

First steps in hosting conversations that matter

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Marc Rettig

I'm Marc Rettig, and recently my colleague Hanna du Plessis and I were remembering what it felt like when we were first learning about this amazing community of practice that is the world of hosting dialogue, hosting and facilitating conversations that matter. People all over the world are hosting gatherings and conversations. Some with decades of experience. Some working in the same community for many years.

When we first began, it felt a little intimidating. The possibility was exciting, but could we really learn to do it? Thinking that we might not be the only ones to feel that way and thinking maybe stories about that could be helpful, we recorded a conversation with a few stories about those early days and first attempts. Here is the result.

The conversation begins

Hanna du Plessis

I think both of us have had deep experience in religion, where the method of change was persuasion and kind of direct action. And last week I was struck when Chris Corrigan talked about if you want to change people, you're in the colonizing business. But both of us that impulse for a better world didn't go away. And so when we were meeting, we had this desire for change in a different way. And that brought us to hosting spaces where some transformation is possible.

Marc

Yes. Through the relationship, the conversation, either that is the whole point--relationship and conversation that needed to happen but it wasn't happening-- or it's happening in a way that something is generated that none of the people involved... That's emergence, right, is you left the room with something that nobody brought into the room. So we wanted to have a conversation about how we learned and how we started. what was it like to begin? So let's look back a little bit.

An early effort based on Theory U: scary and profound

Hanna

There's a quote that says, "Start where you are, use what you've got, do what you can." And I feel that that was what we did. Starting off. When I met you, you were reading Theory U. And also putting some of that into practice with strategic design efforts.

Marc

Yeah. Theory U, that book by Otto Scharmer, it really is a kind of a briar patch of a book. You know, it's like a lot of ideas all mixed in there and not really about how-to. But I had been facilitating these design workshops. And people would collaborate and they'd have a good time and they'd say, Oh, that was wonderful. But as someone who is trying to move into more purposeful work, it was

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frustrating because it just looked like a shinier same old thing. And it didn't really get down into what I couldn't name, at the time, which was the relationship between these creators and the

people they were creating for, and the distance and the us-them, and what Corrigan would call colonizing a way of creating.

So Theory U said, you don't just jump into creating. First of all, who's in the room? Not just the same old folks. That matters. And then there's this kind of deepening arc from oh like seeing each other and noticing and suspending your old beliefs and judgments. And then having some experience together that opens you, confronts you with your presuppositions. And then reflecting on that together, finding possibility together, framing that. There's some steps. And they're not THE steps, but they were useful at the time. They were a place to start. Yeah.

Hanna And so one of the first clients that came to us together, asked us for some training. It was a five day training workshop. It was like, please train us, and by the way, we have some organizational issues.

And so using what we know, which is Theory U, using what we've got, which is this client request, we took them on a five- day journey where we incorporated as much of the Theory U principles as we could. And the outcome was profound. Those are the clients words ten years later. In terms that it created a shift in the organizational culture. It created an opening for them to be honest, say things like "I don't feel trusted." Which created the need to do some work in the organization. Which is different than the training they were asking for, which was ethnographic research.

Marc Yeah. Yeah. I think that was a turning point, you know, because it was a little bit scary to do, to invite them into something that didn't look like what they were used to or what they thought they asked for.

But that thing of having experience together, so this was people from the quality organization. So there were engineers and designers and quality specialists and managers, and we went into people's homes together. They had this experience of real contact with the world outside. And never mind all the details, when we got to about day three, and this moment when it got quiet. And the man said, "I don't feel trusted." We've since learned that those are the kind of moments where, you know something that's happening in everybody in the room.

Hanna 6:00 Yeah. When the thing is named as present. When the elephant reveals itself and now we can work with what's really going on.

Each step of courage was rewarded, leading to the next courageous step

Marc So we moved on from that. The courage of the scaredy pants was rewarded.

Hanna And if I think about our journey since then, it's a little bit like swinging on ropes. You have one thing that you can use and then you get the next thing. And it's a little bit by your seat of your pants. I remember watching videos, for instance, looking at Adam Kahane from Reos Partners facilitating a model building activity, and really paying attention to how he's doing that. And a couple of days later we're with corporate people asking them to be quiet and asking them to build models.

Marc Models of...

Hanna ...of their purpose.

Marc Models of their purpose. Yeah. With like sticks and feathers and stuff.

Hanna Yeah. And every time you do that, you learn something. In that instance, I really took care to make nice modeling material, including beautiful sticks my mom picked up for me on the coast of Namibia, which was then broken and put into putty.

Marc "I need this to be smaller." Snap.

Hanna I'm like, "No!" I didn't say that. But anyway, sso all the things you learn in those moments of just practical things, like the type of material that works and doesn't work. And then also the inner things about the inner courage it takes. Your inner critic that will flare up and tell you that's a stupid idea and you want to quit halfway. All those experiences teach you the inner and the outer work so that you can have the next experience.

Marc Yeah. And each time—and it's still kind of true—maybe it's less every time now, there would be something we would think about doing and inviting others to do, a way of having a conversation. And we'd be like, "Oh, can we ask that like that? Can we ask engineers to be silent for ten minutes?" You know, like, it's scary to ask.

We'll do it. And something powerful would happen. And then that gave us courage to do the next scary thing, which was a little bigger. It was a kind of apprenticeship, self-apprenticeship going just as far as we dare go, which gave us appetite to read more and learn more and talk to people. I think that's kind of how you do it.

