

DIALOGUE

BY PETER STOYKO

Dialogue is not idle chit-chat, self-interested negotiation, nor combative debate. It is a candid, mutually rewarding conversation aimed at creating something new. As Bohm (1996) puts it, dialogue involves everyone making their thinking process known to each other so that the group can think through a challenging problem together. Assumptions are brought into the open. Opinions are voiced. Everyone's contribution

is considered with empathy and good faith. Scrutiny is brought to bear. Overbearing facilitation is avoided. And it all begins by talking about how we talk and then creating a safe space in which everyone feels they belong. Each person plays a role, with roles changing frequently throughout the conversation. The group stays focused by striking a balance between several tensions. This graphic describes these dynamics.

MOVERS

Should. Put forward ideas, claims, and arguments. Frame the conversation initially. Take a tentative stand to give something for others to react to. Give the conversation an impetus and momentum. Fill a conversational vacuum. Take a risk. Think of ways to reach the group's goal.

Should Not. Brow-beat a perceived opponent into submission. Use intimidation tactics. Hijack the agenda. Unilaterally impose rules and limits. Act like the chair of a meeting. Make others feel small for not agreeing. Claim to be the all-knowing expert. Evade criticism.

FOLLOWERS

Should. Add insights, examples, and evidence to the contributions of others. Offer constructive qualifications. Give credit where credit is due. Look out for common ground and points of consensus. Add momentum. Offer encouragement. Lend skills to enhance others' ideas.

Should Not. Hide behind the views of others to avoid conflict and prevent loss of face. Feel obligated to flatter and agree out of a shallow sense of loyalty. Perpetuate faddish and pandering thinking. Take sides in a cheerleading way. Abandon critical judgement. Be trite.

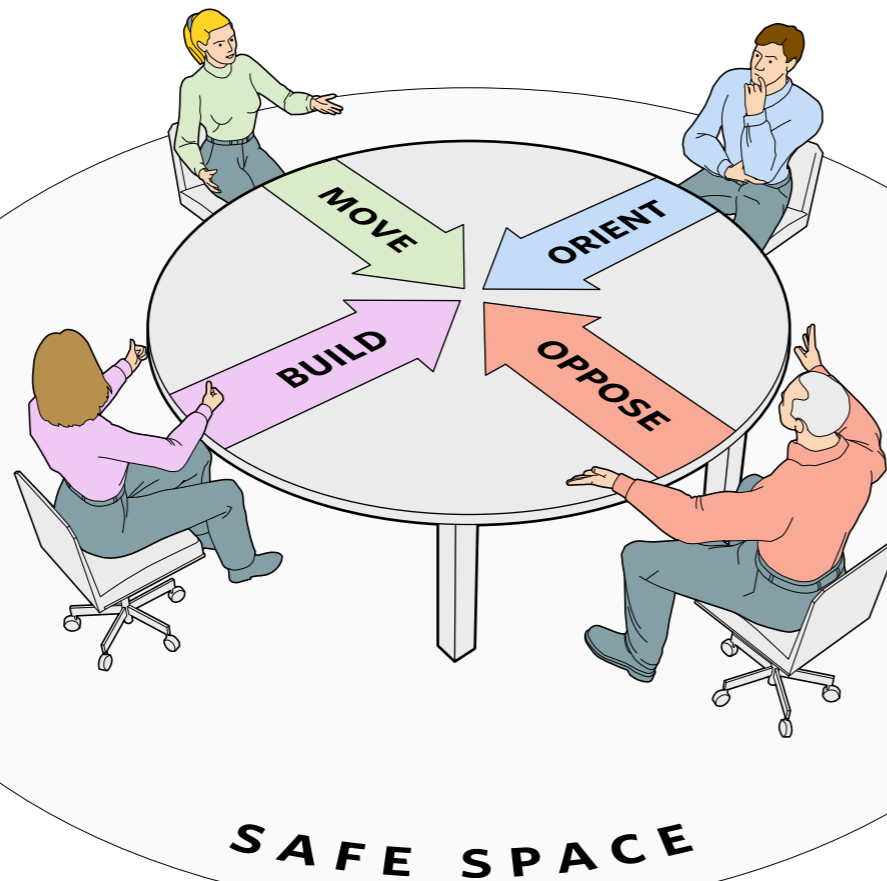
SAFE SPACES

A "safe space" is a **setting and milieu** in which people feel free to be themselves and speak their minds without fear of adverse consequences. Social and physical barriers to honest and forthright interaction are minimised. Claims are considered based on their merits, not on a person's rank, power, or social status. Everyone is respected and involved. Wariness, awkwardness, and worries about self-exposure give way to feelings of assurance and psychological safety.

