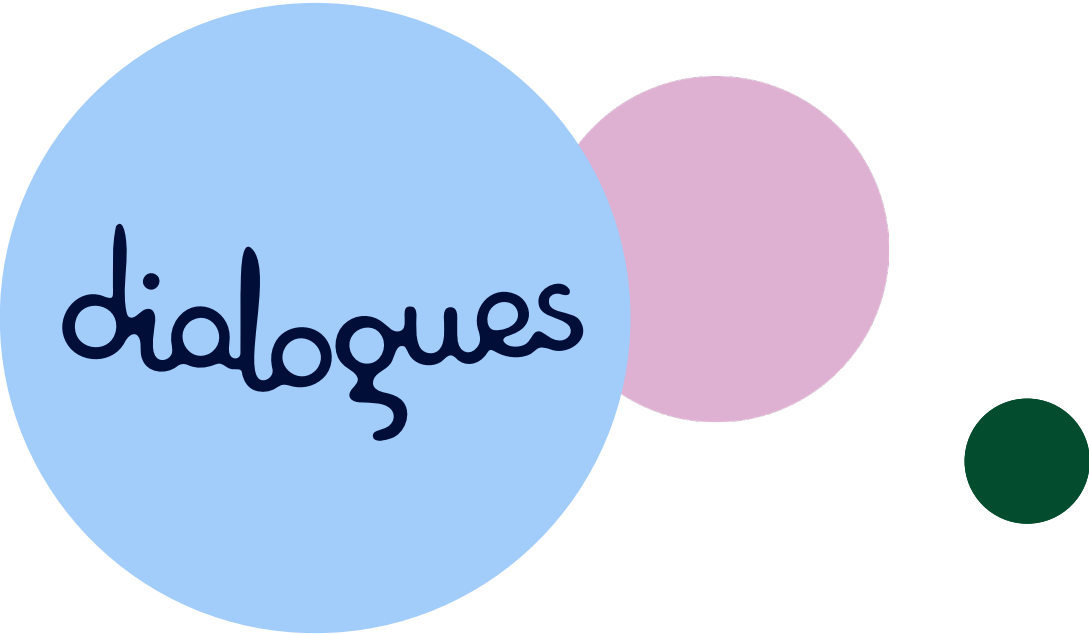
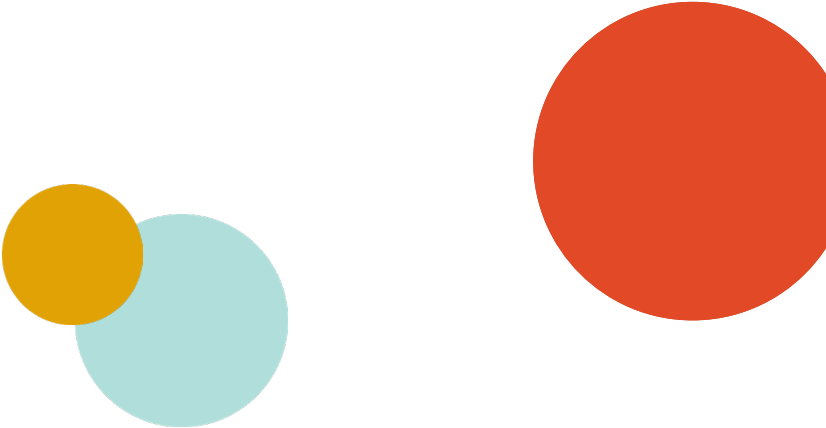
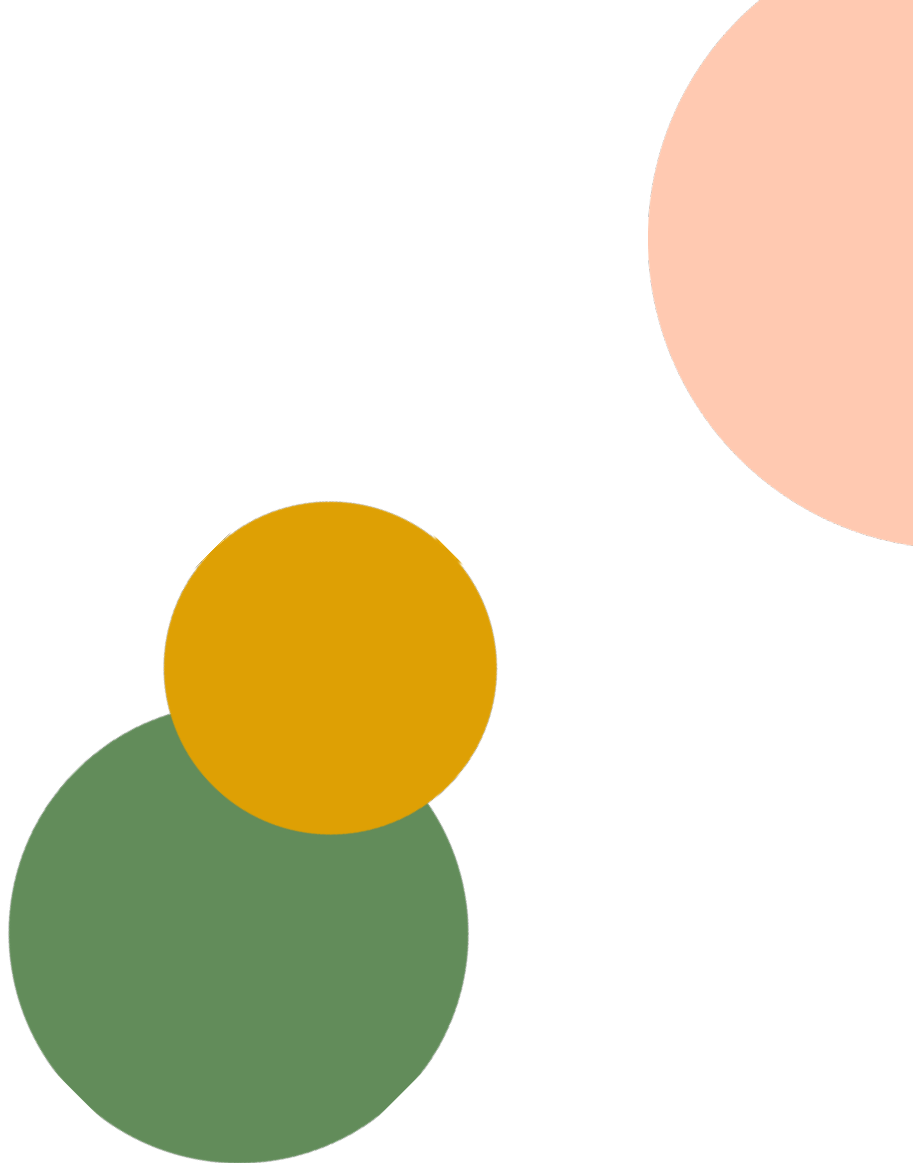




