

Liberating Structures: Engaging Everyone to Build a Good Life Together

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### Liberating Structures: Engaging Everyone to Build a Good Life Together

“...The world is changed through small, elegant shifts in the protocols of how we meet, plan, conference, and relate to each other. The genius of this [Liberating Structures approach].... is how it puts in the hands of every leader and every citizen the facilitative power that was once reserved for the trained expert.”

Peter Block on liberating structures (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013, back cover).

Have you been to classrooms with rows of tables and chairs neatly arranged, the students sitting there with their fingers glued to the smartphone while “the sage on the stage” is lecturing away—a lot of bodies that are present but minds that may be absent? Have you been to meetings where discussions are managed by the chair and the entire group spends the whole time listening to just one person talking—perhaps too much is said yet too little is accomplished? These are challenges that we, as communication professors, researchers, and practitioners, face routinely in our professional lives. In this chapter, we discuss the limitations of traditional group communication methods and present Liberating Structures as an alternative or complementary approach to unleash the potential of everyone, increase work efficiency and productivity, and build trusting and generative relationships—with emergent processes, liberating experiences, surprising outcomes, and meaningful connections—One way to build a good life together!

When it comes to the conduct of meetings, whether in classrooms or boardrooms, five methods are commonly used to organize how groups of people work together: (1) The ubiquitous

*presentation* with one person in control of the microphone—often the invited expert or the “shower and teller;” (2) The go-around *status report* with the microphone being passed from one person to another (i.e., turn-taking) with the purpose of briefing the boss or the bigger group; (3) The *managed discussion* with one person in-charge of coordinating the conversation—often used for consensus-building or decision-making; (4) The *open discussion* with no-one in-charge but often in response to a presentation or a non-directed question; and (5) The free-flowing *brainstorming*, generating wild ideas through a Ping-Pong style conversation that is too loosely structured that often misses multiple perspectives or the local know-how (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013).

These five dominant methods of organizing group work severely limit what groups are able to accomplish. They direct the flow of expertise from the top, foster passive acceptance by restricting and controlling participation, and make exclusion a routine fixture of the classroom or any workplace. As a result, group work is deeply frustrating, marginalizing, and oppressive. This is one reason why most of us hate meetings, considering them as a waste of time, resources, and energy. How can classrooms and workplaces become places where people feel engaged? Here, we describe Liberating Structures that make it possible to include and engage all who are affected in shaping their next steps.

### **What are Liberating Structures?**

Liberating Structures are simple protocols that groups can use to organize how they work or learn together. Each protocol specifies five structural elements: (1) The *structuring invitation* such as a question to create a common focus; (2) *Space arrangement*, usually an open physical setting is required; (3) *Participation distribution* to ensure everyone has an equal chance to contribute, (4) *Groups configuration* with different group sizes for different purposes, and (5) the

*sequence of steps* and *time allocation* for effective execution. Currently, there are three dozens Liberating Structures available (<http://liberatingstructures.com>). They are simpler than a process and more serious than a fun exercise. They facilitate the minimum specifications for a group to make progress together without a predetermined outcome. They control the form or structure of micro-interactions in a way that liberates simultaneous mutual shaping of insights and next steps.

A flock of geese flying in a V-formation can illustrate what Liberating Structures make possible to enhance the performance of any group (see Figure 1). Whereas a single goose is exhausted after flying 500 miles, a flock of geese flying in a V-formation can fly from 800 to 1,000 miles without resting.



Figure 1. A Flock of Geese Flying in a V-Formation

What makes this possible?

Simply, the geese flying in the back utilize the air currents coming from the wings of the geese in front to lift themselves (Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006). The geese rotate leadership at regular intervals. When the leader goose tires, it routinely drops behind in the formation as the

geese at the back sequentially move forward. This means that if a goose moves out of formation, the increased drag on its wings provides instant feedback to self-correct its position. When in-flight, the geese honk regularly and loudly to identify their respective positions and to encourage others to keep going, especially the leader. If a goose is wounded or unwell, two or three geese accompany it to the ground. Once nourished back to health, they will join another passing flock.

