

Liberating Structures



Handbook

This handbook is derived from the Group Jazz publication, *Engaging Everyone with Liberating Structures*.
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Liberating structures are frameworks that make it possible for people and organizations to create, to do new things, to be innovative. These are processes or rules that can be put in place to encourage people to be free, creative, and get results, rather than find themselves oppressed, constrained, confined, or powerless. For things to really change, structural elements need to change, too. Otherwise change is short-lived. Liberating structures are the forms that make it easy for people to be generative together and make a significant impact with their creativity.

The designs that seem to best support the kind of engagement we need and want share a number of key qualities: they are messy and they are complex. The conversations they produce cross boundaries between departments, between roles, between parts of the organization that don't ordinarily talk to each other. Many are self-organized where order arises out of local interaction. The dialogue feels generative. Yet, at the same time, designs that work have just enough structure to channel the energy and keep things moving and productive. These structures are liberating rather than confining.

Jazz is a good example. Through its underlying structure, people are able to play together. In fact, people who have never seen each other, never before met, can sit down and jam. They can create something that is wonderful. The guidelines of jazz are a collection of principles that give enough structure so that people can create together. These same principles make possible infinite degrees of freedom. Different saxophone players playing the same piece can come up with totally unique expressions, each time they play it! Yet, you recognize it as this piece rather than that piece. There's something about it that gives it a persistent identity and there is plenty of room for individual creativity.

OWNERSHIP VERSUS BUY-IN

Ownership is when you own or share the ownership of an idea, a decision, an action plan, a choice. It means that you have participated in its development; that it is your choice freely made.

Buy-in is the exact opposite. Someone else, or some group of people, has done the development, the thinking and the deciding, and now they have to convince you to come along and buy-in to their idea -- so that you can implement their idea without your involvement in the initial conversations or resulting decisions. Aiming for buy-in creates lukewarm, pallid implementation and mediocre results.

Liberating Structures help you create true ownership and avoid the pitfalls of buy-in.

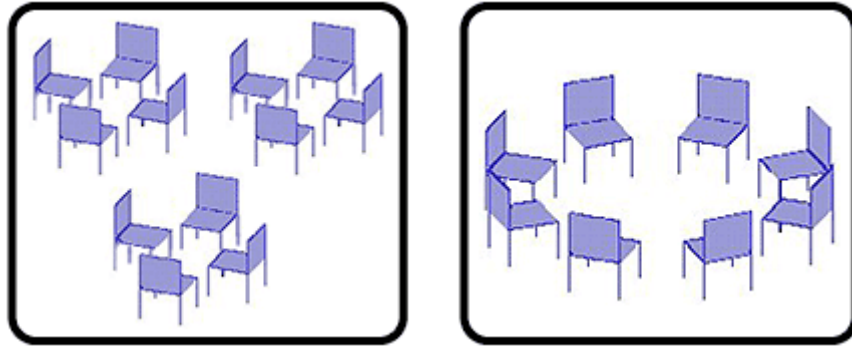
When it comes to solving intractable socio-technical behavioral problems in systems the notion of buy-in is just not useful - people in the system need to own the new behaviors.

Anytime you or someone around you thinks or talks about buy-in, beware! It is a danger signal telling you that your development and implementation process is missing the essential ingredient of involving all who should be involved.

Liberating Structures are all about creating ownership.

CHOOSING SPACE

Many meetings and events work well with NO TABLES in the room. This makes it easy to move chairs around in many different configurations.



SMALL tables are much better than big tables if you plan to have participants do some work that requires writing or drawing. Ask for "café" tables or "4-tops" (that seat 4-6 people). The round tables typically available in most conference centers and hotels are too large for juicy conversation because people end up too far apart and have to yell across to be heard in a full room.

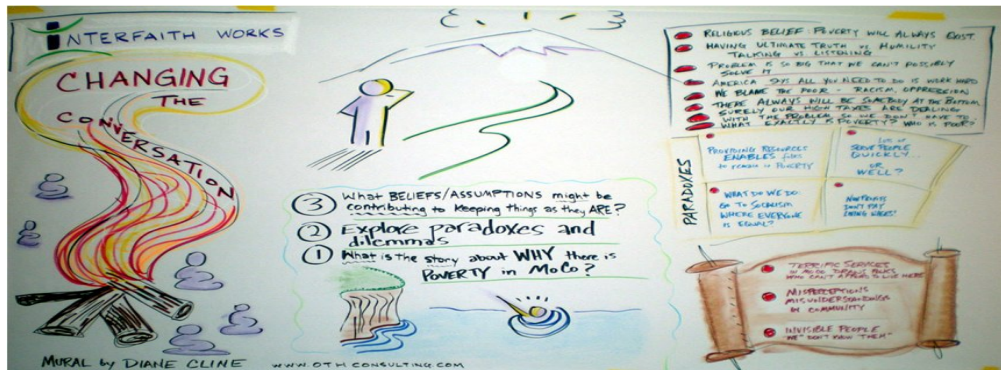
Whether or not you have tables, you need lots of elbow room so it's easy to move around. Some exercises work best with participants standing up in an open space so select a room that is big enough or has access to an open space. Outside works, weather permitting.

AESTHETICS ARE IMPORTANT

Lighting is critical and most people wilt when meeting all day in artificial - especially fluorescent - light. Choose a room with *natural light* if at all possible!



Bring some color into the room. Flowers and other natural materials can breathe life into a space and make it feel more welcoming. Other possibilities are posters, photographs,



It's great to have a big, long wall you can cover with blank paper for graphic recording. If there isn't a long wall or if the site doesn't permit putting anything on the wall you can get big pieces of poster board that can be put on a couple of easels and covered with drawing paper. Graphic recorders are wonderful but, if there isn't someone in your group with graphic recording skill and you can't afford to hire one, it can still be a great idea to create a space for participants to capture some images and ideas from your meeting.

WORKING WITH THE SPACE YOU'RE GIVEN

You can use Liberating Structures in any space. Of course, some spaces are more conducive to interaction than others.



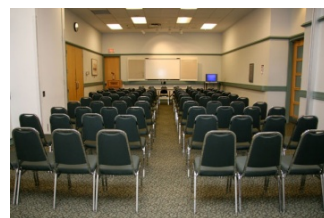
If you're in a space where rows of chairs are stuck to the floor it's harder to get people engaged - but it's not impossible.

Invite people to stand up, turn around, and talk to the person in the row behind. Invite people to stand up and make a group of three to have a conversation. Sometimes there is space at the back or at the sides or front of the room or in the aisles where participants can move freely.





Rooms with round tables are easier to work with, however you will still want to find ways to get participants away from the tables so that they can get closer together for some of the exercises.



Sometimes, you'll come into a room set up with moveable chairs in rows. That's better and though it might be tight, you can move the chairs around! For starters, you could at least turn the chairs so they are facing each other so the room looks more inviting for participants when they arrive.



STORYBOARD DESIGN AND PLANNING

	30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify key elements of Project (deliverables, tasks, interdependencies) Articulate "ghosts" via 4-via leadership, structure Express leadership viewpoint 	Panel members provide different elements of what is "known" so far about this Project
	45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify needs of THIS team Identify issues for creating the project team 	Break-out group exercise TBD
	45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define individual roles & responsibilities Map out what will be included in team Charter/contract 	Report out from break-out groups (Process TBD) Discussion of team chartering
	10		

Try using a storyboard instead of an agenda to design and plan a meeting, event, or even an initiative that will play out over time.

This can include everything any good plan might include (roles, topics, questions, timings, materials needed, etc.). Unlike an agenda, it also includes and illustrates something about what the participants will experience in the course of the meeting.

A storyboard makes it easier to design and plan collaboratively because it's easy for everyone



to get a sense of the proposed flow of the gathering. For example, if you find your storyboard has a whole lot of podium sessions in a row, it's not going to be very engaging!

One technique that can work well is to use post-it notes to represent different components of the meeting so you can move them around to see how different combinations might feel.

Design your own icons or you can find a portfolio of possibilities you're welcome to use on the Group Jazz website.

NOTHING ABOUT ME WITHOUT ME

When searching in your organization or community for behavior and solutions that are unusually powerful and effective (positively deviant), it helps to broaden your conversations to include the people most involved. This is especially powerful when you can bring together people that don't normally talk with one another.

