TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE TRANSITIONS USING LARGE GROUP PROCESSES

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Large group events can be significant in the life cycle of an issue or in the development of an organization or a community of interest (Bunker and Alban, 1992). They are particularly powerful as antidotes to the busy-ness that is causing more of routine organizational life to become "mindless" (Langer, 1989). The pace of change and the omnipresent technologies of paging, voice mail, e-mail, and wireless make it harder than ever to find reflective time to focus on what is really important, to see the familiar through new lenses, and to play with new ideas.

The very forces that cause such events to be more necessary can also serve to encapsulate their impact. A "process high" as the event is finishing successfully gives way to the crush of business as usual. In a few weeks, people look back nostalgically at a "lost weekend" rather than link the thinking that took place to the ongoing organizational challenges.

This is particularly true for the leadership group that sponsored the event. The table shown here characterizes typical levels of engagement of those with active event roles and regular participants in an event cycle.

This makes the "technology" of the event—tools and processes—paramount. Processes that engage participants in real thinking about important issues before, during, and after the event can combat the inevitable forces that

	Pre-Event	*Event*		*Longer Term*
Steering group and staff in active event roles	Manic, dropping other stuff to get it done	Active, engaged	Dead zone, switch to other work to get relief and make up for undone work	Resume ongoing level of engagement, wonder why others are not pitching in more
Participants	Skeptical, curious, not very active	Active, engaged, becoming believers	Looking for ways to be more engaged, waiting to see if they are serious and will follow through	If disappointed in follow-up, then reduce availability

pull people's attention away. One risk is that the technology and tools necessary to make a large group event effective can dominate the substantive issues and the particular culture and context in which they arise. Procrustes, in ancient Greece, would trap travelers only to offer them hospitality in a bed that would require that they be stretched or cut to fit the bed. Large group events that focus too much on the technology of the event and not enough on the substantive issues risk creating procrustean beds: critical issues must be cut or stretched to serve the design of the event. The challenge is to keep the focus on the substantive and relational work, not on the techniques. The host of a large group event must provide good enough containment and space for the participants to use their differences and similarities creatively in discussions about the substantive issues that are the focus of the work.

Paradoxically, the focus of this chapter is on tools and processes, especially ones that involve helping with salient transitions that meaningfully engage the

issues underlying the event—from before the event, from individual thinking to group work, from groups to plenary, and, most critically, from the event to the wider community of interest. Our aim is to enrich the vocabulary for working in large groups. Thoughtful design can match techniques and processes to the culture of the communities and organizations they are working with and, in doing so, provide a powerful way to engage participants in the thinking and development of critical issues for that community or organization.

This chapter organizes tools and techniques into three stages or transitions surrounding a large group event, each with its own core task:

- Pre-Event: Engage key stakeholders in the substantive issues and the "work" of the event.
- The Event: Engage a microcosm of the community in the thinking, challenging, and doing of real work on key substantive issues.
- Effective Follow-Through: Mobilize the larger community to push forward on plans and ideas crafted at the event.

Beginning Large Group Work: Methods to Engage Stakeholders Before Events Begin

Elsewhere in this volume are cases that describe the essential preparatory work for effective large group events. This section focuses on a few design techniques to increase the engagement of multiple stakeholders in the planning of the event.

Creating a Steering Committee

The creation of a steering group (responsible for planning the event) that contains many of the key boundaries that will be in the large group is an opportunity for working as a microcosm group (Alderfer, 1977), where relationships are both interpersonal and intergroup. This helps the team deepen the work that might take place across important boundaries such as center and periphery, union and management, professional and support, stakeholders and company. The steering group should be "good enough" to create shared authority to convene and charge the work.

Designing the Pre-Work for Participants

There are a variety of ways of capturing people's attention and getting them thinking prior to the start of a large group event, but as so much of the power of large group experiences has to do with seeing through new frames and feeling new energy from connecting across differences, we think advance work should be light and encourage inquiry and divergent thinking.

