Liberating Structures FAQs

What are Liberating Structures [LS]?
Thirty-three (and growing) easy-to-learn, adaptable methods that make it quick and simple for groups of people of any size to radically change how they interact and work together, and thus how they address issues, solve problems and develop opportunities.

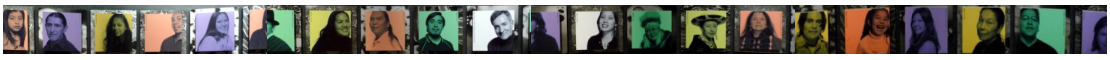
Why Liberating Structures?
Organizations operate mostly top-down and this is reflected in the way "working together" is usually organized. Participation in meetings is restricted and often standardized; agendas and discussions are controlled by a few; meeting formats and designs tend to be nearly always the same (sometimes for decades), dominated by PowerPoint presentations followed by some form of managed discussion. Decisions made by a few depend for their implementation on the "vast majority" who were not included in the decision-making process.

What traditional top-down assumptions do Liberating Structures challenge?
Two implicit assumptions, which we all know are not valid, underpin these top down traditions: the "vast majority" have nothing to contribute that could make a significant difference (bottom-up is useless); the "vast majority" will be willing and capable of rapidly and effectively implement decisions from which it was excluded (with no resistance to change). Therefore, huge opportunities exist for organizations if ways can be found to effectively and authentically engage their "vast majority" (including in many cases customers). Frequently, formal leaders are relieved, delighted and surprised by the opportunities that open up with LS use.

What happens when Liberating Structures are put into action?
Including and unleashing nearly everyone with LS approaches: improves decisions; boosts innovation; accelerates and improves the quality of implementation; and, enables rapid adjustments to change. LS answer the question: how can we engage the "vast majority" practically and cost-effectively? Clearly this calls for new ways of working together.

What keeps *Liberation* from turning into chaos?
Liberating Structures literally **liberate** groups and their energy, and this freedom combined with appropriate **structures,** allows them to tap into their collective intelligence and creativity. The "Structure" prescribes in detail how group interaction will be structured in the steps of a LS process. For instance, one structured step could be as simple as "spend fifteen minutes in groups of five developing a list of all the activities required for doing a XYZ". While the "Structures" impose constraints that focus group attention and purpose, their other main role is to enable **all** participants who are affected by an issue to engage in conversation. This creates real possibilities for developing bottom-up proposals and action. Enabling and constraining are complementary.

Lipmanowicz, Plexus Institute McCandless, Social Invention Group



How does more Structure *Liberate?*
The *Structure* side of LS is that they make it easy -- and safe -- for all participants to express their views freely and fully. There is no control on the content of group conversations. Instead results emerge bottom-up from the whole set of interactions "liberated" by LS. A minimum structure liberates the maximum freedom to explore solutions.

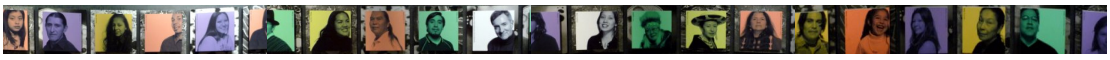
Are Liberating Structures difficult to learn?
NO! However *they need to be experienced* at least once to understand and believe what they can achieve. LS are as subtle and simple as they are powerful. They are also counterintuitive in a culture dominated by the logic of top-down organizing and control. Fortunately a practical understanding of most individual LS methods can be developed in less than one hour, enough to go out and try them without much risk. Workshop participants *act their way into new thinking* rather than thinking their way into new acting. In the end, of course, deeper learning has to come from practice.

What is the impact of using Liberating Structures?
LS stimulate and unleash innovation and productivity at **all** levels. Across diverse roles and disciplines, participants use LS to invent creative ways of working together with colleagues and customers.

How are LS different than other management approaches?
LS **are not** best practices imposed on a whole organization; they do not rely on expensive and lengthy efforts to train people in an attempt to change their behaviors. They are instead a set of simple methods from which individuals/groups can choose what suits their likes and dislikes then mix-and-match them flexibly to address their challenges. Mash-ups are encouraged.

What is the best way to learn to use LS?
A 2-3 day immersion workshop followed by brief one-on-one coaching sessions is the most effective approach. In very rapid cycles, a "see one, do one, teach one" learning method is employed.