For example, a nurse might say, "Well, we would wear gloves if we had the supplies, but they never bring enough."

A good response to this would be, "Who could we talk with in supplies that might be able to help us fix this?"

Or, during a Discovery & Action dialogue someone might say, "The doctors need to change their behavior by rounding on MRSA positive patients last."

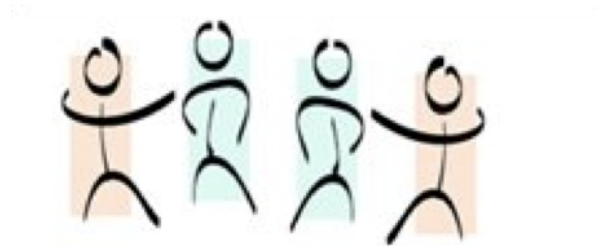
A good response would be, "Which doctors could we ask about whether this makes sense? Who could approach one of these MDs?"

Thinking about the Unusual Suspects is an important part of creating an invitation list for any gathering you design.

ENGAGE THE *UNUSUAL* SUSPECTS

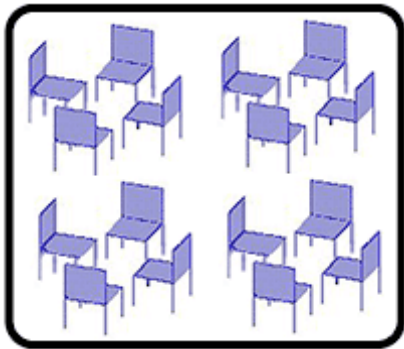
Who's not here that could contribute to our conversation?

This may be one of the most important questions you can ask. Widen the network. *Get more voices into the conversation.*



One of the challenges in doing this is figuring out how to craft an invitation that feels authentic and welcoming. Many people have been to too many meetings where they were invited as window dressing without the opportunity to contribute, so they may be suspicious.

KNEE-TO-KNEE CONVERSATION



Peter Block talks about the power of small groups sitting knee-to-knee - without the mediating effect of a table. Whenever possible invite participants to move closer together to create more intimacy. You can learn a lot more about the power of small groups at www.asmallgroup.net.

This can be a great way to start a meeting and it works with any number. Set up the chairs in small "knee-to-knee" groups before participants arrive. As they come in, they will naturally end up in small groups. When it's time for the session to start, invite all participants to find a place. Encourage them to sit with people they know less well than they know others and suggest they have a conversation based on the purpose and context of the meeting.

Possible questions:

What drew you to this meeting?

What are you most excited about in your work right now?

What are you bringing to this community?

What audacious goal could we have?

ONE MINUTE OF SILENCE

Give participants a full minute of silence to reflect on a question before starting an exercise.

A minute of reflection is not just for the introverts in your group. Everyone benefits from having a moment to think about something before jumping into a discussion. Participants have an opportunity to be fully present - leaving their last meeting, phone call, travel time, and so on, behind.



One strategy to help participants feel more comfortable with the idea of starting in silence is to make a big deal out of the amount of time by saying something along the lines of:

I'm giving you a full minute to think about this before we start and I'm going to time it so it's EXACTLY a minute. For some of you, this minute will go by in a flash. For others, it will seem like it's taking forever. But I promise, it will be exactly one minute. Ready?

Later, when you debrief the LS process, invite participants to notice what the minute of silence contributed to the process if they don't bring it up themselves.

CELEBRITY INTERVIEWS

Sometimes you want to feature one or more people who have information/ideas that can catalyze your conversations.

Instead of having a traditional presentation or panel discussion, create a "talk show" atmosphere where an interviewer can draw out catalysts in a more conversational way. This lets you:



- Convey a small number of ideas associated with a key dimension of a topic or project in a compelling, memorable, engaging way.
- Intrigue the audience enough to make them want to review more in-depth documents, handouts, and related materials that you provide before, during, and/or after the meeting.
- Introduce a key player (source) and their relationship to the topic/project in a way that allows their individual personality, passion, and style to show up.
- Establish an interactive, conversational, inviting tone to a meeting so that all participants will be more likely to speak up and be engaged in the meeting at later times.
- Avoid draining/deadening the energy in the meeting, which happens when people have to listen to any one voice for more than 5 minutes - especially if they are being given large amounts of data particularly text on slides.

Coach both the catalysts and the interviewer so that the questions (and answers) open up rather than limit the conversation.

For example, "What does the marketing data say?" tends to elicit boring responses. A better question might be, "Having explored the marketing data, what surprised you? What strikes you as most important?"

TAKING QUESTIONS

If you invite participants to ask questions or share comments after *Celebrity Interviews* or other exercises, have participants speak in batches (3-4 at a time) rather than 1 by 1.

This avoids a problem that can happen when the first question sends the conversation off in a weird direction.



It also avoids getting into a Q A Q A Q A Q A pattern that tends to reinforce the "central tendency" versus the distributed intelligence of the group. It makes it possible for many more participants to get their question into the mix. When you've heard several questions it feels more like you're getting a sense of the questions that are sitting in the group as a whole.

You can ask participants to write their questions on post-its or cards so that you can collect them all at the end of the exercise. You might post them somewhere or include them in the event proceedings.

The interviewer, volunteer participant, or meeting facilitator can elicit and listen to several questions and then invite the catalyst(s) to respond however they choose. This allows them to combine questions or select one that allows them to riff on the idea they find intriguing.

TAKE 10 (MINUTES)

It could be Take 7 or Take 15 or whatever amount of time seems right.

It may not seem like much – but giving participants a chunk of time to think on their own about something can generate tremendous benefits and allow the conversation to go deeper than it otherwise might. This can even be a good thing to do in the middle of a shorter meeting.

You can suggest that participants jot down some of their thoughts as they reflect. Tell them these notes are just for themselves, so they don't need to worry about writing them in a way anybody else can read or understand.

Give them a really juicy question to think about:

How has your thinking changed about [blank] since we started this morning?

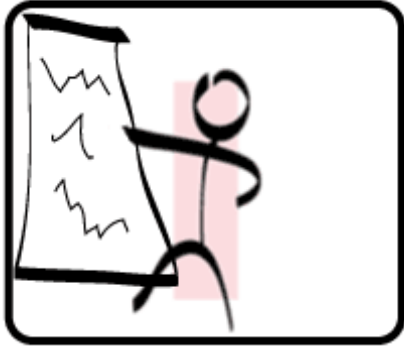
What have you heard that's really got your juices flowing?

What's the question you still need to answer for yourself to get to a significantly new place? Get unstuck?

What's been missing from our conversation so far?

Follow Take 10 with an exercise that lets participants share in a small group.

TAKE A PANEL



Stick pieces of flip chart paper all around the walls - one for each participant. You can also use a hallway if you need more room. Post-It Paper works well but you can use regular paper. Use blue painter's tape so it comes off without leaving marks.

Give participants a long list of juicy questions related to the purpose of your meeting. 8-10 generative questions make a good amount.

Ask each participant to work independently to put their thoughts about the questions on their sheet of paper. In the instructions (on paper, on a slide), suggest that they can use words, drawings, diagrams, mind maps, etc. Encourage participants not to worry about answering in complete sentences but rather capture core ideas. Make sure the result is a "stand alone" that can be understood without explanation by someone who comes by.

After they've worked on their own for about 20 minutes, invite participants to get together with the 2-3 others around them. Each participant shares his/her panel with the others for about 4 minutes each. Bring it to life. You don't need to repeat what others have said. Share the difference that makes a difference. Ask questions for clarification only.

This can work well as a "soft start" activity for a meeting so people who arrive early or right on time can get busy rather than waiting for others to arrive, but make sure everyone has enough time.

Follow this activity with another LS where participants can talk about what they learned from the experience.

A NOTE ABOUT "REPORT OUTS"

"Report Outs" from breakout sessions are **BORING!!!**

There are times when break out groups can come back with something creative and fun to share their thinking (Interpretive dance? Limericks?), but most of the time, we don't really need to hear serial summaries of all the discussions. And, it typically drains the life out of whatever conversation that took place in the small group.

It is more effective to ask participants to bring the experience they had in previous conversations into a new conversation.

The important stuff will turn up again as part of a new thinking integration relevant to the next question or discussion framework.

