



**Art of Hosting:** The Art of Hosting is a powerful approach for leading in complex and challenging situations. It suggests that those leaders who are able to listen to and draw upon different perspectives, and to strengthen connections between people and organizations through dialogue, will be able to bring out the best in those whom they are leading. James Allen, of Sustainability Labs in Brazil, has been involved with the Art of Hosting (AoH) network. He shares with us here his experience of this art of hosting as a powerful approach to leadership.

Brazil's 14<sup>th</sup> AoH get-together was a five-day long meeting, set in beautiful woodlands not far from Sao Paulo in early 2013. It is called an 'encounter', rather than a course, because learning takes place through active participation in a sequence of workshops that draw on different group dynamics, such as World Café and Collective Story Harvesting. Participants are encouraged to take the reins and lead different exercises, with the aim of drawing on and harvesting collective intelligence, i.e. the knowledge and wisdom of the whole group, rather than a chain of individual perspectives.

In this way, participants act as volunteer facilitators, responsible for leading each session, with the aim of 'hosting and harvesting meaningful conversations'. For a conversation to be meaningful, participants must seek to listen actively and speak with intent. As such, the starting point is the individual's relationship with themselves. Silence and meditation techniques form part of the AoH toolkit, since the ability to listen well, both to yourself and to others, is a *sine qua non* of good leadership.

The relationship between the individual and the others within the group is first established through the most ancient form of dialogue, the circle. In the center of the circle, rather than a fire, is the group's 'purpose', the issue or question that the collective is burning to address. Much time is spent on the wording and structure of that question so that the conversations and debates that follow are coherent and meaningful. Here the host plays an important role in helping to shape a powerful question, one that is both inspirational and practical.

What often follows in many of the participatory technologies shared in AoH are break-out groups of between four and six people. A group with that number of participants is large enough and sufficiently diverse to draw on a multitude of perspectives, without being so big that it becomes unwieldy. It is a model that reflects what is happening in many leading companies where self-organizing pods or cells are formed in order to deliver specific processes or results: Google ('projects always start with a small group of people that make traction' says Larry Page) and Kyocera's Amoeba management system are two such examples.

Disagreement within these groups is seen as healthy, indeed is actively encouraged. As management guru Peter Drucker is quoted as saying, the best decisions are based 'on the clash of conflicting views, the dialogue between different points of view, the choice between different judgments. The first rule in decision-making is that one does not make a decision unless there is disagreement.' In fact, conclusions and good decisions ('convergence') can and should only occur after 'divergence' or discordance, where doubts are addressed through pertinent questioning. A good host knows how to needle and question, and embraces difference as part of a collective decision making process.



As such, to lead in this context means to accept the chaos that arises when different people bring their opinions to the table. At its purest form, a collective decision making process can be almost anarchic, in which the group or groups organize themselves and people fit in and contribute in the way they best see fit. Physicist David Bohm's Theory of Dialogue proposes that a meaningful dialogue of enquiry should have no rules, no agenda, and the participants should not be chosen but should put themselves forward. Many of these ideas permeate the AoH encounters: the 'Law of Two Feet' for example says that if 'at any moment during our time together you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, use your two feet and go somewhere else'.

This approach to learning – free, open, self-run – can be wonderfully enriching, but also unnerving. Participants must accept a new way of learning that involves observing, experiencing, embracing difference, and acknowledging mistakes. In this way, the AoH encounter also represents an emotional journey where anxieties can rise to the surface. In our group, a number of participants – perhaps half a dozen, mainly those working at larger corporations – had come with their own expectations of what they would take away, and by the half-way stage of the week-long encounter, begun to question these precepts: 'where was the manual?', they asked; 'why hadn't the information been systematized?' At one stage, these anxieties threatened to boil over into outright revolt. But on this occasion, our hosts stood firm, recognizing and accepting these concerns, but not veering from their vision that it was up to each participant to contribute and to take from the encounter what they would.

It is here that the art of leadership really comes in to play, as the host perseveres through those periods of chaos by having participatory methodologies such as Open Space built into their DNA. In these moments an effective leader will seek to operate in the background as much as possible, an almost invisible actor whose presence does not influence the way the group chooses to operate; but she must be paying complete attention at all times, observing not just what is said, but what is done and how it is done – sensing the group's energy. It is up to her to know when she must play the role of the chalice bearer, embracing, soothing and calming, and when is the time to intervene as the blade-wielding warrior, nudging, cajoling and, above all, questioning in order that the group might move forward.

Successful leaders are therefore those that are able to harness and catalyze collective knowledge and different talents around a shared purpose, weaving solutions that recognize and value the voices and opinions of the individual and of the collective. Where, previously, we were schooled in Isaac Newton's mantra that it was possible to find singular answers to our problems through objective analysis, now we must accept a more inclusive and dynamic view of the world, which accepts that there is no one single, objective 'solution' or answer and that the observer herself influences the response as a direct result of her expectations or intentions.