



The Network for Peace through Dialogue Why Dialogue? (and when, and how, and where?)

[The Public Conversations Project](#)

Fateful Questions: The Power of Inquiry to Influence Dialogue

[The Public Conversations Project](#) has been helping people to prepare for constructive conversations about potentially divisive issues such as religion, the environment, abortion, human sexuality, and war for over 17 years. David Joseph, Program Director and Robert Stains, Vice President, presented two workshops at this conference. The first, "Fateful Questions: The Power of Inquiry to Influence Dialogue," was a two-part workshop which examined the ways in which questions posed to a group or to individuals can have a profound shaping effect on subsequent conversations. Questions can convey assumptions, instructions, criticism or affirmation and elicit fear, interest, connection or aggression. This experiential workshop introduced participants to an approach to inquiry that has been refined by the Public Conversations Project since 1989.

Below are one participant's notes on this two-part workshop:

Part I

Introduction

The role of inquiry is to promote a self-reflective space. When a person faces conflict or controversy, his or her identity, core values and world views may be challenged. Adhering rigidly to these values can result in a narrowing of possibilities. We want to create a process where people can move from conversations of certainty to an atmosphere of exploration and curiosity.

We try to be clear about purposes. We always explain what will be happening. People can choose how (or if) they want to participate. We go for a collaborative approach. Sometimes we even ask "What kind of questions would you like to be asked?"

In this workshop we will look at the kind of questions one might want to be asked; the gap that sometimes results between the intentions behind a question and the effect on the person being asked. We will create

questions for ourselves and for others.

We will seek to address the following questions: What are key messages I can communicate after this day is over? What ways can dialogue be pursued after the initial exploration? How can we interest people more widely in dialogue? When and how do you pose a question? Questions exhibit purposes, intentions and effects. The tone used affects the questions people ask one another. Whether there will be a witness also shapes how people perceive a question.

We have discovered the power of writing to transform emotion. We often ask people to write their questions.

Agreements

A person can always pass if they are not ready or would prefer not to answer.

Observe confidentiality upon request.

Exercise: Asking one another questions

Here we want to reflect on questions we have been asked. Some questions are door slammers, they leave you feeling boxed in and shut down. Other questions are door openers, they open up new ways of thinking or new opportunities.

We formed groups of four or five. After introducing ourselves briefly, we each gave examples of questions we had experienced that were door slamming and then questions that were door opening.

Observations after the exercise:

Door-slaming questions leave us feeling vulnerable and unsafe. They are limiting, preventing new thinking. They reflect a judgment. It is sometimes difficult to get over them. They represent an invalidation of self, can make you feel judged and inadequate. Emotion tends to narrow our perception.

Tone is an important aspect. Door-slaming questions focused on deficits or problems. It keeps people focused on their inadequacies. Rhetorical questions contain a judgment.

Part II

Questions can take us out of our habitual views. Questions that reveal genuine interest and curiosity tend to be openers and can help someone see a situation in a different light.

Observation of a participant: Sometimes people you love and who love you ask door slamming questions.

Response: Yes. People often respond out of their feelings.

Good questions help people to understand their situation in more complex way. As the asker, it's good to stay away from making assumptions. Start from a position of "not knowing." We may never understand another's experience.

Constructive questions get people to think about small steps that may have been effective. Gets them away from thinking of themselves as victims. Gets people to reclaim their own potency. Promotes a more even flow of perspectives. Expands thinking.

Try to take someone else's perspective. Get people out of the present with questions like "If this pattern continued for the next 20 years, how would that be?" Experiment. Questions should be in the service of the asked, not the asker. Think: What is the effect of this question? What does the question raise about the asker?

But the most important part is to really listen.

To review for people who did not participate in the first session: Door-slamming questions reflect: a hidden agenda; limit one from moving on; make one feel criticized or judged; are difficult to get over; contain invalidations of self. They can have both intended or unintended effects. They can leave the asked feeling locked in.

Door-openers have the following attributes: the asker sounded interested; the tone reflected compassion; the question inspired reflection, broadened perspective and returned a different point-of-view. There was a feeling of trust, genuine interest. There was an opening to looking at assumptions behind the conflict or dilemma.

Demonstration

The presenters asked for a volunteer to describe a current dilemma. She requested confidentiality from the group. The dilemma involved criticism from members of her family about choices she had made about her work and relationships.

First everyone was asked to write down several questions they might ask the volunteer to help her think about this dilemma freshly. Afterward, several people asked her one of their questions and then she was asked which of those questions were door openers for her.

One participant observed it was helpful that in asking questions she did not feel she had to solve the problem. Nobody was trying to fix things.

Summary after this demonstration: Ask questions out of genuine curiosity. Start from the assumption that the answer lies within the person. Assume people have the resources and can solve their own problems. Someone asked the presenters how to get conversations about difficult issues started in their families. Answer: people don't usually talk about the kind of conversations they want to have. You can start with a question to the family members by asking "How are we going to talk about this?"

Exercise

In groups of four or five, each person had three minutes to describe a current or past dilemma. They were to give a name to the dilemma, give an example of a time it occurred, and explain why it is a problem for them. Then the others in the group, in one or two minutes, asked questions and wrote them down. The written questions were presented to the speaker, who then revealed how the questions affected them. A last observation by presenters: Get away from thinking in terms of groups. We want to seek out the individuals within a group, because not all members of a group are alike.