



# Dialogue Across Teams

I wrote the short responses below for a discussion board in *Dialogic Decision-Making* with Randy Iden, Ph.D. The prompt for these responses was to suggest a specific dialogue that would help me manage across teams – i.e., influence behavior in other teams or encourage cooperation among teams – in a past or present workplace. Formulating these responses provided me with an opportunity to identify key components of one philosophical approach to dialogue, examine the use of dialogue as a leadership strategy in organizational settings, and understand the limitations of dialogue.

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## Background

In a few different past positions, it has been my responsibility to lead some sort of strategic planning process. These processes always bring together a group of (usually only) internal stakeholders for a half or whole day to evaluate what's going well, what's not going well, and how we want to move forward. I'm realizing, however, that these processes have often mixed dialogue with decision-making, as Yankelovich warns against (pp. 56-57). Often, the dialogue about what is and isn't going well reveals important, far-reaching issues or challenges that require additional dialogue outside the scope of the planning/decision-making process. Similarly, ideas can spring up during the planning/decision-making process that have absolutely no foundation of mutual understanding and thus threaten to derail the group's work together. I see now that mixing dialogue with decision-making is unhelpful and something I should take care to avoid in the future.

## Goal

Moving forward, I will encourage cooperation during the strategic planning process by clearly compartmentalizing the dialogue portion/phase. These dialogues will take place with the relevant internal stakeholders, be they the executive team, department heads, etc. My eventual goal post-dialogue will be to move into a separate decision-making portion/phase wherein we collaborate on the substance of the plan.

## Characteristics

Using Yankelovich's three features of dialogue as a guide, here's how I will approach future dialogues to manage across teams:

- Equality: These dialogues will benefit from even greater equality than my past strategic planning processes because I won't be in the position of having to approve, modify, or reject ideas on the spot. I (and my manager(s)) will be able to participate as true equals – modeling mutual trust and respect as the dialogue progresses.
- Empathy: I am legitimately excited about the ways in which I'll be able to express even greater empathy by focusing solely on understanding the viewpoints of my teammates. It already feels like such a relief! Additionally, I think that by ramping up the empathy in this sort of dialogue, other members of the team will be better positioned to empathize with me as the person who ultimately must find a way to navigate and balance all their viewpoints. That's hard to do.
- Surfacing assumptions: I expect dialogue to be particularly useful in this respect because it will allow me to uncover the underlying assumptions that would otherwise frustrate me under the pressure of coming up with a strategic plan. As a team, we will benefit from putting multiple eyes on those assumptions, as well. We will have brought together stakeholders from various subcultures that might ordinarily result in "misunderstandings and errors of judgment" (p. 46), but dialogue will give us the time and space to examine them.