

Free Space

Field guide to conversations

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Free space and the art of conversations

Imagine a management team which talks about its own moral teachers, a group of professionals who try to identify their long cherished illusions, directors of health care who reflect on the essence and excellence of their work, directors of schools who describe their vision of quality assurance, consultants who discover that fundamental questions are hidden in unnoticed events, software developers who engage in a debate with their managers about the idea that management interferes with the professionals' work, lawyers who express their considerations in a dilemma in just one sentence, neighbours who engage in a meeting about how they want to live in the neighbourhood, help desk staff who try to find the middle position in emotionally loaded situations, ...

We have been practising philosophical conversations with many different groups and in many different ways and have developed numerous guidelines to facilitate them. We make them available in this field guide for anyone wanting to start and conduct philosophical conversations, which are rich in content, depth and reflection.

In our hi-tech world, we engage in high speed communication, effortless connections and ultra short meetings, but we also notice we cannot do without conversations. In those conversations the underlying questions can be asked, the slow questions, the ones that deserve time and attention, the questions about meaning, structure and the direction of what is happening, about aims and points of departure, about the good, the true, the beautiful and the pleasant. Raising those questions is important for our individual wellbeing. And it also influences the quality of our environment, the place where we live, even society as a whole. There needs to be a place where there is room to reflect - a free space.

In such a space one can have a proper conversation. From our own experience we know that such conversations do not arise by themselves. And the opinion that we all know *how* to engage in such conversations is not evident in practice. Slow thinking is easily replaced by the impatience of achieving a quick answer. If one truly wants to think together, then forms of conversation are needed. Such forms of engagement enable us to stay with the question, for a longer period of time than we are used to in a pleasant and strict way. Staying with the question is an art in itself. It requires one to disentangle oneself from all the actions focused on a specific aim or result. Philosophy – the longing for wisdom – is practised by careful scrutiny of what one wants, does, chooses, decides, achieves. It is a meticulous process of clarifying, formulating and justifying underlying concepts and ideas. It is the process of critically checking, sharing and comparing the different views at stake. To articulate what should be valued – this is also the art essential to organisations. There can be no vision without strategy, no clarity without effectiveness, no direction without focus.

Liberal arts

This book offers an extension of the practical guides in our previous book, *Free Space and Room to Reflect* (2005). It contains pointers to a large number of ways of speaking and writing, each of which aims to make our thinking deeper and more reflective. We have developed them through the past years in all kinds of organisations. Quite often we have started from historical sources. We bring them together here, because they have proved inspiring in our work. Many of the people with whom we worked want to use these familiar and unfamiliar practical guides themselves. All the practical guides foster personal and mutual inquiry, in small and large groups, in formal and informal settings, ranging from the boardroom of the CEO to a local café around the corner.

Like *Free Space and Room to Reflect* the practical guides are divided into the three *liberal arts*, namely, dialectic, rhetoric and grammar, plus the art of the good life, ethics. Some of these guides require some practice or an experienced facilitator, others don't and can be used right away. But all practical guides lead to conversations which have a high level of personal and mutual inquiry and reflection. We believe such conversations to be 'the most fruitful and natural exercise of the mind' (Montaigne) and 'the most fulfilling and highest activity of a free person' (Aristotle). Beyond that,

these conversations are of vital importance in our daily hectic, kaleidoscopic lives, in which we need to exchange our own visions and values to experience togetherness amidst mutual differences.

Socrates is the founder of the conversation of inquiry and philosophical reflection in the European tradition. In every conversation he took part in, he investigated serious questions in depth. By exchanging and challenging opinions he led his companions to measure themselves and their acts and to inspect their beliefs about what is important in man's life. His conversations were always aimed at assessing what was of value in somebody's life. To get there he always started by asking somebody to formulate his beliefs about a question carefully. But then he took a more confrontational stance - he didn't only want to know what that person thought of the question, but also wanted to find out how that person dealt with that question practically, in daily life. Investigating your own ideas is the first thing; investigating your own behaviour, attitude and way of life is the second thing. Socratic inquiry is basically an inquiry into yourself.

Free space

Socrates must have been a master in tempting other people to engage in reflective conversation. He was convinced that intelligence or reasonableness is not just an individual affair. To foster it one needs other people and especially people who are willing to think with you and at the same time are able to create doubts. By using the friction arising from different opinions and approaches one can achieve what one cannot do when one is alone, that is, formulating what really is of value, to find an inspiring idea, to create an image of a good life. That is what Socrates tried to establish in his conversations.

Such conversations are quite different from a consultation, a call for help, a meeting with a coach, or the construction of a solution. Socrates' conversations were free – not aimed at helping or counselling, nor at the development of a strategy or a solution, nor at the achievement of a specific result. His conversations were aimed at creating a free place and room for reflection. In the old days a distinction was made between the free and the useful arts, the *artes liberales* and the *artes serviles*. The free arts are practised to bring free space into one's life. These are the arts of a contemplative, reflective life, the *vita contemplativa*. The other arts are the useful ones, necessary to fulfil a certain profession. They belong to the *vita activa*. The first type of life one leads for its own sake, the second type one leads to achieve something else.

We think it's most important to create free space amid the hectic rush of daily life, a place where one can stand instead of run, where one can shift from doing to thinking. It's not only because good ideas arise in slow moments, when there is room for reflection, on one's own or in meeting other people. It's also important as a counterweight to the dominance of the useful. Life is more than just a chain of useful moments. We also need moments of play, celebration, spare time, ease. "We are busy (restless) so as to have ease", Aristotle says. In a society which values business and being busy so highly, it's difficult to sense the deeper meaning of 'ease'. Interestingly both in Greek and Latin 'being busy' had a negative connotation, *a-scholia*, *neg-otium*. Free space, *scholè*, should be the measure, not the deviation.

