

Dialogue poster

- The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities



DIALOGUE POSTER
DESIGNED BY PHILOSOPHER HELGE SVARE FOR THE COUNCIL FOR RELIGIOUS AND LIFE STANCE COMMUNITIES (STL)

1. A dialogue is a conversation characterised by co-operation, and according to the ideal that all participants should gain from taking part in the dialogue..
2. Dialogue follows the ideal of “playing to one another’s strengths”. This requires respect and consideration.
3. A dialogue need not always have a goal. But if we want it to have a goal, we should seek agreement upon what this goal should be and how it is best achieved.
4. Openness and honesty are important ideals of a dialogue. Dialogue is incompatible with hidden agendas, rhetorical tricks and techniques of coercion.
5. Criticism in dialogue should be probing and constructive.
6. Differences and diversity are resources in dialogue.
7. Anyone entering into a dialogue should be open to the possibility that this may influence or change him.
8. A conversation can resemble a dialogue to a greater or lesser extent. Most conversations gain by being made more dialogical.
9. Good management and external structure can create a good framework for dialogue. Above all, however, dialogue grows out of a genuine, personal commitment.

Read more at www.trooglivssyn.no/dialogue 

Explanation of the dialogue poster

Co-operation

A dialogue is a conversation characterised by co-operation, and according to the ideal that all participants should gain from taking part in the dialogue, trying as far as possible to reach a win-win situation. Ideally, all those involved in the dialogue contribute with this in mind, to the best of their ability. Ideally, each should also try to empower and enable the others involved to contribute to the dialogue in the best possible way. “Playing to one another’s strengths” is a fitting expression here. A dialogue is rather like the way a good football team plays together: the better the interaction created by the players, the better the result for the team as a whole – and thus for each participant also.

A dialogue can be self-organising, where all those involved in the dialogue steer it jointly, or moderation of the dialogue can be delegated to a chairperson or facilitator. A facilitator is an enabler. The task of the facilitator of a dialogue is thus to enable the dialogue to proceed in the best possible way.

Singleness of purpose

Not every dialogue needs to have a goal beyond the conversation itself, but many dialogues do. When we meet to conduct a dialogue, it is because this conversation seeks to fill a need, because we want to achieve something by it, or because the fruit of it is to be used for something. It may be that some involved in the dialogue need help or support from the others; that we wish to learn to know each other better; that we wish to gain an overview of a relevant field; that we wish to develop a common understanding or a good basis for decision-making, or that we meet for some other reason. Whatever the goal or task of the dialogue, it is important for us to approach this aspect of the dialogue by being clear about our own objectives, and by being ready to listen to the objectives of the others. It also requires the will and the ability to agree on which of these objectives we should seek to achieve through the dialogue.

There may well be more than one goal in a dialogue, and these goals may also change in the course of the conversation. Regardless of this, however, it is important to try to agree about what the goal should be at any given time. The core issues in this regard are:

- What is the reason for us having this conversation now?
- What purpose should it serve?

Awareness of methods

Different approaches are required to achieve different goals. If the goal of the dialogue is to become better acquainted, a different type of effort is required from participants than if the goal is to gain an overview of a relevant field. A dialogue is a conversation in which the participants are aware of this, and seek to choose approaches that fit the goals. The key question here is this: how do we arrange the conversation so as to fulfil the purpose of the dialogue in the best possible way? Consideration of how much or how little time is available, is a factor here. The issue here is this: How should we arrange the conversation so as to get as much as possible out of it in the time available?

Differences as a strength

In today's public debate, differences are sometimes represented as a problem, and making people more alike is the “medicine” frequently prescribed. In dialogue, differences should ideally be viewed as a resource that can make the dialogue more interesting, valuable or productive. For example, if the purpose of a dialogue is to produce an overview of a relevant field, diversity among the perspectives of the participants will enrich the picture and make it more interesting than if all those participating in the dialogue initially view the world in the same way.

This does not mean that differences (for example, cultural differences or linguistic differences) do not at times create challenges when conducting a dialogue. However, in a dialogue, the solution is not to make people more alike. The solution is to try to arrange the interaction in such a way that everyone contributes from his or her own point of view.

Openness and freedom from coercion

In order to be able to agree upon goals and approaches in a dialogue openness is required. This means that dialogue is incompatible with hidden agendas, rhetorical tricks or techniques of coercion whereby participants try to deceive or force one another to believe something, or try to force through a particular outcome of the dialogue. In this sense, dialogue is free from coercion.

