

“What is our pattern language for engagement? What patterns can we identify that work to support participants in productive conversations about what matters in organizations, to liberate energy, tap into collective wisdom, and unleash the power of self organization?”

---

# Liberating Structures

## A New Pattern Language for Engagement

By Lisa Kimball

We change the culture by changing the nature of conversation. It's about choosing conversations that have the power to create the future.

(Block, 2008, p. 15)

Engagement is the latest hot thing. Everybody is talking about employee engagement, customer engagement, and stakeholder engagement. But, too often, the term feels meaningless—most people do not know where to start to make it happen. To facilitate significant, transformative changes in organizations we need to make a profound change in how people interact, not just at off sites and other special occasion meetings, but in the weekly team meetings, the ad hoc design sessions, and problem solving get togethers that make up daily life in organizations.

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 great example of a liberating structure. Using its underlying rules musicians 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 wonderful. Without the rules, it is harder if not impossible to collaborate. The principles of jazz give enough structure so that people can create together and these same principals allow 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 another piece. There is something about it which gives it a persistent identity while leaving plenty of room for individual creativity. This interdependence between different players and the liberating structure of jazz is a powerful metaphor for the kind of engagement we need.

The idea of liberating structures was first introduced by William Tolbert (1991) whose interest in an integral approach to leadership and action inquiry led him to explore the notion as a form of organization structure that gave guidance to people but in such a way that they developed 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 generate continual quality improvement. Edward de Bono (1991), who is best known for his work in creativity, contributed,

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.

(de Bono, 1991, p. 136)

The connection between liberating structures and process design emerged as new large group methods were developed to engage the entire system. We began to recognize the loose-tight quality of some of the dynamics that made them work (Kimball, 2006). In his book, *Terms of Engagement*, Dick Axelrod (2010) describes essential principles that characterize popular large group methods such as Open Space, Appreciative Inquiry, the Conference Model, and others: widening the circle of involvement, connecting people to each other and 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 within which any group can self-organize around any topic. Other methods include rounds of timed discussion in groups where diversity is maximized. These comprehensive change strategies typically play out over multiple days; some include multiple sessions weeks or months apart and are often led by teams of consultants.

**In any building, house, or office building, people experience a gradient of settings which have different degrees of intimacy. A bedroom is the most intimate, a study less. A common area or kitchen is more public, the front porch or entrance the most public of all. People feel and work best when this pattern is 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.**

There are numerous examples of how these large group methods have generated powerful new ideas and had significant impact on organizations—at least for a time. But often the half-life of the energy and commitment to new ways of being after these events is short when participants return to the default ways of meeting. Changes are not sustained. 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 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. The liberating structures framework is an attempt to define key elements of that pattern language to make them more explicit. We need to invite everyone to play with those elements and create their own repertoire of possibilities for engaging everyone in new ways of solving problems and creating potential solutions whether meetings are large or small, formal or informal, routine or special.

#### What is a pattern language?

Christopher Alexander (1977) developed the idea of a pattern language to identify patterns that work in social space in the context of architecture and community environments. He and colleagues identified several hundred patterns that apply to relationships among everything from the small reading nook to the design of

an entire community. For example, one of the patterns that Alexander talks about is *intimacy gradient*. In any building, house, or office building, people experience a gradient of settings which have different degrees of intimacy. A bedroom is the most intimate, a study less. A common area or kitchen is more public, the front porch or entrance the most public of all. People feel

Table 1: Methods that shift interactions

- » Stories versus PowerPoint
- » Listening, Silence
- » Big Questions
- » Improvising
- » Diversity of formats: pairs, small groups, large groups
- » Focus on purpose
- » Inviting participation, minimizing status differences
- » Rapid learning and prototyping cycles
- » Feedback loops
- » Network weaving
- » Innovative ways to harvest output
- » Natural environment
- » Movement, Fun
- » Social elements, mixing participants

(McCandless & Lipmanowicz, 2010)

and work best when this pattern is 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.

