

## CHARACTERISTICS OF DIALOGUE

“Dialogue tends to develop in relationships, groups, and communities characterized by:

- *Immediacy of presence.* Presence implies that dialogue partners speak and listen from a common place or space from which they experience access to each other. Communicators sense that, for each other, they are relating *here* (a shared space) and *now* (an immediate moment in time). In many situations, the first task of communicators or planners is to clear such a space, but the clearing doesn't guarantee dialogue so much as it enables it.
- *Emergent unanticipated consequences.* Dialogue presumes a certain spontaneity and improvisation linking communicators. The reason dialogue often seems to repair manipulation is that, in it, all parties enter without full knowledge of the directions that may be taken within the conversation. They are willing to invite surprise, even at the expense of sacrificing strategy at times.
- *Recognition of strange otherness.* By strange otherness we mean that a dialogue partner assumes not only that the other person is different (that is often obvious, of course), but is different in strange—that is, in essentially and inevitably unfamiliar or unpredicted—ways. Strangeness means the other cannot be reduced to an adjusted version of a ‘me’; there is always more, and confronting the strange implies imagining an alternate perspective. Such strangeness is not necessarily a threat, but is as often an invitation for learning.
- *Collaborative orientation.* By collaboration, we suggest that dialogue partners stand their own ground while they remain concerned about the current and future ground of others. Dialogic collaboration, however, does not suggest happy two-way backscratching. Indeed, collaboration embraces conflict, because by recognizing accurately the other's perhaps antithetical position in relation to one's own, we confirm each other.
- *Vulnerability.* Dialogue finds participants open to being changed. We speak from a ground that is important to us, but we do not defend that ground at all costs. Dialogue makes participants willing

to be persuaded; dialogue makes us protean creatures. Personalities, understood from a dialogic perspective, are less things that we 'have' than they are patterns of changingness.

- *Mutual implication.* A process of dialogue means that speakers anticipate listeners or respondents and incorporate them into messages. In a dialogic process, speaker and listener interdepend, each constructing self, other, and their talk simultaneously. John Dewey and A.F. Bentley similarly used the word *trans-action* to suggest a new sense of human causality. Humans aren't changed by actions traded back and forth from one individual to another, but by the very existence of relationship itself. Communication isn't primarily 'caused' by either party, but develops through the relation of both, in concert. Even when one person might seem to be the sole speaker, the voices of listeners are already present, said Russian language theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. For the same reason, Martin Buber referred to the term *I-Thou* as a 'primary word' (not words, plural); what he called 'the between,' the relation, was a unified phenomenon.

- *Temporal flow.* Understanding dialogue always involves understanding the past out of which it flows and the future that it unfolds so persistently. As we have written elsewhere, it 'emerges from a past, fills the immediate present (and thus is experienced as 'wide,' 'deep,' 'immersing,' or 'enveloping' by participants), and prefigures an open future'.

- *Genuineness and authenticity.* Dialogue partners base their relationship on the presumption of authentic or genuine experience. This means not that people always tell the truth, but that no sense of genuine dialogue can be based on a participant's self-consciously untruthful, hidden, deceptive, or blatantly strategic set of interpersonal calculations. Rather, in dialogue, communicators are assumed to speak and act in ways that match their worlds of experience. Where such trust breaks down, dialogic potential dissolves."

-Kenneth Cissna and Rob Anderson

Moments of Meeting: Buber, Rodgers and the Potential for Public Dialogue, 2002