

Restorative Dialogue

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Restorative Dialogue (RD) is a key component of Restorative Justice (RJ). RJ is a collaborative, co-creative system of jurisprudence that uses time proven processes combined with age-old values and principles to facilitate personal and relational healing and wholeness. RJ approaches an offense as a wound, and considers the healing of that wound to be justice. Proponents of RJ believe peaceful communities, peaceful organizations, and peaceful families are a result of peaceful relationships.

Like RJ, RD considers an offense to be harm experienced by a person as a result of the action of another, not the breaking of a rule or law. Unlike the retributive stimulus/response justice model which requires the implementation of a binary US v. THEM dichotomy, RD pursues inspired transformation through a process devised to facilitate an empathetic, collaborative, non-binary approach to relational challenges. Since RD requires voluntary participation, the decision of how to address an issue is not an imposition, but, rather, an agreement developed and embraced by stakeholders - those who have an interest in, or have been affected by, a particular action.

Use of the RD process affords stakeholders an opportunity to collectively determine how they choose to address conflict through consensual decisions. And, whereas the retributive model tends to result in classification and division, the RD model is designed to facilitate collaboration, reconciliation, and the building of community.

Process

Numerous techniques are utilized in the RD process. Dialogue through storytelling is a tool used by indigenous peoples for centuries and is foundational to RD. Our common humanity can be revealed and realized through first person perspective storytelling.

The yang to the yin of storytelling is active and empathetic listening. Since RD facilitates conversation (cooperative) rather than discussion (adversarial), stakeholders are relieved of the need to respond to the speaker and can give themselves fully to the art of listening. Intentional listening can result in participants gaining understanding and forming different perspectives toward those whom they have harmed, or the person who harmed them.

RD methodology is used to construct an environment conducive to honest, respectful conversation between parties in conflict. Stakeholders may meet face-to-face as they are guided by a trained facilitator in the sharing of information and perspectives. It is common for the actual dialogue of the stakeholders to be preceded by individual participant preparation by an RD practitioner.

The circle process is a often used in RD. Circles are made up of stakeholders and can be convened for the purpose of community building, decision-making, or addressing conflict. Circles may also be used to expose stakeholders to new ideas and different perspectives which can result in improved cognition, altered realities, and better understanding.

Values

Shared values can provide a point of connection between stakeholders. Common values embraced by RD include, but are not limited to:

- Empathy
- Compassion
- Trust
- Integrity
- Honesty
- Respect

Principles

There are no “official” principles associated with RD. However, there are generally recognized propositions found to facilitate empathy, understanding, healing, and relationship restoration. These principles are as old as recorded history and can be found in ancient religious scriptures, normative ethical theories, and secular philosophy.

Relational healing can be helped when stakeholders gain an understanding and personal application of:

- **Recognition** – Was a harm experienced?
- **Responsibility** – Who caused the harm?
 - Responsible **FOR an act or word**
 - **Cause and Effect**
 - Non-binary
 - No judgment of right/wrong, good/bad
- **Accountability** – Who experienced the harm?
 - Person(s) responsible for harm make themselves accountable to those who experienced harm
- **Confession** – What was the **SPECIFIC HARM**?
 - Empathetic expression of trauma and emotions experienced by others
 - Not recitation of facts
- **Transformation** – External evidence of internal change
- **Forgiveness** – Release of desire for retribution and repayment
- **Reconciliation** – Peace between parties
 - Release of animosity and resentment
 - Restoration of friendship
- **Restitution** – An act that results in what the stakeholders agree is the restoration of wholeness

Relationships may be restored, and personal and communal peace can be experienced, when stakeholders recognize and apply these principles.

The Role of Facilitator/Circle-keeper

RD is a personal journey traveled in community with others. The RD process breaks down the hierarchy of authority freeing individual stakeholders from the constraints of arbitrary norms and conventions. Consequently, there are no positions of leader, instructor, teacher, or student in

RD. Stakeholders possess equal value by virtue of their shared humanity, and the validity of perspectives expressed by participants is recognized and respected.

Ordinarily, RD processes require one or more persons to act as facilitator. The facilitator is sometimes referred to as the circle-keeper or mediator. The facilitator directs the dialogue, usually through questions or prompts posed to the participants. The facilitator may also utilize props, such as a talking piece and centerpiece, and other demonstrative tools if they believe their use would benefit the process.

A talking piece can be any object capable of being handed from one stakeholder to another to help facilitate respectful conversation. When used, the participant who possesses the talking piece is shown respect by the other stakeholders through their active and empathetic listening. The person holding the talking piece conversely demonstrates respect to their fellow participants by speaking succinctly, or sitting in silence, then passing the talking piece to another stakeholder.

Some facilitators use centerpieces placed on the floor in the middle of the circle.. Centerpieces might include candles, pictures, or other objects which remind stakeholders of the values and principles they want reflected during the dialogue. Oftentimes stakeholders are encouraged to place in the centerpiece personal items which are meaningful to them, and relevant to the purpose of the dialogue.

The facilitator does not dictate or demand, but merely directs conversation in a way that creates a safe environment in which participants can expose their most intimate vulnerabilities. A compassionate and thoughtful facilitator can help stakeholders find personal and relational peace and healing, but, ultimately, each participant must travel their own restorative journey.

RD involves the use of an ancient process developed by indigenous peoples to facilitate conversation, understanding, decision-making, the addressing of conflict, and the restoration of relationships. RD can help participants realize their common humanity through the telling of stories and the sharing of thoughts, feelings, and experiences which may result in empathic understanding, changed perspectives, altered realities, and healed relationships.