



Dialogue around a story

Story telling is a joy for almost anybody. Just notice how much time in a regular meeting or conversation stories are told – about what happened, and what happened before or will happen later, about what it meant to the person involved, what his feelings and thoughts are and what kind of support he expects from those who listen. But then? How should one continue? Quite often the next person starts telling a story!

This practical guide helps you to start an inquiry into the story that has been told by means of a dialogue. The dialogue is a particular format for focusing on the key elements and is very suitable for peer-group consultation. It should be remembered, though, that the intention in a dialogue is to explicate, exchange and sharpen views rather than to solve problems.

Approach

- 1 Ask one of the participants to tell a story in which he or she was involved and that he/she experienced as a problematic. What actually happened? What is relevant to know about the background (history, persons / parties involved, interests, circumstances ...)?
- 2 What is the crucial moment in this story, the turning point, the moment that the dialogue should focus on?
- 3 What thoughts and feelings did you have? What did you do yourself? Be as specific as possible.
- 4 What issue should be examined here? What is the question that we should inquire into during the dialogue?
- 5 Write down the crucial moment and the question so that everyone can see and read them.
- 6 Invite the other participants to ask questions for clarification of the facts and acts as they took place, to be able to imagine themselves in the position of the presenter of the story.
- 7 Imagining themselves in the position of the presenter, the other participants ask themselves:
 - What would the situation mean to me? (feelings, emotion)
 - What would I have done? (action)
 - How would I reply to the question posed (under 4)? (judgement)
 - What would my reasons be? (view)





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- 8 Ask a few participants to present their answers to the questions. Make sure that they speak about their own experiences and don't take the role of a consultant ('Let me tell you what you should have done ...').
- 9 Ask all participants to take some time to formulate the crux of the story for themselves and focus on the underlying principles or values at issue here. This is done by reflecting on the four cardinal virtues (for an explanation see below):
 - What touches you? What should we take to heart?
 - What courage is needed to do justice to that (fortitude)?
 - What must you give up for it (temperance / measure)?
 - What needs to be faced (prudence)?
 - Hence, what is required (your part) in the organisation (justice)?
- 10 Everybody reads their answers. Create short pauses in between to reflect on the answers.
- 11 Reflect on the dialogue. What worked well? What turned out to be difficult? What do the outcomes mean to you in future situations?

The four cardinal virtues

Level-headedness or wisdom (*prudentia*) is the correct use of that most human property, namely, reason. It is a combination of realism and imagination. It implies that you are careful, have a keen eye for the essential in a situation, and that you don't let yourself be carried away by illusions or remain mired in an overly restricted worldview.

Measure (*temperantia*) is the check on desire. It is the capacity for self-control, enabling you neither to be drawn along by your needs or inclinations, nor to deny or repress them altogether. Usually, such moderation implies that you must give up this or that, you must make a sacrifice.

Courage (*fortitudo*) is the right form of inspiration and indignation. It is the capacity for facing your fears, to conquer your smallness and, in spite of your anxiety, to do what ought to be done, to pursue your ambitions. Courage is the freedom that emerges when you don't allow your fortitude to be bloated with recklessness or to shrink to cowardice. It is the dignity of steadfastness, resolve in the face of possible disaster, refusal to give in to your distress.

Justice (*iustitia*) is the highest of the four cardinal virtues. It is the art of the whole, the art to ensure that each receives his share, place and task in a community, so that the community gains its optimal form. Because all social cohesion depends on it, it is the lodestar for all other excellences. Justice is the virtue of the right order, of citizenship, of corporate freedom. It is the leader's virtue *par excellence*.

Guidelines to foster dialogue

1. Take your time. A dialogue is a form of slow thinking, aimed at depth.





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2. Listen. Ask questions. Put yourself in the other's place. See the world through his/her eyes.
3. Decisions need not be arrived at. To foster understanding and to gain insight into each other's views is a sufficiently good result.
4. Don't think in opposition to the other ("Yes, but ..."). Think *along with* the other, think together, as one mind ("Yes, and ...").
5. Don't concentrate on solutions. Examine the reasons, values and views beneath a problem or a solution.
6. Make room for new thinking. Move beyond old patterns of thought.

A good dialogue bonds people; it creates space and fosters understanding.