We have found the simplest and often most powerful pre-work is to invite people to become more mindful (Langer, 1989) of critical harbingers of change in areas that are relevant to the focus of the large group event. You might ask questions such as, "What has startled or surprised or unsettled you lately about X?" Or you might invite people to notice emergent shifts or examples that illustrate some tension. The journalist Tom Friedman is particularly good at noticing the vignette that captures some emergent phenomenon such as globalization. If the pre-work is only thinking, people are less vulnerable to feeling shame from not having done the work. Those who have done it can stimulate the group's thinking, and others can be swept along into taking up their member role in the large group. A variant of this is to invite people to interview someone, especially if they can do it as part of their ongoing life rather than as an added task. This sets the stage for illustrating how much more is available for our learning in the cracks of our current lives rather than as part some extra new activity.

Using Existing Forums to Preview the Event's Themes

Using existing forums where the members of the participant community already show up is one way to begin the thinking work before the event itself. So many existing forums and meetings have become dead events, with participants attending to protect their interests or keep informed rather than to think together in fresh ways. By capturing time on existing agendas, both before and after large events, one can energize without adding to overload.

> At a large economic summit in a northeast city, the planning committee used standing advisory group meetings to brief the mayor's key advisers on the topics that would be taken up at the event. This gave them the opportunity to voice their concerns about the "politics" of the event: how controversial issues would be framed, key stakeholders that needed to be invited

for the results to have credibility, and issues that were missing and needed to be added to the mix. By the time the event happened, many constituents had already begun the discussions that would be necessary for real progress to be made on the key issues.

The Event

The work of the event is to engage participants in the thinking and doing of the work. Over the arc of an event, groups often cycle through four phases:

1. Joining: getting people to arrive, to care about the issue, to find their voice, to feel heard
2. Diverging: embracing diversity, brainstorming, thinking outside the box, generating options
3. Converging: searching for "yes-able" packages, finding common ground, coming to hard choices, managing the process of losing, deciding
4. Signing up: testing people's commitments to the choices made

The challenge a designer faces is to avoid the common "Greyhound effect" of these events, where participants can show up and leave the driving to someone else, and instead engage participants in a variety of ways. The following section lays out multiple tools and techniques for structuring participation in ways that pull participants actively into the work and the discussion. Next, we briefly review basic group configurations for each stage of the event, as well as some of the configurations' features.

Configurations for "Joining"

Individual work, such as reflecting silently, journaling, jotting down ideas, voting with red dots, and so on, can be enormously powerful in large group contexts. We know that being in a large group (Turquet, 1975) can lead to decreased risk taking, decreased ability to usefully discriminate, and fear of standing out or being original. In order to reframe this usual reluctance, individuals can identify with parts of what others have said or express ideas via alliances with others instead of honestly stating one's own views.

> In a multiday strategy session for a large Catholic health care system, after groups had posted images and key words of possible vision statements, the 125 participants were invited to walk around in silence to take in the alternatives and, as they felt drawn to a particular embodiment, to stand quietly next to that station. It recalled Maya Lin's comment about her intent in creating the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: "I create places in which to think, without trying to dictate what to think."

It was moving to feel the seriousness of each individual's decision. Obviously, they could see how others were clustering, but it was a significant contrast with processes used later in the same workshop, with red dots on critical issues, when the process felt much more overtly political, when there were humorous comments of "vote early and often" and about vote buying. This is a small example of tailoring tools to the cultures of the groups using them. This Catholic system often uses silence in meaningful ways as part of their discernment in reaching decisions that we were able to incorporate into this event.

Pairs. Pairs are particularly powerful in helping people come to know their own mind in conversation with a colleague in a shared domain. As E. M. Forster ([1910]2003) has said, "How do I know what I think, until I hear what I say?" Having people interview one another with assigned questions can be powerful ways of getting everyone simultaneously active, either in an explicit, sympathetic, probing, listening mode, or in answering.

Threes. The triad is powerful in that one member can be asked to take up the "observer-in-the-balcony role," as a pair consults with one another. Threes are ways of sharpening arguments by exploring similarities and differences. Given the frequency with which large group processes take up polarized issues, threes can be a vehicle for exploring "both-and" thinking (Collins and Poras, 1994; Johnson, 1992).

Configurations for Diverging

Harnessing the diversity of views assembled in a large group requires the use of containing structures and processes. The following are a set of techniques for diverging that are designed to maximize individual input while remaining inclusive of the breadth of discussion across multiple topics and views.

