



These so-called Liberating Structures make it easy to transform how people interact and work together in order to achieve much better results than what is possible with presentations, reports, and other conventional methods. We call them Liberating Structures because they are designed to include and engage everybody. They “liberate,” so to speak, everybody’s contribution to the group’s success.

How well you interact and work with other people often determines not only your success at work but also in other areas of your life. You will find that each Liberating Structure has its own specific benefits. By learning to use some or all of them, you will create your own alphabet and build a different vocabulary for getting things done with others. Your new language will be endlessly adaptable and applicable as you create more combinations to fit every situation that you face in your life, whether challenge or opportunity, large or small, simple or complex.

You will also find that the power of Liberating Structures is not only surprising but also infectious. When you use Liberating Structures, people around you will enjoy the experience and see the unexpected benefits; this will likely help and encourage them to expand their own alphabets. They will become your practicing partners and be grateful that you helped them acquire skills that will serve them forever.

You will find as well that Liberating Structures scale up and down easily for use by a small or large team, a department or function, an organization, a class, a school, a community, or a social movement. That makes them useful for anything from a single meeting to a large project to a system-wide transformation initiative. You will also discover that they can help you bring more structure to one-on-one conversations and make them more productive. And, of course, they can also help you converse with yourself more effectively and transform how you think, plan, and make decisions.

When asked who are perfect candidates for using Liberating Structures, our modest response is simple: everybody. Liberating Structures are for CEOs, senior executives, middle managers, and frontline workers; professors and teachers, administrators, support staff, and students; hospital leaders, doctors, and nurses; military officers and soldiers; government employees and politicians; consultants and coaches; community leaders and philanthropists—and many more. By everybody we mean everybody!

If the notion that Liberating Structures can be universally useful sounds to you too good to be true, join the crowd; this is a common initial reaction and is understandable. You will not believe it until you discover what Liberating Structures can do for you by using them yourself and then using your imagination to extrapolate adaptations and new applications. In other words, this book contains many important ideas, but it is not a theoretical or conceptual book. Instead, it is a practical field guide written to make it easy for you to get started and make significant progress quickly so that you can find out what place to give Liberating Structures in your work and in your life.

Liberating Structures are methods for a purpose: to improve performance. If this were a book about tennis, golf, or skiing, you would read it knowing that its value would come only when you have practiced the methods and learned from them. This is the secret of how to learn and benefit from Liberating Structures: just do it, plunge in, explore, and practice as often as possible, taking advantage of the opportunities that abound daily. Be assured that no matter which Liberating Structure you try, in whatever situation, you will generate surprisingly better results than expected.

## Chapter 1

### SMALL CHANGES, BIG DIFFERENCES

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

---

*For months, a father had been unable to go beyond monosyllabic responses from his teenage daughter. Then, one day, he made a small change in the way he started their conversation, and she talked to him for over an hour.*

*For months, fifteen managers had been getting nowhere arguing about transforming their biweekly meeting, which they all agreed was frustrating and unproductive. Then, one day, they made a small change in the way they usually worked as a group. The payoff? Within thirty minutes, they figured out what their major problem was and decided how they would address it together.*

*For years, each new batch of students in a required course attended it with little enthusiasm, doing the bare minimum to get a decent grade. Then, one semester, after small changes in the professor's teaching methods, the students were animated and eager, feeling engaged and having fun learning concepts they found relevant to their personal lives.*

*For years, the briefings for replacement officers going to Afghanistan were more numbing and overwhelming than illuminating. Then one day, thanks to small changes in the briefing process, returning officers were able to convey to their replacements the nuances of how to hit the ground running. Their replacements listened avidly, asked and got answers for all their remaining questions, and felt more confident to start their challenging deployment.*

*For decades, infections had been increasing in a hospital unit despite regular campaigns to train the staff and introduce best practices. Then one year, the unit implemented a small change in its approach to infection reduction and was able to bring down transmissions to near zero in just twelve months' time.*

*As far back as anybody could remember, strategic plan reviews had always been stressful and unpleasant; you presented your plan to the management team and they did their best to find faults in it. Then one year, a small change turned the review into an energizing, productive, and pleasant event.*

All these vignettes encapsulate true stories with a common story line: small changes in people's routine practices produced big differences in the results they were getting.<sup>1</sup> All that each individual or group did was to replace what we call a "conventional microstructure" with something called a "Liberating Structure."

