



The Network Newsletter

A Joint Project of Cornell University ILR and The National Conference for Community and Justice

Summary Report from the 2000 Spring Forum

Conflict Moves to Learning: Exploring Dialogue as A Process for Diversity Change

The Workplace Diversity Network presented its first Forum of the new millennium June 22-23 at the Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Forum was designed to examine the assertion that the communication process known as dialogue is actually a process that can support organizational learning and change, a process whose application far exceeds its traditional use as a tool for diversity training.

The Forum featured a variety of perspectives on the practice and process of dialogue in myriad contexts. *David Campt*, formerly a senior policy analyst with the President's Initiative on Race, offered his insights about the use of dialogue and dialogic learning to fuel a national conversation on race and ethnicity in the United States. *Deborah Flick*, author of **From Debate to Dialogue: Using the Understanding Process to Transform Our Conversations**, and *Carole Kasper*, a management and organizational development consultant who specializes in fostering communities within organizations, examined the body of literature about dialogue and presented a dialogic learning process known as the "understanding process."

On the second day, Forum participants explored pragmatic applications of the dialogic communication and learning process when they heard three guest discussants describe their use of dialogue in widely different contexts. *Susan*

Musinsky, Executive Director of the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ), Greater Boston, described how effective dialogue intensifies and personalizes the learning of community leaders who participate in NCCJ's civic leadership program, LeadBoston. *Robert Omoyeni* is a Boston-based consultant who specializes in applied economic development working with large public transportation projects. He has used dialogic communication processes when negotiating contracts and relationships between clients and minority vendors. *Grant Keith*, Director of Organizational Effectiveness, Providence Gas Company, described how he used a less-structured form of dialogue to support more effective communication between and among employees and the management team. The Forum concluded with an open discussion among participants to identify the principles, guidelines and components of dialogue. This summary highlights the key ideas that emerged from the Forum.

Lessons from a Survivor of the President's Initiative on Race

David Campt, Ph.D., Former Senior Policy Analyst, The President's Initiative on Race

David Campt, now a consultant with the National Center for Cultural Healing, began the Forum by reflecting on his experience with a dialogue initiative designed to occur on a national scale: The President's Initiative on Race (PIR).

A self-described "survivor" of the Initiative, David served as a senior policy analyst. As the keynote speaker, he provided insider insights that helped Forum participants understand how the Initiative intended to create a national dialogue process and how these intentions failed to meet expectations.

The President's Initiative was developed to endorse education, dialogue, policy-development and the support of existing programs. The seven-person National Advisory Board

included persons of African American, European American, Asian American and Latin American backgrounds, but no one who identified as an Indian. There were no civil rights organizations involved in the planning and race was the primary topic of focus, to the exclusion of all other diversity issues. The theme, *Building One America*, galvanized the interest of many people.

Throughout its year of work, the PIR sponsored a variety of events and programs to establish and nurture a national dialogue on race. Many of these programs featured a town meeting format. David suggested that these national programs generated an important set of lessons about dialogue, its structure, function and facilitation.

