

CONTINUUM DIALOGUE

NAME:

TOPIC:

How to use Continuum Dialogue

Purpose

The Continuum Dialogue is a provocative yet non-threatening way to get to know the people one works with: their perspectives, beliefs, opinions on hard issues, and how they think about themselves and others. It is also useful to see where people stand on difficult issues that need decisions and to hear them out with respect and interest.

Time

From 30 minutes to an hour and a half.

Description

The Continuum Dialogue requires participants to choose a place to physically stand along a continuum arc between 2 polar statements forming the beginning and end of the continuum. The continuum is in an arc rather than a straight line so people can see one another as they speak and listen.

The facilitator establishes norms for the Continuum Dialogue, which are:

- Listen with respect and interest
- Speak with candor
- No one's comments will be challenged or argued
- Thoughtful reflection on others' responses is okay
- The facilitator is responsible for the process until she/he steps back
- When the facilitator steps back, everyone is responsible for the process

The statements that establish the ends of the continuum must allow for differences without there being a right and wrong place to stand. For example, a continuum that addresses the length of the school day goes from one end of "I think our school day is too long for elementary students" to the other end, "I think our school day is too short for elementary students." This example is a reasonable continuum as neither end is right or wrong.

When the topic and the 2 ends of the continuum have been established, the facilitator stands in the open side of the arc and asks people at different points in the continuum why they chose to stand where they did. People explain their reasoning with no interruptions or questions. There is no need to ask everyone unless it matters to hear from every person. Generally, there will be a series of continuums that make up the dialogue, and everyone can be called on at some point to respond. Sometimes, "Why did you choose to stand there?" isn't the right question to ask. For examples of different questions, see the practice rounds in the steps below.

After several Continuum Dialogues, or when a group of people is accustomed to them, the facilitator can step back and people in the continuum can ask others why they chose to stand where they did. The facilitator would step forward and intervene should there be any confrontational questions asked, disrespect shown, or any rebuttal to the person who explained why they chose their position. When the dialogue progresses to the point of the facilitator stepping back, secondary questions or comments may come forth after the initial "Why did you chose to stand there?" such as, "I expected that you would have stood further toward this end. It is interesting to me to see how much I assumed about you without asking you what you really thought." Or, "I had no idea you had gone through all of that. It explains so much!" Or, "I hadn't thought of it that way. In fact, I think I have to move around the continuum closer to you." The dialogue portion happens at this point, always centered around the question, "Why did you choose to stand there?" and with respectful listening. Sometimes there are no comments, only careful listening to people as they state their reasons for standing where they are, and that is fine.

In a Continuum Dialogue that will address a hard issue, it is generally best to have several continuums prior to the "big" question to establish norms of response and to learn about each other in helpful ways. An example might be a difference of opinion as to whether cancel culture (or "callout culture") is good for society. Possible questions for a series of continuums:

- What are the most productive ways to interact with someone who has said something offensive? "Tell them off," to "Listen and try to understand where that person is coming from."
- What are the effects of cancel culture? "Cancel culture silences different opinions," to "Cancel culture allow more opinions to be heard?"
- What are the effects of cancel culture? "Cancel culture can incite violence and threats even worse than the original offense being called out," to "Cancel culture can bring about social change and accountability where the justice system fails."



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- How does cancel culture affect me personally? “I am unsure what I can post online without backlash,” to “I have a good grasp of what I can post online without backlash.”
- Is cancel culture good for society? “I think cancel culture is bad for society,” to “I think cancel culture is good for society.”

A Continuum Dialogue should never be viewed as a vote, or even consensus. Instead, one could state the topic as, “Let’s see where we are on cancel culture,” then ask the questions and listen to everyone’s reasons for standing where they are. Thus it becomes a learning experience that can lead to a good decision. People calmly listen to other perspectives and grow in understanding their colleagues. Solutions even arise as the Continuum Dialogue unfolds.

Description

1. At the end of a continuum the facilitator can invite anyone who has changed their mind and wants to move to do so, and should in the process explain why they chose to move.
2. The facilitator can ask if anyone in the group has a continuum they would like to propose. That person sets up the continuum and facilitates the discussion with the support of the regular facilitator. This gives participants the opportunity to go deeper than the facilitator might. It requires trust to do this well, although sometimes people want to ask fairly simple questions that just didn’t occur to the facilitator. It is the facilitator’s responsibility to be sure the continuum is productive and not a hidden question to get at something or someone.
3. The facilitator can give anyone in the continuum permission to move someone to a place they think they should be telling the whole group why they moved that person there. The person moved can respond and either stay there or go back to where they were. This process gets to the differences between what we know of ourselves and what we project on others.

Process

1. The facilitator describes the process:
 - How statements representing the extremes of a topic mark the 2 ends of the continuum
 - Where the continuum will be by physically walking from one end to the other
 - Explains the norms
2. The facilitator gives the group one or more practice rounds. Below are possibilities:
 - *The importance of time:*
Always on time.....Time doesn’t mean anything
(A secondary question might be, “What does time feel like to you?)
 - *Your desk at school (or at home):*
Neat and orderly nearly all the time.....Utter chaos
(A better question here is, “What role does your desk play for you?)
 - *Time of day you do your best work:*
Dawn.....Deep in the dark of night
 - *Size of group you work best with:*
Alone.....The whole school, maybe the world
 - *Physical proximity boundaries — How close people can stand and talk with you?* (Practice this one and you’ll see exactly where boundaries are as people back up when you get to the boundary.)
2 inches.....2 feet
(Another question here is “What happens when people cross your boundary?”)



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Process

3. Facilitator begins the Continuum Dialogue by stating the first question/topic and physically walking the length of the continuum, stating the 2 preferences that mark either end of the continuum.
4. Participants go and stand in the place that best represents their preference/opinion/belief.
5. The facilitator asks a variety of people at a variety of points on the continuum why they chose to stand where they did.
6. After enough people have been asked, the facilitator either invites people to move if they have changed their opinion (stating why), opens the dialogue by stepping back and allowing participants to ask one another questions or comment on their new understandings, or moves on to the next question. As Continuum Dialogues have their own pace, the facilitator has to judge when to move on and when to extend the dialogue. Use as many continuums as are appropriate to the topic at hand or to the time allotted.
7. Several variations can happen here:
 - Participants can propose the questions/topics, set up the continuum, and facilitate.
 - The facilitator can invite participants to move other participants to spots they think are more representative of that person and tell why. The moved person can respond and/or choose to move back.
8. The group sits down in a circle to debrief, discussing what they learned and how that might impact the work they do together. Discuss the process — what worked, what didn't, and what might be improved for another time.

