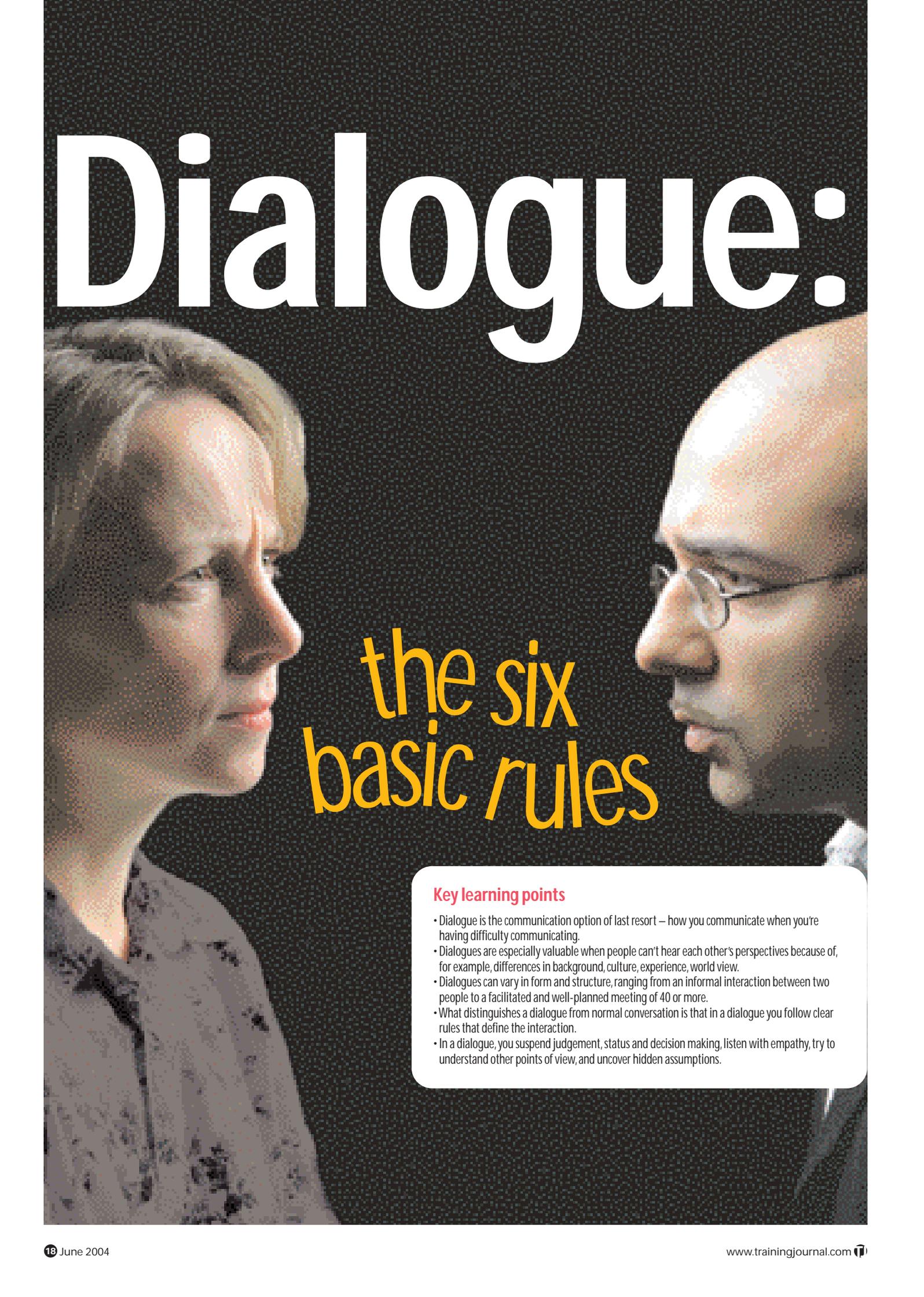


Dialogue:



the six basic rules

Key learning points

- Dialogue is the communication option of last resort – how you communicate when you're having difficulty communicating.
- Dialogues are especially valuable when people can't hear each other's perspectives because of, for example, differences in background, culture, experience, world view.
- Dialogues can vary in form and structure, ranging from an informal interaction between two people to a facilitated and well-planned meeting of 40 or more.
- What distinguishes a dialogue from normal conversation is that in a dialogue you follow clear rules that define the interaction.
- In a dialogue, you suspend judgement, status and decision making, listen with empathy, try to understand other points of view, and uncover hidden assumptions.

