

Hosting in a hurry v 1.0
Putting the Art of Hosting into practice

A quick reference for convening conversations that matter.

All conversations are opportunities for us to connect a little deeper with one another. In the Art of Hosting practice we often talk of the four fold way and the seven little helpers: the simplest tools for convening any conversation.

By far most of the conversations we host in our lives at work or in the community are conversations with small groups. These simple processes are offered as quick reference from bringing depth and life to those conversations. They scale up, but require more thought. The reference material in this guide can help you do that.

The Four Fold Way of Hosting

We have learned that quality conversations leading to close team work and wise action arise when there are four conditions present.

1. Be Present
2. Participate and practice conversations
3. Host
4. Co-create

We call these four conditions the Four Fold Way of Hosting, because you can practice these any time. They form the basis for all good hosting.

Be Present

host yourself first - be willing to sit in the chaos - keep the space open - sit in the fire of the present

Being present means showing up, undistracted, prepared, clear about the need and what your personal contribution can be. It allows you to check in with yourself and develop the personal practice of curiosity about the outcomes of any gathering. Presence means making space to devote a dedicated time to working with others. If you are distracted, called out or otherwise located in many different places, you cannot be present in one. For meetings to have deep results, every person in the room should be fully present.

Collectively, it is good practice to become present together as a meeting begins. This might be as simple as taking a moment of silence to rest into the present. If an Elder is present, a prayer does this very nicely. Invite a collective slowing down so that all participants in a meeting can be present together.

Participate and practice conversation

be willing to listen fully, respectfully, without judgement and thinking you already know all the answer – practice conversation mindfully

Questions to help you become present

What am I curious about?

Where am I feeling anxiety coming into this meeting and how can I let that go?

What clarity do I need?

What clarity do I have?

Conversation is an art, it is not just talk. It demands that we listen carefully to one another and that we offer what we can in the service of the whole. Curiosity and judgement cannot live together in the same space. If we are judging what we are hearing, we cannot be curious about the outcome, and if we have called a meeting because we are uncertain of the way forward, being open is a key skill and capacity. Only by practising skilful conversation can we find our best practice together.

If we practice conversation mindfully we might slow down meetings so that wisdom and clarity can work quickly. When we talk mindlessly, we don't allow space for the clarity to arise. The art of conversation is the art of slowing down to speed up.

Host conversations

be courageous, inviting and willing to initiate conversations that matter - find and host powerful questions with the stakeholders – and then make sure you harvest the answers, the patterns, insights learnings and wise actions

Hosting conversations is both more and less than facilitating. It means taking responsibility for creating and holding the container in which a group of people can do their best work together. You can create this container using the seven helpers as starting points, and although you can also do this in the moment, the more preparation you have the better.

The bare minimum to do is to discern the need, prepare a question and know what you will do with the harvest. If there is no need to meet, don't meet. If there is a need get clear on the need and prepare a process that will meet that need by asking a powerful question. And always know how you will harvest and what will be done with that harvest, to ensure that results are sustainable and the effort was worth it.

Hosting conversations takes courage and it takes a bit of certainty and faith in your people. We sometimes give short shrift to conversational spaces because of the fear we experience in stepping up to host. It is, however, a gift to host a group and it is a gift to be hosted well. Work in meetings becomes that much better.

Co-create

be willing to co create and co-host with others, blending your knowing, experience and practices with theirs, working partnership.

The fourth practice is about showing up in a conversation without being a spectator, and contributing to the collective effort to sustain results. The best conversations arise when we listen for what is in the middle, what is arising out of the centre of our collaboration. It is not about the balancing of individual agendas, it is about finding out what is new. And when that is discovered work unfolds beautifully when everyone is clear about what they can contribute to the work. This is how results become sustainable over time – they fall into the network of relationships that arise from a good conversation, from friends working together.

Practicing conversation

Listen and help others to listen
Use silence
Contribute to the harvest
Put good questions in the centre
Connect ideas

Hosting basics

Determine the need and the purpose
Create a powerful question
Host an appropriate process
Encourage contributions
Harvest

Co-creation

Speak truth
Speak for what is in the middle
Offer what you can
Ask for what you need
Commit to what you can
Let go

So contribute what you know to the mix so that patterns may become clear and the collaborative field can produce unexpected and surprising results.

The Seven Helpers

Over the years, we have identified seven little tools that are the source of good conversational design. At the bare minimum, if you use these tools, conversations will grow deeper and work will occur at a more meaningful level. These seven helpers bring form to fear and uncertainty and help us stay in the chaos of not knowing the answers. They help us to move through uncomfortable places together, like conflict, uncertainty, fear and the groan zone and to arrive at wise action.

1. Be present
2. Have a good question
3. Use a talking piece
4. Harvest
5. Make a wise decision
6. Act
7. Stay together

1. Be Present

Inviting presence is a core practice of hosting, but it is also a key practice for laying the ground work for a good meeting. There are many ways of bringing a group to presence, including:

- Start with a prayer
- Start with a moment of silence
- Check in with a personal question related to the theme of the meeting
- Pass a talking piece and provide space for each voice to be heard

Start well. Start slowly. Check everyone in.

2. Have a good question

A good question is aligned with the need and purpose of the meeting and invites us to go to another level. Good questions are put into the centre of a circle and the group speaks through them. Having a powerful question at the centre keeps the focus on the work and helps a groups stay away from unhelpful behaviours like personal attacks, politics and closed minds.

