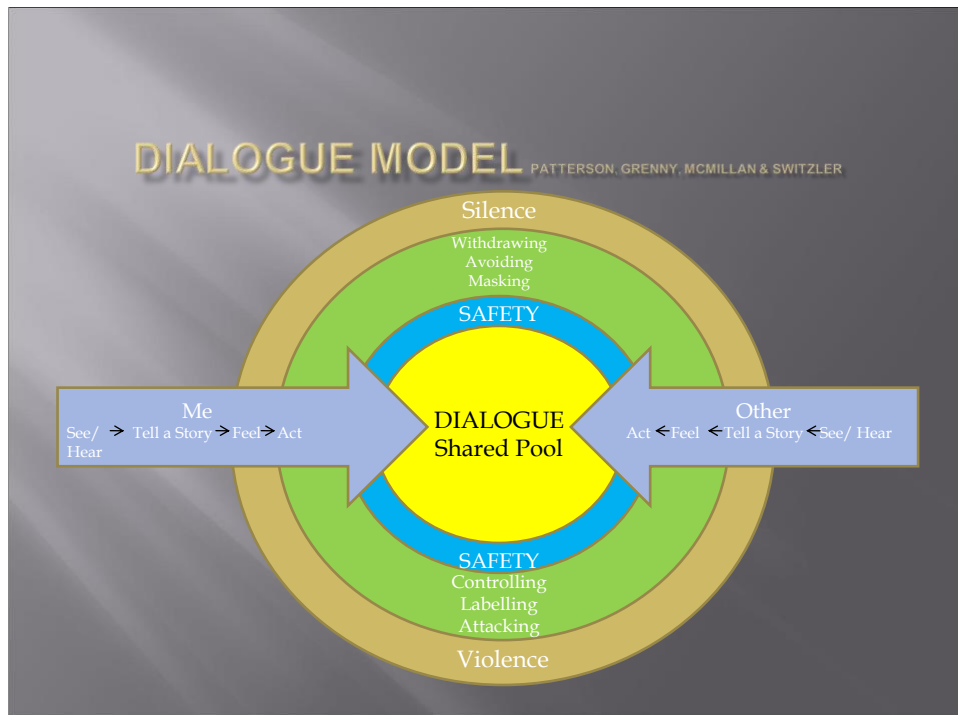


## The Dialogue Model by Clint Adams



Above is a Dialogue Model. Think of dialogue or a conversation as two people throwing information into a shared pool and they can each hear the message and then throw their information in for the other person. A good conversation or good dialogue should be like that. When there is a lack of safety in having that conversation, the dialogue changes a bit. This will depend on what the person now says to themselves, i.e. See/ Hear something, then they tell themselves a story and based on what they say here, will determine how they feel, and how they feel then determines how they might act. The Conversation has now turned crucial.

### Crucial Conversations

What is a crucial conversation?

Crucial conversation: "A discussion between 2 or more people where (1) stakes are high, (2) opinions vary, and (3) emotions run strong.

Examples:

- Ending a relationship.
- Talking to a co-worker who behaves offensively.
- Asking a friend to repay a loan.
- Giving the boss feedback about their behaviour.

- Approaching a boss who is breaking his own safety or quality policies.
- Dealing with a rebellious teen.
- Giving an unfavourable performance review.
- Talking to a co-worker about a personal hygiene problem.

How do we handle them?

### 1. We avoid them.

What happens if you avoid them?

### 2. We face them and handle them poorly.

Why do we handle them poorly?

### We are designed all wrong:

- When conversations turn from routine to crucial, we're often in trouble, because emotions don't prepare us to converse well at that time. **(Red Brain)**
- Consider a typical crucial conversation: Someone disagrees with you about a topic that matters a lot to you and the hairs on the back of your neck stands up.
- Suddenly 2 tiny organs pump adrenaline into your bloodstream. You don't choose this but you have to live with it.
- Your brain now diverts blood from activities it deems nonessential to high priority tasks such as hitting and running.
- Unfortunately, as the large muscles of the arms and legs get more blood, the higher level reasoning sections of your brain get less.
- Result: You are facing a challenging conversation with the same equipment available to a Hyena.
- Also add another factor: Crucial conversations can be spontaneous, so you have no time to prepare, you have to deal with this person, you are dealing with the issue with a brain preparing to fight or take flight and we wonder why we often say things we wish we didn't, or think of things afterwards that we should have said.