Cross-Issue Groups. Often when groups have been working in parallel on different issues, a quick intergroup can be a powerful way to give each group a chance to consult and be consulted on their progress. This can be done in pairs, such that each member has to represent the thinking so far and focus on an area for advice rather than rely on a leader. If the two groups are homogenous, such as physicians and nurses or headquarters and field, then each can be invited to give role messages to the others: what they want more of, less of, and the same. Asking them to also think of what the other might want from them creates some energy from the anxiety of how in touch are they with the other's thinking.

Small, Random Heterogeneous Groups ("Max-Mix"). These groups are often used at the beginning of events as a microcosm of the total membership, which can often serve as a home table that participants return to periodically throughout the work. In these configurations, people are often there as individuals and as members of the different identity groups that make up the membership.

Parallel Homogenous Groups. These groups are particularly useful for political caucusing. When working on challenging issues with many different stakeholder interests in play, participants from a particular identity or interest group (for example, nurses, physicians, administrators, trustees) may find themselves advancing new strategies in heterogeneous groups and find themselves getting anxious about the degree of support from their back-home group. Giving groups the chance to caucus can release considerable energy, as they have the space to check in with one another and recharge (both in terms of energy and substantive focus) one another.

> In a health care system large group event with trustees, hospital administrators, and medical school leaders, during the planned parallel working sessions in mixed groups on different issues such as managed care strategy, cost cutting, and the governance processes, we sensed increasing anxiety in each of the stakeholder groups about whether new ideas being created would be accepted by different constituent groups. We gave the three stakeholder groups the chance to caucus for thirty minutes. In addition to their checking in with one another, we invited each group to think about an area or two where they felt most misunderstood, or to surface two or three

stereotypes that they feel others have of them, or to identify what they would like from others. When they each returned to their substantive issue group, there was significantly greater progress. This is a way of capturing what always happens informally in the halls and channeling that energy in the working processes of the large group event.

Configurations for Converging

Having encouraged the breadth of thinking through diverging processes, the challenge is to focus in on a more manageable set of critical ideas, but do so in ways that are transparent and engaging. The following are several process strategies for pulling the thinking of divergent work back into the large group.

Facilitated, Interactive Panels. A powerful mode of pulling small group work into the full group can be through the use of a facilitated, interactive, and often provocative panel made up of stakeholders who represent difficult boundaries in an organization come together for a public discussion; this models for others that tough discussions about important issues are required to move the work forward.

In a five-hundred-person event with an urban child-welfare agency and its many community partners, the Commissioner had a panel discussion with an advocate who had brought multiple high-stakes lawsuits against him over the past years. The panel focused on what change would be necessary in the coming years to ensure the safety and well-being of children in the system. The relationship between the litigator and the agency had been quite contentious and shut off at times, which made the public discussion between the two unprecedented. Participants were invited to listen and then discuss the panel at their tables. At each table were difficult boundaries: foster parents and birth parents, front line workers and agency heads, private agencies and the public staff. The message was: If the lead litigator for over eighteen years and the Commissioner can playfully explore together the desired future for New York's children, we can overcome our differences.

This format with active facilitation avoids the series of miniparallel presentations as the moderator pulls others into having a conversation, high-

lighting the seams and connections. After eavesdropping on the panel, participants can be invited to talk among themselves for a few minutes to surface comments or questions. The moderator can pull a few of these and have the panel respond, again at the pattern level rather than one question at a time, which often leads to a sense of fragmentation rather than connection.

Large Group Discussions. At different moments in a large group event, the full community can be invited to converse. If the group is under a hundred and the acoustics are good, this can work. If these conversations are facilitated, it can be powerful to use quick straw polling to get a sense of the group on any given issue. Inviting members to pose various questions to get a quick read on the group's views enacts their self-management.

Linking Speakers with the Full Group. Speakers in large group settings contradict the ideology of distributed intelligence and can create an "audience-versus-engaged-participants" scenario. Yet brief, well-crafted presentations can vitalize a large group event if well linked to the work. A powerful approach to link a presentation to the next stage can be to pull from each participant some thinking that uses the resource of the presentation in a next step.