dialogues

Facilitator's toolbox







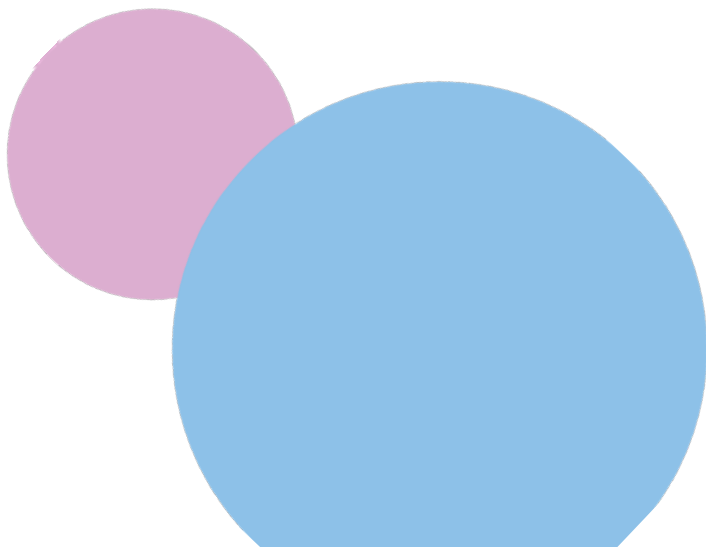
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1. How to use the toolbox

Facilitating good dialogue requires learning and practice. These tools provide tips and phrases to help you to guide the dialogue. First, master a few techniques, then expand your skills, dialogue by dialogue. Start with your own capabilities. Learn to be both a skilled listener and an expert in asking dialogical questions.

In every dialogue, it is important to find a good way to attune, deepen and conclude the conversation, while creating a setting in which everyone can participate as equals. Also, consider the circumstances preceding the dialogue. For example, are there tensions among the participants, and might someone try to dominate the conversation? If so, you should study especially carefully the tools containing advice for challenging situations.



Here are some tips for using the toolbox:



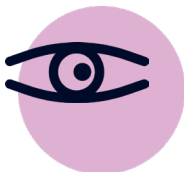
Start using the tools well before the dialogue begins, in the planning stage.



Read through the tools and write “a script” that serves the purpose of your dialogue.



Modify the wording to make it better suit your speaking style.



Read through the tools and your notes once more before the dialogue.

2. What are dialogue and dialogue circle?

Dialogue is **a conversation that aims at a better understanding of the topic, others and oneself**. It aims to maximise the equality and freedom of the participants. At its best, dialogue generates trust and creativity.

A dialogue circle is a structured group conversation method where participants sit in a circle and speak one at a time, creating space for mutual listening and understanding. **Dialogue can happen in many kinds of conversation situations — it's less about structure and more about mindset and skills**. In contrast, a dialogue circle is a specific method guided by clear principles and a defined yet flexible process.

The input of each participant is equally significant. Everyone brings their own unique perspective to the dialogue, and as the conversation progresses, surprising new viewpoints may emerge. Each participant can speak freely about what they want and how they want it, and the conversation is meant to flow freely within its own internal development.

A dialogical conversation can deepen participants' understanding of almost any topic. With the help of dialogue, people from different backgrounds can be brought together for an encounter in which they are on an equal footing. Dialogue can be **a one-off event or part of a longer process** where people need a new understanding to improve their collaboration.

3. When to use dialogue and when not to?

Dialogue is a particular form of conversation. It is needed when we want more understanding on some issues. It differs from other forms of conversation, such as debating, which aims to find the best arguments, and negotiating, which strives for solutions, agreements and compromises. Decisions, agreements, and conflict resolution require other kinds of processes. Dialogue can, however, be woven into these processes where understanding is missing or fragmented — and is often most valuable before solutions are pursued.

Dialogue is not useful when there is an urgent need to find a solution or reach an agreement. Many difficult conflict situations also benefit more from structured mediation than from open-ended dialogue. It should also be kept in mind that it is impossible to have a dialogue with a person who is not willing at least to give it a chance.



4. The facilitator's core competences

A respectful **attitude** towards participants and their individual experiences.

A will to enhance **equality** and **freedom**.

A genuine interest in **learning** from others.

Facilitating the **group process** from start to finish.

Active **listening** to others and oneself.

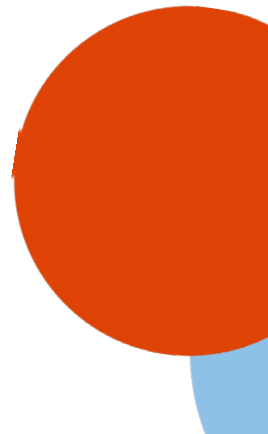
Asking dialogical **questions**.

Tolerating **uncertainty, silent moments, and tensions**.

Engaging with quieter participants.

Dealing with dominant individuals.

Acting in emotionally charged and conflict situations.



5. Training your ability to listen

Try to imagine the events and situations that others are talking about.

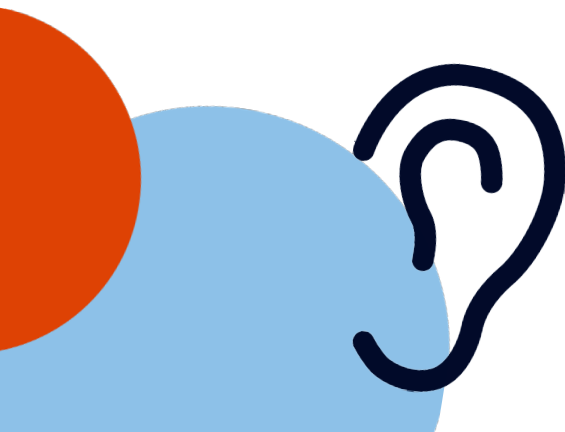
Conceive what the other person is saying as a story with a beginning, middle and end.

