Public Conversations Project Dialogue

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Public Conversations Project[1]

Summary

Public Conversations Project Dialogue (PCP Dialogue) is a method for people to constructively talk about deeply divisive topics that often involve identity, core values and world views which are matters that cannot be easily negotiated or resolved by compromise. Such differences, be it over religious or ethnic identity, a development project, or a community health program, often undermine efforts to create inclusive, participatory, healthy communities where there can be cooperation and constructive deliberation on important public issues.

The goals of PCP Dialogue are to improve communication, increase mutual understanding, and shift participants' relationships towards a constructive direction. When these outcomes are achieved, the conditions are created for stakeholders to talk with each other in a productive way, leading to a process by which mutual agreements can be reached.

What is it?

PCP Dialogue is a method to establish a dialogue that aims to shift *away* from communication patterns that reinforce and perpetuate negative perceptions and assumptions, *to* conversations in which participants come to better understand each others' values, concerns and motivations. It is used where productive relationships are blocked or strained by negative stereotypes, polarization, and distrust, and when people need to build trust and respect before engaging in decision-making, problem-solving, or action planning.

Key elements of PCP are:
- Preparation;
- Communication agreements (ground rules);
- Structures for speaking, listening and reflecting in new ways (e.g. speaking from personal experience, sharing core beliefs, testing stereotypes and assumptions, avoiding inflammatory language);

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[1] Public Conversations Project (PCP) is based in Boston, USA and guides, trains, and inspires individuals, organizations, and communities to constructively address conflicts relating to values and worldviews

- Time management that ensures equal opportunity to participate, and the slowing of conversation in order to reduce reactive responses and encourage listening and reflection;
- Exploring doubts as well as certainties;
- Questions that come from genuine curiosity and interest about the "other," instead of questions that are actually veiled attacks or self-serving statements; and
- A primary goal of shifting relationships and communication, rather than reaching agreement on issues.

Who participates?
PCP Dialogue can be used by any group of people who find themselves unable or reluctant to talk about their differences, and wish to try to break this impasse. PCP Dialogues have brought together "opponents" of many types, for example: industry and civil society; scientists and advocates; competing and opposing advocates and NGOs; logging companies, local governments and environmentalists; community leaders in open conflict.

Who leads it?
PCP Dialogues are best led by experienced facilitators/process practitioners who are thoroughly familiar with PCP Dialogue principles and practice. Contact Public Conversations Project for obtaining a comprehensive Guide and other resource materials.

When?
 PCP Dialogue can be used in the following situations:
- Prior to or during a deliberative, decision-making or participatory process to create or restore constructive communication;
- As a stand-alone process to build understanding and trust among a group of people, without a predetermined outcome;
- In capacity-building workshops to build skills in dialogue and conflict resolution. Optimally, the experience of dialogue is included in any dialogue facilitation training.   PCP Dialogue supports civil society-building and reconciliation in post-conflict/post-violence situations where the re-establishment of communication and civil relationships is vital.

What is it about?
PCP Dialogue can be useful whenever communication and relationships are problematic, irrespective of the issues. PCP Dialogues have been used for issues including ethnic, political, social class and religious differences, environment, child labour, experimental use of animals, domestic violence, responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage and reproductive rights and public health.

How is it done?

Elements of the PCP Dialogue model

1. *Credible conveners:* The people who endorse or sponsor the dialogue are respected and trusted by potential participants, create confidence in the process, are prepared to provide needed time and energy to bring it to fruition, and respect the voluntary nature of the process without pressurizing people to participate.

2. *Careful and collaborative advance preparation:*

- *Mapping:* The facilitator/s learn(s) about the situation and prospective participants. They conduct interviews to understand the varying perspectives, the reasons people want to talk together in a new way, and how the dialogue design can best reflect these purposes and inhibit familiar, negative patterns.
- *Collaborative planning:* Facilitators and conveners seek participant involvement in decisions about purpose and design. This is often done with a planning team that includes a representative group of potential participants.
- *Environment:* A comfortable setting for dialogue is created by arranging a private location that is viewed as welcoming and "neutral" by all participants.
- *Invitation for informed, voluntary participation:* The invitation explains the purpose of the dialogue, what is expected of the participants and of the facilitators, the kind of conversation this will be (and won't be), and the types of communication agreements that will apply.

