

Language and leadership practice for convening dialogue

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William Isaacs' book *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* is continually inspiring reading. It equates very well with the practices that we are teaching of Open Space facilitation and it is a useful guide for other forms of process facilitation. In the book, Isaacs describes four fields of conversation, essentially politeness, breakdown, inquiry and flow. Within each of these four fields of dialogue, there are a number of practices to cultivate and things to do as the nature of the dialogue keeps changing. In a short chapter but important on convening dialogue, Isaacs outlines a guide for leadership in each of these four areas. I have been using this guide more and more frequently and, in addition to Isaacs' work, I have been collecting questions and language approaches to help move deeper into these dialogic spaces. What follows is a brief overview of the four fields, Isaacs guide to navigating the fields and the questions with which I have been working.

Politeness

The first field of conversation is politeness, characterized by people coming into the dialogue with norms and stories about these kinds of meetings and early ideas about what might happen. By and large, in this phase, the container for the dialogue is unstable (because it is in the process of being created) and people rarely delve deeply into issues, preferring to remain at a safe distance from contention. In this phase there seems to be a lot lurking under the surface. Isaacs presents four guides to this phase: clarify intentions, get the entry right, join each person differently and build the container.

For me clarifying intentions is about getting clear about my own work as a facilitator. It is in this phase, which actually begins before the meeting starts, that I set myself a number of personal questions about the group. I try to cultivate a practice of curiosity at every level, and so I find myself asking questions about the kind of dialogue it will be, the kind of problems people may encounter, the kinds of dynamics we will have and the kind of emergence that the group is capable of. I get genuinely curious about each group I work with and this curiosity keeps me open and exploring possibility with the group. This practice helps me to clarify my intentions and check my assumptions about "the kind of group" or people I am dealing with.

Getting the entry right is critical. Isaacs says that how you begin a dialogue will contain the seeds of the flow of the whole dialogue. So it pays to be very careful about how to begin a session. My preference is generally to begin with a solid purpose but with a light heart and tongue. By this I mean that I am clear about the purpose of the meeting, and I can describe it clearly. But I keep my description and welcoming comments light and inviting and encouraging so that people feel invited to join one another in the dialogue. I ask the question of myself "What is the purpose of the meeting? How would I describe what we are doing in just a few words?" My beginnings are solid and friendly. If we are pushed right off the bat, I need to be able to move to a way of describing our pending work together as serious and important, but in general, before a container is really established, I want to avoid seeming too profound. The lightness helps deal with the politeness in the room and makes it easier for people to enter into rapport.

To join each person differently, the next guide for this work, requires that individuals are met where they are. This means using common language and references, employing the cultural modes and learning styles that develop rapport between myself and the participants. Being

someone who is naturally curious about others, and near obsessed with hearing people's stories, I have a wide range of material to draw on in this work, and I often spend time at the outset of a dialogue connecting people and situations to other similar ones I have encountered before. Asking the questions, "Where have I heard this before and who does this person remind me of?" helps me to draw these connections and to join each according to where they are to begin with.

Setting the container

Finally, Isaacs says that it is most important in this phase to set the container. This is certainly the time to do it, as containers need to be quite strong before they can hold the instability of conflict and intense learning.

Building the container involves five key pieces at the outset. Isaacs calls these evoking the ideal, supporting dreaming out loud, deepening the listening, making it safe for opposers and daring people to suspend beliefs and mental models. This is, I think, the art of facilitating deep conversation. It requires patient and gradual embodiment of these principles by the facilitator and constant invitation to the group to go deeper in each area. Under ideal circumstances, I try to start meetings by drawing attention to the potential for change or learning that exists in the room. I support the design of "what if" questions and inquiries early on. I encourage listening to one another in a way that hears connections between ideas, as opposed to the way we are often conditioned to listen for holes in arguments in order to debate one another. Debate, although useful in some contexts, is generally useless when emergence, learning and innovation is called for. Debate stifles the container and diminishes its capacity to handle conflict and diversity because it collapses the conversation into two threads. Finding a third or fourth or fifth way is impossible once people have hardened into a polarity. Even middle ground becomes unattainable. So making the space safe for opposing views and inviting people to suspend their assumptions creates the integrity of the container that can then hold difficult in a way that creates generative dialogue,

Once the politeness phase ends, groups tend to move quickly into the breakdown phase, so getting the contained set with these guidelines is important.

Breakdown

As groups enter the second field of conversation, one which Isaacs calls "breakdown," people begin to confront the issues that they were hoping to avoid. This is where conflicts and struggle appear. It is the beginning of what Sam Kaner calls "the groan zone" but it is the painful entering of that area where people are loosening their connection to position and finding challenging ideas coming from all sides. It is here that the act of setting a strong container pays off. Instability in the container leads to unrecoverable breakdown.

Isaacs offers three guides for navigating the breakdown field: mapping the structures, educating and learning and facilitating cross-model communication.

Mapping the system means taking a step back and asking what the forces are that are at play in the container. Asking the questions "what is at play here? How are these forces working on our conversation?" can be valuable to uncovering polarities, struggles and competing worldviews and mental models. Drawing these structures on a flip chart can provide reassurance for people that they are being understood and can bring some clarity to the process. I sometimes use Polarity Management to capture these ideas, drawing polarities like "individual vs. group" or "short term gain vs. long term sustainability" in a matrix to help the group think into and then through the polarities.

This plays into the educating/learning guide which is about introducing new ways of seeing the world and exploring new ways of being in that world. If a group is in grief, I will often stop a meeting and draw the grief cycle and we can explore together where the group is at in order that we can have new ways of understanding where we stand. Maps are very useful for navigation, and if they can't show us HOW to get where we want to go, they can at least provide the assurance that we can find our way. Once we explore the map that describes the territory, we can then ask "What are other ways we can see, act and be together?"

