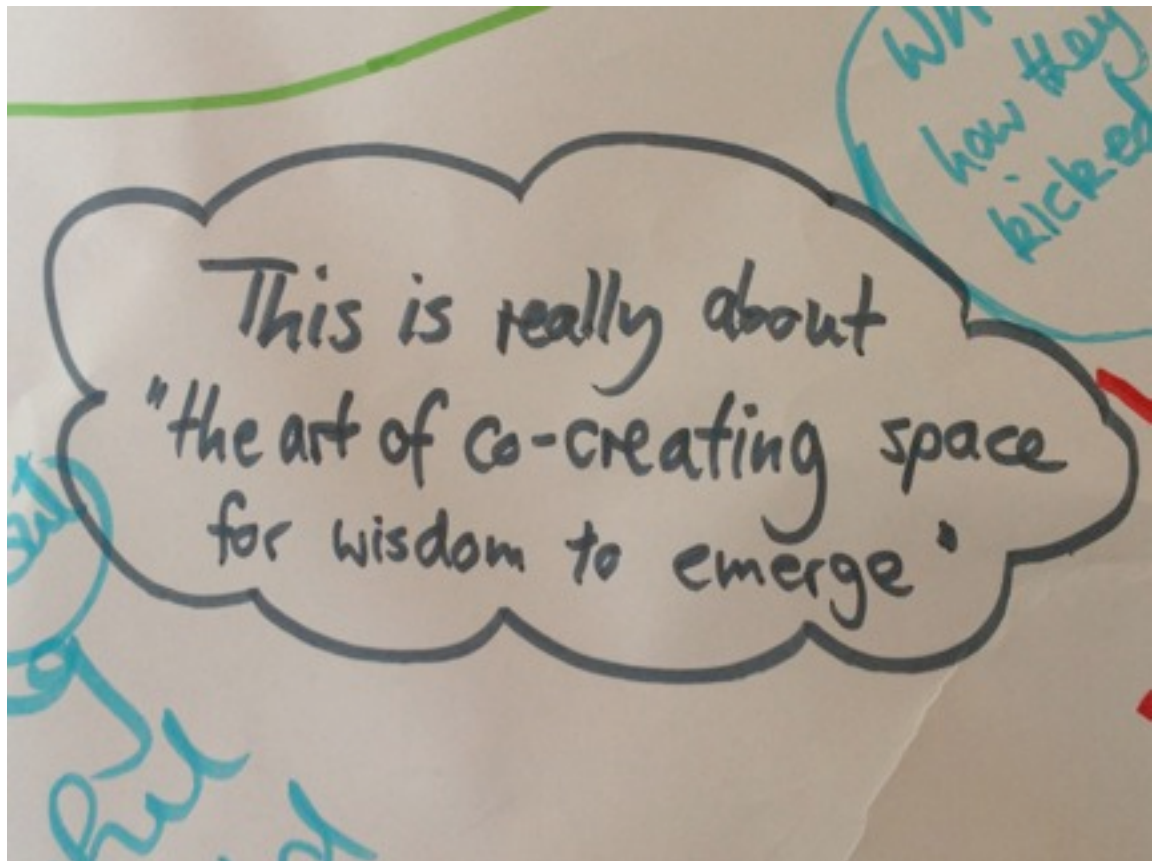# Designing meetings for meaningful conversation

Notes from the Skills for Transformation Workshop April 2013

CONTEXT

One of the most helpful skills we have learned and practiced over the years is how to design meaningful conversations in meetings, workshop, seminars and conferences, and how to do this collaboratively in a team. Our approach to design connects to our worldview of working
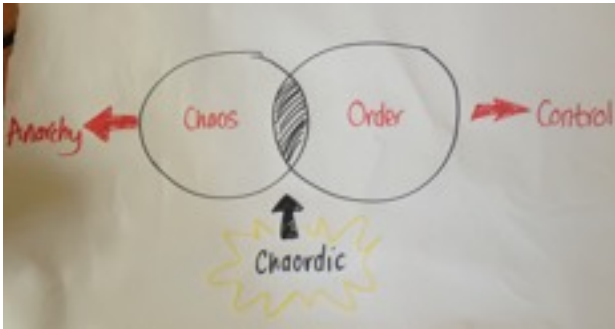
from a living systems perspective. This takes an organic, emergent approach, using models such as the chaordic path as an inspiration. There isn't one way of doing this, and everyone brings in their own ideas and experiences. These notes pull together a few things that can be useful.

Need and Purpose

The question of why a meeting is happening in the first place is often overlooked. What is the need and purpose for bringing people together? What are the core questions that we would like to ask and have a conversation about? What do we need to get out of the conversation? What might participants need to get out of the conversation? What would happen if we didn't have this conversation? This is the starting point for design.
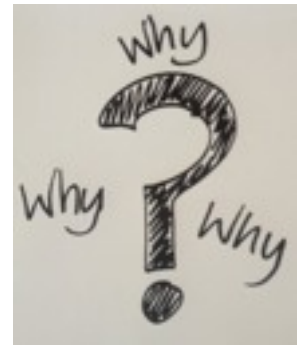
### If that's the purpose, what needs to happen?

Once we have a reasonably clear need and purpose (always leaving space to make changes if something new becomes clear) we sit down to talk about what needs to actually happen. Usually this is a small team, between 3 - 10 people depending upon the size of the conversation we are designing. We place flip chart paper on the table with big pens and, using a talking piece, begin to unearth the context for the meeting, what needs to happen and how might people participate. We don't go into tools or methods at this stage - this is about asking more questions and recording the answers, allowing all ideas to be listened to, recorded and built upon.

