

**"A Surface-to-Depth Discussion Method, Nicknamed 'ORID'"**

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**A Surface-to-Depth Discussion Method,  
Nicknamed "ORID"**

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**Developmental Intentions**

- I. Toward knowing as a dialogical process.
  - 10. Tapping into and drawing on tacit knowledge.
- III. Toward being a continuous learner.
  - 1. Reflecting on one's own and others' experiences as a guide to future behavior.
  - 5. Posing and pursuing questions out of wonderment.
- V. Toward connection with others.
  - 4. Contributing one's voice to a collective endeavor.

**Context**

This is a format that a group leader, trainer, teacher, or facilitator can use to craft and sequence questions so that a group is drawn into a topic. "ORID Lite" is useful for brief transitional discussions; for example, a five- to ten-minute reflection on a common experience such as a lecture, movie, or demonstration. A more lengthy discussion can draw out insights in depth about a chapter, an assignment, a period of time, and the like. In organizational planning workshops, the ORID surface-to-depth discussion method is a powerful tool to help a group become self-conscious about their experience as employees and coworkers charged with managing change strategies.

## Description of Activity

*Purpose.* To foster a train of thought in a group discussion that leads to illumination or significant discovery.

*Format-steps-process.* ORID is the acronym for Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, Decisional, the four steps or stages in an ORID discussion, which more or less parallel the levels of cognitive processing. Whatever the focus of the discussion, this progression of questions allows me to move a group from surface information to depth insight. The four levels of questions that I pose to groups are as follows:

1. One or more *objective*-level questions that solicits surface level data, information, and facts—any information that can be gathered by the senses; I encourage everyone to respond and contribute brief answers.
2. One or more *reflective*-level questions to draw out associations that the group members experience with the data; examples of this type of questions are, “What was surprising? What touched you? What were you most interested in? What feeling did you experience?” I hope these questions will elicit subjective, intuitive, “gut” reactions, and I encourage people to respond with affective content.
3. One or more *interpretive* questions to solicit insights about the significance or meaning of the data. My intent here is to engender thoughtful and analytic responses; for example, “What’s the learning here? What’s the point of this for us? What really happened? What story do you tell from your point of view?”
4. One, probably, *decisional*-level question to solicit comments about the implications of the discussion, next steps, consequences, or requirements in light of the discussion. These questions involve some kind of *choice* or *will*.

*Closure:* I use a simple, affirming statement to close the discussion and acknowledge the group’s insights.

## Processing Tips

The leader sets the stage with a context that connects the group’s expectations and the leader’s reason for a discussion. Sometimes telling a story does the job, sometimes focusing a topic intellectually, sometimes posing a problem or issue. In any case, the group is helped to warm up if the leader begins with a simple, objective-level question, asking for a brief answer from each person in turn. In this way, each person has “broken the ice” of contributing to the group discussion; however, the question requires only recall, not processing.

If any of my questions cause furrowed eyebrows, I rephrase the question. But if people are thoughtful and not confused, I simply restate the question, after a pause. I understand that silence usually indicates that processing is taking place and that all I need do is to help keep people's minds focused by restating the question. Open-ended questions keep the conversation progressing; yes-no questions tend to shut the conversation down.

The time allotted to each level of the questioning sequence will vary depending on the objective of the discussion and the leader's aim with respect to what the participants are to experience. A typical twenty-minute discussion about an intellectual topic might flow as follows: objective-level questions, three minutes; reflective-level questions, four minutes; interpretive-level questions, twelve minutes; and decisional-level questions, one minute. If, by contrast, the point of the discussion was to explore implications or to elicit commitment, the flow might be objective, three minutes; reflective, four minutes; interpretive, five minutes; decisional, eight minutes.

A typical, brief transition or closure discussion (after the major ORID session), lasting five minutes, might be, for example, objective ("What do you recall [about the session itself]?"), one minute; reflective ("What was most engaging?"), one minute; interpretive ("What insights will you take away from this encounter?"), two minutes; decisional ("How will your point of view be different?"), one minute.