What the teenager's father did differently was to take his inspiration from a Liberating Structure called **Appreciative Interviews**. His small change was to ask his daughter, "What was the best moment of your day today?" This prompted her to tell a story, and then another, and another ...

The small change made by the managers stuck on how to transform their biweekly meeting was to use two rounds of a Liberating Structure called **1-2-4-All** to address their issues and settle differences of opinion without conflict.

What the professor did differently was to introduce seemingly minor variations in her classroom approach: she replaced her lectures with a few Liberating Structures such as **Impromptu Networking**, **Troika Consulting**, and **Conversation Café** and created an interactive environment that provided many spaces for self-discovery and peer-to-peer learning.

The Afghanistan briefing used to consist mostly of white-paper and PowerPoint presentations. The simple change the briefing officers made in the process was to use a Liberating Structure called **Users Experience Fishbowl** in which a small group of returning officers shared their on-the-ground stories with each other while their replacements listened and later asked questions.

The hospital unit reducing its infection rate simply stopped promoting top-down campaigns and gradually engaged everybody on the unit in small and diverse group conversations. How did they do that? They used Liberating Structures such as **Discovery & Action Dialogues** and **Improv Prototyping** to have participants discover for themselves how they could contribute to reducing infections. Without buy-in imposed from the top, people volunteered to take actions on their own.

In the case of the confrontational strategic plan reviews, the small change was to eliminate the presentation routine and substitute the Liberating Structure called **Ecocycle** to engage the whole management team in assessing strategic options and cocreating the plan together.

## **THE INVITATION**

Check all that apply when you think about a group or organization you work with:

- Deadly boring or frustrating meetings
- Someone else's best practices imposed
- Deciders separated from the doers

- Brain-numbing PowerPoint presentations
- Difficult conversations routinely avoided
- Fear and politics getting in the way
- Teamwork that feels like drudgery
- Group process that is chaotic
- More training but no changes
- Great ideas that never leave the drawing board
- People excluded because they would “complicate” decisions
- Structural changes that don’t deliver the Promised Land
- Being expected to know and anticipate everything
- Change driven by resorting to fear or “bribery”
- More and more bureaucracy and requests for data
- Accountability without adequate autonomy and support
- Things that everybody knows don’t work but are never changed

If you are like most of the people we have worked with around the world, you experience some of these situations and events day in, day out. It doesn’t matter whether we look at business, government, NGOs, education, health care, or community service—or neighborhood or civic groups, advisory committees, or similar organizations—these realities block most groups’ ability to work together to achieve remarkable results.

This book is an invitation to use the methods called Liberating Structures to organize and engage people in a new way. Too often, we rely on experts to design our world while overlooking the people directly in front of us. With the constellation of methods and principles explained here, it becomes practical for people at any skill or hierarchical level to quickly become expert contributors in taking next steps and innovating.

You can use this book to generate innovative results for yourself, with your family, with your team at work; these methods will work to improve your interactions with leaders in your organization and with neighbors in your community. Everyday use in a conversation or meeting can be as powerful as application to the big transformation initiative.

At the core of the book is the practical idea that simple shifts in our routine patterns of interaction make it possible for everyone to be included, engaged, and unleashed in solving problems, driving innovation, and achieving extraordinary outcomes. Small changes generate big results without imported best practices, more training, or expensive buy-in strategies. This alternative approach is both practical and feasible because, as you will see, Liberating Structures are quite simple and easy to learn; they can be used by everyone at every level, from the C-suite to the front line of any organization, from the neighborhood block club to the global issue-advocacy association. Rather than complicated frameworks or elaborate processes to guide work together, Liberating Structures employ simple rules that are extremely spare and very specific. Liberating Structures have been used by managers and salespeople, by doctors and

nurses, by professors and students, by military officers and administrators, in business, government, and the nonprofit sector—all together in more than thirty countries. No lengthy training courses or special expertise is required. No dependence on expert facilitators is necessary.

