

# *From the Heart. . .*

## *. . . Life Skills for Today*

*By Sharon L. Benedict MS, ACC*



## **Setting the Record Straight—want to dialogue?**

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, April 2, 2010)

For most of us, this month's lifeskill, Recordkeeping, usually brings to mind the basics, such as your Net Worth Statement, Budget, Home/Possessions Inventory, Emergency Records, even possibly records for benevolence and financial giving. However, there is one more I always include in the talks, seminars, and staff development workshops I offer—***Life & Family Memories***.

Life & Family Memories lifeskill is undoubtedly the most important foundation for building a legacy and making your mark in life for yourself and those you care about. You can have all the latest technological tools for keeping your records in order. Yet, without building a memorable life of integrity, honesty, humility, respect and compassion, the mark you are making will definitely be far less than your potential on behalf of yourself, family, and community.

I am, therefore, going to begin with this foundation. I am also going to stretch its definition somewhat this time on behalf of our community and leaders. So, I encourage you to check out each article throughout the month. You may ask, "What's the stretch?"

Here it is. To contribute to the vision, wellbeing, and legacy of your community, as well as yourself and family, begin with the word *Dialogue*. All relationships are built and destroyed by the way we communicate with each other and how we treat one another. These are the ingredients that make up our life memories and will reflect how

we are remembered by others.

Most people do not know what genuine dialogue is. Most believe that it's sharing one's opinion; and often times trying to cajole the other person to your side or way of thinking and believing. And if persuasion doesn't work, then extra flattery, subtle bribes or gifts. Then if that doesn't work, then getting control of the territory by threats or slander will do the job.

Continual bitter encounters mount up to the point that any constructive dialogue and transformative collaboration is seemingly lost forever. The deep-seated bias is fueled by the hatred of the opponent to the point the person can't even entertain the possibility that the so-called "opponent" has anything worthy to say. Can anyone readily admit to each other that "I have seen the enemy, and it is I?" And what we have been doing and seeing with our city officials as of late is definitely not dialogue. You have been witnessing but hopefully not contributing to the consequences of the lack of genuine dialogue.

This scenario often happens with a husband and wife as well as our community leaders. And we are often doomed to repeat the scenario again and again, unless something happens that transforms our way of thinking, believing, behaving with each other. I am ever hopeful that this is possible. How can our city officials reach a collaborative decision without taking combative sides, becoming angry, even hating each other? From the atmosphere of the past couple years and the latest news reports and editorials, the community and political arena of gladiators are heating up! I bet many of you, including myself, are getting calls saying, "Choose your side!" And for many, we end up guilty just by association and become the enemy of the other side!

The media is often used as a forum for venting, attacking, slandering, and just

being plain mean. We may vent in private or shout it to the rooftops. In addition, we humans so often make sweeping judgments based on fleeting emotions and the smallest of evidence; and hopefully regret later our hasty remarks. Whether what we say, hear, or read is really the truth as quoted or offers us the big picture, it is often hard to tell. In addition, setting the record straight is not always a straight path on what is remembered and set right.

Yes, I totally agree that our newspapers, radio, TV, and the Internet are public forums for freedom of speech. I thank God for the opportunity to make our voices heard. My byline wouldn't exist without that freedom. For that I am very grateful to those that give me the opportunity.

With that opportunity given me, I would like to now offer to our city leaders in the coming articles what I hope will invite us all to transform the growing division within our community into a unified people on behalf of one of the most wonderful places to live and raise our families. Let's learn and embrace what real dialogue invites us to create together—something awesome we could never do alone.

What do you think "Dialogue" really is? Here are some tip-off words—open, safe, respectful, into the unknown together. Dialogue is a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together. It has no sides. It is not something you do to another person. It is something you do with people. As one dialogue expert states, "It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before."