Pay attention to the different dimensions of the experiences shared by others:

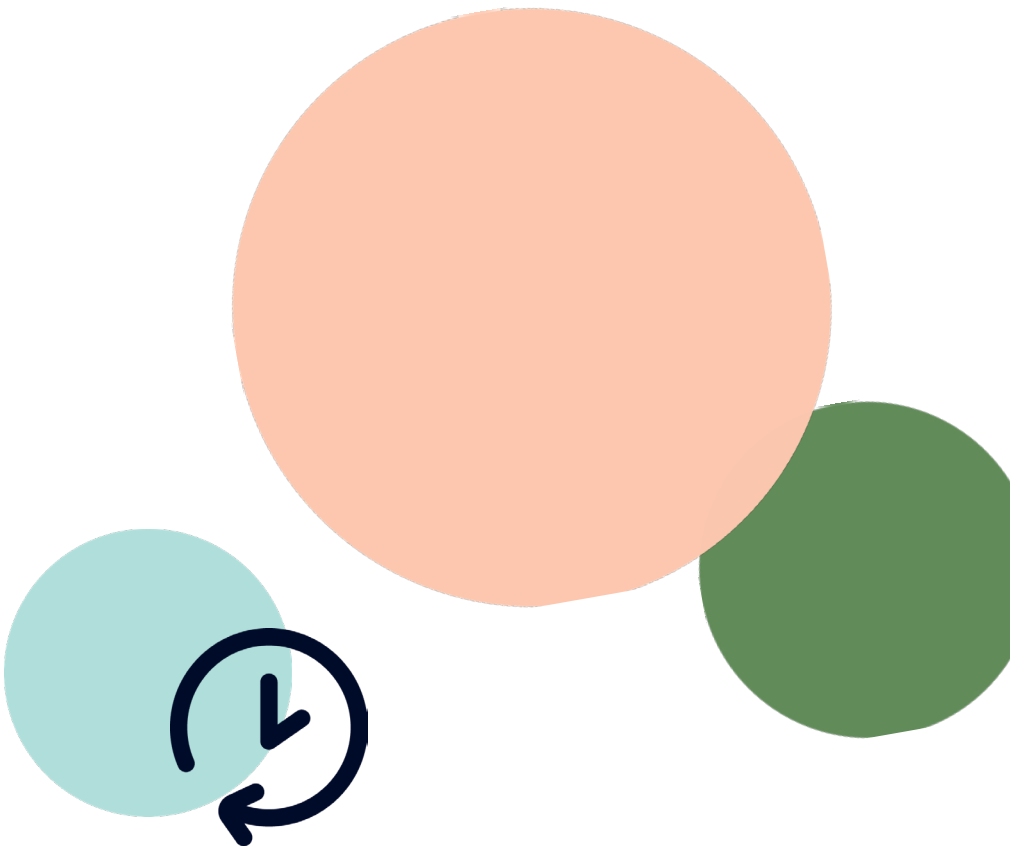
perceptions, thoughts, memories, emotions and imagination.

Listen to yourself. What occurs in you when the others are talking? What emotions does it evoke? What do you find interesting and new? What annoys you? What do you find difficult to understand? Which impulses do you recognise in yourself?

Wait a bit before rushing to say what you want to say. It might be that your urge to speak eases if you focus more on listening to others.



6. Preparing to facilitate a dialogue circle



1. Good planning is particularly helpful if the topic is demanding, the participants have little experience with dialogue, the group is large or the time available is limited.

2. Find out who will be involved in the dialogue. Pay particular attention to the number of participants, their backgrounds, and their relationships with one another. Try to put yourself in their shoes and consider how they might relate to the subject of the dialogue.

3. Formulate a clear and specific topic for the dialogue. A good topic is one that participants can understand more deeply in the time available.

4. Write a script for yourself, outlining the different stages of the dialogue, your facilitation techniques, and your questions. Try to estimate how much time each phase of the dialogue will take.

5. Consider the questions you should ask to start the dialogue, how to deepen the conversation, and what to ask at the end.

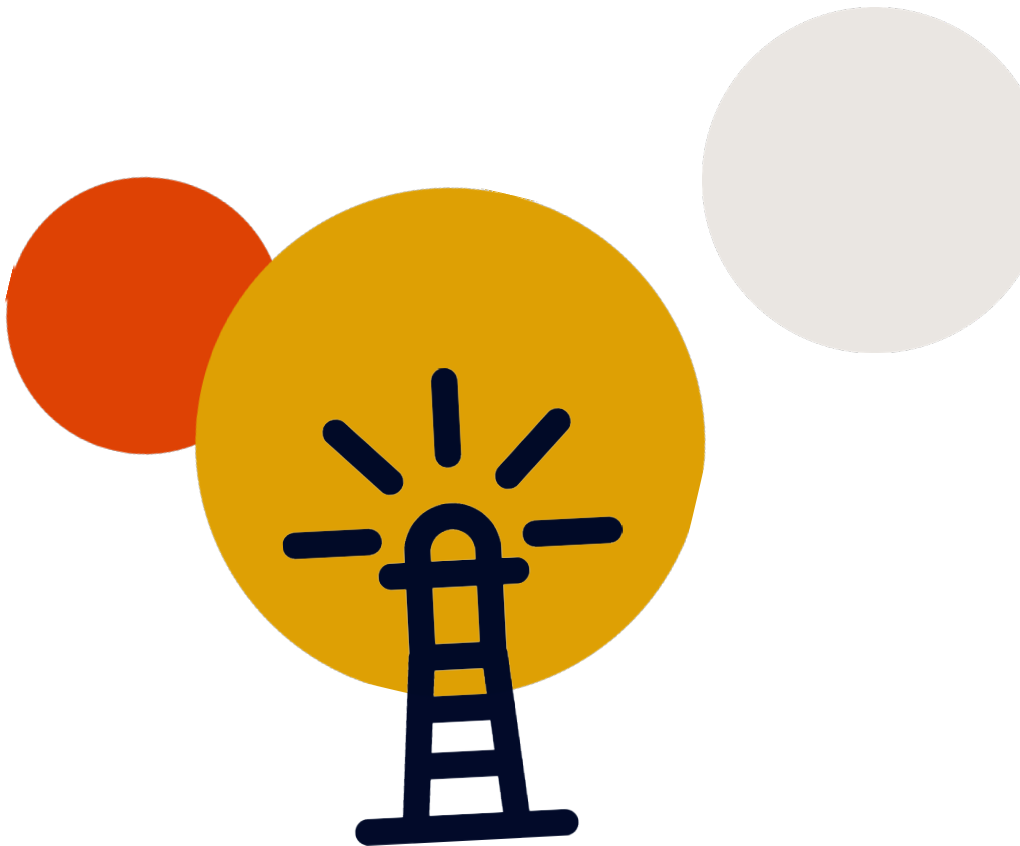
6. Reserve enough time for the dialogue. A good length for a dialogue is 1–3 hours. The required time will depend on the scope and complexity of the topic, the number of participants, and their dialogue skills.