So a flock of flying geese maximizes both individual well-being and overall group performance. In the parlance of industrial engineering, a flock of flying geese represents a dynamic, interactive, and collaborative model of ergonomic design, a scientific discipline concerned with the understanding of interactions among actors and other elements of a system in order to optimize the performance of each individual and the overall system. At any given time, each goose has a specified role and responsibility, but across the spread of time, roles and responsibilities, including leadership, are constantly rotating. Effort, participation, and contributions are distributed and balanced across time and distance. There is no wasted effort. All geese are engaged at all times, working in parallel toward a shared purpose. Feedback is plentiful, authentic, immediate, and affirmative. The geese are ever mindful of not just *who* they are, but *whose* they are!

### **Why Work Life is often “Bad Life”?**

#### **How Liberating Structures Can Create “Good Life”!**

Akin to the rotating V-Formation of a flock of flying geese, Liberating Structures specify how each participant’s time, effort, and contribution are distributed in different spatial configurations so that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate, dialogue, and shape the group decisions and outcomes. However, the standard and dominant practice in a classroom or

workplace is a far cry from what is embodied in a flock of flying geese, or embedded in the premise of Liberating Structures.

The design of classrooms, boardrooms, and workspaces are deeply rooted in the ideology of the industrial revolution, emphasizing standardization, uniformity, and regularity. Participants, sitting in rows and columns, should behave in an orderly manner. Students and employees are looked upon as commodities to be processed, trained, programmed, and produced in an invariant manner. This widespread notion that students and employees are throughput and commodities needs to be challenged. Liberating Structures challenge the prevailing notion that a workplace cannot be engaging or enjoyable. In fact, when participants are engaged in a work place, productivity and group performance outcomes are significantly higher (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Multiple small circles in Singhal's class in Tokyo, Japan in 2011

If group performance can be significantly enhanced, and work be made more enjoyable, why hasn't it happened much? Here are some clues, based on our collective experience in educational, corporate, and non-profit settings:

First, routine work practices are so normalized that they are pretty much invisible. They are what everybody does. They are not diagnosed as a big source of problems or opportunity. They are not on anyone's radar screen. If you have never seen high engagement, how can you believe it even exists or is possible? If you are not convinced it exists, why would you bother looking for it or looking for a way to create it?

Second, improving the level of engagement in an organization is perceived as a big complex challenge. The dominant thinking is that it requires big complex programs, culture change campaigns, extensive leadership development, possibly reorganizations, or a new cadre of leaders. Small chicken-shit changes in routine practices are totally absent from the slate of solutions.

Third, we are all simply doing what we know how to do. We are doing mostly the same thing as the people above/before us are doing. In the hierarchical model within which we all grew up, we have seen people at the top are telling others what to do. They are expected to know all the right answers (experts) and to be competent at directing others (parenting, educating, inspiring, managing, leading). We all know that reality is different, but in the absence of something else, we continue to perpetuate the same organizational model for school, work, home, and church, etc. This model is not inclusive, it includes a lot of "shut up and listen."

Fourth, inertia is enormous for the very reason that the current standard practices are totally imbedded in the daily functioning of nearly all organizations, from top to bottom and across all functions. To appreciate the weight of inertia, it is enough to look at boardrooms where elongated tables occupy most of the space, sitting arrangements are cast in stone, and all meetings look the same, exact same structure, just different agenda items. That is the model that cascades down into organizations of all kinds.

Last but not least, fear of the consequences of doing something different. The existence of practices such as Liberating Structures is not widely known. The first book about them (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013) was recently published. Liberating Structures usually are a visible departure from the prevailing habits, traditions, and culture. For new users, they can easily be a source of anxiety: Until others around me see their benefits, how will they react? What if “it” doesn’t work? What will people think of me? What do I do if people get confused or refuse to participate?

Our experience suggests that Liberating Structures invite the people who are more positive and creative to show up. When people experience new patterns of interactions and see the results, it invites them to experiment with new practices. When their voices are heard, participants feel valued, and are motivated to do more. In short, Liberating Structures create the conditions for a healthier ecosystem to emerge.

