

Much of the time we spend in gatherings with other people disappoints us. But we tend to keep gathering in the same tired ways. My job as a host consultant is to put the right people in a room and help them to collectively think, dream, argue, heal, envision, trust, and connect for a specific larger purpose. I focus on gathering people and what happens between them at the center of every coming together. A group dialogue process called *Sustained Dialogue* aims to transform fractured relationships across racial, ethnic, and religious lines. I am endlessly intrigued by the small and important interventions we can all make to help groups gel. It is the way a group is gathered that determines what happens in it and how successful it is. Everyone has the ability to gather well. Gatherings crackle and flourish when real thought goes into them, when (often invisible) structure is baked into them.

There are so many good reasons for coming together that often we don't know precisely why we do so. The first step in convening is to commit to a bold, sharp purpose. Our thinking about gathering—when we gather and why—has become muddled. We often conflate category with purpose.

Would it be possible to use a courtroom to get everyone involved in a case—the accused, judges, lawyers, clerks, social workers, community members—to help improve behavior instead of merely punish it? What is the problem, and how can we work together to come to a solution? The Red Hook Justice Center team in Brooklyn, NY has been able to do this because they figured out the larger purpose of why they wanted to gather: to solve the community's problems—together. And they built a proceeding around that. Thinking of the place as a laboratory frees the people at the Justice Center to be great gatherers. A category can masquerade as a purpose, particularly the gatherings that have become ritualized over time. Routine is an enemy of meaningful gathering.

Ritualized gatherings are never ritualized at the beginning. A structure is designed to bring people together around a need. Then it gets repeated again and again, year after year, and often becomes ritualized. People begin to attach meaning to the meeting's form. People come to expect these elements of form and even take comfort in them. Over time, the form itself plays a role in shaping people's sense of belonging to the group and their identity within that group. When the need begins to shift and the format solves an outdated purpose, we may hold on to the form to the detriment of our needs.

Specificity is crucial. The more focused and particular a gathering, the more narrowly it frames itself and the more passion it arouses. Put more specificity in the title of the group. Use the Passover Principle, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" Ask why you meet until you hit a belief or value. Think of what you want to change because you gathered and work backward from that outcome. Organize every meeting around a desired outcome. When a meeting is not designed by outcome, it ends up being defined by process.

We often run up against 2 kinds of internal resistance. One comes from the desire to multitask, the other from modesty. If she could accomplish anything with this dinner, how would she want her guests to walk away at the end? I asked her to put aside the demi-purposes of bringing her

husband new business and reciprocating with her friends, and focus on connecting meaningfully with new people. In this political climate, as the very notion of what it means to be American is being questioned, how do *you* think about what "home" is for you?" Having a purpose means knowing why you're gathering and honoring your participants with convening for a reason. Make purpose your bouncer. Let it decide what goes into your gathering and what stays out. What brought you to this city—birth or circumstance? What is a book that really affected you as a child? What do you think would make us a better city? First set and commit to your purpose, and the decisions will flow.

The guest list is the first test of a robust gathering purpose. The desire to keep doors open—to not offend, to maintain a future opportunity—threatens this. You will have begun to gather with purpose when you exclude with purpose. Over-inclusion is a symptom of deeper problems—lack of commitment to purpose and guests. If everyone is family, no one is family. Blood makes a tribe and a border makes a nation. The purpose of a gathering can remain vague and abstract until clarified by drawing a boundary between who is in and out. Who fits and helps fulfill the gathering's purpose? Who threatens it? Who, despite being irrelevant to the purpose, do you feel obliged to invite? People who don't fulfill the purpose of your gathering detract from it and take time and attention away from it. Every person affects the dynamics of a group. Who is this gathering for first? Excluding thoughtfully allows you to focus on a specific, underexplored relationship. One tightly bound program transformed a service program into a relationship between young artists and aging ears.