### 3. We face them and handle them well.

Why is handling this well important to a company?

- Often thought that the key to organisational success depends on strategy, structure, systems and performance management.

- Research in one study of 500 stunningly productive organisations revealed that peak performance had absolutely nothing to do with forms, procedures and policies that drive performance management. In fact, half of the highflyers had almost no formal management processes.
- What's behind their success? It comes down to how people handle crucial conversations.
- In worst companies, poor performers are first ignored and then transferred or kicked out. In GOOD companies' bosses eventually deal with the problems. In the BEST companies everyone holds everyone else accountable - regardless of level or position.

How does this relate to work issues?

The best companies in almost any critical area are the ones that developed the skills for dealing effectively with conversations that relate to that specific topic. For Example:

- **Safety:** When someone violates a procedure or acts in an unsafe way, the first person to see the problem, regardless of their position, steps up and holds a crucial conversation.
- **Productivity:** If an employee underperforms, fails to live up to a promise, doesn't carry their fair share or simply is not productive enough, the affected parties address the problem immediately.
- **Diversity:** When someone feels offended, threatened, insulted or harassed, they skilfully and comfortably discuss the issue with the offending party.
- **Quality:** In companies where quality rules, people discuss problems face to face when they first come up.
- **Every other hot topic.** Companies that are the best in innovation, teamwork, change management or any other area that calls for human interaction are also best in class in holding the relevant crucial conversations.

### Dialogue

- When it comes to risk, controversial and emotional conversations, skilled people find a way to get all relevant information (from themselves and others) into the open.
- Dialogue is the free flow of meaning between 2 or more people.

### Pool of shared meaning

- Each of us enters conversations with our own opinions, feelings, theories and experiences about the topic at hand. This unique

combination of thoughts and feelings make up our personal pool of meaning.

- The pool not only informs us but also propels our every action.
- When 2 or more people enter crucial conversations, by definition we don't share the same pool. Our opinions differ, I believe one thing you another.
- People who are skilled at dialogue do their best to make it safe for everyone to add their meaning to the "shared" pool- even ideas that at first glance appear controversial, wrong or at odds with our own beliefs.
- Obviously, they don't agree with every idea, but they simply do their best to ensure that all ideas find their way into the open.
- As the pool of shared meaning grows, it helps people in two ways. First, as individuals are exposed to more accurate and relevant information, they make better choices.
- The opposite happens when you have a shallow pool, where people purposely withhold meaning from each other; individually smart people can do collectively dumb things. E.g. a women went into hospital for tonsillectomy and the surgical team removed a portion of her foot. In this case 7 people wondered why the surgeon was working on her foot, but said nothing. Meaning didn't flow because they were afraid to speak up.
- The second way it helps is that because the meaning is shared, people willingly act on whatever decision they make because they can understand why the shared solution came about.
- Conversely when people aren't involved, when they sit back quietly during touchy conversations, they're rarely committed to the final decision. Since their ideas remain in their heads and their opinions never make it to the pool, they end up quietly criticizing and passively resisting.

### Playing games

Every time we find ourselves arguing, debating, running away or otherwise acting in an ineffective way, it's because we don't know how to share meaning. Instead of engaging in healthy dialogue, we play silly and costly games.

- Sometimes we move to silence. We play salute and stay mute, because we don't confront people in positions of authority, or at home we play Freeze your partner. With this technique we give loved ones the cold shoulder in order to get them to treat us better.

- Sometimes we rely on hints, sarcasm, innuendo and looks of disgust to make our points.
- Afraid to confront an individual, we blame an entire team for a problem, hoping the message will hit the right target.
- On other occasions, not knowing how to stay in dialogue, we rely on violence - anything from subtle manipulation to verbal attacks.
- We act like we know everything; hoping people will believe our argument. We discredit others, hoping others won't believe their arguments and then we use every matter of force to get our way.
- We borrow power from the boss; we hit people with biased monologues. The goal is always to compel others to our point of view.

