

# The art and science of discussion leading

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## Key learning points

- Discussion leading is an essential skill that reflects a trainer's expertise and, as such, is both an art and a science that can be learned and reinforced.
- It can be learned through experience, and much improved through the tools and techniques of group interaction and training skills.
- Focus on how the trainer can use learning processes to accelerate and improve learning, retention and transferability to the job.
- Use a variety of tools and techniques such as the Socratic dialogue, interaction skills, interpersonal influence and other communication techniques.

Going back to the roots of learning and training is critical to generate new thinking. Many trainers believe that discussion leading is such a central aspect of the learning process that we don't need to consider, and revisit, the process. Many may believe that they have already achieved mastery in this process, yet mastery starts by revisiting basic principles and looking for new ways to become even more effective.

## Learning is no accident

Effective debate and constructive dialogue in training sessions, leading to the outcome of meaningful group discussion, result from deliberate and sustained efforts to design the learning process around the content and the process of interaction. As an experienced trainer, you know unconsciously whether things in the training room are going well or badly. Maybe you cannot always put your finger precisely on why things are going well in your training, but you can certainly spot when debate and discussion have to be rejuvenated and the climate enlivened. This is based on the ability of trainers (or consultants) to engage with others and stimulate discussion.

Although we are probably quite good at reading the learning atmosphere in a group, this should not be based purely on our feelings. There are some fairly hard structural issues that we need to incorporate into the learning process, and too many trainers take these for granted. It's a good idea sometimes to reconsider the whole issue of discussion leading, and see how others can stimulate group learning. Bringing the art and the

science together is an important skill that any diligent trainer or consultant will keep in mind.

## Learning objectives

Outlining the aims, objectives and outcomes that will be achieved at the end of the session is critical to any learning event. When learners are aware of the objectives in advance, the process of learning will more easily be integrated into existing knowledge. The step-by-step approach is the mainstay of many lecturing and teaching qualifications, but is still omitted from many events to train trainers. One core skill of any trainer is the ability to describe, in simple terms, the **purpose** for which the training or learning event has been designed. Asking core questions at the start of any event is a worthwhile investment that will help prevent confusion in the minds of those attending. Aligning expectations of learners is critical as the event progresses. Testing for understanding, and summarising the 'for what purpose' issues as well as the content, helps those participating to review their progress, correct any misunderstandings, test ideas and comprehension with others, and generally help participants back onto their own particular attention or learning curve.

## Close

Finally, you may wish to assess the discussion leading in relation to the following dimensions:

- How well did the process meet the learners' needs?
- How well did you blend structure with interaction?
- Was it stimulating – who participated and did everyone have the opportunity to contribute?
- What learning, which would be used in future discussion sessions, has the group achieved?
- How well did the group ensure there was no gender or racial bias?
- Was the group enabled to respect diversity of views and respectful of others?
- What did you, as trainer, learn from the process, and how will this impact on your next training session?

## Bales' Interaction Process Analysis (IPA)

This is a classic in relation to the study of small-group interaction, communication, learning and problem solving. Typically, the types of observable behaviour are as follows:

### Task orientated

Giving information  
Seeking or questioning for information  
Organising ideas  
Clarifying ideas  
Summarising  
Testing understanding  
Evaluating  
Deciding

### Process orientated

Encouraging  
Harmonising  
Sharing/gate-keeping  
Listening  
Tension reducing

### Individual focused

Blocking or difficulty stating  
Seeking attention  
Dominating  
Distancing

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## Socratic dialogue

The philosopher Socrates, who lived around 400 BC, became famous for introducing discipline and logic into debating important philosophical truths through discussion and dialogue. He held the empowering belief, so useful in discussion leading in training sessions, that all had the capacity to think, debate and arrive at possible solutions to any question, however complex. The key to the 'dialogue' was the questioner phrasing the question in order to uncover the beliefs and assumptions which were critical to the issues under debate. The Socratic dialogue offered the ability to discover the truths by asking incisive questions – so that the questioner would force the debaters to think in new ways. The questions had to be thought through in a logical format, with assumptions clearly articulated.

For a trainer, it is important not to have the solutions to problems but, rather, to develop a series of questions that will promote the curiosity which will enable new thinking to come about. This approach is central to effective discussion leading. I suggest that you develop a series of questions which, when debated, will lead to a full and open discussion of all opportunities. After all, asking the right questions is essential to real learning.

Perhaps, in our role as trainers, we can learn about learning and about ourselves, so that we can apply the Socratic dialogue method effectively in order to share insights between group members.

## Reference

- 1 For information on Bales, see D. C. Pennington, *The Social Psychology of Behaviour in Small Groups*, Routledge, 2002.

Group reaction

Taking objectives and outcomes a little further, we focus on addressing the expressed and assumed needs of the audience. What was the reason for their attendance? How much choice did they have in the decision to join the session? What pre-learning have they done? What are the needs, anxieties and motivations of those attending? As a trainer, you are well aware of the importance of controlling self, the content, the medium and – most importantly – the process of learning. You manage the learning environment and how to direct the focus of your group's attention.