Lessons Learned from the President's Initiative on Race

- There is a significant difference between *convening* a dialogue process and *facilitating* a dialogue process. The skills and responsibilities of each role are widely divergent. Effective, productive dialogue requires skilled facilitators who understand group process, group development and the subtleties of the issues about which participants will engage in dialogue. Convenors may establish the setting, propose the topic and invite participants into the dialogue process, but stop short of leading the dialogue.
- Effective dialogue must not be a "campaign of persuasion." It must allow the free exchange of ideas.
- There is a difference between providing factual information and education and persuading others to view issues in a particular way.
- It is feasible to be "democratic" when inviting participants into the dialogue process. However, designing effective dialogue processes requires expertise and experience; therefore dialogue design is not necessarily a democratic undertaking!
- Convenors must be comfortable with discomfort. Effective dialogue encourages participants to move beyond their "comfort zones" to reflect on new ideas, perspectives and viewpoints.
- When dialogue includes work between members of the same group (e.g., racial, gender, cultural), the convenors and the facilitators must be clear about the purpose and intended outcomes of such intragroup dialogue.
- Convenors of large-scale dialogue efforts must be willing to trade off widespread participation (including individuals who have little or no experience with the dialogic learning process) and a highly effective dialogue experience.
- The PIR revealed that there is rampant misunderstanding of what *dialogue* actually is: a participatory, interactive learning process that requires participants to become personally engaged in the learning. The media culture, David suggested, encourages a spectator approach to dialogue that is inconsistent with its participatory structure.
- Though it is very difficult to conduct meaningful dialogue on a large public scale, there is a role for large community events that introduce ideas and topics to be explored more fully through the intimacy of a dialogue process.
- Convenors must not exert tight controls on the design and content of the dialogue process. If they are to feel personally invested and committed to the process, participants need to have input into the content and design.
- Dialogue is different than a citizen speak-out. Both are needed and each provides a different set of out-comes. The choice of process needs to be aligned with the intended outcomes.

- Can the “system” (the organization, the community, the nation) handle the learnings from a dialogue process? Effective dialogue generates honest assessments of personal and collective experiences of reality. It is important to prepare the “system” to hear, understand and consider these multiple realities when they emerge from the dialogue process.
- If the *convenors* intend to establish an inclusive dialogue process that welcomes a wide spectrum of voices and perspectives, they should possess a higher level of trust than the participants they intend to convene should. By this, David suggested, the convenors must feel a high level of respect and trust for one another as they work to establish the audience, topics and boundaries for the dialogue process.
- If dialogue legitimates disenfranchised voices, how do you prevent reprisals? This is a perpetual question that plagues those who convene and those who facilitate dialogue. We must ensure “safety” in the dialogue process so participants need not fear that their honesty will generate negative or personally damaging reactions from others.

David ended his presentation with a thoughtful set of questions that framed the challenges of dialogue on large-scale and more intimate levels:

To what extent does our media- and event-oriented culture undermine the depth and intensity of a dialogic learning process?

What is the relationship between dialogue and negotiation? Can dialogue support negotiation, pave the way for negotiation or disrupt negotiation?

Is dialogue a type of action? Should a dialogue process move toward action?

Dialogue As an Understanding Process

Deborah Flick, Collaborative Solutions Group, Inc. and Carole Kasper, Synptica

Deborah and Carole are consultants with high degrees of experience working with dialogue in organizational settings. For the Fall Forum, they examined dialogue from a variety of angles:

- The historical influences on contemporary understandings of dialogue;
- The contemporary scholarship on dialogue as a learning process;
- The *Understanding Process*, a dialogue model designed by Deborah Flick for use in organizations;
- Case studies to explore the use of the *Understanding Process* in a variety of organizational contexts.

Deborah Flick developed the *Understanding Process* to demystify the use of dialogue in organizational settings. During the Forum, she identified the stark contrasts between the Conventional Discussion Process (a mode of communication that encourages individuals to *speak* more than they listen and *win* more than understand) and the *Understanding Process* (a process that encourages individuals to *listen* and *inquire* in order to learn, not win). Drawing on experiences with their own clients, Deborah and Carole described how a dialogic communication process can create stronger, more authentic, collaborative, creative working relationships that do not break down when faced with disagreement and conflict. After presenting the *Understanding Process*, Dr. Flick led Forum

participants through an experiential activity wherein they used the behaviors the *Understanding Process* in a hypothetical scenario. Carole Kasper followed with case experiences from her own consulting practice where she employed dialogic communication processes to resolve conflicts, strengthen work relationships and expand creativity.

Their presentations and case scenarios generated a set of questions, observations and perspectives from Forum participants, themes emerged yet again when the Friday roundtable discussion where we attempted to synthesize these questions, observations and assumptions about dialogue. These ideas are presented in the final section of this summary

The Experience Roundtable

On Friday morning, Forum participants heard three individuals who use dialogue in their widely different work settings.

