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Changing the Organization One Conversation at a Time

By Lisa Kimball

In the twenty years since Bunker and Alban’s touchstone article (1992) *Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search, Open Space*, and a host of other dialogic methods have rightly gained traction in the Organization Development (OD) practitioner’s repertoire. Most OD practitioners have favorite stories about designing and facilitating large group, whole system interventions where participants forged valuable new relationships, had juicy discussions, and left energized and enthusiastic.

But, too often, the half-life of these meeting outcomes is short when everyone returns to business as usual. There is sometimes even a kind of hypoglycemic effect where the huge high from the process is followed by a crash as participants reenter an organizational culture where nothing has really changed. This can make it even harder to get participants excited about engaging the next time.

How can we extend that half-life? How can we make the enlivening experience that characterizes these events available every day? How can we put the power to host and facilitate highly engaging conversations in the hands of everyone in the organization?

Liberating Structures

Liberating Structures form a framework for understanding and designing processes that support high quality conversations built on a pattern language for engagement (Kimball, 2011). The goal is to put a large repertoire of simple, easy to use methods for interaction in the hands of people who need to facilitate meetings

all the time—leaders, managers, project directors—to make those meetings better every day.

The term *Liberating Structures* is used to point to the loose-tight quality (Kimball, 2006) that characterizes designs for engagement that promote creativity. The methods are based on simple rules that, like the rules that underlie jazz and improvisation, provide creative constraints that support collaboration. Theories and principles drawn from complexity science about self organization, diffusion of innovation and change (Kimball, 2008) help illuminate why this works. For example, the theory of emergence explains how complex systems and patterns can arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions. Most large group methods are based on multiple exercises woven together during the meeting to produce targeted outcomes for the event as a whole. Many of these exercises can be extracted and used on their own.

A number of authors have identified common principles that underlie large group methodologies and support their effectiveness. Examples of these principles include widening the circle of involvement, connecting people to each other and ideas, creating communities for action, and embracing democracy (Axelrod, 2010). These important macro-level principles are less often used to support the micro-level of daily work. Many view the methodologies as just for major meetings held with the help of consultants and facilitators.

Introducing *Liberating Structures* as a portfolio of small designs rather than

as comprehensive systems that have to be deployed in their entirety makes them more accessible. Participants see them as something they could take on rather than as sophisticated processes requiring a lot of training to facilitate. Instead, they are presented as small, Lego-like components that can be mixed and matched. The big payoff comes when facility with processes that truly engage everyone is widely distributed and becomes the norm rather than the exception everywhere where people gather for important conversations.

To cross the chasm from the multi-day offsite to the meeting in the third floor conference room on Wednesday afternoon, we need to go beyond facilitating great events ourselves and do three more things:

1. Deconstruct the elements of effective processes and break them into small chunks that are easy to see and understand.
2. Make processes transparent at a very basic level by giving participants experience reflecting on and talking about the dynamics of the process as well as the content of their discussions.
3. Allow time for participants to reflect explicitly on where and how a specific process can be applied in their own context.

Deconstruction

Although each individual engagement process provides a unique experience, they are all made up of sets of basic components that produce different dynamics. Peter and Trudy Johnson-Lenz (1991) identified rhythms, boundaries, and containers as primitives: universal, fundamental patterns from which all life is built including our social life. They suggested that our face-to-face contacts often occur in regular rhythms, boundaries of many sorts that pattern when and where we connect and when we do not. Physical and social containers frame and hold our meetings.

Effective large group methods are made up of multiple components, each of which is a design for interaction that can be described in terms of one or more of these patterns. For example, an initiative based

on Appreciative Inquiry (AI) can involve several large group meetings, organization-wide interviews, and sessions with design teams spread out over days or weeks. Most AI facilitators engage participants in discussions about the underlying principles and values associated with the methodology as a whole, e.g., its roots in positive psychology, the importance of getting all voices in the room, how questions can be fateful, etc. (Cooperrider 2005). It is rarer to dig into the specific details about why

Breaking processes into smaller, more digestible chunks seems to help participants see them as more accessible, more like something that does not require a highly trained facilitator to manage. Debriefing their experience with a particular piece helps them see how it works. But if we want people to start using a process themselves, we need to invite them to think explicitly about an upcoming opportunity where they can use the process they have just experienced. Even if they only spend a few minutes doing it, the mere act of articulating a possibility reinforces the participants' sense of their own capacity to try something new.

the conversations about a fateful question in one exercise was structured by putting small groups knee-to-knee rather than around a table and how doing it that way makes more room for every voice. These are the kinds of things OD practitioners talk about all the time. We need to start widening the circle of that conversation.

