

# Dialogue, collaboration and conflict

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## About this course

This course provides basic competences for those whose task is to initiate an interest in, as well as create understanding and participation in nature conservation and other environmental issues. The course participants will learn how to assess the prerequisites for communication and how to change problematic situations with democratic methods and models.

### Implementation

The course consists of two 2-day class sessions with 4-6 weeks in between, and a homework assignment.

### Learning objectives

After finishing this course, participants should:

- Be familiar with and able to use methods and models for participation, dialogue and conflict management in their work.
- Be able to discuss the significance and consequences of selected approaches.
- Be able to see the role of nature conservation and environmental protection in a larger context. Also to understand their own and their organization's aims and roles in relation to other stakeholders' aims and roles.
- Be familiar with how concerned stakeholders'/actors' understanding of nature conservation and environmental protection can change and be able to apply this knowledge in their work.
- Understand that participatory processes take time and be able to change their own routines accordingly.

### Session 1: Introduction to new models and approaches

Four topics are covered through lectures and exercises, for example role-plays, forum-play and reflective discussions.

- Reflection over the course participants own experiences. How do they work today and what problems and opportunities have they come across?
- Investigation of the pre-requisites for communication in nature- and environmental issues. How do role distribution, influence and respect for others' knowledge and integrity work? What roles do the course participants, as representatives for their organizations, take on and what roles do they assign to other actors? What influence do they have and allow others' to have? What happens when they feel themselves ignored or offended or when others feel that that way?
- Models and methods for collaboration, dialogue and participation.
- Models and methods for dealing with different interests and perspectives, and how to use these to prevent conflicts.

### **Homework assignment: Practical implementation**

The course participants choose an assignment in order to implement their new knowledge about dialogue and participation in their own working context.

### **Session 2: Reflection and exchange of experiences**

Facilitated discussion about the course participants' experiences of practical application of the knowledge gained in Session 1. Methods and tools are developed and the foundations are laid for each course participant's own "tool box".

## **Dialogue and exercising authority**

Most of what is written below is quite general. You might recognize the human challenge of trying to understand each other and make progress from many different contexts, also private. This text was written, however, with the special situation of officials working for authorities in mind. **It is equally useful for other professionals dealing with environmental or natural resource issues.**

To exercise authority is to work with people. A professional approach and good communication skills and abilities are fundamental when it comes to working with people. This text discusses dilemmas and opportunities, but gives very few concrete recommendations. It is easy to give recommendations about what should be accomplished: *Make sure that you have a good dialogue!* The question is, of course: *How?*

There is no blueprint for how to create a good dialogue, but there are two pieces of advice that are worth remembering always: Listen as much as possible and formulate more questions than statements. Everyone has to make their own experiments, and no one should have to use "dialogue tricks" they feel uncomfortable with. It is just as important to be aware of what happens within yourself as it is to not count on being able to "read others."

As an authority with the mandate to control, you have power. Others can have more or less mixed feelings towards that power. It might even be difficult for you yourself to step into that role with ease – you might want to play down the power, or, maybe quite the opposite, hide behind it.

Everyone you meet in your profession have different thoughts and ideas about this authoritative power of yours, and it is impossible to know beforehand what they are. The most important is for you to be clear about that this is just a role, and that you can learn to become better and better at assuming this role, based on who you are. If things go well, people usually become more and more at ease in their authoritative roles and at the same time distinctly professional in their communication.

A professional communication approach involves that you never lose sight of your mission. It also involves that you communicate in a way that makes it possible for others to understand

what you mean. If they don't understand what you are trying to communicate, even if you make an effort to be clear, it is important to notice that and try again.

You also have to understand what others are communicating, and show in a way clearly noticeable to them that you are trying to understand, even in situations when you don't agree with them.

Furthermore, you have to handle situations that are emotionally charged – sorrow, anger, accusations etc. can emerge in an instant. Even when you, as the professional, are not welcome in a situation, you are always responsible to steer the conversation as well as you can in the direction of the goals and objectives with the encounter.

The professional communication approach is, in other words, a very complex skill. It requires that you use your self-knowledge and knowledge of human nature, your wisdom and personality, your patience and your intelligence. It is possible to practice and use different tools, tricks, ideas and models, but it is impossible to follow strict manuals. Every situation is unique.

Communication, or dialogue, is a mutual exchange which builds on the premise that there will always be something to learn from the other. It might be about the issue in question, and what demands you can make in the situation. It might be about what should be prioritized, or if the threats involved are short term or long term, and how they can be evaluated in relation to each other.

But often, disagreements and conflicts do not have their roots in the actual substance of the issue. Maybe they stem from peoples' disappointments with earlier contact with authorities, or the concerned parties' economic situation. But there might still be an opportunity for dialogue. You might, for example, reflect on the way people think and react. What is important to them? What should you expect them to understand, and what not? It is also possible to have a dialogue about the dialogue. What can you talk about and what not? In some cases you could even ask the other party for advice. How would they have acted if they were the representative for your organization, dealing with this issue?

Time spent on creating a good dialogue at an early stage will often pay off in the long run. Those representing authorities have a particular responsibility when it comes to communication – they are responsible for both parties.

But there is of course a limit for how much time can be spent on the dialogue. Exactly how much time should be spent has to be decided for each specific case, but a good basis for decision could be that it is always beneficial to create a certain mutual understanding and that there is always something to be learned from others.

An invitation to a dialogue can be seen as the first step towards increased stakeholder involvement, or participation. The right to participate is included in citizenship and

participation is a prerequisite for democracy. The degree, or extent, of participation can vary, however. It is important to try to perceive the opportunities that exist in every situation.

If we succeed in our ambitions to, as far as possible, involve those who are affected by certain decisions, we are likely to make better decisions that are better anchored among the concerned parties. Increased stakeholder participation can also help us increase our own understanding of the many dimensions of an issue, and of ourselves and others.