### **The Conceptual Basis of Liberating Structures**

The conceptual basis of Liberating Structures can be traced back to the teachings of the noted Greek philosopher Socrates over two thousand years ago, and more recently to noted 20th century educational practitioners and scholars such as Dewey (1938/1987), Bruner (1960, 1973, 1996), Piaget (2001), and Montessori (1986). All of them, in their own way, critiqued the industrial model of public education that privileged expert knowledge and overly emphasized delivery of content rather than paying attention to process, experience, and self-discovery (Kolb, 1984). They all deeply valued hands-on, experiential discovery, emphasizing the importance of interactions, dialogue, and collaboration in the learning process. Principally, they argued for curriculum to be organized in an upwardly spiraling manner so that the student continually builds upon what they have already learned (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Davis, 2013). They emphasized



effective sequences in which to present material so that the learning emerged from the students' own curiosity-fueled engagement, not from invariant transmission of expert knowledge.

Despite the valorizing of principles espoused by Dewey, Bruner, Piaget, Montessori, and others, our educational institutions treat students as empty vessels to be filled with the expert knowledge (Freire, 1971). In workplaces, usually it is the superiors who speak and direct; subordinates listen and comply. Unwittingly, conventional structures stifle inclusion and engagement. Meetings and group work lead to disengaged participants, dysfunctional groups, and wasted ideas. Liberating Structures allow participants to recover their voices and agency, and help them believe they have something worth saying.

### **Transforming Classrooms and Learning Experiences**

A small example illustrates concretely what happens when someone uses a Liberating Structure. Anu is a teaching assistant giving a course in public speaking to a group of some 30 undergraduate students at a medium-sized Southwestern university. After all students had their first public speaking experience she wants to do a quick debrief, have the students reflect on what they learned and, looking back, what they would do differently. A standard practice, the one that has been in use for centuries, would be for the teacher to throw the question at the whole class. A few students would raise their hands. She would pick three, four, or perhaps five students to share their thoughts, and then she would share her own observations and recommendations. All other students would be left with no choice but to listen passively. Most students would have likely zoned out.

Anu instead decided to use a Liberating Structure called Impromptu Networking (<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/2-impromptu-networking/>). She first asked each student in class to stand up. Then she told them that she wanted them to pair up preferably with someone

they didn't know well and that they had 30 seconds each to answer the following question, "Looking back at your first public speaking experience what would you do differently?" She told the students that after the first round she would ring a bell and they would have to pair up with another student for another 30 seconds while addressing the same question. And then there would be a third round. Then she rang her bell and said, "Go, first round!" The whole room erupted in spontaneous combustion. All students were immediately engaged first sharing their idea, and then listening to their partner.

The energy in the room was palpable. Positive body language was everywhere: students leaning in, smiling, and listening. Three times meant three opportunities to reflect more deeply and learn from peers. At the end of the three minutes, while students were still standing up, Anu asked, "Who would like to share something you heard from a partner that you thought was particularly valuable?" She let the sharing go till it ended on its own; all the learning from the whole class was captured effortlessly and quickly within a couple of minutes. Importantly, what Anu did with thirty students could have been done with 60 or 300 students within more or less the same amount of time. Liberating Structures scale very easily.

This small example illustrates how and why it is possible to be more effective and productive as a group and, at the same time, make it also enjoyable for all participants. It is enjoyable because everybody is actively engaged from start to finish. It feels good because everybody is given equal space to speak and be heard. It is fun because it is dynamic and energizing. It is rewarding because it gives everybody the opportunity to contribute to the whole learning process. It generates lots of interactions between people who otherwise would remain distant in spite of sitting in the same room. These multiple interactions build connections and, gradually, trust between people thus fostering a sense community, something to look forward to

spending time with. Allowing the entire variety of contributions to emerge from the group enriches the conversations while leveling the playing field. The teacher becomes more of a facilitator, a partner in discovering solutions, a co-conspirator in how to have a good time while working together.

Ask any student of Anu's class whether they enjoyed their Impromptu interactions and you will find out why her class is a favorite of theirs, one that they hate to miss. You will also understand why Anu received the university-wide outstanding teaching assistant award for the 2013-2014 academic year. One important twist: Anu had never taken a course in public speaking or practiced public speaking. She didn't teach from a position of expertise. Instead she created the conditions and facilitated the learning of the students by getting them all engaged with Liberating Structures.

