Skill Toolkit

PARTICIPATORY
METHODS
DIALOGUE

Dialogue involves listening to the perspectives of others and telling your point of view to develop a shared understanding of issues.

THE STORY

Seongmisan is a cooperative community located in the City of Seoul, Korea. It was created in 1994 at a time when the South Korean economy was growing, driven by industrialization and technological progress. Despite popular support for South Korea's economic growth, some residents of Seoul were disillusioned with the competition, individualism, and materialism that increasingly characterized city living. This played out in community debates about public services. Young families in the Seongmisan village were unhappy with the government and private education options available for their children. They shared complaints about their disillusionment with Korean society's obsession for economic growth. These parents longed for an education program that would allow their children to imagine an alternative future for society that reflected values of peaceful and harmonious co-existence between humans and nature. The Seongmisan community held informal and formal meetings to design an alternative childcare program.

Yet through these dialogues, parents realized that while they shared common values for establishing a cooperative daycare center they held different beliefs about policies for running the school. Parents had different opinions about the curriculum, rules for sharing responsibilities, food choices, and school activities. Decision-making was challenging. At first they tried voting on key decisions, but that ultimately didn't live up to their values. They found that when decisions were made based on a 'majority' vote the wishes of a small 'minority' group were sacrificed. And since the well being of all children was at stake, the collective believed that it was crucial for all parents to agree on the decisions made. A unanimous consent rule was applied to force people to listen and empathize with each other's thoughts and compromise on decisions. Since then the community has continued to rely on dialogue and unanimous consent to make decisions about community needs.

Over time, the Seongmisan community grew through this organic process. There were no carefully designed plans, structures or hierarchies. When people in the community saw additional gaps and failures of the market and of public services, this triggered community dialogues to find solutions. Personal needs widened into the social needs as people came together to find collaborative ways to solve community challenges. Now in addition to a cooperative daycare center, residents have created an alternative school, programs for youth and the disabled, co-housing facilities, a car-sharing program, collaborative models for producing and consuming food, a community theatre and radio station, festivals and art projects. A significant feature of each project is the emphasis on creating spaces to promote communication. Public spaces such as restaurants, cafes, open theatre, and streets are utilized to explore the needs of individuals and the wider community.

A democratic and open environment has been a key element to building solidarity and trust in the community. This 'village-like' community emphasizes genuine, personal and face-to-face social relationships typically not found in urban neighborhoods. Through continuous dialogue, relationship building, and active participation, Seongmisan residents have established an innovative and resilient community within an urban context.

DESCRIPTION

Dialogue is the first stage of developing a community that supports common interests and goals. Dialogue does not require a pre-determined agenda or a desired outcome. Engaging in dialogue simply helps to focus on a particular issue or concern that requires further input from a community. Dialogue can occur in assemblies of people with shared interests, affinities, or goals. Dialogue can also occur in spaces where people convene for reasons of dissatisfaction or confusion or tension. Both shared frustration or desire are useful for engaging people in dialogue and further action.

The core of dialogue is that people speak for themselves about their own truths, realities, experiences, and knowledge. Yet, this is not always easy. Speaking with others about our beliefs, values, and principles requires trust. There is risk involved and these risks must be addressed intentionally. Participants must thoughtfully create safe spaces that establish openness to sharing ideas and welcoming difference of opinion.

Such security usually requires the recognition that power exists between individuals and in groups. Power exists because of age, status, title, experience and other identity traits that are either valued or devalued in a community. Power cannot be taken out of the dialogue situation, but it can be addressed. To do so we can begin by simply acknowledging that who we are influences how we see the world, how others see us and how others view our contributions and influence. Many of the assumptions that people make may not be true, but they will affect our encounters with each other. In effective dialogue, all contributors must be open to adjusting their assumptions about others and even altering the usual arrangements of power.

Both speaker and listener must take personal responsibility to manage their participation in order to make space for the other's contribution. This includes knowing when to speak and when to be silent, when and what to sensor, and how to manage topics, with the goal of creating openings for sharing. This view of dialogue changes typical assumptions about why dialogue is needed. The potential of dialogue is limited if it is only viewed as an opportunity to give concrete statements about what one person or another believes. Instead, dialogue can be seen as a subtle synthesis of mindsets.

The goal of dialogue is to develop a new, shared understanding because even without agreement, each participant will been moved by the process of engagement. Therefore, because of the collaborative nature of dialogue the goal is never to agree, but to understand and accept the other person's point of view and why they have come to that belief. This makes way for possibility – the creation of new ideas, new identification of issues, and new solutions.

DEVELOPING AN INNOVATION MINDSET

It's not enough to stick with your own taken for granted understanding of things, so people in relationships and communities who wish to engage in dialogue must commit to developing shared meanings with others.

HOW TO

Step 1
Consider your values

Dialogue is about engagement with another person so it is helpful to be mindful of what you bring to that encounter. In other words, your perspective is always influenced by various identity traits – your role in the community, your background and experience, your affinities and interests. These factors influence what matters to you, what you choose to talk about and how you engage in those conversations. Your values are underneath all of this and it's your language that makes it explicit. After exploring the foundations of your beliefs, chose intentional language that represents what you believe.