If you really feel you need to capture and document some output, engage participants in a conversation about who actually needs this material and what might be the best and most useful way for them to get it. This, of course, works better if they can speak for themselves rather than have us make assumptions about them.

WISE CROWDS

Invite participants to create groups of 5-6 people and sit knee-to-knee.

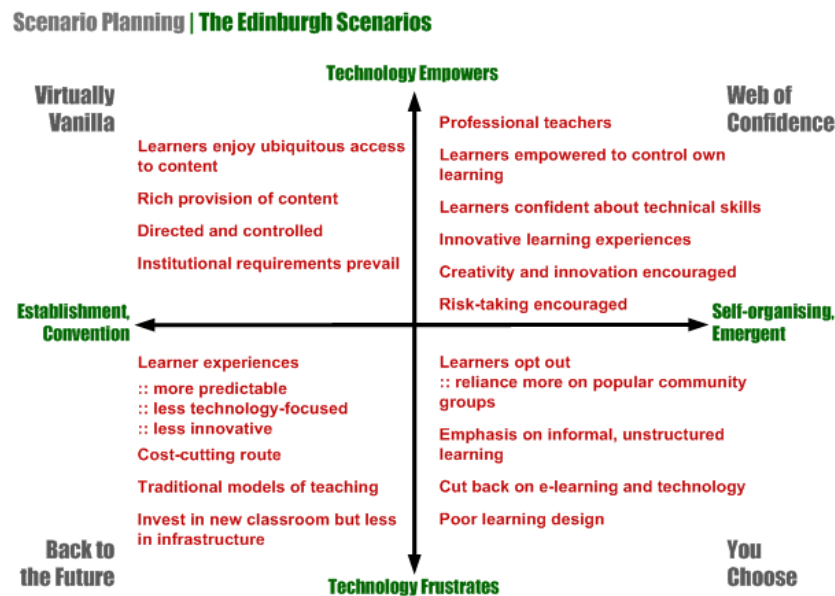
One person will be the “client” and the rest are a consulting team. You can find people who want to volunteer to be the client ahead of time or get volunteers on the spot or, if you have enough time, it's really fun for everyone to get a turn being the client.

1. The Client describes a complex challenge they are facing and some of the questions they're currently struggling to answer. This should take about 10 minutes. Coach the clients that they don't need to provide the entire history of the saga nor all the gory details. Think of it as verbally sketching out the highlights for the rest of the group. The Consulting Team can ask a few questions for clarification, but should resist the temptation to go into major “data gathering” mode.
2. The Client moves their chair so their back is turned to the Consulting Team. The Client may want to have a pad and pen handy to take some notes while they are listening. The Consulting Team proceeds to have a conversation with each other about what they think might be helpful to The Client. This might include questions for The Client to think about, paraphrasing what they think they heard, metaphors or examples that might be useful to explore, their own musings a la “I'm wondering if this is a case of XYZ?” and so on. The Consulting Team's job is not to decide “this is what The Client ought to do.” The Client tries to resist the temptation to use body language and non-verbal utterances to convey what they think about what the Consulting Team is saying, but rather stay in open listening mode. This should take at least 15 minutes but could be longer depending on time available and how you've chosen to handle how many Clients will “play.” In any case, you need to put a time limit on this phase.
3. After the Consulting Team's independent conversation, The Client turns their chair around and joins the conversation. To start, The Client shares, “Here's what I heard that intrigued, surprised, or resonated with me.” Then, the conversation can continue freely for the amount of time set, for example, 15 minutes.

PARTICIPATORY SCENARIOS

Many companies develop scenarios to support strategic planning. These scenarios are often created by “experts” or small teams. As a result, many companies discover that lack of ownership on the part of the whole community means that the scenarios don't really play a part in decision making.

A different approach is to engage the whole community in developing scenarios. This engages the community in thinking about what drivers will make a difference in their environment as well as define indicators that one versus another scenario is emerging in whole or in part.



1. Identify a set of drivers that can be described along a dimension. Of course, these are all on a continuum. You could use another LS process to identify 5-6 potentially juicy dimensions.
2. Pick any 2 of the dimensions and set them up on a matrix as above. You can play with the dimensions in any combinations that seem interesting.
3. Fill in the resulting landscape. You can think in terms of the characteristics that result from the combination, consequences, key questions raised, or potential opportunities/challenges.
4. Develop a “story” that describes the scenario in a way that makes it come alive and give it a name (for example, in the above matrix “Virtually Vanilla”)
5. Create a different combination and repeat - as many times as you can!

SIX WORDS

It's said that Hemingway was once challenged to write a whole novel in just six words.

His novel: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

Larry Smith, founder of SMITH Magazine turned this idea into the "Six-Word" Memoir. The Mulago Foundation suggests applying the idea to mission statements by creating statements that are:

- Less than 8 words
- Include a verb
- Include a target population
- Describes an outcome you can measure

Some examples:

Save African kids' lives.

Get African families out of extreme poverty.

Save island species from extinction.

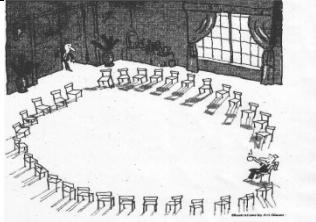
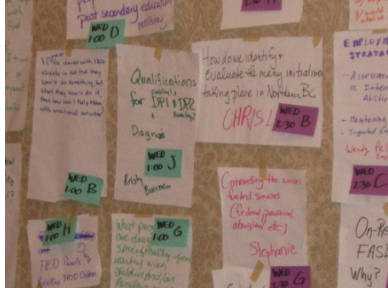
We can turn this idea of short phrase summarizing into a simple strategic tool by inviting people to boil down their thinking about something to a set number of words.

This is especially useful if you want/need to talk about particularly mushy stuff like missions, vision, purpose, or strategy - all the things that can sound like gobblety-gook, blah blah blah!

Taking some of the seriousness out of these things can actually help people get to the core of an important idea.

Answer the fundamental question of, *"What gets you up in the morning?"* or *"What do you do, and why do you do it?"* Additionally, you might also answer these important issues, *"Who can you help?"* and *"What is your influence?"*

JUST IN TIME TOPICS

<p>If possible, start with everyone in a circle.</p>	
<p>Provide a supply of drawing paper and colored markers in the middle of the circle or at the front of the room if you aren't able to be in a circle from the start.</p>	<p>Invite participants to write down a topic - a question, story, or problem - that they would like to spend time (usually 45-90 minutes) talking about with others.</p> <p>It can be a good idea to ask the group to think silently during this time.</p>
<p>After participants have had some time to think and write down their ideas, invite them one-at-a-time to declare their topic.</p> <p>Suggest that they not do a lot of explaining - that can happen DURING the session!</p> <p>Once everyone has presented their idea, ask them to place it on a wall so participants can see them all at once.</p>	 <p>Find a way to indicate where each topic will be hosted - at a particular table, in a corner, in a breakout room, or outside.</p>
<p>Participants are then invited to look at the topics and choose where they would like to spend their time.</p>	<p>Encourage participants to resist the temptation to combine topics (since everything is related) because smaller group discussions are more satisfying.</p>

There are some "laws" that can be offered to facilitate the process:

- Whoever comes are the right people. Don't worry about who or how many - it can even be valuable to spend the hour reflecting on the topic by yourself.
- The law of two feet. If you're not contributing or getting value, use your feet to go somewhere else.

This process is inspired by a larger process called OPEN SPACE. You can find out more about it at <http://www.openspaceworld.org/>.

5 WHYS

The **5 Whys** is a question-asking technique used to explore the cause-and-effect relationships underlying a particular problem. The original goal of the technique was to determine the root cause of a defect or problem as part of a quality improvement effort. However, this process can be used to go deeper to explore questions related to purpose rather than problems.

Post a juicy question and give participants a time to think about it individually for at least a minute. For example:

What makes you excited to get up in the morning?

What difference are you hoping our organization will make in the world?

What opportunity facing us is most important to jump on now?

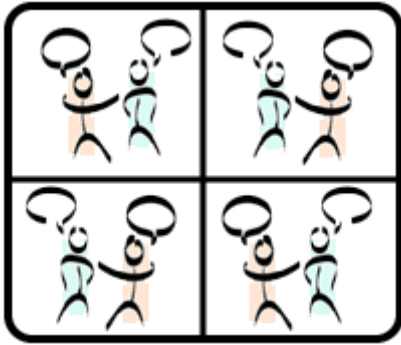
Invite participants to pair up with someone else. Each participant will get a turn being the question asker and the responder.

