

Eight Keys to Productive Dialogue¹

1. Treat dialogue as a journey rather than an event.

Workable solutions to complex challenges rarely emerge full-blown from one meeting or conversation. They more often grow over time as people exchange ideas, go away and think about them, do some research to fill in knowledge gaps, exchange further ideas, do some focused planning and thinking together, and so on. In this Dialogue, we will

- Stay disciplined and inclusive, keeping the momentum building
- Be explicit about the purpose and the outcomes of each interaction, ensuring that each builds on what came before and sets the stage for the next one.

2: Invest in defining the challenge clearly, creating and documenting shared understanding.

Sometimes teams are so anxious to get going they leap into action without making sure they share an understanding of their task – only to find that subsequent discussions seem to be going around in circles. We intend to:

- Invest in developing shared understanding of what the challenge is and why it's important
- Surface assumptions, learning when and how to say things that we think “go without saying”
- Use the process of actually writing things down to confirm shared understanding and/or surface areas of misalignment.

3. Learn how to collaborate and co-create.

Complex challenges involving multiple, diverse players require high levels of collaboration focused on co-creating solutions. The best way to learn how to collaborate is to actually practice it – keeping part of our brains focused on tracking what's happening while it's happening. To do this, we will:

- Establish initial “rules of the road” to guide our collaborative effort
- Assess in real time what's working well, what we want to do better or differently, what we want to stop doing
- Build trust and have fun.

4. Embrace diverse thinking as a foundation for innovation.

Many of us are naturally inclined or have been trained to avoid contention, preferring not to raise topics or ideas that will threaten the harmony of a gathering or conversation. There are times when this is a good strategy. But breakthrough thinking and innovative solutions are often born in the interplay between radically divergent perspectives and opinions. To encourage this, we will:

- Include people with diverse perspectives and experience in the Dialogue
- Work hard to avoid “group think”
- Learn how to constructively talk about differences, disagree with an idea without attacking the individual expressing it, question assumptions and easy answers, and stretch our own and others' thinking.

5. Know when to move to action.

The process of addressing a complex challenge involves both expansive exploration (creative thinking about what's possible) and focus (practical thinking about where to start). In this Dialogue, we will:

- Understand the current state as a prerequisite for determining how to move from what is to what could be
- Engage in out-of-the-box thinking about how to address the challenge
- Establish criteria for assessing options and achieving team alignment
- Create action plans that include objectives and timelines (linked to measures), resource requirements, potential barriers and strategies to overcome them
- Engage key players in implementation through effective communication strategies.

6. Use technology wisely.

Communication technologies made possible by the Internet expand the team's ability to collaborate on the challenge anytime, anywhere. We will decide how to take best advantage of available technology for the purposes of this Dialogue.



7. Agree on how success will be measured.

Early clarity on how we will know we've succeeded in addressing the challenge will help us focus, assess priorities, and move effectively from planning to action. In this Dialogue, we will:

- Choose the right indicators to make up our "scorecard" (e.g. funder/shareholder return, customer/client satisfaction, process efficacy, team member productivity/learning) and agree on desired results and timelines
- Track performance data and use the data to improve performance.

8. Plan ahead to sustain the achievement.

Sustaining the change coming out of the challenge requires integration into ongoing infrastructure, systems, and processes. All dialogues produce good ideas and learning that could benefit others; some dialogues result in significant change. We will strive to:

- Build the leadership systems required to sustain success
- Develop environments that foster ongoing innovation
- Capture the knowledge created by the dialogue, integrate the new knowledge with existing knowledge, and make this knowledge available to others
- Identify key processes impacted by the change and re-design processes to reflect the change.

¹ *The Eight Keys to Productive Dialogue* represent some of the essential principles that underpin the Challenge Dialogue System Network's *Challenge Dialogue System™* (CDS), an efficient and effective vehicle for engaging diverse stakeholders to collaborate and innovate in order to accomplish a complex task. CDS is a structured but flexible methodology for moving a team of people from ideas to action quickly and effectively. For more information about CDS and the CDS Learning Program, please visit the CDS Network at <http://challengedialoguesystem.net>.