

Consumer-Provider Dialogues Guidelines for Preparation

Introduction

The Consumer-Provider Collaborative has been organizing and promoting dialogues in Allegheny County since 1998. The dialogues developed during this period have taken a variety of forms (including a "trialogue" which included family members). The underlying purpose that is common to all the dialogues is to provide an opportunity for service providers and service recipients to come together in a context outside the roles they have traditionally assumed within the service system. Dialogues are designed to provide an atmosphere where people can speak candidly about their respective experiences and thereby create a basis for mutual understanding, respect and growth. Dialogues are about recovery for both consumers and providers.

This guide is intended to assist organizations interested in setting up dialogues to select a format which is best for their circumstances. It will also provide useful information to those organizations regarding the process of dialogue development and tasks to be completed in that process. In addition to these guidelines, it may be helpful to have persons with experience in dialogues to be part of the planning and facilitation process.

History

Dialogues have been occurring in a variety of situations and forms for a number of years, but they were developed formally by New York State Office of Mental Health in the early 1990.s The Center for Mental Health services of SAMHSA brought this process to a National level in 1997 with a two day dialogue between leaders in mental health services and service users over two day period with the idea of promoting the process on the local level. The dialogue that took place in Pittsburgh in 1998 was one of the first of the local dialogues that came out of that initiative and Pittsburgh has been one of the most active centers for dialogue development since that time. To date, nine dialogues have occurred in Allegheny County, all developed with assistance from Consumer Provider Collaborative, with several more in planning. The C-P Collaborative has recently become associated with the Allegheny County Coalition for Recovery (AACR) which plans to promote the dialogue as a tool for recovery education.

Planning a Dialogue

There are several elements and decisions involved in planning a dialogue. First of all, developers need to decide who should be involved in the planning process. Once that has been determined, the planning group will need to consider the logistics of holding a dialogue such as identifying a place, a time and how to cover expenses. These question will of course depend on the type of dialogue that will take place. The number of participants, the amount of space, the refreshments to be provided, the length of the dialogue and written materials to be provided are some of the decisions that will need to be made before proceeding too far with logistic considerations. Once these things have been determined, some additional details will need be considered. How will participants be selected and invited? How will the dialogue be named and what topics should be discussed? How will the agenda be constructed and what type of format

should be used? How will the dialogue be facilitated, recorded and evaluated? Some of the options that can be considered will be discussed in the sections that follow.

The Planning Committee

A planning committee will ideally be small enough to make decisions easily but large enough to represent all participants' interests and to assure that all necessary tasks will be completed. This will usually mean about ten people. Another option is to include a greater number of people in the initial planning, with a smaller core planning or leadership group, which can participate consistently and more intensely empowered to make the majority of the decisions. The planning committee should have one or two people who have had some experience with dialogue planning if possible, or if not, it should have access to people who can provide who can advise it about dialogue planning.

Participants

One of the first decisions that will need to be made is the composition of the dialogue participants. A group of about twenty 20 participants is usually a pretty good size for carrying out these discussions, particularly if a limited amount of time is available to conduct it. Larger groups can work if there is ample time for people to get to know one another and assure that everyone's voice is heard. Smaller groups may work better for focused discussions where time is limited.

It is often desirable to include a larger number of people in a dialogue. This problem can be solved by planning for up to 75 participants to assemble for an opening plenary session where some introductory comments can be made and then dividing up into a number of smaller concurrent "Dialogue groups". A closing plenary session summarizing the smaller groups' discussions is often included in these types of arrangements. A design that could accommodate an even larger number of participants (75-150) would be an observed dialogue. In this design, a dialogue takes place with a group of 15-20 which is observed by the remainder of participants in a kind of town hall meeting arrangement. Participants outside the observed discussants might be invited to make comments periodically at designated times.

In general, it is a good rule to make dialogue participants as diverse as possible. All participants should be able to come with an open mind and be willing to listen. Provider participants should include people from several parts of the service system, including administration. Representation of consumers should include people with a variety of reasons for involvement in the service system. Having said that, there may be some circumstances in which it would be desirable to select a certain group of professionals or consumers to conduct a more focused dialogue around a particular topic or issue. In either case representation of providers and consumers should be roughly equal. A clear majority of one group or another might be intimidating to the minority.