Make Processes Transparent

We typically debrief exercises with small groups and whole communities to harvest the content of the discussions in our meetings. What ideas emerged for new products? How can we improve communication between functions? Are we on the same page vis-à-vis our core values? We need to start debriefing the nuts and bolts of the process in addition to make it more transparent. What did you notice about the way we had this conversation? What happened in the small groups? Were we standing up

or sitting down and did that matter? What was it like to experience iteration where everyone got to articulate their ideas several times in interactions with different people? How did the way we had the conversation affect the quality of the conversation and its outcomes? The process debrief does not need to take a long time but doing it develops the habit of paying attention to how we structure interactions and how small tweaks to the process can make a difference.

Talk about Where and When Participants can do it Themselves (Soon!)

Although most people think of Open Space as a large group meeting design, like many proponents of whole system methods, Harrison Owen has always described it as a better way to lead organizations all the time (Owen, 2008). Typically, participants and facilitators at high engagement off-sites using a wide range of methodologies are heard lamenting, "I wish we could maintain the energy and feelings of this meeting all the time." It does not usually happen.

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explicitly about an upcoming opportunity where they can use the process they have just experienced. Even if they only spend a few minutes doing it, the mere act of articulating a possibility reinforces the participants' sense of their own capacity to try something new. Encouraging them to try it soon increases the odds that they will make it their own.

This three-pronged strategy has been used to introduce these methods in corporations, the Army, government, and community organizations. The degree of uptake has been exciting.

Here is how a manager put three liberating structures together at a Fortune 500 retail organization located in the Pacific Northwest:

We are working on branding our building (1,200 + employees, 8 floors) and we are generating ideas of what the employees would like to see. Yesterday we were able to hijack a meeting (using several Liberating Structures) for one hour with one of our employee recognition groups. It was a lot to tackle in just 60 minutes (with an introduction to boot!), but we pulled it off. I actually liked the pace as it was easy to pull people back when they started to evaluate or go down rabbit holes. And we even had time for a quick +/-delta at the end. The only thing they wanted is more time. Next group we'll take 2 hours to get more specific and deeper in the descriptions. Ran into a participant this morning and they want more.

Intervene from any Seat in the Room

A cohort of Army officers participated in a leadership program that included experience using some of the liberating structures methodologies. A few months later, one of the participants posted a note to their email list about how frustrated he was because he was not able to convince others on his team to change normal meeting procedures (primarily one-way PowerPoint presentations followed by Q&A). Shortly, others piped up with similar stories about how they were using these processes when

they had responsibility for designing and managing meetings but were unable to get others to understand and agree to try them.

In the conversation that followed an important insight emerged. While some liberating structures required someone in a leadership role to introduce and facilitate them, the group realized that others were processes that anybody—no matter what their role in the group—could introduce and have an immediate and significant impact on the conversation.

There was tremendous power in being able to intervene from any seat in the room.

Following are four examples of liberating structures processes that can be initiated by anyone—whether they are in the role of meeting leader or participant.

1. **Wicked Questions**
2. **Talking objects**
3. **Silence**
4. **15% solutions**

Wicked Questions

The marketing team of a global corporation was planning a product launch meeting for the global, regional, and local managers involved in developing the strategy for everything related to introducing and selling the product in countries worldwide. One of the big challenges on the table for the launch was how to make sure local country teams followed the global strategy. In the past, local organizations sometimes changed marketing collateral, ignored customer training protocols, and developed their own idiosyncratic approaches. At the same time, people with experience on the ground in local organizations remembered how frustrating it was when the folks at headquarters dreamed up an elaborate program without being aware of some of the local contextual factors surrounding how products were used and understood in that country. Past meetings were characterized by circular arguments with one faction complaining that people at headquarters were out of touch and the other lamenting that local groups sabotaged the carefully crafted strategies by failing to implement them effectively.

This time, the team designed the

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?

meeting using a variety of liberating structures including a session based on Wicked Questions. In that session, participant conversations in groups of 4–5 were structured around the question, “How can we gain the benefits of a worldwide strategy while, at the same time, making sure we take advantage of local knowledge to customize our approach.” Neither end of the equation trumped the other. The aim of the discussion was not for one side to convince the other or to “win.” The goal was to find a path where two good, but apparently contradictory ideas, could both exist simultaneously. The nature of the question provided the container for the dialogue.

Wicked Questions are a great tool to use to explore the benefits of a both/and way of thinking. One of the principles of complex systems is that creativity and innovation have the best chance to emerge precisely at the point of greatest tension and apparent irreconcilable differences (Zimmerman, 1998). Anyone involved in a meeting where the conversation is stuck can restate the question under discussion to change it into a “wicked” one to make the conversation more generative. It is not necessary to teach participants the concept of wicked questions or get agreement from a group to use them.

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.

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)

In organizational groups, the idea of the Talking Object can be introduced in a more secular manner. The rules are simple:

- » The person holding the Talking Object has the floor.
- » Everyone else’s role is to listen to the person holding the Talking Object.
- » When you want to speak you can either pick up the Talking Object or reach out to receive it from the person speaking.
- » If you are not holding the Talking Object, you must be silent.

