Using Dialogue as a Tool in the Organizational Change Process
California Tomorrow

"Although we know dialogue around diversity and equity is challenging, we believe that the collective learning that takes place and the new lines of communications that are created can powerfully inform your cooperative efforts to address the organization's internal and external inclusion and equity concerns in a more purposeful manner. Viewed from this standpoint, the dialogue we are suggesting the team lead is not intended to be a substitute for planning. Instead, the dialogue is intended to inform the development of strategic and concerted actions to embed diversity, inclusion, equity concerns into the normal planning and development processes of each community organization."

Strategies for Engaging your Organizational Stakeholders: Moving from Dialogue and Assessment to Action through Planning, California Tomorrow, p. 2.

What Is Dialogue?

In the last ten years or so, dialogue has become a word we hear more often, whether in the workplace, in neighborhoods, in our faith communities, and even informal conversations. President Clinton's Initiative on Race is partly responsible for increasing the visibility of this practice in mainstream circles, but dialogue has been around for a long time. Dialogue is used in many settings and is usually defined more broadly than it actually appears in practice. In some circles, it is a structured conversation void of conflict and anger. For others it is a problem-solving technique. Neither of those descriptions, however, are completely accurate. Dialogue is a practice to engage people to listen to different perspectives, promote cooperation, work on difficult issues, and build skills. This open and inclusive process has significant long-term effects, but not only for the individual or group that participates; it can also lead to organizational change and even community-level changes. Descriptions of the practice of dialogue are best provided by the theorists and practitioners who understand its process and impact.

Unlike debate, dialogue emphasizes listening to deepen understanding. Dialogue invites discovery. It develops common values and allows participants to express their own interests. It expects that participants will grow in understanding and may decide to act together with common goals. In dialogue, participants can question and re-evaluate their assumptions. Through this process, people are learning to work together to improve race relations.

One America Dialogue Guide: Conducting a Discussion on Race. Washington D.C.: The White House, March, 1998. p.5.

During the dialogue process, people learn how to think together – not just in the sense of analyzing a shared problem or creating new pieces of shared knowledge, but in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility, in which the thoughts, emotions, and resulting actions belong not to one individual, but to all of them together.

William Isaacs, past director, MIT's Dialogue Project

Intergroup Dialogue is a form of democratic practice, engagement, problem solving, and education involving face-to-face, focused, facilitated, and confidential discussions occurring over time between two or more groups of people defined by their different social dimensions.

Intergroup Dialogue: Democracy at Work in Theory and Practice, David Schoem, Sylvia Hurtado, Todd Sevig, Mark Chesler, and Stephen H. Sumida from the book, *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community and Workplace*, University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 2001, p. 6.

Dialogue is so significantly different than debate or discussion in that it is action, because it is words that elicit and allow meaning to come through, to emerge … People are so used to defining dialogue only from the verbal perspective that they totally miss the other aspects of dialogue, and the work that is going on is spiritual, psychological, and emotional and people don't see that as work or action.

Dr. Paige Chargois, co-founder, Hope in the Cities.

Dialogue is an open and honest forum which brings together diverse people with the aid of trained facilitators to share personal stories, express emotions, affirm values, ask questions, clarify viewpoints, and propose solutions to community concerns.

What is Dialogue, Western Justice Center, www.westerjustice.org/What_is_dialogue.htm, 3/13/02.

Each organization has a unique culture with norms about discussing problems, addressing relationship tension points, and/or creating change within an organization. To better understand how your foundation has already incorporated a dialogic culture within your organization, it may be helpful to see a description of dialogue in contrast with debate.

