

Looking Forward

tiny conversations with

World-class Thought Leaders & Practitioners



BROUGHT TO YOU BY

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April 2006



LISA KIMBALL

liberating structures

Lisa has been

designing on-line learning events since before most of us knew the on-line world existed. She was a founding member of the Metasystems Design Group which began working with organizations such as Hewlett Packard, Merck, and the U.S. Army in the early 80s, exploring the best ways for people to collaborate electronically. Lisa has designed virtual meetings that have included tens of thousands of participants for major corporations.

I first met Lisa at the World Bank in the mid-90s. I was invited to participate in an online conference on storytelling which Lisa's company, Group Jazz, designed. The meeting was a raving success, bringing together people around the world to discuss and share in a powerful, asynchronous environment.

Lisa: Liberating structures are frameworks that make it possible for people and organizations to create, do new things, be innovative. These are the processes or rules can be put in place that encourage people to be free, creative, and get results, rather than find themselves oppressed, constrained, confined, or powerless. For things to really change, structural elements need to change, too. Otherwise change is short-lived. Liberating structures are the forms that

make it easy for people to be generative together, making a significant impact with their creativity.

Seth: Give me an example from everyday life.

Lisa: Jazz is very useful here. It's a great example. Through its underlying structure, people are able to play together. In fact, people who have never seen each other, never before met, can sit down and jam. They can create something that is wonderful. The guidelines of jazz are a collection of principles that give enough structure so that people can create together.

These same principles make it possible for there to be infinite degrees of freedom. Different saxophone players playing the same piece can come up with totally unique expressions, each time they play it! Yet, you recognize it, as this piece rather than that piece. There's something about it which gives it a persistent identity, and there is plenty of room for individual creativity.

Lisa: The constitution is another example of a liberating structure. There is no way the founding fathers could have anticipated what is happening now, yet they created a structure for a way of interacting and deciding things that has worked well over a long period of time during which

circumstances have changed. Those basic rules of operating have held.

Seth: Please talk about non-liberating structures.

Lisa: Micro-management tends to create weird behavior. It makes me think of my high-school; they had dress codes. They didn't want guys wearing t-shirts, so they put out an announcement saying guys had to wear collars and cuffs. So, guys showed up at school wearing only collars and cuffs... and no shirt! As soon as you get into that kind of thing, you end up having to specify everything. When you try to specify everything, you will never think up all the variations. People will always figure out how to do what they want to do anyway. As soon as you get into this, you have lost the liberating quality of interaction.

The assumption that it is possible to anticipate every possible thing that can happen implies there are no surprises, no unforeseen changes in the system, no perturbations. What you get as a result is a severe lack of resiliency.

For example, many office buildings are designed with the offices and cubicles fully planned out. This defies the reality that we don't know ahead of time what kinds of workgroups we need to have. It would be much more helpful to have space you can manipulate: change the size of rooms, move furniture around, because we don't know yet whether we want to have three groups of two or two groups of ten working together. There is a whole branch of office design dedicated to creating spaces you can manipulate to suit the needs of the business as they change.

The point is, we have to ask, "What are the constraints that allow our system to be creative? What makes it possible for people to collaborate?" We can't start with no constraints, because that's chaos. We need to find out what are the minimum specs, the fundamental rules that we will share so that we can both support the key needs of the organization and at the same time make it easy for surprises to happen, for the unknown to emerge creatively. That's a liberating structure!

Lisa Kimball is the founder of **Group Jazz**, bringing together the best tools, technologies, media, and PEOPLE to produce great group experiences with powerful results.

Visit www.GroupJazz.com to learn more & visit some of their exciting works in progress!

Visit www.VirtualChautauqua.com to join in on stimulating conversations with authors

Books by Lisa Kimball

- ⇒ *Intranet Decisions: Creating Your Organization's Internal Network*
Miles River Press, 1997
- ⇒ *Leading Virtual Teams that Learn*
with Dori Digenti
available at GroupJazz.com, 2005
- ⇒ *Dynamic Facilitation: Emerging design principles from the new science of complexity*
with Nedra Weinstein & Trish Silber
The IAF Group Facilitation Handbook
Jossey Bass, 2004
- ⇒ *Facilitator Toolkit for Building and Sustaining Virtual Communities of Practice*
with Amy Ladd
Knowledge Networks: Innovation Through Communities of Practice
Paul Hildreth & Chris Kimble (eds), 2004.

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