> In a recent large group process of a medical school's leadership team, a member of the community briefly framed the challenges in each of the major mission areas: research, education, and clinical care. Each participant, after the brief presentation, was charged by the Dean to jot down on separate Post-its responses to the following question: "What would be 2–3 actions that we could take in the coming months that would signal to ourselves and the larger community that we were making significant progress on the issues framed by the presenter?" These post-its were collected immediately and given to the colleague who was facilitating the next phase of the work, with three smaller groups working in parallel on developing a recommended strategy.
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> As the small groups began, they faced a wall of the post-its that mixed their own ideas with the ideas of colleagues who were now in different rooms, so they had to integrate the thinking across those in their small group, as well as those not present. Finally, post-its enabled rapid and easily revised categorization by the small group, making transparent

different members' theories of how ideas might cluster to create broad strategies.

Signing Up: Managing the Transition Back to Work

One of the dilemmas of large group processes is that they are often counter-structural to encourage thinking across levels and functions and both inside and outside the sponsoring organization or group. The thinking can remain too loosely attached to the authority necessary to carry the work forward after the event. Next, we briefly described tools that help link thinking to roles.

Charging Memoranda. Large group processes often use an in-box to convey instructions to groups (Dannemiller Tyson Associates, 2000). An important addition to this method is great clarity about who is the authorizing source—executive, steering group, standing committee, work-life committee—for this particular piece of work. Often it will be the steering group. But it can also be an existing group, external to the event, with a particular link to that issue beyond the event's time boundaries. For example, if the large group event is about strategy but has, as a follow-up, the search for a new leader in that domain, the memorandum could come from the search committee with a request to focus on key challenges and attributes to guide the search. In parallel groups, different groups can have different memoranda, from different sources of authority. For example, at the transition out of the event, they could come from different organizations that have temporarily aligned for the event but now have to each take up their part of the ongoing work.

An effective memorandum has the following elements:

- The authorizing group
- The charge, a task, a set of questions
- The relevant background and context, often some additional data
- A timetable
- Desired output
- Suggested process

A well-crafted charging memorandum can be a "substitute for leadership (and facilitation)," creating a self-managing work group with the task as the source of coherence. It obviates the need for a chaotic dependency on creat-

ing "instructions" from the front of the room. Clear links to authorized bodies that will carry the thinking forward dampens participant cynicism that the energy will be left behind.

Fishbowl Meeting. A powerful ending would be to have the executive team or steering group meet in a "fishbowl"—that is, they would sit in a small group in the middle or front of the room, viewable by all other participants, who then would observe while the inner group has a public conversation—to reflect on what they have heard and what they see as the next steps. This allows the participants to audit their responsiveness.

One-Minute Essay.[1] Rather than evaluate the meetings via the usual like-dislike scales that locate the responsibility disproportionately on the leaders versus the members, use the one-minute essay: Each participant is asked at the end to take a minute to write about one or two important ideas from the session and jot down any unaddressed issues. These can be summarized and sent back.

The benefits of the one-minute essay are:

1. It requires more active listening from participants.
2. It helps to identify for the presenters what people are understanding and where they have questions.
3. It helps to document for participants that they are indeed learning.

Fast Follow-Up Meeting. It is powerful to schedule the convening group for a half-day right after a big event—just when people feel most tired and drained but also filled with real intelligence and feeling about the successes and failures of the recent event. The task is to learn from experience, extract lessons, and chart a future course.

Effective Follow-Through on Large Group Events

Next are strategies to capitalize on the hoped-for momentum and to avoid the dead zone that so often occurs after such an event. The more all of the follow-up strategies have been discussed and committed to before the event happens, the greater the success and impact. The steering group needs to frame

the finish line for the initiative beyond the event connected to the ongoing real work of the organization, not a conference report. By reviewing the ideas presented next and developing the post-event strategy *before* the event, the steering committee can sustain the momentum.

• *Identify already-scheduled meetings both inside and outside the organization after the event and infiltrate relevant follow-up from the large group event on to those agendas.* By framing those who are attending from each organization as delegates, one creates an expectation that they will carry learnings back to their units. As preparation, they can be charged with bringing the views of their staff to the event. Listing the regular and special meetings that will take place in the days and weeks after the large group event, one can find venues to engage actively with the issues of concern. These should not just be perfunctory reports that can increase the sense of being excluded. Rather, those who attended should actively engage those who did not, selecting particular issues of interest to the group. Stressing the future opportunities for others to contribute to the issue can also help. Successful large group events often are a crucible for new relationships among stakeholders such as suppliers and a manufacturer or service providers and clients. Creating new opportunities for ongoing interaction by adding representatives to an existing group can help pull learnings from the conference into other venues and keep the working alliances alive.

