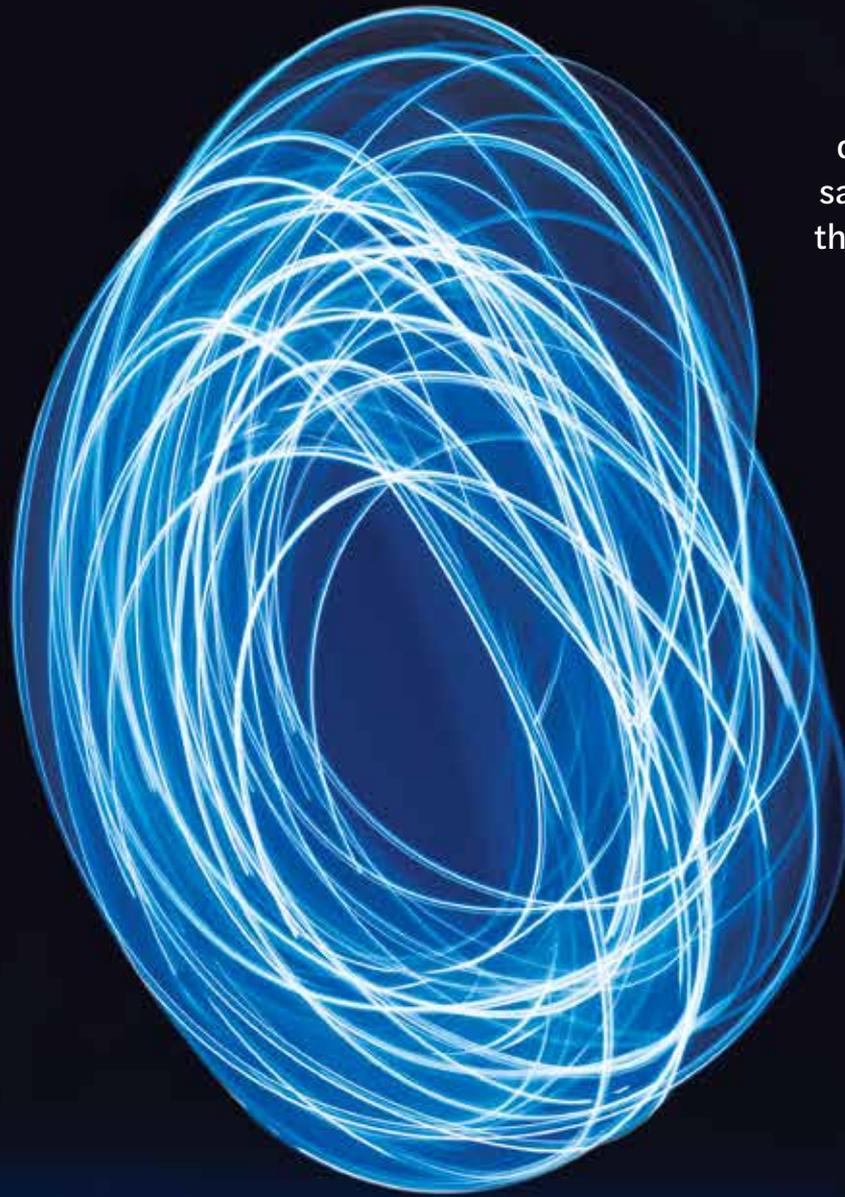




The **MESS** of Discussion



Discussion and dialogue are not the same; understanding that will improve how you communicate with others.

and the **MAGIC** of Dialogue

BY KEVIN EIKENBERRY



here is a great deal of misconception about the nature and meaning of the two words in the title of this article. Both are forms of communication, both are relatively common words, and both start with the letter *D*. While Thesaurus.com does list the two words as synonyms, simply seeing them that way is part of the misconception. Before we can explore the mess of discussion and the magic of dialogue, we must understand the important differences between the two words.

What is discussion?

Let's start with some dictionary definitions.

Merriam-Webster's first definition is "consideration of a question in open and usually informal debate."

Dictionary.com defines it as "an act or instance of discussing; consideration or examination by argument, comment, etc., especially to explore solutions; informal debate."

Both point to the idea of discussion equaling debate.

When you look at the word origin, you find that the word comes from Middle English and the combination of two words: *dis-* meaning "apart" and *quaterere* meaning "to shake." *Quaterere* also is the origin word for *quash*, and a significant part of the words *percussion* and *concussion*.