Grant Keith, Director of Organizational Effectiveness for Providence Gas Company

At Providence Gas, Grant used the process of dialogue in three different contexts: as a mechanism for bringing managers together to address issues of compensation; as a mechanism for connecting diversity initiatives and business issues; and as a mechanism for expressing expectations and needs in the arena of performance management. Grant acknowledged that he and his colleagues lacked sufficient familiarity with the dialogic process to fully plumb the potential of a dialogic approach; however, several of his colleagues indicated that their personal learning experiences in dialogue had influenced their understanding and appreciation for dialogue in the work context.

The managerial dialogue that began with a focus on one issue evolved into a Professional Leadership Group that represents all branches of the company and now meets once every three weeks to explore organizational issues, opportunities and concerns from all vantage points. Grant cautioned that convenors of managerial and employee dialogue groups must carefully delineate the purpose and expectations of the dialogue process so the dialogue group retains the integrity of its purpose and goals and avoids becoming a bargaining group.

In the service of connecting diversity issues with business objectives, Grant explained how Providence Gas used a dialogic approach to work with the Southern Providence Economic Development agency to examine the demographics of the company's "bad debt" customers. Through a dialogic process, Providence Gas and the SPED agency formed a partnership wherein SPED served as a community resource for the "bad debt" customers and a mechanism for collecting payment for Providence Gas.

The use of dialogue in performance management requires the appropriate "context," Grant suggested. Managers and employees must have a dialogue about the organization's mission, priorities and needs and they must be willing to share their thinking about these issues. Dialogue in this context, Grant suggested, frees employees and their managers from making inaccurate assumptions about performance expectations. Moreover, it provides a useful mechanism for aligning organizational thinking and priorities. In this same context, the dialogic process enables organizational planning building to become a shared, collaborative endeavor for managers and employees alike.

Robert Omoyeni, founder and principle, Omoyeni Consulting Group, OCG

Omoyeni Consulting is a Boston-based consulting group specializing in applied economic development working with large public transportation projects, private sector businesses and community and neighborhood organizations. Robert and his consulting partners work to bridge public sector job creation programs and large private sector purchasers with minority and small business vendors and community organizations by facilitating relationship-building and mutual understanding. In the service of this goal, Robert relies on the dialogic process.

Omoyeni's firm has worked with the Central Artery/Tunnel Project, or "Big Dig," in Boston. They have also worked with the North Hartford Initiative, a community leadership effort to implement a comprehensive economic development plan for the North Hartford area. He is an ardent advocate of the dialogic process because he believes that it enables different business parties to develop shared ownership and shared commitment to common projects.

With the Big Dig, Robert served as a consultant with the Disadvantaged Business Enterprise helping to design and produce the Project's apprenticeship, training, reporting and

business development programs. In this context, he used the process of dialogue to build relationships between contractors and minority vendors. Dialogue between these parties revealed that too much paperwork dissuaded contractors and minority vendors from pursuing partnerships through federal minority vendor incentive programs.

Omoyeni's solution to this challenge was to develop a joint application that is completed by contractors and vendors *together*, a task that necessitates substantive dialogue between the two parties. Omoyeni and his consulting colleagues were present at the contractor/vendor dialogues and made sure there was a 1:1 management representation on both sides. The joint application process provided a context in which contractors and vendors could collaborate for mutual gain. It also resulted in the completion and submission of a higher number of applications!

What did he take from these experiences? Omoyeni observed that effective dialogue "requires honesty. You must hold your sympathies at bay because there is an expectation of giving in the dialogic process."

Susan Musinsky, Executive Director The National Conference for Community and Justice, Greater Boston Region.

Susan directs LeadBoston, an annual, year-long civic leadership program that explores economic and social issues through the

lens of the region's cultural, ethnic and economic diversity. LeadBoston's curriculum is firmly grounded in the dialogic

process and works from the assumption that participants have much to teach and learn from one another. Similarly, LeadBoston assumes that people of differing socio-economic classes and cultural backgrounds have important things to teach one another so it is useful to bring the community's formal leaders into direct contact with disenfranchised community members. In this context, a dialogic process that prioritizes *inquiry* and *understanding* enables individuals from widely different economic and cultural perspectives to hear, value and learn from individuals with whom they have little in common.