A few **agreed upon groundrules** set the boundaries of free-flowing discourse. Rules shouldn't encourage overly polite diplomatic-speak and uptight etiquette. Nor should they enshrine "no-go zones." There are no sacred cows. But physical and rhetorical intimidation, such as jeering and heckling, are ruled out. The group's threshold of tolerance for swearing and vulgarity is settled. Interruptions, dismissive body language, and intemperance are discouraged.

The physical setting is **designed-to-purpose**. Furniture shouldn't make people feel socially distant. Equipment (such as office- and art supplies) is freely available to enable people to express ideas according to personal preference and style. Seating arrangements shouldn't send signals about formal roles and status. Distractions are removed. That includes communication gadgets.

THE KANTER-ISAACS MODEL: ROTATING ROLES



BYSTANDERS

Should. Seek critical distance. Absorb and quietly ponder the contributions of others. See the forest for the trees. Reframe the discussion if need be. Offer occasional course corrections. Bring in relevant insights from other disciplines and areas of practice. Ask for clarification.

Should Not. Be quiet because of disagreement. Sit on the side-lines out of a smug sense of superiority. Act as referee. Zone out and let thinking stray. Let others do all of the hard work. Take refuge in a personal comfort zone. Refuse to be accountable as a member of a co-creating group.

OPPOSERS

Should. Be sceptical. Question. Scrutinise ideas, claims, and arguments. Voice counter-arguments and alternative points of view. Speak truth to power. Take a tentative stand for the sake of argument. Encourage others to back-up their views with principles and evidence.

Should Not. Dismiss others' views out of hand. Wring hands and nay-say in knee-jerk fashion. Mock and belittle. Feign praise. Use sneaky conversational gambits to derail another's train of thought. Refuse to acknowledge merit. Steer the conversation in a self-serving way.

BALANCING ACTS



DIVERGENCE

There's a time to suspend judgement and generate ideas through brainstorming and other exercises. A diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and interests ensures that a variety of opinions are voiced. The conversation may have to meander before finding its ultimate direction. Arranging and rearranging ideas using sticky notes (and the like) help a group perceive ideas differently.



CONVERGENCE

Goals give a conversation focus, yet occasional course-corrections may lead to new goals. Creating something tangible and new is the best type of goal. Exercises help funnel a mass of ideas into a tidier pile. Ultimately, the conversation must reach closure, with no stray ideas left hanging. Phoney and expedient consensus must be avoided. People can agree to disagree yet still align on points of agreement.



INQUIRY

New ideas are approached with humility and an open mind. Active listening and probative questioning keep the mind engaged. Curiosity and inquisitiveness drive discovery and the uncovering of nuance. Ideas are tested against rigorous empirical evidence. Exploring new avenues of inquiry, especially involving multiple disciplines, can produce big insights.



ADVOCACY

There's a place for the spirited defence of a well crafted argument or hypothesis. Don't feel guilty for playing "devil's advocate" from time to time. Explain where you're coming from; where your head is at. Remember that a stance should be held tentatively and abandoned in favour of a better stance. Egos, pet ideas, and self-centred agendas need to be checked at the door.



DESTRUCTING

Outmoded theories and frameworks are exploded as more relevant ideas are brought to the fore. Forget hackneyed ideas and expressions. Nostalgic and hidebound attitudes are inherently limiting. Creative conflict breaks-down old ideas while generating new ones.



CONSTRUCTING

Just destroying can lead to cynicism. New solutions need to be crafted. Have something to show for the conversation in the end. Building something practical encourages people to focus, make sensible choices, and apply lessons learned. A tangible output can be passed along to others.