***Four reasons for increasing stakeholder participation:***

- The democracy aspect. It is our right as citizens to have a say in matters that concern us.
- Increased knowledge. There is a value in making use of the knowledge and experiences of the different stakeholders.
- Effectiveness. To take part in decision making increases the interest and motivation for realizing the decision.
- A learning way of working. Tension between different interests and perspectives will always exist in issues concerning natural resources and the environment. To use dialogue as a working tool can be a way to increase mutual learning and handling tension between the involved parties.

**Challenges**

The list of situations where good communication skills are required of officials is infinite. Below are some examples of frequently occurring challenges and dilemmas.

**The people you encounter are, of course, very different.** It is a challenge to always be prepared for the unexpected and be able to adapt ones language and behavior to the person in front of you. It is also a challenge to always be prepared to notice and handle ones own mistakes – because they will be made over and over! Some people will find that your language is too complicated while others will find that you simplify too much. Some will consider you impolite while others will wonder why you are not more direct. The trick is to develop your own sensitivity so you will notice when these things happen, and then to unprestigiously adapt - without leaving the authority role.

**You will often meet persons older than you.** By right of age, they might want to steer the conversation and what it is about, and it might be difficult for you to get on with the matter. The challenge is to, on the one hand respectfully convey that you hear what the other is saying and that you are aware that they are very experienced, but on the other hand keep the focus on your official task.

**The other often has a history to tell** – or many! It is important to make room for this and show that you listen and understand, or at least honestly try to understand. It is a challenge to, in the same conversation, find a good way to indicate when something is not right, or to deliver criticism or an unwelcome message.

**The people you meet have different ambition levels**, and this is not always clear on the surface. Some have an honest ambition to do the right thing, even though there might be current problems of different kinds. Others might have the attitude that they only do what they are forced to do, and flaws and defects that go unnoticed by the representative of the authority can just stay the way they are.

It is a challenge to find the right way to express your questions and maybe skepticism in a way that will not hurt the earnest person's feelings. It is an equal challenge to question the person who wants you to forget or oversee some things. The trick is to express yourself in a non-assuming way. A smooth approach can prevent that the situation develops into a conflict.

**It might be difficult to get to know relevant facts.** The other party can have a lot of reasons to worry about the consequences of telling the truth, or they might be unaware of what is relevant in the situation. Relevant facts are of course necessary in order to draw the right conclusions about, for example, what demands to make. It is a pedagogical challenge to find an effective way to get to know these facts through dialogue and demonstrations without causing the other person to go into defense mode.

**To give others messages that they dislike** is a challenge. It is not uncommon to worry about how they will react. The risk is that you in such situations, maybe unconsciously, tell whatever you have to tell more brusquely or less clearly than you intended. The trick is to find a way to convey the negative information and at the same time show respect, understanding and empathy. Furthermore, you have to be able to stand the other's emotional expressions without being dragged into them or being hit by feelings of guilt that you then bring home with you.

**Sometimes there will be open confrontations**, when the other show their distress in words, gestures and emotional expressions. Sometimes this happens very quickly and comes as a surprise. It is a challenge to avoid being dragged into the confrontation. The challenge is to continue to treat the other respectfully and at the same time stand up for yourself without being, or appearing to be, aggressive, scared or too yielding.

**Sometimes the interaction develops in a destructive direction.** There might be a risk of violence or threats, or the situation seems stuck and it is impossible to move forward despite all your efforts. The challenge is to make a well-ordered withdrawal that leaves openings for continuing the conversation at a later occasion.

## **Participation**

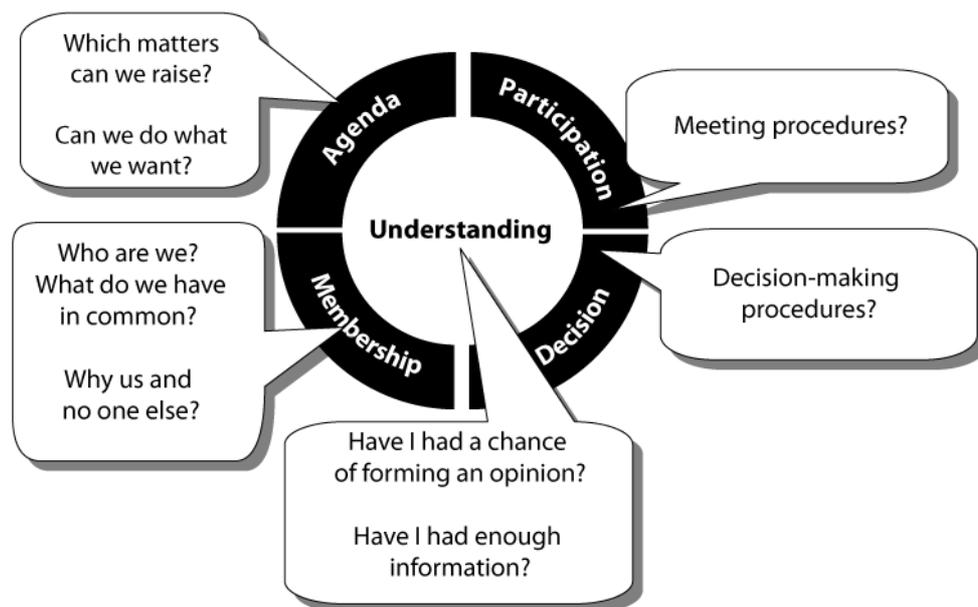
Most of us want to have a say in matters that concern or affect us – especially if it is something close and relatively easy to overview. We want our ideas and experiences listened to, and want to sense that our contribution matters and makes a difference. If this happens in reality, we can call it “participation” (stakeholder participation, public participation, local

participation etc.). You might not achieve exactly what you wanted, but if you have participated in the process you can probably be quite satisfied, or at least less dissatisfied than you would otherwise be.

A lot of research has dealt with democratic challenges and dilemmas, and there are many methods and models intended to be of help for those who want to increase participation or create conditions for a fairly democratic process. The political scientist Robert A. Dahl has defined five criteria for democratic processes that can be used to assess what is required to make satisfactory levels of participation possible in a situation. These five criteria can be expressed as five simple questions that are so fundamental for human interaction that probably even the smallest children have them at the back of their minds.

