

# RSOG SEMINAR

With Peter Nixon

Potential Dialogue Ltd.

“Public Sector Leadership in the Era of Dialogue Gap”

20<sup>th</sup> September 2013

Razak School of Government (RSOG)

## About the Seminar

Dialogue is an integral aspect of communication in the workplace. Dialogue seeks to find a shared connection between two or more parties on a particular subject. It is not concerned with winning or losing, rather it aspires to listen more deeply, understand more fully and build a collective point of view. When the diversity of personality and opportunity present moments of conflict and tension, a dialogic approach is used to mediate the conversation back to a renewed sense of connection.

This Seminar is a platform for participants to gain insights on the importance of good dialogical skills for effective planning and managing in an organization.

## Summary

Peter Nixon began the talk by stressing on the importance of acknowledging oneself as a leader. In order to become a good leader, sometimes one must learn from mistakes. He stated that being a leader meant that one is in a position of influence and therefore, he or she could make a difference, which can either be positive or negative. However, he reminded the participants that time is limited and therefore, they will have to seize the opportunity to become a good leader.

He then continued by explaining about the important characteristics that leaders should have, such as:

**Strategy**— Leaders must have the right strategy to lead the people. In order to get that strategy, you need to dialogue with everyone to learn about what issues and challenges might occur.

**Decisions**— Leaders need to make the right decisions. Sometimes it is difficult to have dialogue with others because of the fear or possibility of a conflict erupting. They will have to manage various challenges and problems and sync the many differences into a unanimous voice.

Peter explained that there is a difference between communication and dialogue. Communication is an exchange of information while dialogue is the process of thinking together—aiming for the same goal. The challenge that people face today is that people struggle or forget to dialogue when needed and communicate when they should dialogue instead. That is the reason that real issues are hard to address.

He acknowledged that problems in the work place especially in the civil service is challenging. Therefore he suggested that it's imperative to know one's personality well, especially when conflicts escalate. He also said that it is important to know and use different dialogue methods such as challenge mapping, gestalt, therapy, mediated advocacy, world café.

Towards the end of the talk, he gave a number of different examples of where and how dialogue occurs today. For instance, in America, dialogue has been used for military men and women who have been serving the military in the Middle East. Many of their marriages break down due to the lack of dialogue between them and their partners and family members.

In conclusion, he urged to the participants to read his book “Dialogue Gap” in order to understand how dialogue can be applied in more detail. He also said that we only get better when we learn, and we have to learn more in

order to improve our work environment and ourselves. He also suggested that dialogue training should be taught in schools because students should know that it is good to open up and talk about their problems.

## Issues Raised

- 1 It is important to understand the cultural context of any given situation in order for effective dialogue to take place.
- 2 Leaders must engage and dialogue with all stakeholders. But leaders must also be humble to listen and understand the challenges faced by their subordinates.

## Key Lesson Imparted

- 1 Dialogue is an important element in home, at work and in the society in general to suppress conflict and achieve optimal outcome.
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## Question and Answer

### 1 Zaim Mohzani, Perdana Leadership Fellow

**Q:** In context of the government, dialogue is not much emphasized because the people at the lower level are afraid to speak their minds to their superiors. What is your opinion on addressing this challenge?

**A:** Indeed, it is very challenging. In government meetings, most of them are very formal, and people talk about things covering only on the agendas. However, in the private sector, 90% of the meetings are held at places where it is informal and more relaxed, such as Starbucks. But that happens only when you have people who you trust and who are on your side.

My suggestions to the young civil servants are: 1) Always have passion. You do not want the enthusiasm to die out. You need to know how to get their knowledge across. Many times, it seems as though it comes across as an insult but in the end, people do not choose to talk because they feel less energized. You need to create the proper space and time to have dialogue. 2) Find ways to do express your opinion, to get your voices heard 3) If that does not work then try involving a third party.

### 2 Syaza Onn, Perdana Leadership Fellow

**Q:** How do we get the senior leadership involved in dialogue? The culture is that you do not speak, unless you are of a certain rank. Sometimes departments do not communicate within one another.

**A:** 1) Create a method. 2) Change your dialect of how to speak to your superior to get the most effective outcome. For instance, if your superior is a green person, which you may want to present him or her with research that you have done in order to influence their thinking; showing that you have a sound judgment. If your boss is a blue person, then he or she is most likely to focus more on the people and the growth of the relationship.

### 3 Perdana Leadership Fellow

**Q:** How do we build trust across borders? Because I feel like the people here feel like the West is a hegemonic power. This can be seen by the TPPA problem here in Malaysia. How do we address this problem of mistrust?

**A:** When there is no trust, you would want to build that trust. This is how you can approach this: 1) You need to see the differences, and understand the different cultures. You need to see what can be done to make them see that you are trustworthy. 2) You have to show them what is wrong/ineffective within their own culture.

#### 4 **Perdana Leadership Fellow**

**Q:** How do we deal with people who are resistant or opposed to dialogue? How do we convince that both parties can benefit from dialogue? For instance, two political parties almost never dialogue with the aim to get the best outcome for the nation.

**A:** We need to ask ourselves how to overcome the bias of politics. We have to overcome 1) corruption 2) payback in the public sector. We also need to make the whole election process more transparent.

With regards to political parties, you will need to manage the dialogue with the opposition.

#### 5

**Q:** Do dialogues need to face to face?

**A:** The best one are the ones that are done face to face. If you cannot do that then proceed to video Skype and audio. What you cannot see through video Skype and audio is their facial expression.

#### 6

**Q:** Can you have a dialogue when someone is more powerful than the other?

**A:** It can happen, if the superior is humble. Culturally, it is difficult. For instance, in hospitals, the surgeons are seen as God. But in the most successful hospitals are the ones that the bosses can still come down to talk to the nurses.

### **About the speaker**

Peter is author of Dialogue Gap and Negotiation, Mastering Business in Asia. As speaker, consultant, trainer, coach and advisor Peter has spent the last decade helping senior leaders of MNC's, global firms, local, state and national governments, charities and NGO's to focus on their most important dialogues and assemble key stakeholders to discuss the issues, in the right way, at the right time, and in the right space.

Prior to consulting Peter was an external auditor with Coopers & Lybrand (PwC) in Montreal, Geneva and Hong Kong. Peter has degrees from Bishop's, McGill and Leicester and has studied at U of A, Harvard, INSEAD and Fielding. Peter speaks to audiences at WPO-YPO, EO, HKU/LBS/Columbia EMBA, McGill, Royal Roads, Singapore Institute of Management, HK Management Association, Razak School of Government and various chambers and membership groups around the world.