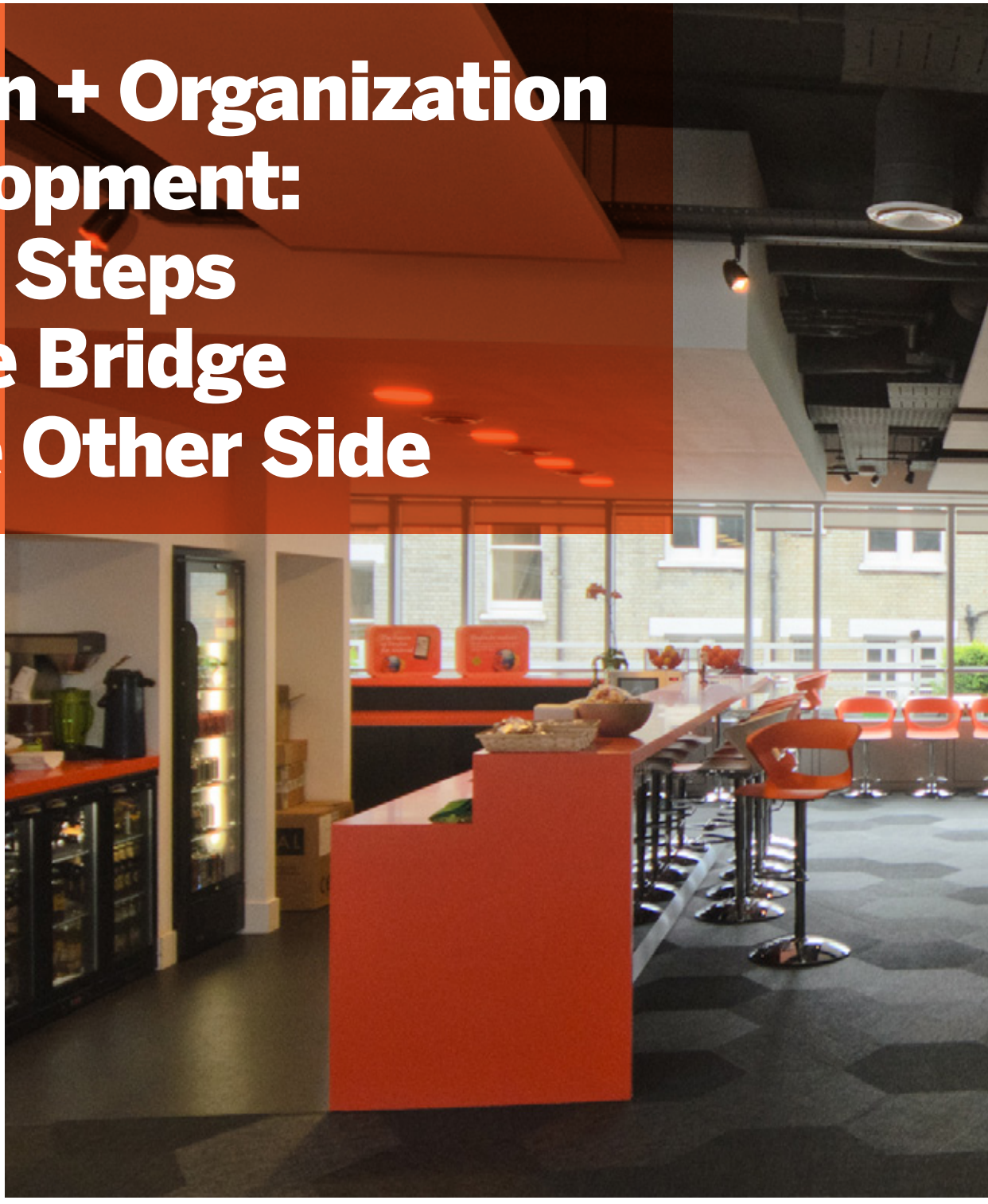
By Alex M. Dunne
and Tonya Peck

These organization development specialists offer some ways to make your staff meetings and meetings with clients more interesting, more inclusive, and more productive. You can start the process by taking out some chairs and leaving out the PowerPoint presentation.

