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## **The power of dialogue in intercultural teams:**

### **How to create safe spaces for dialogue in a professional context and enrich collaboration**

In today's globalised world, people with different cultural experiences, values and perspectives work together every day. While diversity is intended to be inspiring, it can also lead to misunderstandings, irritation and even conflict in everyday working life. For collaboration to succeed across borders and languages, it quickly becomes apparent that specialist knowledge and professional expertise alone are not enough to enable good cooperation. Instead, teams need to consciously consider what is successful and what is difficult — in other words, they need to pause and reflect.

Practising an attitude of dialogue, as we know it from Imago work, can make a significant contribution to a culture of constructive cooperation in teams and organisations. Dialogue creates spaces in which differences are not relativised or dissolved, but rather consciously acknowledged and utilised.

In this article, I demonstrate how an attitude of dialogue and specific dialogue formats — in this case, 'Safe Conversation Dialogues' — can contribute to the development of a constructive team culture. I will focus in particular on collaboration in international teams.

When working with these teams, I repeatedly observe the complex intersections that come into play in collaboration. Team members come from different parts of the world, have different basic social experiences, communicate predominantly virtually in a language that is often not their mother tongue, and rarely have the opportunity to meet in person and build trust in an informal setting.

#### **Culture is a relationship, not an attribute**

When people from different backgrounds work together, attributions and prejudices quickly come into play when solving challenging situations. Reducing people to their 'culture' does not do justice to the complexity of social reality, and therefore rarely leads to viable solutions. Culture is not a fixed set of norms or identity characteristics of a particular group. Rather, it is a network of meanings and agreements that arises in relationships and is constantly changing. Everyone is part of several social groups that overlap and hold society together. We are all characterised by a variety of social experiences, which we can 'update' or expand depending on the context.

However we explain culture and cultural affiliation, one thing is certain: complexity is challenging. When values, expectations, and social roles conflict, inner flexibility is required — the willingness to accept different things at the same time without fear of losing what is one's own. It is important to approach each other with curiosity and an interest in finding out more about each other's experiences, rather than thinking: 'Let them adapt. That's how it is with us.'

I see the ability to engage with diversity and embrace difference as a key future skill that goes beyond collaborating in intercultural teams. If we learn to recognise the uncertainties resulting from unexpected reactions from others without rushing to judgement or

stereotyping, we can create a stable basis for good cooperation. Together, we can foster a climate of psychological safety. Psychological safety is defined as the trust that questions, criticism, mistakes, and unusual points of view will be valued as contributions, not sanctioned. The term originates from the research of Amy Edmondson (2019). Psychological safety is considered a prerequisite for learning, innovation and cooperation within organisations.

### **Dialogue is more than just communication**

Many teams talk a lot. They inform each other, coordinate tasks and sometimes even discuss issues, but they rarely really listen. This results in communication taking the form of a series of parallel monologues, where people defend their positions instead of sharing their perspectives. This is precisely where a dialogue-based approach comes in. It creates a space where conviction does not matter, but where enough security is established to address even sensitive aspects of cooperation, which often lie at the relationship level. This structured form of dialogue can create a framework in which everyone has an equal say, which is particularly important in intercultural teams where power relations or culturally influenced taboos are implicit.

Engaging in dialogue on equal terms requires courage and the willingness to connect with others. This can be very challenging, particularly in a professional context. The reason for this is not just time pressure. Many of my coachees report feeling insecure when addressing difficult situations. They fear that their perception will be judged as inappropriate or that expressing their feelings will be seen as unprofessional. But feelings cannot simply be left at the door — they remain active in the work context. The failure to know how to address emotions often results in a dialogue vacuum, leading to subtle and long-lasting friction under the guise of professional courtesy. This puts a strain on collaboration when there is no opportunity for dialogue and clarification.

### **Creating safe spaces for discussion through dialogue**

In my work with international teams, I repeatedly witness the impact that creating safe spaces for dialogue can have. These spaces foster a new quality of interaction and facilitate discussions about underlying issues, such as values and behavioural expectations. In Imago work, we are familiar with various formats that all aim to facilitate this kind of dialogue. These include the 'classic' dyad dialogue in all its forms, as well as the communologue, which is a conversation format used in groups of all kinds, such as families, teams and village communities.

In "Safe Conversation Dialogues" (SCD), the dialogue has been adapted for broader application in professional and social contexts. Like a couples' dialogue, SCDs are conducted between two people. Harville Hendrix describes them in detail in his new book, *How to Talk with Anyone About Anything* (Hendrix, 2024).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In my article "*Dialogue as a bridge to understanding. Developing the capacity for dialogue as a foundation for transcultural collaboration*" I discuss the basics of dialogue, the exact process of "Safe Conversation Dialogues", and a case study in more detail. This appeared in the autumn 2025 issue of [intercultural journal](#).