What is our pattern language for engagement? What patterns can we identify that work to support participants in productive conversations about what matters in organizations, to liberate energy, tap into collective wisdom, and unleash the power of self organization?

Peter and Trudy Johnson-Lenz (1991) talked about 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 pattern when and where we connect and when 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. 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

## Liberating Structure Example: Impromptu Speed Networking:

This is a great way to generate energy at the beginning or end 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.

1. Ask everyone to stand up, leave all their “stuff” behind, and move into a space where there is some elbow room.
2. Invite everyone to think individually (silently) about a provocative question that relates to the purpose of the meeting. Make it a question with no right answer. Something everyone has an equal ability to talk about.
3. 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.
4. After a short time, 5–10 minutes depending on how much total time you have, ring the bells again. Invite participants to find another partner and have another conversation.
5. Three “rounds” are usually good.
6. Invite the group to sit back down or provide instructions for whatever you are going to do next.

space and room set up, and conceptual containers created by the way a question is phrased. All of the liberating structures are made up of these simple sets of components that can be combined in literally dozens of different ways.

Liberating structures designs come from theories and principles drawn from complexity science about self organization and diffusion of innovation and change (Kimball, 2008). Liberating structures help groups tap into collective intelligence, be creatively adaptable, and build on each other’s ideas to get results. They have a bias for action. Liberating structures are fractal – they can work at multiple levels – from small groups to large groups to the whole system. Impromptu Speed Networking can work with a dozen people or with several hundred. The processes are simple. They are fast to learn. In a somewhat heretical fashion some small pieces are “cherry picked” from many of the best methodologies such as the Appreciative Interview from Appreciative Inquiry or Discovery and Action Dialogues from Positive Deviance. The goal is to find small processes that anyone can pick up and use. They do not require explanation or theory in order to use them. They do not require extensive training or certification.

However, they do need to be experienced in person. Keith McCandless and Henri Lipmanowicz (2010) who have introduced these methods in diverse organizations suggest,

The generative qualities of liberating structures cannot be adequately described in writing. Many are counter intuitive; who, for instance, would believe that the most productive meeting can be one that starts without any agenda? Other practices may seem too simple—can one minute of silent reflection change the outcome of a meeting? (p.9)

For some time, practitioners have found that many innovative ideas and creative approaches to new opportunities emerge from meetings designed around high engagement processes. In addition, processes that bring diverse participants from different parts of the whole system together tend to produce many surprising serendipitous outcomes unrelated to the primary

theme of the meeting. For example, at one meeting of a large health care organization, a vexing problem with the information available to the person who made appointments for patients was solved when she happened to sit in a small group with someone from the Information Technology group and had a chance conversation that enabled them to collaborate on a new approach.

But in addition to these traditional outcomes, the strategy that McCandless describes as a methods “mash up” delivered something new. After the event, there was a significant degree of uptake of the liberating structures methods by participants in the meeting who picked up one or more of the methods they had experienced and used them in subsequent meetings they facilitated in their own groups.

Participants experience rapid cycles of multiple methods in the course of working on something important to the organization. After each exercise, participants debrief the process as well as the content to help them notice things about its structure and the patterns across different methodologies. For example, after participating in some Impromptu Speed Networking participants are invited to notice different aspects of the process: how starting a meeting standing up builds rather than drains energy, how having several iterations of the same conversation with different partners changes understanding, and how questions open up more space for creative thinking than presentations. The goal is to introduce participants to the pattern language of these generative processes.

None of the methods is presented as the right answer for any particular situation. Most participants find several methods that appeal to them and many find a place to try one out quickly. Something about the deconstruction – the demystification – of the processes makes them feel easy and forgiving.