3. *Communication agreements:*

Agreements are always customized to the needs of the group, but typically include:

- Respect time limits and share speaking time;
- Speak for yourself (not on behalf of or in defence of a whole group) and let others do the same;
- Speak thoughtfully, holding back the urge to criticize and persuade;
- Keep listening even when it's hard, and don't interrupt others;
- Hold back from debating or trying to persuade;
- Notice the assumptions you are making and ask genuine questions to find out whether they're accurate;
- Honour the confidentiality requested by others (usually this means not revealing what particular people have said within the dialogue without permission);

- Allow people to "pass" (not speak) without having to explain.

4. Non-partisan facilitation:

- providing a process that suits the purposes of the participants;
- following the dialogue design and ensuring that communication agreements are observed; and
- limiting their own speaking, so as to foster conversation among the participants.

5. Dialogue within a small group circle

The ideal number of people in face-to-face dialogue is 5 to 8. "Face to face" means that sitting in a circle is important. (A table in the middle works, but not a long rectangle.) If the group is much larger, people can be subdivided into smaller circles, each with a facilitator, after the welcome, orientation and introductions. Insights/new learning can then be shared with the full group. We recommend not exceeding 25 total participants, though a larger number can be handled if the facilitation support is sufficient.

6. Dialogue within a balanced group of mixed perspectives

If the context of the dialogue is conflict with clear lines of difference and the goal is to bridge this conflict, balance between "sides" is important. Exactly equal numbers may not be necessary, but under no circumstances should there be only one person or a few who are very different from all the others, if there is to be genuine openness and dialogue.

7. Carefully crafted opening questions

These are designed to elicit new information and challenge rigid ideas about others' beliefs and motivations. Typically, questions ask people to share stories about life experiences that are connected to their views, and encourage people to talk about the complexity of their views. The facilitator poses these questions and provides each person a chance to answer, while others listen.

8. A planned sequence for initiating dialogue

After posing a question, the facilitator indicates how much time people have to answer, asks one of the participants to respond first, and has the group pause before the speaking begins so that each person can collect his/her thoughts and prepare to fully listen to others. Following the pause, the facilitator restates the question. After the first person responds, the order of speaking proceeds around the circle, in what is termed a "go-round." If a person passes on the first time

around, s/he is given another opportunity to speak after everyone else. One of the variations is to let people speak in a "popcorn" fashion, meaning they can speak in any order as they are ready (this usually develops as people become comfortable in the dialogue format).

Example of a Structured Dialogue Plan

- Welcome and Orientation
- Review and Adoption of Proposed Communication Agreements
- Introductions
- First Go-Round (3 minutes each)
  Is there something you'd be willing to share about your life experiences that might help others understand your thoughts and feelings about the issue?
- Second Go-Round (2 minutes each)
  What's at the heart of the matter for you?
- Third Go-Round (3 minutes each)
  Please speak about any value conflicts, grey areas or uncertainties you've experienced as you've thought about the issues. For example, perhaps you can think of a time when the values you hold dear related to this issue bumped up against other values that are also important to you—or a time when you felt yourself pulled in two directions.
- "Connected Conversation"
  - Note a point of learning: Have you heard something that stirred fresh thoughts or feelings?
  - Pick up and weave a thread: Has an interesting theme or idea emerged that you'd like to add to?
  - Clarify differences: Have you heard something you disagreed with? If so, first check to see if you understood it correctly. Then say what was unsettling to you about what you heard and why.
  - Ask a question: Is there something someone said that you'd like to understand better? If you ask a question, be sure it reflects genuine curiosity and is not a challenge in disguise
  - Parting Words

