



## Skillful Discussion Worksheet

### Dialogue and Skillful Discussion Background

This week's exercise is focused on the core discipline of team learning. Learning as a team builds on individuals' skills in understanding mental models, personal and shared visions, as well as using the common language of reinforcing and balancing loops. Team learning occurs through true dialogue. The following background and exercise on skillful discussion and dialog are from The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook (Senge, et. al, 1994).

The word dialogue comes from two Greek roots, *dia* (meaning 'through' or 'with each other') and *logos* (meaning 'the word'). It has been suggested that this word carries a sense of 'meaning flowing through'.

Dialogue can initially be defined as *a sustained collective inquiry into everyday experience and what we take for granted*. The goal of dialogue is to open new ground by establishing a 'container' of 'field' for inquiry: a setting where people can become more aware of the context around their experience, and of the processes of thought and feeling that created that experience.

As we practice dialogue, we pay attention to the spaces between the words, not only the words; the timing of action, not only the result; the timbre and tone of a voice, not only what is said. We listen for the meaning of the field of inquiry, not only its discrete elements. In short, dialogue creates conditions in which people experience the primacy of the whole.

Dialogue is an old term. There is some evidence to suggest that human beings have gathered in small groups to talk together for millennia. It does not feel like ordinary 'civilized' conversation, but it does feel very natural to people once they start. That may explain why it seems to flourish in modern settings, despite a range of institutionalized barriers. The word 'discussion' stems from the Latin *discutere*, which meant 'to smash to pieces.' Discussion is a conversational form that promotes fragmentation. However, skillful discussion differs from unproductive discussion because the participants are not merely engaged in 'advocacy wars' of one-upmanship. They develop a repertoire of techniques (encompassing reflection and inquiry skills) for seeing how the components





of their situation fit together, and they develop a more penetrating understanding of the forces at play among the team members themselves.

In skillful discussion, you make a choice; in a dialogue, you discover the nature of choice. Dialogue is like jazz; skillful discussion is like chamber music.

The protocol for skillful discussion includes the following five points:

**1. Pay attention to my intentions**

What do I want from this conversation?: Am I willing to be influenced?

**2. Balance advocacy and inquiry**

"What lead you to that view?" "What do you mean by that view?"

**3. Build shared meaning**

"When we use the term \_\_\_\_\_, what are we really saying?"

**4. Use self-awareness as a resource**

What am I thinking? What am I feeling? What do I want at this moment?

**5. Explore impasses**

What do we agree on, and what do we disagree on? Four categories to explore for impasses include:

Facts – what exactly happened, what's the data

Methods – how should we do what we need to do

Goals – what is our objective (vision?)

Values – what do we believe in? Why do we think it must be done in a particular way?

Listen, consider the other person's perspective and ask what do we need to do to move forward

### Team Discussion Exercise

Your facilitator will assign a topic. Teams will divide into pairs of a participant and a coach (partners). Half the team (participants) will discuss the issue, while the other half (coaches) will observe and coach participants on skillful discussion.

**Step 1** – Partners seek understanding of each other's assumptions, values, and aspirations for the topic and team evolution. Ask:

- What strong opinions do you hold (as an individual) about this topic?
- What observable data (facts, not opinions) can you bring to the group's skillful discussion?
- Are you willing to be influenced?





- What is your vision for a satisfactory outcome of this issue?

**Step 2** – Participants use the skillful discussion protocol (above) to discuss, define and pursue the issue for approximately 20 minutes. Coaches should take notes about specific instances of partner's skill in the discussion with the following questions as guidelines:

When advocating, how often did your partner:

- State opinions and ideas clearly as to paint a picture in others' minds
- Offer assumptions on which ideas were built
- Provide observable data to support / illuminate reasoning
- Invite others to add to his / her ideas
- Refrain from defensiveness when questioned

When inquiring, how often did your partner:

- Ask questions about others assumptions and data without evoking defensiveness
- Ask questions which increased group's understanding of someone's opinions
- Listen without judgment

**Step 3** – Group returns to partner pairs (participant and coach) and coach reviews feedback notes with participant. Use the protocols yourself in providing feedback. This interchange can occur by using the private message feature of the chat room. (Click on your partner's name from the list of those in the chat room to have you message go only to that person).

**Step 4** – Participants return for an additional 15 minute skillful discussion using the feedback provided by their coach. Coaches again take notes. At the end of 15 minutes, partners return to their pairs with the feedback this time being focused on what has changed. The purpose of the feedback is to build competency, not to criticize or correct.

**Step 5** – The team reconvenes to reflect on their reactions to the session and identifying behaviors that worked particularly well in generating a broader understanding of its own behavior. **A summary of this discussion should be posted by the team leader in the Discussion Room.**