### Moving to our best

When stakes are high, opinions vary and emotions run strong, we are often at our worst. In order to move to our best, we have to find a way to explain what is in each of our pools of meaning- especially the high stakes, sensitive and controversial feeling and ideas- and get others to share their pools.

- We have to develop tools that make it safe for us to discuss these issues and come to a shared pool of meaning, and when we do our lives change.
- The skills required to master high stakes interactions are quite easy to spot and moderately easy to learn.
- First consider that a well handled crucial conversations leaps out at you. When you see someone enter the dangerous waters of a high stakes, high emotion, controversial discussion and that person does a particularly good job, we step back in awe and say WOW.

### The HOW of Dialogue

How do you encourage the flow of meaning in the face of differing opinions and strong emotions?

- Need to start with yourself. If you can't get yourself right, you will have a hard time getting dialogue right. When conversations become crucial you'll resort to the forms of communication that you have grown up with- debate, silent treatment, manipulation and so on.

- When faced with a failed conversation, most of us are quick to blame others. "If others could only change my life would be better." "They started it, it's their fault not mine" and so on.
- Sometimes we may be innocent bystanders, but more often than not we do something to contribute to the problems we are experiencing.
- People who are best at dialogue understand this fact and turn it into the principle "Work on me first" They realise that not only are they likely to benefit by improving their own approach, but they are also the only person they can work on anyway.
- People who start with themselves become the most skilled at dialogue, so ironically, it's the most talented not the least talented who are continually trying to improve their dialogue skills.
- Skilled people start with the right motives and stay focused no matter what happens. They maintain this focus in 2 ways:
  - First, they are steely eyed smart when it comes to knowing what they want, despite constant invitations to slip away from their goals they stick with them.
  - Secondly, they don't make sucker choices (either/ or choices), unlike others who justify their unhealthy behaviour by explaining that they had no choice but to fight or take flight. They believe that dialogue is always an option.

#### Focus on what you really want

- Asking the question, "What do I really want?" when under attack, has a powerful effect on your thinking during crucial conversations.
- Refocus your brain. Let's move to a situation where you are speaking with someone who completely disagrees with you on a hot issue. How does this goal/ motive stuff apply? As you begin the discussion start by examining your motives. Going in, ask yourself what do you really want?
- As the conversation unfolds you find yourself giving your spouse the cold shoulder, pay attention to what's happening to your motives. Are you starting to change your goal to save face, avoid embarrassment, win, be right, or punish others?
- Our motives usually change without any conscious thought on our part. When adrenaline does our thinking for us, our motives flow with the chemical tide.
- In order to move back to motives that allow dialogue, you must step away from the interaction and look at yourself- much like an outsider.

Ask yourself, "What am I doing and what does it tell me about my underlying motive? This helps to go to **Blue brain**.

- As you make an honest effort to discover your motive, you might conclude that you are pushing harder than you actually believe, and I'm doing anything to win. I've shifted trying to select a holiday location to trying to win an argument.
- Once you call into question the shifting motive, you can make a conscious effort to change it.
- How do you recognise what has happened to you, stop playing games and then influence your motives? You can ask these questions when you find yourself slipping out of dialogue or as reminders when you step up to a crucial conversation.

What do I really want for myself?

What do I really want for others?

What do I really want for the relationship?

Once you have done this ask one more question:

How would I behave if I really wanted these results?

### Find your Bearings

The purpose of asking the questions is to locate our bearings. Despite the fact that we are being tempted to take the wrong path by -

- (1) People who are trying to pick a fight
- (2) Thousands of years of genetics that brings our emotions to a quick boil and
- (3) Our deep ingrained habit of trying to win

We can still maintain our bearings.

"What do I really want? Oh yeah, it's not to make the other person squirm or to preen in front of a crowd. I want people to freely and openly talk about...

The second reason for asking the questions is that when we ask ourselves what we really want, we affect our entire physiology. As we introduce abstract and complex questions to our mind, the problem solving part of our brain recognises that we are dealing with intricate social issues, not physical threats (**Blue Brain**). This causes the body to send blood to this area of the brain and away from the body part required for fight or flight. This allows better focus.