The role of the question asker is to be an active listener, pose the question and ask "WHY?" at least five times after hearing the answer or a variation such as "Why is that important? And why do you care about that?"

Option: After everyone has had their turn, invite participants to pair up with another pair and talk about what they discovered in this process.

By the way, you don't need to stop after 5 Whys. Keep going until you feel you've pared away enough layers to get at a fundamental truth.

IMPROMPTU SPEED NETWORKING



This is a great way to generate energy at the beginning of a meeting. It provides an opportunity for everyone to speak early. It gets everyone up and moving so blood is flowing. It signals that this will not be a meeting like all others.

Ask everyone to stand up and move into a space where there is some elbow room. Ask them to leave all their "stuff" behind.

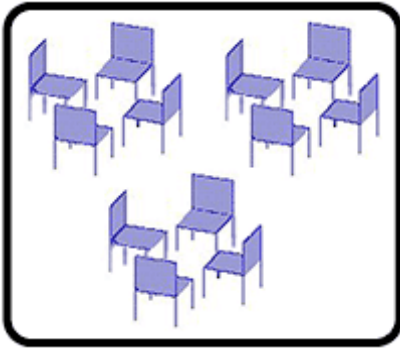
Invite everyone to think individually about a provocative question that relates to the purpose of the meeting or the group. Make it a question that levels the playing field. No right answer. Something everyone has an equal ability to talk about.

Tell participants that when they hear the bell, they should find a partner - someone they know less well than they know others will be most interesting. Invite them to have a conversation about the suggested question. After a short time, 5-10 minutes depending on how much total time you have, ring the bell. Invite participants to find another partner and have another conversation. Put a hand up if you are looking for a partner so you can see who else needs a partner. Three "rounds" are usually good. When the bell rings continuously, stop. Invite the group to sit back down or provide instructions for a next piece of the process.

This can be combined with 1-2-4 whole group process.

One thing to notice about this process is that everyone gets to speak early in the meeting. The distance between not having said *anything* and making a first comment is vast. But the distance between having said something and saying another thing is much smaller. In the debrief, make sure participants notice how much "air time" everyone has had. In a 30-minute session, everyone will have had 12-15 minutes of air time - no matter how many participants are in the meeting!

1-2-4-WHOLE GROUP



This process is a great way to get into a rich conversation with small groups. It can be done on its own or combined with Impromptu Speed Networking.

Individual reflection

Give participants a short amount of time (a couple of minutes is fine) to reflect on a question or issue. Some may want to jot down a few notes. Others may want to close their eyes. Ask for silence during this time so that individuals really have time and space to get their own thoughts together.

Twos

Ask participants to find one other person and share their ideas. You can invite them to talk to the person next to them or, if you'd like them to move around and mix it up a bit more, ask them to stand up and find a partner. Depending on how much time you have, you could spend 5-10 minutes in pairs.

Small Groups

Invite each of the pairs to join up with one or more pairs to make groups of 4-6. More than six is too big to give everyone a chance to talk. Suggest they each first share interesting things they heard or said in the previous rounds. Then continue with the conversation as a group.

Whole group

Invite everyone back to the whole group. Ask an open question such as "What insights emerged from your conversation?" or "How has your understanding/view of the issue changed?"

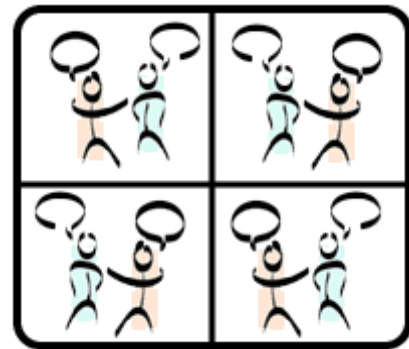
APPRECIATIVE INTERVIEWS

What we focus on tends to get bigger. So focusing on what works rather than on what doesn't work creates the context for more progress.

Invite participants to pair up. Each will have a turn telling a story and being the interviewer. Tell a story about "a time when..." Choose a positive framework such as, a time when our relationship with customers really worked; a time when I was able to suggest an out-of-the-box idea and got a positive response; a time when collaboration between our teams was successful.

Characteristics

- Connection Through Empathy
- Personal Excitement, Commitment, Care
- Intense Focus Through "Third Ear" and "Third Eye"
- Generative Questioning, Cueing, Guiding
- Belief vs. Doubt
- Allow for Ambiguity, Generalization and Dreams
- From Monologue to Dialogue



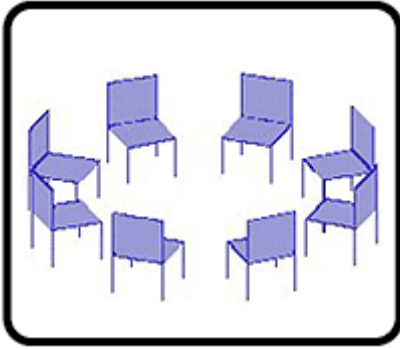
Here are some possible questions to probe further:

- Tell me more.
- Why do you feel that way?
- Why was that important to you?
- What was your contribution?
- What was the organization doing that helped you do this?
- What do think was really making it work?
- How has it changed you?

Let the interviewee tell his/her story, please don't tell yours or give your opinion about their experiences. Take good notes and be listening for great quotes and stories. Be genuinely curious about their experiences, thoughts and feelings. Some people will take longer to think about their answers - allow for silence.

Appreciative Interviews are part of a larger process called Appreciative Inquiry (AI). To learn more about AI and explore a wealth of related resources: <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>.

DISCOVERY & ACTION DIALOGUES



Discovery & Action Dialogues (DADs) are conversations with participants designed to:

1. Engage everyone in short, lively conversations to discover the existing solutions they already know and to create new ideas to eliminate and prevent the target problem.
2. Identify volunteers among this group to experiment with solutions and ideas.
3. Provide the facilitators and participants the opportunity to listen to each other and identify barriers to action or change.

What do you know/think about _____?

What do YOU do about _____?

What keeps you from doing that all the time?

Who/Where have you seen overcome those barriers?

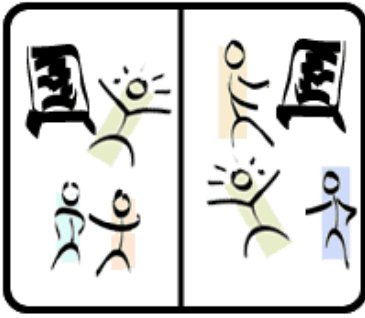
What other ideas do you have about removing barriers? (or supporting desired behavior)

What has to happen next to make that happen?

Who will do what when next?

The D&A Dialogue process is one developed as part of Plexus Institute's work with Positive Deviance that we applied to quality and safety problems in hospitals. You can find out more about this at <http://www.plexusinstitute.org> and at <http://www.positivedeviance.org>.

TRIZ



TRIZ is "a problem-solving, analysis and forecasting tool derived from the study of patterns of invention. It was developed by the Soviet inventor and science fiction author Genrich Altshuller and his colleagues in the 1940s. In English it is typically translated as "the Theory of Inventive Problem Solving." It is sometimes used in Six Sigma processes, in project management and risk management systems, and in organizational innovation initiatives. The full TRIZ

process includes many problem-solving strategies. As a Liberating Structure, we're only going to use one piece of the TRIZ approach.

Think about a difficult and complex problem you need to solve. Describe as many of the key elements of the result you want as you can. Be as specific as possible.

Design a comprehensive system that makes it absolutely impossible to get that result. What policies, practices, and ways of operating would make it 100% certain there is no way any of the things you want can happen.

Does the system you've designed have anything in common with the current state of affairs?

What would it take to eliminate similarities between the current system and the adverse system you designed?

TRIZ is a process that emerged from engineering. You can find out more about it at <http://www.triz.co.uk>.

WICKED QUESTIONS



Wicked questions are used to expose the assumptions that we hold about an issue or situation. Articulating these assumptions provides an opportunity to see the patterns of thought and surface the differences in a group. These patterns and differences can be used to discover common ground or to find creative alternatives for stubborn problems.