Benefits

PCP Dialogue can transform communication and relationships in ways that make other kinds of change possible, laying the groundwork for making decisions or taking significant collaborative actions. In some circumstances, the best way to bring about valuable outcomes in the long run is to set aside outcome oriented

objectives in the short run, in favour of dialogue. Experience shows that PCP Dialogue may lead to these beneficial outcomes:

- Healing in small communities struggling with controversy, and mending of damaged relationships.
- Reduced hatred in the public arena because of changes in the way people talk about their "adversaries."
- The emergence of common ground and shared values that lay a foundation for taking action as allies.
- Increased trust and understanding such that people can successful move on to jointly develop solutions to mutual problems and deliberate effectively on public issues.
- Breakthroughs in deadlocks where decisions are needed.
- Increased optimism that people can coexist peacefully despite differences and disagreements.
- Greater capacity, both personal and collective, to communicate about differences, and handle conflict constructively.

Challenges and lessons

Sometimes these challenges are apparent at the start and are good reasons not to start planning a dialogue. Sometimes they come up after planning has begun. If they cannot be sufficiently resolved, it may well be better to forego or postpone the dialogue. Possible ways of dealing with each challenge are in italics.

- An adequate balance of participants cannot be achieved (those interested are overwhelmingly from one "side"). *See if a special recruitment effort, or the endorsement or request of a key trusted leader brings participation from the "minority" group.*
- The convener is seen as having a "hidden agenda" or the convener is undermining the dialogue by not devoting sufficient energy, resources and time for planning. *Speak forthrightly about the purposes of dialogue and each aspect of planning, inquire about the convener's purposes and participants,' and explore whether the people and situation are well-suited to dialogue.*
- There is insufficient time to do an adequate level of preparation. *See whether the date can be postponed. If more help would make a difference, see if others can assist. Don't go forward if you're not prepared.*
- A larger number of people want to participate than can be accommodated. *You might create a waiting list in case vacancies occur close to the date, or hold a series of dialogues, with different people coming each time.*
- There is a reluctance to participate or it feels like people are coming (or are present) because they think they must, not because they want to, attend the dialogue. They resist the purpose and/or design of the dialogue. *Ask people*

directly about this. If you hear that people feel pressured or do not want to be involved in a dialogue, it is best not to go forward with a dialogue. Is a meeting with some other purpose desired instead? If you think such a purpose can succeed, you may want to continue to help. If you are dealing with this challenge after a dialogue has started, you will have to reconsider how to redesign the meeting to match a new purpose. If however, you feel the relationships are so negative, or some condition exists such that any other purpose (e.g., action planning) is futile, or could actually do more harm than good, don't feel pressured to continue. Be very clear about any concerns you have.

Key resources

Public Conversations Project

☞ PCP Dialogue is the methodology created by the Public Conversations Project **(PCP)** The information is accessible in both English/ En Espanol. For more information on PCP visit the main page:

http://www.publicconversations.org/main

For PCP Dialogue guide books visit:

http://www.publicconversations.org/resources/guides

For articles on PCP Dialogue visit:

http://www.publicconversations.org/resources/catalogue

For Links to other dialogue-related organizations:

http://www.publicconversations.org/resources/links

For PCP Dialogue Tool Box visit:

http://www.publicconversations.org/resources/pcp-dialogue-tool-box-questions-ask-dialogue

The Germany HIV Peer Review Group

http://www.hiv-prg.org/

☞ The German HIV Peer Review Group was created in 2004 by HIV experts working in German and international development cooperation. Its aim is to collaboratively manage knowledge about good practices and lessons learned, including public dialogue processes, in German contributions to AIDS responses in developing countries.