## **WHAT'S AHEAD**

We assembled this collection of Liberating Structures by tapping great ideas in the public domain, simplifying them, and adding a few of our own. Our purpose is to make all of the structures accessible for use by anyone from the bottom to the top of any organization. Whether you are a leader, facilitator, or part of any group of people who want to be more innovative, adaptive, and quick off the mark to achieve better results, this book shows you how to put the power of Liberating Structures to work immediately.

**Part One: The Hidden Structure of Engagement** will ground you with the conceptual framework and vocabulary of Liberating Structures. Chapter 2 introduces key concepts and contrasts Liberating Structures with the conventional ways of how people work together. In Chapter 3, we explain in more depth the features of Liberating Structures and show the benefits of using them to transform the way people collaborate, how they learn, and how they discover solutions together; also included in this chapter are two key performance indicators to assess what we are calling Engagement Expertise. The intent of Chapter 4, Liberating Leadership, is summed up in its subtitle: “How leaders can avoid perpetuating the problems they complain about.” Here we offer insights and alternatives to leaders at all levels.

**Part Two: Getting Started and Beyond** offers guidelines for experimenting with Liberating Structures and learning from your experience in a range of possible applications, from one-off, small-group interactions to system-wide change initiatives.

**Part Three: Stories from the Field** is a collection of real-life case examples provided by people who have used Liberating Structures around the world. Their stories unfold in all types of organizations, from health-care to academic to military to global business enterprises, from local judicial and legislative systems to national and international R&D efforts. They are snapshots of the depth and breadth of what Liberating Structures can make possible in a broad variety of situations.

In **Part Four: The Field Guide to Liberating Structures**, we give you a repertoire of thirty-three Liberating Structures. Each Liberating Structure is carefully designed to include only what is absolutely necessary to generate innovative results. The Field Guide provides the minimum specifications for each Liberating Structure (shortened to Min Specs) in a standard format so that they are easy to follow and easy to use. In describing how to use each Liberating Structure, we provide a step-by-step explanation of what to do and what to expect, including:

- What is made possible

- Five microstructural design elements
- Purposes for use
- Tips and traps
- Riffs and variations
- Examples

Throughout the Field Guide, we point you to a host of supporting materials on our website [www.liberatingstructures.com](http://www.liberatingstructures.com) to make it easy for you to start experimenting immediately.

In the **Afterword**, we share our thoughts about what it means for people individually and as a group to become regular users of Liberating Structures.

\* \* \*

We believe Liberating Structures are transformational because they are purposely designed to make it easy to accomplish what is missing in most organizations, namely to include and engage people effectively and to unleash their collective intelligence and creativity. They provide a wide variety of ways to:

- Accommodate groups of any size
- Let go of control safely
- Give everyone equal opportunity to contribute
- Facilitate progress through rapid sifting and sequencing
- Maximize active participation
- Routinely generate better-than-expected results

Most important, Liberating Structures are simple enough to fit within normal work routines and schedules. They can save enormous amounts time by making it possible to include all the right people from the start.

The thirty-three Liberating Structures included in this book can be combined in an infinite variety of designs that can be tailored to whatever needs to be accomplished. This makes them adaptable for shaping next steps in everything from personal relationships, to tomorrow's meeting, to big projects, to strategic work, to organizational transformations, to social movements.

*One Liberating Structure can transform a meeting, a classroom, or a conversation. Using many of them together, on a regular basis, can transform an organization, a community, or a life.*

## **PART ONE**

### **THE HIDDEN STRUCTURES OF ENGAGEMENT**

*The aspects of things that are most important to us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. Ludwig Wittgenstein*

---

Part One contains the necessary background for working with Liberating Structures. We introduce the concept of Liberating Structures, contrast them with the conventional ways people work together, and describe how using them can transform the way people collaborate and discover solutions together. The last chapter speaks to leaders at all levels about why the strategies they use to address perpetual problems in organizations usually do not improve the situation and often make it worse. We propose the use of Liberating Structures as a proven way to get things done while overcoming perennial leadership challenges.