THE SEVEN ASPECTS OF COLLABORATIVE COMMUNICATION

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INTRODUCTION

Successful dialogue (defined as a mode of discourse used when our goal is to understand another person and our self) is dependent on the use of collaborative communication (defined as communication that encourages individuals to think together constructively). Building on work of Dr. John Peters, Professor Emeritus at the University of Tennessee, his students, and colleagues, seven aspects of collaborative communication are described here.

Each aspect contains one or more tools that individuals can employ in their dialogue with others. The seven aspects are distinctly different but act in an integrative form to enhance dialogue. The seven include climate building, questioning, listening, thinking, focusing, acting, and facilitating. The model below depicts the seven aspects and how they interact with each other. Next we describe each aspect along with the respective tools.

Figure 1: Model of the Seven Aspects
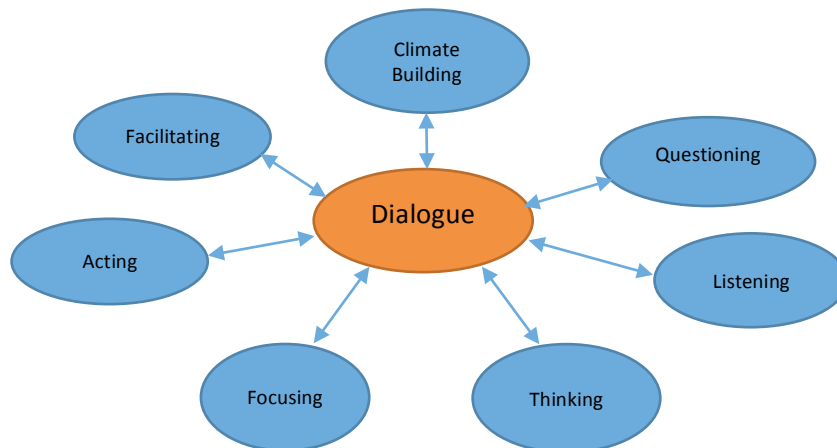
THE SEVEN ASPECTS

<u>Climate Building</u>

Climate building reinforces a collaborative environment and encourages dialogue along with the other six aspects. It occurs in an environment that is inviting, comfortable, and safe for the participants. Two tools are recommended for climate building. First, create a set of ground rules that everyone can abide

by. The purpose of setting ground rules is to create and reinforce a sense of emotional security within the group. An example of a list is provided in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Ground Rules for Collaborative Communication

1. Treat everyone with legitimacy and respect
2. Engage in listening carefully
3. Participate actively
4. Be honest and promote transparency
5. Promote creativity
6. Engage in a balance between inquiry and advocacy
7. Assert your freedom to disagree respectfully
8. Commit to the (whole) process – take responsibility for yourself, others, and how you interact together

Second, create a physical space that will help facilitate interactions. Arrangement of seating for a group should be such that each participant can easily see the other participants. . While circular seating is ideal for viewing each other, often meeting rooms and classrooms are restrictive. Whatever the room arrangement, try to position everyone so individuals can readily see other people and reinforce this. An example of an undesirable and a desirable seating arrangement are provided in the figure below.

Figure 2: Seating for Collaborative Communication
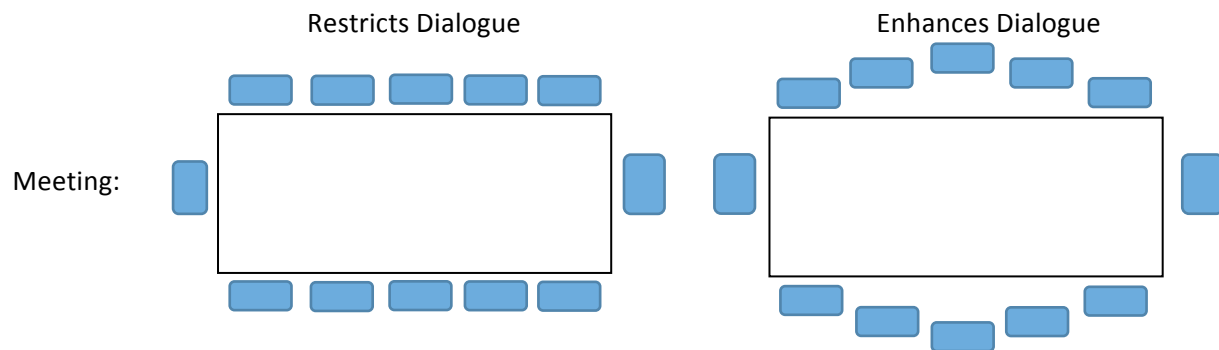
Questioning

Questioning is one of the most important, yet rarely used, techniques in conversation. Two primary questioning tools are *open-ended questions* and *asking back*. Rather than entering into an ongoing dialogue with a statement of advocacy (justifying or explaining your viewpoint or position), try asking an open-ended question (a question not answerable by one word, e.g., "yes" or "no") to a person who might have a different viewpoint. In structuring an open-ended question, the question should be worded to avoid revealing the questioner's position. News interviewers often combine advocacy with questions at the same time as a means of restricting the nature of the answer to respond to the interviewer's agenda or own perspective. For example, "Why didn't you do it this way?" This automatically biases the response one might receive. Open-ended "questions typically start with "Why," "What," and "How." Examples include: "Why did you do it the way you did?" What let you to this conclusion?" How would you approach this differently?"

A second questioning tool that encourages dialogue is "asking back." When a person asks you a question, after you answer them, ask them "Why did you ask this question?" or if you tend to avoid asking "Why" questions (as often touted in clinical psychology), "What led you to ask this question?" or "What are you thinking?" or "What are your thoughts now?" This "asking back" allows the poser of the initial question to express his perspective. When people ask a question, there is usually a reason why, i.e., some motivation. Rather than assuming we know why, asking them why they asked honors their thinking and can uncover assumptions on their part as well as yours. It also encourages more collaboration rather than the conversation turning into something like interview or interrogation. It is important to consider your tone of voice in asking back, retaining a relatively objective, neutral tone. By asking back, new, deeper, contributions enter into the dialogue.

The third questioning tool is a question that invites others to participate. In a larger group, after dialogue between two or three people takes place, it will likely be desirable to bring others into the dialogue. This can be as simple as "What do others think?" to something more complex such as summarizing a person's experience and asking "What similar experiences have other's had?"

<u>Listening</u>

Too often we desire to share our own point of view or advocate for our own position. Sadly, this can minimize listening effectively to others and our ability to examine assumptions and build joint understanding. In collaborative communication, a balance between *inquiry* (asking open-ended questions) and *advocacy* (stating one's position) is desirable. At the heart of good listening is the ability to suspend your thoughts while listening. Too often, while a person is speaking, the person listening is already generating a possible response. For example, when someone advocates for a position, the receiver may, at the same time, be developing their counterarguments to the speaker's position. Another typical example occurs when the speaker is telling a story; the receiver is focused on a similar story that they can't wait to share. What has happened is that the receiver has stopped fully listening to the speaker. The term for this behavior is "reloading." When everyone is simultaneously bringing in their own advocated positions or experiences (e.g., stories), this is referred to as "popcorning," a very dysfunctional form of group communication where everyone is trying to get in their two cents worth.

We need to listen, not only to content, but also for the underlying assumptions and beliefs of the speaker. This type of listening is not easy and takes practice. Each time a person speaks, this can be considered as a *conversational entry* into the dialogue. One method of practice is to try and keep track of as many conversational entries as you can, perhaps as far back as seven. This allows you to not only identify each person's contribution, but also to tie these contributions together as appropriate (see focusing below).

<u>Thinking</u>

While you may be attempting to suspend your own thoughts while listening, it is important to acknowledge when this "reloading" occurs, that is, when you begin to consider your own experiences or beliefs as someone else is speaking. Attempt to put aside these thoughts for later, perhaps as you generate an open-ended question. However, there is a balance here, as while one is listening, one needs to recognize not only the beliefs and assumptions of the speaker, but also one's own beliefs and assumptions. One's thinking should not dominate the communication space at the cost of actively listening, nor should it be ignored altogether.

Two tools are important here. First, when thoughts begin to occur while one is listening to another, the individual needs to intentionally reinforce the following type of self-message: "I need to save this thought in my memory, but now be in the moment with the individual speaking." Second, when a thought takes over from listening and one feels they have lost track, one should not hesitate to ask the speaker to repeat something that was said. For example" I'm sorry, I got lost there for a second, would you please repeat what you just said (or '…would you please go over that again')". Thank you." In a sense, asking a person to repeat or review what she said, gives others in the group an opportunity to pause, hear what was said again, and combine what was said with their own thinking. The balance between listening, thinking, and questioning requires that the pace of dialogue be slower as compared to normal conversation. Pauses should occur and be viewed as appropriate as they allow for greater, and often more accurate, processing of what was said.

Focusing

It is important in a dialogue to stop at key moments and pose the question, "What are *we* talking about?" or "What are *we* focused upon?" This keeps the group focused and lessens the potential for popcorning. It also aids listening. By asking each person this question, you are likely to hear different perceptions of the dialogue content. This is healthy as it exposes the individual lenses through which group members are processing the dialogue. Focusing does not reflect what an individual is saying, but rather what the *group* is saying. What is the focus of the group at a specific moment? This focus will likely change as the dialogue proceeds, but stopping to ask and review the current focus can be helpful-- especially at times of confusion when more clarity is needed.

Acting

Groups are constructed with an underlying purpose in mind. That purpose may be to create something, discuss an issue, to resolve a problem, or merely to converse to exchange ideas or experiences.   Not only is the group involved in action, but the individuals are as well.   This desire to make progress towards a goal is shared; it contains and results in action, not passivity. Thus, acting includes both participating in dialogue and working toward a resulting action. Thus entering into dialogue and the completion of a dialogue itself can be considered goals.

There are two tools that may be of help in understanding how this occurs. The first is "reflecting in action." This occurs as we reflect "in the moment", within the dialogue, as regards the content of the as well as other dynamics (e.g., non-verbals, external disruptions). This reflecting in action is very important in the facilitation process. The second is reflecting on action. This occurs following the dialogue when afterwards we are attempting to recall the nature of the dialogue. One is in the action of reviewing the dialogue itself, recalling what various people contributed and the assumptions, beliefs, and motivations behind these contributions.

Facilitating

As noted in the Acting aspect above, groups are formed with a purpose in mind. Often a group is assigned a "manager" or "facilitator." This person needs to continue to provide instruction for collaborative communication and reinforce the tools, as well as help the group in their common understanding.   Time-outs can be used to review the collaborative communication process to assure that the process is being followed. Reinforcing the use of collaboration tools in dialogue, indeed, the

success of dialogue itself, is everyone's responsibility. Thus when a question is asked of someone else and answered, everyone takes responsibility for making sure the receiver is "asking back." Anyone in the group can "catch" closed-ended questions and request these be reconstructed. Everyone needs to take responsibility for recognizing popcorning. Anyone can ask the focusing question. A group member can also tactfully ask another group member if they have just reloaded.

SUMMARY

These seven aspects of collaborative communication work in synergistic fashion. Optimally, all seven will be present so dialogue can occur. The consistent and intentional practice of these tools will promote productive and healthy dialogue.

In summary, Collaborative Communication comprises a set of seven aspects, each with respective tools. These are summarized in the table below:

Table: Aspects and Tools

Aspect	Tools
Climate Building	• Ground Rules • Seating
Questioning	• Ask open-ended questions • Ask back
Listening	• Listening for assumptions and beliefs • Suspending one's own thoughts • Track conversational entries
Thinking	• Consider your own assumptions and beliefs • Use self-messages to minimize time spent reloading
Focusing	• Pose question to the group – "What are we all talking about right now?"
Acting	• Reflection-in-action • Reflection-on-action
Facilitating	• Continue to reinforce collaborative communication aspects and tools • Move the group toward a common understanding • Time—outs to reflect on the process • Shared responsibility for facilitating

We have many years of experience in both the training and employment of these aspects and tools and have found them to be extremely valuable in their application to many different professional practice environments.

For more information regarding Collaborative Communication and potential training and group facilitation in this area, please contact Dr. David Schumann (dschuman@utk.edu) or Dr. John Peters (jpeters@utk.edu), Senior Partners, Collaborative Communication Practices, LLC, or Dr. Ferlin McGaskey (fmcgaske@utk.edu), Director of the Institute for Collaborative Communication, University of Tennessee Teaching and Learning Center.