7. Find a peaceful space in which to hold the dialogue. Ideally, arrange the participants' chairs in a circle, without a table, to ensure that everyone can see one another.

8. Take care to calm and attune your own mind before starting the dialogue.

7. Principles of dialogue circle

Introduce the principles of dialogue at the beginning of the conversation. Explain each one briefly. Then ask the participants if they have understood the principles and if they can accept them as guidelines for the dialogue.



ACTION

WORDS

Listen to the others and do not interrupt.

"Everyone should be allowed to speak in peace. It is important that we do not interrupt one another."

Connect to what others have said.

"Try to relate what you say to the points raised by others during the discussion. However, you don't need to agree on things."

Share your own experiences.

"To understand the topic and one another better, we should talk about our own experiences. This means that we explain to others what events and situations have shaped our views."

Ask questions to understand more.

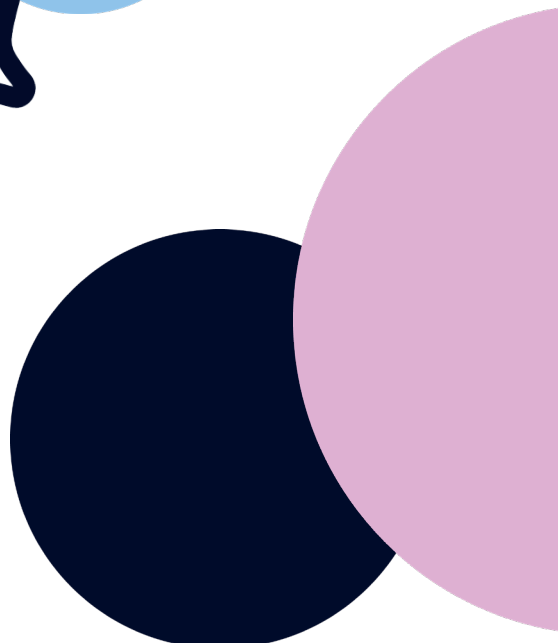
"When you want to know more about something, ask the others directly about their points of view."

Explore also new and unknown things.

"It is important to look for things that have gone unnoticed for one reason or another. We can try to see things together that nobody can see from their own point of view or would not otherwise emerge."

8. Attuning

Attuning creates an environment of trust, where participants are on an equal footing. Attuning shifts attention away from other matters and onto the present moment, focusing on the other people and the topic being discussed. Enough time must be allowed for attuning in order to create an atmosphere of trust, in which participants feel prepared to share their experiences.



You can help participants attune by asking the following questions:

Who are you and what has **brought you here** today?

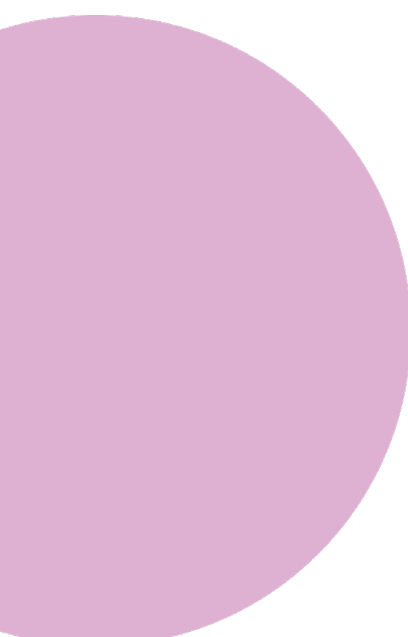
What **experiences** come to your mind when you think about this topic?

What **thoughts** or **emotions** do you associate with the topic?

What is it like to talk **about this topic together**?

How do **the people present** affect how the topic is handled?

Do you have any **concerns or doubts** that you would like to share?



9. Deepening

ACTION

Aim to find a more specific topic for the group to discuss in more depth.

Ask the participants what kinds of issues they would like to understand better.

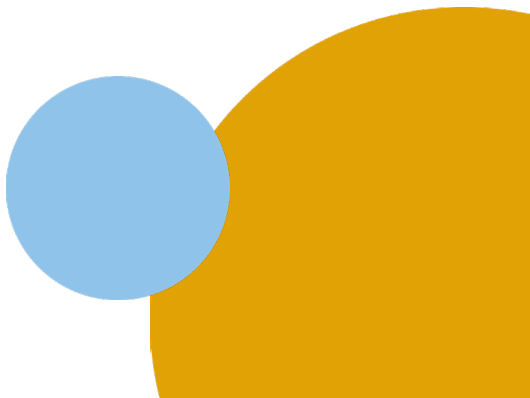
Encourage the sharing of viewpoints that have not yet been presented. These may also be conflicting or difficult.

WORDS

“We have now covered topics A, B and C. In order to discuss each topic in more depth, which one would you like to focus on?”

“Which issues would each of you like to understand better?”

“Can anyone think of anything else that we haven’t discussed in connection with this topic yet?”





ACTION

Direct the discussion from a general level to the participants' experiences by sharing a personal experience related to the topic.

