

TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Member Involvement Improves Workforce



By Sarah B. Ely, MSW

At any given conference, a distinguished speaker addresses the entire assembly. Q&A follows, then time is up. Breakout sessions come next, and members move on. Out the banquet hall doors go individual perspectives about what the speaker just said and what mattered most, if anything, to the participants and their work. Sound familiar?

Conference traditions were subtly tweaked—with impactful results—on the opening morning of Michigan APPA's (MiAPPA) 2019 Summer Meeting.

Scheduled plenary time was increased to keep the entire assembly together throughout the keynote address and for 90 minutes afterwards. The conference planning committee had decided it was time for new methods to actively engage and involve everyone—simultaneously and immediately—about what they had just heard that morning from APPA Executive Vice President E. Lander Medlin. Here's why:

Strategically on tap was a powerful keynote about the relentless acceleration of change and challenges facing educational facilities management. Lander's message was loaded with the latest facts and figures about critical impacts to the educational facilities industry. Based on the belief that Lander could inspire MiAPPA attendees to think more about these challenges and help them shift their mindset to professionally grow through them, the host committee introduced its first "follow-on session" to establish conditions for just that. Here's how:

Two large, concurrent sessions were held for maintenance/operations and planning/construction in two separate conference halls. Equipped with a handful of new group-engagement techniques, two MiAPPA members and two business partners cofacilitated. With a 90-minute plan carefully designed to *engage everyone in making sense of the profound challenges ahead of them*, these facilitators were fueled with identical agendas, precise timing guidelines, and duplicate slides to steer their respective groups through three activities. Each activity was drawn from a single resource called "Liberating Structures," a set of over 30 contemporary group techniques for stimulating collaboration, problem-solving, creativity, and innovation.

We used the following three comprehensive questions to knit the 90 minutes together for optimal momentum and flow:

1. What? *What stood out in the keynote? What was most important to you?*
2. So What? *What might this mean to you, to your workforce at home, and to your physical campus?*
3. Now What? *Continuing along the theme of critical uncertainty, what is a challenge you face? And what can you*

begin to do now to be proactive about it—without needing any additional authority or resources. What can you do?

Here's a window into how each of these segments unfolded:

1. What?

Our first goal was to gain the immediate engagement of everyone in the room and capture fresh reactions to the keynote. What stood out? What was most important? During the first six minutes, we used a technique that resembles speed networking, with people standing up and moving around the room. In our case, it was Liberating Structure's "Impromptu Networking" framework, which guided our participants seamlessly through rapid, successive cycles of one-on-one reflection with random peers. This method is an adaptive and lively opener that establishes a single shared focus and also sets a collaborative tone right from the start.

2. So What?

Our next 25 minutes involved small groups (4-6) working in three stages. Their first collective task was to quickly name and record all the critical uncertainties faced in educational facilities management. Within minutes, over 100 items were logged on flip charts and placed between the two venues where maintenance/operations and planning/construction met.

The second task was to filter their small group list into categories and agree on which three categories rose to the top as the biggest challenges facing educational facilities management, regardless of current or future state. Closing the 25-minute segment was a time for each small group to introduce their "biggest three challenge" categories to the rest of the room.

The final 60 seconds provided space for everyone to step back and notice any overlap that surfaced between peers. Murmurs of amazement were overheard about the repetition of themes from group to group. Little did anyone know that at the same time down the hall, the same themes were also surfacing. In analysis performed later that day, maintenance/operations and planning/construction colleagues independently distilled five highly similar categories as the "biggest challenges" facing educational facilities maintenance:

- i. Breakneck advancements and changes in technology.
- ii. Workforce challenges (aging workforce, acquiring and retaining new talent, developing new knowledge and skills for optimal performance and for succession planning).
- iii. Collaboration (breaking barriers, working together seamlessly in service to customers and physical assets, timely communication for shared understanding and intended results).
- iv. Climate change impacts (without additional dollars).
- v. Budget shrink and budget efficiency.

You might wonder how small groups accomplished so much in as little as 25 minutes. This robust collaboration was made possible by using the Liberating Structures “Critical Uncertainties” format in a highly interactive, compressed time frame. Now that the table was set with small group results about the biggest challenges to be faced in our industry, we moved on to the final and most lengthy segment, personalizing it.

3. Now What?

We included some problem-solving questions for our last Liberating Structures activity of the morning, giving participants a focus question and asking them to take 15 quiet minutes to reflect on their own and make personal notes. Their focus: Name one critical and uncertain challenge you face. Their task: Write down your thoughts and ideas about what can you do about this challenge soon, without requiring any additional resources or authority.

For the remainder of the session, members continued this activity in trios. One by one, each person succinctly presented their challenge and possible action steps, closing with an invitation for feedback from their trio partners. The prescribed role of each partner was to respond in support, seek clarification, give feedback, and generate ideas for success on behalf of the member who spoke. This Liberating Structure is termed “Troika Consulting,” a powerful tool to help organize time and space for personal reflection and for seeking the wisdom of others.

