

#2 Monologue vs. Dialogue (pp.136-137)

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Part 2:7 Managing the Dialogue

Dialogue does not demand that we give up our own ideas while we listen to someone else we might disagree with. It merely asks that we suspend our judgment and explore those contrary ideas with an open mind. Flick adds, “A key to practicing the Understanding Process is the knowledge that understanding someone from their point of view does not necessarily mean agreeing with them. Nor does deeply understanding another perspective require we surrender our own beliefs and values” (p.7).

One of the principal benefits of dialogue is that it fosters more open communication by removing the element of judgment. If I am participating in dialogue, as Bohm defines it, I should be able to say what’s on my mind without fearing that others are judging me, finding fault with my ideas, or forming adverse opinions about me. Of course, I have to trust that what I say will not be used against me later, so dialogue requires a degree of trust among the participants. Interestingly, trust is both a prerequisite and an outcome of dialogue. In his 1991 proposal, David Bohm describes how trust builds through dialogue.

As sensitivity and experience increase, a perception of shared meaning emerges in which people find that they are neither opposing one another, nor are they simply interacting. Increasing trust between members of the group - and trust in the process itself - leads to the expression of the sorts of thoughts and feelings that are usually kept hidden. There is no imposed consensus, nor is there any attempt to avoid conflict. (<http://world.std.com/~lo/bohm/oooo.html>)

Bohm’s concept of dialogue applies to coaching in numerous ways. To show parallels, here are the precepts and practices of dialogue:

- The purpose is to facilitate open communication.
- The key method is to examine perceptions and assumptions, to try to understand the basis for long-held beliefs and behaviors.
- The participants should be open to unbiased and open exploration.
- One key goal is not about debate where there are winners and losers. In dialogue, everyone wins.
- Another goal is to understand how “hidden” values and intentions control behavior.
- There is no single right answer. There may be multiple “truths” from multiple perspectives.
- Two of the primary skills are asking and listening.
- Participants must learn to suspend judgment. Fault finding is anathema to the process.
- Participants do not necessarily have to agree with one another. The goal is not to reach consensus, though that may be an outcome.
- As trust grows, so does the participants’ willingness to disclose thoughts and feelings that are usually hidden, which results in greater insight.
- A successful outcome is the emergence of shared meaning.

It should be apparent that these are also the precepts and best practices of coaching. Coaching is not about imposing one’s will, perspectives, or ideas on another person. It’s about helping clients explore, understand, develop insight, and change their attitudes and behaviors so they become better leaders, managers, colleagues, and contributors to the enterprise.