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."

—Peter Block

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 offsites and other special occasion meetings, but in the weekly team meetings, ad hoc design sessions, and problem-solving get-togethers that make up daily life in organizations.

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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, and between parts of the organization that don't ordinarily talk to each other. Many are self-organized, in which order arises out of local interaction. The dialogue feels generative. Yet, at the same time, the designs that work have just enough structure to channel the energy and keep things moving and productive. These structures are liberating rather than confining.

Restricting Versus Liberating Structures

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 play or met before can sit down and jam. They can create something wonderful. Without the rules, though, it would be harder if not impossible for them to collaborate. The principles of jazz give enough structure so that people can create together, and these same principles 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. Something about the rules of jazz give each song 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 in our organizations. 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 as facilitators and organizational development specialists over the past 20 years developed new large-group methods to engage whole systems (see "Methods That Shift Interactions"). In reviewing these practices, we began to recognize the

TEAM TIP

Similar to Einstein's contention that "Problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them," keep in mind that innovations cannot be created by the same kinds of practices that led to the status quo.

loose-tight quality of some of the dynamics that made them work (Lisa Kimball in a 1996 interview). 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 within which 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

Examples abound of how these large-group methods have generated powerful new ideas and had significant impact on organizations—at least for a time. But 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 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, 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 (see "Rhythms, boundaries, and containers"). 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 literally dozens of different ways (see "Partial List of Liberating Structures" on p. 3). These patterns support participants in productive conversations about what matters in their organizations, and liberate energy, tap into collective wisdom, and unleash the power of self-organization.

A Methods Mash-up

Liberating structure designs come from theories and principles drawn from complexity science about self-organization and the diffusion of innovation and change (see "Introduction to Complexity"). They help group members tap into collective intelligence, be creatively adaptable, and build on each other's ideas to get results. They have a bias toward action.

Liberating structures are fractals—they can work at multiple levels, from small groups to large groups to the whole system. For example, what we

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INTRODUCTION TO COMPLEXITY

What is complexity science? Very simply, it is science's most recent attempt to explain how order and novelty emerge in the world. (As such, it is the intellectual successor to systems theory and chaos theory.)

The traditional view of the natural world was that it was made up of machine-like entities that you could understand by taking them apart and examining the components. Much has been learned about nature by this approach. But the vast majority of nature is not amenable to being understood in this way, because most of nature is made up of what complexity scientists call *non-linear, complex adaptive systems.* Such systems are created by a number of diverse and independent agents that are constantly changing and interacting with each other. In complex adaptive systems such as ant colonies, ecosystems, and human organizations, a study of the parts produces an incomplete understanding of the whole.

The defining feature of complex adaptive systems is *emergence:* The order that emerges through the interactions of components in complex systems is "greater than—and different from—the sum of the parts," to use a familiar phrase. Complex systems therefore have a large degree of unpredictability. But more than that, the emergent collective order in turn influences the behavior, or interactions, of the parts. Feedback loops exist at every level. Such systems are constantly adapting and evolving.

Because there is little mathematics appropriate to non-linear systems, complexity scientists study them using computer simulations and models of various kinds, and observe patterns in nature. One of the earliest problems addressed by complexity science was the phenomenon of flocking birds. Computer simulation suggests that flocking arises from three simple rules guiding the behavior of individuals. In ant colonies, similarly, individuals follow a small repertoire of behaviors, and from these simple rules emerge an elaborate physical architecture and precise temperature regulation.

The Myth of Control

These examples illustrate two important properties of complex systems. First, complexity arises from a deep simplicity. Second, the order of the whole system flows from distributed control, that is from interactions among individuals, not from central control. In organizations, one way to think about this phenomenon, called *self-organization*, is to remember what happens in times of crisis. People take on tasks where they see the need, often breaking the normal rules of operation and doing things they don't normally do. In the process, they achieve amazing feats.

