

Dialogue: An Ethical Framework for Interpersonal Communication

The outcome of any conversation is largely dependent upon the attitude we bring to the encounter. Consider how you respond to a request from a coworker you respect as compared to one you distrust, for instance. You're likely to be more friendly and helpful to the former than the latter. Twentieth-century German philosopher Martin Buber argued that our attitudes also set the moral tone for our conversations. He identified two primary human attitudes or relationships: I-It and I-Thou.¹ Communicators in I-It relationships treat others as objects. Centered on their own needs, they are not really interested in the ideas of their conversational partners. Participants in I-Thou (I-You) relationships, in contrast, treat others as unique human beings. They are genuinely committed to understanding the perspectives of their fellow communicators.

Buber identifies three types of communication that reflect varying degrees of interest in the self or the other. *Monologue* is self-centered, I-It communication, which, at its worst, is characterized by deception, exploitation, coercion, and manipulation. *Technical dialogue* reflects a more neutral stance toward the self and other. In this type of interaction the focus is on gathering and processing information. *Dialogue* is the product of an I-Thou relationship. Dialogue occurs between equal partners who focus on understanding rather than on being understood.

All three forms of communication have their place in the organization. There are times when we legitimately engage in monologue to meet our needs, such as when we need emotional support. Technical dialogue enables us to get our work done, and we spend most of our time sending and receiving information-centered messages. However, dialogue has the most potential to build productive relationships and organizational communities. Entering into I-Thou relationships heightens self-esteem by reaffirming the worth of both parties, strengthens interpersonal bonds, and promotes understanding and learning. Yet, before we can pursue dialogue, we need to clear up some common misconceptions about this form of communication, clarify its unique characteristics, and identify the ethical demands dialogue makes of us.

Dialogue is frequently misunderstood. It is *not* merely venting one's feelings (that is a form of monologue). Successful dialogue focuses on what happens between communicators based on the meanings and understandings they jointly develop. For that reason, dialogue can't be forced, only encouraged. Nor is dialogue limited to friendly interactions between friends or intimates. Instead, dialogue is most powerful when acquaintances profoundly disagree but remain in an I-Thou relationship. Buber urged discussants to walk "a narrow ridge" between extreme positions, avoiding the temptation to take up

residence in one opposing camp or another.² They should stand by their convictions while remaining open to the positions of others. Buber had this type of relationship with Mahatma Gandhi. The two disagreed about whether violence should be used against the Third Reich in World War II. Gandhi urged nonviolent tactics while Buber (who suffered persecution as a Jew) was convinced that such strategies would not sway the Nazis. Had he lived in our era, Buber would likely be distressed by today's highly polarized political environment filled with pitched battles between conservatives and liberals.

Communication experts Kenneth Cissna and Robert Anderson outline the following as characteristics of interpersonal dialogue:³

- *Presence.* Partners in dialogue are less interested in a specific outcome than in working with others to come up with a solution. Their interactions are unscripted and unrehearsed.
- *Emergent unanticipated consequences.* Dialogue produces unpredictable results that are not controlled by any one party.
- *Recognition of "strange otherness."* If dialogue is to flourish, discussants must refuse to believe that they already understand the thoughts, feelings, or intentions of others, even people they know well. They are tentative instead, continually testing their understanding of the perspectives of other group members and revising their conclusions when needed.
- *Collaborative orientation.* Dialogue demands a dual focus on self and others. Participants concentrate on coming up with a shared, joint solution that preserves the relationship, not on winning or losing.
- *Vulnerability.* Dialogue is risky because discussants open their thoughts to others and may be influenced by the encounter. They must be willing to change their minds and to be changed as persons. (Turn to the Chapter End Case for an example of someone who signaled her vulnerability in a most unusual way.)
- *Mutual implication.* Speakers engaged in dialogue always keep listeners in mind when speaking. In so doing they may discover more about themselves as well.
- *Temporal flow.* Dialogue unfolds over time—drawing from the past, filling the present and leading to the future. It is a process that can't be cut into segments and analyzed.
- *Genuineness and authenticity.* Participants in dialogue give each other the benefit of the doubt, assuming that the other person is being honest and sharing from personal experience. While speakers don't share all their thoughts, they don't deliberately hide ideas and feelings that are relevant to the topic and to the relationship.