When the time was up, it was clear that a sensory shift had taken place in the room. Few people hurried out the doors; many remained to talk at length in their trio. A handful approached facilitators to offer glowing comments about this experience, including “Thank you for the chance to discover and actually prove how much we have in common” and “Our small group formed an official partnership. We have scheduled a phone call to keep our conversation going and we plan to stay connected.”

It seems that we all want our meetings and forums to be more purposeful, productive, and innovative. Our time is precious. People want meetings that ultimately make a difference.

The challenge is *how*? How can we engage everyone *and* deliver innovative results when we bring people together? Furthermore, when we develop better skills as facilitators and integrate more contemporary group techniques into our

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repertoire, does it have a positive impact on our professional development? Is the result something that can benefit us as part of the workforce and benefit the institutions we work for?

It was certainly this line of thinking that prompted conference host leader Steven Gilsdorf (Western Michigan University) to tap emeritus MiAPPA colleague Sarah Ely for a follow-on session design that would enable peer facilitators to guide the group work. Steve’s strategy had two objectives: 1) organize a highly productive event, and 2) use tools that members could prepare and use back at home with their own people.

Steve’s goals are practical ones, since the resources of Liberating Structures are freely available online via Creative Commons licensing. With over 30 tools available for a variety of purposes, such as general engagement, problem-solving, collaboration, and innovation, Liberating Structures includes a matrix from which users can select activities that align with their objectives. Beginning facilitators will find that they can easily prepare and use one or two Liberating Structures formats, while most activities take further practice to progressively increase facilitation skills.

Higher education institutions in the United States, Europe, and Australia/New Zealand have begun to take note of Liberating Structures over the last decade. Prior to this, the early adopters were solely in corporations and some local government entities. Today, the system is found on some campuses in senior executive retreats, boardrooms, classrooms, and faculty/staff engagement events, for example. Perhaps one or more individuals on your campus are using Liberating Structures and are available to help you leverage their experience to get you started in your own educational facilities management work. What a powerful and audacious collaboration that would be!

Traditional group methods will always serve a purpose and are here to stay. Open discussion (hand-raising), guided discussion (such as roundtable), presentations, brainstorming, and report-outs are necessary and fruitful. One concern is that traditional methods usually fall short of including everyone and unleashing creative problem-solving and innovation, especially in efficient time frames.

Changes in the mode and manner of work along with an acceleration of these changes call for more creative methods. Leaders at every level can achieve greater facilitation prowess and establish promising conditions for collaboration, innovation, testing, and refinement when new tools for engagement are part of their professional development. After all, good facilitation fosters the development of others. People learn to make things better by working with others—through collaboration, problem-solving, and other forms of interactive involvement.

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES

Looking for other examples of the use of novel group work, we can turn to APPA's Midwest Region (MAPPA). For instance, the MAPPA 2016 Education Conference drew over 30 constituents for an all-day, preconference session on the general topic of training and development. The session opened with a traditional presentation about APPA's Continuous Learning Series and quickly went to work using Liberating Structures, as members explored strategy to move training and development forward in an age of higher workload pressures and fewer available dollars in educational facilities management. At the time, six MAPPA members from Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin took turns cofacilitating the session and honed skills they could use back home.

A second example is found at the University of Michigan, where the author used Liberating Structures designs to propel facilities department cross-functional project teams, customer focus groups, lessons-learned sessions, and program development initiatives, all with dependable and successful

results. Campus applications are found elsewhere in facilities departments at Grand Valley State University, Michigan State University, and Northern Michigan University. Unintentionally, some Michigan campus facilities departments are likely absent from this list. Additional resources on the topics of engagement, collaboration, and innovation are available via APPA Continuous Learning opportunities.

CONTINUOUS LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IS IMPERATIVE FOR A CHANGING INDUSTRY

For an added resource, I would encourage members to read APPA's Strategic Plan, *Preparing for Every Future*, in *Facilities Manager* (September/October 2018, Volume 34, Number 5, pp. 19-23) or on the APPA website (<https://www.appa.org/board-of-directors/strategic-plan>). Its content and leading remarks tie in closely to the opening morning keynote address and our described follow-on session during MiAPPA's 2019 Summer Conference. ☛

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APPRECIATION AND KUDOS TO MIAPPA SUMMER 2019 COFACILITATORS:

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Liberating Structures resources—including activities, a selection guide, and other resources—are freely available online at liberatingstructures.com and in the comprehensive practice book by **Keith McCandless** and **Henri Lipmanowicz**, *The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures: Simple Rules to Unleash a Culture of Innovation*.

A3 problem-solving is a tool developed first in the automobile manufacturing arena and applied widely in many sectors. It is a component of Lean practices.

