

# SKILFUL DISCUSSION

## Session Leader Guide



This exercise helps a team to make their thought processes transparent, to bring assumptions to the surface and perhaps challenge them. Also, to look more closely at sources of disagreement.

This exercise is based upon "The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization" by Senge, P., Roberts, C., Ross, R., Smith, B., and Kleiner, A.

### PURPOSE

To collectively enhance your team's awareness of the impact of Skilful Discussions on daily performance.

### OBJECTIVE

At the end of the exercise everyone should be aware of what impact their behaviour in a discussion could have on the outcome and how to achieve a better result.

A recommendation is to conclude with an agreement that everyone will strive to apply these skills in future meetings.

### TIME

Estimated time for this exercise is approx. 1 - 2 hours.

### BEFORE THE SESSION

1. Anchor the decision to do the exercise with the group.
2. Read through the whole Session Leader Guide – the best thing is to try out the exercises yourself first so you know the key steps.
3. Book a meeting room that makes it possible to work in pairs in an acceptable way.
4. Send out the invitation for your group meeting at least two weeks before your meeting. Communicate Purpose and Objective, when, where and who will be involved. Attach to the invitation a description of what we mean by a 'Skilful Discussion' (attached at the end of this document, page 182-184) and ask them to read it through and reflect on their own experiences.
5. Select supporting slides to use at the workshop. Review speaker notes and add your own. You will find suggested slides at [www.valuescentre.com/getconnected](http://www.valuescentre.com/getconnected). Here, you can also download suggested pocket cards, which you can print and use as reinforcement material.
6. If you intend to use a meeting evaluation or team reflection, have it prepared in advance (see page 172).
7. Try to come at least 20 minutes before everyone else.
8. Write the Purpose, Objective and Agenda on a flip-chart so that everyone can see them during the whole session.

**DURING THE SESSION**

1. Follow the proposed agenda on page 181.
2. Divide the group into pairs and let them share their reflections/conclusions/concerns with their partner.
3. Gather the group again for a whole group reflection.
4. Have a team reflection of what insights the exercise has given, how it might impact their own mindset and ambitions to strengthen their skills (look at the suggested reflection questions in the exercises 'Team Learning'; "Team Follow up & Reflection"). Write down the team reflections on a whiteboard/flip chart so that everyone can see and build on each other's reflections.
5. Let the team conclude what they consider critical for them in order to get a more fruitful discussion climate.
6. Ask if everyone can agree to apply these guidelines in their daily work and meetings. Try also to come to an agreement of how to follow up the agreed intentions e.g. by planning a follow-up meeting as part of the individual performance reviews, appraisal discussion, etc.
7. Distribute, if available, the pocket cards and promote the use of them as a reminder of the importance of skilful discussions.

**AFTER THE SESSION**

1. Write and send out minutes as soon as possible after the meeting. Enclose the slides you showed (if requested by any of the participants).
2. Make sure you follow up on your agreement and note what you have learnt from your progress of the work with skilful discussions.
3. Have a follow up reflection about your discussion climate within 2 - 4 weeks to make sure you all start to practice and live by your skilful discussion agreement. Make adjustment in agreement, if needed.

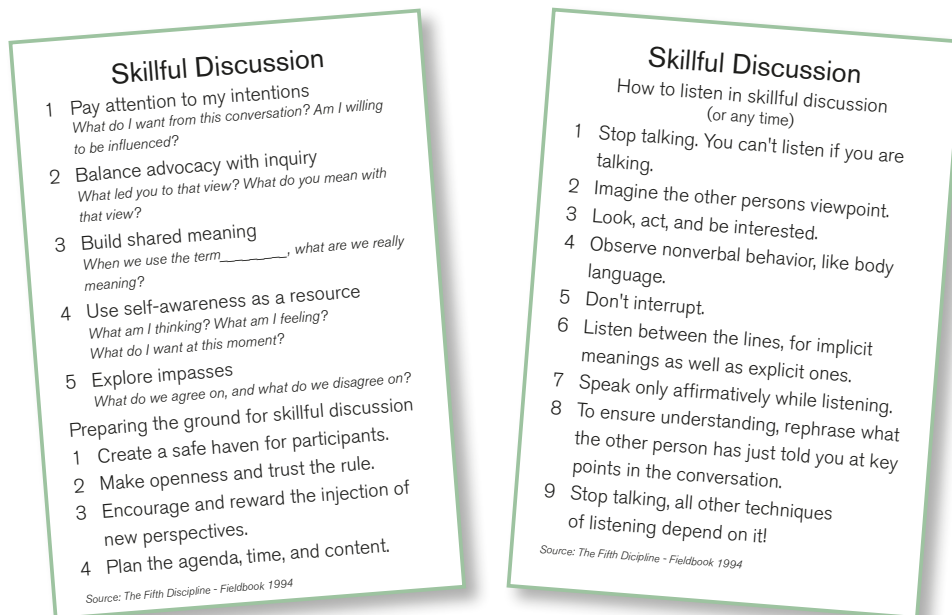
## Agenda

(proposal and facilitator notes)

