with what is said because it resonates with your own views then it is easy to listen and to receive what they are saying. Where you do not agree, you have a choice. On the one hand you can ignore that different view (which devalues the person saying it and may be experienced by them as a violation), or you can reject outright what was said (which will be experienced as some level of violence). The practice of Respect is one of learning how to receive constructively that which is different and that you do not immediately agree with or even understand. It is about receiving difference whilst not necessarily supporting or condemning that difference. Rather than withdrawing or rejecting, this requires listening to the other person to hear what they are saying and what they mean, which in turn will help them to be more articulate and genuine. It requires an acceptance that the other person, who holds different views from yours, has a reason for holding their views which is valid to them. Because each person is unique and has a unique set of experiences, you may not know what that reason is for them. Respect leads you to receive their view (not agree with, support or condone their different view) and creates the conditions to discover why they hold that view. A coherent understanding is the fruit of Respect.

**SUSPENSION:** The first step in Suspension is following what happened. When we talk and think together with others, there is a sequence to the way things develop and to what is said and how it is received, ignored or rejected. Things that are said lead to proposals and explanations that in turn lead to others. Sometimes we trip ourselves or each other up, or get caught in repetitive cycles that impair or prevent progress. Sometimes people even find themselves arguing with one another not realising that they actually agree with each other. Looking back on it reflectively we may realise where we went wrong. When you suspend your view you step back to look at how you come to hold that view. Rather than simply judging a person or a situation, you ask yourself how you come to be forming that judgment. The deeper practice of Suspension is the art of following what happens as it is happening, and adding that perspective in order to free things up and help to make progress. This requires awareness, attention, insight and flexibility. When there is no Suspension, individuals will be absolutely certain that they are right, and that their view is how it really is. If others don’t agree then there is an impasse. Suspension is required to free locked horns. The practice of Suspension leads to an inquiry into how the view (that people are certain is right) has been formed. What have people seen, heard or read, and what assumptions have been made? What reasoning has been used and have they jumped to any conclusions to form the belief held? What are the implications of acting on that strongly held view? It is this inquiry into our individual and collective views through Suspension that enables us to be more open-minded in the way we engage with others. The wisdom developed by the Practice of Suspension enables us to change and grow as individuals. When people in Dialogue collectively suspend their views, then this enables changes of collective thought and enables change and development in the overall culture in the agency.

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