



Improve

Leading Impactful Dirt World Discussions

A Masterclass for
Training and Field Leaders



Discussion Guide 2025

Introduction

Whether you do on-the-job training, classroom sessions, or have a video-based training platform, you know the training material itself is only part of the equation when it comes to making lasting change.

One deciding factor cuts across every format or topic, often determining if people really end up understanding and retaining what they learn: **discussions**.

The quality and frequency of discussions can make or break whether training sticks—and whether learning remains a one-off event or embeds itself into your culture.

Done well and it can change everything. People open up. They start talking to each other more, share knowledge, and ask for help. Communication goes from reactive to proactive, helping to prevent accidents and rework.

The best part is, it doesn't have to be complicated. Even 5-10 minute conversations will help your team lock in knowledge, apply it on the job, and build a culture of continuous improvement.

So what makes a good discussion? In this guide, we'll cover practical techniques to lead engaging, high-impact conversations that not only reinforce training, but strengthen your crew's connection and commitment.

We'll cover simple habits and advanced coaching strategies—with example dialogues you can use to build your own style.



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1: The Power of Names and **Acknowledgment**

Why It Matters

Using someone's name builds instant connection and shows respect. In the Dirt World, where relationships and trust are everything, this simple habit invites participation and creates a sense of belonging.

Key Techniques

- **Use Names:** Address people by name when asking questions or acknowledging responses.
- **Learn Name Preferences:** Some prefer formal (Mr. Rodriguez), some informal (Mike vs. Michael).
- **Pronounce Names Correctly:** Take the time to learn proper pronunciation; it shows respect.
- **Acknowledge Every Contribution:** Even brief responses deserve recognition.



Example Dialogue

Individual Engagement:

Leader: "James, what stood out to you from the material on trench safety?"

James: "The part about soil classification."

Leader: "Thanks, James. That's a critical piece. What specifically about soil classification caught your attention?"

Team Engagement:

Leader: "In yesterday's video on communication, we learned about closed-loop communication. Carlos, have you seen that in action?"

Carlos: "Miguel double-checked the grade before we started backfilling."

Leader: "Exactly. Miguel, what impact did that communication have on the job?"

Such a simple yet powerful way to build rapport. With that foundation set, let's look at how to create the kind of environment where, when you do use names, those people feel comfortable speaking up.

2: Creating Psychological **Safety**

Just like using names fosters inclusion, building trust ensures the people behind those names actually feel comfortable speaking up.

Why It Matters

People won't participate if they fear being embarrassed or criticized. Creating a safe environment where people can share thoughts without judgment is essential for productive discussions.

Key Techniques

- **Respond Positively to All Contributions:** Recognize the value in every response.
- **Handle Incorrect Answers Respectfully:** Make people feel safe participating, whether right or wrong.
- **Model Vulnerability:** Share your own learning experiences and mistakes.
- **Use Supportive Language:** "That's an interesting perspective" instead of "That's wrong."



Example Dialogue

Handling Incorrect Answers:

Leader: "What's the maximum slope angle for safe excavator operation according to today's video?"

Ryan: "I think it was 35 degrees."

Leader: "Thanks for jumping in, Ryan. The video specified 30 degrees. It's an easy detail to mix up, and I appreciate you getting us close. Does anyone remember why 30 degrees is the limit?"

Encouraging Participation:

Leader: "Sarah, you've been doing this for a while. Is there a piece of PPE you've grown to appreciate more over time?"

Sarah: "My safety glasses, after seeing someone get something in their eye."

Don't be surprised if it takes a few reps for people to open up and for your team to get into a natural rhythm. Once you've got people willing to share, you can guide them toward deeper learning.

3: Moving Down the **Learning Pyramid**

Now that people feel safe contributing, it's time to take learning to the next level. Here's how to progress discussions past the initial icebreakers.

Why It Matters

People remember more when they do more. Your questions can help move the team from watching or listening to discussing, applying, and even teaching each other.

Key Techniques

- **Start with Recall Questions:** Verify basic understanding before moving deeper.
- **Progress to Understanding Questions:** Ask people to explain concepts in their own words.
- **Move to Application Questions:** Bridge to how the content applies to daily work.
- **Culminate with Analysis/Evaluation:** Encourage critical thinking about when and why to apply learning.



Example Dialogue

Safety Topic:

Leader: "What were the three ladder inspection steps?" (Recall)

Tom: "Rails, rungs, feet."