- |  |             |
|--|-------------|
| <b>1. Introduction</b>   | 10 min      |
| Go through Purpose, Objective and Agenda. Be open for questions.   |             |
| <b>2. Reflection in small groups</b>   | 10 – 30 min |
| Ask the participants to select a partner and share their reflections/ conclusions/concerns on the handout “What is Skilful Discussion?” (page 182-184).  |             |
| <b>3. Group dialogue</b>   | 30 – 60 min |
| Make a presentation of the meaning and benefits of ‘Skilful Discussion’. Let the group reflect on what has been presented and ask them to share their opinions of what they would like to bring to the team. |             |
| <b>4. Reflection</b>   | 10 – 20 min |
| Have the group reflect on what was the major thing they learned and took away from this exercise.  |             |

### What is a Skilful Discussion?

In skilful discussion, the team intends to come to closure, in order to make a decision, reach agreement, or identify priorities. Skilful discussion incorporates some of the techniques of action learning and dialogue, but it is always focused on a real task at hand. It helps a team learn to make their thought processes transparent, to bring to the surface and challenge assumptions, and to look more closely at sources of disagreement.



The most important part of skilful discussion is the commitment team members make to follow the five protocols.

1. **Pay attention to your intentions.** It is important that each team member understands what she/he wants to accomplish in the discussion. If you are not willing to be influenced, what is the purpose of the conversation? Be clear on what you want and do not mislead others as to your intentions.
2. **Balance advocacy with inquiry.** If this is not done, the team will just sit and listen to each other's position statements. People's assumptions will not even surface, much less be challenged. In this case what people are really thinking will surface in the hallway after the meeting.
3. **Build shared meaning.** If people understood that words are symbols and have different meanings to different people, then everyone would routinely check what others mean and there would be far less miscommunication. If you want to create shared meaning it is very important to use language with precision and to question what is really meant – what is the meaning behind the words? As you talk around the meaning, you will get closer to a precise definition, which everyone can agree on.
4. **Use self-awareness as a resource.** When you are feeling confused, angry, frustrated, concerned, or troubled in a meeting, ask yourself the following questions:
  - a. **What am I thinking?** (pause)
  - b. **What am I feeling?** (pause)
  - c. **What do I want at this moment?** (pause)

You will often end up with insights about the team's assumptions or your own concerns, which you can then discuss with the team.

5. **Explore impasses.** When the team seems to be “running into a brick wall”, ask, “What do we agree on, and what do we disagree on?” “Can we pinpoint the source of our disagreement?” Often sources of disagreement fall into one of four categories.
  - a. **Facts** – What exactly has happened? What is the “data”?
  - b. **Methods** – How should we do what we need to do?
  - c. **Goals** – What is our objective?
  - d. **Values** – Why do we think it must be done in a particular way? What do we believe in?

Simply agreeing on the source of disagreement often allows people to learn more about the situation, clarify assumptions, and then move forward.

Three things might help the team when this happens.

- a. Listen to ideas as if for the first time. Work at being open to new ideas.
- b. Consider each person's “mental model” as a piece of a larger puzzle. Look at the issues from the other person's perspective.
- c. Ask yourself (and everyone else): ‘What do we need to do to move forward?’

The Skilful Discussion pocket card also lists nine ways to improve listening in skilful discussion (or any time)!

*Source: Senge, P., Roberts, C., Ross, R., Smith, B., and Kleiner, A. (1994).*

*The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization.*

### Questions for reflection of own experiences

1. *What has dominated the meetings you have taken part in during the last month? Debate, Discussion or Dialogue? What impact has the discussion climate had on your team performance and result?*
2. *Recall a situation when you left a meeting saying to yourself "This was a good and constructive meeting".*

  - What was the situation?*
  - What was at stake?*
  - How were you involved?*
  - What made this meeting so successful?*
3. *What individual and team skills are needed to have fruitful and skilful discussions in our meetings?*