



Dialogue and debate:

Two complementary approaches

The Stakes

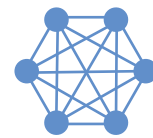
Business organizations are traditionally dominated by the desire to maximize efficiency, and for lack of time, human interactions are generally focused on sharing just the information and arguments required to take initiatives and make decisions to attain specific objectives. However, this all-business attitude tends to brush aside other factors critical to performance, such as a shared understanding of situations, the sense of belonging or creative skills. Companies are therefore advised to create opportunities for employees to explore their ideas freely through open dialogue—in addition to more formal discussion.

Two complementary modes of interaction

Dialogue is a means to compare and combine points of view to refine understanding of a problem and hence improve the quality of decisions, while more formal debate is designed to make a clear-cut decision among two or more options.

**Debate**

Debate is an efficient process in which **different points of view are identified and analyzed** in order to identify the best solution.

**Dialogue**

The object of dialogue is to **share and deepen the understanding of a situation** by combining viewpoints, without deciding which is best.

WHAT ARE THE KEY PRINCIPLES?

Debate involves:

- Raising different points of view;
- Weighing the pros and cons of different arguments;
- Deciding among the available options.

Dialogue involves:

- Openly sharing perceptions and questions about the situation;
- Sharing ideas to understand various viewpoints to develop a better understanding of the situation.

WHEN TO USE THEM?

Debate is most efficient when:

- Making a rapid decision is important;
- The various facets of a problem are well identified and easy to explain;
- The objective is to decide among defined options, rather than imagining a completely new solution;
- Once a decision has been made, people will clearly know how to play their role.

Dialogue should be used when:

- The complexity of the problem or the stakes of the decision merit making efforts to obtain a thorough understanding of the situation;
- A creative solution is desired;
- Reaching a consensus or a shared understanding of the situation is important to ensure the quality of execution.

WHAT POINTS TO WATCH?

- Beware of the reflex to tackle discussions in debate mode; the temptation to use this approach is great due to time pressure, but it is not always the most productive.
- Establish clear game rules to ensure civil debate and truly constructive discussion.

- Introduce a minimum dose of dialogue in team interactions to foster cohesion.
- Be careful not to use dialogue as the default mode whenever a problem arises, or people may be turned off by “meeting-itis.”