1. Who are here? Do I understand who I have in front of me?
2. What are we/they doing?
3. How are they doing it? Are certain tools necessary, are there rules that one needs to know about, how can I take my place here?
4. Where are we heading? Will it end soon, is the goal a certain result, how do we reach it?
5. Do I really understand...? Can I ask questions if I don't understand without feeling stupid? Is there time for reflection? Do others listen to me... and do I listen to them?

Below the five questions will be connected one by one to Dahl's criteria. The questions are interconnected and exist as challenges in all conversations and meetings where important issues are dealt with and decisions are expected. All five criteria for completely democratic processes can hardly be fulfilled to 100% at the same time and over prolonged periods of time, but they can always be used to assess the pre-conditions for participation in individual cases.



<http://www.democracy.se>

(From: <http://www.democracy.se/en02/en02bg/democratic-management>)

## **1. Who – the question of “membership”**

*Everyone is included – in a completely democratic process everyone has the right to participate on equal terms. No one can be excluded.*

Before the meeting or conversation takes off, it is necessary to clarify who are taking part and why. To a certain degree this is a matter of politeness, but also about describing what interests the participants represent and what their roles are. Looming questions are: Who are “we”? What do we have in common? Why is that we are here and not others?

It is important to clarify if there are people who are not participating but would want to if they could. In cases where such people exist their absence will inevitably have some effect, and the best you can do in the situation is to acknowledge this verbally.

Furthermore, to answer the questions above, you have to consider concrete things such as furniture arrangements; can all participants see and hear each other?

## **2. What – the question about the agenda**

*Control over the agenda – in a perfectly democratic process the participants decide the content of the agenda.*

Most people would of course want to spend time on the issues they find important and relevant, and maybe give very limited room for things they find unimportant. The best pre-conditions for democracy are created when all parties have equal opportunities to, in collaboration with the rest of the involved, decide what to talk about; what should be on the agenda.

But of course this does not happen in encounters between representatives of authority and common citizens! As an official you usually bring a lot of issues to the table that the citizens have to relate to, whether they want to or not. They might be about laws and regulations from the government, from the EU or other international entities, or from the local government. They might also be about laws of nature, about research results that keep evolving, or sometimes become invalid... Etc.

As representatives for authorities you bring an agenda that the other parties cannot influence. Many people have quite a diffuse picture of how society is organized. Even well-educated people often have very limited knowledge about, for example where decisions are made, and how a municipality is organized. It is important to be prepared for this ignorance and be able to give short, simple lectures in how civil society works as soon as one senses that there might be a need for it.

It is not a good idea to show astonishment, or worse, irritation when one encounters ignorance. Neither is it good to expect too much. Parts of your civil society lectures will probably be met with protests on more than on one occasion. What you can do is to try to be

even clearer and at the same time remind yourself that you are in a way domineering others in the situation. Of course not domineering in a formally incorrect way – you are fulfilling a task and the task is on behalf of the government and... But from the individual's communicative perspective you are domineering because you are not providing optimal conditions for participation! If you were providing optimal conditions, *everyone would have equal opportunities to, in collaboration with all others involved, decide what issues should be on the meeting, or discussion agenda.*

What you can do to meet and respect the other's fundamental needs is to be very transparent in your domineering and patiently explain why you are doing it, and furthermore to ensure that the other party also gets an opportunity to bring up their issues and questions. You do that by explicitly asking what they want to bring up and then make sure that you have time for that as well. It might be that you think the other's issues are irrelevant for the meeting, or that they are unimportant or wrong. If you want to encourage participation you have to tolerate that!

### **3. How – the question about participation**

*Effective participation – in a completely democratic process, everyone has equal and suitable opportunities to suggest things, speak their minds and be heard.*

If people are to take part in a meeting or process in a way that is worthy of being called “participation” we have to ask ourselves what every participant needs for that to happen. We can never assume that we know what someone else needs – we can only be sure about the fact that people are different and that the individuals themselves know best what they need. For participation to be effective, everyone needs to have suitable opportunities to express themselves and be heard.

What constitutes a “suitable opportunity” is different from one person to another. Some people find it easy to speak up while others hesitate to do so. Some people can easily focus their thoughts while others need more time. When it comes to these differences it is never a matter of right or wrong. The only thing that is wrong with differences is to not calculate with them.

To create equal and suitable opportunities for everyone is of course a huge task that can never be totally accomplished. But to take on the challenge means that you have to think about what kind of discussion supports the shy person, gives the reflective person enough time to think, opportunities to concentrate for the distracted person, space to calm down for the scared person, blood sugar for the hungry one etc. etc.

It is never wise to assume that silence is the same as consent. The silent person might have a thousand other reasons for not voicing their opinion, and this is something we need to consider if we want to create preconditions for effective participation.

### **4. Where to – the question about decisions**

*Equal voting rights – in a completely democratic process, everyone has equal influence on decisions.*

Obviously everyone wants to have influence on decisions that affect them. We might prefer to decide everything ourselves, but if that is not possible we at least want to take part in the decision making process. This poses a challenge for authorities – on the one hand to try to create as much “participation” as possible and on the other hand to have to tell people that they cannot take part in decision making in matters they find really important. There is a risk that people become disappointed and upset. You might have to repeat your short and simple lectures about how civil society works many times, and you as an official will have to stand peoples frustration.

Indeed, it is also important to broaden the space for people to have influence and make their own decisions as much as possible within the legal framework. It is fine to tell people openly that this is what you want and are trying to achieve.

### **5. Do I really understand? – the question about understanding**

*Informed understanding – in a completely democratic process everyone has equal and suitable opportunities to find out what is in their own interest, both on a collective and an individual level.*

The last of the criteria is about really understanding what is going on and the ability to form an informed opinion. The need to understand is of course an underlying factor of the other four criteria. All options should be exposed and it should be clear what alternatives serve each party’s interests

The affected parties should have the opportunity to get information and form their own opinion about what is serving their interests in the long term, both individually and collectively. This applies to all phases of the process. The more you understand about the conditions for the working process and your own participation, the better you can prepare yourself and make reasonable decisions about how to act. Most people are not only caring about themselves but also want to act in a way that benefits society at large. If they are pressured, do not understand, or if time is too limited for them, their willingness to contribute in a constructive way might be reduced.