Help participants process experiences related to the topic also emotionally.

Observe the atmosphere and level of the dialogue. Do you think the participants find the conversation interesting and important?

WORDS

"This dialogue reminds me of an experience of my own in which xxx... Does anyone have any similar or completely different experiences related to our topic?"

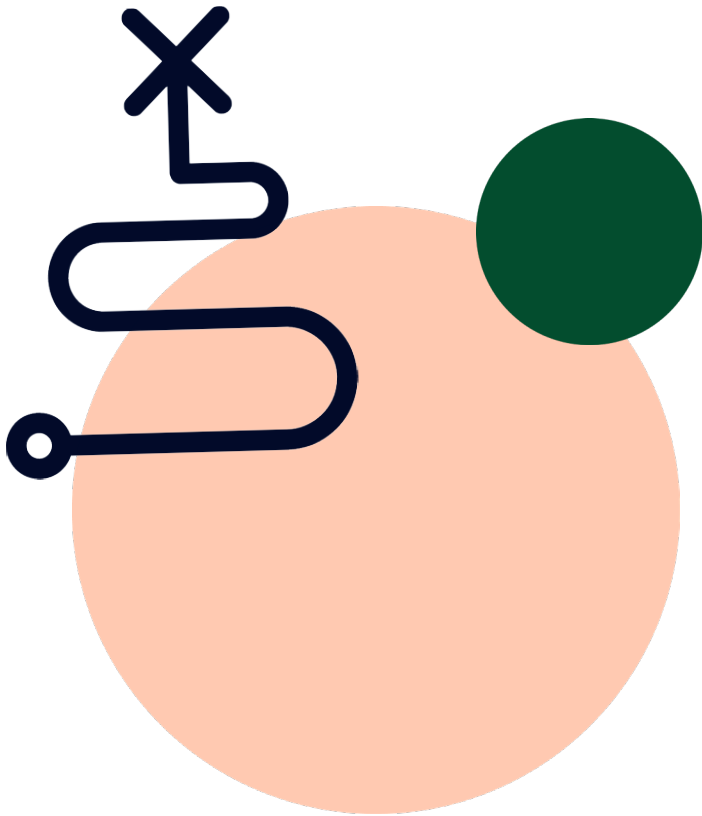
"What goes on in your mind in regard to this topic? What emotions does it evoke?"

"I think we are still talking at a fairly general level. How should we deepen this conversation? What issues should we explore in more depth?"



10. Concluding

Make sure you let participants know well in advance that the dialogue is coming to an end.



Here are some questions that can be used to conclude the dialogue circle:

What did you find relevant and meaningful in this dialogue?

.....

Did you learn something new from the topic, others or yourself?

.....

How was it to talk about this topic with this group of people?

.....

Did we discuss the right issues?

.....

Did we discuss different points of view?

.....

How was your experience of the dialogue?



11. Basic guiding acts for facilitators

ACTION

The dialogue facilitator ensures that everyone is given enough space to talk about their experiences.

The facilitator helps the participants to relate what they say to what others have said by steering them to pay attention to the links between the different points of view.

The facilitator can provide an example by sharing their own experiences.

WORDS

“Let’s now concentrate on listening to this.”

“How is this connected to the previous points of view?”

“This is what goes through my mind during the dialogue. What about the rest of you? What does this evoke in you?”





ACTION

WORDS

The facilitator ensures that the dialogue uses everyday language and asks participants to explain any terms that might be difficult for some people to understand.

“Please explain a bit more what you mean by ‘xxx’.”

The facilitator helps participants talk about the possible tensions and describe related experiences in more detail.

“Please tell us more. Let’s listen to different points of view without haste.”

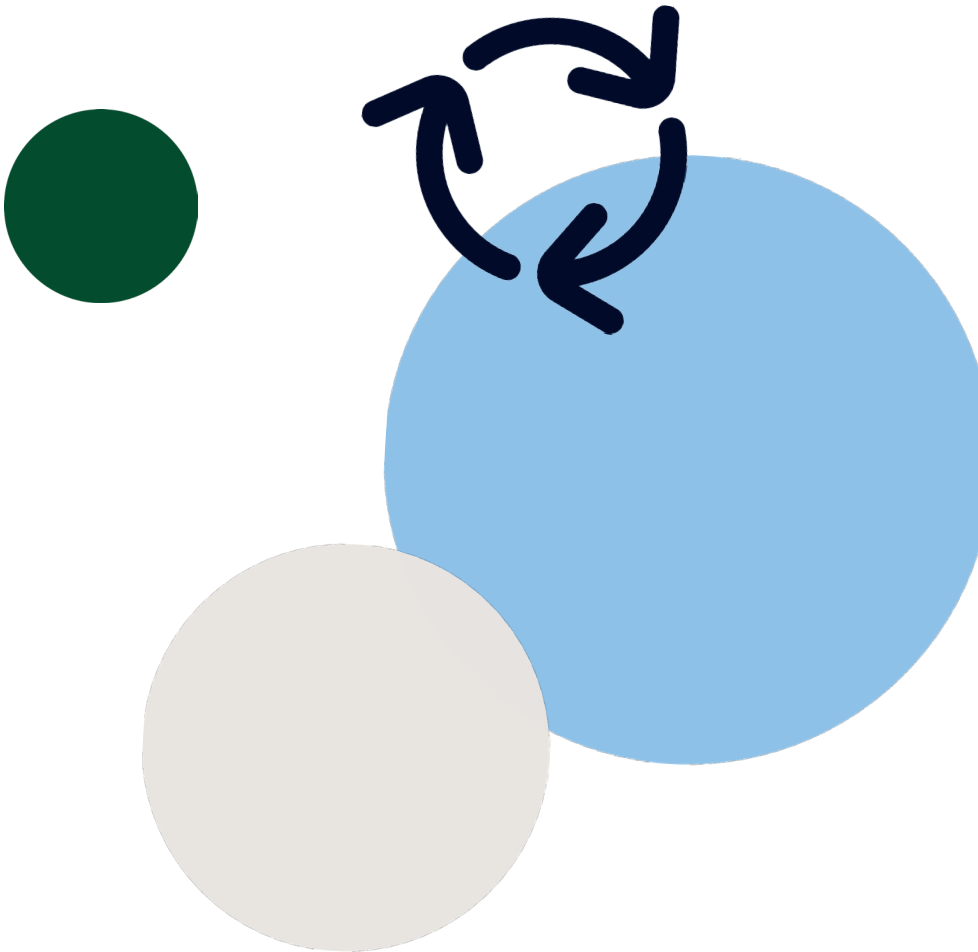
The facilitator helps to find points of view that have not been noticed yet.