For every gathering purpose, there is a corresponding ideal size. If you want a lively but inclusive conversation as a core part of your gathering, 8-12 people is the number you should consider. Groups of 6 are wonderfully conducive to intimacy, high levels of sharing, and discussion through storytelling. But this size not ideal for diversity of viewpoints and cannot bear much dead weight. Twelve is small enough to build trust and intimacy, and small enough for a single moderator. The *table moment* occurs when an organization's members can no longer fit around one table. Groups of 30: 30 starts to feel like a party, whether or not your gathering *is* one. Groups of 150: intimacy and trust is still palpable at the level of the whole group, and before it becomes an audience. This is the natural size of a tribe, the number of stable friendships humans can maintain, which has come to be called Dunbar's number.

Venues come with scripts. Seek a setting that embodies the reason for convening. If the purpose has something to do with bonding a group, you will want more listening behavior. Choice of venue a powerful lever over your guests' behavior. It can and should do also displace people from their habits.

Gatherings need perimeters. Make sure the energy isn't leaking out with too large a space. "Once the game's perimeter was gone, its players lost their sense of being in an alternative universe." We tend to accept the default setup we're given. Understand the appropriate human density for the event. One of the reasons party guests often gravitate to the

kitchen is that they instinctively seek out smaller spaces as the group dwindles in order to sustain density.

I urge those I advise to own their power as host. Chill is a miserable attitude when it comes to hosting gatherings. Hosting is inevitably an exercise of power. Abdication often fails your guests rather than serves them. Once your guests choose to come into your kingdom, they want to be governed. “Chill” masquerades as you caring about them. In fact they will be left to one another. Pulling-back creates a vacuum that others can fill. Others are likely to exercise power over people who signed up to be at your mercy. When you abdicate leadership, you are filling them with confusion and anxiety. “Freedom for the wolves has often meant death to the sheep.” If you’re going to compel people to gather in a particular way, enforce it and rescue your guests if it fails. With no source of enforcement, meetings became dominated by informal sources of power: tenure at the company, professional success, force of personality. If you are going to create a kingdom for an hour or a day, rule it with generosity.

Generous authority imposes in a way that serves your guests. Hecklers are a perfect example of those pretender authorities waiting to rule if the host shows any weakness. Protect your guests from one another, or from boredom, or from the addictive technologies that lurk in our pockets, The anger of the shushed is concentrated, while the gratitude of the protected is diffuse.

I must operate as a representative of my guests’ future selves—happy they met new people, surprised by new connections with people unlike themselves—and actively go against what their present selves demand. Nora Abousteit loves nothing more in the world than having the people she loves meet one another. Her guests have one job before dinner: make 2 new friends. “In Egypt, we always serve one another first. When that happens, everyone gets food.” She admits she plays the Egyptian when greater warmth is required and the German when greater order is required. **YOU ARE THE BOSS.** Hosting is not democratic, just like design isn’t. Structure helps good parties, like restrictions help good design. Introduce people to each other A LOT. But take your time with it. Be generous. Very generous with food, wine, and compliments/introductions. **ALWAYS** do placement. Always. Placement **MUST** be boy/girl/boy/girl, etc. And no, it does not matter if someone is gay. Seat people next to people who do different things but complementary. Within each table, people should introduce themselves, but it must be short. Name, plus something they like or what they did on the weekend. Two things are embedded in every instruction: compassion and order. The “offhand comment” risk factor is among the biggest reasons many institutional gatherings leave generosity out of their authority. Frame the event. “This is why we are here.”

The best gatherings transport us to a temporary alternative world. Design it as a world that will exist only once. Junior Cotillion offers students “a 3 year curriculum designed to give young people instruction and practice in the courtesies that make life more pleasant for them and those around them” - How Old Rich People Want You to Behave.

But many of us do not live in closed circles of like-minded, similarly raised people. It is no accident that rules-based gatherings are emerging as modern life does away with monocultures and closed circles of the similar. The new etiquette is

more suited to modern realities. Explicit pop-up rules are better for gathering across difference and are bringing new freedom and openness to our gatherings. If the standards of etiquette are fixed, imperious, and exclusionary, pop-up rules have the power to flip these traits on their head, creating the possibility of more experimental, humble, and democratic—and satisfying!—gatherings. Everyone realizes that the rules are temporary and is, therefore, willing to obey them. Explicit rules serve open circles that assume difference. The explicitness levels the playing field for outsiders. Etiquette allows people to gather because they are the same. Pop-up rules allow people to gather because they are different—yet open to having the same experience.