Design + Organization Development: Three Steps on the Bridge to the Other Side



"Wow, can I work here?" Mozilla's London office offers lots of light, bright colors, bar stools, and cushy movable ottomans. More than just cool to look at; they create the epitome of inquiry-based collaborative work environments.

BACK IN THE LATE 1990s, WHILE working at a global design agency near London's Smithfield Market, we routinely heard visiting clients exclaim, "Wow, can I come work in your office?" On one level, they were expressing a visceral reaction to the more open nature of our office layout. But on another level, they were echoing a refrain we've heard again and again across corporate offices, factory floors, and meeting rooms the world over: The more people are exposed to the inquiry-based, collaborative nature of design work, the more they want to work like designers.

We've seen designers respond to this dynamic in recent years, as established firms known for brand strategy, user research, forecasting, even architecture, have expanded their service portfolios to include organization transformation, innovation labs, design thinking seminars, and even change management and transition consulting.

There's another professional field that does all these things—organization development (OD). Dating back to 1947 and the founding of the National Training Labs in Washington, DC, OD practitioners research and apply behavioral science methods to a wide range of groups to help them pursue more inquiry-based, collaborative ways of working together. Just as design practitioners focus on users' experiences

Notes

1. Edgar Schein. *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett Koehler, 2013), p. 8.
2. Fritz Steele, *The Sense of Place* (Boston, MA: CBI Publishing, 1981), p. 8.
3. M. Plovnick, F. Steele, and E. Schein, *Expanding Professional Design Education Through Workshops in Applied Behavioral Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).
4. Op. cit., p. 9.
5. Ibid, p. 58.

with plastics or pixels, OD practitioners focus on group members' experiences with each other. With this shared emphasis on the human experience and our own dual grounding in design and OD, we believe one definition reasonably describes both fields—the intentional exploration and elaboration of an emotionally resonant experience. Further, many methods and skill sets that we're accustomed to in design can be used as OD interventions (and vice versa).

To explore these synergies and start building your own bridge to OD, we offer three steps to get started. Why not start your next project kickoff meeting experimenting with these?

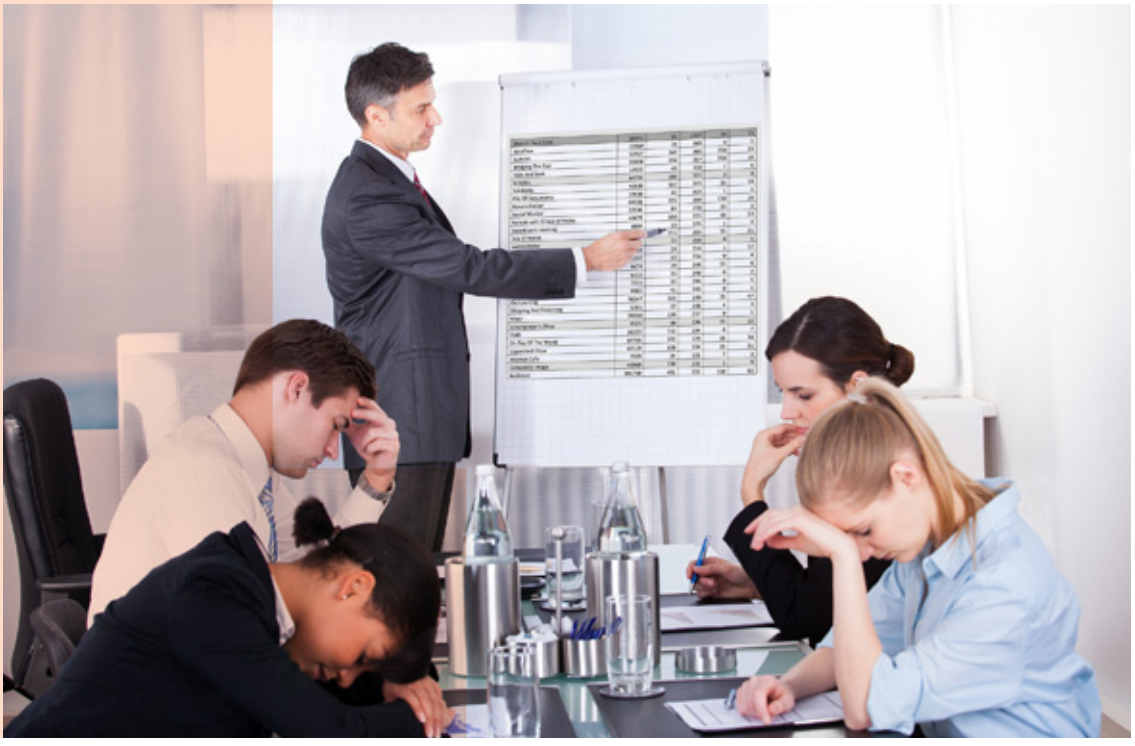
#1. The project meeting: Start with nothing.