The ideal of freedom from coercion need not imply that everyone involved in the dialogue should have equal say, or that the dialogue must be organised as a perpetual open meeting where everything that happens minute by minute must be based on unanimous decisions. For example, sometimes the goal of the dialogue may be announced in advance, as when someone invites others to participate in a dialogue on a particular theme: “Let’s get together and have a dialogue about this!” Often, also, facilitation of the dialogue may be delegated to a facilitator, who then determines how the dialogue should proceed.

In such cases, freedom from coercion is ensured by the organisers or facilitators being open about the goal of the dialogue, how they intend the dialogue to be moderated, and about other significant aspects of the dialogue and its context. In this way, the participants in the dialogue can form a picture of what they are being invited to join in with, and can decide whether this is something they want to get involved in, or not. This also implies the right to withdraw from the dialogue. And it implies the right to be present in the dialogue as each individual desires, provided that this does not destroy the process of dialogue itself. For example, some may be content to listen for most parts of the dialogue without saying very much themselves.

Respect and consideration

Defining the dialogue as a collaborative effort implies that anything that could contribute to creating a positive working climate belongs in the dialogue. This includes respect and consideration. If, in a dialogue, it is possible to live up to the motto of playing to one another’s strengths, we are well on the way to achieving this, for we cannot play to one another’s strengths unless we respect one another as competent fellow players and show consideration by enabling each to do his or her best.

Honesty and criticism – and willingness to be influenced

Dialogue does not mean desisting from saying what we think by adopting an excessively polite and cautious attitude. Dialogue is at its best when people say what they think, openly and honestly. Also, this honesty should not only extend to what we *believe* or are *convinced* of. We should also be honest about what we are uncertain of, or what we do not understand.

In this way, dialogue may also embody *criticism* in the true sense of the word, i.e. *differentiating* or *examining*. An important aspect of such criticism is the ability to ask questions. Before we respond with disbelief or anger to something someone else says or does, we ask: “What exactly did you just say?” “Why did you say/do that?” “Do you actually mean what I think I heard?”

Criticism in a dialogue demands something both of the person giving the criticism and of the person receiving the criticism. The person giving the criticism must remember the ideal of playing to one another’s strengths. Therefore, he should try to formulate the criticism in a way that *strengthens* the person he is criticising, instead of belittling him. And he should seek to formulate the criticism in a way that increases the likelihood of jointly achieving the desired end. In other words, the criticism

should be probing and constructive. The person being criticised should try to receive the criticism as a service that gives him the opportunity to gain insight into something he has not yet seen or understood.

This takes us to another important characteristic of dialogue: anyone entering into a dialogue must be open to let himself be influenced, or to be changed by what happens in the dialogue, when this feels right. Or, to put it more forcefully: he should seek dialogue because he recognises that he *wants* or *needs* the influences and the potentially boundary-pushing experience offered by the dialogue.

Dialogue and other types of conversation

In everyday parlance, we often use words such as dialogue, conversation and debate interchangeably, and in fact it is not always too easy to differentiate these types of conversation. In its purest form, however, a debate differs from a dialogue. A debater “knows” what he thinks before entering into the debate, and he enters into the debate not to learn from others, to be touched or to change, but to convince other people that he is right. Often, he will use all available rhetorical tricks to achieve this, if necessary including ridicule and manipulation. Debaters may also have hidden agendas. Some of this is also typical of the classic monologue, when it takes the form of instructing, ordering or preaching, whether in a religious, political or moral context.

This does not mean that debate or monologue is despicable and to be rejected. Not all conversations need to take the form of a dialogue. But all conversations can be made *more* like a dialogue, and often (but not always), there will be good reasons for doing this, because dialogue can achieve something important that cannot be achieved by other means.

Dialogue represents an ideal

Few dialogues are perfect in the sense of realising all the ideals of a dialogue. In the real world, we have to content ourselves with conversations that resemble dialogues to a *greater* or *lesser* extent, and we should be satisfied if we manage to make conversations *more* like a dialogue.

The Golden Rule of dialogue: Engagement!

Knowledge of what a dialogue is, and knowledge of dialogue facilitation increases the likelihood of good dialogues taking place. However, high-quality dialogues cannot be created purely by the application of external methods or techniques. They require participants to have a dialogue mindset. In some instances, this mindset could proceed from a moral duty: I enter into the dialogue and abide by the rules of the dialogue because it is the “right thing” to do. However, the best way is when participants’ motivation is based on a genuine engagement for and a fascination with dialogue: when we enter into dialogue because we experience this as deeply engaging, meaningful and useful: when we experience the joy of reaching out and expressing ourselves in a way that is meaningful to others: when we find it important and interesting to listen to other people because we know this is the way to learn from their experience: when we thus create something in common that is deeply fascinating to be involved in, and when we enter into dialogue with a view to achieving all this.

This poster is written by Helge Svare (helge@afi.no) in co-operation with members of The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities (STL).