Talking Object

A small city sponsored a series of community town meetings that engaged thousands of parents, education professionals, students, local policy and business leaders, seniors and others in discussions on the purposes of education, closing achievement gaps, ensuring school safety, promoting school readiness, preventing bullying, and many other youth-and-education topics. Although some of the discussions had interesting outcomes, a lot of them were dominated by a few highly vocal citizens who tended to make the same speeches every time.

A group in the city decided to hold a different kind of meeting using a series of small group dialogues to give everyone more airtime. One of the tools they used was a Talking Object to make sure all the voices in the group had the opportunity to be heard. It slowed down the discussion and eliminated much of the usual interruptions that sometimes squelched ideas before they had a chance to be expressed. In the processes debrief, participants reflected on the impact of the added structure of the Talking Object.

Although it takes a little more finesse than simply restating a question, any individual in a group discussion has the power to improve the quality of the conversation—even in midstream—by suggesting, “How about using something to help make this discussion more coherent?” It does not take much to explain the concept and any object at hand can work.

A Minute of Silence

Managers in a department of a government agency felt like they were constantly playing “Whack-a-mole” because of a continuous stream of new requirements, reorganizations, staff turnover, and urgent requests. Everybody was working on multiple “priorities” simultaneously, often arriving to meetings at the last minute because of overlapping schedules. Typically, participants spent a lot of time at the beginning of meetings telling stories about what just happened at the meeting they just came from and sharing the latest gossip

A MINUTE OF SILENCE



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

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.

about the agency. Discussions felt scattered and unfocussed.

Several teams started experimenting with starting every meeting with a minute of silence to help everyone get their head in the game. Most felt that this made a positive contribution to their ability to get on task quickly. As the practice became mainstreamed in the organization, groups experimented with calling for a bit of silence (a minute, 5 minutes or more) at other times when they felt stuck.

15% SOLUTIONS

Peter Drucker is quoted as asserting that most people have about 15% control over their work situations. The other 85% 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, 1994).

It does not matter if you are 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 is in your 15%?

Let’s take a minute and give everyone some time to think about this on their own.

Before we get started, let’s all take a look at the question at the top of the agenda and reflect a bit on what we’re thinking.

Wait! Can we hit the pause button here for a minute? I’d like a minute to think through this silently on my own.

A minute of silence might not seem like much of a structure but it is surprisingly powerful. It creates a boundary between now and the world before the meeting or before this phase of the discussion.

Calling for silence is an intervention that can profoundly change the vibe of a meeting. It is a good way to get a reset if things are not going in a productive direction. It creates some space that allows something new to emerge.

15% Solutions

Leaders of a nonprofit focused on economic development felt the staff lacked motivation and initiative. Hallway conversations tended to be about how others—other organizations, government regulators, politicians—made it impossible to make progress. Whenever one function was confronted with not delivering on something, they blamed lack of cooperation from other departments, complained about being held to unrealistic expectations, or cited regulations that prevented them from doing the right thing.

The organization held an off-site they hoped would reenergize the organization. One exercise in the design was 15% Solutions.

They introduced the idea that for everyone, no matter their role or level in the organization, about 85% of what happens is out of their control because it depends on the environment, other people’s decisions, and other factors. That implies that the remaining 15% could be in their span of control. But what do we spend most of our time talking about?

Complaining about? Fretting about? The 85%. It's infinitely more productive to spend our energy on the 15% where we have agency. And, when everyone is doing that, that 15% zone tends to get enlarged.

At the next weekly meeting of one of the task groups they asked participants to get in a group of three and, after some time to reflect silently, spend 10 minutes each describing what was in their personal 15%. The role of the other two was to help their partners expand their view of what was possible. As a result of the 15% exercise, it became a norm in this organization for someone in the group to pipe up with, "Are we stuck in the 85%?" whenever the discussion was in the rut of generating all the reasons something was impossible or could not work.

Small Interventions, Significant Outcomes

The *Butterfly Effect* is a concept from complexity science that teaches us that small changes can make big differences. The possibly apocryphal reference is to the notion that the flap of a butterfly's wing in Africa can impact storm conditions in North America. If we make methods more transparent and more accessible we can build the capacity of more and more people in organizations to change the quality of the conversation. The examples described here are just a few of the hundreds of small interventions that could make big differences when organizations do not have to wait for the big event meetings because the capacity to use better processes belongs to everyone.

That is our butterfly effect.

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Lisa Kimball, PhD, is Executive Producer of Group Jazz. She has worked for more than 30 years with diverse organizations on dealing with complex change. Much of her work has been around designing meaningful ways to engage stakeholders in significant organizational processes. Kimball holds a PhD in Educational Psychology: Cognition and Learning. She has served on the Board of Directors of The Organization Development Network and of The Plexus Institute. She can be reached at lisa@groupjazz.com.