While Impromptu Networking is one of the simpler Liberating Structures, it is illustrative of the whole set. A small, discrete example like Impromptu Networking makes it easy to see the differences between a standard instructional practice in a classroom and a Liberating Structure. Those differences remain the same at a larger scale, in more complex situations, and when using multiple Liberating Structures. The differences scale because these engagement outcomes are automatic "side-effects" of the way all Liberating Structures are constructed: Get everybody engaged from start to finish, give everybody equal space to be heard and contribute and practice self-discovery. Just as low participation is built into the fabric of standard work practices, high engagement is built into the fabric of Liberating Structures. Table 1 lists some of the other commonly-used liberating structures in classrooms.

-- Insert Table 1 about here --

Two of the present co-authors, Singhal and Wang, have under the guidance and mentoring of the other co-authors, Lipmanowicz and McCandless, been employing the practice of Liberating Structures to liberate their classrooms—whether in El Paso or Buffalo, or in other parts of the world. Here co-author Singhal, in first-person, shares how he makes small adjustments in the protocols of how his classroom is structured and conducted (for more, see Singhal, 2013). In my classes, participants invariably find themselves in circles (see Figure 2). There is no “sage on stage,” and all participants have equal opportunity to be seen and heard. To deepen classroom conversations, I often introduce a “talking stick” when doing small-group work. Whoever holds the stick talks, the others listen. The stick is then passed until all have spoken. The stick may go around three to four times so that participants have an opportunity to widen and deepen their own thoughts and to build upon others’ thoughts. Trust rises as relationships deepen over time.

### **Inviting Everyone to Save Lives**

Liberating takes courage. The first wave of mutually shaped insights, decisions, actions, and agreements may seem inconspicuous, crude, or fleeting. They often come from overlooked details, unusual suspects, and need to be coaxed out of messy or ambiguous situations. It is much easier to see big system failures (and then propose standardized outcomes) than to notice how widely distributed local solutions make a difference. System problems shout, widely distributed solutions whisper.

For decades, a standardized approach to preventing the spread of antibiotic resistance organisms (aka superbugs) was delivering modest to poor results. Scientific evidence supported three effective prevention strategies: hand washing, cleaning surfaces, and isolating patients with

infections. Standardized policies and procedures regarding *what to do* were developed and handed down from technical experts to the staff interacting with patients and families everyday.

With these outcomes predetermined, training to reduce variation in *what to do* was handed down the chain of command. The goal was to tightly manage execution—rewarding adherence and punishing non-compliance. If results were poor, managers and technical experts employed more training, more rewards, and more punishments. If performance still did not improve, more forceful edicts and still more technical *what to do* education was repeated ad infinitum. An unproductive self-reinforcing pattern of over-control or over-helping from and dependency from the front line can take hold.

In contrast, an action research project using Liberating Structures such as Improv Prototyping made it possible for the managers and experts to include the people closest to the challenge in shaping *how to* prevent the spread of infections together (Singhal, Buscell, & Lindberg, 2014; Singhal, McCandless, Buscell, & Lindberg, 2009). For the first time, unusual suspects like cleaners, aides, doctors, patients, and family members were asked: How they knew the risk of transmission was present; what they did to prevent transmission (e.g., how they washed their before and after every exposure to patients or unprotected surfaces); what made it difficult to take precautions all the time, and, what more they could do to improve or invent new solutions.

Answers, ideas, and small solutions poured out. Many people were astonished that they were being asked. Rarely if ever had they been invited to shape next steps. Being told what to do was far more familiar. New connections within and across functions started to generate results. With more freedom, people were taking more responsibility for solving the problem and working in partnership across barriers.

Paradoxically, the scientific evidence or evidenced-based-medicine about *what to do* was present but the *how to* generate local practice-based-evidence was sorely neglected. The traditions of waiting for direction from the top, power differences among staff, and diverse functional roles created barriers to generating solutions. However, social skills to required work productively with these challenges were acquired rapidly through use of Liberating Structures.