Leader: "Why check the feet?" (Understanding)

Tom: "Worn feet can slip."

Leader: "How does that apply to tomorrow's setup?" (Application)

Leader: "What would you do if you found worn feet?" (Analysis)

Encouraging Participation:

Leader: "In today's video on reading cut sheets, what's the symbol that indicates an existing utility line?" (Recall)

Maria: "A dashed line."

Leader: "That's right, Maria. Can you explain why it's important to identify existing utilities before excavation?" (Understanding)

Maria: "So we don't hit them and cause service disruptions or safety hazards."

Leader: "Exactly. Miguel, how would you apply this to our current project on Main Street?" (Application)

Miguel: "We need to verify all the utility markings match what's on our cut sheets, especially around that old section where the as-builts might not be accurate."

Leader: "That's excellent thinking, Miguel. What steps would you take if you found a discrepancy?" (Analysis/Evaluation)

These deeper questions start to help your team build up critical thinking skills and transfer knowledge between team members. Let's get into knowledge transfer in greater detail.

4: Drawing Out Existing Knowledge

Your team is probably made up of a wide range of individuals with different backgrounds and levels of experience. Drawing on that shows appreciation for what they know and helps close skill gaps faster.

Why It Matters

Knowledge transfer is critical to achieve with many exiting and entering the workforce. The sooner you can make it a habit, the further ahead you'll be.

Key Techniques

- **Ask for Personal Experiences:** Connect content to real-world situations they've encountered.
- **Invite Comparisons:** Ask how new information compares to current practices.
- **Solicit Alternative Approaches:** Explore different ways to apply the learning.
- **Bridge Generations:** Encourage experienced workers to share wisdom while respecting new perspectives.

Pro Tip: Encourage peer teaching by rotating discussion leadership among team members.



Example Dialogue

Experience-Based Discussion:

Leader: "Today's video covered proper excavator bucket positioning for trenching. Who has a technique or tip they've developed over the years that wasn't mentioned in the video?"

Frank (20-year operator): "I always keep a small level in my cab to double-check my trenches when visibility is poor."

Leader: "That's a great practical addition, Frank. Thank you for sharing that experience. Has anyone found a different approach that works for them?"

Jamal (newer operator): "I've been using the AR guidance system on the new machines, and it's been helping me maintain grade more consistently."

Leader: "That's an excellent point about using new technology, Jamal. Frank, have you had a chance to try the AR system yet?"

Knowledge-Bridging Discussion:

Leader: "The video showed proper rigging for concrete pipe. Tony, from your experience, what's a situation where you might need to modify that approach?"

Tony: "When you're setting pipe in a confined space with existing utilities, sometimes you need to use a shorter sling and adjust your lift point."

Leader: "That's valuable insight, Tony. Could you share a specific example of when you had to make that kind of adjustment?"

Tony: "On the Jackson project, we had to set 36-inch pipe alongside that gas main, and we..."

Leader: "Thank you for that real-world example. That's the kind of situation the video doesn't cover but we need to be prepared for."

These stories also help your people identify who to go to for help when they're outside of a training environment—and elevate veteran employees who might not be in a dedicated mentor role.

5: Creating Relevance Through “Why” Questions

Now that we’re making progress on knowledge, let’s get into meaning-making. “Why” questions help team members internalize the importance of training.

Why It Matters

People are more likely to engage when they understand why something matters to them—on the job, for their crew, or in their career.

Key Techniques

- **Ask Direct Why Questions:** “Why does this matter for our work?”
- **Explore Consequences:** “What could happen if we didn’t follow this procedure?”
- **Connect to Company Values:** “How does this reflect our commitment to safety/quality/teamwork?”
- **Link to Personal Benefit:** “How might this make your job easier/safer?”



Example Dialogue

Safety Discussion:

Leader: "Today we learned about proper lifting techniques. Why is this particularly important for us as a construction team?"

Elena: "Because we're constantly lifting heavy materials, and one back injury could put someone out for months."

Leader: "That's exactly right, Elena. The physical demands of our work make this critical. Mark, how have you seen improper lifting affect someone in the past?"

Mark: "My cousin works concrete and herniated a disc trying to muscle a form panel by himself. He was out for three months and still has pain."

Leader: "I appreciate you sharing that, Mark. That personal connection really drives home why this matters."

