

Leader As Coach Tool: STRUCTURED DIALOG

Mirror, Validate & Empathize

Leaders want results and results come from people. Friction, unresolved conflict and a lack of psychological safety get in the way. Leaders who show up as authentic, curious and genuinely “for” their people create the climate for best work. Structured Dialog enables human connection and bridges differences. Leaders who use it cultivate deeper *human* information and forge stronger relationships critical to 1) team performance and 2) leaders’ ability to make right decisions under pressure.

Deepen Connection | Build Trust | Gather Better Information

Get your head in the game: Avoid rushing to problem-solving or targeting specific outcomes. Focus on connection and positive regard. Defer judgment and suspend criticism. Be curious. Embrace vulnerability. Assign a Sender who picks a topic and a Receiver who facilitates the process as follows:

- Create an environment of safety and rigor. Let your partner know that he can trust you – use your words, your energy, your intention. Let go of defensiveness. Be vulnerable yourself.
- Maintain eye contact and body language that’s alert and engaged – lean in (literally).
- Relax into deep listening rather than preparing what you will say next. Be present.

Technique: Mirror, Validate & Empathize

- **Mirror:** Sender sends a few lines over about what they’d like to discuss. Receiver facilitates, focusing on listening and connecting, rather than on gathering all the details your mind may want.



1. Mirror in words, body language and tone of voice to affirm that what you heard is what they intended to communicate. Use their exact words or slight paraphrasing. Example: *You were successful on that project but this one’s different. You’re frustrated and wish that....”*
2. Next, ask: *Did I get you?* Your partner will say yes or clarify. If they clarify, mirror again up to 3 rounds.
3. Next, ask: *Is there more?* This is the double click that deepens the conversation, releasing what’s below the surface or intentionally held back. If there is more, mirror again. Go up to 3 rounds.

- **Validate:** Put your opinions and judgements aside. Put yourself in the other person’s shoes. Start by summarizing what you’ve been mirroring. Pull out key points. You are not agreeing or endorsing, just conveying that you get that their experience is significant for them. Example: *“It makes sense to me that you’re worried about losing the project due to missed deadlines and budget issues. You take pride in your work. It’s painful to be stuck in first gear.*

Did I get you? Is there more?” (See above. Go up to two rounds.)

- **Empathize:** How does it **feel** in their shoes? Use your imagination, human to human. Go beyond the roles each inhabits and join them with feeling. Pay attention to your voice and body language. *“I imagine it has been pretty frustrating for you to be working so hard and not be getting results. I feel for you.”*

To complete, ask your partner to mirror your empathy. Then switch roles.

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M, V & E are cornerstone elements of the Imago Dialog from the life work of Drs. Harville Hendrix & Helen LaKelly Hunt, authors of the bestselling book, [Getting The Love You Want](#).