• *Identify key stakeholders who were unable to attend and arrange to brief them immediately.* When someone makes an effort to brief an individual on an important event that he or she was unable to attend, people feel much more involved in the ongoing work and ready to join in the implementation of the key changes. It also deepens working relationships between the attendees and individuals being briefed.

• *Use e-mail to connect to staff who were unable to attend and thank them for keeping the work going during the event.* Recipients of such an e-mail feel that they were at least kept in mind during the event, if not actually present at the event. The e-mail can also actively pull them in on a relevant issue. Letting people know what resources might be available on a Web site if they were interested (for example, issue briefing materials, data sets) enacts that attendees were carrying their interests into the large group event.

• *Think about re-use of the event briefing materials and working notes to sweep in people who were unable to attend.* A huge amount of staff work goes into a large group event both before and during the session, resulting in position papers,

relevant articles, data sets, presentation notes, focus group themes, lecture notes, and to-do lists. These are frequently overly "bound" in a workbook and do not get broken apart and distributed in pieces that are relevant to the ongoing real work of the organization or convening community of interest. For each of the major elements of the event, think actively about constituencies that would find that material of value. Find ways to get it to them in an engaging, rather than a dumping, fashion.

• *When having meetings, think about sweeping in new participants to keep alive some of the collaborative conversations begun at a large group event.* One of the common values of such events is the presence of interesting outsiders: customers, suppliers, government officials. Rather than having these connections occur only in these large events, it can be powerful to pull in particular stakeholders at regular meetings in ways that are linked to the issue at hand. For example, at a major child-welfare conference many foster parents, birth parents, and youth were present. By engaging them on a more ongoing basis, the sponsoring organization has been able to enact one of its key themes of partnership.

• *Circulate ideas from the large group event or sections of the plans and invite comments from both attendees and others on specific issues. Acknowledge people who take the time to respond.* Cialdini (1993) has identified reciprocity as a key source of influence. When one person does something for another, it creates a relationship. In addition, when someone needs something from someone else, it deepens the connection. Many times 98 percent of the effort goes into producing reports from an event and only 2 percent into framing the transmittal. Imagine the difference in getting a report with a boilerplate transmittal versus a personal note, asking for "your feedback on a particular section." In the latter case, the recipient feels "on the hook" and needed.

• *When composing implementation or planning teams, explicitly draw from people who stood out at the event to harness their energy.* These events can be informal assessment centers where people have a stream of opportunities to interact in different ways than hierarchy or traditional roles allow. Those who are given formal roles of facilitating, note taking, or presenting should get feedback so that they can learn from their active involvement. The steering group should notice and follow up with people who stood out as particularly thoughtful or committed during various conversations. Obviously, the more interactive the designs are, the greater the chances for active practice and learning about participants' skills and interests.

• *Make a point of following up with new contacts from the event to keep conversations going and to create links that can be used in the future to advance issues that were*

addressed. When one follows up on new contacts, they become part of an individual's network. If one does not follow up, the contacts fade quickly. If the steering group meets immediately after the event, the many informal conversations are fresh. They can list people to contact about particular interests. As mentioned earlier, some of the outsiders can be pulled into advisory boards or even targeted as potential employees.

• *Use routine newsletters to put in some intriguing information about the event or the follow-up.* Any organization or community of practice has many regular vehicles for communication. By planning in advance of the event, one can often have a sequence of follow-up stories through the organization's routine vehicles.

Large events are costly in out-of-pocket dollars but even more so in terms of the scarce resources of time and attention (Davenport and Beck, 2001). The value of those investments can be greatly enhanced by paying attention to the follow-through issues before, during, and after the event. The payoff is significant take-up of the ideas and new relationships formed in these sessions.

Note

1. The original concept for the "one-minute paper" comes from R. J. Light (1990) and was adapted for the CFAR tool (CFAR, 1999).

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