Debate	Dialogue
Oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.	Collaborative: two or more sides work together toward a common understanding
Winning is the goal.	Finding common ground is the goal.
Listening to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.	One listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.
Affirms a participant's own point of view.	Possibility of enlarging and changing a participant's point of view.
Defends assumptions as truth.	Reveals assumptions for reevaluation.
Causes a critique of the other position.	Causes introspection on one's own position.
Defends one's own position as the best solution and excludes other solutions.	Opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.
Creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right.	Creates an open-minded attitude: openness to being wrong and an openness to change.
One submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.	One submits one's best thinking, knowing that other peoples' reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.
Calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.	Calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.
One searches for glaring differences.	One searches for basic agreements.
One searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.	One searches for strength in the other positions.
Involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feeling or relationship and often belittles or depreciates the other person.	Involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.
Assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.	Assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.

Catherine Flavin-McDonald and Martha L. McCoy, *Facing the Challenge of Racism and Race Relations: Democratic Dialogue and Action for Stronger Communities*. Pomfret, CT: Topsfield Foundation, 1997, p.47.

"Dialogue and deliberation" is a theory-based practice with documentation of its impact. (See the Resource section for books and articles to learn more about the practice.) Within the umbrella of dialogue and deliberation practice, there are several different types. Some of the prominent ones are collective inquiry, community building and social action, conflict transformation and peace building, critical dialogic education, and deliberative democracy. The field has had significant growth this past decade, and a new organization, National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, was formed two years ago to support the diversity of organizations who use this practice. The organization's Web page is an excellent resource for learning more about this approach and how to start a dialogue process. (See Resource section)

Why is Dialogue Important?

As human beings, we develop and carry into interpersonal interactions and communications a set of assumptions about life in general, the world around us, our experiences, and our work. We vigorously defend these assumptions when they are challenged, both consciously and unconsciously, whether with words or with body language. Our assumptions are based on past experiences and thought; they are deeply embedded in our memory. For each of us, they are "givens" or "truths." When we communicate with others, these assumptions operate in our minds. As a result more often than not, a group "discussion," in fact, consists of everyone in some way presenting his or her "opinion."

Growing up, each of us was taught consciously and unconsciously about different racial groups. These lessons were sometimes from television programs, our teachers, and even family members. Our stereotypes of different groups were developed and reinforced by this socialization process. It is not easy to dismantle these beliefs and attitudes, especially when they have been our truths for so long and shared by people we love and respect. When interacting with others, we use our stereotypes as a filtering tool, and rely on them especially when those stereotypes are not challenged. Dismantling stereotypes requires a conscious effort to replace them with experiences based in the context of institutional racism rather than the misinformation, missing and biased history, and myths we learned from other people, the media and institutions.

In many schools across the United States, there is not a formal class to teach cross-cultural communication skills or to learn about the history of racism in our country. If you went to a segregated school, there was minimal opportunity to interact with people who were racially different. Dialogue provides an opportunity to increase one's skills, take some risks and be more confident through more cross-racial interactions. It is important to note that white people and people of color may have some different concerns participating in a dialogue. The dialogue group provides a structured process with ground rules and the premise that each of us can learn from each other's experiences and perspectives.

Many times when people hear about disparities regarding access to jobs or education, they look to the individual to see what he or she is doing or not doing for the disparities to exist and sometimes assume the exceptions to the rule are the norm. Through dialogue, one can not only learn about individual differences and personal experiences of discrimination but one can begin to understand how structural racism works in each institution of the United States and the role of power and privilege. Since each foundation is an institution, dialogue provides a unique process to hold up the mirror to the foundation's policies and practices through learning about employee's experiences within the foundation. Beyond the dialogue process, it is essential for a foundation's staff to participate in a training workshop to explore the complexities of institutional racism.

Sometimes emotions can become quite intense when discussing issues of race. Dialogue can be an effective tool for creating an inclusive process for staff to communicate effectively and respectfully with each other. A dialogue group is a key strategy for dismantling stereotypes, improving working relationships between different races, and understanding how organizational practices impact different racial identity groups.

Where Does Dialogue Fit in the Organizational Change Process?