We have to make several ethical commitments if we hope to engage in the kind of conversation described by Cissna and Anderson.⁴ First, we must be committed to the good of others in order to treat them as unique beings. Second, we need to value relationships and the common good, recognizing that organizations are made up, not of autonomous individuals, but of people living in relation to one another. Third, we have to be open to influence and be

willing to take criticism. Fourth, we ought to allow others to hold and express opinions different from ours. Fifth, we have to commit ourselves to honesty, not just during dialogue, but also when we engage in monologue and technical dialogue. There are times when we need to get others to follow our directions or to change their opinions. However, let's not disguise our motives by pretending to dialogue when we really only want to get our way. Sixth, we need to invest ourselves in the hard work of dialogue. Focusing on the needs and positions of others takes a good deal of time and energy, as does mastering the necessary communication competencies to make dialogue successful. These dialogic skills will be introduced in the next section.

Ethical Communication Competencies

While dialogue can't be forced, it is much more likely to take place when we have the necessary competencies. Productive communication behaviors that foster I-Thou relationships include mindfulness, effective listening, confirmation, emotional sensitivity, trust building, and productive conflict management. These strategies can also help us make better choices. When used in conjunction with the principles and practices of sound moral reasoning introduced in the last chapter, they further increase our likelihood of coming up with a well-reasoned ethical conclusion.

MINDFULNESS

Dialogue demands our complete attention. Not only is it unscripted, unrehearsed, and unpredictable, but this type of interaction also requires that we simultaneously focus on our own thoughts as well as on the positions of our conversational partners. Psychologist Ellen Langer uses the term *mindfulness* to describe the process of devoting full attention to the task at hand.⁵ She contrasts mindfulness to *mindlessness*, which is the state of mind in which we find ourselves in most routine encounters. In the mindless condition we operate on "auto pilot" and perform our roles mechanically, without much reflection. Mindlessness can be costly. We get stuck in our current roles and self-perceptions; stop developing intellectually; engage in unintended cruelty by rationalizing our immoral behaviors; lose control of our choices to advertisers and other outsiders; give into helplessness when we can control the situation; and limit our potential.

Langer identifies three psychological processes of a mindful state of being which help us sidestep the dangers of mindless behavior. These characteristics are contrasted to mindlessness in the narrative found in Box 4.1.

Box 4.1 Mindlessness Meets Mindfulness: Napoleon Versus the Russian Bear

When Napoleon invaded Russia, he appeared to the world as a brilliant conquering hero, yet again proving his military genius by daring to march against a giant. But behind the proud banners and eagles, he carried a dangerous mindset, a determination to have Russia no matter what the cost in human life. As Tolstoy describes him in *War and Peace*, Napoleon had no use for alternatives; his determination was absolute.

Opposite Napoleon stood the old Russian bear of a general, Kutuzov, a mellowed veteran who liked his vodka and had a habit of falling asleep at state occasions. An uneven match, or so it would appear.

As Napoleon's army advanced, Kutuzov let his army fall back, and then fall back some more. Napoleon kept coming, deeper into Russia, farther from his supply lines. Finally, as Kutuzov knew would happen, a powerful ally intervened: the Russian winter. The French army found itself fighting the cold, the wind, the snow, and the ice.

When Napoleon at last achieved his single, obsessive goal—Moscow—there was no one there for him to conquer. The Russians had set their holy city on fire to greet the invader. Once more Kutuzov played the seeming loser.

At that moment, when Napoleon had no choice but to retreat—from the burned city, from the winter—the mindful old general attacked. He appealed to Mother Russia, an appeal that Stalin was to use with similar success years later. He appealed to the people to save their land, and that appeal revived all of Russia. The French had everything against them, including the Cossacks, who rode down off the winter steppes. Mother Russia prevailed, just as she would when Hitler was to repeat Napoleon's mistake.