While there is certainly a time and place for a lively or healthy debate, I'm guessing you don't want most of your communications to quash others or their ideas, nor do you want them to feel like percussion or a concussion to either one of you.

What is dialogue?

Now let's define *dialogue* from the same two sources:

From *Merriam-Webster*: a conversation between two or more persons; an exchange of ideas and opinions; a discussion between representatives of parties to a conflict that is aimed at resolution.

And from Dictionary.com: conversation between two or more persons; an exchange of ideas or opinions on a particular issue, especially a political or religious issue, with a view to reaching an amicable agreement or settlement.

The word origin is two Greek words: *dia*, meaning "through" and *logos*, meaning "words or meaning." Dialogue, then, could be translated as a flow of meaning. Notice the strong focus here in the definitions on the idea of resolution, without the overtone of debate.

William Issacs, in his book *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, takes this one step further: "In the most ancient meaning of the word, logos meant 'to gather together,' and suggested an intimate awareness of the relationships among things in the natural world. In that sense, logos might best be rendered in English as 'relationship.'"

Without getting too deep or too soft, let's think of dialogue as a process that allows us to "think together."

Why the difference matters

Why am I reaching back to Greek and Middle English in a contemporary article for leaders and talent development professionals? Because too much of our communication, especially oral communication, isn't working nearly as well as it could.

If you are like me, the "aha" that comes from seeing the underlying meanings of the two words coupled

The Skills of Dialogue

with the reflection on which of these two communication methods we use most frequently is jarring and profoundly helpful.

We are discussing our way into a mess, when dialogue might hold the answers to better decisions, stronger relationships, clearer communication, and better results.

The mess of discussion

Turn on any news channel on your TV. Almost always when there is a split screen—and, even more disheartening, sometimes in the studio—we see discussion at its worst. People who try to quash each other, talk over each other, and pound the other person into submission take debate to new lows, reinforcing through repetition this dangerous form of communication.

Discussion, when seen through that lens, is clearly a mess. And while you may say that the conversations you have at work don't operate like that, how many conversations at work feel a lot like a percussion drum line:

I talk, you talk. I talk, you talk.

Bam. Bam. Bam. Bam.

Point. Counterpoint. Point. Counterpoint.

There is a lot of asserting, but little asking. There is a lot of talking, but not much thinking (about the other person's perspective).

In short, when we rely on or resort to discussion as our main form of communication, it is no wonder that our communication results are stunted, that it takes far too long for messages to be clearly understood, and that miscommunication (and the costs associated with it) is rampant. And while that is reason enough for concern, the mess extends far beyond that.

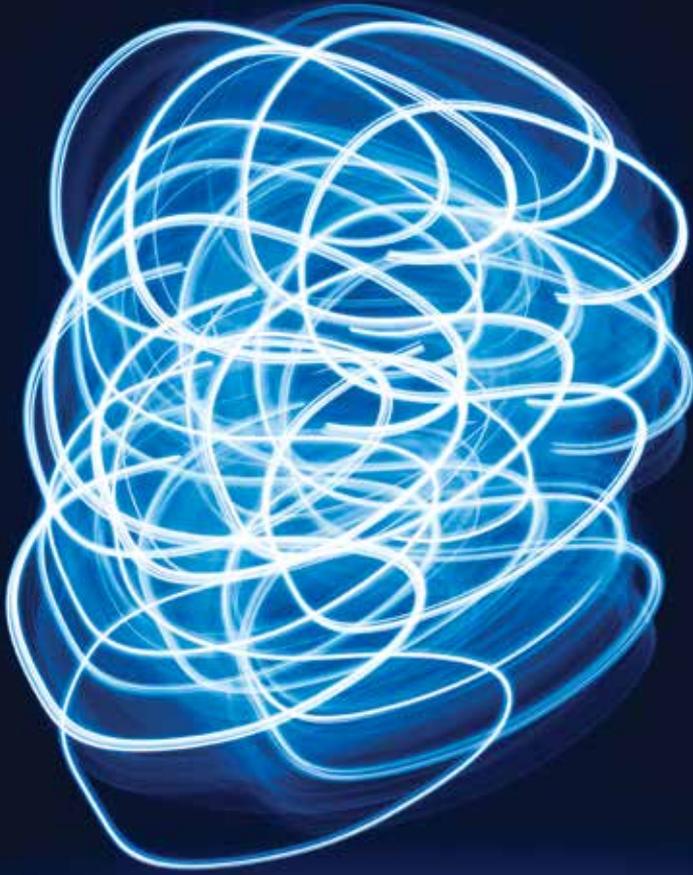
At the worst, when communication becomes purely discussion, trust can be damaged, silos can be reinforced, and working relationships can be strained. Put all that together and you have the recipe for a workplace full of conflict, stress, and frustration.