In the next article, I will offer not just my opinion but also those notable experts who bring to the table significant wisdom for achieving genuine dialogue for our community's future wellbeing. Here's another hint—order and read these two books,

*Dialogue and the art of thinking together* and *Crucial Conversation, Tools for talking when the stakes are high*. Yes, each of us has choices to make not just in our pending elections but also for the future wellbeing of our community. Let's make those choices in an atmosphere of respect and genuine dialogue that will transform our relationships and community we dearly love. Are you ready to discover a better way and venture out together? Stay tuned! Want to dialogue together? The choice is yours dear reader.

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# *From the Heart. . .*

## *. . . Life Skills for Today*

*By Sharon L. Benedict MS, ACC*



## **Want to Dialogue even when it gets tough?**

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, April 9, 2010)

Are you ready to discover and embrace what genuine dialogue really is? In the last article, *Setting the Record Straight-Want to dialogue?*, I gave you some hints—such as open, safe, respectful, into the unknown together.

Whether you are a Mom and Dad with a house full of kids or a community leader affecting the direction and future wellbeing of our entire community, I hope these hints have sparked your curiosity and desire to read each article throughout this month. If so, let's venture out together into that unknown and create strategic opportunities for genuine dialogue that will transform your relationships and make all the difference in our community's future wellbeing.

Often times we think we are having a very constructive conversation with someone, when all we are really doing is hearing our own opinion over and over again. And the only ones that usually show up at a meeting are just there to complain without wanting to listen to the other side, hearing or even offering a possible resolution. I bet if you are a community leader, you personally know on repeated occasions what the atmosphere feels like as you attempt to continue doing the community's business. And it's even more disconcerting when it comes from one of your colleagues next to you—bordering on being an insult to just plain slander. We can all agree—that is not genuine dialogue!

If you have ever heard someone actually offer a compliment, you are one of the lucky ones. You are extra lucky if they also want to volunteer helping bring a unified vision to our community (and I don't mean trying to make everyone agree with your side of the issue and damn the torpedoes with the other side!). Unfortunately, some would rather "do it" to others than "do with" each other.

And when the atmosphere then heats up and locks up, dialogue cannot happen unless a mediator is brought in to facilitate respectful, constructive, and creative process of discovery, planning, and follow-through. Yet, even with a mediator, participants may refuse to participate according to the rules of genuine dialogue. That's when a mediator says, "Ok, I think it's time to take a quiet break; and no venting at the water cooler!" The mediator then may have a private, respectful conversation with that person to help him or her constructively re-engage in dialogue.

Keep in mind, genuine dialogue is actually a reflection of respect and love for another human being, no matter the conflict or emotionally charged disagreement. William Isaacs, author of the classic book, *Dialogue, and the art of thinking together*, believes with dialogue you are not just interacting but creating together something you could never do alone. Isaacs defines dialogue as a ". . . conversation with a center, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarization and into a great common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people. Dialogue fulfills deeper, more widespread needs than simply 'getting to yes.'"

Then consider Kerry Patterson's view on communication in his book, *Crucial Conversations, Tools for Talking When the Stakes are High*. A crucial conversation is a

discussion between two or more people where (1) the stakes are high, (2) opinions vary, and (3) emotions run high. Patterson’s crucial conversations are about tough issues. They may not only be challenging, frustrating, annoying, even frightening, but “. . . the results could have a huge impact on the quality of your life [and community],” for better or worse. While emotions run high in these types of conversations, Patterson believes “If you know how to handle (even master) crucial conversations, you can step up to and effectively hold tough conversations about virtually any topic.”

For both Isaacs and Patterson, mastering dialogue takes you through the “*architecture of the invisible*.” And put the wisdom of these two phenomenal experts together, and you have a winning strategy for transforming the way we talk with and how we treat each other—forever transforming our lives and community. There is no way that I can cover every valuable detail of what each of these experts offer; but I will do my best, in the articles this month, to give you a glimpse into the awesome world of transformative dialogue.

Both Isaacs and Patterson direct us to first examine our own motives and heart intent on what we believe. We are also often hindered by our inability to actively, and authentically, listen. We have any number of listening filters that hinder genuine dialogue (which will be covered in the next article). We are many times entrenched in our own views and preconceptions not only at work but also our personal lives. We try to avoid, explain, justify, rather than inquiring with an open mind—from the “inside-out.”

