

Requirements for Dialogue

HUMILITY

Humility is manifested in many actions during dialogue. First, we need to go into conversations as learners more than teachers. When we talk with others with the goal of learning from them, rather than teaching them, our entire way of conversing changes. We begin as listeners and turn the focus onto our partners. During dialogue, the humble communicator is fully present, paraphrasing what is heard, hearing the emotion and meaning of what is said in addition to the actual words.

Humility means, too, that we are more concerned with getting things right than being right. Therefore we ask good questions, real questions, that we don't know the answer to, and then we listen for the answer. We stop trying to persuade and start trying to learn. As David Bohm has written, "If something is right, you don't need to be persuaded. If somebody has to persuade you, there is probably some doubt" (Bohm, *On Dialogue*, p. 15).

Humility in dialogue often means that we simply withhold our opinion so that we can hear others. This may involve a kind of radical honesty. Rather than covering up the flaws in our argument, or hiding our ignorance, in dialogue, we should display the gaps in our thinking for everyone to see. If we want to learn, we can't hide behind a dishonest veneer of expertise. Indeed, treating others as equals demands that we tell them truthfully about what we believe, assume, know, and do not know.

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HOPE

"Dialogue cannot be carried on in a climate of hopelessness. If the dialoguers expect nothing to come of their efforts, their encounters will be empty, sterile, bureaucratic and tedious" (Freire, p. 80). Dialogue cannot occur when people are paralyzed by hopelessness. Dialogue can only flourish in situations where there are many possibilities.

In part, this means, that a conversation that is dialogical can only be so when it is open-ended. If I come to you with a plan and I expect you to implement it, I am clearly not engaging in dialogue. Dialogue occurs when we start by trying to understand together, when we listen and learn rather than tell and resist.

Hope too, for me at least, means that even act of dialogue is a hopeful act, a sign that we believe a better future is possible. When I listen to you, and you listen to me, we are better for the experience, and there is always the hope that we can create something new and better, that we can advance thought, and, through dialogue, create a better tomorrow.

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FAITH

When we have faith in others, we let go of the notion that we need to control them, tell them what to do, or hold them accountable. We see people as autonomous individuals deserving of our respect. William Isaacs elaborates on respect in his book *Dialogue* (1999).

Respect is not a passive act. To respect someone is look for the spring that feed the pool of their experience... At its core, the act of respect invites us to see others as legitimate. We may not like what they do or say or think, but we cannot deny their legitimacy as beings. In Zulu, a South African language, the word *Sawu bona* is spoken when people greet one another and when they depart. It means “I see you.” To the Zulus, being seen has more meaning than in Western cultures. It means that the person is in some real way brought more fully into existence by virtue of the fact that they are seen (Isaacs, *Dialogue*, p.111).

When I have faith in my conversation partners, there is a much greater chance, too, that they will trust me. Without mutual trust there is little chance that a conversation will be open enough for dialogue to occur.

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CRITICAL THINKING

“Only dialogue ... is ... capable of generating critical thinking” (Freire, p. 81). When we go into conversation to confirm our views rather than to learn, we choose to think by ourselves rather than with others. If I only want to hear you tell me that you agree with me, then I don’t really want to hear your thoughts at all. If we really want to learn from a conversation, we are wise to go into it looking for ideas that disprove our way of thinking rather than looking for confirmations that our opinion is right.

Dialogue is the thinking approach to communication. In the best situation, our ideas flow back and forth so freely that we truly start to think together, we reach a point where we lose sight of whose ideas are whose. Such conversation is energizing, humanizing, and the most natural way for partners to communicate.

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LOVE

Dialogue is only possible if we have empathy for others. In dialogue, we start by being empathetic, respectful, and non-judgmental rather than taking the superior approach and starting by judging others. When we are empathetic toward others, when we move from love rather than control, we recognize our mutual humanity, the great bonds we share with others just because we are all people. This is especially important for people with whom we disagree. Isaacs, again, recognizes empathy as a core part of dialogue:

One lens that can reduce the temptations to blame and increase respect is to listen to others from the vantage point that says, “This, too, is in me.” Whatever the behavior we hear in another, whatever struggle we see in them, we can choose to look for how these same dynamics operate in ourselves (p. 124).

Love is necessary for dialogue but love can also be created by dialogue. As Bohm writes, “love will go away if we can’t communicate and share meaning... However, if we can really communicate, then we will have fellowship, participation, friendship, love, growing, and growth” (p. 41).