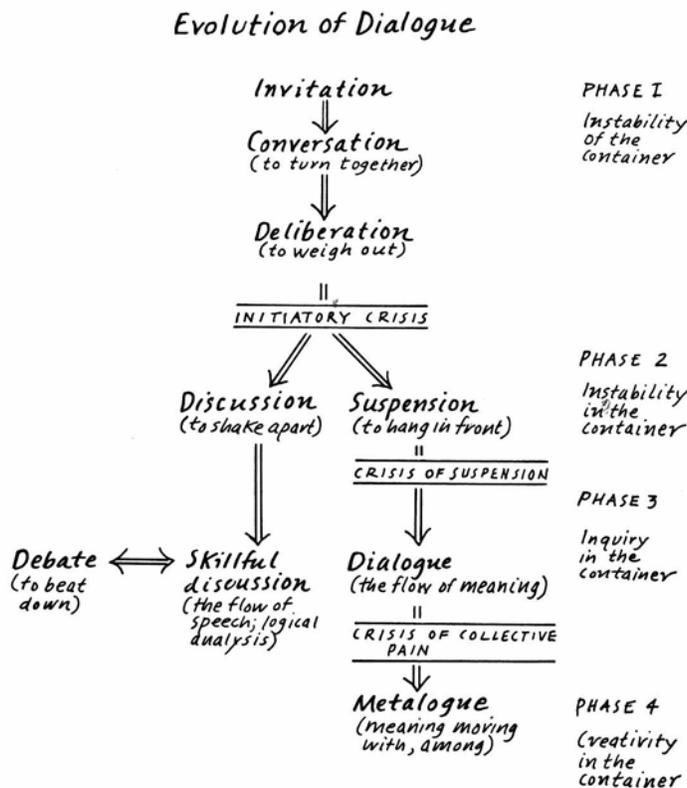


## Level and stages of dialogue : the development of cool inquiry



Passing from one phase to the next seems to entail meeting different types of individual and collective crises. Once one moves through a phase, one can return to it. In a sense, all the phases are always present, though one may seem more dominant at any moment.

**Phase 1: Instability OF the Container<sup>1</sup>.** When any group of individuals comes together, the individuals bring with them a wide range of tacit, unexpressed differences in perspectives. At this moment, dialogue confronts its first crisis: the need for the members to look at the group as an entity including themselves as observers and observed, instead of merely ‘trying to understand each other’ or reach a ‘decision that everyone can live with.’ In this initiatory crisis people confront and navigate a critical paradox: that you can intend to have dialogue, but you cannot force it to happen.

Gradually people recognize that they have a choice: they can *suspend* their views, loosening the grip of their certainty about all views, including their own. They can observe the ways they have habitually made, and acted upon, assumptions. They can question the total process of thought and feeling that produced the conflict—and everything else—in the room: ‘Let’s see where this divergence, this chaos, this instability came from.’ That will move them toward dialogue.

<sup>1</sup> A container can be understood as the sum of the collective assumptions, shared intentions, and beliefs of a group.

Or the group can move to converge, avoiding the challenge of gaining insight into the barriers that are appearing, choosing instead to dissect or defend previously held positions. This convergence can take two very different forms. To the extent that people begin to defend themselves, avoiding evidence that would weaken their view, they are moving toward unproductive discussion. To the extent that they begin to surface the data that leads them to conflict, and the reasoning they use to support their positions, they are moving to skillful discussion.

***Phase 2: Instability IN the Container.*** Having chosen to live with chaos, groups begin to oscillate between suspending views and ‘discussing’ them. At this stage people may find themselves feeling frustrated, principally because the underlying fragmentation and incoherence in everyone's thought begin to appear. Normally this would be kept below the surface, but now it comes forward, despite the best efforts of the participants to keep themselves ‘cool’ or ‘together.’ The members begin to feel as if they were in a giant washing machine. No point of view seems to hold all the truth any longer; no conclusion seems definitive. They can't tell where the group is heading; they feel disoriented, and Perhaps marginalized or constrained by others.

This leads to a ‘crisis of suspension.’ Extreme views are stated and defended. All of this ‘heat’ and instability feels distressing, but it is exactly what should be occurring. The fragmentation that has been hidden is appearing.

In our health care dialogue sessions, at this stage, people began to talk about the long-suppressed ‘myths’ different groups felt about each other (physicians versus administrators, for example), and the anger which they felt about each other. Though expressing conflict of this sort was traditionally anathema to ‘caring’ people, the instability in the container compelled them to explore it directly. However, instead of talking about it in terms of interpersonal issues, they could talk about their different collective images of one another. ("You think nurses are less intelligent than doctors, don't you?")

To manage the crisis of collective suspension that arises at this stage, everyone must be adequately awake to what is happening. People do not need to panic and withdraw, to fight, or to categorize one viewpoint as ‘right’ and another viewpoint as ‘wrong.’ All they need to do is listen and inquire: "What is the meaning of this?" They do not merely listen to others, but to themselves: "Where am I listening from? What is the disturbance going on in me [not others]? What can I learn if I slow things down and inquire within myself?"

At this crisis, skilled facilitation is most critical. The facilitator does not seek to ‘correct’ or impose order on what is happening, but model (in his or her own behavior) some ways to suspend assumptions. The facilitator might point out the presence of polarization, the opportunity to learn what they represent, and the limiting categories of thought that are rapidly gaining momentum in the group.

***Phase 3: INQUIRY in the Container.*** If a critical mass of people stay with the process beyond this point, the conversation begins to flow in a new way. In this ‘cool’

environment people begin to inquire together as a whole. People become sensitive to the ways in which the conversation is affecting all the participants in the group. New insights often emerge.

This phase can be playful and penetrating. Yet it also leads to another crisis. People gradually begin to sense their separateness. Such awareness brings pain. It hurts to exercise new cognitive and emotional muscles, and it especially hurts to feel how you have created your own fragmentation and isolation, throughout your life.

This 'crisis of collective pain' is deep and challenging. It requires considerable discipline and collective trust. As areas of lack of wholeness come to the group's attention, its members begin to change, freeing up rigidity and old habits of attention and communication.

Moving through this crisis is by no means a given nor necessary for 'success' in dialogue. Groups may need a considerable period of time to develop the capacity for moving to the final level.

***Phase 4: CREATIVITY in the Container.*** If this crisis can be navigated, the distinction between memory and thinking becomes apparent. Thinking takes on an entirely different rhythm and pace. The net of words may not be fine enough to capture the subtle and delicate understandings that begin to emerge; the people may fall silent. Yet the silence is not an empty void, but one replete with richness.

"When the soul lies down in that grass," wrote Rumi, a thirteenth century Persian poet, "the world is too full to talk about." In dialogue's fourth phase, the world is too full to use language to analyze it. Yet words can also emerge here: speech that clothes meaning, instead of words merely pointing toward it. I call this land of experience 'metalogue' 'meaning flowing with.' The group does not 'have' meaning in its conversation. The group *is* its meaning. This land of exchange allows participants to generate breakthrough levels of intelligence and credibility and know the aesthetic beauty of shared speech.

- Peter Senge, et al.  
**The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook**