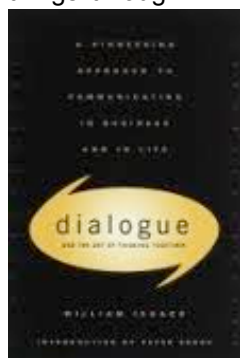




Dialogue

And The Art Of Thinking Together
William Isaacs

Dialogue is one of my favourite, most dog-eared and re-read books. It is an antidote to Sartre's observation that 'Hell is other people'. In it, Bill Isaacs turns his attention toward the commonly experienced difficulty that people face when they come together and try to think things through. Different perspectives, factions and interests fragment conversation into a arsenal of verbal weapons used to inflict damage on the other. Disputes, whether at an international, regional or local level contain the same dynamics that prevent their resolution.



Using examples from his own broad, international experience, Isaacs describes the turning point in a number of difficult negotiations between intransigent groups. Whilst doing so he explores the necessary conditions, skills and processes that make these turnarounds possible. In essence this is 'real conversation' where the parties are fully present

Central to real conversation is the notion of a 'container' within which the conversation can safely take place. Fashioned out of structure and rules the container provides a boundary within which it is safe to say the things that are normally only thought. Isaacs points to four practices that form the fabric of the container. These are: **Listening** deeply by quietening our own internal chatter; **Suspending** the instantaneous judgements we find ourselves making that colour everything we then hear; **Respecting** the speaker by seeing through the job title, group membership or gender to the whole person beneath the external appearances and **Voicing**, having the courage to voice your thoughts rather than taking them home again and bitterly sharing them with people who can do little about the issue. Whilst each of these are familiar notions, Isaacs devotes a chapter to each one which gives an idea of the depth in which he covers the simplest of ideas.

Lying underneath the four practices Isaacs introduces us to the patterns that lie beneath the surface of conversations. He draws on David Kantor's Four-Player system to describe the roles that conversations seem to require. When observing conversations develop Kantor noted that people adopt roles that make the conversation work. The **movers** initiate action and shape the initial focus of the conversation. Someone who agrees with the ideas or sentiments of the first, expresses his or her support and is said to be **following** the first. The first two people are symbolically close as a result. At the same time a third person will be noticing something not quite right with the ideas expressed and will challenge or **oppose** them. Symbolically they place themselves between the first two. Finally a fourth person who has been observing from a slightly detached position, neither siding with one or other of the sides, steps in. He offers a **bystanders** perspective on what has been evolving. Of course more than one person can occupy each of the roles and each may switch roles at any time. What is crucial to the quality of the conversation is that each role continues to be represented throughout, balancing the others. Each of the four player's roles corresponds to one of the practices mentioned above to produce a powerful model of dialogue.

Language is central to Isaacs' message and being mindful about what sort of language you are using is central to the practice of dialogue. Sprinkled throughout the book are the etymologies of words revealing a deeper, original or alternate meaning of the words he uses. Some of my favourite surprises are: Discussion (*Dis quaterere*) to shake apart; Respect (*respecere*) to look again; Dialogue (*dia logos*) through meaning; Conversation (*Con verser*) take turns together.

Dialogue is an ancient practice and poses an alternative view of communication to the one that exists in most of today's institutions. If, frustrated after a difficult business meeting, you feel there just has to be a better way, this book may just be it!