A question is "wicked" if there is an embedded paradox or tension in the question. A wicked question is not a trick question. With a trick question, someone knows the answer. Wicked questions do not have obvious answers. Their value lies in their capacity to open up options, inquiry and bring to the surface the fundamental issues that need to be addressed.

Examples:

How can we sustain quality standards across the system while allowing for local innovation?

How can we maintain top down discipline needed for safety and level the playing field for bottom-up creativity?

This is not a wicked question:

How can we succeed when the guys at headquarters are such bozos?

15% SOLUTIONS



Most people have about 15-percent control over their work situations. The other 85 percent rests in the broader context, shaped by the general structures, systems, events and culture in which they operate.

The challenge rests in finding ways of creating transformational change incrementally: By encouraging people to mobilize small but significant "15-percent initiatives" that can snowball in their effects. When guided by a sense of shared vision, the process can tap into the self-organizing capacities of everyone involved.

Gareth Morgan, *The Globe and Mail*

It doesn't matter if you're a General or an enlisted soldier, a Senior Executive or a member of the team. You still have only your 15 percent.

Where do you have freedom to act? What's in your 15%?

This conversation works very well using the Troika process.

CONVERSATION CAFÉ DIALOGUE

Conversation Café Agreements

Open-mindedness Listen to and respect all points of view.

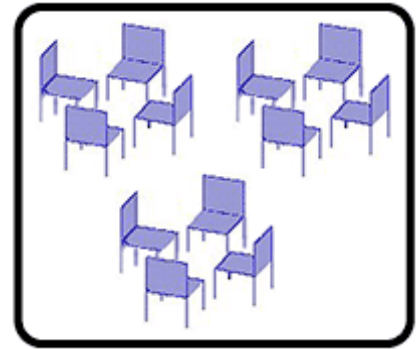
Acceptance Suspend judgment as best you can.

Curiosity Seek to understand rather than persuade.

Discovery Question assumptions and look for new insights.

Sincerity Speak from your heart and personal experience.

Brevity Go for honesty and depth but don't go on and on.



Process

Invite participants to create small groups. 6-8 is a good number to make sure there is ample time for everyone to speak and enough diversity of participants to make it interesting. Introduce the idea of a "talking object" that will be used throughout the session. The person with the talking object speaks and everyone else listens. Make the point that this is not for back-and-forth conversation.

Round 1

Pass around the talking object; each person speaks briefly to the topic, no feedback or response. You might suggest that this round is for about a paragraph or two from each person.

Round 2

Again with talking object, each person deepens his/her own comments or speaks to what has meaning now. You might suggest this round is for the equivalent of a page from each person.

Dialogue

Open, spirited conversation. Use talking object. Suggest that whomever wishes to speak just hold out their hand to receive the object.

Final Round

With the talking object, each person says briefly what challenged, touched or inspired them.

Learn more about the Conversation Café process at <http://www.conversationcafe.org>.

WORLD CAFÉ

The World Café is a process that can engage a very large group in conversation in a way that creates a sense that everyone is part of one whole conversation.

Setting Create a "special" environment, most often modeled after a café such as small round tables covered with a checkered tablecloth, butcher block paper, colored pens, a vase of flowers, and optional "talking stick" item. There should be four chairs at each table.

Welcome and Introduction The host begins with a warm welcome and an introduction to the World Café process, setting the context, sharing the Café Etiquette, and putting participants at ease.

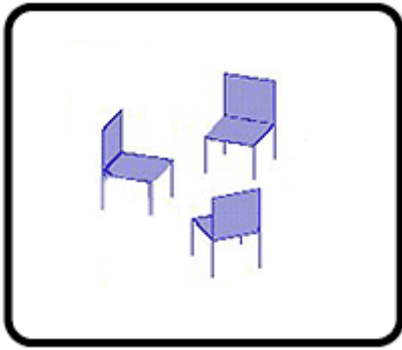
Small Group Rounds The process begins with the first of three or more twenty minute rounds of conversation for the small group seated around a table. At the end of the twenty minutes, each member of the group moves to a different new table. They may or may not choose to leave one person as the "table host" for the next round, who welcomes the next group and briefly fills them in on what happened in the previous round.

Questions Each round is prefaced with a **question** designed for the specific context and desired purpose of the session. The same questions can be used for more than one round, or they can be built upon each other to focus the conversation or guide its direction.

Harvest After the small groups and/or in between rounds, as desired, individuals are invited to share insights or other results from their conversations with the rest of the large group. These results are reflected visually in a variety of ways often using graphic recorders in the front of the room.

There are many resources available to support creating and facilitating World Café conversations at <http://www.theworldcafe.com/method.html>.

TROIKA CONSULTING



This is a great process to help participants get started thinking about applications and action planning.

Invite participants to find two partners and sit down in a knee-to-knee group of three. Suggest that one member of the group be a time keeper to keep the group on track and to ensure everyone gets equal time.

Give everyone time to reflect individually on a gnarly question. It may be very useful for them to take some notes.

Think about a challenge you are facing in your work. How might you apply some of the ideas from this workshop?

What's the question you most need to answer in order to move forward? How can you get that question answered?

What's the biggest obstacle to making the changes you want to make? What can you do now to move beyond that obstacle?

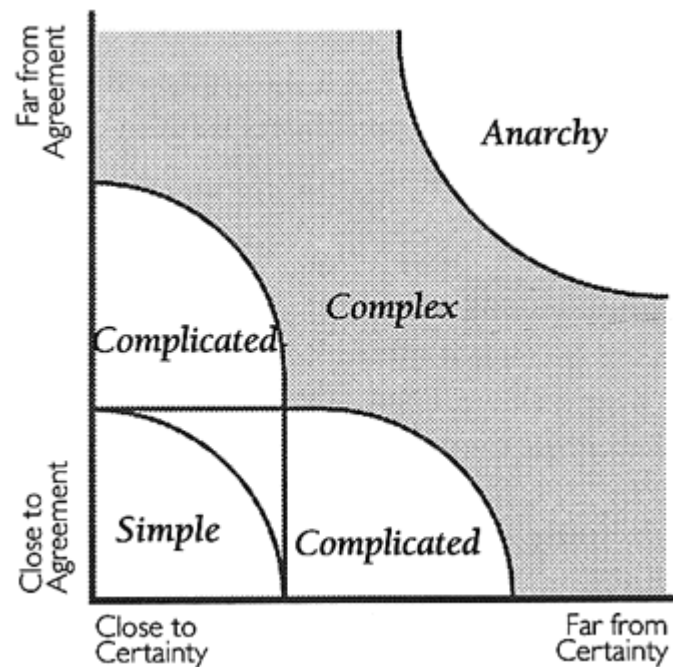
In each round of 10 minutes, one participant will share their challenge and ideas for next steps. The role of the partners is first to ask questions to help them hone and improve their ideas.

Next, the partners engage with each other and, finally, with the participant about how they might handle the challenge and what possibilities might contribute to moving forward.

Switch roles so that each member of the troika has a turn. After each member of the troika has had their turn, the group can spend some time in conversation about insights and patterns they noticed across the three rounds.

AGREEMENT/UNCERTAINTY MATRIX

An important distinction can be made between situations, problems, organizations, etc. that are simple, complicated, or complex. Ralph Stacey created one way to think about this distinction by distinguishing two axes - the degree to which a group is certain about what's going on and the degree to which there is agreement about what to do or about the meaning of different aspects of the situation.



Brenda Zimmerman suggests that a recipe is simple; building an airplane is complicated. There are lots of parts and formulas but if you understand aerodynamics you can pretty much put one together and be pretty certain it will fly. But raising a child is complex.

Many of our strategies and heuristics for working on problems are designed for simple or complicated situations. These strategies don't work well when things are complex because the situation is emergent and unpredictable.

Introduce the idea of the Agreement/Uncertainty Matrix and invite the group to think about where the things they're working on might be mapped in this diagram.

25-TO-10



Tap into the wisdom of the crowd.

Distribute file cards to everyone. Pose a question. Ask everyone to think about it and then write their best idea clearly on the card. No names.

When everyone has completed a card, invite participants to:

Stand up, mill around, and pass your card to someone new. Keep moving and passing cards until you hear the bell. Don't try to read the cards yet.

Then, stop in front of another person. Read the card you were given to your partner in a way that might "sell" them on the idea. Trade cards.

