In-the-Moment Reminders for Dialogue

Leadership Development In-the-Moment is using any work situation for three purposes: (1) accelerating progress toward goals; (2) working toward high quality work relationships; and (3) advancing leadership and team development.

All three purposes depend on high quality communication to generate shared understanding of problems, creative solutions, shared commitment, and coordinated implementation.

At the same time, the constant presence of complexity, uncertainty, and pressure will tend to degrade quality of communication and increase the risk of disruptions in alignment and partnerships.

When working through an issue or problem, the critical first step is most often to set aside, for a time, the push toward decision making and final resolution and to protect time for high quality dialogue.

These tools offer a definition of dialogue and a series of one-page reminders—one-page because they are intended to be quick references to support actions in-the-moment.

Because these tools are designed as brief reminders, there are elements that may not be self-explanatory. If you have questions, please contact Neil—neil@njbaker.net.

Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In-the-Moment Reminder for Dialogue</th>
<th>pg. 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-the-Moment Reminder for Checking Understanding</td>
<td>pg. 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-the-Moment Reminder for Active Listening</td>
<td>pg. 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-the-Moment Reminder for Active Telling</td>
<td>pg. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take a small step of low risk. Learn the way to success.</td>
<td>pg. 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>pg. 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In-the-Moment Reminder for Dialogue


Definition
A conversation designed to set aside coming to decisions, answers, or final solutions in order to:
- discover what is important to each participant;
- find mutual definitions of problems, mutual goals, creative solutions, and shared commitment for action;
- maintain feedback about what is working and not working in order to sustain progress and to continually enhance the effectiveness of communication.

Key methods
- Use cycles of active listening, active telling, and checking understanding.
- Explore complex issues by getting many points of view on the table.
- Assure wide, balanced participation.
- View and explore disagreements together, not debate them (agree to disagree).
- Mutually explore the data and observations which are the basis for viewpoints.
- Suspend certainty about right vs. wrong.
- Sustain a perspective of mutual contribution to problems as opposed to blame.

Patterns which can undermine dialogue
- Sequential telling (e.g. idea after idea) without checking for understanding.
- Silence among some participants.
- Arguing for or against, right or wrong--defending views instead of mutually exploring.
- Jumping to decisions early without sufficient time for exchange of views.
- Excluding certain positions from discussion.
- Those with authority dominating the conversation and not soliciting differing opinions.
- Those without authority falling into silence or aggressively pushing viewpoints.
In-the-Moment Reminder for Checking Understanding

Note: Understanding the Ladder of Inference is recommended. See the brief article: The Ladder of Inference.

To check understanding, use powerful questions.

Definitions of powerful questions and examples

- A selection of powerful questions for multiple different situations can be found at Questions that drive change.
- Criteria from John Whitmore Coaching for Performance 2009: Powerful questions...
  - ...elicit a higher order awareness than usual.
  - ...are descriptive vs. judgmental.
  - ...are open vs. closed.
  - ...use what, where, when, how often, how many, who as opposed to why.
- Criteria from Marilee Adams Change Your Questions, Change your Life 2009:
  - Powerful questions come from a learner stance and facilitate learning.
    - What are the facts?
    - What outcomes do I want?
    - What is possible?
    - What responsibility do I and others have?
    - Am I coming from a judger place?
  - Questions that come from a judger stance impede learning.
    - How can I prove I am right?
    - Who is at fault?
    - What’s wrong?
    - What’s wrong with me?
    - What’s wrong with them?

Powerful questions to check understanding with active telling

- Can you tell me what you heard me say?
- What am I missing? Where could I be wrong?
- Does my reasoning make sense?
- What different or opposing views do you have?

Powerful questions to check understanding with active listening

- Here is what I heard you say. Did I get that right?
- What observations and assumptions are you basing that on?
- What data supports this point of view?
- What data may conflict with this point of view?
In-the-Moment Reminder for Active Listening

Definition of active listening
Listening that focuses attention on the speaker and assures that the speaker feels understood

Key methods
- Be like a journalist: ask who, what, where, how, when, how often (avoid "why").
- Repeat back, reflect back, teach back, paraphrase, summarize. Ask "Did I get that right?"
- Use powerful questions.
- Ask about feelings and empathize.
- Offer positive regard and respect.
- Validate and legitimize concerns (e.g. “Anyone would feel that way in this circumstance.”).
- Help the speaker to put his/her best case forward. Champion the speaker's position even if you disagree.
- Ask questions to explore the data and observations on which conclusions are based.