At the start, it was messy and ambiguous. Managers and experts did not know how to ask for help. The cleaners, aides, and patients were not sure their contributions would be valued. Differences in power, social background, and perspectives were enormous. As local action was undertaken, social proof that the approach was working spread quickly. If one unit was able to see their ideas enacted and they reduced transmissions, their more liberated partnership quickly spread to other units. A big problem was being solved and a new way of solving problems together with was discovered. Does “the good life” get any better than that!?

### **In Conclusion**

Through our collective work over the past decade or so, more than thirty Liberating Structures are documented. They are precisely described from their particular range of purposes to the details of how to use them. Liberating Structures can be used singly in routine situations. For more sizeable projects or ambitious goals, they can be combined into an infinite range of combinations or strings.

Our experience also suggests that the use of Liberating Structures doesn't demand any exceptional qualities or leadership talents. The structures are so simple that anybody at any level can do it. They don't require extensive training. Liberating Structures don't ask of leaders to develop new and complex competencies. They ask of people to do something that they can do,

namely to modify in small ways the practices they use routinely when working together. See Table 2 for the ten principles of Liberating Structures.

-- Insert Table 2 about here --

In the process of developing Liberating Structures and exposing students and employees in many different countries and environments, we have come to the conclusion that: You can't get to a "good life" if you don't know *how to* do it. So here is our proposition: Use routinely a collection of simple methods called Liberating Structures and your chances for a "good life" for you and those around you, at school and at work, will be dramatically increased.

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#### Additional Resources for Liberating Structures

*Learning Six Liberating Structures by Henri Lipmanowicz and Arvind Singhal, UTEP*. Available at <http://vimeo.com/60843778>







*Liberating Classroom: Lipmanowicz in Convo with Singhal*. Available at <https://vimeo.com/50347352> (8' 20")

*Liberating Structures: Inviting and Unleashing All: Lipmanowicz in Convo with Singhal*. Available at <https://vimeo.com/50352840> (8'30")

*Liberating Structures: Simple, Subtle Powerful Clinton School Speaker Series, Arvind Singhal*. Available at <http://clintonschoolspeakers.com/content/liberating-structures-simple-subtle-powerful>

*UnScripted: Liberating Structures by Arvind Singhal*. Available at <https://vimeo.com/51546509> (10'20")

Table 1. Commonly Used Liberating Structures in Classrooms

<b>Brief Description of Liberating Structures</b>	<b>Icon</b>	<b>Example of Classroom Use</b>
<b>1-2-4-All</b> Engage everyone simultaneously in generating questions, ideas, and suggestions.		Invite participants to generate the most vexing questions that they are struggling with, including prioritizing the ones the class should collectively tackle.
<b>Conversation Café</b> Engage everyone in making sense of profound challenges.		Invite participants to discuss how to tackle their most challenging questions by expanding and deepening the solution space.
<b>User Experience Fishbowl</b> Share know how gained from experience with a larger community.		Invite groups to share their unique field experiences, insights, and struggles with the whole class.
<b>Troika Consulting</b> Get practical and imaginative help from two colleagues immediately.		Obtain help on an individual project, assignment, or task from peers, and in-turn serve as a consultant to address their challenges.
<b>25-10 Crowd Sourcing</b> Rapidly generate and sift a group's most powerful and actionable ideas.		Invite participants to rapidly generate the most concrete scenarios to go from knowledge-to-action.
<b>What, So What, Now What? W<sup>3</sup></b> Debrief together, look back on progress to date and decide actionable next steps.		Analyze a case study in class by step-wise, beginning with a discussion of (1) <i>what</i> happened (i.e. establish the facts), (2) <i>so what</i> (i.e. discuss inferences and conclusions), and (3) <i>now what</i> (i.e. chart implications for applying the findings). Or, simply, use to track class progress with respect to a particular topic.

*Note:* More description of each of these liberating structures, including how and when to use, can be found in (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013) and at [www.liberatingstructures.com](http://www.liberatingstructures.com).