Starting from the “inside-out” applies whether you are asking your friend to be more supportive, or want to present your ideas on expanding the vision for your community. Do you think you are right and always want to “fix them” or “bring them over to your side?”

Before we begin in the next article to learn more about the skills and process for mastering crucial conversations and creating dialogue, consider these *what, why, when, with whom,* and *how* questions:

1. What do you really want for yourself and others with communication and relating?
2. In what way, do you believe it is important to communicate?
3. When the talking gets tough, what do you routinely do? With whom are you most comfortable? Least comfortable? Explain.
4. How do you get from the place of “my way or your way” to “our way?”

As you respond to each question, again (as I always do) write them down and share them with your spouse or trusted friend for feedback. Then I again encourage you to read Isaacs’ and Patterson’s respective books. You will never regret it, believe me! See you at the dialogue table next article.

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# *From the Heart...*

## *... Life Skills for Today*

*By Sharon L. Benedict MS, ACC*



## **Want to Dialogue—are you listening?**

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, April 16, 2010)

In the previous article, I asked you to respond to four questions related to the *what, why, when, with whom, and how* of communication and dialogue. The fourth question asks, “How do you get from the place of “my way or your way” to “our way?”

Each of us may have very strong opinions on what we believe and where we want to take a stand on many issues. Yet, many of us tend to communicate those opinions, particularly in the heat of the moment, with emphatic statements and sharp barbs not just about the issue but also directed toward another person or group. This is naturally a very human tendency, particularly when emotions run high.

In addition, the way we talk not only reflects but also directly impacts the way we think. We often times get trapped in an “artificial” intensity that prevents us from experiencing real personal intensity that helps us face our fears, pain, anger, guilt, uncertainty, and doubt as well as the beauty deep within us. This artificial intensity tends to routinely embolden emotions via attacking others. We think we are protecting ourselves when it is really just the opposite. Somehow, each of us needs to embrace that, “I Am NOT My Point of View.”

We may start with Polite Conversation/small talk; move on to Deliberation (weighing out, sizing up position); then on to Defend (ward off, protect from attack). This is the junction where there are two paths to choose from. One is Controlled Discussion

(passionate advocacy, competing, verbal brawling). The second option is Skilled Conversation (analytic, hard data to get answers). The controlled discussion leads to Debate (resolve by beating down). Skilled conversation leads to Dialectic results (tension, synthesis of opposites, art of investigating truths through discussion). Which one would you rather journey toward to experience genuine dialogue?

How can we really experience genuine dialogue as we move through and beyond those emotions? Remember William Isaacs' definition of dialogue (author of the classic book, *Dialogue, and the art of thinking together*)? Worthy of repeating, Isaacs believes with dialogue you are not just interacting but creating together something you could never do alone. He defines dialogue as a “. . . conversation with a center, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarization and into a great common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people. Dialogue fulfills deeper, more widespread needs than simply ‘getting to yes.’”

Remember Kerry Patterson's (author of *Crucial Conversations, Tools for Talking When the Stakes are High*) views on communication? When the stakes are high about tough issues, opinions vary, and emotions run high, Patterson emphatically believes “If you know how to handle (even master) crucial conversations, you can step up to and effectively hold tough conversations about virtually any topic.”

To even begin to experience genuine dialogue, let alone master crucial conversations, Isaacs emphasizes three levels of action required:

- 1) **create coherent actions/building capacity for new behaviors** (learn four new behaviors to overcome the contradictions between what you say

and what you do).

- 2) **create fluid structures of interaction** (liberating “stuck” structures of interaction where you do not see the forces that are operating below the surface of your conversations); and
- 3) **provide wholesome space for dialogue** (become more aware of the “architecture of the invisible”—the atmosphere/environment that influences how we think and act).