For understanding to grow, people need time to think and reflect. People usually dislike to change their opinions, or even to just modify their opinions if others are watching. They Want to withdraw and ponder the arguments alone. This suggests that it is beneficial to have not only one but several meetings, whatever the subject.

For understanding to emerge, everyone needs to listen to the others’ opinions and then have time to combine this with their own perspective. Most people are not prepared to really listen to others if the others are not listening to them...

Our paths to understanding are very individual and no one can decide how others should come to conclusions. The process should make it possible for every participant to make their own way to understanding. Therefore it should always be possible to ask questions about everything concerning the issue. A person may have “heard” something a thousand times but it is first at this moment that they really take it in – and then they start wondering about this and that. It should never be difficult or embarrassing to ask.

For all of this, good meeting forms are needed, whether the participants are two or more.

## **Dialogue competence**

It is important to always keep the five questions about preconditions for participation in mind – but there are of course also other things to consider. Maybe you feel that you do everything you can to live up to the criteria for participation, but you still don’t achieve a good dialogue. The question is, how does a reasonably good dialogue emerge, even though different parties may disagree, and what can you do for it to happen.

Most people want to be understood by others. And it becomes really important in situations when there is a risk or possibility that decisions that affect our own interests will be taken. In general, people want to make sure that the other party understands what they are saying before they are ready to take in the other party’s arguments. In other words, people want to be listened to before they are ready to listen.

To simplify, you can say that there are two possible scenarios in a dialogue between two parties that have diverging ideas. Either both parties repeatedly express their own views and make efforts to get the other party to change their mind. Or the parties take turns to listen to each other and modify or complement their own views along the way. In the first scenario nothing changes – except maybe the parties’ opinions about each other; irritation, anger, contempt etc. increase. In the later scenario both parties increase their knowledge and understanding and get a richer picture of the issues’ complexity.

As representatives of your authority or company, you are responsible for making the communication as beneficial as possible. You have to lead by example – you have to start by listening carefully and show it. In the best case scenario you can encourage the other to listen just by listening actively yourself. Such conscious promotion of mutual active listening is what some scholars call “dialogue competence”. To be able to speak and listen is the core of dialogue competence. It might seem obvious, but when you examine what it implies things become more complicated. We all have communicative habits. Some of us often dominate, others are more quiet. To what extent we speak or listen depends on our habits but also on context.

When you practice horse riding, you learn about the rider’s “helpers”. They are the tools the rider uses to make the horse move the way the rider wants; e.g. the voice, the legs, how you

sit and how you use the whip. In a conversation we can also use “helpers”, that is, we can act and relate in different ways in order to help move the conversation in a certain direction.

Some conversation helpers are:

- To listen
- To affirm
- To ask questions
- To mirror
- To speak
- To vary between closeness and distance
- To meta-communicate

For these helpers to contribute to creating a dialogue, one has to have a genuine interest in both understanding and making oneself understood. Below, the possibilities and challenges with the different helpers will be discussed further.

### **To listen**

To listen is an equally important aspect of communication as speaking, and it needs practice and sometimes preparation, just as speaking does. To a certain degree, listening and hearing are two different things. Hearing is to perceive sounds, while listening is to interpret meaning and intention. Sometimes while we are involved in an intensive conversation, our attention is on formulating our own responses to, or arguments against, what someone else is saying rather than trying to understand the meaning the speaker is trying to convey.

Sometimes there might be good reasons behind such behavior, but it is not “listening” and it does not contribute to the dialogue. An often used cliché is “I hear you”. There are good reasons to once in a while consider what people actually mean by this. Sometimes you get the impression that what they mean is “I can see that you are talking”...

To listen actively implies that you understand the meaning of what the other is saying – but this is not enough to make the conversation flow. The other person also needs to know that you have understood. So you have to show that you are listening, which connects listening to the next “helper”; to affirm.

### **To affirm**

A person who speaks is constantly wondering (maybe without being fully aware of it) if the other listens and understands. The listener usually shows that they are following what the other is saying by making signs and gestures; like saying aha, right, mmmmm, ohhh etc., or nodding, shaking their head, filling in words in the other’s story. We have all practiced this behavior since childhood. Some of these signs are probably universal, while other are connected to language and culture. A nod does not mean the same everywhere!

Becoming aware of that we affirm, and how we do it, will help us help others make themselves understood. We can also use affirmation so that we affirm when we understand but give a sign when we don’t understand. In difficult situations with evident disagreements,

there is a risk that we stop affirming (maybe we just stare with a hard-set look on our face) despite the fact that active listening is especially important in such situations.

### **To ask questions**

To ask questions is very important for those who want to be active listeners and contribute to dialogue. Properly asked questions make it possible to reach further in the joint exploration of dilemmas, diverging interests and complex situations. What is a proper way to ask depends on the situation, and there are no blueprints or checklists that fit all situations.

The basis for all questioning is to show curiosity and interest in what other persons are telling and how they think. If one is not genuinely interested one should not use questioning techniques – the lack of interest will shine through. If you on the other hand have come to the conclusion that it is valuable to try to understand the other, questioning techniques can be a good tool.

Questions can be more or less open or closed, depending on to what degree the person answering can dispose the answer. Examples of answers belonging to totally closed questions are yes and no or some other fixed answer alternatives: good-bad, often-seldom, or information in numbers. Open questions are usually better because they make it possible for both the person answering and the person asking to take their own initiatives. It is important to be clear on what type of question you want to ask. A request for clarification can, for example, easily be confused with an accusation which can cause the understanding you are seeking to be blocked by a misunderstanding.

