

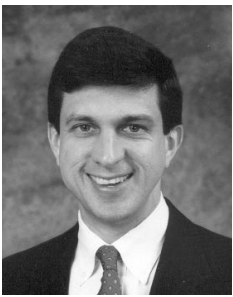
BUSINESS COURIER

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Serving the Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky region

Learn the Art of Dialogue and have Open, Productive Conversations

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Having open and productive conversations is absolutely critical in today's high-velocity business environment. If our conversations go nowhere, failure will quickly follow.

Let's focus on a few things that can make your conversations more effective and productive.

Let's start by looking at how successful your most recent conversations have been. In the last week did you have any conversations that:

- Were meant to produce a course of action or develop an understanding that fell flat?
- Got mired down in a meeting when consensus was needed?
- Focused on some point of conflict or difficulty that never got resolved?

Most likely, your answer is yes.

The problem is simple—most of us think we're having conversations when we really aren't. For us to have a productive conversation a dialogue should be taking place and it usually isn't. Instead, we are having one way conversations—or monologues.

I talk and tell you what I want to tell you.

You talk, and tell me what you want to tell me. Or you tell me what you think I want to hear so I'll leave you alone.

We're very good at taking turns talking. But neither side is exploring and discovering and building on what's being said. We aren't solving problems. We're usually creating them.

There's a difference between what typically passes for "conversation" and what is true "dialogue." The difference is that for dialogue to occur, at least one of those engaged in it has to be curious.

Consider the Greek parents of the word *dialogue*. *Dia*, which signifies the passing of something from one to another, and *legesthae*, meaning to tell or to talk. The nobility of their marriage is a true wonder of the world.

Introduce dialogue to any occasion and you create rich possibilities. Engage two people in a dialogue—and one of them can dependably benefit from the other's experiences.

That's why it's important to learn the art of dialogue and practice it daily in all your communications.

To practice the art of dialogue, all parties must agree to:

- question each other and be genuinely curious about why the other thinks the way they do.

- draw out each other's beliefs, assumptions, conclusions, speculations, hopes and anxieties, etc.

By agreeing to be curious about another point of view, we can create a two-way, non-defense, open communication that examines assumptions and becomes a conversation geared to mutual discovery.

To help promote the art of dialogue, you must be willing to:

- state your own view and ask others for their reactions.
- be wrong
- be curious as to why others think what they believe is correct or true
- accept that you may be unaware of certain facts and be open to new information and changing your mind
- interpret how others are thinking and reacting and seek to understand their underlying feelings.

When the value of creating dialogue is seen from this perspective, it's easy to see how most conversation is more like two related monologues. Monologues are usually about telling the other person what you think, giving directions and or convincing someone to adopt your point of view. Sometimes outright manipulation is the real agenda. When this happens, the promise of a new discovery or breakthrough is lost.

Dialogue lets us discover more of our own intelligence and blend it with the knowledge and wisdom of others. Clear and powerful agreements can result from dialogue, whereas little worthwhile insight is likely to come from simultaneous monologues. And they rarely inspire anything more than weak commitments to act.

Under pressure and stress, breakdowns in communications are “normal.” When the breakdown occurs, instead of having a conversation that supports the mutual discovery of a clear path of action to success, words become weapons with combatants wielding them in an attempt to force others to surrender their viewpoints.

Nobody wins when that happens. Nothing gets accomplished. The truth is, when conversations become miniature battlegrounds, nobody is even thinking about accomplishing anything. They're thinking about themselves.

To avoid these miniature battlegrounds, start by understanding how conversations break down. When people are engaged in this type of combatant discussion, they're engaged in what we call “reactive cycle.” It takes place when people “react” in a conversation instead of participate in one. And if left unchecked, the reactive cycle can do more than kill the productivity of a conversation, it can damage relationships.

To understand reactive cycles, let's look at how our mind acts when we're engaged in one. It starts when someone says something you don't like or agree with. At that moment, you judge them. In a split second, you have decided they're insensitive, uncaring, selfish, dishonest or irresponsible—or all of the above. They haven't changed. What changed is that your emotions kicked in. That happens when we feel threatened, out of control, defensive and/or some form of fear. We react by attempting to control the situation, the person or we simply retaliate.

When you react in this manner, you inevitably say something the other person doesn't like—and then they assess you; just as we described above. Their fears kick in and – you guessed it—they react to you by attempting to gain control as much as you did. This, in turn, appears to you to justify your original assessment of them and causes you to react again—which reactivates them!

You are now locked in the downward spiral of the reactive cycle with predictable results—you hold another unproductive discussion or meeting that produces no useful action.

There are three steps we need to take to break the reactive cycle:

- name it—one of the parties notices they're engaged in the reactive cycle and “names” it.
- one or both of the parties “claims” their responsibility for being reactive.
- both parties try to understand their own—and the others'—perspective and emotions and enter into dialogue. They “reframe” their perspectives.

After we've named, claimed and re-framed our reactive cycle, we can engage in the type of open, honest and productive discussion needed to accomplish our mutual objectives.

By learning the art of dialogue we help ensure that everyone is on the same page and moving forward in the same direction.