In each case, Napoleon's blind obsession provides a vivid mirror image, a portrait of mindlessness. First of all, Kutuzov was flexible: Evacuating a city would usually fall under the category of defeat, but for him it became the act of setting a trap. Second, his strategy was responsive to the news of Napoleon's advance, while Napoleon did not seem to be taking in information about Kutuzov's moves. Finally, while Napoleon saw his rapid advance and march on Moscow only from the point of view of conquering enemy terrain, Kutuzov could also see that an "invasion" in the context of winter and distance from supplies could be turned into a bitter rout.

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The first psychological process is the *creation of new categories*. Being mindful breaks us out of our old rigid categories and makes us more sensitive

to differences. These distinctions enhance our thinking and relationships. We become better problem solvers when we realize that moral reasoning can be broken down into smaller stages, as we saw in Chapter 3. We're much less likely to stereotype individuals and act in a prejudiced manner if we refuse to lump people into broad categories based on age, race, gender, or role.

The second psychological process involves *welcoming new information*. In mindful communication we seek new information as we closely monitor our behavior along with the behavior of others. This data allows us to revise our conclusions and adjust our responses. Mindless communication, on the other hand, closes us off to new information. As a result, we make costly mistakes and fail to adjust to changes in our environments. We assume that others hold our ethical values when they don't, settle on the first solution when a better one might be available, fail to meet the changing expectations of our audiences, and so on.

The third psychological process is *openness to different points of view*. Any event or behavior can be viewed from more than one perspective. What seems like thoughtless, hurtful behavior on the part of a coworker may have been intended as playful or harmless. Exploring multiple perspectives gives us more options, reduces the probability that we will get locked into an extreme position, and equips us to change our behavior. For instance, we are more likely to change the way we act when we realize that others take offence at what we're currently doing.

Mindfulness is a mode of thinking, not a personality trait. As a consequence, we can consciously shift to this frame of mind when needed. It's easy to identify situations that clearly demand a mindful state of mind: dealing with strangers and people of other cultural backgrounds, public presentations, brainstorming sessions, interviews, strategy meetings, change efforts. However, even routine interactions like casual conversations with coworkers can be enhanced with a mindful awareness. You can practice shifting your thinking modes by deliberately paying more attention during common communication events. For example, approach a classroom lecture with a mindful attitude, noting elements of delivery, audience response, and other factors you usually overlook. Or you might analyze a film from more than one point of view (see Application Project 2 on page 109).

EFFECTIVE LISTENING

Listening is key to coming to mutual understanding through dialogue. We can't come up with a joint, shared solution or speak to the needs of the other party unless we comprehend the other party's perspective. Skillful listening is also essential to processing the informational messages that make up technical

dialogue. According to Judi Brownell of Cornell University, communication is best understood as listening, not speaking, centered.⁶ She offers the multistage HURIER model to describe her listener-focused approach to communication.

Component 1: Hearing

The environment is filled with all kinds of stimuli. Listening begins when we focus in on one or more of these elements—music, a radio announcer, the voice of a friend, a supervisor's phone call. What we choose to hear is dependent on our perceptual filters, which are made up of our cultural background, beliefs and values, past experiences, interests, family history, and other factors. Consider how you and a friend respond to the same stimuli, for example. If you are an avid ski boarder, you'll listen carefully to the morning radio report on mountain snow conditions. Your conversational partner (who is not interested in heading for the slopes) may change stations when this segment comes on.

Component 2: Understanding

Once the message is received, it must be processed. Like reading comprehension, listening comprehension is based on the literal meanings of the words and signals received. Shared language and vocabulary greatly increase the likelihood of understanding.

Component 3: Remembering

Memory allows an individual to retrieve information in order to come up with an appropriate response. Memory, like hearing, is especially influenced by our perceptual filters. Information we're interested in is retained; other messages are quickly forgotten.

Component 4: Interpreting

During this stage meaning is assigned to the message based on the words and nonverbal cues like context (location, previous events, participants), vocal qualities, and body language.

Component 5: Evaluating

At this stage the receiver makes a judgment about the accuracy and truthfulness of the message by evaluating evidence and reasoning, source credibility, the situation, emotional appeals, and other factors.