While discussion rather than dialogue isn't the only cause of conflict, stress, and frustration in the workplace, I believe it is a root cause of them.

This short list can help you as a practitioner and in your leadership role. Once you have decided to create dialogue, these are the skills that will support it:

- Being respectful of others and their opinions. Dialogue won't occur if people don't respect each other or if people feel disrespected.
- Suspending judgement. If we are thinking together, we haven't come with decisions, but with perspectives to share.
- Listening deeply. Not listening with one ear, and more than just active listening. The deeper the listening, the more likely dialogue can occur.
- Being fully present. It is exceedingly hard to do the other things on this list if we are distracted by other factors, including our thoughts and opinions.
- Asking more and better questions. Dialogue requires a sense of, and skill with, inquiry. Being willing and able to ask better and better-timed questions is an important dialogue skill.
- Reflecting on the full conversation. Dialogue requires that we step back and see the big picture of the conversation and how we have arrived where we are at any given moment.
- Separating facts from opinions. They aren't the same, and when opinions are mistaken as facts, dialogue will be difficult to achieve.
- Validating others. An extension of respecting others, the skill of validation helps build trust and mutual respect.





Too much of our communication, especially oral communication, isn't working nearly as well as it could.

The magic of dialogue

When I think of magic, the first images that come to mind are magicians with playing cards, hats, and rabbits, and sawing someone in half. When I think a little longer, images of grander or more amazing feats of, well, magic come to mind.

Magic is a skill that can be mastered. It's also something that can be explained. Yet, for me, magic—whether sleight of hand or elaborate process—has an aura about it; it's something that has real power.

When I think of dialogue, I think along the same lines. Dialogue is real (not a sleight of hand type of thing) and extraordinarily powerful. And even though relatively few are masterful at dialogue, it's a skill—like magic—that can be learned.

While there are no “tricks” to dialogue, its potential power is real, and when it's achieved in any group, the magic is real.

As a leader, your role requires that you become a skilled communicator. When most people think about communication skills, they typically include presenting in meetings or groups, providing feedback, discussing topics of importance, listening intently, and even emailing.

Yet this short list of important communication skills leaves out an important one: dialogue.

Dialogue, then, is more than just “really good conversation” or even what happens when I “really focus on listening.” Rather, dialogue is a meeting of minds in the spirit of connection and the creation of synergy. It's the open exchange of ideas in the context of relationship.

When you begin to think about dialogue in that way, you get a glimpse of the magic, and of the power that can be gained. If you had more of the magic and less of the mess:

- How would trust be affected?
- Might silos be weakened, with more cross-organization conversation and understanding?
- Would there be less conflict and frustration?
- Might meetings be more effective?
- And what might happen to your retention rate and the engagement of your team members?

Magic, indeed.

If you like any of your answers to those questions, read on. We're going to create some magic.

Just like it takes the magician time and practice to master his craft, learning how to create dialogue is hard—and it would take far more than this article to outline all the secrets to its magic. What I can do is help you get an intelligent start, now that you realize the power that dialogue can create.

Deciding when

Until the skills of dialogue are developed to the point that they become habit, it is helpful to target some highly valuable situations to practice. When are the times in your organization or on your team that “thinking together” would be especially important?

Think about your answers to the question above. Where are your biggest gaps or challenges? Those might be clues for situations you might want to practice. Additionally, here are four other situations you might want to consider:

- when seeking to develop trust
- when attempting to create understanding related to a change
- when exploring problems and solutions
- when trying to come to complex decisions.

And that’s a very short list.

In the context of thinking about a communication that truly allows for thinking together (rather than discussing and trying to sell, advocate, or influence a particular point of view or solution), you hopefully can see that the opportunities for dialogue are many.

The leader’s role

If you have read this far and want to know what you can specifically do to create more of this magic, you are thinking like a leader, regardless of your job title. If you are an individual without positional power who wants to create more dialogue, keep your focus on modeling dialogue yourself and practicing the skills that help you do exactly that.