“What hasn’t been brought up yet?”

The facilitator helps to find links between different points of view.

“What do we agree on? Where do we differ? Is there something new that we now understand?”

12. Talking from experience



ACTION

Ask people to talk about events and situations that are important to them.

Ask questions that specify the different dimensions of the experience, such as perceptions, thoughts, memories, feelings and imagination.

Ask questions that specify the causes and effects.

Ask the other participants to share experiences that come to mind when they listen to one another.

WORDS

“Tell us about some events or situations that have shaped your views on the topic of this dialogue.”

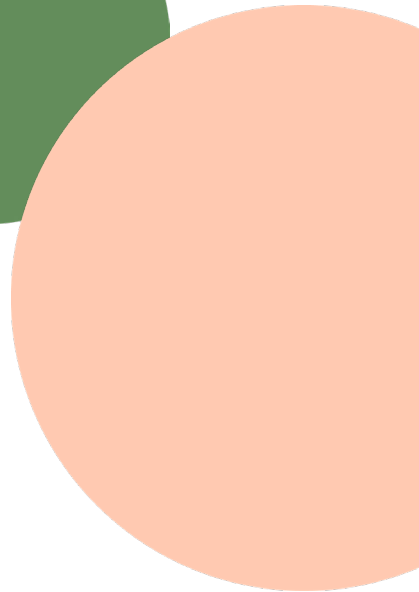
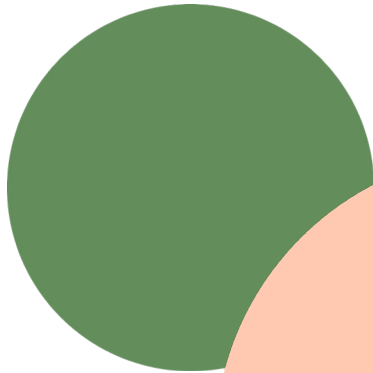
“Tell us more about what you perceived, thought, felt, remembered or imagined in that situation.”

“What caused that to happen? What was the result?”

“What about the rest of you? What kinds of experiences come to your mind when you hear what was just said?”

13. Asking dialogical questions

Dialogical questions must be genuine and honest. Ask questions that help participants to better understand the discussed topic, other people, or themselves. Avoid rhetorical questions, or those that provide advice or express an opinion.



ACTION

Ask open questions, not closed ones. There is no one right answer to these types of questions.

With your question, you can call attention to certain dimensions in the participants' experiences.

You can start by explaining what kind of experience of your own has led you to ask the question.

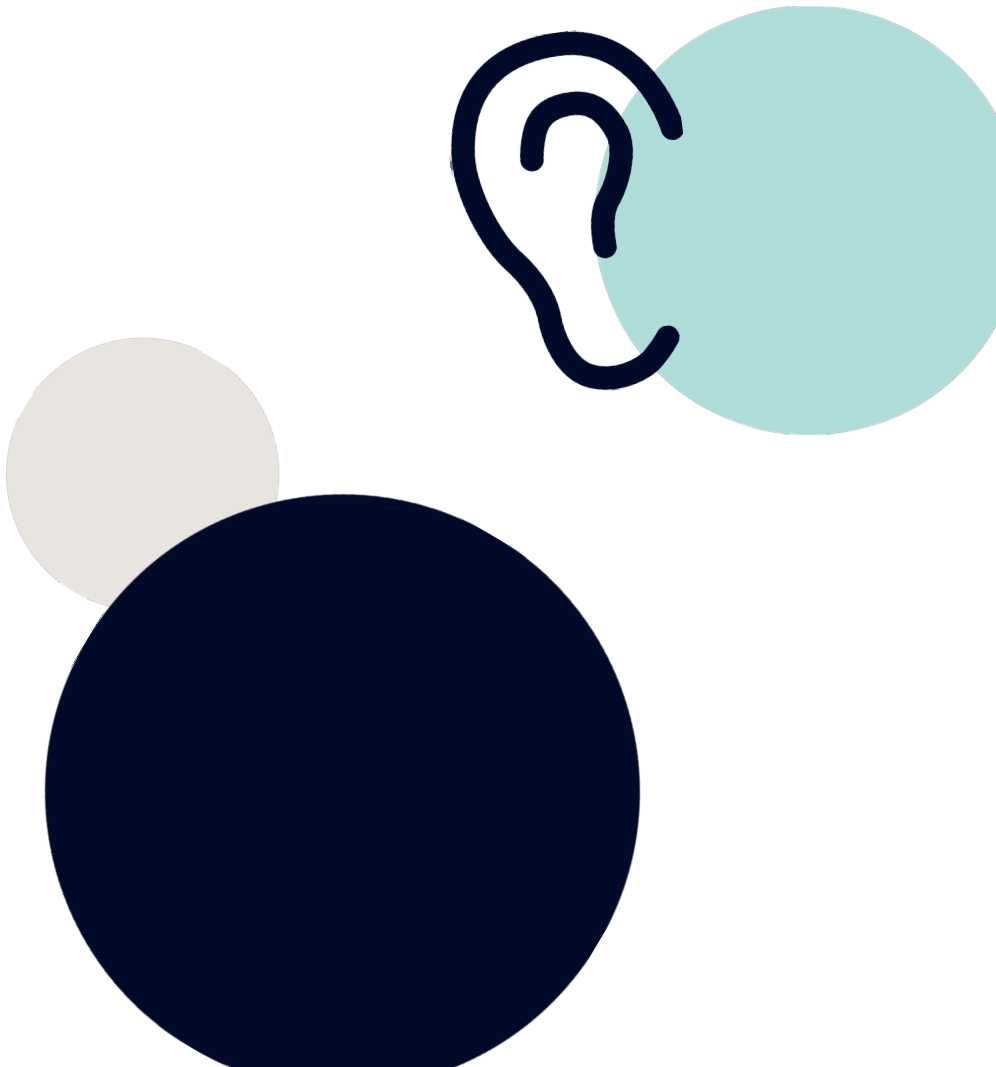
WORDS

An open question: "What do you think about the safety of your neighbourhood?"
(A closed question would be: "Is your neighbourhood safe?")