Passover Principle: a special invitation for a special night that would happen no more than once a year. If you accept a greater rigidity in the setup of the event, the gatherer will offer you a different and much richer freedom—to people who check their phones an average of 150 times a day. You may have everyone in one room, but how do you get people to be *here*?

An army of some of the smartest people alive (IT companies) are working feverishly to ensure that etiquette stands no chance against our addictive new technologies. Never before in history have the decisions of a handful of designers had so impacted how millions of people around the world spend their attention. Making it an individual’s responsibility not to be distracted is “not acknowledging that there’s 1000 people on the other side of the screen whose job is to break down whatever responsibility I can maintain.”

There is a certain kind of fun in trying something for a bounded moment. It’s rare for groups of people to do things together for a sustained amount of time. I used the Law of Two Feet, and it stipulated this: “If at any time during our time together you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, use your two feet, go someplace else.” You couldn’t pour yourself a drink; someone had to pour it for you. Board members could only ask questions that were not asking for more information. By putting information-gathering questions off-limits, he forced his board members to have the kind of difficult but productive conversations that led them to state their positions more explicitly and reach decisions.

Your gathering begins at the moment your guests first learn of it. So much gathering advice focuses on preparing things instead of people. 90% of what makes a gathering successful is put in place beforehand. You need from the beginning to reinforce your interlocutors’ belief that you will never bullshit them; never promise what you cannot deliver; always be straightforward with them; and that there are no hidden agendas. The bigger the ask, the more care, attention, and detail should be put into the pregame phase. Asking your guests to do something instead of bring something, to contribute to a gathering ahead of time changes their perception of it.

I send out a digital “workbook” to participants to fill out and return to me ahead of a gathering--6-10 questions for “Why did you join this company?” and “What are the most pressing questions you think this team needs to address?” I try to embed 2 elements in my workbook questions: something that helps them connect with and remember their own sense of purpose as it relates to the gathering, and something

that gets them to share honestly about the nature of the challenge they're trying to address. The workbooks create a connection between each participant and me. By crafting the workbooks and sending them out, I am sending the participants an invitation to engage. By filling them out and sending them back to me, they are accepting.

Priming matters because a gathering is a social contract, and the pregame drafts this contract and implicitly agrees on it. A gathering proceeds from an understanding between host and guest about what each is willing to offer to make it a success. Part of the job of the pregame is to find ways, implicit and explicit, to communicate to your guests what they're signing up for by saying yes to the invitation. The Martha Stewart approach elevates the readying of things over the readying of people. To name a gathering affects the way people perceive it. "I Am Here" primed people for what we most needed from them: presence. Helping people figure out their vision for their work, company, or life signifies experimentation and possibility—a Visioning Lab. Ushering is carrying across a proverbial threshold; walk them through a passageway.

Attention is highest at the outset, as our brain effectively chooses what we will remember later. Don't start with logistics. This is an opportunity to sear your gathering's purpose into the minds of your guests. Handing it over to sponsors is costly. George Lucas in Star Wars chose to forgo opening credits entirely. The result was one of the most memorable beginnings in movie history. And he paid for it—the Directors Guild fined him \$250,000 for his daring.

The *cold open* is the practice of starting a show directly with a scene rather than opening credits. Open cold. Your opening needs to be a kind of pleasant shock therapy, planting in guests the feeling of being totally welcomed and deeply grateful to be there.

Your next task is to fuse people, to turn a motley collection of attendees into a tribe. A 2001 Johns Hopkins study found that when Operating Room team members introduced themselves and shared concerns ahead of time, the likelihood of complications and deaths fell by 35%. When doctors, nurses, and anesthesiologists practiced good gathering principles they felt more comfortable speaking up during surgery and offering solutions.

