



Pattern Generators

by Royce Holladay

What has been your experience when people come together for the purpose of exploring a new idea or learning from a shared experience? In my work, too often what has happened is each member in the group talked about his or her own personal experience, with little coherence in the shared conversation. It is actually more like monologues running in parallel than like a real dialogue where people engage freely with each other. This is particularly true when the topic has elements of real or potential conflict or when people are just confused and don't know what to do next.

People in organizations of all sizes recognize the value of dialogue to share learning and perspectives. What they often don't have, however, is a clear and productive way of beginning such an exploration. One of the most difficult things I've done as a facilitator is hold space for a generative dialogue when people deal with difficult issues or with their own frustration and confusion.

- Analyzing a shared experience to identify new learning
- Seeing and understanding real sources of conflict in a system
- Exploring the potential impact of a new idea or product
- Gleaning insights from a failed attempt at something new

When topics have the potential to be so personal or when they challenge individual competence and performance, it's too hard to engage in an open, free-flowing conversation. Personal feelings like blame and shame, hopes and fears, and safety and risk often get in the way, or participants just cannot see their ways through the current challenge. The conversation can quickly get out of control and escalate to a shouting match over who did what to whom. It can veer off into an exploration of what "they" did to prevent "our" success—"they" referring to whoever is not in the room. Or it can shift to a non-emotional theoretical discussion, remaining at the proverbial 10,000-foot level with no real insights that inform future action.

That is, after all, the basic reason for pursuing such a conversation. Identifying what can be learned from a past experience or about a shared opportunity can inform decisions about future actions and arm us for moving forward with courage. How can we engage in these conversations in ways that generate new ideas and insights that have the potential to contribute to individual and group learning?

In HSD, we have borrowed a model from Soft Systems Methodology that helps us set a framework for moving forward in these conversations. The model offers simple and direct prompts that help a group talk about difficult ideas in ways that bring shared meaning to the dialogue. We refer to these prompts as "Pattern Generators," and we use them to facilitate conversations of all types. Once the topic is introduced, any necessary explanation is given. Then members of the group are asked to reflect on the following prompts.

- **Generalization:** *"In general, I noticed . . ."*
- **Exceptions:** *"In general, . . .but . . ."*
- **Contradictions:** *"On the one hand . . . on the other . . ."*
- **Surprises:** *"I didn't expect . . ."*
- **Puzzles:** *"I wonder . . ."*

After their reflections, participants are asked to share one or more of their responses, taking turns and listening to each others' thoughts. They may go through each question in turn, or just choose one that is most meaningful for that discussion. Each prompt has its purpose in triggering generative dialogue.

- **Generalization** – allows for a view of the whole event at once. It provides broad reactions.
- **Exceptions** – allows individuals to state what they missed or what they say that didn't fit the general patterns.
- **Contradictions** - allow the expression of paradoxes that occur to the observer.
- **Surprises** – allow them to say what happened that they didn't expect, giving voice to more potent emotions like fear and joy.
- **Puzzles** – allow individuals to pose their next questions and prepare for further learning.

These prompts are generative and help people open the space by providing a framework for healthy dialogue.

- People are speaking for themselves, using "I" statements that make them responsible for what they say.
- People are talking about their own reactions rather than assigning motive or rationale for others' responses.
- Each person gets a chance to reflect before they speak, which brings all voices into the conversation.
- Members of the group are looking at the question or issue through a similar lens so the dialogue is more coherent from the beginning.

Imagine for a moment that you use these prompts to consider events and trends happening in the US government today.

- **Generalization:** *"In general, I notice that it seems like partisanship for the good of the few has become more important than collaboration for the good of the whole."*
- **Exceptions:** *"In general, I was taught that I elect representatives to speak for me in Washington, but too often these days it feels that elected officials are more focused on getting re-elected or on ensuring the perfect sound bite."*
- **Contradictions:** *"On the one hand I believe elected officials run for office because they are committed to the public good. On the other hand, I see many attempts by some elected officials to undermine and erode programs and services that were created for the public good."*
- **Surprises:** *"I didn't expect that the American political process could become so virulent and divided that it seems to be rendered dysfunctional."*
- **Puzzles:** *"I wonder what would happen if our elected officials understood human systems dynamics and used some of its models and methods to build the nation's adaptive capacity."*

What you might notice first is that these statements, while clearly exhibiting a bias, do so in a way that takes ownership and refrains from blame and shame. They state what the speaker believes and sees, allowing for others to do the same. If you disagree with these statements, use the prompts to clarify and state what you see. Next you might notice that each statement could lead to productive and powerful dialogue about definitions of terms, clarity of perspective, evidence that might support or detract from these ideas. Finally, each statement opens a new set of options for taking action to move the group forward or toward greater clarity.

At HSD, we use these prompts to support groups in describing and identifying the patterns around them as learn together and build adaptive capacity through productive and meaningful dialogue. We invite you to use them in your own groups. Visit us at www.hsdinstitute.org for more opportunities to learn about this and other models and methods that offer you ways to build adaptive capacity in your organization.