



What is a Working Dialogue?

You may have heard people talking about a Working Dialogue, or you may at some point be invited to participate in one, and wonder what is involved. This article describes why the Department is introducing Working Dialogues and how they are structured. Working Dialogues are all about putting Dialogue to work in the everyday workplace, to make it easier to get things done and to be more efficient or effective. There are some ideas, opportunities and issues that have always been addressed directly with your supervisor or line manager, and that remains unchanged. There are others that are more difficult because they involve a range of different stakeholders, departments or people who are affected by the situation – and this is where the Working Dialogue comes in.

A Working Dialogue is **Set Up** by the Unit Head or a member of their Executive Team, with the support of an experienced Dialogue Practitioner to help design and facilitate the entire process. Anyone can ask the Unit Head or Executive Team for a Working Dialogue on a particular topic, giving the case for why it should be considered. The theme of the Working Dialogue will be either an issue or problem that needs attention, or an idea or opportunity to introduce a new and better way of working. So, a Working Dialogue can be reactive (about a problem) or proactive (about a new opportunity). The topic and scope need to be clearly defined and written down, and it is worth checking that there is a good chance of the Working Dialogue resulting in some meaningful benefit. It may be quite local and of concern to only five or six people for a few hours, or it may be large and complex and involve 20 or more participants representing many parts of the Unit and other stakeholders beyond the Unit and require several longer meetings

Once the topic is set, some care is needed to work out who will be invited to participate, so that everyone affected is directly involved or is represented in the Working Dialogue. The aim is that all of them have an understanding and a voice in the decision-making process, and that the information and perspectives held by different people are incorporated into the changes proposed. If some were overlooked, during the Working Dialogue you would hear participants talking about 'them' without any of 'them' being in the room to respond with their particular perspective and way of thinking about the topic. Leaving out key players in any decision-making process is one of the reasons why the resulting action plans are only partially effective. Quick fixes that are designed by a small, limited group of

people often come undone when they are rolled out to others, and therefore later have to be re-designed.

The Unit Head could choose to attend the Working Dialogue, and should do so if they have information that others lack. On the other hand, they could choose to step back and offer others the chance to address issues or new opportunities in their own way.

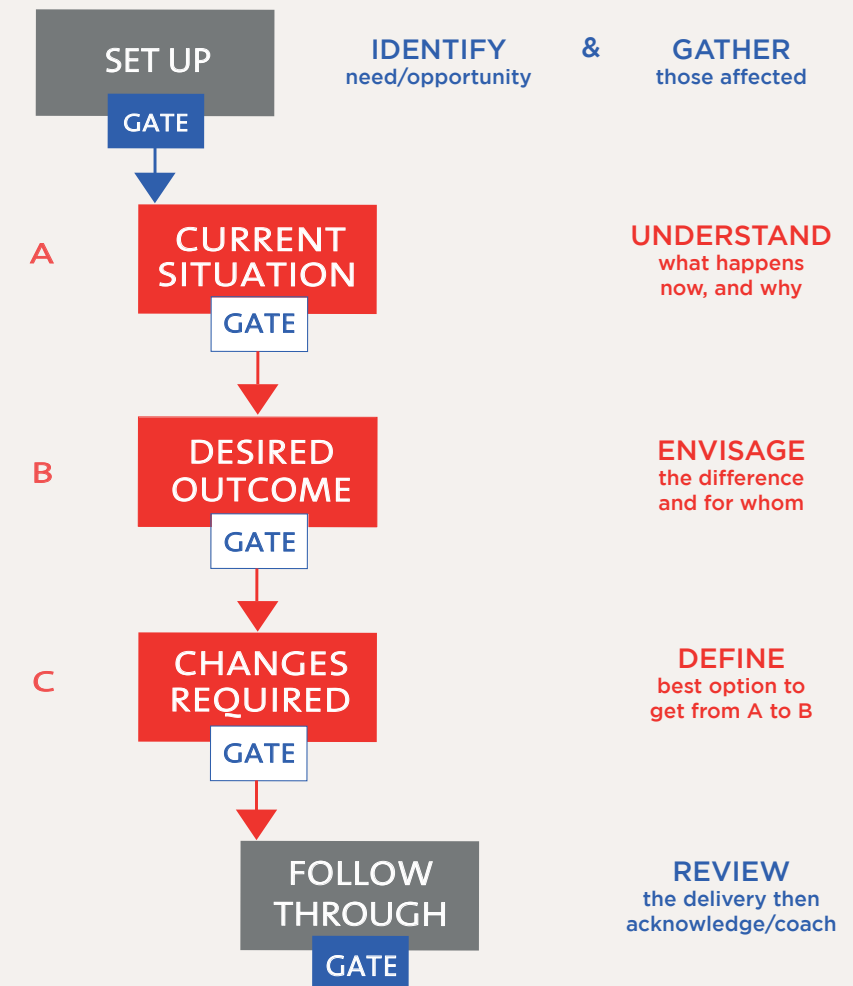
The Working Dialogue then follows a sequence of three steps: understanding the current situation, defining the desired outcome and laying out the changes required to get there.

