

WHAT ARE THE DIALOGIC ACTIONS?

You may have heard about the Dialogue Skills Training (DST) that is currently being made available to all staff of the VADOC to improve communication. This one-day training covers engagement skills such as the Check-in and Check-out, which are now used at the start and end of many meetings in the Department. It also explains (in an experiential way) the different Modes (such as monologue, debate, discussion, conversation and dialogue) to encourage you to choose the best way to engage with people in a particular situation.

The Dialogic Actions are a skill included in the DST to help you when you are talking with someone and it is not working very well or gets messy. It is simple enough that you can remember it during the conversation itself. There are only four Actions that you can make in a conversation, and they are to Move (which gives direction), to Follow (which gives completion), to Oppose (which gives correction) or to By-stand (which gives perspective). It is the same whatever subject you might be talking about, and whether you are at work or at home. They are only actions if they are spoken out loud. If they are thought but not spoken then they don't help to improve the conversation. When you use the Dialogic Actions clearly the conversation works better, so let's look at them in more detail.

MOVE: The first is a Move and it takes the form of a proposal of some kind, such as "I would like to talk about next week" or "why don't we work together on this?" When there is a clear Move it is obvious where that person would like to go with the conversation. A Move gives direction to the conversation.

It helps to say why you are making the Move, such as "I am not clear which meetings we already have scheduled, so I would like to talk about next week" or "Neither of us seems to be having much success on our own, and the team needs an answer urgently, so why don't we work together on this?"

FOLLOW: The second Action is a Follow which means that the speaker would like to go with the proposal, such as "I think I have it all written down so let's take a look at my list" or "I agree – the team needs an answer from us urgently, and two heads are better than one". When there is a Follow after a Move then the two speakers agree and a decision is made to proceed with the direction proposed.

OPPOSE: The third is an Oppose which disagrees with the direction proposed, such as "I would rather think about what we still have to get done this week" or "no thanks". When there is an Oppose it stops movement in the direction of the Move. This may not feel particularly helpful, depending on the tone of voice with which the person Opposes you. If it is done with respect you are far more

likely to listen rather than dismissing the person as being difficult. Opposing is helpful because it improves decision-making. If people stay quiet rather than Opposing, then the information they have is not available to include in the decision. We may be about to drive over a cliff but if everybody kept quiet rather than opposing where we are going it would not help at all!

When someone Opposes your Move, there is always some information to be gained, if you are willing to enquire and find out more. Of course it helps when the person says why they Oppose in the first place, because this is the information that others need. For example "I am sorry but I can't even start to think about next week until we get on top of what we have already committed to do, so I would rather think about what we still have to get done this week" or "I want to try to prove to myself that I am capable of doing this on my own, so no thanks."

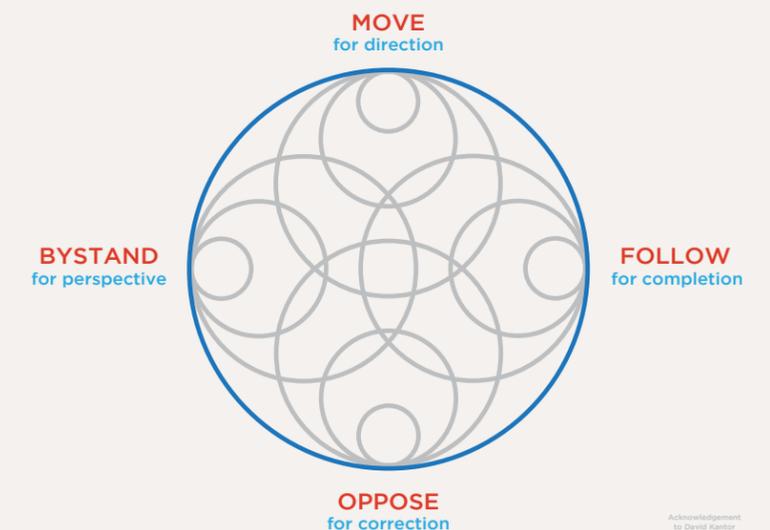
BY-STAND: The final action is a By-stand which is an observation about the way the conversation is proceeding, or getting stuck. An example of a By-stand with the exchanges we have been following would be "you seem to live in the future, whilst I seem pre-occupied with the here-and-now" or "We both know that the team needs an answer from us urgently, yet you would seem to be more interested in your own success rather than the team's success." The BYSTAND gives perspective, and if it is done well it changes the dynamics in the conversation. It can free up stuck patterns that repeat themselves unless they are talked about openly.

A healthy, well-functioning conversation will include all four Actions to reach good decisions together. If any of them are often (or always) missing, then the communication will be less effective and may even suffer a break-down. If there are no Moves the conversation will wonder around aimlessly without really going anywhere, like a sail boat with no wind. If there are no Follows, it will be impossible to reach a decision, however long you might talk together. If there are no Opposes, people will just be paying lip service, knowing that the decisions being made are not the best ones. If there is no By-standing, the conversation will get stuck in a familiar way, and there will be the feeling of 'here we go again!'

Why not think about some of the conversations and meetings that you are involved in to see how well you are doing? If the conversations are not working particularly well, the Dialogic Actions may help you to do something about it...

DIALOGIC ACTIONS

Have you ever wondered what to do when a conversation is simply not working?



Use the Dialogic Actions when conversations...

...take too long to get to the point, become arguments, are superficial, are cyclic and repetitive in nature, lack closure, have little direction, lack inquiry, are indecisive, lack perspective or are simply not working.

Dialogue is a mode of talking and thinking together that...

...helps people to find a common understanding and a common purpose. The decisions and actions that result from good dialogue make common sense to everyone involved. Good dialogue requires a set of simple and practical skills that can easily be learned and bettered with practice. In dialogue people express their own views, needs and aspirations, listen to others, agree and disagree with one another, support and challenge each other, become aware of their own assumptions and impact on others, come to appreciate diversity and to accommodate differences in ways that may not have been obvious at first. With the benefit of dialogue it is possible to undertake participatory change with people rather than imposing change by doing it to people. Change of this kind is sustainable over time because it feels right and is based on collective common sense.

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