Excellence

The focus in the useful arts is on the acquisition of expert skills, as a manager, a teacher, a doctor, a lawyer, or whatever. The useful arts develop one professionally and socially and in exercising them one increases one's skills. The liberal arts, on the contrary, are focused on the development of the intrinsic human capacities – consciousness, communication, language, thinking, speaking, writing. So they are about skills of a different kind. These are not specific professional or social skills, but general, human skills – reasonableness, excellence, freedom, living the good life. Aristotle defines what we aim at in the exercise of the liberal arts like this, "Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it." [Nicomachean ethics, 1106 b 36, translated by W.D. Ross].

Aristotle wanted to distinguish between expertise and mastery – an expert is mainly interested in making the right decision in a specific case and in how that decision can best be effected. Mastery is about a state of mind in which one makes the right decisions. What kind of attitude, of world view and of thinking is needed for that state? What kind of a person is someone who *has* reason and practical wisdom? The expert is focused on solving a problem, the person of practical wisdom is focused on an ‘idea’. By ‘idea’ we mean the underlying pattern in a question or an issue. An idea shows one how different parts of a complex issue are connected to each other and when we get the ‘idea’ we are able to relate all the aspects of a particular issue to each other and see a meaningful whole. An idea, although it’s abstract, depicts reality at its best, reality when it is ‘in shape’, just like when you and I are ‘in shape’.

In daily life the useful and the free arts overlap. Most often both kinds of skills are needed. The practical guides in this book contribute to the development and application of the free arts, the joy of inquiry and reflection in a free space. It is a serious and necessary play, to be engaged in the free arts, and often demanding and challenging. It may even be useful, if you want it to be. But above all it is a beautiful and fulfilling play, fit for free spirits.

Practical guides: how do they work?

For reflective conversations in organisations one needs a proper way to work. Otherwise confusion arises about ‘What kind of conversation are we having here anyway?’ Confusion about the format damages the quality of a conversation. That’s why we have a wide variety of practical guides in this book, so that one can choose a specific format for a specific topic or circumstance.

Technical skills and freedom to move

Some practical guides are similar, others are surprisingly different. The one is easier than the other. With some one can start a conversation right away, without any preparation. Others require some study or practice before one can handle them well. And finally there are some which require a high level of expertise or experience as a facilitator. Such a gradual increase in difficulty is true of any art, so and in the liberal arts. But it is not only the level of expertise that counts; there is something else, something that goes beyond being skilful. In music it is called ‘musicality’. There too, in music, it is true that one should practise long and systematically. That is the only way to master the necessary skills. ‘Musicality’ is different from having mastered music’s technical skills, it is the feeling for what it is all about, an ability to move beyond technique and to play. It is a kind of freedom, not limited by rules or by the limits of skills, something like the ability to do exactly what is needed in a situation. An experienced artist knows how to mould the technique into the shape he needs, so that his play is free and not limited. The practitioner of the liberal arts has the same aim.

All the practical guides we present presuppose this combination of technique and freedom. They do invite precision in their use, specifying where one should be strict and accurate, identifying where ‘roughly speaking’ is not good enough. At the same time the practical guides need to be interpreted again and again. Like the scores of music, they demand a personal reading and an individual interpretation. One cannot apply them as if they were mechanical, without paying attention. The art of using the practical guides is to learn to play with them, so as to master the technique of each of them in such a way that one can set oneself free from them, turn them into music, with one’s heart and soul in it.

The pleasure of a practical guide

We have made the guides as practical as possible. Bear in mind that all guides are meant to facilitate a conversation, so that there is a mutual exchange of thoughts and ideas. At the same time there is an inquiry into oneself, and that is true for each of the participants. This is a subtle and delicate aim. It will not be achieved when one ‘just tries something’. Rather think about the aim of a particular guide and what is needed to achieve that aim. All the practical guides help to establish a certain kind of inquiry. We have tried to describe them in such a way that the reader will look forward to making use of them and experiencing the feeling of ‘This will be a pleasure, but very serious at the same time’. We think that this is what a conversation should be, a serious play, with relevant issues at stake.

We have arranged the practical guides inside each of the liberal arts in such a way that they work like an introduction. The less complicated ones are at the beginning. Then there are the practical guides that lead to conversations in depth. Some build on previous ones, others show how one can approach the inquiry from a different angle. ‘Dare to bring in variety’, is our theme. But once you have chosen, you should stick to the format of that particular guide. It offers clarity and support, it helps the participants to focus on the content, to pay attention to the issue that needs clarification. The format of the practical guide supports the inquiry; it helps to preclude conversations from wandering off into different directions and ending nowhere. If things work well, the format will be pleasure.

16 Little time – good conversation

Even when there is only a little time, we would still like to have a good conversation. That is possible if you use the following approach which helps you not to lose track of the structure and the time.

Time

Agree how much time is to be spent on the dialogue. In a small group half an hour could be enough.

Topic

Select the topic. Exchange some thoughts about its relevance. Describe the topic in a few words and write them down.

Questions

Formulate some questions about the topic that are worth being investigated.

Experiences

Collect personal experiences that relate to the topic – “When and how did you experience this topic in your own life or work?” for instance. Try to be as concrete as possible.

Responses

Ask questions about the experiences. Maintain an atmosphere of joint investigation. Think with the other participants, not against them. Make room for new thoughts

The essence

Each participant states what he finds the essence of the topic to be. What really hits you here? Have them read aloud. Ask one of the participants to make a short report of the conversation, including these statements.

Reflection

Take a few minutes to reflect. How did it go? What should you keep in mind for a next time? Make an appointment for a follow up.