

Skilful Discussions

PURPOSE

This exercise will help you and your team make your thought processes in discussions transparent, bring to the surface and challenge assumptions, and to look more closely at sources of disagreement.

OUTCOMES

You'll learn how to come to closure, make a decision, reach agreement, or identify priorities. Skilful Discussion is always focused on a real task at hand.

The most important part of Skilful Discussion is the commitment team members make to follow the five protocols.

1. Pay attention to your intentions

It is important that each team member understands what she/he wants to accomplish in the discussion. If you are not willing to be influenced, what is the purpose of the conversation? Be clear on what you want and do not mislead others as to your intentions.

2. Balance advocacy with inquiry

If this is not done, the team will just sit and listen to each other's position statements. People's assumptions will not even surface, much less be challenged. In this case what people are really thinking will surface in the hallway after the meeting.

3. Build shared meaning

If people understood that words are symbols and have different meanings to different people, then everyone would routinely check what others mean and there would be far less miscommunication. If you want to create shared meaning it is very important to use language with precision and to question what is really meant – what is the meaning behind the words? As you talk around the meaning, you will get closer to a precise definition, which everyone can agree on.

4. Use embodied self-awareness as a resource

When you are feeling confused, angry, frustrated, concerned, or troubled in a meeting, ask yourself the following questions:

- a. *What am I feeling in my body?* (pause)

b. *What am I thinking?* (pause)

c. *What do I want at this moment?* (pause)

You will often end up with insights about the team's assumptions or your own concerns, which you can then discuss with the team.

5. Explore impasses

When the team seems to be “running into a brick wall”, ask:

“What do we agree on, and what do we disagree on?” “Can we pinpoint the source of our disagreement?”

Often sources of disagreement fall into one of four categories:

- a. **Facts** – What exactly has happened? What is the “data”?
- b. **Methods** – How should we do what we need to do?
- c. **Goals** – What is our objective?
- d. **Values** – Why do we think it must be done in a particular way? What do we believe in?

Simply agreeing on the source of disagreement often allows people to learn more about the situation, clarify assumptions, and then move forward.

Three things might help the team when this happens

1. Listen to ideas as if for the first time. Work at being open to new ideas.
2. Consider each person's “mental model” as a piece of a larger puzzle. Look at the issues from the other person's perspective.
3. Ask yourself (and everyone else): ‘What do we need to do to move forward?’

Source: Senge, P., Roberts, C., Ross, R., Smith, B., and Kleiner, A. (1994). The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization.