What is a dialogue? When do we know we're having one? And what does it achieve? In answering these questions, **Robert Rosell** suggests some practical techniques that can improve our workplace communication.

Have you ever been in a conversation with someone, looking each other in the eye, explaining important information, when suddenly it dawns on you that your partner hasn't really heard a word you've said? Somewhat more off-putting is when you suddenly realise *you* haven't heard a word your discussion partner has said, though you try to look interested as you nod your head in agreement.

Do you remember working with that group of people who are supposed to be collaborating on an important project but can't seem to get past their interpersonal animosities, prejudices and preconceptions? Their personal relationships and a basic lack of trust are sabotaging their ability to get the job done.

Have you ever tried to listen to someone explain something to you in English and realise that you don't understand that person because s/he is using terminology or jargon that is as foreign to you as if s/he was speaking in some archaic dialect?

As our world globalises and shrinks, we come into regular contact with a more diverse and complex assortment of people. Men and women, people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, technologists and salespeople, young and not so young all find themselves interacting together. Effective communication is critical to our successful collaboration with these colleagues, customers and suppliers.

Yet the differences between us are not always easily bridged. Misunderstandings abound. Preconceptions about who people are, what their intentions might be and whether they are friend or foe profoundly influence our decisions. Communicating with people you don't particularly like is difficult at best. Collaborating with those you distrust is next to impossible.

So how should you communicate when you're having difficulty communicating? That's where 'dialogue' comes in.

WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

A dialogue is an exchange between people who want to understand each other but haven't been able to. It requires a higher level of listening, suspending feelings and differences that can get in our way, and uncovering hidden assumptions we may not even know we hold.

Dialogue is a form of communication that is not generally taught in our schools and colleges. We learn to debate, to stand our ground and to defend our positions. We learn to negotiate – trying to gain the greatest advantage possible while giving up as little as we can. We can be quite good at casual chat – avoiding areas of disagreement. However, we don't usually learn how to have a meaningful dialogue.

This is odd, since dialogue has been around as a communication tool for a very long time. The ancient Greeks used it. So have successful political and business leaders in countries around the world. Families have dialogues, as do governments and community groups.

A dialogue can happen between as few as two people or as many as a group of 40 or more. The process can be formal, using a facilitator and clear set of guidelines, or more casual. Larger groups addressing more sensitive issues are more likely to need skilled facilitation, but essentially anyone who understands the basic structure and rules of a dialogue can enter into one.

Dialogues are usually organised to address a particular issue; however, they often take on a life of their own. Unexpected feelings and concerns tend to surface during the course of a dialogue, opening paths to subjects that were not on the agenda. This is normal and positive, as these hidden topics are often at the root of the surface conflicts that inspired the dialogue in the first place. The team that seems to be having a conflict over some strategic issue may actually be fuming about the fact that a couple of the team members are chronically late. The team's frustration at repeatedly having meetings delayed by its tardy colleagues could surface (perhaps dramatically) in the dialogue, although the meeting was called with the larger strategic issue in mind.

Most important, a dialogue is a process of learning and discovery. When we are having challenges that make it difficult to collaborate, we need to find out what is getting in our way, and search for a level of mutual understanding and trust that will allow us to move forward. Dialogue offers us the tools we need to accomplish this goal.

Listening is widely accepted as the **single most important communication skill**; this is true in a debate or negotiation as well as in a dialogue

THE TOOLS OF DIALOGUE

A variety of authors have presented recent works on dialogue. Most prominent among these is the late physicist David Bohm whose seminal work *On Dialogue* introduced dialogue to modern organisations.¹ Daniel Yankelovich's practical guide entitled *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation* provides excellent examples of how dialogue can be effective within organisations and guidance for those looking to implement dialogue at work.²

While experts may differ on the details, the fundamental tools of dialogue are widely accepted. These can be grouped into three broad categories: suspension, listening and discovery.

Suspension

Suspension is the process in which participants agree that for the duration of a dialogue they will suspend their *judgements* about each other, *decision making* and *status differences*.

Suspending judgement is critical to the success of a dialogue. We all enter our relationships with preconceived notions about others. These can be based on a variety of factors, and flow from our experiences, upbringing and fundamental beliefs. While these judgements are valuable in helping us to navigate our lives, they can also get in the way of opening our eyes to ➤

Once dialogue becomes embedded
in your organisation's culture,
the results can be astounding

- ▶ alternate realities. We tend to fill in the blanks of what we don't know by drawing from what we believe to be true. Suspending judgement frees us to explore what we don't know without imposing our own filters on the information.

