MISTRA
ENVIRONMENTAL
COMMUNICATION

The Dialogue Guide

A tool for assessing the conditions for dialogue in post-truth situations

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Background and Purpose

The transition to sustainability is a disputed issue: there are different views on how it should be carried out and what kind of society it should lead to. Dialogue between opponents is an important prerequisite for the transition to be perceived as legitimate by both its advocates and its critics.

In a dialogue, participants articulate their perspectives, listen to one another, and are open to being convinced by sound arguments. Dialogue can lead to consensus or to understanding and respect for different viewpoints. In today's transition efforts, dialogues are made more difficult by a lack of trust in opponents, polarization, and increased levels of conflict.

The Dialogue Guide is intended to be used by those who participate in dialogues related to sustainability transition. Its purpose is to support your skills development and to strengthen your ability to understand the opportunities and limitations of dialogue.

To shed light on the difficult-to-interpret situations that arise in times of conflict, we use the concept of "post-truth." This concept refers to situations in which actors have differing claims to the truth and a lack of trust in one another. In such situations, problems with society's information and communication structures lead actors to behave in ways that hinder dialogue.

Post-truth situations can, for example, be characterized by:

- facts being used selectively to support preconceived notions;
- emotions being expressed in destructive ways;
- processes of communication and decision-making being perceived as illegitimate;
- actors spreading misleading information;
- communication between opponents being destructive or non-existent.

You can either use the Dialogue Guide to reflect on situations you have personally experienced, or you can use the tool to reflect on fictional stories based on interviews with dialogue facilitators (only available in Swedish). You can access these stories on this website, where you can also download the Dialogue Guide's worksheet.

Step 1: Describe

In this initial step, you analyze the situation. First, you discuss at a general level what you know, then you move on to analyzing three key dimensions in post-truth situations: facts, emotions, and power.

We encourage you to follow the path suggested by the guide for the analysis, but it is also valuable to move back and forth along the path to deepen your understanding. Remember to document your discussions on the dialogue guide's worksheet.

A. Overall Analysis

1. Who are the actors?
2. Which dimension would you like to begin analyzing?

B. Analysis of key dimensions

Facts

• How does the conflict over facts manifest itself?
• Why do the actors disagree on the facts?

Emotions

• How do emotions play a role?
• Why do emotions play the role they do?

Power

• How does power play a role?
• In what ways are power relations important?

Step 2: Assessment of current situation

After analysing one or more of the dimensions (facts, emotions, and power), it is now time to summarize your discussion. Reflect on how the different dimensions are interconnected and influence one another.

Step 3: Requirements for dialogue

Based on your understanding of the current situation, you will now move on to assessing the conditions for dialogue. Post-truth situations have a number of different characteristics that can influence the conditions for dialogue. These characteristics are described on the worksheet. Identify the characteristics that are present in the situation you have analysed. Then discuss how the marked characteristics manifest themselves.

Afterward, you will move on to determining whether your post-truth situation is diabolical or conducive to dialogue.

• “Diabolical” situations involve a risk that, under current conditions, dialogue may do more harm than good.

• “Dialogical” situations mean that the conditions for dialogue are relatively good.

You can write down your observations and details on the worksheet.

Is the situation diabolical or dialogical?



Diabolical

You have concluded that the situation is diabolical. This means that the situation is currently not suited for dialogue. Now you can learn more about the situation and identify what you can do to try to change it so that dialogue becomes possible.

• What makes the situation so difficult?
• What would need to change for the situation to become suitable for dialogue?
• What steps need to be taken to make the situation suitable for dialogue?



Dialogical

You have concluded that the situation is suitable for dialogue. You can now begin to design a dialogue process using the questions below.

• What is the purpose of the dialogue?
• Who should participate in the dialogue?
• How will the dialogue be facilitated?
• Where should the dialogue take place?
• What dialogue methods should be used?