This perspective does not say that leaders simply have to sit back, give up control, and wait for unpredictable miracles. Instead, it argues that leaders must help create conditions that unleash the talent distributed among their people. It is a model of leader as cultivator rather than controller.

Complexity scientists have found that complex adaptive systems fluctuate between three states: *stasis* at one extreme; *chaos* at the other; and an in-between state called the *edge of chaos*. It's in this state that the system is most adaptable and creative, and in organizations it's from this edge that new ideas and unexpected directions of activity flow. Complexity scientists find that in systems poised at the edge of chaos, small changes can produce big effects.

Small changes can generate big effects in complex systems because the web of connections and interactions among the parts causes changes to cascade and multiply throughout the system. Again, one way to apply this to organizations is to remember what sometimes happens when a team is grappling with a complex problem. Ideas are tossed about, some rejected, others thought to be valuable, but no real progress is being made. Then the next new idea triggers a flurry of connections, and a solution emerges quickly, a further property of complex adaptive systems.

Relationship Matters

One final property of complex adaptive systems that is relevant to organizations is that when the interactions among the agents are enhanced, the adaptability and creativity of the system is also enhanced. In human organizations, these agents are people, and interactions are relationships generated by conversations. Enhancing people's ability to interact and to develop enhances the adaptability of the organization. Complexity scientists have also observed that a diversity of agents in the system serves to enhance this adaptability and creativity even further. In organizations, this means inviting a diversity of experience and perspectives.

Leaders guided by a complexity perspective therefore place great value on developing and strengthening relationships with and among their colleagues. Perhaps counterintuitively, complexity science leads to very human-centered practices in organizations, validating such value-based leadership ideals as openness, diversity, and integrity.

Adapted from the Plexus Institute website

like to call "Impromptu Speed Networking" can work with a dozen people or with several hundred (see "Impromptu Speed Networking"). 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 group methodologies, such as the Appreciative Interview from Appreciative Inquiry and 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. Likewise, they do not require extensive training or certification.

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

> The generative qualities of liberating structures cannot be adequately described in writing. Many are counterintuitive; 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?

Practitioners find 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 a meeting of a large healthcare organization, the person who made appointments for patients described a vexing problem regarding her access to information. She happened to sit in a small group with someone from the Information Technology group; through their chance conversation, they were able to collaborate on a new approach.

But in addition to this kind of traditional problem-solving outcome, the strategy that McCandless describes as a methods "mash-up" delivered something new. After the event, people who had participated in the meeting demonstrated a significant degree of uptake of the liberating structures methods. In subsequence meetings with their own groups, they used one or more of the methods they had experienced.

An Invitation to Play

As noted above, the liberating structures framework is an attempt to define key elements of that pattern language to make them more explicit to people who both design and participate in large-scale change initiatives. The next step is to invite people to play with the elements that make up this proposed framework and create their own repertoire of possibilities for engaging everyone in new ways of solving problems and creating potential solutions, whether in meetings that are large or small, formal or informal, routine or special.

One way to teach liberating structures is to have participants apply multiple methods in rapid cycle in the course of working on something important to their organization. After each exercise, the facilitator debriefs the process as well as the content to help people notice things about the structure and patterns across different methodologies. For example, after participants take part in Impromptu Speed Networking, they 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 the techniques feel easy and forgiving.

For instance, a U.S. Army leadership program incorporated liberating structures by positioning them 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

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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 participants up and moving so their blood gets flowing. The introduction of this activity 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—the activity will be most interesting if they find someone they know less well than they know others. 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 bell again. Invite participants to find another partner and have another conversation.

5. Three "rounds" are usually good.

6. Invite group members to sit back down or provide instructions for whatever you are going to do next.

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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. An Army division chief shared that after several conference sessions in which one or two individuals dominated the talk and focused on their issues only, by applying liberating structures, "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 a state department of education said,

> I didn't think we were going to be 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 that range from 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 wherever people gather for important conversations. ◘

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