Once the basic structure is set, it will be necessary to identify the individual participants, and planners must have some method for prioritizing the individuals to be invited. It usually works well to develop a list of potential invitees based on the various categories that would be represented. For example, the committee may decide that there should be two administrators,

three social workers, one psychologist, four case managers, two nurses and three psychiatrists. Ideally, having a list of two or three names for each position would assure that someone would be able to fill that slot. Likewise, organizers may say that they would like to have three people with severe psychotic illnesses, five with mood problems, two with personality disorders, four with substance use problems and at least one with a dual disorder. A list of potential participants could be generated in the same way. It is often helpful to delegate the responsibility for inviting individuals to various planning team members so that invitations can be made personally and the burden does not fall on one or two persons.

In larger dialogues, a different kind of process may be needed. In dialogues designed for training purposes for example, a list of professionals will be drawn from the agency that wishes to do the training. Consumer participants might be selected either from within or from outside the agency depending on how the committee views the relationship between consumers and providers. More will be said about this later.

The main point is to define some process for identifying participants, inviting them, and then maintain a list of those who have agreed to attend. In many cases, the first choices may not be able to attend, and a second and even third round of calls may be needed to fill all of the identified slots.

Theme, Format and Agenda

Before extending invitations, it will be important to be able to explain to invitees what they are being invited to. A theme or title for the dialogue is a helpful starting point. The title should reflect what the dialogue is about in some way. Some examples follow:

Listening to Each Other for a Change
Constructive Collaborations and Mutual Respect in Recovery Processes
Standing in Someone Else's Shoes: Talking to each other
Consumer - Provider Collaboration in Quality Improvement.

It is often helpful to develop a brief script of what is to be covered in extending an invitation, especially if a number of people will be involved. If invitations are being extended more broadly, a letter would be composed. The script or letter would include the title, a brief description of what a dialogue is and why it is being organized. It should also include the date, time and location of the dialogue, and give the invitee some idea of the time commitment that would be involved. In order to include the latter details, a format for the dialogue must be selected. This will have been determined to some extent when a number of participants was decided upon. Other issues must be resolved. How long will the dialogue last? What accommodations will be made for participants? Will a meal(s) be served? Where will the dialogue be held? What transportation/parking arrangements will be made? Once this basic information is determined, potential invitees can be contacted and commitments for participation can be requested. Further information about the event such as agenda and other preparatory material can be sent at a later date.

Budget

It will be necessary to determine how much the event will cost. This will vary a great deal depending on how many people will participate and what type of refreshments and or meals will be served. It may be possible to obtain support from the sponsoring agency, or in some cases outside support must be obtained. The actual expenses may be quite minimal if a location is available that is free, or if there are some ways to obtain donations of food. The resources available may have some impact on the type of dialogue that is developed. A sample budget for a dialogue of 50 people follows:

Meeting Space (1day)	\$500
coffee and donuts	\$50
Box Lunch \$6@	\$300
Facilitator Expenses	\$100
Materials	\$100
Total	\$1050

So, a one day dialogue involving 50 people might have a cost of \$1050. In many cases, some of these expenses can be avoided or transferred to another source. For the purposes of raising money to cover expenses, it is always useful to create a budget so that you can say how the money you are asking for will be spent. It will also be important to save receipts as money is spent in case funders would like documentation of expenses actually incurred as opposed to those projected.

Designing the Dialogue.

Dialogues may take several forms and may be developed for a variety of purposes. The simplest dialogue is that of a single group of about 20 people. The dialogue can be an open free form discussion or it can be divided into few topically organized sessions. In either case the same group will be meeting throughout. Larger dialogues will require the formation of smaller groups for discussion. When this is the case, planners must determine how the small groups and facilitators will interact. Most commonly group members remain together and facilitators rotate. This will serve both the establishment of continuity, while providing some cross pollination between groups. It is possible to rotate group members, but this is generally not recommended. A general rule of thumb is that the longer group members are together, the more comfortable they become in expressing themselves.