Ask questions such as:

- What is my belief about this topic and why do I hold this belief? *(Ex. I want my child to attend schools that supports values of community and caring so she can prioritize those values over materialism.)*
- What do I want to do about my beliefs? *(Ex. I want to establish an alternative to the government and private day care options available to my child.)*
- How do I talk to people about these beliefs? Does the language I choose focus on these beliefs or am I talking about other things? *(Ex. Instead of simply talking about improving the day care options in our community, I will use words such as "community" and "caring" to emphasize what I value about alternative child care.)*

Use these related skills: Self-reflection

◄◄ Back to the story

Seongmisan parents were a diverse group and they certainly didn't all share the same experiences. Despite being of different backgrounds, the parents all shared dissatisfaction with the day care options available for their children. However, they used different kinds of language to critique the existing schools. Many of the parents talked about the flaws in government and private day care options and the need for quality child care programs. But others spoke about establishing alternative education communities that instilled the values of community and caring. They came to agree that these values were the primary reason for their discontent. So instead of simply talking about improving the day care options in the community, the goal was to emphasize the values of community and caring.

Step 2
Read the data

Part of healthy dialogue is sharing your perspective as well as listening to the thoughts and ideas of others. Speakers and listeners must manage their participation and make deliberate attempts to invite others to speak. This includes creating pauses so that others can speak and asking questions such as, "What do you think? What are your ideas? Do you agree or disagree with what I've just said?"

Trained listeners have learned to build rapport with others by using active listening techniques such as mirroring the body language, tone of voice, and word choice of the other. This may seem forced at first but it has the effect of encouraging a superficial connection that can eventually lead to real understanding.

Remind yourself to:

- Periodically summarize what the other person has said. *(Ex. "So you think…Is that right?")*
- Match your body language and tone of voice to the other. *(Ex. If your dialogue partner is speaking softly, then lower your voice to match the volume. If your dialogue partner is sitting, then do not stand above them, sit so your eye line is even.)*
- Listen to the preferred terms and phrases used by others and integrate them into your own way of talking about an issue.
- Allow for silences so that all group members may contribute. Some people need time to organize their thinking. It can be helpful to actually tell your listener, 'Let me take a moment to think about that."

Use these related skills: Question, Facilitate, Interview

◄◄ Back to the story

In Korean language and culture, it is common to use honorific titles to show respect to elders and others with high status in the community. These references are a traditional form of deference that is embedded in all forms of communication such as greetings, word endings and various social expectations. However, in the Seongmisan villagers' attempts at dialogue, this traditional custom had the unintended consequence of over-valuing the contributions of the more senior members of the community and de-valuing the perspectives of younger participants. They wanted to change that members agreed to use nicknames regardless of age or social position to foster more open communication and even relationships.

Step 3

Consider unexpected problems or issues

It is often assumed that effective dialogue should address a specific topic of discussion or debate. This can be useful but be open to going off topic to facilitate an easy flow of conversation. This allows for unexpected knowledge sharing that will ultimately foster new kinds of relationships and the development of a community of shared purpose. However, this still requires careful facilitation to make connections to common issues and prevent enthusiastic contributors or those who are not self-aware from hijacking the conversation.

Ask questions such as:

- Why does this person think this way? What more should I know about his/her experience? (*Ex. My neighbor feels strongly about not paying for childcare so I will ask her why.*)
- What more do I need to know about this issue? (*Ex. Hearing about my neighbor's experience as a school teacher may help me understand the challenges involved in caring for other peoples' children.*)
- Has the dialogue gone too far off topic? What has been said that will help steer us back to discussion of a shared interest? (*Ex. "You have a lot of knowledge about caring for other peoples' children. Can we discuss how it might help us to plan cooperative child care in our village?"*)

Use these related skills: Question, Facilitate

LIMITATIONS

- Dialogue requires time and commitment to build relationships. Successful dialogue may not always translate to larger communities in society.

RESOURCES

- **The Barefoot Guide**
  Through real-life stories about organizations for social change, these two guidebooks provide facilitation techniques to encourage organizational learning, self-reflection, and growth. *http://www.barefootguide.org*

◄◄ Back to the story

After the successful creation of the Seongmisan cooperative day care center, other community enterprises were developed including a cooperative organic grocery, a community restaurant and dining area, and green public spaces for relaxation and education. Many of these efforts came from the desire to transform the entire local area into a safe environment for children to grow up in without constant supervision. Each additional community services were developed through dialogue based on the shared values of trust and harmony. However the desires of this local village soon clashed with the goals of the local municipal government. Government officials announced a plan to build a water distribution system at Seongmisan, which meant destroying many parts of the village's valuable public space. In July 2001, community members launched a "Save Seongmisan" campaign. Eventually after two years of negotiation, the Seoul Metropolitan Government agreed to change their plan to maintain the space, but this required a large degree of activism, commitment, and political clout.

References

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