

Know the Building Blocks of Dialogue

By Manya Arond-Thomas

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Know the Building Blocks of Dialogue that Lead to
New Learning, Innovation and Synergy

By Manya Arond-Thomas, M.D.

With the complexity and continuous change leaders and managers face today, continuous learning, responsiveness, adaptation and innovation are essential survival skills. Yet, one constant that human beings seem to want and need more than anything when they are in relationship to another human is to be heard. So often in conversation, we spend a lot more time advocating for our position rather than seeking to hear and understand another.

Listening may be the single most powerful skill of communication for it is an act of respect and of valuing. It seems counterintuitive, yet when we listen and seek to understand first, we also create more receptivity in the other to hear us. When we create such an environment of safety, people are willing to take risks and new learning can occur.

There are four building blocks of conversation that help people move out of defensive, routinized, or reactive communication patterns that inhibit movement towards clear action and successful achievement of desired goals.

1. Developing Your Listening Skills — This includes eye contact, listening without thinking of one's rebuttals or preparing for what to say next, listening for emotional content as well as information, and asking questions to clarify

meaning

2. Seeking to Suspend Judgment — To be human is to be a judgment manufacturer. We are always in the process of making judgments, both positive and negative. Whether we are judging ourselves or others, judgment shuts down creativity, imagination and learning.. Whether you agree or disagree with the other person, your judgments will limit your ability to listen and learn something new. Be aware that negative judgments are particularly damaging to your ability to listen. Strive to first be aware of your judgments. In so doing, you can become clear that this is a reaction and you can then more objectively bring it into the conversation as an interpretation.

3. Testing Your Assumptions — Assumptions are all those things that we think we know about how reality is, whether for ourselves or for others. We carry multiple sets of assumptions that act as lenses or filters for our perceptions. Because each of us has a unique life experience, we each carry a unique set of assumptions although we do, of course, also have shared assumptions which serve to glue us together. Effective communication demands that we test our own assumptions as well as clarify those of others. Only then can we know that we are speaking a shared language of meaning. Different assumptions in and of themselves don't create problems so much as the need to be right about our assumptions!

4. Balancing use of inquiry with advocating your own position and interests — Growing out of the ability to listen, inquiry is about asking questions and holding an attitude of curiosity. Questions that seek to understand (as opposed to questions that seek to interrogate) create doorways into new levels of understanding and learning for both the speaker and the listener. Inquiry, by its very nature, can deepen your ability to think systemically because questions often reveal the relationships among the parts that make up the whole.

Organizations and businesses need to create effective communication cultures in order to thrive. The competitive edge in business will be maintained by those who are continually learning how to improve. Leaders who understand and employ these high-impact communication strategies

will create robust and resilient organizations that cannot only adapt to the new challenges and changing conditions of these uncertain times but can actually thrive.

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