When someone calls a meeting, often their first step is to compile an agenda—a list of approved topics to discuss. But agenda-driven meetings fail routinely in these common ways:

- When calls to submit agenda items in advance yield none, participants walk in unaware of what's to occur, or worse, expecting a useless experience.
- When the leader shares her agenda at the outset and then polls for additions, important but unrelated topics may go unspoken. Unpopular (though important) topics may be shut down before they are meaningfully explored—or worse, deferred to another meeting.
- The success or effectiveness of such meetings are often measured by how many items on the agenda are crossed off rather than by the quality of participation, decisions, or next steps that emerge.

The second step many meeting-callers take is to prepare a presentation. But the use of presentations in meetings reinforces what Edgar Schein calls "the Culture of Do and Tell": *Telling puts the other person down. It implies that the other person does not already know what I am telling and that the other person ought to know it.*[1]

This is especially so in organization cultures that place high value on expertise and deliverables. In these environments, the



Meeting failure is epidemic in most workplaces. The three biggest clouds hanging over any meeting are agendas that prohibit in-the-moment innovation; show-and- tell presentations; and conference tables that block collaboration and movement.

presentation bounds the conversation and can limit the thinking that goes into it.

Finally, with the agenda and presentation in hand, the next step commonly taken to "manage a meeting" is to find a conference room. If we're optimistic about attendance, we might find the biggest one available with a table large enough to impress. Of course, in many settings, conference tables are so large they literally are an immovable object at the center of the meeting experience. Tables block active curiosity and engagement with others. They subtly dictate the sequence and direction of who speaks next, as if an invisible talking stick were being passed around the room. They invite the use of laptops that divert individuals' attention away from the group. Worse yet is the table-as-battlefield on which we arrange laptops in defensive-shields-up postures against each other. Tables anchor us in kinesthetic lockdown, preventing the pacers, gesticulators, and parallel processors in the room from engaging more of their mental activity. In larger groups, they limit your potential for connection to only those sitting circumstantially nearby. And they can reinforce subtle rank and conflict cues, as people choose seats near, opposite, or far from the authority in the room.

Chairs also play a role in stifling creative thinking and collaboration. A conference room cluttered with chairs suggests an organizational culture that may rely too much on consensus decision-making. Excess chairs and furnishings block participants from each other and subtly sap the possibility of divergent thinking from what Fritz Steele calls the "sense and spirit of place." Steele notes that "because of [a] drift toward bland, less stimulating settings, the need for improved consciousness of place is greater than it's ever been."[2] Maybe some other meeting requires a flock of empty Aerons and a credenza in the conference room. If yours doesn't… then remove them.

Consider instead the work of Edgar Schein, Fritz Steele, and Mark Plovnick, who in 1972 designed a one-week experiential learning program for design graduate students at MIT. They sought to use behavioral science "to illustrate and explore the dynamics of team collaboration in design professionals."[3] Instead of an agenda, they worked from a set of only four objectives—experiential outcomes participants might achieve that were shared at the outset. Each day's activities were then designed and redesigned to meet those objectives as the experience unfolded. Instead of a presentation, participants created their own work products using markers and newsprint that accumulated on the walls around them over time. And instead of a random conference room cramped with chairs, videoconferencing equipment, and the detritus of past meetings, they met in a dedicated empty 25-foot-by-50-foot room.