Personal Development Discussion:

Leader: "In today's video on conflict resolution, we learned about separating the problem from the person. Why might this approach be especially valuable on our busy jobsites?"

Jackson: "Because we're all under pressure to get things done quickly, and it's easy to get frustrated with each other."

Leader: "Great insight, Jackson. Pressure definitely tests our communication skills. How might applying this approach affect our team's performance?"

Jackson: "We'd probably waste less time being mad at each other and focus more on fixing the actual problems."

Leader: "That's a powerful observation about efficiency. Anyone else see additional benefits?"

When people understand why something matters, they're more likely to use it. We can take it a step further and create relevance for the task right in front of them.

6: Applying Learning to **Today's Work**

If they know why it matters, they'll be more likely to be bought in and willing to apply it to the job at hand. Let's help them learn how to do that.

Why It Matters

Training doesn't matter unless it changes how people work. Help your crew see the link between training material and today's tasks.

Key Techniques

- **Create Specific Scenarios:** "How would you apply this to the Johnson project today?"
- **Make It Immediate:** "What's one thing you'll do differently this morning based on what we learned?"
- **Follow Up:** "Yesterday we discussed proper compaction testing. Did anyone apply that today?"
- **Help Them Think Ahead:** "What obstacles might you face when applying this, and how will you overcome them?"



Example Dialogue

Immediate Application:

Leader: "Today's video covered effective hand signals for crane operations. How might we apply that specifically to our current lift plan for the Miller building?"

Darren: "We need to make sure everyone's using the same signals, especially with the two different crane companies we have on site."

Leader: "Great point about consistency, Darren. What's one thing we could do this morning to implement this?"

Darren: "We could take five minutes at the crane setup to verify signals with both operators and all riggers."

Leader: "That's an excellent actionable step. Let's do that right after our meeting."

Follow-Up Discussion:

Leader: "Yesterday, we discussed proper material storage to prevent trip hazards. Did anyone make changes based on what we learned?"

Sophia: "I reorganized our material staging area and marked out clear walkways with spray paint."

Leader: "That's excellent implementation, Sophia! What difference did you notice after making those changes?"

Sophia: "There was less confusion about where to put new deliveries, and people weren't cutting through material piles as much."

Leader: "That's a great concrete example of how a small change can make a big difference. Has anyone else implemented something from yesterday's discussion?"

You've got a lot of new strategies in your back pocket. But out in the real world? You've got to be prepared for some curveballs. Here's what to do when things get bumpy.

7: Handling Challenging Situations

Even with a strong foundation, not every discussion progresses as planned—especially when you and your team are still forming your own etiquette around the practice.

Why It Matters

It's inevitable to experience rocky moments. Having tools to navigate tough times keeps things productive and positive—and can even deepen trust in the long run.

Key Techniques

- **Managing Dominant Participants:** Redirect the conversation to others while acknowledging contributions.
- **Encouraging Quiet Members:** Gently direct questions and start with low-pressure asks.
- **Addressing Negativity:** Acknowledge concerns then turn them into learning moments and opportunities to find solutions together.
- **Handling Tangents:** Recognize the contribution but guide back to the topic.



Example Dialogue

Managing Dominant Participants:

Mike: (after answering the third question in a row) "...and that's why I always check the hydraulic lines first thing."

Leader: "Thanks for sharing your expertise, Mike. You've given us several good insights today. Raul, what's your approach to daily equipment checks?"

Encouraging Quiet Participants:

Leader: "I notice a few of you haven't had a chance to share yet. Juan, you've been running the new dozer all week. What's one thing from today's video on undercarriage maintenance that connects to what you've observed?"

Juan: (briefly) "Keeping the tracks tensioned right."

Leader: "That's a great point, Juan. Could you share what you've noticed happens when the tension isn't correct?"

Redirecting Negativity:

Derek: "The training material is wrong about these specs."

Leader: "I'm glad you pointed that out, Derek. Since we're in a different region, these specs will be different for us even if they're correct for the team that created the training. Does anyone know what conditions unique to our state make it different for us?"

Regardless of the situation, sometimes even the best words aren't enough. You might know the old saying, "Show, don't tell." Let's learn what that might look like for you.