With these three levels of action, you must clearly see your heart’s intent or motives for what you believe and how you communicate it. You must begin there in order to master crucial conversations. You must also be willing to “**jump into the void**” of the unknown and allow space for the energy, possibilities, and safety to emerge. Whatever the container (two individuals or a board room full), the pressure will be there, but those participating need to feel safe in the “fire of creation.”

So, how do you begin to move in these three essential actions? First, let’s keep in mind that we all have listening filters that create barriers to relationship connections and can hinder all three actions for creating dialogue. Here are examples of typical listening filters. Which ones are familiar to you or that person next to you? I encourage you to focus on you first.

- **Rehearsing:** Instead of truly listening, you are thinking about what you will say next.
- **Denying Content or Feelings:** Here you discount another's feelings by telling them that what they feel is wrong.
- **Derailing:** Derailing means avoiding a topic by abruptly changing the subject in order to avoid being uncomfortable.

- **Evaluating/Judging:** Judging is the mental-emotional act of looking down at someone.
- **Sparring:** Sparring means that you enjoy debate and argument. You value the process of arguing, defending your point of view, and pushing it on to others
- **Nitpicking:** Nitpicking means choosing some small aspect of the other person's presentation and finding fault with it so as to obscure the overall message.
- **Being Right:** It is an effective defense against looking at yourself -- your beliefs, politics, behaviors, and feelings.
- **Giving advice:** Instead of listening, you like to "help" by giving advice. Sometimes this is done in an important and superior manner leaving the other person feeling not listened to, even put down.

Now let's see what a typical conversation might look like in terms of actions within the group experiencing genuine dialogue.

Isaacs believes the key building blocks and continuum for transformational dialogue and lasting behavioral change come from “active, intentional, quiet” **listening**, **respecting** others, **suspending** judgments thereby creating a fluid environment for dialogue, and **voicing** what is true for you. These building blocks are key to four kinds of actions (offered by David Kantor's work on family systems therapy) that are allowed to be present and freely flow—in order to have healthy conversations occur:

1. Someone makes a **move** (initiates an action; focused on truthfulness and **voicing**)
2. Someone **follows** the first (often in agreement; focused on **listening**)
3. Someone then **opposes** (challenging what is said; focused on **respect**)
4. Someone is then the **bystander** (expands possibilities, adds valuable dimension;

focused on ***suspending***)

All four are free to occupy any of the four positions at any time. For Isaacs, dialogue not only resolves problems but actually dissolves them, creating “. . . a totally new basis from which to think and act.”

Dialogue is a life-long learning experience that introduces you to the “architecture of the invisible” in many life arenas, personally and professionally. And by all means enjoy the ride! The next article will focus in more detail on these four individual actions—moving, following, opposing, and bystanding. Which action of the four do you routinely express at home, at a business meeting? See you at the next dialogue meeting table.

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# *From the Heart. . .*

## *. . . Life Skills for Today*

*By Sharon L. Benedict MS, ACC*



## **Want to Dialogue—movers, followers, opposers, bystanders**

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, April 23, 2010)

Does this statement reflect how you feel when in the midst of a challenging dialogue with someone? “I can make space for other positions without jeopardizing my own inner stability.” If so, you are among the few who understand what it means to “go with the flow” in dialogue.

William Isaacs, author of *Dialogue, and the art of thinking together*, spends considerable time in his insightful book offering four typical actions or stances people take (gleaned from David Kantor’s work within the field of family systems therapy). These four individual actions—***moving, following, opposing, and bystanding***—all reflect not only an individual’s need but also the “unspoken needs of the group and the situation.”

When someone makes a move, they are initiating an action. A person in the stance of following, may be listening to the initial proposal and might agree and want to support what is being said. A third person, watching these two, might step up to oppose, thinking that there just isn’t something right with the picture. The fourth person, who observes the entire situation (and has the advantage of neutrality at this point), may describe from his perspective what he has seen and heard. This person may also propose a way of thinking and seeing that expands everyone’s vision. This fourth

person is called the bystander.

Kantor asserts that a “. . . healthy conversation consists of all four of these actions being in balance. And all the people in the conversation find themselves free to occupy any of the four positions at any time.”