A good question has the following characteristics:

- Is simple and clear
- Is thought provoking
- Generates energy
- Focuses inquiry
- Challenges assumptions
- Opens new possibilities
- Evokes more questions

It is wise to design these questions beforehand and make them essential pieces of the invitation for others to join you. As you dive into these questions, harvest the new questions that are arising. They represent the path you need to take.

Refer to *“The Art of Powerful Questions”* for more.

3. Use a talking piece

In it's simplest form a talking piece is simply an object that passes from hand to hand. When one is holding the piece, one is invited to speak and everyone is invited to listen. Using a talking piece has the powerful effect of ensuring that every voice is heard and it sharpens both speech and listening. It slows down a conversation so that when things are moving too fast, or people begin speaking over one another and the listening stops, a talking piece restores calm and smoothness. Conducting the opening round of a conversation with a talking piece sets the tone for the meeting and helps people to remember the power of this simple tool.

Of course a talking piece is really a minimal form of structure. Every meeting should have some form of structure that helps to work with the chaos and order that is needed to co-discover new ideas. There are many forms and processes to choose from but it is important to align them with the nature of living systems if innovation and wisdom is to arise from chaos and uncertainty.

At more sophisticated levels, when you need to do more work, you can use more formal processes that work with these kinds of context. Each of these processes has a sweet spot, it's own best use, that you can think about as you plan meetings. Blend as necessary.

Process	Requirements	Best uses
Appreciative Inquiry	At least 20 minutes per person for interviews, with follow up time to process together. Can be done anywhere.	Discovering what we have going for us and figuring out how to use those assets in other places.
Circle	A talking piece and a space free of tables that can hold the group in a circle.	For reflecting on a question together, when no one person knows the answer. The basis for all good conversations.
Open Space Technology	A room that can hold the whole group in a circle, a blank wall, at at least an hour per session. You have to let go of outcomes for this to realize its full power.	For organizing work and getting people to take responsibility for what they love. Fastest way to get people working on what matters.
World Cafe	Tables or work spaces, enough to hold three to four at each, with paper and markers in the middle. You need 15 to 20 minutes per round of conversation and at least two rounds to get the full power. People need to change tables each round so ideas can travel.	For figuring out what the whole knows. World Cafe surfaces the knowledge that is in the whole, even knowledge that any given individual doesn't know is shared.

Refer to *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry, Calling the Circle, Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, The World Cafe: Convening conversations that matter* for details on running these processes.

4. Harvest

Never meet unless you plan to harvest your learnings. The basic rule of thumb here is to remember that you are not planning a meeting, you are instead planning a harvest. Know what is needed and plan the process accordingly. Harvests don't always have to be visible; sometimes you plan to meet just to create learning. But support that personal learning with good questions and practice personal harvesting.

To harvest well, be aware of three things:

- **Create an artefact.** Harvesting is about making knowledge visible. Make a mind map, draw pictures, take notes, but whatever you do create a record of your conversation.
- **Have a feedback loop.** Artefacts are useless if they sit on the shelf. Know how you will use your harvest before you begin your meeting. Is it going into the system? Will it create questions for a future meeting? Is it to be shared with people as news and learning? Figure it out and make plans to share the harvest.
- **Be aware of both intentional and emergent harvest.** Harvest answers to the specific questions you are asking, but also make sure you are paying attention to the cool stuff that is emerging in good conversations. There is real value in what's coming up that none could anticipate. Harvest it.
- **The more a harvest is co-created, the more it is co-owned.** Don't just appoint a secretary, note taker or a scribe. Invite people to co-create the harvest. Place paper in the middle of the table so that everyone can reach it. Hand out post it notes so people can capture ideas and add them to the whole. Use your creative spirit to find ways to have the group host their own harvest.

*For more information and inspiration, consult *The Art of Harvesting* booklet available from Monica Nissen or Chris Corrigan.*

5. Make a wise decision

If your meeting needs to come to a decision, make it a wise one. Wise decisions emerge from conversation, not voting. The simplest way to arrive at a wise decision is to use the three thumbs consensus process. It works like this:

First, clarify a proposal. A proposal is a suggestion for how something might be done. Have it worded and written and placed in the centre of the circle. Poll the group asking each person to offer their thumb in three positions. **UP** means "I'm good with it." **SIDWAYS** means "I need more clarity before I give the thumbs up" **DOWN** means "this proposal violates my integrity...I mean seriously."

As each person indicates their level of support for the proposal, note the down and sideways thumbs. Go to the down thumbs first and ask: "what would it take for you to be able to support this proposal." Collectively help the participant word another proposal, or a change to the current one. If the process is truly a consensus building one, people are allowed to vote thumbs down only if they are willing to participate in making a proposal that works. Hijacking a group gets rewarded with a vote. Majority rules.

Once you have dealt with the down thumbs, do the same with the sideways thumbs. Sideways doesn't mean "no" but rather "I need clarity." Answer the questions or clarify the concerns.

If you have had a good conversation leading to the proposal, you should not be surprised by any down thumbs. If you are, reflect on that experience and think about what you could have done differently.

*For more, refer to *The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making*.*

6. Act.

Once you have decided what to do, act. There isn't much more to say about that except that wise action is action that doesn't not over-extend or under-extend the resources of a group. Action arises from the personal choice to responsibility for what you love. Commit to the work and do it.

7. Stay together

Relationships create sustainability. If you stay together as friends, mates or family, you become accountable to one another and you can face challenges better. When you feel your relationship to your closest mates slipping, call it out and host a conversation about it. Trust is a group's most precious resource. Use it well.

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Please share this document and contact me at chris@chriscorrigan if you need to. My website at www.chriscorrigan.com has links to or copies of most of the resources discussed here.