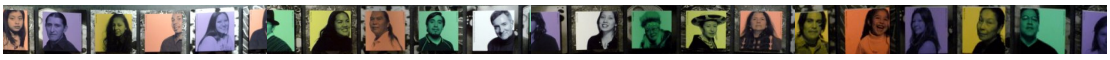
Who should be included in a LS workshop?
A diverse mix of leaders, managers and front line colleagues from the same organization or with shared interests. Up to 150 participants can learn the approaches together. LS are about working together and they are best learned together.



What are key elements of a workshop?
A three-day immersion workshop may feature the following themes and methods. Each session is co-designed with clients and customized to address key innovation challenges & opportunities.

DAY I	DAY II	DAY III
Impromptu Networking Focusing on People & Purpose **Agreement-and-Certainty Matching Matrix** Matching Simple, Complicated, & Complex Approaches to Specific Challenges **Making Space with TRIZ** Designing a Perfectly Adverse System to Make Space for Innovation **Café Conversation Dialogue** Making Sense of and Forming Consensual Hunches about Big Challenges **Appreciative Interviews** Creating Momentum by Building On and Designing With "What Works Now" **1-2-4 Progressive, Rapid Cycle Conversation** Conversing in Rapid-Cycles:: Self-Reflection, Pairs, and Small Group **Five Whys** Becoming Clear About Purpose **Ecocycle Planning** Engaging Groups in Growing and Sifting Their Portfolio of Activities	**Min Specs** Unleashing Innovation & Action by Specifying Only "Must-do's" & "Must-not-do's" **Wicked Questions** Framing a Paradoxical Challenge That Engages Everyone's Imagination **Design Party Debrief** Reflecting on Your Design-In-Progress and Making Adjustments-As-You-Go **Discovery & Action Dialogue (Positive Deviance)** Discovering Solutions To Big Challenges In Plain Sight **Chunking – User Research & Rapid Prototyping** Tapping Tacit and Latent Knowledge in Seriously-Playful Rapid Cycles **Panarchy** Spreading Your Innovation or Good Idea At Many Scales Simultaneously **Fishbowl Conversations: What I Need From You** Surfacing and Working Improvisationally Through Shared Challenges	***Wise Crowds* Consultation** Tapping the "Wisdom of Crowds" To Solve Problems Together **Graphic StoryBoarding** Illustrating and Detailing a Design Process for Key Meetings **Generative Relationships** Understanding Patterns that Create Surprising, New Sources of Value **Scenario Planning** Preparing and Practicing Strategy-Making for Surprising-Yet-Plausible Futures **Smart Networks** Weaving Social Connections and Informal Networks To Advance Practice **Open Space Technology** Liberating Action and Leadership In Large Groups **Integrated~Autonomy** Amplifying Attributes that Make You Always and Never the Same **15% Solutions** Noticing the Influence, Discretion and Power Individuals Have Right Now …….. **DAY IV & DAY V** **1-To-1 Coaching Sessions**

With so many methods, what are the common characteristics of LS?
Like all methods for working together LS are mixtures of control and freedom. In this case, the emphasis is on achieving maximum freedom for participation. Thus, the "structures" are the minimum possible to achieve maximum engagement. They are all very simple, easy to implement & learn. They are forgiving; perfection is not required to achieve benefits. Every LS invites all voices, promotes self-discovery, & generates shared ownership of decisions/actions.



Why so many methods, so fast?

- To provoke a "surprise of discovery" that LS are useful for a very wide range of challenges
- To ensure that every person is likely to find two or three methods they like and can start using immediately
- To help participants gain confidence through many experiences on diverse issues
- To show how new ideas and answers repeatedly emerge bottom-up
- To discover how LS methods are modular and can be mashed-up easily & very quickly
- To demonstrate by using them quickly can generate great results without tight fidelity

Why include top & front-line together?

Complex issues involve multiple functions, levels, & disciplines. Adopting new methods of working together requires the involvement of multiple layers, engaging all relevant stakeholders regardless of their formal position. Learning together provides the platform for discovering how working together using LS generate surprising outcomes. Learning together also builds the platform for launching LS quickly through the organization. Confidence builds when everyone starts on an equal footing and there is no waiting for permission.

Since Liberating Structures are not imposed, how do they spread?

