

What We Mean by “Dialogue”

The word “dialogue” is used in many different ways. It is often used to describe any conversation – planned or spontaneous - in which people search for and gain a better understanding of each other’s perspectives. At Public Conversations Project, this is how we have come to think about the “dialogue” that we hope to foster across differences of worldview, ideology, and identity.

What it is

It is a conversation in which participants take as their primary goal to pursue mutual understanding. Over time, as participants pursue this goal, they sometimes decide to pursue other goals. For example, dialogue groups sometimes decide to become better informed together, or to build consensus about ways that they can act on shared values while continuing to have significant areas of disagreement.

What it is not

It is distinct from debate; in fact, participants often agree to set aside persuasion and debate so that they can focus on mutual understanding. Dialogue is also different from mediation, conflict resolution, and problem solving; however, it may serve as a prelude to or aspect of such processes.

What participants do

- listen and are listened to so that all speakers are heard;
- speak and be spoken to in a respectful manner;
- learn about the perspectives of others;
- reflect on their views.

What participants gain

- greater mutual understanding, which may stimulate new ideas for learning and action
- communication skills that can be used in other conversations about divisive issues

What it takes

While “dialogue” can occur spontaneously, when groups are in polarized conflict, it is most likely to occur after people have explicitly agreed to pursue mutual understanding, rather than debating or rushing into problem solving. Before beginning the dialogue, participants usually make communication agreements that will help them achieve this goal. Dialogues are usually facilitated by a third-party who does not engage in the issues being discussed but whose sole responsibility is to help the participants honor their agreements and reach their shared goals.

A dialogic spirit can be brought into programs of various kinds, e.g., study groups, visioning exercises, deliberation processes, and even activists’ work. Dialogue is present any time people genuinely seek mutual understanding, setting aside *at that time*, the urge to persuade, pressure to decide, or attachment to one-way forms of information sharing.

DEBATE	DIALOGUE
Pre-meeting communication between sponsors and participants is minimal and largely irrelevant to what follows.	Pre-meeting contacts and preparation of participants are essential elements of the full process.
Participants tend to be leaders known for propounding a carefully crafted position. The personas displayed in the debate are usually already familiar to the public. The behavior of the participants tends to conform to stereotypes.	Those chosen to participate are not necessarily outspoken "leaders." Whoever they are, they speak as individuals whose own unique experiences differ in some respect from others on their "side." Their behavior is likely to vary in some degree and along some dimensions from stereotypic images others may hold of them.
The atmosphere is threatening; attacks and interruptions are expected by participants and are usually permitted by moderators.	The atmosphere is one of safety; facilitators propose, get agreement on, and enforce clear ground rules to enhance safety and promote respectful exchange.
Participants speak as representatives of groups.	Participants speak as individuals, from their own unique experience.
Participants speak to their own constituents and, perhaps, to the undecided middle.	Participants speak to each other.
Differences within "sides" are denied or minimized.	Differences among participants on the same "side" are revealed, as individual and personal foundations of beliefs and values are explored.
Participants express unswerving commitment to a point of view, approach, or idea.	Participants express uncertainties, as well as deeply held beliefs.
Participants listen in order to refute the other side's data and to expose faulty logic in their arguments. Questions are asked from a position of certainty. These questions are often rhetorical challenges or disguised statements.	Participants listen to understand and gain insight into the beliefs and concerns of the others. Questions are asked from a position of curiosity.
Statements are predictable and offer little new information.	New information surfaces.
Success requires simple impassioned statements.	Success requires exploration of the complexities of the issue being discussed.
Debates operate within the constraints of the dominant public discourse. (The discourse defines the problem and the options for resolution. It assumes that fundamental needs and values are already clearly understood.)	Participants are encouraged to question the dominant public discourse, that is, to express fundamental needs that may or may not be reflected in the discourse and to explore various options for problem definition and resolution. Participants may discover inadequacies in the usual language and concepts used in the public debate.

This table contrasts debate as commonly seen on television with the kind of dialogue we aim to promote in dialogue sessions conducted by the Public Conversations Project.