Isaac emphasizes that “One critical step in learning dialogue is to become conscious of the tone we are using as we take the actions we do. This ‘notice’ [by others] triggers reactions and may prevent us from allowing a deeper level of inquiry to open up.” Typically, what then happens is that some of the four positions are silenced or “disabled.” Watching what is happening, one or more in the group just doesn’t say or do anything. As frustrations mount, they retreat into politeness and maybe even denial. This denial builds cynicism, not confidence or hope that there is a way through the difficulties.

Isaacs warns that “. . .any system that silences bystanders and opposers is by definition in trouble.” A bystander does nothing and a disabled opposer cannot offer correction to or challenge what is happening. Unfortunately, this personally concerns me about what is happening with Boerne’s city government officials and affiliated officers and staff. I’m also hearing similar things from a few other cities. I would imagine two major contributions to dialogue being “disabled” is our nation’s economic woes and political tone heating up all the way to the local level. No matter what side or stance you may be taking at this time, it’s a very uncomfortable place to be in not only for city officials but also for the community at-large affected by it.

Unfortunately, the individuals who position themselves in one or more of these action roles are also often misunderstood. Their intentions are clouded by how the action is received and filtered by the other individual. Here’s a chart offered by Isaacs

that gives you a glimpse into the dynamics of being unintentionally misunderstood:

<b>How Four-player Actions are Misunderstood</b>			
<b>MOVER INTENDS</b>	Direction Discipline Commitment Perfection Clarity	<b>But sometimes comes across as</b>	Omnipotent Impatient Indecisive Scattered Dictatorial
<b>FOLLOWER INTENDS</b>	Completion Compassion Loyalty Service Continuity	<b>But sometimes comes across as</b>	Placating Indecisive Pliant Wishy-washy Over-accommodating
<b>OPPOSER INTENDS</b>	Correction Courage Protection Integrity Survival	<b>But sometimes comes across as</b>	Critical Competitive Blaming Attacking Contrary
<b>BYSTANDER INTENDS</b>	Perspective Patience Preservation Moderation Self-Reflection	<b>But sometimes comes across as</b>	Disengaged Judgmental Deserting Withdrawn Silent

Which action of the four do you routinely express at home, at a business meeting? How do you come across to others who hear you? Isaacs sees “the challenge in dialogue is to go beyond the appearance and the baggage that might be attached to a particular action, and look for the underlying intention. What was the person trying to do? What was I trying to do?” Here’s the flip side. “How do I come across? Why was my intention, which was clear to me, so badly misheard by others?” Isaacs emphasizes that the art of thinking together is to explore the underlying motives and intentions of the people involved.

The central spirit behind dialogue is *forgiveness*. You are then looking to the motives that a person intends regardless of how their actions appear. You don’t disregard action. Yet, you will come to a place of understanding action far better with



this approach. In the next and final article on dialogue, you will see what a typical conversation might look like in terms of actions within the group experiencing genuine dialogue. See you at the next dialogue meeting table.

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# *From the Heart...*

## *... Life Skills for Today*

*By Sharon L. Benedict MS, ACC*



### **Want to Dialogue?—some extra tips**

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, April 30, 2010)

How did you see yourself in the previous article? Were you usually a mover, opposer, follower, or bystander? I bet depending on the topic and situation, you could possibly represent any one or two of these action positions. Were your intentions being clouded by how the action was received and filtered by the other individual or group? Where did you find yourself misunderstood the most?

Did you know that your personality style also has a lot to do with how you behave and dialogue with your spouse, neighbor, group, co-workers? As a DISC personality style facilitator, there are any blend of four basic personality behavioral styles—**Dominant, Influential, Steady/Stable, and Compliant**. For example, a person with a primary personality style of Dominant may behave as a mover more than other actions, possibly opposer at times when the topic doesn't fit their view. A person with, for the most part, a Compliant personality style may be an opposer that says, "Where are your facts? I don't think this is possible; and it's never been done before."