Structure and interaction

Focusing upon learning outcomes, then reinforcing them as you progress through the session, is a good guideline. Later, reviewing the material and summarising the major learning points is critical in helping those who may have fallen temporarily off the learning curve. And as you progress through the structure, you need to be constantly aware that it is necessary to reinforce key points. The attention or learning curve issues are critical. Whereas some members of the audience may have a long attention span, and need to review only now and again, others may well need some stimulation to keep their attention. In particular, focusing on how the learning or material can be used in their role in the organisation is key to transferability from your head to their behaviour and their performance. At this stage, focusing upon Bales' approach to analysing interaction in the group (see the box on the back page) is a useful tool. Bales' interaction analysis focuses upon leadership dynamics in small groups. His research investigates measures of leadership in small face-to-face groups. In a simple format, the categories of observable leadership which he identified



included 'instrumental leadership' and 'socio-emotional leadership'.

Instrumental leadership involves examples such as 'giving information' – that is, explaining, summarising and making suggestions, requesting information, asking for details, seeking out new possibilities and asking for clarification. All these behaviours focus on being instrumental in getting the task completed.

To add balance, socio-emotional leadership is also important in maintaining a group's ability to function in harmony as a team. The behaviours were principally identified by Bales as leading to positive reinforcement of behaviour in the group. Examples include praising and acknowledging the contribution of team members, clarifying any disagreements, and building and reinforcing a positive atmosphere. Bales was aware of behaviours which would overcome the more negatively orientated, to win group or team compliance. These include setting rules for mutual working, dealing with violations, defining and enforcing standards, and limits and rules for managing conflict that could lead to disharmony in the group. This element of socio-emotional

leadership focuses on holding the group together.

As a trainer, you can use Bales' approach to assess the climate and interaction within the group of learners. By understanding interaction analysis, you can significantly shift behaviours from negative to positive. You will be aware of the mood and the dominant style or contribution of the group members. The role of the facilitator or trainer is to focus upon keeping things positive and to deal with any negative behaviours, in order to steer the discussion back to positive intent. Using Bales' approach you can reap rewards in creating a positive learning climate.

Dealing with bad news

Although Bales generally focuses on very positive behaviours, the analysis does highlight that some integration will require a more critical, or even negative, orientation. If bad news is to be discussed, it cannot be avoided. If this is necessary you, as the trainer, need to alert the group to the Bales categories which tend to be focused on the associated negative behaviours, and then to steer the group to consider win-win

interaction through testing, understanding and summarising progress.

Develop rules – maintain a safe learning culture

If you know that discussion will tend to move into a negative spiral, and this is part of the learning process, then it is important to draw up some rules about what, and how, views should be expressed. These can range from allotted talking time, interruptions, focusing on intent rather than behaviour, and respecting diversity of views. As trainers, we are aware that people will often feel passionate about their views and opinions, and the facilitator should not shy away from dealing with negativity. Bales' view was that the negative categories of interaction were valuable in getting a group to review their learning, and to move from the negative towards a more thorough, positive understanding. It is useful for the trainer to agree with the empowering belief that the motivation behind every behaviour is a positive intent.

Take thoughtful risks

At some point, the group discussion may stick and become a little frustrating. I find that when people feel frustrated, there is quite often a creative leap around the corner, where a breakthrough in thinking will occur. Creative and intuitive leaps of faith arise from perseverance in debating diverse viewpoints. This activity moves people from thinking 'in the box' to 'out of the box' perspectives. As trainers, it is our intention to encourage people to think outside their box and take some thoughtful risks. This is especially the case if the group has some members who prefer the more formal, orthodox approach, when what they may require is some innovation for creating new ideas.

Delta – things to be reviewed or changed	Plus – positive elements of the programme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Temperature - room too cold</i></li> <li>● <i>More group debate - ensure all the group members express themselves</i></li> <li>● <i>Challenge some views of the audience</i></li> <li>● <i>More short, energising breaks</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Quality debate</i></li> <li>● <i>Interesting application of theory</i></li> <li>● <i>Good inputs and models</i></li> <li>● <i>Exercises</i></li> <li>● <i>High value to on-the-job performance</i></li> </ul>

Fig. 1: Delta Plus analysis



Facilitate the learning process

There are many group skills that the trainer will employ, including ensuring that the facilitator or trainer may control, but not dominate, the discussion. This entails inviting debate, taking the role of devil's advocate, using Socratic dialogue (see the box on the back page) to explore values that underpin thinking, inviting debate from the non-contributors, making it safe for those whose views are presented quietly, ensuring that the gate-keeping role enables all contributions, and controlling those who would willingly contribute for 80 to 90 per cent of the time. We should always encourage note taking – especially on vital issues that relate to transferability of learning from discussion to the workplace; keep parking lots of issues (displayed on flipcharts) that must be addressed later; and constantly visit the parking lot, using motivation and

positive strokes to reinforce behaviour and encourage experimentation and learning for the whole group.

Ecology tests and evaluation

At the end of the session, you may want to evaluate the actual learning experience with the aid of a questionnaire. You may want to test that the learning was 'ecological' and fitted the general values and expectations of the learners.

We use questionnaires and what we call a 'Delta Plus' analysis. Using a flipchart, set out as in Figure 1, you ask participants to focus principally on the quality of discussion, debate and dialogue, and get them to identify those things which were positive and stimulating – these would be assigned under the 'Plus' column. Then request 'Delta' – those things that need to be changed or amended for the next event. Undue discussion should not be devoted to this process – this is simply a surface response for those who are attending the event. We often use this in a morning session, and then test for improvement with a secondary, afternoon session. By 'parking' these issues in full view of the participants, we can actively strive to ensure that any other sessions take this learning on board.