Table 2. Ten Principles of Liberating Structures

<b>Principle</b> <b>When Liberating Structures are part of everyday interactions, it is possible to:</b>	<b>Liberating Structures make it possible to:</b> <b>START or AMPLIFY these practices that address opportunities and challenges with much more input and support:</b>	<b>Liberating Structures make it possible to:</b> <b>STOP or REDUCE these “autopilot” practices that are encouraged by conventional microstructures:</b>
<b>1. Include and Unleash Everyone</b>	Invite everyone touched by a challenge to share possible solutions or invent new approaches together. Actively reach across silos and levels, beyond the usual suspects.	Separate deciders from doers. Appoint a few to design an “elegant solution” and then tell all others to implement it after the fact. Force buy-in. Confront resistance with hours of PowerPoint presentations.
<b>2. Practice Deep Respect for People and Local Solutions</b>	Engage the people <i>doing the work</i> and familiar with the local context. Trust and unleash their collective expertise and inventiveness to solve complex challenges. Let go of the compulsion to control.	Import <i>best practices</i> , drive <i>buy-in</i> , or assume people need more training. Value experts and computer systems over local people and know-how.
<b>3. Never Start Without a Clear Purpose</b>	Dig deep for what is important and meaningful to you and to others. Use <i>Nine Whys</i> routinely. Take time to include everyone in crafting an unambiguous statement of the deepest need for your work.	Maintain ambiguity by using jargon. Substitute a safe short-term goal or cautious means-to-an-end statement for a deep need or a bold reason to exist. Impose your purpose on others.
<b>4. Build Trust As You Go</b>	Cultivate a trusting group climate where speaking the truth is valued and shared ownership is the goal. Sift ideas and make decisions using input from everyone. Practice “nothing about me without me.” Be a leader and a follower.	Over-help or overcontrol the work of others. Respond to ideas from others with cynicism, ridicule, criticism, or punishment. Praise and then just pretend to follow the ideas of others.
<b>5. Learn by Failing Forward</b>	Debrief every step. Make it safe to speak up. Discover positive variation. Include and unleash everyone as you innovate, including clients, customers, and suppliers. Take risks safely.	Focus on doing and deciding. Avoid difficult conversations and gloss over failures. Punish risk-takers when unknowable surprises pop up.
<b>6. Practice Self-Discovery Within a Group</b>	Engage groups to the maximum degree in discovering solutions on their own. Increase diversity to spur creativity, broaden potential solutions, and enrich peer-to-peer learning. Encourage experiments on	Impose solutions from the top. Let experts “educate” and tell people what to do. Assume that people resist change no matter what. Substitute laminated signs for conversation. Exclude frontline

	multiple tracks.	people from innovating and problem solving.
<b>7. Amplify Freedom AND Responsibility</b>	Specify minimum constraints and let go of overcontrol. Use the power of invitation. Value fast experiments over playing it safe. Track progress rigorously and feed back results to all. Expose and celebrate mistakes as sources of progress.	Allow people to work without structure, such as a clear purpose or minimum specifications. Let rules and procedures stifle initiative. Ignore the value of people's understanding how their work affects one another. Keep frontline staff in the dark about performance data.
<b>8. Emphasize Possibilities: Believe Before You See</b>	Expose what is working well. Focus on what can be accomplished now with the imagination and materials at hand. Take the next steps that lead to creativity and renewal.	Focus on what's wrong. Wait for all the barriers to come down or for ideal conditions to emerge. Work on changing <i>the whole system</i> all at once.
<b>9. Invite Creative Destruction to Enable Innovation</b>	Convene conversations about what is keeping people from working on the essence of their work. Remove the barriers even when it feels like heresy. Make it easy for people to deal with their fears.	Avoid or delay stopping the behaviors, practices, and policies that are revealed as barriers. Assume obstacles don't matter or can't be removed.
<b>10. Engage in Seriously Playful Curiosity</b>	Stir things up—with levity, paradoxical questions, and Improv—to spark a deep exploration of current practices and latent innovations. Make working together both demanding and inviting.	Keep it simple by deciding in advance what the solutions should be. Control all conversations. Ask only closed <i>yes</i> or <i>no</i> questions. Make working together feel like drudgery.