### Common deviations

As we step up to a crucial conversation, fully intending to stimulate the flow of meaning, many of us change our original objectives to much less healthy goals. These include

- **Wanting to win:** From an early age this is instilled in us, school, sports, heroes, movies. First we correct the facts, quibble over details, point out problems in the other person's arguments. What started out as resolving a problem turned into a tussle to win an argument.
- **Seeking Revenge:** Sometimes as our anger increases, we move from wanting to win the point to wanting to harm the other person. "I'll teach this moron not to talk to me like that in front of others."
- **Hoping to remain safe:** Sometimes we choose personal safety over dialogue. Rather than add to the pool and possibly make waves along the way, we go to silence. We are so uncomfortable with the immediate conflict that we accept the certainty of bad results to avoid the possibility of uncomfortable conversation. We choose (at least in our minds) peace over conflict.

### Refuse the Suckers Choice

- In order to justify especially unhealthy or bad behaviour, we suggest that we're caught between 2 distasteful options. Either we can disagree with the boss to help make a better choice-and get shot for it- or we can remain quiet, starve the pool and keep our job. Pick your poison.
- What makes these Suckers Choices is that they are always set up as the only 2 options available. It's the worst of either/or thinking. The person making the choice never suggests that there is a third option that doesn't call for unhealthy behaviour. For example, there is a way to be honest AND respectful.
- Not only do Suckers Choices set us up to take ineffective actions, but they close us down to change. They present our brain with problems easily solved with restricted blood flow. If we simply choose between fight or flight, who needs creative thought?
- They also keep us stuck in ineffective strategies by justifying our attacking or retreating behaviours. Why alter our behaviour when we are the only one savvy enough to keep quiet? "Somebody has to tell the ugly truth."

Search for the elusive AND



- This is where you clarify what you DON'T want. Think of what you are afraid will happen if you stop your current strategy of trying to win or stay safe.
- "What I don't want is to have a useless and heated conversation that creates bad feelings and doesn't lead to change."
- Present your brain with a more complex problem. What do I want? and what DON'T I want? and then combine the two, with a question that forces you to think of other options.
- Is there a way to tell your co-worker your real concerns AND not insult or offend them?

### Watch for Conditions

You need to watch for 3 different conditions:

- The moment a conversation turns crucial
- Signs that people don't feel safe (silence or violence)
- And your own style under stress.

### Silence

Three common forms of silence - Masking, Avoiding and Withdrawing -

- **Masking:** consists of understating or selectively showing our true opinions. Sarcasm, sugar-coating and couching are some of the popular forms. "I think your idea is brilliant. Some ideas come before there time, so expect some uh resistance."
- **Avoiding:** involves steering completely away from sensitive subjects. We talk but without addressing the real issues.
- **Withdrawing:** means pulling out of a conversation altogether. We either exit the conversation or exit the room.

### Violence

Violence consists of any verbal strategy that attempts to convince, control, or compel others to your point of view. It violates safety by trying to force meaning into the pool. Methods range from name calling and monologuing to making threats. The 3 most common forms are controlling, labelling and attacking.

- **Controlling:** Consists of coercing others to your way of thinking. It's done by either forcing your views on others or dominating the

conversation. Methods include cutting others off, overstating the facts, speaking in absolutes, changing subjects or using directive questions to control conversations. "There's not a person in the world who hasn't bought one of these."

- Labelling is putting a label on people or ideas so we can dismiss them under a general stereotype or category. "Your ideas are practically Neanderthal. Any thinking person would follow my plan."
- Attacking speaks for itself. You have moved from winning the argument to making the person suffer. Tactics include belittling and threatening. "Try that stupid stunt and see what happens." Meaning: I will get my way on this even if I have to bad mouth you and threaten some vague punishment.

### Your style under stress.

Let's say you have watched for content and conditions. You are paying special attention to when the conversation turns crucial and you are looking for the safety signs of silence and violence. Now the most difficult element to watch closely as you are madly dual processing is your own behaviour.

Most people have trouble pulling themselves out of the argument at hand, while trying to deal with others who might be using their own tactics.

We usually lose any semblance of social sensitivity when we become consumed with ideas and causes that we can lose track of what we are doing.

### Self Monitoring

What does it take to step out of an argument and watch for process-including what you are doing and the impact you are having?

You have to become a vigilant self monitor. You must pay close attention to what you are doing and the impact it is having and then alter your strategy as required.

Specifically watch to see if you are having a good or bad impact.