Dialogue is going to be an important vehicle in your change process. It can be used to create a vision for change; for increasing colleagues' awareness of the issues, differences, and similarities; to create a set of norms for inclusive behavior for the foundation; to create a process for responding when conflict occurs in the change process; and in many other ways as well.

It's important to be aware of the power dynamics, not just in terms of the roles each of you are in but also how you self-identify. These dynamics will play out in the dialogue. Being a leader on inclusion and equity is a challenging job. No matter how good your intentions are, no matter how much you believe the foundation team is ready to move forward, at times your leadership team will face resistance and conflict. Self-care and team care will be important, and dialogue will support the process to sustain each of you.

As you begin thinking about ways to use dialogue in your foundation, we suggest you think about and discuss the following:

- How can you assist others in the foundation in sharpening their understanding of what inclusion and equity means—inside and outside the foundation?
- Is reaching a shared understanding of inclusion and equity an important step in strengthening the foundation's diversity practices and outcomes? If so, what steps can be taken to build a shared understanding of inclusion and equity?
- What ways can you ensure that the staff of the foundation will receive the support each needs to participate constructively in dialogues?

Dialogue can play a key role in addressing equity in the workplace. To implement this strategy, it is important to reflect on how your foundation has and is addressing racial equity and inclusion. Here are a few questions to help you decide what focus would be most helpful for your foundation:

Has your foundation created opportunities to discuss racial equity and inclusion between staff members? *Examples include: workshops, brown bags, panel presentations, staff meeting agenda items, etc.*

If not, you may want to use dialogue to increase staff members' awareness of differences and help to understand different cultures.

How does your foundation address intergroup tension? How does the foundation respond when/if a staff member makes a statement about another racial group that is demeaning?

If there is tension, or communication is sometimes ineffective between individuals of different racial groups, you may want to use dialogue to begin to address underlying conflicts by increasing skills through facilitated intergroup discussions, and to begin to examine the power dynamics that exist in groups.

Has your foundation assessed its practices, norms, policies, and culture in the context of racial equity and inclusion? *Areas assessed may include employment practices, organizational diversity, investment portfolio, the foundation's reputation in different racial identity communities, and grant-making decisions.*

If not, you may want to use dialogue to begin to identify internal organizational practices and how they apply—and are perceived—by different groups.

Dialogue is an important strategy to increase understanding, enhance competency through practice, and provide an opportunity to learn different perspectives about individual and organizational issues. An organizational change initiative should include a dialogue process through the different stages of change, though the focus of the dialogue may be different depending on what the foundation's past work on racial equity and its current plan for change.

On the next page is a grid to assist you in determining your focus. There are other strategies for addressing individual awareness and relationship building, such as workshops, coaching, skill-building, social events, educational forums, etc. There are also many resources for foundations to implement their organizational change initiatives. Some steps include creating an internal diversity committee, assessing practices and policies, collective planning, and organizational learning.

Getting Started

Ideally, the board chair and president will commit to a long-term process of becoming a more inclusive and equitable foundation in all internal operations, and then insure that its practices and values are transparent in the foundation's

community partnerships, outreach, and grantmaking. Even if this commitment doesn't exist at the top leadership level, there are still opportunities to increase skills, assess operations, and enhance understanding. Depending on organizational dynamics, it may be easier to start the process with staff, building a critical mass of committed colleagues before requesting leadership's commitment. Here are some ideas for getting started with staff:

- Start a brown bag series; bring in presenters to discuss issues, or send an article out for staff to read and discuss, or share childhood differences of growing up.
- Gather staff who are interested in participating in a dialogue on race. Contract with a multiracial team of facilitators not affiliated with the foundation. If funding is not available at this stage, see if you can barter services with the facilitators.
- Integrate dialogue into your strategic planning process. Dialogue can be helpful in understanding how organizational practices and future goals may be perceived and how they may affect different identity groups.
- Use part of your staff meetings to discuss dialogue norms and integrate them into the culture.

