

Defining and Designing Successful Conversations – Reflections on the Delta Dialogues.

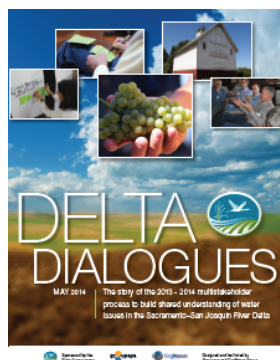
Groupaya recently wrapped up a two-year project facilitating a series of dialogues around contentious water issues in California's Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. As we reflected on the process of facilitating the [Delta Dialogues](#), we found ourselves reflecting on the process of dialogue itself – how do we design for success, and how do we measure successful dialogue? With a bit of introduction to the context of our work in the Delta, we want to share our learnings, recently published in our [Delta Dialogues Phase II Report](#).

Context: What were the Delta Dialogues?

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta provides water to 25 million people throughout California and spans three million acres of fertile land. It hosts 750 species of plants and wildlife, including more than 55 species of fish. It hosts half a million acres of farmland and is home to half a million people and 200,000 jobs. Most of the Delta is below sea level, protected by over a thousand miles of levees that need maintenance and upkeep. Protecting this region, its inhabitants, their way of life, and the water that runs through it is a critical issue for all of California.

Hosted by the [Delta Consevancy](#), the Delta Dialogues brought together a representative set of stakeholders who care about the future of California's Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to have a different type of conversation. Almost every month for two years the group of 15 representatives – farmers, politicians and agency representatives, engineers, environmentalists, and water specialists – met to talk face-

to-face about shared challenges around water use in California. The stakes were high, as some participants (federal agencies and water contractors) had spent many years and millions of dollars creating a \$68 billion proposal for channeling water from the Delta to the rest of California, and many other participants – for many different reasons – vehemently opposed this proposal. Through these dialogues the group got to [sit in circle and get to know each other](#) as individuals; they went on site visits in which they toured each other’s “home turf” and learned about each other’s interest groups and perspectives on the issues at hand; and they worked together to explore resolutions to some seriously sticky problems.



The deeper goal was to have meaningful conversations that could inform and catalyze a new type of shared understanding and – in the long term – action around the future of the Delta. In assessing how we did with reaching this goal, we found ourselves facing the challenging question of what constitutes breakthrough and success in a dialogue process.

The post below, originally printed in the [Delta Dialogues Phase II Report](#), offers an in depth and in context reflection on this question.

Note on the Process of Dialogue

Dialogue is not easy. Water is a contentious topic in California, and as you read the individual interviews of Delta Dialogues participants, you will see how challenging it is to bring a group like this together. Everyone has different opinions, needs and interests. Some participants wanted to

pursue a conversation about governance in the Delta; others did not. Some wanted to spend more time in the drought conversation; others thought it was a distraction. There was tension between those who wanted more action and those who wanted more reflection. There was tension between short-term thinking (“let’s figure out some quick hits”) and long-term thinking (“let’s figure out governance”). Some wanted to focus on making the BDCP work; others wanted to throw it out and start from scratch. Some wanted to focus on low-hanging fruit and incremental change; others wanted to focus on systemic change.

As a result of all these tensions, the dialogue process was often emotional, unpredictable, and messy. But it was also incredibly powerful. In this section of the report, we step back and share a little about how we, as facilitators of the dialogues, think about dialogue, in hopes that it might inspire you to try some of this in your own meetings about difficult topics. Below we focus on the idea of facilitating breakthroughs, we share some key insights from the Dialogues for more effective water governance in California, and we reflect on a few of our favorite moments of the last few years.

What constitutes a breakthrough?

It is laudable for busy people to show up over and over again—taking an entire day out of every month—to engage in a new kind of conversation and see if something new emerges. Who has time for daylong dialogues that may not yield substantive change? To keep them coming back, it helps if there are meaningful breakthroughs along the way.

If you spent a long time discussing water in California with a

very diverse group, what would you consider a “breakthrough”?