Case studies

Peace-Building in Burundi: Community Leadership Center (CLC) is an organization created by a group of Burundian master trainers engaged in post-conflict dispute resolution and reconciliation work.   PCP and a partner organization, Conflict Management Partners (CMP), undertook to expand CLC's efforts, so that Burundians could move from their difficult past to a future where they work jointly to strengthen democracy and enhance development. In 2007, six pilot dialogues were set up, involving 100 people in small towns and villages across the country.   The CLC trainers and PCP later created a brochure that adapts PCP's practices to Burundian culture, using French text, diagrams created by the master trainers, and proverbs in their native language, Kirundi. The end result is a new tool for CLC to use in its work. PDF versions of both French and English brochures are available.

Northern Forest Dialogue Project: In the mid 1990's, there was serious concern about the future of forest land in the northeast part of the United States. The federal government established a Council to examine the issues in public meetings and listening sessions. Parallel to this, several representatives of opposing stakeholders—timber companies, environmental groups, local government and community organizations—decided to come together, out of the public eye, to see if distrust could be overcome and some common ground discovered. People came as individuals, not in their official capacities.   The focus was on shifting old, negative patterns of communication, uncovering the sources of tension and distrust, increasing understanding of "opposing" viewpoints, finding areas of common ground.   The impacts reported by participants were: identification of unrecognized opportunities for agreement; increased appreciation for the complexity of the issues; and increased understanding of challenging dilemmas presented to their "adversaries." The relationships developed in the dialogues led to more regular communication and information exchange; and in some instances enabled stakeholders to negotiate agreements and/or pursue joint strategies in other settings. More information at:

http://www.publicconversations.org/dialogue/policy/forest

Massachusetts Department of Mental Health: The new US government policy adopted in 2003 required changes in how mental health patients are restrained and secluded. The State of Massachusetts Department of Mental Health (DMH) received federal money to increase the use of alternatives and wanted to have input from patients, families, Department of DMH staff and advocates in the policymaking. The issue was highly emotional for patients and patient advocates, and DMH clinical staff.   In preparation for bringing these groups together, facilitators met with them separately to talk about hopes and fears about the

dialogue and the issue, and to look at the language likely to provoke strong reaction and block communication. A series of joint dialogues followed. A mental health advocate reported that, "What surprised me was how much you could transform a relationship during a three-hour conversation. It opened the door to real talk about real issues."
More informationat:
http://www.transformation-center.org/advocacy/policy/pdf/Dialogue%20Public%20Conversation%20Project%20newsletter.pdf

Generational Dialogue about Female Genital Mutilation and HIV/AIDS, Guinea
The Generational Dialogue is the outcome of a partnership between GTZ, a German international cooperative enterprise for sustainable development, and a network of NGOs in Guinea. After a decade of trying to show the harmful effects of the practice on women's health, there was no discernible and Guinea remained the country with the highest known level of FGM in the world. So beginning in 2000, a listening and dialogue approach was tried, involving health care groups, male and female youth, religious leaders, teachers, and women. It is having an impact, and now more dialogues are being established across the country.
More information at:
http://www.hiv-prg.org/en/toolboxes
http://www.hiv-prg.org/en/document-download/doc_download/436-Tool2_GenerationDialogueApproach_englishpdf
http://www.hiv-prg.org/en/document-download/doc_download/435-Tool2_GenerationDialogueApproach_frenchpdf

Medical Dialogue between Traditional Experts and Biomedical Health Workers, Kasungu, Malawi: Awareness campaigns about HIV/AIDS presumed that information about transmission and prevention would directly lead to behavioural changes. But while intellectually, many people accept bio-medical concepts, they would often still turn to traditional healers. So a Medical Dialogue process was established, using the principles of the Public Conversations Project and of GTZ. Noticeable changes in perceptions and attitudes occurred, and new efforts to establish Medical Dialogues across the country are under way.

More informationat:
http://www.hiv-prg.org/en/document-download/doc_download/433-Tool4_Medical%20Dialogue%20between%20Traditional%20Experts%20and%20Biomedicapdf
http://www.hiv-prg.org/en/document-download/doc_download/429-Tool8_Report%20Evaluation%20Kasungupdf