The first is to understand the **Current Situation**, which means what happens now, why are things done the way they are and what impact that has. Understanding why things are like they are leads to better informed changes. Time is needed to hear the different perspectives and build up the complete picture of what is happening, even when there are many participants in a complex situation. Often, different people will have different ideas about what happens (or does not happen) and why, because everyone does not have access to the same information. Indeed you are likely to hear people say at some point during a Working Dialogue: "I have no idea why you do X. Could you help me to understand why you do that?" So, this first step involves inquiry and learning from each other in a constructive way. The challenge in this step is not to jump to the answer and propose solutions before you have understood the situation from all the different perspectives.

The second step is to build a picture of the **Desired Outcome**. This requires the imagination to see how things could be done in a better way, what that would look like, and what kind of difference it would make to everyone involved. What is needed here is not just general statements, like "better communication." but specific descriptions such as "no new member of staff will be in post for more than 14 days without meeting the Unit Head" or "family members will know which prison the offender was moved to within two days," along with what difference that might make to all affected. The Working Dialogue encourages imaginative and viable proposals that are within the means of the assembled group to achieve.

The third step is to work out the **Changes Required** to get from the Current Situation to the Desired Outcome. This involves listing a range of different options that could be delivered, and exploring

WORKING DIALOGUE



Putting Dialogue to work...

Working Dialogue is designed to change things for the better in the everyday workplace. It is a structured way of dealing with multi-stakeholder situations, and can address difficult issues as well as taking forward new opportunities with the help of those affected. The Dialogue skills (such as Check-ins, Dialogic Actions, Dialogic Practices and Leading Energies) are used to help participants to engage with each other constructively, propose helpful and viable changes, and design and deliver an appropriate action plan. Over time this moves decision-making to lower levels in the organization, freeing up time for the executive to provide direction and coaching. The outcomes are new ways of working together for the overall benefit of the Agency that deliver better financial value, operational efficiency and lasting public safety in an ethical way.

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the predictable consequences of each of them. The best option, or combination of options, is then incorporated into an Action Plan that defines who is responsible for doing what, and by when, to make the changes required for a successful outcome. This Action Plan is owned and delivered by the participants in the Working Dialogue.

Clearly the **Dialogue skills** will be needed for constructive engagement and effective thinking together within any Working Dialogue. Every member of staff has already been trained in the Dialogue skills by participating in a Dialogue Skills Training (DST) and/or working through the Dialogue Learning Plans in their Learning Teams. So people are already familiar with a Check-in, the Dialogic Actions (Move, Follow, Oppose and Bystand) and the Dialogic Practices (Voice, Listening, Respect and Suspension) and a Check-out. Now these skills become useful to design and achieve change in a structured way in the workplace. As the Dialogue Practitioner facilitates the different steps in the Working Dialogue, they remind participants of the Dialogue skills, and intervene where necessary to ensure that the skills are used.

(Most supervisors have also attended a Dialogic Coaching Training (DCT), which includes the Leading Energies (Visionary, Citizen, Performance and Wisdom) and the Accountability Progression, and both of these are also helpful for the Working Dialogues).

Built into the Working Dialogue are **Gates** at the end of each step. The Gates take the form of several questions for participants to answer, to check that the step is complete before moving on to the next. The Dialogue Practitioner facilitates the Gates to ensure that the thinking is rigorous and inclusive. This is more important than completing the process in a set time, and proper use of the Gates may slow the process down. For example it might reveal that or a perspective has not been heard or understood and more time is required, or that one of the key players has not been included and the group would need to reconvene when they are also available. The Dialogue Practitioner makes sure the progress of the Working Dialogue is documented on flip charts for everyone to see, and that the overall process is participatory. They also make sure that The Unit Head is apprised of the progress made with all three steps, including: A) the groups' understanding of the Current Situation, B) their proposals for the Desired Outcome, and C) their Action Plan to bring about the Changes Required (to get from A) to B).

There is a **Follow Up** to the Working Dialogue, where the Unit Head checks that the Action Plan has been successfully delivered and acknowledges participants for their work. There may be times when the Action Plan is not fully delivered, and the anticipated changes do not materialize - because of a weakness in the implementation, or in the Action Plan itself. This is a great opportunity for learning, and the Unit Head or members of his Executive Team are likely to want to coach participants to develop their skills to design, plan and deliver changes more effectively for this and future Working Dialogues.

Over time, the repeated use of Working Dialogues will move decision-making to lower levels in the organization in a practical way and give more people the chance to participate. This should free up time for the Unit Heads to provide direction and more coaching. The outcomes of Working Dialogues can become new ways of working together for the overall benefit of the Agency. These can be measured in terms of better financial value, improved operational efficiency and effectiveness, and the enhancement of lasting public safety - all delivered in an morally right and ethical way. This is how cultural change occurs in the Department.

The Working Dialogue was designed by Dialogue Associates specifically for the VADOC.

Submitted by Peter Garrett of Dialogue Associates

Augusta Shares ALICE Training With Local Schools

Submitted by Augusta Correctional Center

After a spate of events sparked fear and school closings in the Augusta County the Virginia Department of Corrections shared its ALICE training with the community.

ALICE, an acronym for Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, and Evacuate, is designed to increase survival during an active shooter emergency.

Augusta Correctional Center's Lieutenant Chad Crookshanks shared the VADOC ALICE training with the Augusta County Sheriff's Department, the Staunton City Police Department, Clymore Elementary School and Stuart Middle School.



Pictured: Lieutenant Chad Crookshanks with Clymore Elementary School Principal Fonda Morris, top, and with Augusta Sheriff Donald Smith, bottom.