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.

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 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.

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McCandless & Lipmanowicz, 2010

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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—one who 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.

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, “We were 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 people gather for important conversations.

**References**


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.