

*What makes stakeholder dialogue different? What are the ideas that underpin it? The principles and characteristics can be distilled into ten major points, for now anyway.*

by **Andrew Acland**

# DIALOGUE TOP 10

**AN ENTHUSIASTIC CORPORATE CLIENT** recently sent me a document explaining 'Stakeholder Dialogue' to their staff and customers. Did I think it said all the right things? I did, but I also thought there were things missing. So what were they then?

We-ell.... and I realised that I had never tried to capture exactly the characteristics of 'Stakeholder Dialogue' or the principles which underlie the process and differentiate it from other forms of conference or consultation.

So this is an attempt to boil down the essentials into ten points. Of these, the first is the thread that ties them all together: because none of us is interested in creating yet more 'talking shops'.

## 12345678910

### **THE PURPOSE OF DIALOGUE IS TO ENABLE DISCUSSION THAT LEADS TO CHANGE**

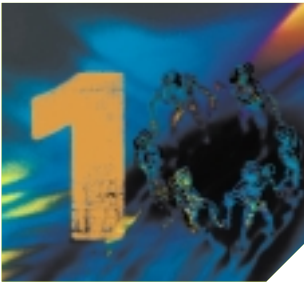
Let's not muck about: there are so many meetings and so much talking already, dialogue has to be productive. It may be a meeting to inform rather than make decisions. Fine. But I advise sponsors

and stakeholders not to enter a dialogue process unless they are prepared to discuss and ultimately implement solutions that achieve change. Otherwise it's all hot air and politics.

Many dialogue processes are about sustainable development in some form because, my argument goes, achieving sustainable development has to mean changes throughout society, finding solutions to specific problems, and equitable sharing of the costs of social, economic and environmental change.

Dialogue is an essential precursor to sustainable development because it enables people to recognise and take responsibility; it acknowledges and values different needs and interests and therefore the need for trade-offs; it uncovers and encourages synergy, new ideas, and collaborative partnerships; and it enables joint ownership of difficult decisions.

*Dialogue is an essential precursor to sustainable development because it enables people to recognise and take responsibility*



## 12345678910 DIALOGUE TRIES TO BE AN INCLUSIVE PROCESS

The fear of not being ‘inclusive’ makes everyone jumpy and I find people very anxious to be clear about who *are* their stakeholders.

It’s not always an easy question to answer. I tend to divide stakeholders into *actors* (key decision-makers who have to be involved); *oilers* (people who aren’t essential but make life easier if they are there); and *blockers* (people who can be a menace and obstruct decisions if they are not).

But wherever there is doubt the default decision is towards inclusivity, and we make particular efforts to include those whose interests and concerns might otherwise be marginalized or excluded. This has practical implications: if you need to involve mothers and children it is not much good arranging meetings for when the children should be tucked up in bed; and don’t suggest a jolly old booze-up if you’re talking to a bunch of teetotallers.

## 12345678910 PEOPLE ATTEND AS EQUALS

While different actors have different responsibilities in relation to the issues, within a dialogue process it is best if stakeholders can participate as equals. This means, in particular, that ideas can be judged on their merits, not on their source.

So the ideas of someone who is junior, or from a minority, or old, or outside the established orthodoxy, can be taken as seriously as those of everyone else, and you can avoid ruling out anything interesting or different. For these reasons dialogue ground rules often state that specific points are not attributed to named stakeholders.

## 12345678910 DIALOGUE MEETINGS ARE DESIGNED AND FACILITATED BY INDEPENDENT PROFESSIONAL FACILITATORS

Another familiar question is “Do we really need a facilitator?” All we do, after all, is wander around, bark occasionally, and indulge our fetish for covering the walls in paper. Having seen one meeting go easily people sometimes decide they can dispense with facilitators and save the money. However, we do have our advantages.

Firstly because we do not take positions on substantive issues we can ensure that meetings are as balanced and even-handed as possible by, for example, preventing particular individuals or interest groups dominating.

Somebody also has to produce an independent record of the meeting. Facilitators normally record meetings on large sheets of paper, and produce a record in the form of photographs or an exact transcription of what has been publicly recorded. It is up to the stakeholders, both during and after the meeting, to agree the accuracy of the record before it is accepted.

However, possibly the clinching reason for employing a facilitator is that no two dialogue processes are the same. Each one needs to be tailored and designed around the needs and expectations of the stakeholders. People who need to run a meeting on a particular subject often turn, naturally enough, to an expert. Most experts though have not got the first idea of how to bring together large numbers of people to talk about complex issues in a short space of time – and, indeed why should they? Facilitators need to know enough about the subject matter not to make fools of themselves, but while many facilitators do end up specialising in particular subjects (I know more than I ever thought likely about large and rusting structures in the North Sea), the vital attributes for successfully designing and managing a dialogue are process rather than content skills.

## 12345678910 RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE AGENDA AND THE PROCESS IS SHARED

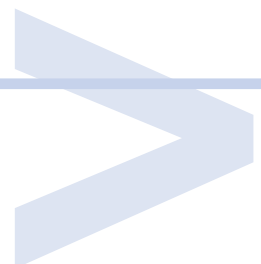
Many conventional processes fail from the outset because nobody has asked whether the agenda meets the needs of the participants, and when it doesn’t nobody is prepared to adapt it.