"Tell us more about what you /perceived/felt/thought/remembered/imagined when...?"

"I haven't experienced what you have, which is why I'd like to hear more about what kind of..." or "I find it puzzling that I still don't quite understand what you mean when you say... Could you tell us more about it?"

14. Noticing the silent participants



ACTION

In the beginning, express your hope that as many participants as possible will engage in the dialogue. As the conversation progresses, pay attention to those who have not contributed yet.

Stop the conversation for a moment. Say you would like to hear what those people who have not said much yet have on their minds.

If the group is large or the atmosphere is tense, you can ask the participants to talk in pairs or small groups for a while. Afterwards, you can invite those who have been quiet until then to speak.

WORDS

“For a fruitful dialogue, it is important that as many people as possible participate. This does not mean that everyone must speak for the same amount of time, but that everyone has the opportunity to speak if they wish.”

“We have already heard from some of you. Therefore, I would now like to ask those of you who have not yet said anything what is on your mind.”

“Talk to the people next to you for a while about the things this dialogue has evoked in you so far. Then we can hear especially from those who have not said anything yet.”

15. Limiting speech





ACTION

Reserve yourself the right to limit the number of contributions and their length.

If one of the participants starts to dominate the dialogue, intervene as soon as possible. Thank them for sharing their views. Then say that you would now like to hear what the others have on their minds.

If a participant keeps dominating the conversation, you can ask them to wait a moment and give others a chance to speak.

WORDS

“The aim is to give everyone an equal space to express their views. Is it all right with you if I limit your turns to speak as necessary?”

“Thank you for sharing your views. Now, it would be important to hear what the others have on their minds.”

“I won’t let you speak again just yet. First, let’s hear what the others have on their minds.”



16. Dealing with disagreements

ACTION

Stop the conversation for a moment and describe the disagreement you have noticed.

Ask the participants what they think about what you said.

Decide together as a group whether any of the time reserved for the dialogue should be used to examine the disagreement.

WORDS

"Pysähdytään hetkeksi. Näen, että teillä on erimielisyyksiä. Sopiiko, että tarkastelemme niitä hetken tarkemmin?"

"It appears to me that..."

What do you think about what I just said?"

"Would it be sensible for us to spend some of our time together examining this disagreement?"





ACTION

Emphasise that the aim of the dialogue is to improve understanding of others' points of view, not to resolve the disagreement.

Ask those involved in the disagreement to explain their views and experiences in more detail. Emphasise the importance of listening to others.

WORDS

"It is not necessary to try to resolve disagreements in a dialogue. It is sufficient if we gain a better understanding of what they are about."

"Let's listen without haste. Everyone will get the chance to speak. Please do not interrupt one another. Instead, try to listen and understand one another's points of view."

If the conflict gets tense or heated, slow it down. You can do this by asking questions or summarising the things that have emerged in the dialogue. This creates a sense of safety for those involved and prevents the risk of the tension spiralling out of control.



17. Working with strong emotions

ACTION

Say that you can see the dialogue evokes strong emotions. Emphasise that acknowledging these emotions is important for a better understanding of one another and the topic.

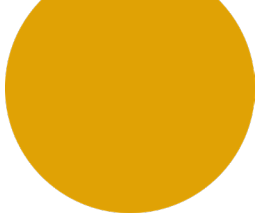
Show the person reacting emotionally that you have noticed their reaction.

WORDS

“I can see that this issue evokes strong emotions. It’s good that these emotions are being expressed, as it helps us to understand the topic better. Let’s try to talk by allowing room for all kinds of experiences.”

“I can see that this matter is important to you. It’s good that you’ve brought up how you feel about it.”





ACTION

Give all participants an equal opportunity to talk about how they feel.

If an emotional outburst seems to be harming the dialogue, stop the conversation and give the participants a break. During the break, talk to the person who became overwhelmed by their emotions.

If the emotional outbreak is targeted at you as the facilitator of the dialogue, ask the participant to tell you about their reaction in more detail.

WORDS

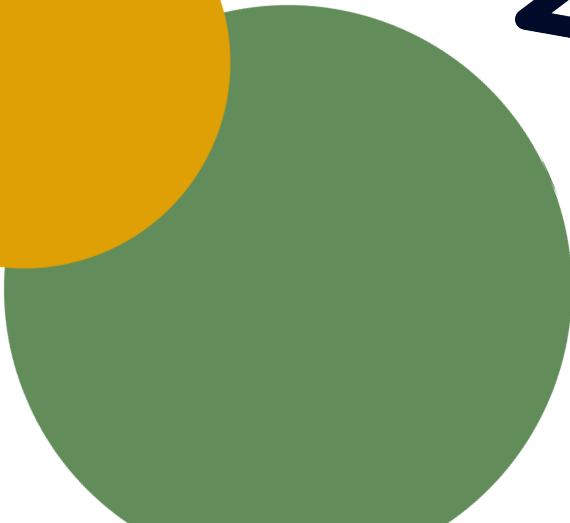
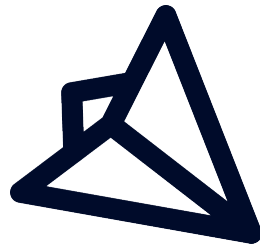
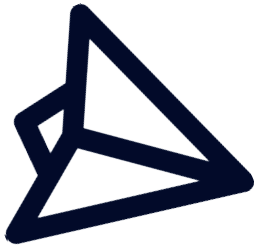
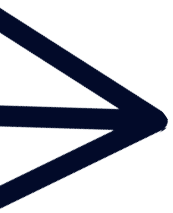
“What about the rest of you? What are your feelings about this?”

“I think we’re now in deep water. I suggest we take a break and continue the dialogue after that.”

“Tell me more. What do you find difficult or wrong about my actions? Then I can try to clarify what it is from my point of view.”