The dialogue we are suggesting you undertake might more expansively be defined as a process of human communication and interaction in which the basic assumptions of participants are revealed, suspended, shared, examined, and appreciated as to their meaning. During this experience, "thinking together" takes place, new understandings are realized, new possibilities are envisioned, and more complete knowledge is created and shared among all participants. An important milestone in your foundation's journey toward inclusion and equity will be the shifting from discussion/debate patterns to a dialogue model that engages your leaders in joint learning and development. As a way of supporting your team's efforts to create and sustain such dialogue, the following is a set of reflection questions you may want to use as a guide posts for your journey.

Seeing Change Through A Quad-Focus Lens

Focus on yourself, your attitude and behaviors:
- Where are you on this journey? What change framework (Refer to Rainbow Research) do you typically use? What equity principles do you use to guide your leadership?
- What are your strengths? Your challenges? What are your hot buttons (an intense emotional response)? How can you learn to understand and manage these?
- How do you respond to conflict? To change?

- What type up of support do you need to be a leader of equity and inclusion? What do you need more information about, coaching, and/or training?

Focus on the interpersonal (for the internal committee):
- What is working well in your interactions with this team?
- What issues do you need to talk about?
- How are the power dynamics affecting your interactions?
- What do you need from each other to effectively carry out your role?
- How do you give feedback to each other?

In working with your colleagues who are not on this team...

- What framework (Refer to Rainbow Research) do they use when thinking about inclusion and equity?
- What are the norms for communication and feedback?
- How do they respond to conflict? To change?
- What type of support do they need to be an integral part of this change process?
- What support will help sustain this change process?

Focus on the foundation:
- How has the foundation responded to other change initiatives? What have been the successes? What have been the failures? Why? What can we do to ensure we incorporate these lessons into this effort?
- Who are key voices that help move things?
- What critical mass of staff support, time investment, and resources is needed for change to happen?
- What are the barriers for getting this change process off the ground? What are the strengths of the organization that will help sustain this change process?

Focus on the community foundation's relationship and responsibility to the community:
- How is the foundation currently perceived? Is it seen as an ally or a gatekeeper? Is it considered welcoming and open or exclusive and closed-minded?
- Is it seen as a leader and a player on matters related to equity or as another do-gooder organization?
- What needs to be in place internally at the foundation, in order for the foundation to have more credibility and play a stronger leadership role on equity in the community?

- What are the foundation's assets for encouraging and supporting community and civic leaders to look at race relations and respond to the racial justice issues?

Things to Consider when Creating an Effective Dialogue Process

Ground Rules/Principles:

All dialogue processes adopt a set of ground rules or principles for their discussions. These principles help create an inclusive process that honors and respects each person, and create an effective process for creating cross-racial discussions. Below are some basic ground rules and some examples from other organizations that specialize in creating dialogue processes:

- Respect confidentiality. After a person has shared a story, the story stays as part of the dialogue group history, not to be brought up again unless initiated by the person who originally shared it. This is especially important if there is management and staff involved in the dialogue group. It is important to insure individual statements will not effect an individual's performance evaluations.
- Pace your contributions to the group. Give everyone a chance to talk, yet be respectful to people who may want to gather their thoughts or who are not ready to share.
- Listen first; suspend judgments and seek to understand other people's perspectives. It will be difficult at first to turn off the internal debate switch. Those who enjoy it should try to resist and ask for support.
- Keep humor a part of the discussion. Talking about race is sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes tense, and sometimes emotional. The intensity needs to be lightened with some personal reflection or just being able to laugh.
- If you hear something that is offensive, let the group know by saying "ouch" or "I found that statement hurtful." If you feel comfortable, explain why you found the statement offensive. If not, then it is an opportunity for the group to reflect on a statement's impact, not the person's behavior. Sometimes, especially in a group that is predominately white, people of color are looked to for the answers. It is important to keep in mind that each member is responsible for their education and that one person never speaks for an entire racial group.

The following are group agreements or principles used by organizations that specialize in dialogue.