- Somebody from a fisheries agency becomes willing to talk about an option that could be problematic for fisheries?
- The head of a state agency acknowledges that the conversation on governance is making him question the approach of his own agency?
- Someone representing in-Delta agriculture acknowledging that “we are spoiled in California” because we haven’t ever really had to plan for weather?
- A senior water rights holder saying that senior water rights can’t be inviolable?
- Somebody from a company that has paid tens of millions of dollars for a detailed plan saying that maybe we should have a conversation where we start from scratch asking for what we really want?
- Somebody from a water company saying “After all of these years, now I understand why the In-Delta folks don’t trust us!”

For us, the first accomplishment is getting a group to agree to spend time together in dialogue. Once in the room, we get excited when we see folks trying to listen and speak with more openness and curiosity. Then, any acknowledgment of an “ah ha” or a shift in one’s feelings or thoughts feels like progress. Ultimately, we seek to cultivate meaningful shifts in thinking and feeling that could eventually lead to new ways of acting for the whole group.

What generates a breakthrough?

Why is it that sometimes, when someone speaks, everyone gets more engaged in the conversation, and before you know it, the whole group is going to an unexpected place in their thinking?

Why is it that at other times, when that same person speaks, everyone starts mentally checking out, thinking about a problem back at the office or the farm, instead of focusing what's going on in the room?

We like to think of facilitating dialogue as making a stew: you need a pot or a container to throw the ingredients in. If you put the ingredients directly on the fire, they would just get burned. But if you throw them in a pot (e.g., the "container") and then put the container on the fire, the different flavors have a chance to deepen, to mix, and to create a new flavor that is not any one of them, but a combination of all. The new flavor tastes richer than any individual flavor. Likewise, we expect the collective thinking that emerges to be more intelligent than the thinking of any one individual. Our work is all about building the container for productive conversation so that new ways of thinking and acting have a chance to emerge.

1. We build a container for dialogue and constructive conversation through several tools.

We:

Ground Rules

(From participant agreement)

- Focus on understanding rather than on persuasion
- Get curious when I disagree
- Assume positive intent + intelligence
- Listen for the wiser collective intent that is trying to emerge

Guidelines for Participation

- Get some level of agreement between the stakeholders on the Goals of the dialogues.
- Create a Participant Agreement that each stakeholder

reads and commits to, including guidelines or “Ground Rules” for participation which Campbell and Nancy pointed to in their introduction.

- Review the Ground Rules at the beginning of each meeting, to remind people of how to foster a more productive conversation.

Knower's Mindset	Learner's Mindset
I am right. You are wrong.	We each have a piece of the "truth" puzzle.
If I were in control, I could set this straight.	We can only come up with the best answer together.
This is my opportunity to make my case.	This is my opportunity to get help making my case more effectively + help others make theirs + I want to do some new thinking, together, here!

Knower's Mindset v.
Learner's Mindset

- Introduce the distinction between Knower's Mindset and Learner's Mindset and encouraged folks in every meeting to be in Learner's Mindset.
- Introduce the distinction between Relational Thinking and Either/Or thinking.
- Do Check-In's at the beginning of each meeting to help get everyone's voice into the room [For more on check-ins, see [this article at Zocalo Public Square.](#)]
- Do Checkout's at the end of each meeting to get a pulse on how people are feeling, gauge the progress made in the meeting, and get a sense for what the group wants to tackle in the next conversation.

2. We reinforce the container through several critical facilitation disciplines.

We:

- **Ask a lot of questions.** In meetings focused on high-conflict topics, people have a tendency to focus on advocating for their own positions. We can go into “fight” mode, wanting to win the argument and show others the “right” way to think about the situation. We listen from the place of “what is missing” in the other’s argument, ignoring where there might be relevant grains of truth. We stop asking questions, and instead, hurl statements at one another. To break the logjam, the simple act of asking questions like, “Why do you think that? What is the data that informs your thoughts? What has you feel so strongly about it?” can completely shift the tone of the conversation and therefore the quality of the thinking.
- **Encourage the conversation to be grounded in data.** In the August 2013 meeting, when several participants were having a very murky conversation, expressing disagreement at a very high level, we also introduced The Ladder of Inference. The Ladder of Inference refers to the underlying steps (or leaps!) in logic that have led people to the views they hold.



Adapted from the work of Chris Argyris & Donald Schon.



