

THE LISTENING CENTER

PRINCIPLES OF DIALOGUE

By Kay Lindahl

OPENING

Arrange seating in a circle, without tables or desks. This creates an open space and promotes listening. Start with five to ten minutes of silence. This provides a transition from the busy schedule of daily living to an opening for reflection and listening. Go around the circle to check in with each other. What brought you here? What do you need to say to be present?

PRINCIPLES

Begin each session by reading and/or talking about the principles. This is one way to incorporate newcomers and to remind everyone of their agreement to use these principles.

1. When you are listening, suspend assumptions. What we assume is often invisible to us. We assume that others have had the same experiences that we have, and that's how we listen to them. Learn to recognize assumptions by noticing when you get surprised, upset or annoyed by something someone else is saying. You may be making an assumption. Let it be - suspend it - and resume listening for understanding of the other.
2. When you are speaking, express your personal response, informed by your tradition, beliefs and practices. Speak for yourself. Use "I" language. Take ownership of what you say. Speak from your heart. Notice how often the phrases "we all", "of course", "everyone says", and "you know" come into your conversation. The only person you can truly speak for is yourself.
3. Listen and speak without judgment. The purpose of dialogue is to come to an understanding of the other, not to determine whether they are good, bad, right or wrong. If you are sitting there thinking "that's good", "that's bad", "I like that", "I don't like that", - you are having a conversation in your own mind, not listening to the speaker. Simply notice when you do this and return to listening to the speaker.
4. Suspend status. Everyone is an equal partner in the inquiry. There is no seniority or hierarchy. All are colleagues with a mutual quest for insight and clarity. You are each an expert in your own life, and that's what you bring to the dialogue process.

5. Honor confidentiality. Leave the names of the participants in the room so if you share stories or ideas, names of participants will not be revealed. Create a safe space for self-expression. This also eliminates gossip.
6. Listen for understanding, not to agree with or believe. You do not have to agree with or believe anything that is said. Your job is to listen for understanding and new ideas and ways to think about something.
7. Ask clarifying or open-ended questions to assist your understanding and to explore assumptions. Watch out for questions with your own agenda embedded in them, like “don’t you think that....?”
8. Honor silence and time for reflection. Notice what wants to be said rather than what you want to say. Allow time to take in what’s been said.
9. One person speaks at a time. Pay attention to the flow of the conversation. Notice what patterns emerge from the group. Watch that each person has an opportunity to speak, knowing that no one is required to speak.

CLOSING

At the close of the dialogue, each participant shares one idea, insight or learning that they gained by participating in the dialogue.

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