Connect audiences to a subject by asking them "How many of you can relate to this question?" Or "Who else wonders about this?" How many of you are thinking about this for the first time? How many of you just realized you're in the wrong session? Imagine building a spiderweb together—that each of you has strings coming out of your wrists that connect with the other 32 people here. We can only go as deep as the weakest thread will allow. Build a web.

We asked guests to start their toasts with a personal story or experience from their own life? What if we made the last person sing their toast? We call it the *15 Toasts* to discern patterns in what helped the real and the revelatory to surface. If the term "stump speech" evokes the strongest, most durable part of the tree, "sprout speech" describes the newest and weakest part of the tree. It is the part still forming. It is people's sprouts that are most interesting—and perhaps most prone to making a group feel connected enough to attempt big things together.

The more a group of entrepreneurs shared of their vulnerability, the more I could relate and the more I wanted to help. The stronger they seemed, the less they needed me and the less I could connect with their travails. So often when we gather, we do it in ways that hide our need for help and portray us in the strongest and least heart-stirring light. It is in gathering that we meet those who could help. However, they often ended up intimidating rather than helping one another. Our accomplishments are humble-bragged and our personal brands are promoted.

Lis Lazarus, a student one year ahead of me at Kennedy College, created a small group called CAN, or Change Agents Now. In an inversion of norms, weakness became more valued than strength. "**Crucible moments**" are **challenging moments in our lives that shape us in some deep way** and shift our lens on the world. They are stories that define us in our own minds—and that seldom come up in the ordinary course of conversation. Push for people's experiences over their ideas. We got stories because we asked for stories—we made a clear distinction in the prompt between people's experiences and their abstract ideas. Many gatherings would be improved if people were simply asked for their stories. **Story is about a decision that you made.** It's not about what happens to you.

15 Toasts: to the stranger, to faith, to happiness, to collateral damage, to escapes, to borders, to Them, to fear, to risk, to rebellion, to romance, to dignity, to the self, to education, to the story that changed my life, to the end of work, to beauty, to conflict, to tinkering, to the truth, to America, to local, to the fellow traveler, to origins, to the right problem, to the disrupted, to the fourth industrial revolution, to courage, to borders, to risk, and, yes, to vulnerability. The best themes were not sweet, but the ones with darker sides to them: fear, Them, borders, strangers. We give our guests a chance to pause and consider what is not uplifting but thought- and heart-provoking--the "integration of the shadow." We had each toaster choose the next toaster. We asked the group to **share a story, a moment, or an experience from their life that changed the way you view the world.** We found a way to design for the stranger spirit.

With strangers, there is a temporary reordering of a balancing act that each of us constantly attempts: between our past selves and our future selves, between who we have been and who we are becoming. Strangers create a temporary freedom to pilot-test what we might become, however untethered that is to what we have been. In front of a stranger, we are free to choose what we want to show, hide, or even invent.

There is a typical dynamic to events that we hope to avoid—the dynamic of showiness and puffery. I invite people to leave outside the door those parts of their lives and work that are going well. We're interested in the half-baked parts--the parts they're still figuring out. When I work with business teams and do a 15 Toasts before a big meeting, there is another set of problematic dynamics to fend off. By naming the way I anticipate they will be and asking them to set that aside and try something else, I often get through to them. "Tell us something that would surprise us," or "Leave your successes at the door," or "There's no need to slip in an accomplishment--you're all here because you're remarkable. We don't want to hear about your résumé or how great you are. We

already know that.” I make sure every toaster has my full attention throughout the dinner. I listen deeply and show the kind of self that I am asking them to show me. To get the group to be vulnerable, we facilitators need to share an even more personal story than we expect our clients to. Hosts set the bar. However much we share, they share a little less.

The singing rule we established with 15 Toasts nudged people toward risk-taking. By creating a risk in not coming forward with a toast, the host evens out the risk calculus. But he is explicit about letting every participant choose their desired level of depth. “I draw a swimming pool,” he said. “There is a deep end and a shallow end. You can choose whatever end you want to enter.”