A bystander may have a primary Steady/Stable personality style that says, "I understand your need for more facts. Yet, Joe's vision of how to accomplish this project is interesting. Possibly, since you are such a great detail person, you can do some research to find the facts you need and offer it to the group to consider related to Joe's

vision or idea.” As you can see, personality behavioral styles directly impact the way we communicate and contribute to a dialogue.

Here are a few other factors among many William Isaacs offers in his reference, *Dialogue, and the art of thinking together*. These three—**Forgiveness, Spirit of curiosity/inquiry without agenda**, and **Silence** are essential for experiencing a healthy conversation and dynamic, safe dialogue. Forgiveness reflects the core of dialogue as offered by Isaacs. Dialogue “. . .is about a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together. It is not something you do to another person. It is something you do with people. Indeed, a large part of learning this has to do with learning to shift your attitudes about relationships with others, so that we gradually give up the effort to make them understand us, and come to a greater understanding of ourselves and each other.” This tenet is at the heart of forgiveness we extend to others and ourselves.

A Spirit of curiosity/inquiry without agenda is just that—your desire for open inquiry without any cloaked agenda. This form of curiosity expands the imagination of the individual and the group. Free-flowing dialogue can emerge. Participants feel safer, more accepted, respected, and are willing to take conversational risks.

Silence for those who may not experience it as a natural part of their daily lives feel edgy and uncomfortable with the virtue of silence. Yet, getting to know this invaluable friend is essential to one’s health and wellbeing, let alone dialogue. Isaacs sees silence having four different qualities or conversational spaces. First, silence is socially awkward. Second, silence emits tension fueled by disagreement or judgment and can even be dangerous. Third, silence is pensive, thoughtful—reflecting, looking inward, listening for new possibilities.

Fourth, silence is whole and at times sacred. “The wisdom of the wider group takes precedence over the chatter of the individual.” When silence is experienced with the fourth space, genuine transformative dialogue is present in that moment.

Now let’s see what a typical conversation might look like in terms of actions within the group experiencing genuine dialogue. Isaacs believes the key building blocks and continuum for transformational dialogue and lasting behavioral change come from “active, intentional, quiet” **listening**, **respecting** others, **suspending** judgments thereby creating a fluid environment for dialogue, and **voicing** what is true for you. Let’s see how they fit with David Kantor’s work on family systems therapy (discussed in a previous article). Keep in mind, healthy conversations occur when four kinds of actions are allowed to be present and freely flow.

1.	Someone makes a <b>move</b>	(initiates an action; focused on truthfulness and <b>voicing</b> )
2.	Someone <b>follows</b> the first	(often in agreement; focused on <b>listening</b> )
3.	Someone then <b>opposes</b>	(challenging what is said; focused on <b>respect</b> )
4.	Someone is then the <b>bystander</b>	(expands possibilities, adds valuable dimension; focused on <b>suspending</b> )

All four are free to occupy any of the four positions at any time in balance. For Isaacs, dialogue not only resolves problems but actually dissolves them, creating “. . . a totally new basis from which to think and act.”

When at home and work, practice this type of transformational dialogue with willing partners. Give yourself time to learn how to authentically listen, respect others’ views, suspend judgment, and find your voice. Be focused more on the relational process than on the outcome. Be sure to read Isaac’s book. Also, check out Kerry

Patterson's books, *Crucial Conversations* and *Crucial Confrontations*. All three books offer a wealth of insight for experiencing genuine dialogue in your life and profession.

This finishes out our month's important topic on guess what? I truly hope you have enjoyed the dialogue and the journey. I would very much enjoy hearing from you. I leave you with these final words from Isaacs. "As this free flow [of meaning] emerges, it becomes quite apparent that no one person owns this flow and that no one can legislate it."

May you begin to take this incredible journey of discovery and transformation with your family and your community leaders. Remember, ***Dialogue*** is a life-long learning experience for all that introduces you to the "architecture of the invisible" in many life arenas, personally and professionally. By all means enjoy the ride!

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