To find the right question in a certain situation it is helpful to think about what different kinds of questions you could ask and what effect a certain question has. We can distinguish between questions that encourage people to tell more, questions for clarification, for deepening, and inquiring questions. There are of course other ways to categorize questions, but the important thing is not to categorize questions but to become aware of what you do when you communicate and to facilitate the constructive conversation. Below the significance of the different types of questions will be elaborated on.

**Encouraging questions.** This type of question encourage people to tell about their point of view, experiences, knowledge on a certain subject etc. Encouraging questions are always open, as for example: Can you tell about when... What do you think about... This type of question introduces a topic that you can explore together.

**Questions for clarification.** These are questions that you have to ask in order to understand what the other has said: “But who is it that used to... is it you or him?” or: “But what do you think about ... do you like it or not? You ask this type of questions when you feel uncertain about how to understand what the other is saying.

**Questions for deepening.** The aim with this type of question is to get others to develop their story further. You ask to hear more about something that has already been touched upon, for example a point of view, an emotion, a situation or an experience.

Questions for clarification and questions for deepening might resemble each other, but there are reasons to make the difference clear. Questions for clarification stem from not understanding, while questions for clarification stem from an interest and a desire to know more.

**Inquiring questions.** They are necessary when you want to investigate the credibility of what someone is telling. This type of question are very sensitive because they can easily be interpreted as questioning the person instead of the content of their story. To avoid this, you can show that you are aware of the risk of being misunderstood and that you hope that you will not be: *It might seem that I think you are lying, but of course I don't believe that. But I think it is important for us to investigate together the trustworthiness of all the information we have, so I wonder, can it really be true that... How do you know? Could there be another reason, for example...?*

### **To mirror**

To mirror is to feed back the content and feeling of what the other has said, with other words and sometimes a bit more exaggerated, and feed it back in the form of a question. The aim with mirroring is both to show that you are trying to understand and want to make sure that you understood right, and to help the other hear what they themselves are saying. Mirroring can be used when you want to dwell on something and investigate experiences and feelings etc., but also in situations when you want to move on.

Some examples of mirroring: *Please, stop a moment, I just want to check that I have understood you correctly... what you are saying is... and that you don't... and that you rather want... Is that right?* Or: *So you think, then, that there is too much talk about... and that it causes us to forget about more important topics, and that makes you irritated?*

As an answer to your mirroring you might get an affirmation or a clarification. Or, if you have misunderstood, a denial: *No, this was not what I meant...*

If you get an affirmation that your understanding is right it is possible to go further: *Good that I understood you right. Then I would like to tell how I see things...*

It is very good to get to know if you have misunderstood, and different kinds of questions can then be used to move the conversation forward.

A third alternative is that you have understood quite well, but the other does not want to stand for the opinion you have mirrored back to them because it seems too harsh when it is summarized. This might result in a modification of their opinion.

## **To speak**

Hitherto the emphasis has been on the art of listening in a conversation. But it is also worth reflecting over the art of speaking! This is a common focus for interest – people talk about the art of persuasion, and argumentation and presentation techniques are hampered as important tools.

We will not discuss the art of persuasion here, because the aim with our democratic conversation is not to persuade or be persuaded or convinced, but to explore and create a common understanding. Instead it is the art of answering a question that we are interested in.

In the same way as the quality of the conversation is affected by the way you ask questions, it is also affected by the way you answer questions. To make the conversation function, it is necessary that the involved parties are willing to share their perspectives, experiences and knowledge and that they contribute reflections over the other parties' experiences.

When we answer a question we have to trust that there is an honest intention with the question and that the person asking it is genuinely interested. But that is of course not always the case, and earlier experiences of others' lack of interest can cause people to avoid giving detailed answers. That decreases the joint capacity to explore problematic issues.

Imagine a conversation about wind power:

Benita: If you are out driving and notice a wind mill, what comes to your mind?

Andy: Well... different things

B: Have you passed any wind mill recently?

A: Yees, I have, oh yeah

B: Can you tell me what you were thinking then?

A: Well, I thought... I don't really know what I thought

B: But you think that the wind mill at Grundet is a good idea?

A: Yes, I do

B: Can you tell me more about why you think that it is a good idea?

A: Well, I think it is a good way to produce electricity?

Etc...

In this conversation no new knowledge is generated and both parties find it difficult to contribute Andy probably have good reasons for being a bit reluctant. Maybe he finds Benita manipulative, threatening, pushy or just plain stupid. Whether this is true or not, in the described situation it is Andy with his reluctant attitude that prevents the conversation to increase their mutual knowledge.

In a well-functioning conversation, when we are answering questions we have to be able and willing to move beyond the boundaries set by the questions. By associating further, built on the other's question and your own answer, you can add new experiences to the conversation that then evoke new questions that make it possible to view the discussed experiences in a new light.

### To alternate between distance and closeness

Most people are quite good at speaking for their own case. They know quite well what they want to say and they say it to the other party because they have the feeling that the other doesn't know, or doesn't agree. They want to influence the other. But the next second the other might speak up and does exactly the same thing, only from their point of view. And while they speak, the first person is busy thinking about even more powerful arguments that can be used. None of them is listening attentively to the other.

In order to move forward in a discussion, it is just as important to present own ideas clearly as to step aside and listen carefully to the other. The ideal is to take shifts talking and listening, and while listening it is important to try to see things from the other's perspective. It does not mean that you abandon your own standpoint, only that you in your mind try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. The table below illustrates this:

The ingredients of dialogue competence		
	Me	Others
Closeness	Speaking	Listening
Distance	Critical self-reflection	Critical reflection over others' point of view

(Lena Wilhelmsson och Marianne Döös, 2002).