Key barriers and traps
- Listening through or offering one’s own opinions, feelings, agenda, experiences.
- Judging or assuming bad or negative intentions without checking them out.
- Avoiding sensitive topics.
- Jumping to solutions.

Listener thoughts which impact active listening


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listener thoughts which can interfere with active listening</th>
<th>Listener thoughts which facilitate active listening</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What am I concerned about?</td>
<td>What is the speaker concerned about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are my goals? What is my agenda?</td>
<td>What are the speaker's goals and agenda?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I think the person should do?</td>
<td>What does the speaker think he/she should do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would I do in this situation?</td>
<td>What options is the speaker thinking about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What advice should I give?</td>
<td>Is the speaker ready to act? In what ways?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I feel?</td>
<td>What does the speaker feel?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What effect is the speaker having on me?</td>
<td>What effect am I having on the speaker?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In-the-Moment Reminder for Active Telling


Definition
Telling that assures the speaker is understood and minimizes defensiveness or withdrawal in others without the speaker inappropriately abandoning, revising, or holding onto positions

Key methods
- Ask permission to give your point of view.
- Use "I" statements (i.e. "This is the way I am seeing things." as opposed to "This is the way things are."). Don't present ideas and conclusions as the one truth.
- Share where your perceptions come from: behaviors, data, observations.
- Ask for questions about the rationale for your ideas.
- Ask for repeat back or teach back to check understanding.
- Acknowledge negative feelings about your views.
- Seek differing and opposing views.

Key barriers and traps
- Exaggerating by using strong terms such as "always" or "never."
- Abandoning or revising positions to placate or win over others.
- Rigidly holding onto positions and not incorporating accurate and important feedback.
- Assuming negative or bad intentions of others instead of asking about them.
- Trying to control the discussion, persuade, or win an argument.

Thoughts which impact active telling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thoughts which can interfere</th>
<th>Thoughts which can facilitate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have to get them to decide.</td>
<td>They have to choose. I help put all the data and reasoning on the table.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is easy to understand. I do not need to check understanding. They should just get this.</td>
<td>What seems easy to understand can be easily misunderstood. I need to check understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is the way things are. I am right.</td>
<td>This is the way I am seeing things. Each person can only know a piece of the reality in a complex system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If people express negative feelings about my ideas, I will lose.</td>
<td>People are more likely to pull together if they are able to express negative feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one has anything to teach me.</td>
<td>Everyone in the room has an important perspective from which I can learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have to minimize weaknesses and flaws in my position if I am to win the argument.</td>
<td>I must ask others for strengths and limitations of my position if we are to get the best solution.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Take a small step of low risk. Learn the Way to Success.

If you are unsure or lack the level of confidence you hope for about how best to approach a difficult interaction, you are probably on the right track.

Human, team, and organizational situations are ordinarily quite complex. If we are unsure, then we are in a better place to ask questions—a powerful and relatively low risk initial strategy for a difficult conversation. Being certain actually results in high risk for communicating in ways which make others feel unheard, judged, or maneuvered.

To find a starting place in a difficult conversation, consider the context carefully and look for strategies in which you feel some confidence that you can be successful. Think of the interaction as the start of a series of conversations in which you will gradually learn how to be successful. Take one small step at a time and learn what works best.

Guidance for determining level of risk/difficulty of communication strategies

The following table is intended to offer rough, general starting points for consideration. “Levels of potential risk/difficulty” will be highly context-dependent. The final choice of communication strategies is dependent on the situation and your level of confidence. Actively listening is quite low in risk and it usually leads to valuable learning. It might be the starting point for a highly volatile situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of potential risk/difficulty</th>
<th>Communication Strategy</th>
<th>Decision strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Active listening</td>
<td>No decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(or a low-risk decision like agreeing to meet again)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Balance active listening and active telling</td>
<td>Input into a future decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Balance active listening, active telling, and deciding</td>
<td>Decision to be made in the meeting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References

Additional articles and tools available at [neilbakerconsulting.com](http://neilbakerconsulting.com)
Subscribe for free monthly articles and blog posts: [subscribe](#)

5. Lencioni, Patrick *Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team* Jossey-Bass, 2002

**About Neil Baker M.D.**

Neil Baker M.D. works with healthcare organizations to enhance leadership and team impact through Leadership and Team Development In-the-Moment. This means making development as efficient as possible by focusing on immediate work challenges—using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Quality at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for ten years for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Currently, in addition to his consulting practice, he serves as faculty for the leadership track he created for the IHI—Project ECHO collaborative on improving access and office efficiency in primary care.

You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at [neilbakerconsulting.com](http://neilbakerconsulting.com).