

## DIALOGUE

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This is a short self-study aid for individuals who want to get better at exploring differences of opinion to arrive at better group decisions.

It is designed to provide individuals with a basic structure for approaching and preparing for conversations in which they wish to either influence someone else's thinking or to harness their experience and expertise to arrive at a better decision.

This guide should be read after having watched the short film on dialogue which can be found at <http://www.saigei.com/download-tools/>



Saigei Teamtrain teaches the operational and organisational development techniques practiced by Saigei teams to staff from health and social care organizations.

## RECOGNISING PATTERNS

In work we often have a pressing agenda and we often do not agree with each other. This dynamic creates tensions that can result in unhelpful behaviours.

These behaviours include:

1. **We discuss only what we agree upon**

The problem with this pattern is that (a) this changes nothing - if we agree on something it is going to happen anyway; (b) the tension on 'the other thing' is usually there anyway because we all know much more about what is going on than we discuss openly. It shuts down communication.

2. **We get into a conversation but end up arguing**

Arguing is not dialoguing. It is about point scoring. Arguing can take many forms:

- **personal criticism** ("I can't believe I am listening to a Republican"). This quickly repurposes the conversation away from getting to a decision that helps the business, into a contest of personal one-upmanship.
- **passive resistance / implied criticism** ("you reversed my position"). This is another version of the previous personal struggle, using a play for sympathy to deflect discussion of the issue, and it has much the same outcome.
- **assertion of belief without evidence.** This is one of the most common patterns of behaviour. This can often result in the more powerful personality precluding better quality thought. More often though it results in apparent agreement in the room, followed by renegeing moments later.
- **abdication/shut-down** ("we've tried that before and it doesn't work"). This is a form of avoiding the discussion altogether. It usually works by sapping everyone's will to live which makes it hard to press on. Ainsley stays in the room with Sam ("other than that Sam... Other than what you've been saying for the last hour and a half...").
- There are certainly other forms that you can think of.

## BACKGROUND TO THE FILM

The film is a short excerpt from The West Wing. Many of you will know this series but for those that do not:

Sam is Deputy White House Communications Director and Special Legal Council to the Democratic President of the United States. He has been asked to clarify the President's position with respect to a bill to help small businesses combat employee fraud.

Ainsley is a very bright lawyer who was recruited to the post of Associate White House Counsel despite her membership of the Republican Party. Her politics are very different from Sam's. She is smart but inexperienced.

Sam has a job and a deadline that Ainsley has not properly appreciated.

The excerpt shows dialogue in action as Ainsley and Sam get to grips with the fact that they do not agree.

## DEBRIEFING THE FILM EXCERPT

1.) Ainsley takes a position. She does not just go with the flow. This is the first part of her value. She brings her perspective to the table and highlights the fact that she and Sam see things differently. Reversing Sam's position is something of an ambush but at least she gets into play.

2.) Sam takes the discussion into his office. Two things here: (i) he creates the time to get into this he does not just dismiss her and say "I'll do it then"; (ii) he does not enter into a tense conversation in public, he preserves his own and Ainsley's dignity.

3.) Both sides argue with passion. Emotion is in the room but not at the expense of the discussion.

4.) Ainsley combats an entrenched position with facts not ideology or beliefs.

5.) Having presented her facts Ainsley asks Sam to draw his own inferences. ("Because of what?... That's right... What do you say to that?") Ainsley simultaneously avoids pronouncing her view and gets Sam to use his own critical faculties. She trusts his better judgment and allows the evidence to speak.

6.) Ainsley sticks with the dialogue (and so does Sam). Rather than simply repeating herself though, Ainsley keeps leading Sam back to the critical issue on which the argument turns ("one third of small business fail because of fraud"). In fact it is Sam who keeps repeating himself ("you reversed my position.") She is clear about where the key difference that must be resolved lies, and she avoids discussion of the inconsequential personal argument.

7.) She holds Sam to her standard (“...other than that Sam...”) rather than criticising him for not meeting it straight away. She has faith.

8.) Sam is persuadable (“Start from the beginning”). This is the best behaviour to master. There are at least two sides to every dialogue. Seek to persuade but also be open-minded and persuadable. If you accept the logic that the best answer will not always come from you, show this in your behaviour. Dialogue is not competition it’s collaboration.

9.) Getting “turned around” is a good thing. Sam takes the revised position to the Chief of Staff. Both men are entirely happy that the *best available* answer is being put forward. Being persuaded to reverse your position is good.

10.) They act on the decision without delay. Once the end point of the dialogue is reached Sam goes directly to the Chief of Staff. The effort was worth it because it resulted in action. “We play with live amo here”.

Of course, the genius of Aaron Sorkin’s writing is that although on the face of it Ainsley is the more skilled dialoguer and Sam appears to be exhibiting lesser behaviours, in fact it is he that has given the time to a young colleague to try to persuade him, to test his position thoroughly, and of course it is he that ultimately takes the new position forward. He is encouraging dialogue as a means of quality assuring his own work.

## DIALOGUE: PREPARATION FRAMEWORK

The characters of Aaron Sorkin are paragons. Few people are as adept at dialoguing without some preparation. This framework has proven useful for Saigei practitioners.

### THINK ABOUT THE ISSUE AND THE PEOPLE:

Be specific about your position and know your facts.

Anticipate the other person’s position and their beliefs / facts.

Try to be clear about what the decision will turn on.

Pick your timing for the dialogue sensitively.

### NOW PLAN THE CONVERSATION:

What is your purpose?

Know exactly what you are trying to achieve, why and what is at stake. As you think

about this, allow for the fact that you may be “turned around”. Have a purpose that allows for this or you will become entrenched.

**How will you get into the conversation you need to have?**

You will start wherever they are in their own heads and you will need to guide them to the topic you want to discuss in a way that keeps them open.

**How will you make your case?**

This is about having the facts at your disposal arranged so they are persuasive. It is also about anticipating the points they will raise or the behaviours they will exhibit. What will you do / say if they say this... or do that... In short how will you steward the conversation to a conclusion.

**How will you know when you have what you need?**

This is the end of the dialogue. The aim is to get to this point as efficiently as possible so be clear about how you will recognise this point.

**How will you exit the conversation?**

How many conversations drag on well past the point at which they are valuable? Plan your exit.

## CLOSING THOUGHT

Differences are good. Used well they lead to insight and new ways forward.

We all need to get better at disagreeing with each other. We should all encourage people to disagree with us – it makes us better at what we do.

Also, it is nicer to live in a world where people respect you enough to listen and take you seriously, even if you ultimately choose to stick to your guns.

Good luck.