And here is an attempt to describe the same thing as a case scenario:

*When I speak I am close to myself. I say what I intend to say and express the aspects that differentiate my view from others' – because why should I otherwise use my energy on telling it. In this way I indicate the distance between us; I keep a distance to the other and a critical reflection over their views.*

*In the next moment it is the other's turn to speak – and then I have to listen and try to understand. I have to step away from my own perspective, i.e. listen with a distance to myself. I need to have, and preferably show that I have, a critical self-reflection. It doesn't mean that I reject my own perspective, only that I'm ready to examine my own perspective in the light of what the other is saying. I transmit that I know that I don't know everything and that I'm interested in knowing if what the other has to say might complement my own picture.*

*Then it's my turn to speak again, and I again have this closeness to myself – but from a slightly different point of view than last time. Because I have understood something by listening to the other.*

In the ideal case the conversation would continue like this. Both parties take turns to speak and both try to ingest what the other is trying to say and allow it to enrich their own point of view. Maybe they will not come to an agreement, but neither will they get stuck. Both parties

learn something and become a little wiser. Maybe they learn something about how different they are, or how complex the situation is. They might even come closer to a solution.

As a representative of an authority, you are responsible for doing whatever you can for this to happen. If you want to make it happen, it is important to start by listening. And your listening should be noticeable so the other believes that you indeed want to understand. In other words, you have to show clearly that you have a critical self-reflection, i.e. that you know that you don't have the whole picture and that you are genuinely interested in the other's view of the situation.

If you are quite successful in this, and the other person thinks that you really have tried to understand, then the time might be ripe for you to speak and be listened to. You might have listened well enough for the other to be ready to listen to you!

### **To use meta-communication**

The conversation aids mentioned so far have focused on the content of the conversation. We listen, acknowledge, mirror, ask questions, speak and balance in order to give the conversation a content that is relevant, credible and legitimate. But the content is not all – the question is also how we talk about it. When we want to promote dialogue, we have to try our best to contribute to a beneficial structure of the conversation, and talk about that can be a part of the conversation itself. This is called meta-communication.

“Meta” means to transcend to an overarching level. Thus, meta-communication means communication about communication, or to talk about how to talk. It is used to discover and correct misunderstandings about the structure of the conversation, to discuss how to interact with each other, to handle conflicts, to discuss how to evaluate the level of “truth” and credibility in the conversation parties' contributions etc. All the previously mentioned conversation aids can also be used in the meta-communication.

If one of the party's trust in, for example that the other parties are actually listening, that they care, understand, value important parts, or want to come to an agreement, decreases for some reason, there is a chance that this will start a conflict. If the other party understands this situation correctly and puts the understanding in words, there might be a chance to recover the other party's trust. It could be something as simple as saying:

A: “I don't know if I understand you right, but I get the impression that you feel that I don't listen to you. Is that correct?”

B: “Yeah, you don't even try to understand!!!”

A can then say something like: “Okay, I don't know if I have understood what you wanted to say. Would you mind explaining it to me once again, then I will tell you what I think I understand from it?”

In an ideal case, B will accept the suggestion and A has demonstrated that he/she listens. This attentive listening helps both parties to move closer to each other.

## To facilitate conversations and meetings

Each conversation you have as a representative for an authority is a kind of “meeting”, even though you might only be two persons. You have to plan how the meeting should be conducted and you can see yourself as a facilitator. Every meeting should have a clear start and a clear ending, and in between an agenda that all participants know and can contribute to.

There is much to think about before a meeting. We all have different needs that need to be fulfilled to some degree for us to be able to attend, whether in minor situations or in large groups. This poses large, sometimes even unreasonable, requirements on meeting arrangements and resources. Still, it is wise to adapt the process to the participants’ different needs as much as possible. If this is your intention, the others will perceive that and they in turn will increase their efforts to contribute constructively to the process.

If conflicts still arise, for example if some participants don’t accept the meeting frames and bring up their own agenda instead, it is easier to return to a constructive dialogue if they feel that the other party listened respectfully earlier. In other words, there is a trust account to take from – but it is not unlimited! If the majority find that “this was a good meeting” but one or a few parties disagree, they might build this on reasons that do not stem from the meeting itself. They might, for example, have negative past experiences of meetings with authorities or something else that belongs to previous situations. People with such negative experiences might need to express something about what disturbs them, and they also need the others to listen respectfully. If these needs are met, it is more likely that the meeting can then focus on the matter at hand without anyone feeling rejected. This is in the interest of all, because parties who have seemed uncooperative can become a great asset for the whole if they are treated in a way so that they can and are willing to contribute.

“Perfect” methods and blueprints for meeting arrangements do not exist. Instead, each situation requires special considerations, and each facilitator who works in contexts where tension exists will succeed sometimes and fail sometimes. Because you always have to adapt to circumstances, it is impossible to give specific advice on what to say at the beginning of a meeting, how to conduct presentation rounds etc. Still, there are certain details that you should always think through before you start, in order to make conscious choices. Below is a simple list, created with a small meeting in mind (few participants). This can be, e.g., a planned meeting or an unscheduled inspection.

### *Before the meeting:*

- Consider the meeting purpose, expectations and concerns. Create a simple agenda that is clear and understandable.
- Create a short and clear introduction. It is a good idea to practice beforehand (say it out loud!) to make sure that it covers the important things. It is good to mention something about all aspects connected to the **possibilities of participation** described earlier in this document), e.g., who will participate, what is the meeting about, **how it**

**will proceed**, how decisions will be made, and that everyone's understanding will be of importance during the whole meeting.

*On site:*

- Make a clear and very short introduction
- Tell about, or show the agenda to the participants. Ask if they want to add something and if they accept the agenda. Maybe you need to discuss an additional topic, maybe you should rearrange the order of the topics. The agenda can of course include such informal topics as “I will walk around and have a look myself”, or “we sit down (over a cup of coffee) and go through the questions I have”.
- Agree on how much time you have to your disposition, at least roughly. It is important to decide an ending time, but you don't have to use all that time if it is not necessary. To know that “at 4 o'clock the latest will I get rid of this inspector” can make it easier to endure it. Uncertainty about how long a meeting or encounter will take causes unnecessary tension.
- Act as facilitator; hold the steering pin. Remember the conversation aids and remember to alternate between closeness and distance!
- Do meta-communication and mirroring if the conversation gets out of focus. Put the obvious in words: “I notice that you want to talk about...” “Do I understand you right, that this has been difficult/good/... for you?” “Now I would like to talk more about..., which is of course what I'm here to get more information about!”
- At the end of the meeting, sum up what has been said. Ask all participants if they agree on this summary. Make sure that the next steps are clear to everyone.
- Last, but not least, make a joint evaluation of the meeting. The goal is that every participant, as far as possible, gets the opportunity to talk, gets time to reflect, and listens to the others. The only way to know if the participants feel they have had this opportunity is to ask them. It only counts if they themselves feel that they have had a say, that they have listened, been listened to, and had adequate time for reflection, etc.