## **The development of a dialogue-based attitude**

All of these formats are based on the dialogue approach. The approach encompasses more than dialogue as a method — it is a conscious inner focus on relationships, characterised by presence, openness and the will to engage in genuine encounters. This attitude originates from the thinking of Martin Buber, who developed the concept of the 'I-Thou' dialogue as early as 1923. For Buber, true humanity is not created by retreating into the ego, but in relationships, where we encounter others without purpose or judgement.

The physicist David Bohm later adopted this idea, viewing dialogue as a means of overcoming the fragmentation of our thinking. He emphasised the importance of 'pausing' and 'suspending' one's own perspective; by setting aside one's assumptions, a space is created in which collective knowledge becomes possible. Building on this, organisational theorists such as Peter Senge (2017), Otto Scharmer (2009) and William Isaacs (1999) have introduced dialogue into organisations as a means of facilitating shared learning, innovation and systemic change. They view dialogue as a collective thought process that fosters solidarity and facilitates change. At the centre of this approach is the idea that relationships, rather than individuals, are the primary unit of human development. A dialogue-based approach therefore opens up spaces not only for understanding, but also for transformation.

The ability to listen plays a central role here. Otto Scharmer distinguishes between four levels of listening: from confirming one's own assumptions ('downloading'), to fact-based listening, to empathic listening, to generative listening. In the latter, new insights and shared understanding unfold through dialogue. In intercultural contexts in particular, this depth of listening enables a change of perspective and the recognition of deeper commonalities.

## **Experience the power of dialogue**

Anyone who engages in genuine dialogue is entering new territory. This is precisely where the potential lies: by consciously recognising differences, something new emerges — a shared space in which new perspectives and solutions become possible. This becomes particularly clear when "validation" is practised. It is a central element of the dialogue approach, which plays a key role in intercultural teams in particular. Validation means recognising the other person's perspective as understandable - even if you don't share it. It is not about being right, but about taking the logic and emotions behind the other person's point of view seriously. In a team with different cultural backgrounds, this attitude can defuse tensions because it recognises rather than judges differences. Validation thus creates a space in which people feel seen - beyond attributions or hierarchies. Especially when values, norms or communication styles clash, validation becomes the key to mutual respect and sustainable coexistence.

## **Safe Conversations - structure and attitude for genuine connection**

"Safe Conversation Dialogues" create a space in which challenging team situations can be discussed, ideally moderated by a facilitator. The structure is strongly based on the Imago Couple Dialogues format: After an introductory mutual appreciation, the topic is named and presented in detail by one person, while the other person listens and reflects (repeats what they have heard). This is followed by a summary of the essence of what has been said, which ensures that the other person has understood the essentials. In the next step, validation, the listener tries to fully empathise with the sender's presentation. In essence, it is about recognising that the respective perception of the situation may be completely different, but

is absolutely comprehensible and meaningful in its own logic, as are the feelings and reactions triggered by it.

### **Clarifying relationships in the service of good cooperation**

The following example shows how a safe dialogue space can help to clarify professional challenges.

During a project visit, heated discussions arose between Carina, a member of the Austrian board, and Mohammed, the managing director of the organisation in Ghana, which they attributed to their different understanding of the strategic direction of their projects. They tried to discuss and clarify these issues, first in pairs and then together with the other board members. However, several attempts at discussion did not lead to a satisfactory result. I then suggested an SCD between the two of them. During this conversation, it quickly became clear that the relationship was strained for both of them due to an event during a project visit. At the time, no room had been prepared for Carina when they arrived together in the project region and she had reacted unusually emotionally to this due to her tiredness. Mohammed had felt offended and ashamed by Carina's open reaction. They were both hurt. From then on, the unresolved issue put a strain on the relationship on an emotional level, blocked the collaboration and escalated into a substantive discussion.

During the structured dialogue, it became clear how strongly cultural influences (e.g. with regard to hospitality and dealing with conflicts) affected their perceptions. By consciously listening and pausing, space was created for differentiation. Carina and Mohammed realised that they had experienced the situation completely differently, but had been driven by the same basic needs — for recognition, belonging and security. What had initially seemed culturally incomprehensible became an opportunity to clarify the relationship by revealing their respective experiences, which had a positive effect on further collaboration.

### **What dialogue-based behaviour changes in organisations**

Working in dialogue creates more than just good communication. A culture is created in which diversity is not experienced as a threat, but as a resource.

Understood in this way, dialogue is more than a tool — it is a cultural process: a shared search for meaning, for relationship, for connection. And this is exactly what organisations need if they want to survive in a diverse, complex world.

Enabling dialogue spaces in organisations:

- **Creating tolerance for ambiguity:** the ability to explore rather than devalue differences and contradictions.
- **Psychological safety:** People feel seen and heard - regardless of their role, background or status.
- **Trust and resilience:** Teams can deal constructively with conflicts and grow together.
- **Transcultural learning:** Beyond understanding, a sense of togetherness is created that makes new connections possible.

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