Susan shared experiences from LeadBoston that underscored the importance of dialogic learning in a program that seeks to build capacity and competency among civic leaders. She related a particular LeadBoston program component wherein women from communities of new immigrants came to speak with the civic leaders in the LeadBoston program. Their honest stories of struggle, challenge and pride had a profound impact on LeadBoston participants, many of whom had never had a face-

to-face conversation with newly immigrated persons. One LeadBoston participant reflected later that the stories and experiences these women shared had so profoundly affected him that their faces were indelibly etched into his conscious thinking. For him, these women became emblematic of the larger struggles of Boston's immigrant communities. Because he was able to engage in dialogue with these women, he felt a deeply personal connection to them and their experiences. This connection had changed the way he made decisions, expressed values and lifted up priorities in his daily leadership. The dialogic experience had changed him profoundly.

Susan explained that LeadBoston embraces a dialogic learning process because it personalizes and familiarizes that which often seems impersonal and unfamiliar. In the world of civic leadership, impersonal and unfamiliar issues are often neglected at the peril of those who are marginalized or voiceless in the community. LeadBoston seeks to make issues familiar and personal to all those who are entrusted to make decisions for the public good.

Sharing the Wisdom: Uses, Risks, Objectives & Results of Dialogic Learning in Organizations & Communities

The Forum closed with a full-group discussion about dialogue and dialogic learning. Below is a selection of observations, insights and threads that emerged from this conversation.

- **Dialogue as Full-Time Communication Process:** Dialogue must cease to be a discrete “tool” and become a full-time process of interpersonal and intergroup communication and learning. It must become the norm of communication, not simply a tool for specific learning processes. Dialogue is not just for organizational change (particularly around diversity issues) but for *constant learning*. Dialogue can become a “habit of communication” that is characterized by *respectful inquiry*. As a habit of communication, dialogue rejects a “debate to win” model and embraces an “inquire and listen to learn” model.
- **Changing the Tone of Communication:** In order for dialogue to become a full-time communication and learning process, organizations and communities must set a new tone for communication. Instead of asking *What do I have to say to this group?* we must learn to ask *What do I have to learn from this group?* To achieve this tone shift, we must dismantle the reward for fast response and cease to see fast response (as opposed to reflective thinking) as the primary sign of intelligence.
- **Collaborative Guidelines, Aligned Goals:** Successful dialogue and dialogic learning require participants to identify and align themselves around the rules or norms that will guide their dialogue; agree on the goal or purpose of the dialogue; and commit to full participation in the dialogic learning process.
- **Naming What Is Valued:** The perennial struggle in dialogic learning occurs between the thinkers and the doers. Those who value action or decision-making often express frustration with reflecting and listening. The reverse is also true. Effective dialogue requires participants and convenors to clarify at the beginning what is valued and what is expected. Important questions to ask include: *Do we expect that decisions will flow out of the dialogic process? Do we expect that decisions will not flow out of the dialogic process? If there are no decisions, is the dialogue still valuable? If there are decisions, is dialogue still valuable? How will we know when it is valuable? What needs to happen for the doers and the thinkers to feel that the dialogue is useful?*
- **Establishing Trust in Distrustful Systems:** Dialogue and dialogic learning require a significant amount of trust among involved individuals. How can convenors of dialogue or leaders of a dialogic learning process establish trust in places that are distrustful? Ground rules or norms are critical to trust-building, but it is insufficient simply to establish norms. Individuals need to know what the ground rules mean to them and what they will look like in action. For instance, *What does confidentiality look like in action? What does withholding judgment look like? What does respectful inquiry look like and feel like? What does active listening feel like? How will we know when the ground rules are working? How will we know when they're not working?* These questions need to be addressed at the start of the dialogic process.

In organizations where dialogic learning has become habit, not just practice, it will be especially critical to prepare new employees for entry into this new and probably unfamiliar system—and preparation should begin during the interview phase!