### **Joint agenda**

“Joint agenda” is a simple method, which can be modified and used in very diverse contexts. It is a kind of basic procedure for meetings, with transparency in each stage – everyone can, regardless of formal status within the system, see and hear what is going on, and be encouraged to contribute.

To create the agenda together gives practice in focusing on what is most important and taking responsibility for one's own wishes regarding the agenda. It can be combined with a previously distributed agenda draft. This method creates order and structure as well as participation right from the beginning of the meeting. You can cover all issues important to the participant without having to delegate something to “other issues” at the end of the meeting agenda. Everyone is responsible for their own issues, and for keeping the time. If you use more than your allotted time you take time from someone else. If an important issue needs more time than scheduled, participants are asked if someone would give away some of their time, or maybe even refrain from bringing up their issue at this meeting.

**Joint agenda – How to proceed**

1) Choose one person (it can be the *facilitator*) who writes on a flip-chart or whiteboard, counts and make changes if necessary. Choose also a *time-keeper*, a secretary and an *observer*. Draw up the agenda on a large piece of paper or a white board:

Nr	Who	Issue	Information	Discussion	Decision	Time

2) Decide how much total time you have for the meeting. Then all participants tell what issues they want to bring up and how much time they think they need. You also have to decide if the issue involves information, discussion, decision, or a combination. All of this is continuously added to the agenda table. All columns, except the first one, are filled in. When all issues are listed, the time is added up and compared with the total time available for the meeting. Time for an evaluation round at the end of the meeting, and for a break (if the meeting takes more than two hours) should also be added. If there is excess time, it is saved as "backup time", if there is not enough time for all issues you will have to negotiate. This whole process might take a few minutes.

3) The group chooses what issue to start with and make a preliminary order for the rest. This order is listed in the first column. This order can be changed during the meeting if it seems necessary.

4) The issues are dealt with one by one. For every issue, the time keeper warns the group when there are a few minutes left. The time allowance can always be re-negotiated.

5) A final evaluation round at the end of the meeting with the questions: *What was positive with today's meeting? What can we improve next time?*

**Distribution of roles in a meeting**

In Joint agenda meetings or other meeting where you want to ensure effectiveness and facilitate participation, it is wise to distribute the responsibility. No one has the ability to notice everything that goes on in a meeting, and the all too common arrangement with a director or chairman leading the meeting, who at the same time is responsible for bringing up many issues, puts an unreasonable load on that one person. Usually, there is nothing that argues against having someone else facilitating the meeting. Distributed responsibility and a

transparent agenda make it possible for the director/chairman/expert to concentrate on the issues at hand.

Below are some suggested meeting roles, or functions. All of them might not have to be explicitly distributed in every meeting context, but those who want to be responsible for creating a good meeting should always keep them in mind. These functions relate to different needs that generally are present in all groups.

The **chairman/facilitator** takes the initiative to the introductory and final speaking round, is in charge of the joint agenda and makes sure that everyone who wants to contribute can do so. Is in charge of the meeting and points out if people repeat themselves, or if someone impedes or interrupts a round. Sums up ideas if necessary.

The **time keeper** is responsible for making it easier to start and finish as decided. Reminds participants of the time allotted to each issue and warns the group a few minutes before the time is up.

The **energy manager** notices if the conversation is stuck, or is not leading anywhere, and can then suggest a break, a speaking round, refreshments, that people stand up and move around a little, or open the windows to get some fresh air. This creates time for reflection, might give people courage to reveal underlying conflicts, and make it easier for those who find it difficult to speak up to express their meaning.

The **process enhancer** helps ensure democracy, especially during larger and more complicated meetings. Can, for example, suggest that the large group is divided into smaller groups to deal with the issue.

During the meeting, the **observer** notices how things work during the meeting and tells the group about the observations before the last round. This gives the group the opportunity to develop and improve future meetings.

**All participants** are responsible for bringing up whatever they think needs to be brought up, and for listening to the person speaking. Any participant can suggest a round.

It might be a good idea to distribute the roles differently next meeting!

## **Language and body language**

Many unnecessary misunderstandings happen because expert- and authority language/jargon is used in interactions with people who are not familiar with it. More words than you might think might be unknown to others, or not fully understood. A beneficial level to aim at is to talk in way that you think a clever twelve year old child would understand. And it goes without saying that clarity and simplicity is even more important if the participants do not have the same mother tongues.

It is impossible to choose your words so that misunderstandings and ambiguity never occurs. But what we can do is to always be aware of language pit falls, and to ask the others to tell you if you use words or concepts that are not crystal clear. We can lead by example and mirror what the other person is saying: *...you are saying ... do I understand you right ... do you mean that? ... Okay, good, then I understand ... and I hope you will also ask me ... we have to help each other check that we mean the same thing!*

Some words are including and open up, while other words have the contrary effect. A simple thing to do is to exchange “but” with “and” as often as possible. *This and this looks good, but this needs to be changed...* creates a different feeling than *...this and this looks good and this needs to be changed...* It might seem like a minor thing – and it is a minor thing but with great consequences!

Another word that can go wrong is *Why*. *Why* can be perceived as an accusation or a doubt, even when the person asking was only wondering. If you are just wondering, or would like the other to tell more and explain, you can say things like: *what do you want to happen when you do like that? Can you describe how...?*

There are no simple manuals that can help us read other peoples’ body language. On the other hand, we all have ideas about what body language is and what certain gestures and poses mean. It is wise to become aware of these ideas! We can be quite right in our interpretation of others’ – and we can be totally wrong. The only thing we can know is how other peoples’ body language affects us. We can use that in the conversation, as long as we refrain from claiming that we know, understand, or can see this or that.