#2. Lead with inquiry

Once you have cleared space for possibility in your next gathering, invite participants to fill it via open-ended what and how questions, such as:

- "What question are you walking in with today?"
- "What questions might we explore together?"
- "What decisions might we make together?"
- "How might we explore the issue of…."
- "How might we generate ideas for …"
- "How might we best use this time together?"

The "How might we…" phrasing (from our colleague Min Basadur) reliably invites divergent thinking in both the speaker and the listener. As Schein has pointed out, "Asking temporarily empowers the other person in the conversation and makes me vulnerable."[4] If you are a leader, start from open-ended questions and authentically and consistently allow participants to influence what happens next. You may find that doing so increases employee engagement at a time when many organizations find staff disengaging.

In our Western show-and-tell, do-and-tell culture, "asking the right questions is valued," says Schein, "but asking in general is not."[5] Leading by authentic inquiry, not "imposter" inquiry, helps the group find its own meaning and action in the work; it also models and sustains the asking behavior and curiosity mindset we seek. This becomes especially critical during

times of creative conflict within teams. The same empathic curiosity we bring to researching users can often be used within the team. Tension is often necessary for creativity; this helps keep it healthy and productive.

#3. Let go, but hold on

After clearing the space for possibility and then peppering participants with open-ended questions, you may find yourself in the wide, uncharted territory of the unexpected. You may even feel some performance anxiety, because the experience you are called upon to create could change in an instant. The work of our colleagues Keith McCandless and Henri Lipmanowicz has proven extremely helpful in designing and re-designing group experiences on the fly—that is, holding a group minimally while freeing them maximally (see our suggested readings at the end of this article). Their inventory of "liberating structures" contains nearly three dozen concisely specified group processes that maximize participation and possibility. Some liberating structures may seem familiar to experienced practitioners. A user-experience fishbowl looks structurally like a T-group from OD or a focus group from product design. But in McCandless's and Lipmanowicz's version, participants move fluidly between the inner ring of speakers and the outer rings of listeners as the dialogue uncovers meaningful expertise in the group. Similarly, their reverse version of TRIZ, a common brainstorming technique, explores the question, "How might we guarantee failure?" and generates dozens of currently unproductive behaviors that should be stopped. While curating their set of liberating structures, McCandless and Lipmanowicz identified five essential design elements these group processes share:

A simple "meet and greet" at a professional conference can be transformed by liberating structures into an experience of shared discovery. By giving participants a clear objective and simple process, they can each bring their own energy and ideas and innovation to the party. How great would it be to experience every meeting this way?
Photo credit: Ted Eytan.

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1) They begin with a well-structured invitation.
2) They specify the arrangement of space.
3) They maximize the distribution of participation.
4) They specify how groups are configured.
5) They follow clear steps and time allocation.

When designing experiences with these types of structures, just as with using Illustrator to render drawings, the subject matter does not matter. What matters is how they can be strung together, repeated, embedded, layered, and re-combined. Artfully designed experiences can quickly move groups into curiosity, possibility, and sometimes chaos. Should you become unsure where the group ought to go next, just ask them: "Turn to a partner and share what you think is the best thing we could do next." Remember, your value is the experience you design and create; the content and outcomes are theirs.

Putting it all together

We continually combine these ideas to test our premise that experiences in groups should be as designed as if they were experiences with consumer products. Over the years, we've done so for meetings of existing teams, workshops for professional development, and even conferences of industry professionals. At the 2010 annual conference of the Organization Development Network in New Orleans, we broke with many conference norms in our experiential learning session, iPads & Organizations. We removed all tables, wall hangings, and furnishings from the ballroom to render the space as blank as a clean sheet of paper. We posted large-print questions on the walls to provoke inquiry. We arranged chairs in small half-circles to foster intimate social connections. We welcomed each of the 100 participants by name as they entered the room (thank goodness for conference nametags!). We invited them to explore the open space, and encouraged them to answer the posted questions on sticky notes. We then invited them to coalesce around the question that interested them most, to affinitize the sticky notes with whomever else was there, and to talk with each other until some "worthy wisdom" emerged that they might share with the whole room.