In dialogue processes we work with a project manager, sometimes with a core group of stakeholders, sometimes directly with all the stakeholders, to design an agenda and meeting schedule. It is then up to the stakeholders to decide whether to follow it. If they reject it, we start again; if there is disagreement about it, we help them to find consensus on a new way forward. The point is that the agenda must work for the stakeholders: people need to talk about the issues they want to talk about in a way that suits them.

Yes, process discussions can be very tedious: but they are a vital investment as those who dispense with them usually come to realise. Painfully.

### exec summary

**Stakeholder dialogue is an evolving field, and every dialogue is different, but there are some ideas that are basic to what we try to do in a dialogue and how we go about doing it. From leading to change to building on common ground, the ten principles and characteristics outlined here are part of what makes dialogue not only different to other forms of engagement but also a uniquely successful way to tackle issues in an increasingly expectant world.**



## 12345678910

### STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUE IS A TWO WAY PROCESS

'Dialogue' means an interactive process involving at least two people communicating with each other. So it is customary in Stakeholder Dialogue meetings to limit formal, pre-prepared, one-way presentations to the absolute minimum, to confine them to the delivery of information that assists dialogue, and to ensure that the information presented is objectively referenced and verifiable.

Where more information is required, it is ideally generated from among the stakeholders themselves, or through an agreed joint fact-finding process. In particular, we discourage any presentation that smacks of public relations. While public relations may be an effective way of delivering information – if it is believed – it is not a way to develop relationships between people. Real relationships, based on mutual understanding and leading to trust, evolve out of two-way communication and a consistency of word and deed.

## 12345678910

### DIALOGUE PROCESSES ARE ITERATIVE IN THEIR APPROACH

The same issues are often addressed several times from different directions and in different ways to allow for the development of shared solutions. 'Snapshot' consultations that enable participants to state their existing positions have their uses, but in isolation they are rarely of much value: the same information can be gleaned from reading publications or visiting web-sites.

In other words, difficult issues need to be worried at, mulled over and chewed upon. Easy answers tend not to last, and it is the repeated attempts to find that elusive mutually acceptable solution that educates stakeholders, builds relationships, and enables them to appreciate the need to negotiate.

## 12345678910

### THE PROCESS VALUES INTERESTS, FEELINGS, NEEDS, AND FEARS

Unlike some conventional consultation processes, Stakeholder Dialogue values everything that is said without pre-judging what is 'real', or 'important', or 'rational'. I get so bored with being told that you have to start with the 'facts', because I find the 'facts' tend all too often to be a dubious amalgam of perception, interpretation and assumption.

It is much better to separate out all the different approaches to 'the facts': understand what people want, what they fear, how they perceive things, how they interpret past behaviour – without making premature judgments about what is important and what is not. When you have done this you can begin to help people put themselves into the shoes of others, and, when they are ready, you can talk about what facts are important, what they think would help them understand the situation better or inform whatever decisions they need to make.

Start with the people, not the information; and get the consent of stakeholders before you introduce the 'experts'. After all, even the least educated stakeholder is an expert in his or her own point of view – however flawed others may consider it to be.

**ANDREW ACLAND** IS A DIRECTOR OF DIALOGUE BY DESIGN LTD AND ONE OF THE ENVIRONMENT COUNCIL'S TEAM OF INDEPENDENT FACILITATORS.

## 12345678910

### THE PROCESS SEEKS TO ENCOURAGE NEW UNDERSTANDING AND RELATIONSHIPS

We hope to value 'invisible products' such as increased understanding and trust as much as 'visible products', such as documents or agreements, because they are often crucial in enabling participants to move forward or to implement the outcomes of a process.

These invisible products are particularly important when people are coming from opposite corners of the local universe. Half a morning spent understanding the differences in decision-making processes between a local community group and a multinational corporation may do much to explain what has gone wrong in the past.

## 12345678910

### DIALOGUE PROCESSES SEEK TO IDENTIFY AND BUILD ON COMMON GROUND

This enables participants to enter a process that first builds momentum and relationships through incremental agreement, thereby increasing the possibility of resolving or setting aside areas of disagreement.

So often disagreement is a legacy of the dismal past, and while the focus of dialogue processes tends to be on the present and future, in some circumstances the exploration of the past, however painful, is for some stakeholders a necessary precursor to any further work.

So we never try to disguise disagreement, but equally we try not to allow disagreement to disguise the areas of genuine agreement that might pave the way towards new understandings and relationships that will ultimately enable disagreement to be resolved. It can be a tricky balance to maintain.

**One of the most irritating habits of facilitators must be the reluctance to commit ourselves. People ask for something as simple as a list of the main principles and characteristics of dialogue processes and we start humming and haahing and saying 'it depends' and hedging our thoughts around with a thicket of cautions and reservations.**

**It is true here, too: partly because the field is evolving and we still have lots to think about; partly because these are dynamic, living processes. I have tried to boil the principles and characteristics down into ten essential points. I am still not sure, though, which are principles and which are characteristics, because the two come woven together.**

**While the principles shape the character of dialogue processes, the characteristics necessary to make it work also give rise to certain principles. It is a rather satisfyingly circular conundrum.** ■

**For more information on Stakeholder Dialogue contact The Environment Council's Dialogue Team**

tel 020 7632 0117

email [stakeholder.dialogue@envcouncil.org.uk](mailto:stakeholder.dialogue@envcouncil.org.uk)