If you for example notice that someone is not looking you in the eyes, that they turn the other way or keep their arms tightly crossed, you can, in a neutral voice, say something like: *I can see that you turn the other way ... maybe you don’t want to talk more about this?* You might then get the answer. *Well, it’s difficult to explain this...* Then you can use your hypothesis (=that the other is embarrassed) and meta-communicate. The result is important information, which might lead to discovering a new way to move forward, for example: *Can you show me how you are used to do this? Maybe we can draw it on a piece of paper?*

It is also very possible that the other avoids eye contact, turns the other way and keep their arms crossed for totally other reasons. *No, I just got the sun in my eyes... I just heard my phone ringing ... I’m just cold...*

## **Disagreements, conflicts and conflict prevention**

Frictions occur regularly wherever people meet, but usually they are resolved. Often we are not even aware that we do it – we have all practiced conflict prevention and conflict resolution since childhood.

In almost all human interactions there are disagreements of different kinds. In almost all handling of disagreements there is the risk that a conflict will develop. And in almost all

conflicts there will be many opportunities for any of the parties to act in way that facilitates or initiates conflict resolution. Almost all humans do conflict preventive work every day. In almost all so called conflict preventive work you will now and then be on the verge of conflict.

It is important to separate *disagreements – or diverging interests – and conflict*.

Disagreements and different perspectives do not necessarily evolve into conflicts. A disagreement can develop in many different ways, whatever it is about. Dialogues around interest divergences do not have to be peaceful and quiet – it is possible to proceed as long as the parties listen to each other and take account of what they hear, and at the same time trust that those with opposing views do the same.

*Conflict* can be defined as social interaction where the actors' trust in the interaction is decreasing. With *trust in the interaction* is meant that the actor believes that it is worth it to continue the mutual interaction because he/she believes that it will lead somewhere. To work on conflict prevention or solution implies to attend to the inter-human trust.

*Diverging interests* implies that the different interests and needs are incompatible, such that they cannot be fulfilled completely at the same time in the same way as if the other interest did not exist. Depending on how the parties handle this, they will either enter a dialogue where they weigh different needs and try to find an acceptable solution, or go into a conflict. As long as the parties are willing to listen to each other and to interact around the issue they have different ideas about, there are diverging interests but no conflict yet.

Divergences contain a great potential. They imply that there is a difference between the actors' expectations, interests, knowledge, ideas, experiences, goals, needs and perspectives. This means that together, it is possible to find totally new solutions to the problem if you combine the different perspectives. But as we all know, it is not at all certain that this potential is used. Instead distrust often develops, which then increases.

How we choose to act depends partly on how we perceive the phenomenon *disagreement*. If we mainly perceive disagreement as important information about different perspectives, and believe that knowledge about others' perceptions give all the involved a more nuanced picture and a deeper understanding of the mutual dilemma and difficulties you would like to handle, then the chances for a constructive process are good.

If we, on the other hand, first and foremost see disagreements as disturbing and something that should be avoided, then we are more likely to act in ways that prevent expressions of disagreement. We can do that in a thousand ways, and often without really meaning to do so. Examples can be everything from a very rigidly followed agenda or not inviting certain people to the meeting, to sighing and looking anguished. If we act to somehow oppress disagreements, ignore, slide past, sweep them under the carpet etc. then there is a great risk that the trust in the interaction will decrease fast – the more sensitive the situation, the faster.

If any of the parties trust in that those with opposing views *listen, care, understand, value important things, want to come to an agreement* etc. starts to waver, then they risk to get into

a conflict. If the other party understands this situation right, there might be a chance to recover the other's trust. It can be something as simple as saying:

A: "I don't know if I have understood you right, but I get the impression that you think that I don't listen to you. Is that right?"

B: "YES, you don't even try to understand!!!"

A: can then say something like: "OK, I cannot be sure that I have understood what you wanted to say. Could you maybe try to explain it one more time, then I will tell you what I think I have understood."

In an ideal situation, B will accept the suggestion, A shows that he/she has listened and asks B to listen to what he/she has to say, which B accepts. Active listening helps both parties to approach each other. If the dawning conflict is not resolved by one of the parties, or both, acting in ways that recovers the trust in the interaction, it might get worse through alternating destructive interaction.

### **The conflict staircase**

There are many steps on the path to the total breakdown. A schematic description of the conflict process can be pictured as a staircase, where the trust decreases for every downward step. The staircase model builds on the work of Glasl (1999).

- 1) On the first step we have discussions and argumentations. Positions harden, tension increases and we risk talking past each other.
- 2) On the second step we have entered a debate where the polarization is clear. We use our verbal power and ridicule our opponent. We are tactical and "new thinking" becomes unlikely.
- 3) On the third step we steamroll the other. There is no point in talking anymore, we have negative expectations and distrust the other. We no longer feel empathy for our opponent.
- 4) On the fourth step we have started to form malicious pictures. We run advocacy campaigns against our opponent and are very pleased with ourselves.
- 5) On the fifth step we try to make the other lose face. We make overt attacks and try to expose the other.
- 6) On the sixth step we use strategic threats. We are ready to use power to remove the opponent, who we no longer perceive as totally human.
- 7) On step seven we want to hurt the opponent, even though we might also get hurt ourselves.
- 8) On step eight we are focused on destroying the enemy's defense.
- 9) On step nine there is no return. It has become a battle of life and death.

The Conflict staircase is a model that can be used as a diagnostic tool to help understand why the opponents act the way they do. If one or both parties have come some steps down the staircase, you can be totally certain that it will be very difficult to stick to the actual issues at

hand. Before you, hopefully, can return to the issues, you have to move upward in the staircase. You have to try and reestablish the parties' trust in that it can be worth it to start talking and listening to each other.

(Figure on next page: The Conflict Staircase, from Brodal/Nilsson 1999. Built on Glasl's conflict escalation model)