

Paired Dialogue Interviews: A Sensing Exercise for the Workshop Context

Timing: 1-3 hours
of Participants: 2 or more

PURPOSE/DESCRIPTION:

Dialogue interviews are one of the most reliable and versatile tools of the Change Lab process. They are also foundational in that they can be used to build participants' capacity in a number of different skills—from seeing, suspending, and redirecting to talking and listening empathetically and generatively—and they can play a role in many parts of the Change Lab itself. During the convening phase, dialogue interviews help facilitators engage with stakeholders; they provide a way to tap into the interviewees' commitment and determine whether they may want to participate in a Lab process. During the co-sensing phase, they help us see the system, both when they are done between Lab members and when they take place with external partners. Through dialogue interviews, we build our collective knowledge about the system we are seeking to impact, and we form deeper and stronger relationships among team members.

Dialogue interviews can also be powerful in a workshop setting, where they again combine skill building with relationship building and co-sensing. We often use them toward the beginning of a workshop, because they provide an effective means for building an esprit de corps among the participants and for quickly generating a lot of knowledge about the system in the room.

Dialogue interviews can segue into other teaching methods, like the four-quadrant model for talking and listening, the ladder of inference, as well as more work on seeing, suspending, and redirecting.

Last, because of the richness dialogue interviews provide, the skills they build, and the results they deliver, we often start our work with client teams with a full one-day workshop dedicated to this process. As a result, the participants can then go and interview others in order to build the field in which they will work.

GENERAL NOTES:

We find that 15 minutes for each interview (30 minutes per pair) is about the minimum amount of time to allot for the interviews. In a workshop setting, 20 minutes for each person is ideal, as it gives the pairs enough time to get into the conversation.

When they begin the interviewing process, participants often ask if they can leave the room and find another space. We prefer to have everyone stay in the room, as it holds the energy better.

Unlike other tools that require little instruction and framing, this one requires quite a bit.

PROCESS:

1. Introduce the concept of the dialogue interview with the following talking points:

Dialogue interviews are used in the convening and co-sensing phases of a Change Lab. They serve a number of purposes:

- To see and understand the dynamics and complexities of the system
- To help interviewees to express and clarify their own thinking about the theme and to connect to their own commitment
- To help interviewers step into the world of the interviewees—their values and motivations, their frames for thinking about the issue
- To generate or inspire action by the interviewees—possibly with the interviewers
- To build the relationship between interviewers and interviewees and, through them, to the rest of the system

Dialogue interviews are not purely a data-gathering exercise. They are an opportunity to share experiences and stories, and create connections between the interviewer and the interviewee. We call this form of interview a “dialogue interview,” because the root is in the word dialogue, from the Greek words *dia* and *logos*; *logos* means “word” or “the meaning of the word,” and *dia* means “through.” So we are trying to create “meaning flowing through.” While this is an interview—one person is asking the questions and listening and the other is responding, it is a flow back and forth. The new question is informed by the previous answer; it doesn’t come from a prescribed “list of questions.” The interviewer and interviewee ideally “dance” together.

Interviewers play a specific role:

- Suspend judgment and be aware of your own mental models
- Create a safe and comfortable space for the interviewee to speak into
- Offer confidentiality
- Be “in service” of the interviewee
- Practice inquiry—don’t offer your own point of view or assessment
- Invite examples from the interviewee’s own experiences
- Try to put yourself in the interviewee’s shoes
- Listen for surprises and disconfirming data
- Connect heart-to-heart on an emotional, human level
- Look for patterns and underlying causes
- Allow silence—do not jump in to fill the gaps
- Don’t be afraid to ask simple or “stupid” questions
- Go with the flow
- Relax and enjoy

Interviewers pose questions to interviewees about their experiences with the topic area of the workshop. As mentioned above, the questions should flow, one into the other, helping interviewees to uncover a new perspective or understanding about the topic. It’s good to ask questions that will generate feelings and emotions, opening the mind and the heart.

Ask if there are any questions at this point. Tell people that they can take notes if they wish for their own use, but encourage them to focus on listening. They will have a chance to capture their thoughts after the interview is over.

2. Ask each participant to find a partner—preferably pairing up with someone who they think will have different views. Have them sit side-by-side and wait for instructions. If you have an uneven number, create one group of three.
3. Explain that sitting “side-by-side” (you can turn and look at your partner) fosters a different physical relationship than sitting face-to-face. Rather than sitting opposite from each other—normally a confrontational position—you are sitting together, sharing the same perspective. You are trying to see through each other’s eyes.
4. Ask the participants to now sit in silence and just look at each other. Each partner should notice what preconceptions they might have about the other and what they might say. Say, “What assumptions are you making about your partners based on what they look like, what they are wearing, or what you’ve observed about them so far. [Give them a minute]. Now, do your best to let go of those assumptions. Try to set them aside. [Pause]. Note down one or two questions you would like to start the interview with. [Pause]. Now connect with your intention for this interview. Focus on being of service.” [Pause]
5. Say, “When I ring the bell, you will quickly decide who goes first as interviewer and interviewee. After 20 minutes, I will ring the bell again, and you will swap. Please be sure to take a moment to connect with your intention after the first interview. Then, after another 20 minutes, we will come back and reflect together on the exercise.”
6. When the time is up, have the pairs thank each other and take five minutes to journal about their experience—both the content and the process. As an alternative, you can ask them to journal about what they noticed and what they noticed about their noticing.

DEBRIEF:

First, let pairs give each other feedback for a few minutes. Have them start by assessing their own participation and then hearing the feedback of their partners.

Consider using some or all of the following questions to debrief as a group:

- What did you learn about the resources we have in this room/about our theme?
- How did it feel to be the interviewee? What did you notice when you were in that role?
- How did it feel to be the interviewer? What did you notice when you were in that role?
- What are your reflections on the dialogue interviewing process?

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