The responsible harnessing of good controversy—handling with structure and care what we normally avoid—is one of the most difficult, complicated, and important duties for a gatherer. When it is done well, it is also one of the most transformative. Good controversy is contention that helps people look more closely at what they care about, when there is danger but also real benefit in doing so. We moved the controversy from implicit to explicit by ritualizing it. We created a temporary alternative world within the larger gathering, pop-up rules, and made the whole thing playful, to change that context and those norms temporarily, using ritual to carve out a space for conflict and controversy (and therefore removing conflict and controversy from other spaces).

What are people avoiding that they don’t think they’re avoiding? What are the sacred cows here? What goes unsaid? What are we trying to protect? And why? What was not working and what they thought the core issues were—whether the core problem was within the cause itself, or between the cause as a whole and those who opposed it. There was a massive power imbalance. Dissatisfaction was coming out in proxy wars: battles over language on pamphlets and sharing of data. I created a digital workbook in which I asked questions to continue the process of naming what participants believed were the core issues. I asked them all to fill out the workbook ahead of time and return it to me and told them that their answers would be read aloud in the room, anonymously. “Tell me about a moment in your early life that deeply influenced you.” “What do you think is the most needed conversation for this group to have now?” We hosted a 15 Toasts dinner with the leaders and chose the theme of conflict. I wanted to normalize the word and show that there was some light in it. There are all kinds of conflicts. The one that most resonated with people was of a different kind: inner conflict.

I set the ground rules asking, “What do you need to feel safe here?” Getting them to participate in creating the rules, is also a way to begin naming and acknowledging past behaviors inspiring the suggestion of new rules to foster new behaviors. It lets the facilitator say: “These are the rules you said you wanted.” When things would get heated, I would slow them down and try to help them go “below the iceberg.” Rather than looking at the specific incidents and events above the water line, I would ask them how those moments revealed their underlying beliefs, values, and needs. I would try to make what they were saying more hearable to everyone else. So that even if they didn’t agree, they understood. I bring good controversy to a gathering only when I believe some good can come out of it.

There is an equal and opposite problem to the opening: a widespread tendency to close without closing. Great hosts understand that how you end things, like how you begin them, shapes people’s experience, sense of meaning and memory. It is your job to help your guests close that world, decide what of the experience they want to carry with them, and reenter all that from which they came. The failure to close well is rooted in avoidance of an end. My husband is staunchly in favor of letting people linger as long as they want, and I strongly favor ending an event preemptively so as to give guests an escape. That invitation to the living room is a soft close; in a sense, it’s the equivalent of the last call. A last call is not a closing; it’s the beginning of an outbound ushering. When the law doesn’t mandate a last call, when should it be declared? What is your equivalent of the 20-people-left-on-the-dance-floor moment? When are you still in charge of events instead of being carried by them? Who should make this decision to issue the last call? A strong closing has 2 phases, corresponding to 2 distinct needs among your guests: looking inward and turning outward. Looking inward is about taking a moment to understand, remember, acknowledge, and reflect on what just transpired—and to bond as a group one last time. Turning outward is about preparing to part from one another and retake your place in the world. When a mother asks her children every night at dinner not just what happened today, but for their “rose” and “thorn” (the best and worst parts of their day), she is helping them make meaning. Tribe-making is vital to meaning-making. What of this world do I want to bring back to my other worlds? People think in groups. It can be a force for good, or a force for evil, and quickly coalesce around hatred or mistrust.

Just as you don’t open a gathering with logistics, you should never end a gathering with logistics, and that includes thank-yous. The last call, the logistics, and the dramatic close. There is often a subtle way to remind people of why what is now ending was initiated in the first place. One host grabbed as many volunteers as she could and lined them up in the front hallway to wait for the kids to file through.

Master the techniques in this course until they look like magic. One professor uses the send-off not only to remind his students of their purpose together in the class, but to remind himself of his own purpose as a teacher as well.

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