- **Dialogue As a Tool to Change Habits:** While dialogue may become a habit itself, it is also a tool for changing habits in a system, particularly around issues of diversity and inclusion. When dialogic learning is used to explore issues of diversity, it is important to be very aware of several things: the pressing, perhaps unspoken issues that exist around this topic; the participants and their perspectives; the larger dynamics of the organization or community; and the skill level of the facilitators. Much like the LeadBoston participant felt changed by his exposure to and interactions with women of a very different experience than his own, dialogue has the power to change personal, organizational and community habits. It must never, never be taken lightly, however, as a simple tool for helping people share their stories.
- **The Components of a Dialogic Process:** The components of dialogue or dialogic learning can vary widely according to the context and content, but Forum participants sought to identify a widely generalizable, core list of components that must be present to establish a strong, effective dialogic learning process. They are:
 - Participants must feel full ownership of the dialogic process. Dialogue cannot be mandated and must not be used as punishment.
 - Participants must set and agree upon the ground rules and their interpretation.
 - The dialogic learning process must have a clearly purpose, theme or topic.
 - Participants must be willing to use fundamental skills of dialogue (e.g., I statements; “This is how I hear you” statements; “Is this how you’re hearing me?” statements; following the norms of communication.)
 - All participants must agree to honesty.
 - There must be a commitment to stay in the dialogue. Participants must not abandon the process when issues become difficult. Circumvent this by identifying from the beginning: *What will real dialogue feel like when we do it?* It may not always feel good or comfortable when it is most productive!
 - There must be clearly stated and agreed-upon goals or expectations of the dialogic process. All dialogue participants should help to establish and align themselves around expectations.
 - There must be competent, excellent facilitators who are willing to establish new rules of communication (e.g., inquiry not debate, listening not speaking, etc.) and employ a variety of approaches to address or explore difficult issues that emerge in the dialogic process.
 - Allow time for relationships to build in the dialogic process. Don’t jump on tough issues right away. People don’t leave their “bars” at the door, so it takes time for individuals to remove the personal and social barriers that disrupt trust building. Take the time to establish the trustful intimacy that exists within the dialogue process.
 - Do your homework and understand the issues in your organization or community before you introduce a dialogic process. Use focus groups, surveys, interview, any number of investigative techniques, but do your homework so you know what lies beneath the surface!
 - Invite support from “formal leaders” and celebrate the successes, large and small, of the dialogic process.
 - Facilitators and participants must be able to tolerate a wide variety of perspectives without needing to agree. *Dialogue requires us to expand our capacity to accept the presence of disagreement.*
 - Dismantle the notion that asking questions is a sign of weakness or lack of intelligence particularly between men and women. Asking questions and then listening carefully to their answers is the core of effective dialogue!
 - Dialogue is not always verbal. Don’t be afraid to use visual, artistic or written forms of communication in the dialogue process.
 - Establish the context (who is here and why) for dialogue right up front so people can get their roles and relationships aligned before entering the dialogue process. This is better than remediating confused relationships later! When

establishing the context for the dialogue, be sure to acknowledge that the communication *process* is as critical as the communication *outcomes*.

- Constantly assess your progress and challenges. Ask the Plus/Delta question at the end of each dialogic process: *What went well? What needs change? What have we learned?*
- **Is Dialogic Process a Deliverable?:** *Process* and *task* need not be viewed as mutually exclusive! We must integrate task and process into a natural continuum. Dialogic *process* allows people to see what is involved in *task* and enables them to respond creatively to task. *Process enables task accomplishment.* (Dialogue convenors should consider who is in the best position to shift the model from valuing only task to valuing process and task. This may be neutral person or a third party.) Remember: Sometimes the benefits of process need time to bubble up! It is possible to divide process into stages with “deliverables” at the end of each stage so people are reassured that they’re “getting somewhere.”
- Dialogue convenors and participants must be willing to challenge the prevailing assumption that action is better than talk!
- **Given the alternatives, is it too risky NOT to introduce dialogic process into our organizations and communities?**



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