Ladder of Inference

Whether we are deciding something as simple as where to eat lunch or as complex as what to do about fish in the Delta, we SELECT DATA we think is important to pay attention to, we MAKE ASSUMPTIONS about it, from which

we DRAW CONCLUSIONS. These conclusions then inform what data we pay attention to, so it is easy to get locked into circular loops of logic. By encouraging people to share how they got to their conclusions, we make it easier for people to understand each other's thinking, to challenge one another's thinking, and to have a true dialogue.

- **Map the conversation.** In the Delta Dialogues, we use a tool called [dialogue mapping](#). Mapping a conversation enables a group to more easily track what they have talked about. It also reveals where they are developing shared understanding and where they are not. People are less likely to get stuck making points over and over again because they see their point of view represented for everyone to see; they know that they have been listened to. The best mapping supports the knowledge creation process by driving the group to find the most productive questions to explore.
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Three key insights for California government

One simple form of breakthrough comes when the group surfaces previously hidden assumptions, perspectives, and complaints, as well as ideas for positive change. Here we feature a few of the most powerful insights that we think might support more effective water governance in California into the future.

1. Trust. In-Delta folks will fight any solution that only provides written assurances and does not also provide physical assurances that the Delta won't be over-pumped.

The BDCP currently plans for tunnels capable of carrying 9,000 cubic feet per second of water, which is far more than should be pumped during dry periods. While there are many legal restrictions on over-pumping during dry periods, legal assurances can be overturned, whereas physical assurances (such as having smaller tunnels) cannot. Trust is too broken for in-Delta folks to agree to mere legal assurances.

2. Engagement. One-way communication, no matter how well-intentioned or thorough, does not constitute effective engagement. As consultants, we have witnessed this over and over again as leaders try make change in their organizations. This lesson was illustrated beautifully when a senior water agency participant expressed frustration that the large number of public meetings they had hosted and the public posting of thousands of pages of material wasn't considered practicing transparency. It was also quite an eye opener when a county supervisor pointed out, "You call publishing a 40,000 page updated report without showing track changes 'transparency'?!"

3. Participation. You can't leave a key group out of a change process. They will fight changes to oth and nail. This is true in business, in nonprofits, in government, everywhere. If you want people to be committed to a solution, you have to involve them in designing it. If the BDCP goes ahead, figure out how to involve the Delta in governance in a more powerful way. If it doesn't, involve the Delta in designing the next solution.

Powerful moments from the Dialogues



It has been an honor to facilitate the Delta Dialogues over the last few years. We have had many powerful moments with this dedicated group of people. These special moments— both emotionally touching moments of connection as well as breakthrough moments—are why we do this work. Here are a few of the most notable moments:

- During a lunchtime conversation, we heard a farmer share a memory about his grandfather sitting him down on his knee when he was about 8 years old to tell him, “These are the people we trust. Those are the people we don’t trust.”

Impact: It was the first time we understood how deep our water conflict in California runs. In some families, it is literally inter-generational.

- In several conversations, we discovered that everyone had stories about how their stakeholder group’s trust had been betrayed by the government or another stakeholder group. Every single group had experienced broken promises. It was a real surprise. While participants were quite clear about how their own stakeholder group had been betrayed, they just didn’t know about how other stakeholder groups had also been wronged.

Impact: This raises many questions: How do we move

forward when there is so little trust? How can we build trust over and over again, even as future politicians are free to make their own choices and to unmake agreements of the past?

- In another conversation, participants discovered that they have each, at some point in their career, felt misunderstood by not only other stakeholder groups, but by their own stakeholder group as well.

Impact: This is a reminder of the challenges of visionary leadership: when we try to make big change happen, we are risking relationship, community, reputation, and sometimes even livelihood. How do we support one another in taking such big risks?

- We had a powerful conversation in Phase I about what it means to be a leader “for the whole” and not just your stakeholder group.

Impact: This led us to ask some key questions: As you start to consider other perspectives and look for solutions that require fair compromise, “How do you not get too far away from your stakeholder group’s position? How do you influence your stakeholder group to care about other stakeholder groups and not just their own interests?”

- Every time we heard someone take the risk to say something that was potentially counter to their stakeholder group’s position.

Impact: Inspiration! Minds can change. Real dialogue can lead to previously unthinkable solutions.