Public Conversations Project: Sample Ground Rules (Agreements) for Dialogue

1. Speak personally, for yourself, as an individual, not as a representative of an organization or position.

2. Avoid assigning intentions, beliefs, or motives to others. (Ask others questions instead of stating untested assumptions about them.)
3. Honor each person's right to "pass" if he or she is not ready or willing to speak.
4. Allow others to finish before speaking.
5. Respect all confidentiality or anonymity requests the group has agreed to honor.
6. Stay on topic.
7. Call people and groups by the names they prefer.

coAction's Six Key Components
1. *Suspension*: The ability to be aware of and temporarily suspend our judgments, opinions, and beliefs about how the world is.
2. *Identifying Assumptions*: Assumptions are our personal beliefs and opinions about how the world works and what is universally true...
3. *Listening to our Meaning*: Listening with a willingness to be influenced … as though the speaker is wise, listening as an ally.
4. *Balancing Inquiry and Advocacy*: Advocacy is the act of sharing our position in relation to others. Inquiry involves asking ourselves about what underlies our opinions.
5. *Reflection*: The process of thoughtful contemplation for new meaning, deeper understanding, or breakthrough learning.
6. *Holding Tension*: The ability to sit with discomfort/tension in order to inform self-discovery and personal inquiry.

Hope In the Cities' Sample Ground Rules
1. We will speak in first person.
2. We will share from a level of personal vulnerability.
3. We will focus on those persons present. We will not focus on an historic person or group
4. We will not judge one another.
5. We will acknowledge anger but we will not express thoughts that are aimed at specifically hurting or demeaning one another.
6. We will listen as allies, not as critics.

Facilitation

Though there might be some excellent facilitators at your foundation, it is helpful to have outside facilitators come in to facilitate the dialogue sessions.

- This will provide an opportunity for all staff to participate.
- Depending on their roles of the potential internal facilitators, it will eliminate some of the power dynamics in the dialogue group.
- It will provide an external perspective to the organizational culture and norms, which will be helpful as you move through an organizational change process.

Also, it is helpful to have a multiracial team of facilitators for your dialogue process.

- Depending on the demographic mix and the roles people of color have in the institution, it will provide an opportunity for a person of color to play a leadership role.
- There will be times during the dialogue process that it will be helpful for the white facilitator to model being an ally by interrupting possible hurtful statements. If the foundation's demographics reflect a small percentage of people of color, then the facilitator of color can take the pressure off these individuals who may be asked to teach or share stories.
- The group can experience two different facilitation styles.
- One facilitator can focus on facilitating and the other facilitator can focus on group dynamics and insuring that ground rules are being upheld.

Possible Issues

What if we do not have a diverse staff?
It might be best to start with a diversity workshop or antiracism training. It will be helpful for staff to begin talking about these issues in a structured setting, and understand basic terms related to individual and institutional racism. One of the most important lessons for whites is not to ask people of color to teach. Whites need to take full responsibility for their education, take risks, become effective allies, and build relationships with people of color. It is also an opportunity to not only reflect on the lack of diversity and the barriers to recruiting and retaining a diverse staff but also create a plan to address those barriers.

How can we deal with the power dynamics when all levels of staff are present?
It is important that people's roles are suspended in the dialogue process and that the facilitators assist by interrupting power dynamics or checking in with people to insure that their roles are not getting in the way of sharing. Dialogue is about "power *with,*" not "power *over.*" Unfortunately, even when ground rules are created, there are no assurances everyone will follow them. It is not just up to the facilitators to reiterate the norms; group members must also keep each other accountable. If power dynamics are occurring in the dialogue group or internal decisions are made based on what is said in the dialogue, ask the facilitator to have a one-on-one coaching discussion with the individual.