Practically speaking, suspending judgement requires that we temporarily let go of our stereotypes, prejudices and preconceptions, and enter the dialogue process with an open mind intent on learning what other people believe rather than on convincing them of the veracity of our own beliefs.

Suspending decision making is a practical aspect of dialogue. Since the process of making decisions is one of limiting options and dialogue is all about expanding options, the two are incompatible. This is not to say you don't eventually make a decision. However, the dialogue process precedes decision making, opening up the options so that the best possible decision can be made – later.

Suspending status can be very challenging. We all recognise that status exists within any organisation, and having a dialogue doesn't change that reality. However, if you want the most open dialogue process possible, where people honestly search for common ground and try to

uncover hidden information, status differences can get in the way.

Suspending status requires leadership from those with higher status in the organisation. It falls to them to set the example by clearly stating that status differences are suspended for the duration of the dialogue and acting in such a way that people will believe them. It helps if the dialogue is held in a neutral location, perhaps offsite, where the usual trappings of status are not present. The higher status people should not chair or facilitate the process. They should be equal participants, allowing another participant or an outside facilitator to run the show. They might want to dress differently, signalling that the dialogue is not 'business as usual'. Finally, it helps if they aren't the first to speak. Allowing others to set the tone of the dialogue can be a clear signal that the leadership is serious about suspending status.

Listening

Listening is widely accepted as the single most important communication skill. This is true in a debate or negotiation as well as in a dialogue. However, we listen differently in a dialogue. Whereas in a debate or negotiation we may be listening to find a weakness in our opponents' positions, in a dialogue we are listening to better understand why the speakers believe they are right.

The goal of a dialogue is to learn by clarifying what we don't understand, and opening our minds to other approaches and perspectives. In so doing, we hope to uncover what is getting in the way of effective communication so we can move forward. The tools we use to accomplish this are familiar. We listen actively, asking clarifying questions to make sure we understand. We repeat back what we have heard to confirm that we are interpreting accurately. We show respect for the opinions we are hearing, indicating we care both about the person speaking and about what s/he is saying.

This last point merits underscoring. It is very difficult to build trust with people who believe you really could not care less about them, their beliefs or concerns. On the other hand, people are usually quite willing to communicate openly in the safety of an environment where they feel those they are speaking with truly care and are listening empathetically. One of the best ways to move past a block in a conversation is to offer what Dan Yankelovich calls a 'gesture of empathy'. This can be as simple as showing you appreciate how difficult a situation may have been

WHO GETS THE PROMOTION?

A dialogue case study

To demonstrate how dialogue works, let's look at the situation faced by Beroz, a supervisor who is brought into a work team that management feels is having some challenges. From the beginning, Beroz gets nothing but resistance and resentment from two of the five members of her team. She doesn't know why, but it is clear that rather than improving the situation, conditions and productivity have dropped in the four months since she took on this assignment. She turns to HR and they schedule a dialogue session. All participants are promised that what transpires in the session will remain confidential to the group. The rules of dialogue are reviewed. Status is suspended as a facilitator from HR co-ordinates the session.

As the dialogue unfolds, we learn that Beroz is seen by the organisation as a problem fixer, and that she has been very successful in the past playing this role with troubled teams. She has excellent leadership and communication skills. Yet despite her experience she is getting nowhere with the current group. Beroz reminds everyone of a recent embarrassing 'incident' where an angry customer took his concerns to the media. The first Beroz heard of this customer's problem was when she saw it in the news.

There is significant anger directed towards Beroz by David and Cleo, the two team members who have been resistant to her leadership. They are both experienced employees with good track records, yet they appear almost petulant in their relationships with Beroz. They defend their handling of the 'incident', explaining that they need to be able to function independently in order to be effective. Beroz wants to know what's underlying their animosity, but her inquiries generate nothing more than a stony silence.

After a few false starts, we finally learn that both David and Cleo felt they had been promised the promotion to the supervisor's position that Beroz holds. We also learn that Rohit, the division manager who promoted Beroz, is of the same ethnicity as she is (they are both Indian), and that David and Cleo assume Beroz received the supervisor assignment over them because of her ethnicity, not her abilities.

The turning point in this scenario happens when David challenges Beroz on the reason why she was given the supervisor's position. Beroz reviews her qualifications. David becomes angry as he discloses his assumption that nepotism was the real reason. As proof, David offers that he has extensive experience and was being groomed for the supervisor's job, yet it went to a relative newcomer who happens to be of the same ethnicity as the department manager who hired her. This revelation is news to Cleo, who felt she too was being prepared for the same supervisor's position. Important information has surfaced and can now be addressed.