Now rate the card on a scale of 1-5. 5 is fabulous, 1 is ok. Talk over your ratings with your partner and adjust as needed. Write your final rating on the back of the card.

Mill again. Pass "your" card to someone else. Keep milling and passing.

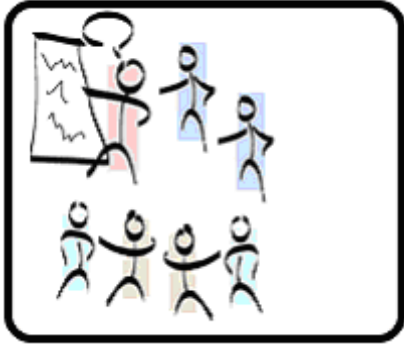
When you hear the bell, stop in front of another person. Rate the cards in the same way.

Repeat five times, in five rounds. By round five, each index card should have five ratings. Add them up. What is the score?

Ask, "Does anyone have a card with a score of 25... 24... 23... until you get a "yes." Ask that person to read their card out loud. Continue with the countdown, "Anyone with a 22...21...20? Please read your card aloud." Identify the top 10 high scores or more as needed.

Collect ALL the cards and keep them somewhere. Sometimes an idea that didn't seem that interesting or important at the time of the exercise will seem more interesting or stimulate some other good thinking later. This is not recommended to make a decision. It's a way to get a sense of the wisdom of the crowd.

AFTER ACTION DEBRIEF: WHAT, SO WHAT, NOW WHAT?



At the conclusion, or sometimes in the middle, of a meeting it is very useful to ask the following questions in the following order:

WHAT?

What is emerging here? What data stands out? What actually happened?

SO WHAT?

What do the data imply? Do you see a pattern? Does it make a difference?

NOW WHAT?

What action may help us move forward? Who else should be here?

What? So What? Now What? is an exercise included many of the Center for Creative Leadership's creative thinking and leadership programs. Find out more at <http://www.ccl.org>.

GALLERY WALK



This is a good alternative to "report outs."

Have groups or teams put whatever they want to share on a poster.

It's great if you have a long wall to use so that all the posters are arrayed and everyone can appreciate the range of contributions.

Somebody from each team should "hang out" by their poster to answer questions. Members of the team could take turns doing this.

Everyone else takes a walk through the gallery, stopping at each poster to take in what's there.

This exercise works well followed by a small group conversation:

What did we notice?

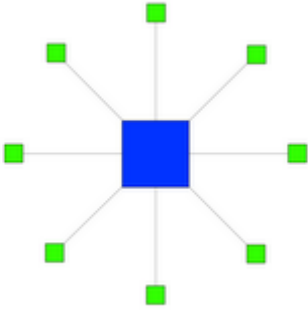
What were the themes?

What was surprising?

What was new?

How does this change our conversation?

MINI CONSTELLATIONS



Place an object on the floor to represent an idea, choice, move, etc.

1. Ask participants to place themselves somewhere in the room that represents to what degree they feel positively about the idea. For example, if they think it's a fabulous idea, they might stand very close to the object. If they feel tepid about the idea, they would stand farther away.
2. Starting from the participants who are farthest away, ask them to speak from the perspective of that distance from the object. Note: although they will, of course, have put themselves there - this way of giving the instruction invites them to take the "role" of someone with that perspective and not simply be representing a personal view.
3. Then ask someone from the next "ring" to speak until you get to someone who is the closest to the object.

In another "round" of the process change the question. For example:

To what degree do you think we can/will be successful with this idea/strategy/whatever? Or how likely do you think it is that this will happen?

This can lead to an interesting conversation about the source of the difference between how people feel and their assessment about something.

Constellations is a process rooted in family therapy. <http://www.familyconstellationwork.net/>

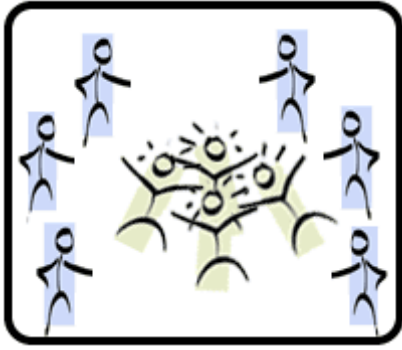
This is a very small exercise from a much more comprehensive body of work.

LEVELS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Take Action and Learn	Make it happen, renewal	
Find Solutions	"This can work"	<i>Learn & Grow</i>
Accept ownership	"It starts with me"	<i>Empowered</i>
Acknowledge situation	"I'm a piece of the puzzle"	
<hr/>		
Wait 'n Hope	"Somebody should do something"	
Blame self	"It's my fault," guilt	
Blame others	"It's their fault"	<i>Protect & Defend</i>
		<i>Disempowered</i>
Denial	"Woe is me"	
	"This has nothing to do with me"	

What do we need to do to work "above the line?"

FISHBOWL



Create a circle of chairs in the center of a larger circle. 5-6 is a good number. If you have a very large group, there may be multiple outer circles.

Invite a small group of people that have direct experience with the challenge into the small circle of chairs at the center. Ask this group to talk about the challenge together, sharing stories of their direct experience and insights as they might do if they

were sitting in a coffee shop or at dinner together. They talk to each other, NOT the audience.

Invite the audience to ask questions and share their insights about the conversation while those in the center circle just listen. Gather all the questions. You might want to use file cards or have someone capture all the questions on chart paper.

Then invite the group to dialogue with each other between the two circles.

Some good questions for the debrief:

What did you hear that surprised you?

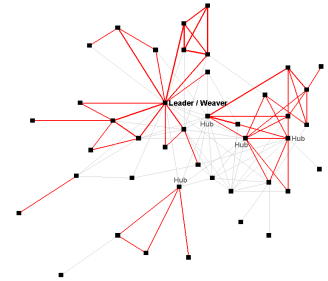
How has your perspective on the issue changed?

What questions are still open for you?

NETWORK WEAVING

Invite participants to draw a "map" of the key network connections around a specific project, goal or initiative. Suggest that they think about the people and organizations that matter in this network. After enough time (about 20 minutes), ask participants to get together with 2-3 others around them and share their maps.

1. What about the map surprises you? Is unexpected?
2. Who is missing? What types of individuals or organizations are missing?
3. Who are network hubs (having many links)? Who are isolates?



Closing Triangles: Which two individuals that you know don't know each other? Which ones of those pairs would benefit from knowing each other? What do they have in common?

Integrating clusters: What clusters do you notice? Do they have much overlap? How could you initiate introductions among the clusters? What projects might individuals in two clusters be interested in working together on?

Expanding the periphery:

1. Are there as many nodes in the periphery as in the core? If not, how might you expand the network's periphery?
2. What types of individuals, organizations or perspectives are missing or underrepresented (gender, race/ethnicity, class, neighborhoods, etc) and how might you include these individuals to the network?
3. What individuals might you introduce to the network that would expand the network's access to resources, new ideas, new skills, or new perspectives?

Q STORMING

Diana Whitney, one of the originators of Appreciative Inquiry, says:

"Questions are fateful!"

Give everyone a supply of post-it notes.

Invite them to generate multiple questions - one question per post-it note; in handwriting anyone can read. Invite courageous and provocative questions as well as "silly" and "dumb" questions.

Questions should be related to the purpose of the meeting:

- What questions would you most like to walk out of here having answered?
- What's the question that, if you could answer, would make it possible for you to move forward or get unstuck?
- What questions do we need to address in order to make the choices we need to make?
- What questions need to be resolved before we can start on this initiative?

Ask participants to put their post-it notes on a wall.

There are several different ways you can engage participants in sense-making around the questions. They could do some things to organize the questions in groups. They could categorize them in various ways (fact-based questions, policy related questions, etc.) You could invite the group to prioritize the questions (by importance, by degree of interest) using another process like "dot voting."

It's also fun to give participants an opportunity to look at all the questions, or you could have someone just read them all out loud, and then get in small groups to talk about what they think about the questions, do they see any patterns?

The questions could also be the beginning of a "just-in-time topics" process.

The Q-Storming process was originally developed by **Marilee G. Adams**.