Liberating structures were introduced in an Army leadership program where they were positioned as tools for gathering information from the edge to enhance decision making. One officer explained,

These simple exercises give everyone a voice. I found liberating structures to be very powerful in breaking the paradigms of traditional meetings

and an effective method to achieve solutions to complex problems within a hierarchical organization.

Many participants tried out one or more of the processes within days or weeks of their introduction. A division chief in the Army shared that after several other conference sessions with one or two individuals dominating the talk and focusing on their issues only, “We were able to accomplish much more in a day than the previous two days.”

In another organization, a manager at the DC Office of the State Department of Education said,

I didn't think we were going to be

#### Partial list of liberating structures

- » Impromptu speed networking
- » 1-2-4-whole group
- » 15% solutions
- » Appreciative interview
- » Wise crowd consultation
- » 5 whys and 10 hows
- » What, So What, Now What Debrief
- » Conversation café
- » Troika consulting
- » Wicked questions
- » Storyboard agendas
- » Shift and share
- » Social network mapping
- » Discovery and action dialogue
- » Fishbowl
- » Celebrity interview
- » Minimum specs
- » Agreement/uncertainty matrix
- » TRIZ
- » Q-storming
- » 25 will get you 10
- » Open space marketplace

This is just a partial list from among dozens of possibilities. You can probably think of more from your own practice. Descriptions of these and other liberating structures can be found in the learning community on Exploring Complexity at <http://www.plexusinstitute.org>.

able to pull together so many different departments that had not been at the same meeting without spending hours making presentations to explain what we were all doing. I was amazed that we just got right to work. By the end of the day we were on the same page and had a way forward on things that would have taken weeks of meetings to accomplish.

Liberating structures have been introduced in global corporations, hospitals, educational institutions, multi-stakeholder coalitions, and local community groups for purposes including developing new product marketing strategies, reducing infection transmissions, creating innovative curriculum, and designing solutions for intractable economic problems. Many of these applications have delivered significant bottom line results. But the potential of liberating structures goes beyond any one initiative or the convening of a successful meeting. The big payoff will come 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.

#### References

- Axelrod, R. (2010). *Terms of engagement: New ways of leading and changing organizations* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Block, P. (2008). *Community: The structure of belonging*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Christopher, A., Ishikawa, S., & Silverstein, M. (1977). *A pattern language: Towns, buildings, construction*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- de Bono, E. (1991). *Teaching thinking*. London, England: Penguin.
- Johnson-Lenz, P., & Johnson-Lenz, T. (1991). Post-mechanistic groupware primitives: Rhythms, boundaries, and containers. *The International Journal of Man Machine Studies*, 34, (3), 395-417.
- Kimball, L. (2006). Lisa Kimball on liberating structures. *Looking forward; tiny*

Lisa Kimball, PhD, is President, Plexus Institute, a nonprofit social enterprise focused on applying ideas from complexity science to solve social and organizational problems. Much of her work has been around designing meaningful ways to engage stakeholders from every level of an organization in significant organizational change processes. Kimball previously founded Group Jazz, a company supporting facilitators and leaders to change the conversation about problems and potential solutions. She has worked for more than 30 years for clients including government agencies, corporations, nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions. She serves on the Board of the Organization-Development Network. She can be reached at [lisa@plexusinstitute.org](mailto:lisa@plexusinstitute.org)

*conversations with world-class thought leaders & practitioners.* sethkah.com. Kimball, L. (2008). Practicing OD in complex systems. *OD Practitioner*, 40(4), 52-54.

Lipmanowicz, H., & McCandless, K. (2010). Liberating structures: Innovating by including and unleashing everyone. *EQY Performance*, 2(4), 6-19.

Torbert, W. (1991). *The power of balance: Transforming self, society, and scientific inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

**Lisa Kimball is facilitating with Tom Mandel and Jeffrey Goldstein a session on Flirting with Uncertainty and Surprise: Thriving on Change in Complex Systems at the 2011 ODN Conference in Baltimore, Maryland.**