The contagion starts with the initial LS workshop where participants invariably have a lot of fun experiencing the various methods. This has been the case in all countries regardless of the differences in culture. Long rounds of applause are a frequent occurrence at the end of the workshops. Since the workshop uses actual challenges from the participants as case material for the sessions, they can generate surprising results as they are being introduced for the first time. The "fun" continues at work where using LS is neither complicated nor a lengthy time-consuming. Newcomers learn from being included in a work experience and get attracted by the same elements of fun and surprising results. Because LS are effective for addressing entangled and chronic problems, they attract attention and broad participation.

How are users changing and localizing Liberating Structures?

LS methods can easily be mixed-and-matched creatively to fit local challenges. This increases dramatically the range of situations that can be addressed. Just as what can be accomplished with a pair of pliers, a knife and a hammer combined goes well beyond what each tool can do alone, so it is with LS where the number of permutations available with 33 methods is obviously huge. Like open source initiatives, LS attract diverse participation (often bottom-up and fringe-in), cross boundaries easily, quickly build on serendipity, and create new possibilities. When embraced, the approaches invite creative adaptation and *spontaneously* order themselves.

What challenges are being addressed with LS?
The challenges presented to us during the 1-on-1 consulting sessions by workshop participants has ranged from strategic to personal issues. Examples include: re-making mundane-yet-boring meetings; introducing a new product; making personnel decisions; training sales organizations; exploring new strategies in tough markets; shifting from a product to a customer orientation; inviting customers to co-develop new ways to succeed together; redesigning management meetings; dealing with the consequences of reorganizations or downsizing; resolving organizational conflicts; mergers of two distinct organizations. The more familiar people become with LS the more they discover opportunities to use them.

How are changes arising from using LS sustained?
Self-organizing attributes help make solutions that emerge from using Liberating Structures sustainable and self-spreading. People learn and implement best when they discover solutions themselves, among peers in their local context. Resistance to change evaporates because ownership is shared.

How do LS fit with other change management and lean initiatives?
Users report that LS are complementary to technical, expert-centered methods. LS can add momentum to efforts that have stalled or reached limits. LS methods cultivate ownership beyond typical programs that promote participation.

What problems do Liberating Structures solve?
For a large class of management challenges, too few people are included in planning and coordinating a response. Engaging more people at multiple levels, earlier and more strategically, can dramatically boost capacity for solutions that generate spectacular and unexpected results. Clients have actively engaged their customers using LS. In turn, customers often want to learn LS for use in their own work.

What should leaders who bring Liberating Structures to their organization be prepared for?
Using LS the first time around can be unnerving for leaders. LS require from them to willingly let go of control. Fortunately benefits become quickly visible (as early as during the workshop) thus providing reassuring evidence that this was a responsible choice. LS are especially attractive to leaders who are frustrated with traditional approaches, are curious to apply innovative methods and are comfortable working with ambiguity.

What are the origins of Liberating Structures?
Building on a few methods introduced in EdgeWare in 1998, LS draw from emerging insights from complexity science, organizational development, and user experience. Keith McCandless and Henri Lipmanowicz have partnered with clients to develop and advance LS starting in 2003.

Where have LS methods been tested?
Starting in 2003, LS was first developed and tested in Latin America. More recently, workshops have been held in Europe and the US. Organizational settings include: multi-national business, hospitals, government, schools and non-profit organizations.

Why do they work?
LS are more unit-based and local, with solutions worked out by front-line groups instead of imported "best practices." LS grow through informal social networks and decentralized communities-of-practice rather than the organizational chart via *buy in* initiatives. LS are practical, simple, and ready to be adapted in everyday settings without additional education, training or certification. LS are inspired by complexity science. Complexity science focuses attention on the pattern of relationships and small local changes that can make a big difference.

What is special about our approach with Liberating Structures?
Unique synergies arise from combining the following elements:

- A large collection of simple and practical self-organizing methods
- An immersive 3-day workshop design that makes it possible for a large group of co-workers to experience and internalize many methods very quickly
- Inclusion of all organizational levels (top to frontline) in the LS workshop
- The personal experience of jointly shaping *wise* responses to current-complex issues
- The one-on-one consulting sessions that immediately follow the workshop and help participants move right away from learning to implementation

Combined, these elements make it possible for an organization to start rapid cycles of experimentation that can launch a transformation that includes everyone.

Not hammer strokes, but the dance of water
sings the pebbles to perfection. R. Tagore

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