Beroz is unaware of the promises the employees felt they received from Rohit, and commits to support their advancement in the organisation when opportunities open. She expresses empathy for both Cleo and David, assuring them that these revelations are news to her and that if she had been in their place, she would likely have felt the same anger and sense of betrayal.

The team still has work to do to get to the level of productivity and co-operation expected by the organisation, but progress has been made, hidden assumptions and information have been exposed, and the air has been cleared. Both Cleo and David feel their concerns have been heard and taken seriously by Beroz. A process of healing has begun.

Adapted from Dialogue – Now You're Talking program 2 'Dialogue for Cultural Understanding' from Quality Media Resources, Inc. (QMR).

or how angry someone must have felt. A sincere demonstration that you care goes a long way in building the trust so essential to effective workplace relationships.

Discovery

The breakthroughs that can happen in a dialogue are usually related to the uncovering of hidden assumptions. This process can be very powerful. We find out we were holding beliefs or acting in ways of which we were completely unaware. We learn about the unintended impacts of our behaviours on others. We discover what has been getting in our way.

The dialogue process builds trust among participants. This is essential if people are to feel safe revealing what may be uncomfortable or embarrassing. These revelations in turn enhance the level of mutual understanding and trust within the dialogue group. We may not end up in agreement, but we will have a much clearer understanding of where everyone stands. More importantly, we will have strengthened the interpersonal foundation on which all successful collaborative relationships are built.

THE SIX BASIC RULES OF DIALOGUE

We can summarise the fundamentals for successful dialogue outlined so far into six basic rules.

1. Be open and suspend judgement. Don't disparage other points of view.
2. Keep 'dialogue' and 'decision-making' separate. Dialogue precedes decision-making, negotiation or action.
3. Speak for yourself, not as a representative, and treat all participants as peers.
4. Listen with empathy – acknowledging you have heard others and that you care.
5. Look for common ground – identifying areas where you agree.
6. Search for and disclose hidden assumptions – especially in yourself.³

It is important to remember that, unlike a debate or negotiation, the goal of dialogue isn't to win. Nobody 'wins' a dialogue. The goal is to learn from each other, and to develop mutual understanding, trust and respect.

WHY DIALOGUE WORKS

Dialogue is used in a wide range of settings. It can help community groups overcome divisions based on differences in ethnicity or economic status. It can be used in schools to bridge gaps between groups of students or between different stakeholders. Families can use dialogue to uncover hidden assumptions that can lead to misunderstandings and break down trust. Businesses can use it to enhance team effectiveness. In fact, any group of people having trouble communicating can benefit from introducing dialogue.

Why does dialogue work in these many and varied settings? Because

It is very difficult to build trust with **people who believe you really could not care less** about them, their beliefs or concerns

when you suspend judgement, decision making and status differences, you open the pathways to learning. When you listen with empathy, asking questions because you really want to know what the other person thinks, you lay the groundwork for building trust. When you uncover hidden assumptions, you break through misunderstandings and discover what may have been getting in your way.

Dialogue works because it brings us into multi-sided communication. We move away from the 'us' versus 'them' approach common to debate and negotiation, and explore areas in which we share common ground. We look at third or fourth options rather than simply settling on mine and yours. We discover there is more that we have in common than that separates us. We develop deeper levels of understanding.

NOW YOU'RE TALKING!

Dialogue takes time and effort, and is not necessary where groups or individuals are already communicating effectively. However, when you need to build understanding and trust to get to a place where you can make decisions and collaborate effectively, dialogue works.

Introducing dialogue into your organisation requires a training approach that combines learning the basic skills and reinforcement through practice. Reading about dialogue may be interesting, but, like any communication skill, there's no substitute for practical experience.

Once dialogue becomes embedded in your organisation's culture, the results can be astounding. Where once there was suspicion and hidden agendas, you'll find more open relationships built on mutual respect. It's no panacea, but dialogue can become a powerful tool in your efforts to build productive, respectful workplace relations. 🗨️

The author of this article can be contacted at Robert@qmr.com

References

1. David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, Routledge, 1996.
2. Daniel Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation*, Simon & Schuster, 1999.
3. Adapted from materials developed by Viewpoint Learning; visit www.viewpointlearning.com

Dialogue recommended reading

- David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, Routledge, 1996.
Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society*, Basic Books, 1997.
William Issacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life*, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1999.
Arnold Mindell, *Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity*, Lao Tse Press, 1995.
Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue*, Random House, 1998.
Daniel Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation*, Simon & Schuster, 1999.