The leader can be quite informal and conversational about posing the questions, without bothering to announce the level of the question or the intent of the discussion. The magic is in the sequence. Because it reflects the levels of our mind's cognitive processing, it is a natural flow, built on a foundation of shared information. Often a group member spontaneously answers the next-level question. If I feel that the group has entertained enough data at the present level, I'll take such a response as an indicator to ask the next-level question.

Members of a group skilled in using the ORID method will remember the steps in the thought process and remind each other if they need more data at any given level. Or they will request to move to the next question if they feel they have exhausted the possibilities of the question currently before the group.

It is my experience that there are four skills required to use the ORID method powerfully. The first involves being self-conscious about the purpose of the discussion and the hoped-for experience of the participants. The second is thoughtfully crafting open-ended questions so that they build on each other. The third is trusting that the questions themselves, put repeatedly to the group, will elicit rich content. The fourth is the ability to enter intuitively into a natural flow state with the group to capture and build upon the insights of the moment in light of the aims of the discussion. Anyone can begin to practice the ORID method. It



takes years of practice for it to become second nature and natural and to consistently achieve occasions of discovery and wonder.

### Contributor's Commentary

The skillful crafting of the questions and the flow of thought that leads from surface impressions to depth of understanding may draw out a group into an unsuspected moment when a discovery is made. The discovery can be mundane or transcendent, depending on the topic and the point of the discussion. Wonder and awe don't break loose all the time, but when they do, they are a strong indicator that a *break-loose* insight has just occurred that can be noted and used in some important, practical way. But the point of the method is to invite the group to look beyond the surface and see what they discover: an insight, an implication, whatever. The movement of the four levels, that is, the flow that "gets somewhere," releases energy because it occasions insight or action based on a joint exploration.

The times that I have used this method in connection with a workgroup's planning have been most consistently the occasions for break-loose thinking. For example, when a group is analyzing the barriers to their vision for their future, I'll use an informal ORID discussion to help them process the brainstorm of issues, obstacles, and irritants on a flip chart or a wall chart. The questions would typically be as follows: objective [I read the data from the flip chart]; reflective ("Which of these issues and obstacles do you personally experience most powerfully?"); interpretive ("What gives these obstacles power over us?" or "What keeps these from being removed as barriers?"); and finally, decisional ("What name would you give to the underlying pattern that keeps these barriers in place?").

Groups that thoughtfully address these questions discover aspects of their culture or their approach to work that inadvertently thwart their best intentions and most cherished hopes. For example, a group of gifted architects discovered that the very perspective they bring to their craft tends to separate them from the other players in projects with whom they need to collaborate most effectively. Or in another case, the staff of an important human service agency discovered that the patterns of care that enabled them to serve their clients effectively had seduced them into dysfunctional patterns in their supervisory relationships with each other. In both of these real life instances, the ORID method allowed people to explore the evidence of their own life experience and together to look at it in new ways. When the interpretive questions focus on "Why?" the group frequently has an "aha" discovery that sheds new light on real predicaments. These moments are very energizing and stimulate creative brainstorming about natural and effective solutions to the real, underlying problems facing people in their work together.

As Stanfield (1997) points out, other uses of the method include informal, light occasions when it's fun or useful to review a period of time or an accomplishment; supervisory or disciplinary interactions requiring a disciplined, reasoned train of thought; occasions when it's important for people to discover what they know together or what they have experienced in their lives.

### Reference

- Stanfield, B. (1997) (Ed.). *The art of focused conversation: 100 ways to access group wisdom in the workplace*. Toronto, CA: Institute of Cultural Affairs. (Available from the Institute of Cultural Affairs at [www.ica-usa.org](http://www.ica-usa.org) or [www.web.net/~icacan](http://www.web.net/~icacan))