<http://inquiryinstitute.com/resources/q-storming/>

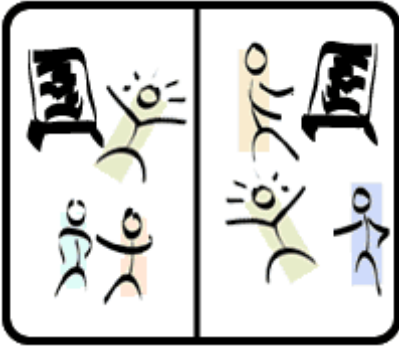
SIMPLE RULES

Patterns are generated by simple rules. These are the “constraints” (like the rules of Jazz) that create the space for creativity but, at the same time, describe the critical elements that make something work. These simple rules may include rules about a number of different key factors including: How To rules, Boundary Rules, Priority Rules, Timing Rules, and Exit Rules.

1. Invite participants to think about an important initiative, process, activity, etc. that could benefit from being “reinvented.”
2. Say, “Imagine you are handing off this activity to a design team who will come back with one or more new ways of doing it.”
3. What simple rules would you give the design team? What are the few key things that **MUST** be included in the design? What is really mandatory?
4. Make a list of all the rules you think are necessary. Then find a partner and “test” each of the rules on the list. What would happen if you left that rule out? Is this really required versus just an artifact of what we’ve been doing all along?

Debrief the process to explore the extent to which we “over” versus “under” specify constraints.

SHIFT & SHARE

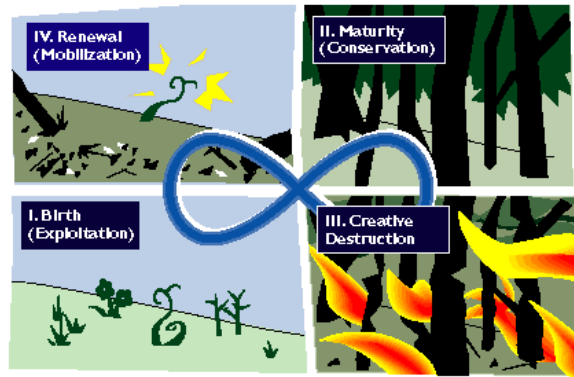


This is a good way to provide opportunities to hear experience stories, research results, or project plans from multiple groups while avoiding linear, didactic reports. This is usually a process where you need some advance preparation so participants have a chance to pull together materials.

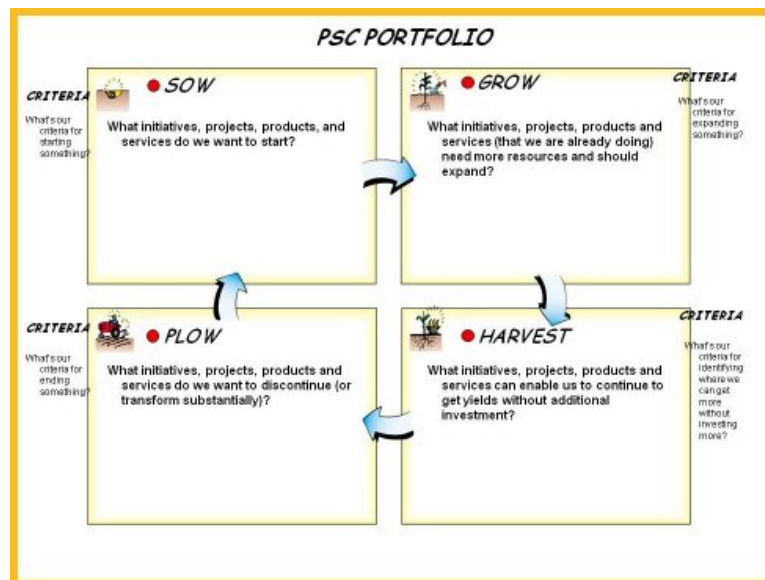
1. Solicit volunteer teams who have something to share.
2. The number of teams depends on the total number of participants and the time frame.
3. Coach teams to bring some "show and tell" materials that tell a story at an "executive briefing" level to allow time for questions and interactions.
4. Each group will have a "location" in the room.
5. Participants will "travel" to each group in turn so that they get to attend presentations by multiple teams.
6. Depending on the total time you can devote to this activity and the number of teams you have with something to share you might decide to do more than one round of Shift & Share. For example, with 5 teams and 1 hour, participants could spend 15 minutes at each location. You could also give them more time and allow them to select 3 out of the 5 to spend 20 minutes at each location.

PORTFOLIO PLANNING

It's useful for groups to look at the whole picture instead of always talking about one part at a time. Brenda Zimmerman uses forest fires to describe different phases of an eco-cycle. A key understanding is that creative destruction is critical to create space for renewal.



Introduce the idea of an eco-cycle and invite participants to work in small groups to talk about where different activities might fit in a portfolio of projects that could be placed in different parts of the eco-cycle. Another option, have a wall-size version of the portfolio and let participants put different activities on post-it notes so they can be placed and then moved around.



You can find this and many more useful discussion templates at The Grove
<http://www.grove.com>.

IMPROV GAMES

Engaging in Improv Games can help a group get a sense of what it might be like to open up rather than close down conversations and to build on each others' ideas. There are hundreds of possible games.

One Word at a Time Story

This is an exercise to train group narrative. All players sit in a circle. We are going to tell a story one word at a time. Each player provides one word of a sentence. The end of a sentence can be indicated by a player saying "period," although that is not necessary.

Yes And Exercise

In Yes And the players are constantly saying, "yes and." The mechanism goes something like this. One player may start off with, "Your coat is so lovely." The response of the other player could be, "YES AND I made it for you." The other player responds, "YES AND I have a thousand dollars for it." "YES AND I am going to use that money to make a hundred more coats for you." The players must always have the 'yes and' at the beginning of their sentence. This seems contrived and it is. It is remarkable how much easier it is to notice players that insist on controlling the scene. They cannot bring themselves to accept the offer. The most common response is, "yes and but."

Coffee Filters



Give everyone a coffee filter. Invite them to play with it. Lift it in the air and see how it floats. Catch it on one hand, on a foot, on your head. Experiment with a partner. Make a new move. Can you imitate your partner's move? What else can you do with it?

What do you notice about what happens?

Learn more about this activity from Tom Sparough, The Space Painter!

<http://www.spacepainter.com>

SEEING COMPLEXITY AND COMPLEX SYSTEMS

The following are activities that are not Liberating Structures in themselves. They are exercises that can catalyze good conversations about the nature of complex systems.

COMPLEX SYSTEMS GAME: HOW MANY WAYS?

This exercise is a way to give participants an opportunity to discover the understanding that complex systems are socially constructed versus being objective truth.

1. Fill a set of lunch bags with 12-25 random objects each - small toys, office supplies, kitchen items, party favors, etc - the more random the better! Items in the bags should be similar but not exactly the same.
2. Give each group a bag and instruct them to group the objects according to some criteria, similar colors, similar functions, similar materials, etc. and array them on a paper without labeling the group.

Try asking them to create several possible organizations and then choose the most "elegant" one. They need to figure out what that means to them.

Suggest that they try to create an organization that would be EASY to guess or one that is HARD to guess. You could ask the group to figure out a single "meta" structure that would allow them to organize all the objects into subgroups that relate to a single "super group."

3. Invite groups to look at each other's results and guess what criteria they used to organize the objects.

Debrief This exercise provides an opportunity to talk about how people can "see" very different things based on their experience, their initial ideas, the makeup of their group, and a host of other factors. Some questions you might ask:

Is there a "right" answer? Is there a wrong answer?

What influences how a group gets to their solution?

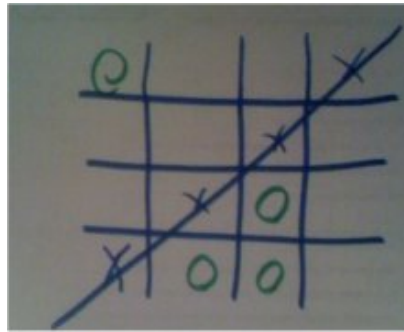
What assumptions did your group make about the objects that influenced how you grouped them?

What was the group process like? How did you "negotiate" to get to your final result?

What surprised you about other groups' solutions?

TIC TAC TOE

1. Find a partner and stand facing them.
2. Simple Rules: No talking. No touching.
3. Play a game of Tic Tac Toe in the air.
4. Play several games.
5. Now, play a 4 X 4 game of Tic Tac Toe in the air.



