

Commentary

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As practitioners, social change facilitators, and participative leadership professionals, we are inspired by the qualities inherent in the Transition Movement:

- The belief that communities must become more resilient in the face of global threats
- The efforts to shift paradigms rather than prescribe cookie-cutter solutions
- The willingness to engage in local experiments with global relevance

Our world needs innovative approaches created and supported by people everywhere. As we see from Jessica Stites's stories of Transition initiatives from around the world, what's essential now is a social architecture to support passionate citizen activists in their efforts.

To support the development of that kind of cohesion and participatory framework, we served as members of two teams that offered three-day Art of Hosting trainings for 160 Transition leaders and people from other like-minded organizations. The first two took place near Petaluma, CA, in June 2013 and March 2014, and the third near Portland, ME, in April 2014. Our experience in these trainings as well as our other work have led us to several reflections important to the Transition Movement and other local and trans-local undertakings.

The Art of Hosting

Whether in response to peak oil, climate change, environmental racism, or other crises, this is an age that requires participation. Most of us observe that while resilience leaders are driven by passion, many have also become exhausted. While some communities have social resources to draw upon, there is a need for processes to help groups be inspired together, see together what can't be seen alone, and create together what can't be created alone. The Art of Hosting provides frameworks to help these things happen.

The Art of Hosting (AoH) is a way of harnessing the collective wisdom and self-organizing capacity of groups of any size. Based on the assumption that people give their energy and lend their resources to what matters most to them, it blends a suite of powerful conversational processes to invite people to step in and take responsibility for the challenges facing them. As such, AoH is a kind of operating system for networks of impassioned, experimenting people. By connecting individuals working on things that matter in constructive ways, it helps them to be smart, thoughtful, and heart-full together.

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Through the Art of Hosting, people:

1. Learn and sense together
2. Build and strengthen lasting relationships
3. Roll their sleeves up to work with the experiments, offerings, and practices needed now

Essential Frameworks

Two Loops of Change

One essential framework we use—which we learned through association with our colleagues Meg Wheatley and Deborah Frieze at The Berkana Institute—is called “Two Loops of Change.” This model proves helpful to citizen activists in two ways. First, it helps them locate their current work and strategy in the context of what others in the movement are doing. It invites a systemic view, to make possible more collaboration among people with different roles and in different phases of networked change. Second, “Two Loops” invites people to see their work from a living systems perspective, to witness the decline of old systems and the birth and emergence of new ones, and to notice what leadership acts help in working with the natural dynamics of emerging systems.

Two Loops of Change

As one system culminates and starts to collapse, isolated alternatives slowly begin to arise and give way to the new. Large-scale change emerges when local actions get connected globally while preserving their deeply local culture, flavor, and form.

According to Saira Austin, a participant in one of the Transition trainings, “The biggest spark of learning was the life cycles of systems—physically placing myself in the two loops map, and then viewing and listening to others around me, all of us simultaneously interrelated but in very different places along the path of emerging and dying.”

Dynamics of Chaos, Order, and Control

A second key framework in the Art of Hosting is exploring the dynamics of chaos, order, and control. Most Transition leaders are familiar with chaotic environments. What is less familiar is how to orient ourselves with the dynamic energy or inherent order found within chaos. When a messy, complex situation disrupts our sense of order—when funding doesn’t come through, when policy thwarts an intended innovation, or when people aren’t listening to our well-crafted plans—many of us habitually attempt to regain control.

An alternative is to shift toward a skillful dance with chaos—for example, by inviting even more diverse voices and perspectives into the conversation. When

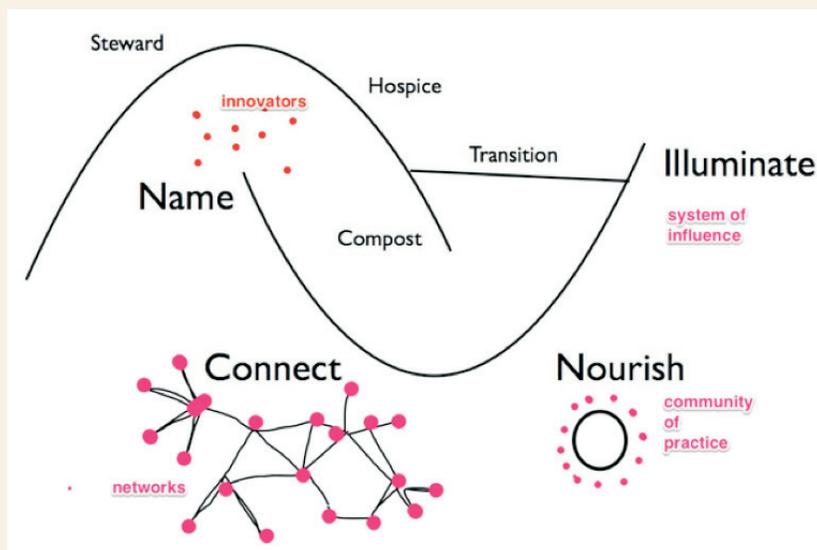


Image courtesy/ Amanda Fenton

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well hosted, this can lead to a new, emergent sense of order that is more robust and resilient. Learning to trust these dynamics, to welcome emergence, takes practice and is a core competency in Transition leadership.

