

**TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR DIALOGUE
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The newly established \$20 million Wosk Center for Dialogue at Simon Fraser University in downtown Vancouver promises to set a new architectural and philosophical challenge to City Convention Centers everywhere. Opened on Sept. 20, 2000, the Center breaks with the traditional design of meeting halls. In place of the big, linear, and impersonal halls including a high platform and podium, the Center's main meeting hall is built in a series of circles and is equipped with the latest interactive conference technologies. Each seat is enabled with computer projection and polling buttons indicating yes, no, abstain, and two other open choices. The hall is clearly intended to be egalitarian and conducive to dialogue. It represents what the world desperately needs now for dialogue and conflict resolution.

At a Center conference that took place on Dialogue and Negotiation (Feb. 2–3), bringing practitioners and academicians together, the result was a rich, participatory, intimate and enlightening conversation. Admittedly, the participants were generally predisposed to dialogue. They consisted of lawyers, mediators, arbitrators, family therapists, civic leaders, and professors of communication, peace studies, and international affairs. As the conference took up three different case studies of a dialogic approach to conflict resolution, it became clear that the method is sorely needed for most human conflicts that plague the world today.

Iona Campagnolo's presentation of cooperative decision making in the Fraser Basin in British Columbia showed how a complex regional development project can, in fact, engage all stakeholders instead of just the government and developers. By leaving their egos at the door, the stakeholders in a contentious development project have discussed and resolved many of their conflicts amicably.

Great Fraser River in British Columbia supplies 80 percent of the water in the province. The Fraser Basin Council, consisting of the major stakeholders in five geographic regions, has focused on sustainable development, environment and equity. The case study of the residential schools, in which the children of the Canadian indigenous population had been subjected to prolonged sexual and other abuses, demonstrated how a potentially explosive and costly litigation could be circumvented by pacific settlement out of court.

Presented by Robert Joseph, a tribal chief, and Glenn Sigurdson, a lawyer-mediator, the case also has successfully grappled with reconciliation among the indigenous peoples and the churches. The abused people carried the scars of their childhood memories while the churches were faced with financial and moral responsibility for the misdeeds of their forefathers.

The power of dialogue was shown again in a case study of the Toda Institute's project to achieve security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf region. This is an explosive region of the world that has already known two wars and a creeping third. In the last two decades, more than 1 million people have been killed, another million maimed and billions of dollars of property destroyed, while the population of Iran and Iraq are suffering under U.S. sanctions. In collaboration with other peace and policy centers, the Toda Institute has established an International Commission for Security and Cooperation in West Asia consisting of senior diplomats and scholars from the littoral states of the Persian Gulf, the

five permanent member-states of the U.N. Security Council, and the United Nations. The Commission has so far met three times in Istanbul, Turkey (1999), Limassol, Cyprus (2000), and Doha, Qatar (2001) to explore the possibilities for arms control and dispute resolution among the littoral states.

Dialogue (among two) and multilogue (among many) can be best understood in contrast to other conflict and communication strategies. Violence, silence, adversarial, didactic, command, persuasive, bureaucratic and disciplinary communication strategies are employed in a diversity of conflict situations.

Violence is the language of raw force. It is often used when all else has failed or when one or several parties see a gambling chance in getting their way through violence. Silence is typically the communication strategy in situations of repression, in which the oppressed choose to keep their peace while undermining the oppressor in subtle ways. Adversarial strategies characterize litigation, trial courts, political campaigns, and sometimes labor-management disputes. Command communication is typical of the military and hierarchical structures. Advertisers, politicians, parents, friends, and sometimes enemies employ persuasive communication. Bureaucratic communication often takes place within the framework of rules and regulations of organizations. That is why bureaucratise often baffles the clients! Disciplinary communication is a lingo that has been developed by academic disciplines (economics, sociology, medicine, etc.) and working professions often to achieve economy and monopoly. It mystifies the uninitiated and keeps them out of the conversation of “the experts.”

What is the magic of dialogue? In contrast to all of the above, dialogue begins with the assumption that “truth” or “meaning” is not the monopoly of any single person or group. Truth (with a small “t”) must be therefore negotiated among contending parties. To do so, it is necessary for the parties to any dispute to enter an open-minded conversation on their conflicting perceptions of the situation at issue. Dialogue is thus a contemplative process in which parties to a dispute listen more than talk.

The listening process leads each side to question its own truth claims in the light of what is heard or examined. Dialogue is thus a kind of foreplay before serious negotiations start. Its aim is to build trust and mutual understanding before a common ground can be found for the compromises that are often needed to reach a settlement.

From an economic perspective, dialogue may be considered as social capital formation. Like all capital investment, it takes time to reap its fruits. In other words, it has a gestation period, after which, through cooperative learning and decision making, the stakeholders can collaborate in a project with higher productivity than otherwise possible.

In its peace-building projects, the Toda Institute has employed a tablet of Ten Commandments for Dialogue that has proved useful in complex situations of conflict. The tablet received considerable attention at the Vancouver conference. Here it is, dear reader, for your consideration. You may modify it in any way you wish. Unlike the other Ten Commandments, this one is subject to negotiation.

- 1) Honor others and listen to them deeply with all your heart and mind.
- 2) Focus on the agenda while seeking the common ground for consensus, but avoid groupthink by acknowledging and honoring the diversity of views.
- 3) Refrain from irrelevant or intemperate interventions.
- 4) Acknowledge others’ contributions to the discussion before relating your own remarks to theirs.

- 5) Remember that silence also speaks; speak only when you have a contribution to make by posing a relevant question, presenting a fact, making or clarifying a point, or advancing the discussion to greater specificity or consensus.
- 6) Identify the critical points of difference for further deliberation.
- 7) Never distort other views in order to advance your own, try to restate others' positions to their own satisfaction before presenting your own different views.
- 8) Formulate the agreements on any agenda item before moving on to the next.
- 9) Draw out the implications of an agreement for group policy and action.
- 10) Thank your colleagues for their contribution.

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