

General Principles for Participating in Reflective Discussion

by David J. Voelker

1. Listen carefully and use what you hear to help you reflect—rather than focusing on defending your preexisting assumptions.
2. If you have a natural tendency to “go on” in discussions, challenge yourself to listen rather than speak and try to be very selective about what you say.
3. If you have a natural tendency to be reserved and quiet in discussions, challenge yourself to share your thoughts with the group.
4. Keep in mind that the main goals of a reflective discussion are: 1) individual reflection and clarification (of assumptions, habitual thought processes, values, feelings, etc.), and 2) community building (building trust and capacity to listen)— not consensus building, problem solving, or decision making (though the practice of reflective discussion may enhance these processes at a future time).
5. Avoid the temptation to offer easy solutions to problems. A reflective discussion is not the appropriate place to give advice to anyone about how to solve their problems.
6. Feel free to ask questions of other participants, but make an effort to keep these questions open-ended, rather than “leading.” Strive to ask what Parker J. Palmer calls “honest, open questions.”
7. Attempt to understand the views of other members of the group—while accepting that they may differ from your own views. You should share your own views without arguing for them with the intention of persuading or instructing others.
8. As David Bohm says of authentic dialogue: “We are not playing a game against each other, but with each other. In a dialogue, everybody wins” (p. 7). Everybody wins because everyone walks away with a deeper understanding of themselves and others, and the group is stronger from having shared a common experience of thinking together.

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