Bonus material for Hosting Generative Change

Checklists and additional material to accompany the book Hosting Generative Change: Creating Containers for Creativity and Commitment by Mark McKergow

Six roles of a host/host leader

- Initiator
- Inviter
- Space-creator
- Gatekeeper
- Connector
- Co-participator

Four positions for a host to stand

- In the spotlight
- With the guests
- In the gallery
- In the kitchen

Five elements of groundwork

- Need and purpose
- Cultural
- Strategic
- Structural
- Resourceful

Elements of a container

- Topic
- Purpose
- Participating group
- Space
- Ground rules and expectations

(Any of these can be expanded or tightened as the event proceeds. A new event will probably have a new yet related container.)

Three elements of a great invitation

A great invitation should be:

- Attractive (this is going to be great/useful/interesting)
- Acknowledging (why we'd like YOU to join us…)
- Optional (you have a choice)

Checklist for finding and choosing a space

These are the kind of questions the author asks himself when looking at a potential space. Some readers may find these issues mundane and tedious. They should try working for a day with 50 other people in an unsuitable space to see quite what a difference any one of these can make…

On-site or off-site? On-site venues can be cheap and available (and therefore tempting), but In terms of helping participants to focus on this issue, not be distracted or tempted to rush off to deal with crises, an off-site venue can pay dividends. Off-site also marks the event as something different, can help people come with the possibility of new thinking, and can make things more memorable and significant.

One big space or several smaller spaces? Decades ago, conference centres were built around the ideas of 'break-out rooms', with the idea that small conversations had to take place behind a door lest anyone else hear what was being discussed. Times and practices have changed, and these days I would prefer one big space with plenty of space for people to cluster into different groups. Which is not to say that small spaces, corners, lounge areas, foyers and so on can't be useful – they can. Aim for somewhere big enough to sit the group around small round tables of 5-7 people, rather than cramming them in theatre-style rows. There will be more on room layout to come.

Display? Can you use the walls etc for displaying posters, flip charts, work in progress, drawings and mind-maps, agendas and other materials? For me this is a vital part of helping people engage with the topic and with each other. Expensively decorated and untouchable Baroque interiors are not usually the generative change host's friend. Some places try to make you use pin-boards as display panels – second best in my view.

Light, heat and sound? Natural light is, for me, very important. Surprisingly many conference centres are built without it! If you are restricted on natural light, make sure that the lighting is good, controllable and fit for purpose. How do you control the temperature? Will the place be warm enough on a cold morning? What if it gets too hot? Are there outside spaces or other places to go if the inside environment turns unattractive? Shivering people in a dark space is not the best start to the day (as I know from practical experience). Is there external noise? Is it disturbing? Can everyone hear in the room (big echoey places can be impressive but difficult even for those with perfect hearing).

Furniture? Ideally flexible furniture, tables and chairs that can be moved around and reconfigured at will. Anything too fixed can be problematic – I once attended a session in a church with rows of fixed hard wooden pews and little other space: not a good setting for dialogues apart from talking to a neighbour, and uncomfortable too. Board Rooms are particularly hopeless – inevitably a big table fills most of the space, movement is difficult and the whole atmosphere is one of power and domination (possibly appropriately).

Equipment? Does the place have a PA sound system? Once you go past about 30 people in the room, this becomes increasingly essential for helping everyone to hear what's being said in large group and plenary sessions. Do you want to use a projector and screen? If the space doesn't have one, you'll have to bring it.

Access? Entering a well-prepared space is a key element of the good-enough holding of anxiety we are looking for. Can you get into the space in advance to prepare it and set up? I much prefer to get in the evening before (or even the day before, for large events with more complex

technical set-ups) to make sure everything is ready, chairs are set out as you wish, the place is suitably decorated, everything is in place, cared for and is ready to go the following morning. Setting up on the day can be a nerve-racking rush and takes your focus from welcoming the participants.

Practicalities? What are the catering arrangements? If you are offering lunches you will need to ensure that whoever is supplying them can fit in with dietary requirements and timings. Who is doing the washing up? (Lovely lunches quickly turn into piles of dirty plates!) What is the cost? What are the transport links? Is there parking?

And finally, a less specific factor:

Does it feel right? There are some places which tick all the boxes above and yet just don't feel right. It can be hard to put a finger on exactly what this is, but some spaces just don't fit the event we want to put on. It might be that the room is part of a larger complex that doesn't fit with your project (tackling drug abuse in a big pharma training centre?), or it's tatty and tired, or even too smart and 'corporate' for your event. Maybe it has a persistent smell of boiled cabbage (like one venue I rejected). Whatever, if it doesn't feel right to you, keep looking.

A few FAQs about Hosting for Generative Change

Isn't Hosting just the same as Facilitating?

It depends… As I have attempted to show, these activities are not mutually exclusive. Facilitating has come a long way in the past half-century, and the trend seems to be more towards creating spaces for people to have conversations that matter rather than trying to be involved and steer the conversations at every turn. This is a move in the direction of hosting.

I have very strong views about what should happen in this project. Can I host it as well?

Think very carefully. I have tried to show that it can be possible for a host to join in a conversation around the periphery, it would likely be problematic if you had a desired end in mind and were seeking to propel the work in that direction. Much better to find a more disinterested host who can focus on bringing the people together for the benefit of all.

What do I do if people come up with the wrong answers?

If you have any idea of 'wrong answers' then you have probably not established the project or container very well. If there are constraints, put them in at the start and help people know and understand them. If they don't like them, then you can consider adjusting the container or having conversations about how the project might be redefined, or you can just work with both the constraints and acknowledge the frustration. (This latter is rather normal, I might add.)

If the 'wrong' answers are simply those you don't like or didn't think of, you are not really cut out to be a host. Find someone else to work with you.

What do you do about resistant participants?

In my home field of Solution-Focused work we sometimes say that 'there are no resistant participants, only inept practitioners'. Our role as hosts is to help people to join in, co-operate and speak what they think. If they are 'resisting' joining in, we haven't yet asked them in the best way. It's our job to find ways that help them to engage, not their job to engage with us whatever. If they are 'resisting' working with other parties, then it's our job to help build the space, the connections and the trust so that can happen (which may well be a gradual process). If they are 'resisting' the conclusions that are being drawn, the conversation is not yet over.

How do I get people to join in with the activities and discussions?

I find that once people have accepted a well-crafted invitation and are in the room, they are in principle prepared to join in. Prepare the ground with check-ins and pace things carefully – build from simple and everyday exchanges to more profound and complex topics, go from shorter activities to longer, from more bounded to more open-ended. Offer choices wherever you can – people can (for example) make a mind-map, a diagram, a drawing, a collage or anything else rather than the list your rational side might have had in mind. Or they can go work someplace else, as long as they return here at 11.30. Or they can go to whichever topic inspires them rather than the closes group, and so on. A clear invitation about what, where, when, with whom and to what end will always get more participation than a vague hand-waving shoulder-shrugging uh-well-y'know starting point.