



## Skillful Discussion

Discussion, with a root meaning of shaking apart or hitting, can be a fragmenting and unproductive experience.

The term, "*skillful* discussion," however, promotes a different experience – one that moves beyond debate and advocacy to a collaborative process to fit the pieces together and understand the dynamics of the people involved.

Skillful discussion is similar to dialogue, in that the team is attempting to build shared meaning. The key difference involves intention.

In The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Peter Senge writes:

In skillful discussion, the team intends to come to some sort of closure - either to make a decision, reach agreement, or identify priorities. Along the way the team may explore new issues and build some deeper meaning among the members. But their intent involves convergent thinking. In dialogue, the intention is exploration, discovery, and insight. Along that path, the group may in fact sometimes come to a meeting of the minds and reach some agreement - but that isn't their primary purpose in coming together. (386)

This difference makes skillful discussion practical for work teams, citizen groups and other people trying to gather diverse opinion *and* chart a course of action. Five basic behaviors are recommended for skillful discussion:

1. Pay attention to your intentions. What do you want from this conversation? Are you willing to be influenced?
2. Balance advocacy with inquiry. As with dialogue, there is a need to inquire deeper into opinions and comments to surface hidden assumptions and clarify what's being said.
3. Build shared meaning. What do you mean by certain terms? Is something that's "understood by all" really understood?
4. Use self-awareness as a reference. In moments when you are feeling confused, angry or frustrated, ask, "What am I thinking? What am I feeling? What do I want at this moment?" You may uncover insights that help the group as a whole.
5. Explore impasses. If you determine what you agree on, and then pinpoint the sources of disagreement you can learn more about the situation, clarify assumptions and move forward.