How should we get the organization ready?
Ideally, it would be best for the leadership to initiate the dialogue group process and to set the tone for why dialogue is important: for individual awareness, intergroup relations, and/or organizational change. If the leadership is not ready, staff can still gather to discuss the issues (see the Getting Started section for ideas). There may be apprehension about having a dialogue. White people may be concerned that they say something offensive or be called a racist. People of color may be concerned they will be placed in the teacher role, or need to keep

their emotions in check. Open conversations about people's fears are important along with reinforcing that the dialogue process will include outside facilitators who will create a structured process with ground rules. There may still be resistance. Continue to create a critical mass of allies who are interested in making this long-term commitment.

What should I look for in a facilitator?
It is important to not just contract with someone who is a good meeting facilitator, but rather a multiracial team that has:
- Done personal work on these issues, has an advanced understanding of individual and institutional racism, and is aware of their own emotional responses to these issues.
- Experience facilitating dialogues, not just discussions or meetings.
- Ability to work with staff on where they are in learning about race and ethnicity, and that does not have a personal agenda with the foundation.
- Experience asking questions about the organizational norms and culture to have a sense of the dynamics, especially the power dynamics, prior to facilitating the dialogue sessions.
- Ability to be creative and flexible to the needs of participants.

How long should a dialogue group last?
Dialogue groups can be ongoing, but within an organization and with the staff changes it would be helpful to have a set length. Ideally, the group should commit to two hours, four to six times over a short period of time, such as two to three months. This will provide a better opportunity to build relationships, reflect on reactions and emotions, and build momentum for change.

Possible Questions and Issues for Dialogue:

Individual Awareness Questions/Issues	Intergroup Relations Questions/Issues	Organizational Change Questions/Issues
• What were the messages I heard growing up about racial identity groups (from teachers, media, family)? • How does racism affect your community? • Take a current event and discuss different perspectives, e.g. Trent Lott's statement. • Describe the neighborhood where you grew up. • What are you most proud of about your racial or ethnic group?	• How often do you have contact with people of different races? What is that like? Is it hard to make friends with people of different races? • What are two to three things you believe need to happen for your community to become more inclusive and equitable? • What does it mean to be an ally? What will I need to do to be effective? What do I want from my fellow allies? • What is one thing that I wish I was not asked or assumed about my race?	• What does an inclusive and equitable organization look like? (Describe community relations, staff, governance, practices.) • Imagine: in the year 2007, the president of the Council on Foundations calls your president and says, "It is a great honor to inform you that your foundation received the most votes from your peers for being a shining example of an inclusive and equitable foundation." Share what you hope will happen—starting today—for this scenario to come true. • Does the organizational culture, policies, and/or practices create barriers and/or not support cultural differences? Describe your experience.

Resources

Books, Web Sites, and Articles on Dialogue

Bohm, David. *On Dialogue*. New York: Routledge, 1996

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Books and Articles on Race and Ethnicity

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Institute for Democratic Renewal and Project Change Anti-Racism Initiative. *A Community Builder's Tool Kit: 15 Tools for Creating Healthy, Productive Interracial/Multicultural Communities*. Claremont, California: Claremont Graduate University, 2001.

Kivel, Paul. *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*. Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2002.

Klinkner, Philip A. *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Martínez, Elizabeth. *Decolores Means All of Us: Latina Views for a Multi-Colored Century*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1998.

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Organizations - Provide Resources and Assistance

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650-344-0403
www.antiracism.com

Hope in the Cities
1103 Sunset Ave. Richmond, VA 23221
804-358-1764
www.hopeinthecities.org

National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation
P.O. Box 402
Brattleboro, VT 05302
802-254-7341
www.thataway.org

National Conference for Community and Justice
475 Park Ave. South, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10016
212-545-1300
www.nccj.org

National Issues Forum
1-800-433-7834
www.nifi.org

Public Conversations Project
46 Kondazian Street, Watertown, MA 02472
617-923-1216

www.publicconversations.org

Study Circles Resource Center
PO Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258
860-928-3713
www.studycircles.org

Western Justice Center
85 South Grand Avenue
Pasadena, CA 91105
626-584-7494
www.westernjustice.org