8: Using **Technology and Visual Aids**

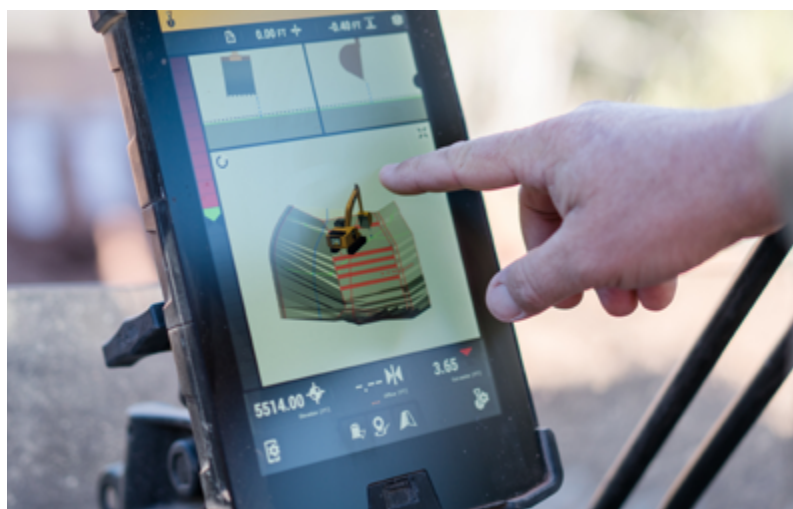
Sometimes the best learning aid isn't what you say—it's what you show and how you demonstrate it.

Why It Matters

There are different learning styles and no apparent way to tell what people's preferences are. If you use a combination of audio and visual techniques, you have a better chance of reaching everyone.

Key Techniques

- **Photo/Video Capturing:** Document real jobsite examples to reference in discussions.
- **Drawing and Sketching:** Use a whiteboard or paper for visual explanations.
- **Reference Materials:** Have standards, manuals, or specs handy for reference.
- **Physical Demonstrations:** Use tools or models for hands-on learning.



Example Dialogue

Using Jobsite Photos:

Leader: (showing a photo from their jobsite) “In today’s video on proper shoring, we saw some examples of good setups. Here’s a picture from our Central Avenue project last month. What do you notice about our shoring compared to what was shown in the video?”

Terrence: “We used the hydraulic shores while the video showed timber shores.”

Leader: “Good observation, Terrence. What advantages does our hydraulic system give us in situations like this?”

Creating a Quick Diagram:

Leader: (sketching on whiteboard) “The training material covered water flow principles. Let me draw our current site drainage. Where do you see potential issues based on what we learned today?”

Madison: “The collection point at the northeast corner seems too small for the watershed area.”

Leader: “Excellent analysis, Madison. Let me adjust the drawing. How might we modify this to apply what we learned?”

Great discussions don’t just end—they echo. In the next section, we’ll learn some easy ways to close and reinforce what’s been learned.



9: Closing the Loop

Wrapping up well helps reinforce the key takeaways and shows your crew that the conversation matters, not just the facts of training material.

Why It Matters

A strong close boosts retention, reinforces team culture, and sets the tone for the rest of the day. It also creates an “easy-in” for newer crew members to feel heard and valued.

Key Techniques

- **Ask for Summaries:** “What are your key takeaways from today’s discussion?”
- **Commitment Questions:** “What’s one thing you’ll do differently based on what we learned?”
- **Follow-Up Planning:** “Tomorrow, let’s share how we applied today’s learning.”
- **Connection Questions:** “How does this connect to what we learned last week?”



Example Dialogue

Checking Understanding:

Leader: "We've had a great discussion about proper equipment shutdown procedures. Before we wrap up, who can summarize the three main steps we need to follow?"

Chris: "Make sure the equipment is in a safe location, follow the proper shutdown sequence for that specific machine, and conduct a post-operation inspection."

Leader: "Perfect summary, Chris. And why is the post-operation inspection so important?"

Chris: "It helps us catch maintenance issues early and gives the next operator a heads-up on any concerns."

Leader: "Exactly right. That inspection is our first line of defense against major problems."

The best way to help people remember something is to make it as easy as possible. A simple summary goes a long way when it comes to making a new concept stick. On that note, one more thing...



Remember, **Better Doesn't Happen Overnight**

Like any skill, the more you practice, the better you get. As you improve, your team will get more comfortable, too.

Most importantly, don't forget *your why*. You're a critical piece in making this all a success. You're doing much more than leading a meeting. You're building culture.

If the pressure gets to you at times, remember what rewards are on the other side—you're making a real difference for the business, for every individual, and growing as a leader.

Keep at it.

 **Improve** | Better Every Day