Continually encountering need for more methods, and finding them; learning along the way

Hanna Yeah. And this is ten years ago, so there's so many more resources available.

As you are in the room, you also bump into things that you don't have tools for. Which is just as valuable as the moments where you take the courage to do something. So I just branched off into many worlds to find tools.

9:00 For instance, a lot of the people I was learning for did not center oppression. So that sent me off on a quest to get anti-oppressive frameworks, and learn how to use that in the body. A lot of the activities were cerebral and not embodied. So I went into applied improv and theater of the oppressed. A lot of the work is head-based. So we did a lot of making. And drawing and storytelling. So, as you bump into things you can't handle, you go find things to help it be more workable.

Marc Yeah. And we've definitely gone through periods where we... you know you feel so... you're doing something new, so you plan very carefully. And you're like, okay, this will take twenty minutes. This will take fifteen. And oh we should do everything. And so we need to have these facilitation plans. We make really detailed facilitation guides. We still do. That's helpful. But we crammed so much in, you know, and we were learning that this stuff needs room. And then it would get serious. So like, Oh, where's the lightness? where's the time to play? And then we meet things like liberating structures. Where you know, this is a 15-minute joyful thing, and it builds relationship, but just with two other people. So the world is learning. We're benefiting from it. It is a craft.

A little can do a lot; spontaneous model-building story

But, another thing I found through this is that even a little does a lot. A friend of mine has a small publishing business and he had brought together like four or five advisors just for an afternoon to help him get a sense of direction. He was feeling a little stuck. And all this talk, talky talk talk. I mean, boy, are American business people good at talky talk. You can't get them to stop.

So at some point I just said, "All right, everybody. Empty your pockets."

And everybody, "well, What do you mean?"

"Get stuff out of your pockets onto the table." So here comes keys and wallets and credit cards and pocket rags. All this stuff goes on table. And that exactly the thing we had done.

"Picture this business. Picture who it affects. Picture the impact it has. Okay now. Take this stuff on the table and build a model of the soul of this business."

And it changed the conversation. So what you find is that some of these little interventions are tools that you start to feel at home with. And even saying that to a group of people—"Let's do this different thing"—at first is scary, but becomes not scary.

Breaking patterns, switching us on

And it's what's needed in the world, you know? Break these patterns.

Hanna
12:00
Breaking patterns, and also switch us on. Like we are talking heads. Our beings need to be resuscitated. We need to learn to be embodied again. To think with our fingers, to laugh with our bellies, to move with our feet. You know, we need to learn to... re-becoming human is, it's actually an organizations name and I feel like that's core of what is happening as we do the work.

Anyone can learn to do it

Marc
Yeah. Yeah. I find it very exciting, you know. With grad students, we teach a grad course and we start just by, we'll listen a little differently, among yourselves. Okay. Now go out in the world and listen differently. Now go listen to groups of people for conversations that feel important to them, but aren't happening. Now make an invitation. By the end of a few weeks, they're hosting their first dialogue where the outcome is relational or conversational. You know, most people can do it.

But there are challenges; fear of things you can't handle; it's okay to not get it right

Hanna
Yeah. We can all do it. I think there's just a lot of things that can get in the way of doing it. I can think of a long list of things. But one is the fear of causing harm. Of hurting people, of having something happening in the room that you can't handle.

And I have not been in a room where something happened that I can't handle. But I have had, people be really angry at me for the discomfort in which I placed them. Which for me is two learning outcomes. One is that I can scaffold the discomfort a little bit more. The other one is that if you are really doing the work, you are really going to have people be rattled also.

And how do I, as a facilitator who's opening these doors, how do I do that with craft? And also just stay strong. Because so much of what's going on is not being talked about. And when that comes into the room, it's got power. Which can really make people afraid and uncomfortable. So for me just a tenet of this work is you're not going to get it right, meaning everyone's going to be happy. Oh, and that's okay.

Standing in defense of who we can become together

Marc Yeah. That reminds me that really a key lesson for me, and I don't remember where in these years it really sunk in or who first said it, but the sentence is, "I'm not responsible for your happiness."

And when we think of facilitator, you think you're the one that carries the weight, you're carrying the burden of the success of the gathering. But as a host, I prefer the term host, I am standing in defense of a story that's much bigger than the people gathered in the room. You know? I'm standing in defense of who they can become together. And getting past patterns that hold them back. And getting past the, the things they think are okay but are actually harmful. Whatever it is, but we know that a group of humans can be something wonderful together.

15:00 So you walk in in defense of that becoming. And if somebody is upset or insist on their agenda, it's actually lovely in the moment to say to the room, "Hey, this is happening. Here we are adults together. This is happening. But what we want is this bigger thing. Let's work with this."

Hanna Yeah. This is part of what is. Like the yes-and of improv.

This is part of something bigger

Marc So for me, it's something I love and it's not everyone's job, but it is a kind of awareness and set of practices that's part of the shift we're all living into together. I keep saying something's going on. This is part of it, I think.

Hanna Yeah, definitely. Yeah. It's the reawakening of humans to get their actions aligned with their intentions and us learning to do that in rooms and groups and organizations and communities.

Marc Yeah. And not just being decision factories or to-do list factories.

Anything else you want to say?

Hanna It's been a joy being on this journey with you.