Finally there is the guide of facilitating cross-model conversation which is where we can help each other find the language to speak between mental models. People with vastly different world views often need to see others in vastly different terms. It is important that these models be named in a way that is non-judgmental and appreciative, and sees the world view in terms of the value it can provide to the task at hand. Finding language and questions about these fundamental underlying structures is important and can see a group into a rich field of diversity where the variety of experiences becomes an asset to solving the problem at hand.

Inquiry

Heading deeper into the groan zone, Isaacs says we next come to the field of reflective inquiry. This field arises when people begin asking questions about how to get out of the breakdown. In my experience this is a tricky field to negotiate because the trust of the group for the facilitator can be very low. In this field of conversation the call is to embody the inquiry and reflection needed to take the group to emergence. At this point facilitative leadership calls for us to take a step back and follow four guides that Isaacs calls listening for emerging themes, leading from behind, predicting and dealing with retrenchment and embodying reflective inquiry.

Listening for emerging themes means taking a stance that is bigger than where the group is. It requires asking a question like "what fills the container?" This is about moving beyond the individual statement and comments being made and offering observations and inquires as to the bigger questions and the implications of the emerging conversation. Sensing the emerging themes also requires us to inquire about what is not being said, or what voices are unheard in the dialogue.

Leading from behind is a facilitative stance that seeks to model a behaviour that will help us through the inquiry. This leadership stance calls us to suspend our roles as experts and instead participate as members of a whole trying to discern the bigger questions in the field. This leadership stance, interestingly, has its mirror in the physical layout of a dialogue. In a true circle, any point on the rim is "behind" every other point. When one leads from behind it is a reminder to see one's place in the circle and to see one's spot as slightly behind every other spot. Using this guide, we can ask questions of the group like "What seems to be in the centre now? What is our shared inquiry?"

Dealing with retrenchment is a powerful role to ensure that a group is not suffering from an over inflated sense of itself. Groups who reach deep resolutions in dialogue can think of themselves as somehow special or different from others. Being able to ground the lessons from good dialogue requires that the group not retrench itself in an exclusive place. Asking questions like "How are we going to tell others about this?" brings an external focus to work and story that helps lead the inquiry out of the room.

Finally, embodiment is the most important guide here. You must at all times model the kind of reflection you are inviting others to model. This may be the most critical practice of all. Modeling inquiry means avoiding directive statements and changing language to invitation.

“I’d like to invite you to...” “What if we...” “I wonder if these things connect?” All of these examples are ways of embodying inquiry, curiosity and invitation that is critical to keeping space open for the group as a whole to sense the emerging themes.

Flow

Isaacs calls the final field of conversation “flow.” This is the high point of a dialogue, when the group attains the capacity to meet its own needs and leadership becomes very much servant-leadership. Flow in this sense requires five facilitative practices which Isaacs calls embodying service, reflecting on the whole process, seeking paths to resolution, allowing leadership to move and seeing the whole as primary.

Service and offering is the modality of action in this field. Participants offer into the bigger whole and action that flows from dialogues takes the form of service. Leadership in this field means seeing the ways in which this group of people can be of service to the world in a completely unique fashion. We can encourage this by asking “What is the highest end we might serve as a result of this work?” Powerful answers to this question serve to ground the inquiry in higher purpose and serve to set lofty and significant goals in direct proportion to the level of depth the group has been invited into.

Because this field of conversation returns us to knowing an acknowledging the primacy of the whole, reflecting on the whole process is important in this field. Sometimes called second loop learning, bringing a group’s awareness to both what they have done and how they have done it is a powerful way to build capacity, curiosity and sustainability in a group’s work. Over time this deepens people’s commitment to the special sense that was felt in the dialogue and provides participants with a touchstone to the deeper work that was invoked in the dialogue. Facilitators can bring awareness to this practice by asking “What have we learned about being together? How did we accomplish this work?”

This guide ties into the next capacity which is to inquire about the nature of the whole now. “How has this dialogue changed what we now think? What are the bigger questions now? What else is being born out of our work?” Going forward from dialogue, these questions serve to build momentum and intention to continue harvesting the fruits of the conversation.

Seeking paths to resolution is the guide to beginning to see how the results of a dialogue may flow out of the room. “What are the possibilities for action?” is a good question to use to focus on this aspect of the work. It is about aligning with the flow in the container to ride that momentum back out into the world.

Finally, deep dialogue changes leadership patterns and expectations. Allowing leadership to move is about opening opportunities for anyone to steward the results of the dialogue back into the world. Without hands and feet engaged, ideas will stay in the room, and leadership can come from anywhere to keep things alive. Asking “Who is able to take responsibility?” and inviting leadership to come from anywhere is the way forward here. People need to consider what they can offer, what support they need and what partnerships will help them take the responsibility. A good dialogue in a well held container can support people making these requests back to the group. If things are truly in flow, the group will find a way to support the individual leadership offerings.

Timeliness and practice

Isaacs’ guides are valuable check points for facilitators running dialogues. The essential skills for facilitators lie not in using these guides as recipes but aligning their approach with the markers that Isaacs articulates. This work is very much a practice, and the practice of sensing

the right time to ask these questions is the art of facilitation. Moving groups too quickly (or even thinking that one CAN move groups) through this process is folly. Untimely or inappropriate “interventions” can create unwanted instability in the container and can compromise the ability of a group to reach flow.

But when action is aligned, powerful results are possible, even in relatively short periods of time. These leadership practices, taken through a facilitative approach to dialogue accelerate those results.