18. Enhancing playfulness





ACTION

Invite participants to play with the issues that come up in the dialogue. Encourage them to experiment with different ways of perceiving the issue at hand.

Agree together on the starting point for the playful dialogue. Then ask the participants to develop the chosen direction from their own perspective.

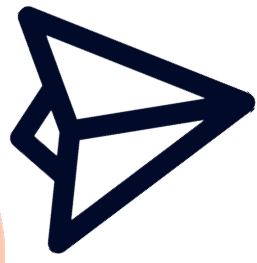
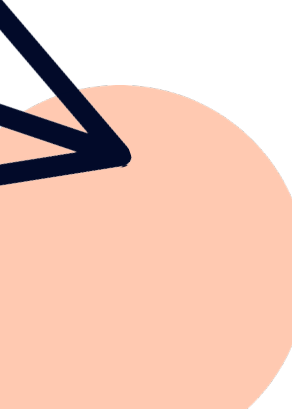
Help participants to keep a balance between freedom and consistency of play.

WORDS

“Let’s focus on this thing that just came up. If you try to follow your imagination a bit, could you tell us what could happen if...?”

“I suggest that soon we will explore together imagined directions. The alternatives will be A and B. Be as free and courageous as you can. Who would like to start by sharing where their thoughts and imagination lead when envisioning these directions?”

“Tell me what you think would happen next, and feel free to take it in any direction you like.”



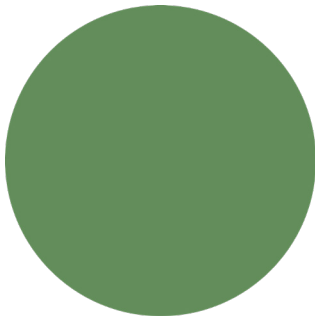
19. Developing as a facilitator

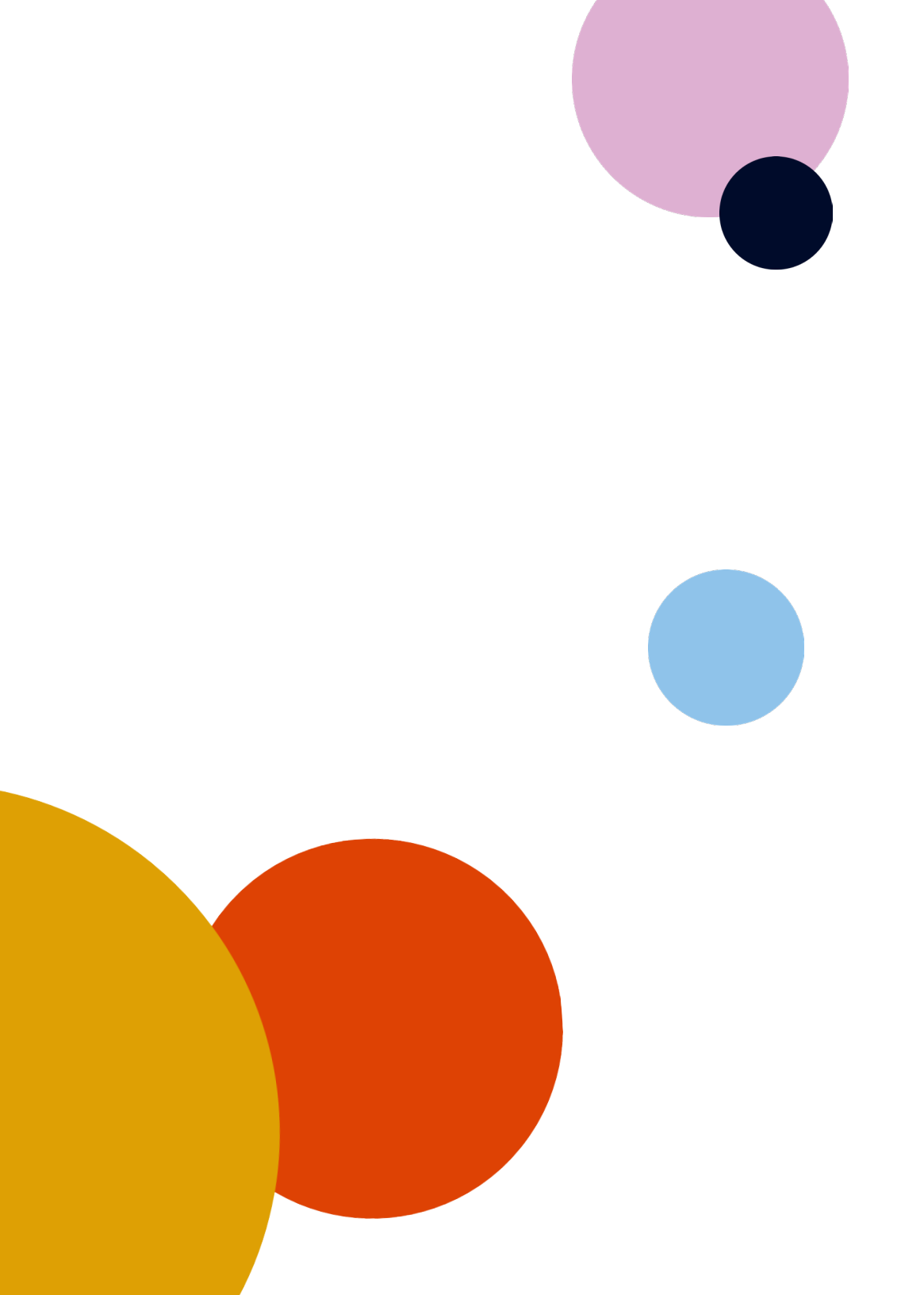
After the dialogue circle, reflect on how it went. What went well? Which situations did you find challenging? What could you do differently next time?

Find someone who has experience with facilitating dialogues. Ask them to support you and reflect with them on your own practice as a facilitator.

Read the relevant literature and attend training courses.

Practice, practice, practice.





20. Sources

Writer: Kai Alhanen

Co-writers: Janne Kareinen, Irina Kuznecova, Ieva Morica,
Lauma Zubule

Alhanen, Kai. The Dialogue Book. Into. 2024.

Timeout cards developed by Sitra

www.kansallisetdialogit.fi/en/

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