Jesse Watson, a participant from Midcoast Permaculture Design, comments, “When an organization gets stuck in a rut, the thing that might help is to introduce chaos into the situation. This chaos may take the shape of a participatory meeting with no set agenda beforehand.”

Development of Core Teams

A third key framework in these trainings is the development of core teams. Movements don’t begin as movements; they begin with small groups of individuals that begin to name the work and connect with others. If well tended, core teams may grow into networks and begin to connect with allied networks. And then they may grow into communities of practice—in the case of Transition and allies, cultivating the emergence of new approaches to energy, food, economy, community, and resilience.

Transition US Communications Manager Marissa Mommaerts reflects, “Strong core teams, built on trust, are vital to the success of our work. Strong, dynamic core teams can alleviate burnout, build a more robust and diverse vision, and are a much more resilient model than having a single leader.”

Core teams have a hidden role; they are not just for hands-on action projects like gray water systems and education campaigns. They are also a practice ground for developing essential personal and interpersonal capacities.

In AoH, we speak of a four-fold practice:

- Engaging in self care to be more fully present for the work
- Practicing generative conversation by cultivating curiosity rather than judgment
- Hosting conversations among others, at varying scales
- Co-creating a community of practice and learning

Social change is thus rooted in fundamental practices of democracy—good conversation and learning together inside core teams, among core teams, in allied and diverse networks, and in broader public conversations around our shared future in our communities.

Added Capacity

Participant Angelo Silva noted that the Art of Hosting trainings reflected the permaculture principle of “stacking functions,” in that people could simultaneously have deep conversations about issues, learn a new meeting method, practice their own capacities of hosting, and deepen their connections with one another for ongoing work.

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Through experiential learning, participants left with several portable principles. In her [blog](#), participant Beth Tener eloquently summarizes some of them:

- **Circle.** We began the event sitting in a circle and returned to this circle multiple times. The emphasis was that the learning is in the center, and we all have something to contribute to that learning.
- **Story.** “The shortest distance between two people is a story.” This quote from Meg Wheatley kept resonating with me through the weekend as I saw how the opportunity for people to share stories created a growing sense of trust and camaraderie among the group.
- **Hosting.** Participants were invited to help “host” various parts of the gathering—an opportunity for people to share their skills and creativity, embodying the idea that we all have something to offer, we can all contribute to the gathering, and we can show up in various roles in a group at various times.

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- **Space.** When meetings are tight on time and strictly wedded to a fixed agenda, there is little space for the serendipity that enables new things to emerge. We used a variety of engagement processes, including Open Space. By the afternoon of the second day, it felt like all of our interweaving had created a quality of space that was humming with good will, appreciation, inspiration, ideas and deeper understanding, and a sense of possibility.
- **Wisdom.** People had profound insights, powerful stories, and so much wisdom. In most gatherings, this is latent, yet with this format, so much more of this could be accessed, by creating the space to have real conversations and listen to each other.
- **Pay exquisite attention to relations.** It is not our blaming and judging of one another that will pull us through uncertainty. When situations are complex, many stories are true. To be able to be in a multiplicity of truths, a plurality inherent in democracy, we must continue to develop our relationships together.

It's Time to Be Inspired Together

"I am inspired to reach out to non-like-minded individuals, build connections, and support a resilient, earth-friendly future with 'unlikely candidates.'"

—Lesley Heyl, participant

Thriving Movements Through Simple Practices

We are learning that, as our friend Meg Wheatley shares, three practices are key to the emergence of movements like Transition:

- **Stay awake.** Fortunately, by definition, most people involved in movements like Transition are people who are awake. They are not asleep or numb to the frightening trends and frailties of our current world. They are willing to face facts and fears together, and to stay present and curious to what is unfolding.
- **Dwell in complexity.** It's not always easy to lean into uncertainty or dwell in complexity. The job for most of us is to resist our tendencies to oversimplify—to impose solutions that satisfy our need to reduce anxiety but don't create lasting solutions.

Like Transition, The Art of Hosting is a commitment to working individually and together at scale on behalf of a world in significant change. It is a participative process to catalyze shared perspective and action. It is large- and small-group methodologies that bring people into deeper relationship and commitment together. It is a set of models and worldviews to reclaim democratic process and action. Emergence, self-organization, and living systems inspire the work. Passionate local and trans-local responses—like that of the Transition movement—can only help us respond to the key issues of our times. ■

More can be found at www.transitionus.org and www.artofhosting.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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