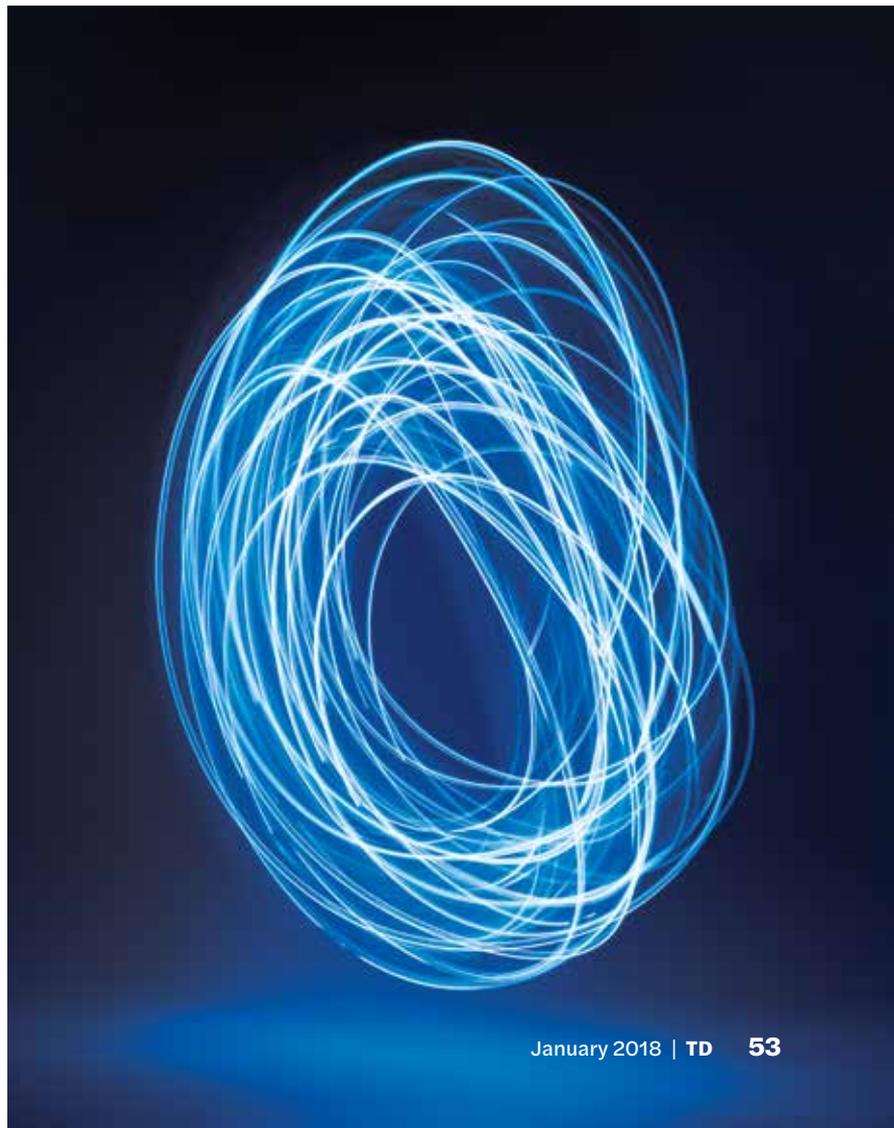
If you are a leader by title, you would start with the same suggestions, but there is more that you can do:

- Set an expectation. First you must be clear on the differences between discussion and dialogue, then make the case to others as to why you want to create more dialogue. People won’t do it if they don’t know what it is, why it is important, or that you expect it. Perhaps this article can help you make the case.
- Model the behaviors yourself. Setting expectations is a pretty hollow exercise if others don’t see you trying to do more than have a debate. You must be willing to model the behaviors yourself.
- Build your skills. Being willing is one thing, but you need to build your skills too (see sidebar on page 51).
- Support people’s skill development. Because dialogue requires skills, make sure you are supporting others in building those skills too. Consider all forms of learning, including training, but don’t forget about practice.

- Provide coaching and feedback. Help people get better by letting them know how they are doing and helping them build a plan to grow.
- Provide time and space. Learning any new skill takes time, and the process of dialogue may require a greater investment of time than our typical communication approaches. Make sure you are providing patience and time to learn, but also the space for dialogue to occur.

Hopefully the glimpse of the power encourages you to get on a learning journey to help make more of this happen in your team and organization. Effective communication is critical to organizational success, and it is far too often lacking. If you want to build your communication skills, recognize the value of and learn how to create the magic of dialogue.

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