

The Extraordinary Power of Dialogue⁺ – of Hearing and Being Heard

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It seems somewhat ironic that an American (Coleman) is co-authoring an opinion on the power of dialogue in Colombia for Colombian Independence Day, from a nation (the USA) where dialogue is sorely missing from political discourse. In Colombia, the term “dialogue” (as in *Dialogos de Paz*) has a particularly negative connotation to the 50% of the country that opposed the negotiation of the Peace Treaty with the FARC, viewing it as a “soft” and too “lengthy” approach to solving conflict.

So, let's define our terms. Many of us have learned to equate dialogue with debate, when in fact they are polar opposites. Debate, like competitive bargaining, is essentially a strategic game of argumentation where the primary aim is to prevail over your opponent. As such, debaters typically listen carefully to their opponents' arguments in order to identify flaws in their logic and then weaponize them to score points and win the game. This entails a narrow, vigilant cognitive process of error-identification. Debate, of course, can serve a useful purpose in political discourse, but it is often seen as *the only* form of political communication.

Dialogue, by contrast, is a more open process of exploration, discovery and learning. When dialogue is done well, it often leads to new insights into the issues under discussion - especially their layers of complexity and the dilemmas inherent to proposed remedies - as well as to deeper insights into the speakers themselves; their personal histories and experiences. Such processes are usually done intentionally with trained facilitators who introduce and enforce conversation guidelines regarding respectful listening and turn-taking.

In fact, [research](#) has shown that well-facilitated dialogues introduce two powerful forces into political communications - those of hearing the other side and being heard. In a remarkable set of studies on dialogue between members of high versus low-power groups (Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East and US citizens and illegal immigrants in America), these two forces were found to have different effects for members of distinct groups. Positive changes in attitudes towards the outgroup were greater for Mexican immigrants and Palestinians (relatively lower power) after "perspective-giving" or *being heard by the other* during a dialogue, and for White Americans and Israelis (higher power) after "perspective-taking" or *hearing about the other's personal experiences*. There seems to be something particularly humanizing that happens when we hear and are heard by others with whom we differ on important issues.

In an era of [severe political polarization](#), outgroup [misperception](#), and [vilification](#) of one's opponent – as both our societies are currently trapped in – dialogue is a *necessary but insufficient* first step. [Studies](#) find that dialogue is often essential – and certainly beneficial – in reducing distrust and establishing a modicum of rapport between members of hostile groups *before* moving on to debating or negotiating issues and problem-solving. In other words,

hearing and being heard by the other side helps to establish a sturdy foundation for effective negotiation and joint-action. This combination of dialogue + debate + joint action is what we call *Dialogue+*

Unfortunately, dialogue is mostly absent in political discourse in our societies, and rarely taught in schools or modeled by our leaders. Today, most political communication in the media, social media, and in our local communities takes the form of attacks and counter attacks.

What can the power of dialogue look like in Colombia today? Take [Com Promiso Valle](#) for example. This initiative, created in Cali in 2021 in response to social unrest in the streets, began when a group of Colombian business leaders realized that responding to the protestors with traditional punitive measures would have little lasting positive effect. After analyzing social media data from the “hot spots” of unrest in Cali, they learned that these platforms were being weaponized by the two sides in the conflict driving further polarization. However, they also discovered a third resonant cluster in the data calling for better opportunities by the protestors themselves. So, the business group began reaching out to local businesses, educators and community organizations to identify existing resources to offer the protestors, and once identified, “hacked” the social media spaces in the area to share specifics about the offerings.

In effect, the scraping of social media data from locals was an innovative way of “hearing” the core needs of the protestors. But ultimately, the dialogue was successful because the protestors were listened to *and* responded to – as those in power heard and responded by offering genuine opportunities. This process transformed the previously distrustful relationships between the protestors, businesses and the local government in ways that led to the de-escalation of the unrest, a resumption of stability for business, and a rebuilding of social trust.

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