



Liberating Structures

☛ What are Liberating Structures [LS]?

Thirty (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” that wasn’t included in the decision-making process.

☛ What 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 bottom-up 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.

Liberating Structures

☀ **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. Professors discover more effective approaches to interact with their students and promote learning. Leaders experience a transformation of their role.

☀ **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.

☀ **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.

☀ **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 in their practice
- To help participants gain confidence through many successive experiences on diverse yet familiar 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 that one can get great results without tight fidelity



Liberating Structures

☛ **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 120 participants can learn the approaches together. LS are about working together and they are best learned together.

☛ **Why include top & front-line together?**

Complex issues involve multiple functions, levels, & disciplines. Adopting new methods of working together requires the involvement of multiple functions and layers particularly since LS are all about 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 and learning 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 to LS for the first time. The “fun” continues at work where using LS is neither complicated nor a lengthy time-consuming process. 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 participation across roles, disciplines and functions.

☛ **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 30+ 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.

☛ **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.



Liberating Structures

☀ **What challenges are being addressed with LS?**

The range of challenges participants have chosen for the workshop “theme” or taken on with LS after experiencing the workshop has gone from complex/strategic to personal issues. Examples include: re-making mundane-yet-boring meetings; solving a safety problem; 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 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?**

The one aspect of using LS that is unnerving for leaders the first time around is that it requires 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?**

The idea was first introduced by William Torbert whose interest in an integral approach to leadership and action inquiry led him to explore the notion as a form of organization structure that gave guidance to people, but in such a way that they developed skills to guide themselves. He developed a theory of power that generates productivity, justice and inquiry; and a theory of 'liberating structure' through which organizations can generate continual quality improvement. Later, the idea of liberating structures was applied to a wide range of designs for interaction at meetings, off-sites, community gatherings, and other events where it is important to invite everyone to participate fully. These processes are based on simple rule sets that make it easy for people to be generative together. LS draw from emerging insights from complexity science, organizational development, and user experience.



Liberating Structures

☀ **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.