It may be helpful to select topics for each dialogue session. For a day long dialogue, typically three such sessions are held in addition to the plenary sessions. Each session should last at least one hour, but 90 minutes or more is usually better. Starting with a topic may help stimulate discussion at the beginning of the sessions. Groups more advanced or experienced with the dialogue process may not require this structure, and if the members of the dialogue group are particularly active, they may not want this either. The point of the topic is not to restrict the discussion in most cases, but rather to stimulate discussion. A few topics that might be chosen follow:

What is recovery?
Stigma and Prejudice
Developing a Recovery Plan
Power and Choice
What we call each other
Graduation
Empowerment
Mutuality in the C-P Relationship
Obstacles to Collaboration
Setting Boundaries

There may be significant overlap in the topics selected, but this should not be overly concerning. All of these topics should come up in any case given ample time for discussion. The main rule that facilitators should follow is that the discussion should stay focused on the relationship between the consumer and the provider, and should not focus on issues that are unrelated to it (i.e., the problems with managed care). This leads us to the next topic.

Participant Preparation

It is usually helpful to prepare participants in some way for the dialogue experience. An orientation will allow them to use the time available most efficiently and reduce the time needed to explain the dialogue process at the time of the event. Most commonly some written material is provided prior to the event explaining what the dialogue is and what it hopes to accomplish. Some basic information about how the discussion will be conducted and what the participants will be expected to do can make the event go much smoother. Providing the written information does not eliminate the need to provide some orientation on dialogue day, but it will reduce the time needed to do so. In some cases, the planning committee may decide to have an orientation session with participants prior to the event. The method of preparation matters less than the fact that it occurs in some form.

Facilitation of the Dialogue.

The dialogue will often be as good as the person(s) facilitating it. A good facilitator can stimulate healthy interaction and lively discussion even in a group where many of the participants are shy or nervous. Poor facilitation might allow the discussion to deteriorate or to be monopolized by one or two outspoken and assertive people. Ideally, the dialogue will provide an atmosphere where people feel respected and listened to. They should not feel that their comments are not valuable or that their comments are being criticized. The main reason for the facilitators is to assure that this environment is maintained.

It usually works best to select a facilitator that has some experience with dialogues if this is possible. Co-facilitation, a consumer paired with a provider usually works well. As mentioned above, the facilitator's role is to ask thought provoking questions, to make sure that the discussion is orderly, and to help insure that everyone has a chance to speak. The facilitator should not offer their own opinions, but in some cases, may share their own experiences and

feelings. As general rule, the less they have to say, the better the dialogue is going.

One additional role the facilitators may take on is helping to set up the rules for the discussion. Some examples of rules that are commonly used are

1. Be Respectful of Others, do not interrupt
2. Try to listen and understand
3. Do not personalize the comments of others
4. Talk about your own experience and feelings, don't make assumptions about others
5. Try to accept the thoughts and feelings of others rather than arguing.
6. Encourage less assertive members to speak, moderators will give preference to those who have spoken least.
7. Wait to be recognized by the moderator before you speak.

Dialogue Participants may choose some or all of these rules, and may have some additions of their own. It is ultimately their choice.

Evaluation

The committee will want to develop some method for getting feedback about the event and especially about how it might be improved. Standard evaluation forms can be used, or the committee may want to ask questions more focused on the dialogue itself. Specific questions with a likert scale is often used. It may be most helpful to have some opportunity for people to comment of their experience, both in written and verbal forms. When time permits, it is often very informative to use some time at the end of the formal program to ask for comments regarding the quality of the experience. Some times it is easier for people to make these kinds of comments more anonymously, so a written opportunity should also be provided. For ongoing dialogues, assessments should be completed periodically.

Recording and reporting

Provisions for recording the products of the discussions should be made. Someone should be appointed to takes notes on the discussion of each dialogue group. sometimes this is done on flip charts, or it could be done on an overhead projector. For dialogues that have more than one dialogue group, someone should be selected to give the report back to the larger group at the end of the event. The notes will help deliver that report.

After the dialogue is complete, it is valuable to develop a written report of the event. The report may summarize the proceedings in some detail, often including individual comments made during the discussions. It will also include a report of the evaluation of the event by participants and organizers. The report becomes a tool for planning future dialogues.