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REGIONAL
STEWARDSHIP

**The Magic of Dialogue:
Transforming Conflict into Cooperation**

**By
Daniel Yankelovich
(Simon and Schuster, 1999)**

Daniel Yankelovich, one of the world's most respected public opinion experts, has provided a practical guide to dialogue as a tool for promoting cooperation in a world of widely dispersed organizations with different interests and agendas. Not just another form of conversation or discussion, "dialogue" is a specific skill to be acquired. If successfully practiced, it can produce extraordinary results.

His book shows how dialogue differs from debate, discussion and deliberation. In debate, participants compete to win, defending one's views against others and searching for conclusions that ratify one's position. In dialogue, participants collaborate toward a common understanding, exploring common ground and listening to find agreement.

Yankelovich makes that case that dialogue is essential for transforming conflict into cooperation. It requires the absence of coercive influences (all participants must be treated as equals), listening with empathy, and bringing assumptions into the open. He documents how dialogue can achieve results by building trust and understanding.

Yankelovich makes the following points about the importance of this approach.

Most people have two purposes for dialogue: to strengthen personal relationships and to solve problems. Today, the second purpose is growing in importance: increasingly, we find ourselves facing problems requiring more shared understanding than in the past... Traditional top-down styles of leadership in semi-isolation from others is increasingly out of vogue. It is being replaced by what I have come to think of a "relational leadership" with others, rather than



handing down visions, strategies, and plans as if they were commandments from the mountaintop.

His ideas have been recently tested in series of innovative applications of civic engagement tools to address specific issues in San Diego, including the recent ChoiceWork Dialogues focus on regional growth and governance issues.

Beyond the specific tools outlined in this book and tested in ChoiceWorks Dialogues which are valuable for the practice of regional stewardship, Yankelovich makes the critical observation that in this diverse and less hierarchical world, decision-makers need to learn to argue less and dialogue more. In this sense, he is giving practical advice to help realize John Gardner's wisdom that some people just need a "good listening to."