Some questions might be: what's the context for this meeting? What's happened before? What's worked? What hasn't? Are there any issues, conflicts, uncertainties etc that we need

to be aware of? Have we got a sense of participants expectations? Do we need to know this? If so, how will we find out? What outcomes and outputs are needed? We usually end up with a big messy piece of paper with lots of ideas, and yet a pattern will be starting to emerge.

What's the pattern?

Usually at this stage, one of the patterns spotters in the group (they'll appear naturally!) will start to say, well I can see in the morning we need to do x and y, and then after lunch that would lead to a and b. We start to put some form to the meeting, creating chunks

of activity. Do people know each other? What sort of introductions are needed? How can we check in? What needs to happen then to open up the conversation? What might happen after lunch? How might we close? The easiest thing to do at this point is to write down the knowns on a piece of paper - when will the meeting start, when will we have lunch and when will it end, for example. Then begin to fill in the chunks in between.
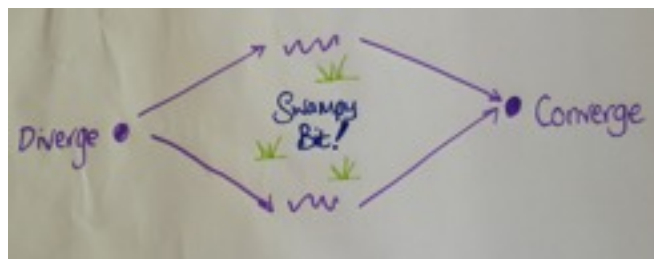
We often use divergent-convergent thinking for this stage of the design. Like a diamond shape, a conversation begins at a point, usually with a question. Then it opens up as people get into their conversations (divergence). Often in the middle we have a difficult patch where it's unclear where all this is heading (sometimes called a groan zone - this also happens in the design process! It's not a negative thing, just a part of the day where thinking is happening and it can get a bit swampy before clarity emerges). Then we try to bring the conversation towards some sort of conclusion (convergence).

A key principle is keep it simple - don't overload the meeting with loads of different bits, it gets confusing and is more likely to run over time. At this stage, our meeting plan starts to move from

to

What are the questions?

"If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than 5 minutes."
- Albert Einstein

Once we've got our chunks of activity, we start to explore what the really good questions would be to ask at each step that would get the conversation started. It's really important to get a good question, and it's quite a skill creating them. Allow time for creating questions and allow them to change as the design develops, revisiting the questions to check that they still work as a conversation starter that will give space to participants to explore the issues.

What are the tools and methods we could use?

Often, we have a tendency to run to the tools and methods first before we have really thought out what is needed and why. We often find ourselves doing this in the design process, usually someone will point it out and we'll drop the tools conversation until we're ready. There are so many different methods available for hosting meaningful conversations and yet what is important is not the method itself, more how it is used and the appropriateness for the situation. Some of our favourite conversation methods are Circle Practice, Open Space, World Cafe, Mind Mapping, Pro-Action Cafe, Solo Time, Check In /Check Out, Clustering, Improvisation, Appreciative Inquiry and so on. Many examples can be found on the Art of Hosting websites and more in-depth information can be found on method-specific websites for Open Space, World Cafe and others.

What's the detail?

Once we have the pattern of activity, the questions, the methods and the outline times, we start to create a detailed plan for the meeting. This is a simple table with the headings: room layout (eg circle or small groups), when (timings for each section), what (what will be happening eg welcome or check in), purpose (why are we doing this), who (who out of the team will host this section) and resources (what's needed - pens, paper, tea, coffee etc).

Room layout	When	What	Purpose	Who	Resources
Circle	09:00	Welcome and framing	To welcome & orientate participants	Draeyk	Pens and paper, flow for the day

Harvesting

It is really important to capture what has happened during the meeting, otherwise, what is the point in having the conversation? The purpose, outcomes and outputs of the conversation will help highlight what are the most important things that need to be recorded. We use a mixture of photography, sound recordings, video and paper.

Sometimes, such as in circle, one person will sit in the middle and record the conversation on flip chart paper. Or a graphic recorder might record the whole conference. We might create some pre=prepared sheets for use in Open Space that directs what people need to record, or we just place blank paper on the tables for doodling and scribbling as in World Cafe. All the elements are written up as a record of the day. This includes being really clear about next steps and who will do them so that everyone is clear about what will follow.

Emergence

One of the most important aspects of hosting meetings as conversations is that things change. Unlike an agenda, when we start at the top and keep going through the points until the time runs out or we finish the list, having conversations means that unexpected things emerge. We can't completely predict what participants will say or do or what ideas might come up, or that people want to spend longer on one question than we thought.

The plan that we draw up, despite all the detail, is just a guide. We can change things, move things, drop things and add things, depending upon what is needed at the time. It's really important not to be too rigid about sticking to the plan. Timing is one aspect that can be difficult to let go of - we always try to stick to lunch times (because the food is prepared) and finishing times. Other than that, we let things flow.

Before the meeting starts

We'll write the meeting plan up on the wall. We never share the detailed plan because this can change - a simple map of the main elements of the day, breaks, lunch and start / finish

times is sufficient to allow people to navigate the day. And you can use this map or 'flow' to record elements of the day. We also check in as a team and go through the flow so that we each become present to the meeting and what needs to happen.

When the meeting finishes

The hosting team have a check out - how did it go? What worked? What didn't go so well? How are we feeling? What needs to happen next and who will do the actions? As soon as possible after the conversation, we share a written record of the day so that it is fresh in people's minds, actions can be taken and people feel that what they said has been valued and captured in written form.