Most people can play 3 x 3 after a bit. But most people find that the 4 x 4 version is impossible.

Proposition We spend a lot of time in meetings doing the equivalent of playing 4 x 4 tic tac toe in the air. We THINK that we are all talking about the same things, on the same page, having the same assumptions, or defining things the same way. But we rarely take the time necessary, especially when we're talking about complex problems and situations and organizations, to make explicit all the things where we need a ***common understanding*** in order to make progress.

A PLACE IN THE SYSTEM

1. Invite participants to stand in an open area of the room.
2. Ask them to look around and find one person and choose them as Person A and another person as Person B.
3. Instruct them to "get between" Person A and Person B.

The group will start milling around. Depending on the size of the group and the amount of space, they may take a shorter or longer time but after a while the group will settle into a relatively stable configuration. Ask for some reflections about what they noticed in the exercise.

4. Change the instructions. Instruct them to get equidistant from Person A and Person B.

Ask for some reflections about whether this was the same or different? How?

This exercise gives an opportunity to talk about what it's like when you are not "in control" of factors that are important to your plans. What happens when everything is "moving?"

RANDOM THOUGHTS

The following pages include some random thoughts about things that can help create the conditions for Liberating Structures to thrive.

WAVING HANDS VERSUS CLAPPING

At various times participants may want to acknowledge a great contribution to the meeting or community.

Some groups find that having a norm of waving hands in the air is nicer than clapping. It makes the point without breaking the mood.



TALKING OBJECTS

Many traditions include ceremonies and other processes that use a Talking Stick to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak. Many of these traditions have a spiritual aspect so it can be more comfortable to use a "talking object" instead.

A Talking Object can be anything. You can ask participants to pick something - even a pen can work.

I like using things that are fun to hold in your hand.



A rubber duck works great!

Rules for Talking Objects

Dr. Locust, at the American Research and Training Center in Tucson, Arizona, describes the talking stick, according to Native American tradition:

"The talking stick has been used for centuries by many Indian tribes as a means of just and impartial hearing. The talking stick was commonly used in council circles to decide who had the right to speak. When matters of great concern would come before the council, the leading elder would hold the talking stick, and begin the discussion. When he would finish what he had to say, he would hold out the talking stick, and whoever would speak after him would take it. In this manner, the stick would be passed from one individual to another until all who wanted to speak had done so. The stick was then passed back to the elder for safe keeping." (Locust, 1998)

"Whoever holds the talking stick has within his hands the power of words. Only he can speak while he holds the stick, and the other council members must remain silent. The eagle feather tied to the stick gives him the courage and wisdom to speak truthfully and wisely. The rabbit fur on the end of the stick, reminds him that his words must come from his heart." (Locust, 1998)

MUSIC & POETRY

If you really want to create the conditions for creativity and out-of-the-box thinking, add a bit of poetry & music to the mix. Have some music playing while people are arriving.

Try asking participants if any of them would like to play something or share a poem either one they've written or one they like. You may be surprised at how many people may step up!



TINGSHA BELLS



Liberating Structures require participants to move in and out of groups frequently.

You need a way to call them back - from groups, from the hall, from outside.

YELLING is abrasive. Tapping on a microphone is grating.

Find another way.

Tingsha bells work well and the sound can carry a long way. Participants can become accustomed to responding to the bell. You can get them online at stores that sell products from Tibet. They are easy to carry, though the TSA folks may want to see what they are in your luggage!

Kid's xylophones also work.

TAKE 20 SECONDS

(Pause and look at your shoes)

When it is more important to create a real conversation than it is to provide all the “right” answers, which is almost always, facilitators can do this by asking the assembled group good questions and then WAITING for people in the group to answer.

The most important thing to remember here is not to begin speaking too soon after you ask a question. Pose the question and then wait at least 20 seconds for someone else to speak.

20 seconds of silence in a group can feel like a very long time. On average, facilitators begin speaking after six seconds. So, increase your tolerance of loooong pauses.

During these long pauses people in the group are often formulating their answers and working up the courage to respond. If you start talking too soon, you truncate that process and communicate, unwittingly, that you're the one with the answers.

So, learn to pause for 20 seconds. Ask a partner to time you and find out how you're doing. Learn to count off 20 seconds in your head and stretch those pauses out to at least 20 seconds.

One good way to encourage the group to respond is to look down at your shoes, this disrupts your eye contact with members of the group, signals that this is time for reflection and thinking and takes a little of the pressure to begin talking off you.

Try it. You'll be surprised at the effectiveness of this trick!

This might be something that could come up in a debrief after another LS method where members of the group notice that pausing can be powerful even when you don't have someone carrying the role of facilitator.

ORIGINS

The idea of liberating structures was first introduced by William Torbert in *The Power of Balance: Transforming Self, Society, and Scientific Inquiry* (Sage, 1991). Bill's interest in an integral approach to leadership and action inquiry led him to explore the notion of a form of organizational structure that gives guidance to people but in such a way that they develop skills to guide themselves. He developed a theory of power that generates productivity, justice, and inquiry and a theory of liberating structure through which organizations can create continual quality improvement.

Edward de Bono, who is best known for his work in creativity, contributed the following perspective in *Teaching Thinking* (Penguin, 1991):

We can distinguish between restricting structures and liberating structures. Tools are liberating structures. With the proper tools students will surprise themselves with ideas that they have not had before.

The connection between liberating structures and process design emerged over the last 20 years as facilitators and organizational development specialists developed new large-group methods to engage whole systems. In reviewing these practices, we began to recognize the loose-tight quality of some of the dynamics that made them work. In his book, *Terms of Engagement: New Ways of Leading and Changing Organizations* (2nd ed., Berrett-Koehler, 2010), Dick Axelrod describes essential principles that characterize popular large-group methods such as Open Space, Appreciative Inquiry, the Conference Model, and others. These include widening the circle of involvement, connecting people to each other and other ideas, creating communities for action, and practicing democratic principles.

Beyond these principles, each of these approaches is made up of multiple components that collectively fuel interactions of a certain quality. For example, Open Space Technology is guided by four principles, one law, and a set of common practices. With these, any group can self-organize around any topic. These kinds of comprehensive change strategies typically play out over several days. Some include multiple sessions that take place weeks or months apart and are often led by teams of consultants.

A PATTERN LANGUAGE FOR ENGAGEMENT

Examples abound of how large-group methods have generated powerful new ideas and had significant impact on organizations - at least for a time. The half-life of the energy and commitment to new ways of being after these events can be short when participants return to their organizations and fall back into default ways of meeting. Frequently, the changes are not sustained. So, how can we extend that half-life? How can we make the enlivening experience that characterizes these energetic events available every day? How can we put the power to host and facilitate high engagement in the hands of everyone in the organization?

What we need is a *pattern language* for talking about these engagement methods in ways that are accessible. Christopher Alexander (*A Pattern Language*, Oxford U, 1977) developed the idea of a pattern language in the context of architecture and community environments to identify patterns that work in social spaces. He and his colleagues distinguished several hundred patterns that apply to relationships between everything from a small reading nook to the design of an entire community. For example, one of the patterns that Alexander talks about is the *intimacy gradient*. In any building, house, or office building, people experience a gradient of settings that have different degrees of intimacy. A bedroom is the most intimate and a study is less so. A common area or kitchen is more public. The front porch or entrance is the most public of all. People feel and work best when these patterns are present and recognizable in their social space. Talking about and using the vocabulary of these patterns allows designers and community members, planners and architects to think and talk about the implications of different choices.

Complementing the work that Alexander has done in the realm of architecture, Peter and Trudy Johnson-Lenz talk about rhythms, boundaries, and containers as *primitives*: universal, fundamental patterns from which all life is built, including our social life. They suggest that our face-to-face contacts often occur in regular rhythms. Boundaries of many sorts pattern when and where we connect and when and where we do not. Physical and social containers frame and hold our meetings. The skillful use of these tools is the critical capacity of experienced group facilitators.

As a pattern language for engagement, liberating structures give us multiple options for each of these primitives: the rhythm/timing of each round of interaction, the boundaries of group size and inclusion, physical containers like space and room set-up, and conceptual containers created by the way a question is phrased. All liberating structures are made up of these simple sets of components that can be combined in dozens of different ways.