Only after participants had wandered, reflected, met strangers, shared, laughed, and learned from each other for 30 minutes did they sit down to receive content from us. We limited our presentation to just a few minutes before putting them back in process, so the majority of their time was spent discovering and learning with each other. Using cue cards we provided, they examined the experience they were having in the moment through the lens of design. They asked each other what they had noticed about the space, the invitation to engage, the distribution of participation, and the impacts these signals had on their own experience and behavior. Working in small groups as peer-consultants, they then explored how they might apply these ideas to their own work.

Imagine the energy and volume that 25 to 50 simultaneous conversations generate in a hotel ballroom. The session had a buzz that made passersby in the hallway exclaim, like our clients back in London, "I want to be in *there!*" As those conversations grew, morphed, coalesced, remixed, and mutated, imagine the quantity, quality, and energy of ideas that emerged. After several rounds of those conversations over 90 minutes, imagine the individual and collective learning generated and carried out of the room.

Could you achieve that same impact with a traditional format of presenter, presentation, parallel rows of chairs, and a single microphone stand in the aisle for questions? If so, we'd love to hear how.

Next steps

In the years since, we have continued to provoke design approaches among OD professionals while similarly provoking a sense of OD among design colleagues. In doing so, similar insights have emerged on both sides of the bridge:

- Your skills and strengths on one side of the bridge give you a foundation for the other.
- Your value is the experience you create for and with others, not your content.
- Designers can be just as effective at OD as OD professionals can be at designing experiences.

If there is a routine meeting in the week ahead, make no slides, draft no agendas, and remove tables

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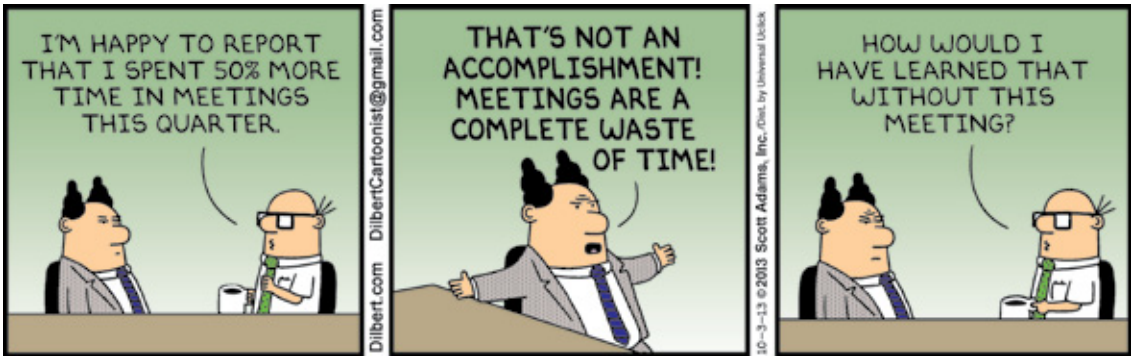

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and extra chairs (or move the meeting to a space without them). If you are an agency consultant, request the same arrangements from your clients. Their response may signal their relative openness to positive deviance and subversion of the dominant paradigm. If you face resistance or questions, simply explain that you're trying to "clear space for possibility and the divergent thinking that we need for our work together."

If taking these steps seems challenging, then start small. Schedule your next meeting in the biggest conference room you can, no matter how small the group. But show up early to remove all but the minimum of chairs required. When prompted for agenda items, offer what and how questions, not nouns. Suggest that "we might end early if all can keep their laptops closed."

As you gain confidence blending design and OD, why not attempt a more explicit conversation with colleagues about how you'll work together? See our 2012 article in this publication ("Calibrate Before You Collaborate: Five Questions to Guide Group Work") for a related approach to strengthening your team.

At some point, when a major decision or strategic choice must be made, an explicit convergent thinking experience may be required. Min Basadur advises that this shift should occur at least a full day after the divergent thinking that preceded it. When you design these subsequent experiences, start with liberating structures. Add agendas, presentations, tables, chairs, and room types selectively, and *only* if they support the experience you aim to create.

We wish you well in your experiments designing experiences for colleagues, employees, and clients. We would love to learn what you discover along the way, and how these ideas worked (or not) for you. ■

Suggested reading

Bellman, Geoffrey, and Ryan, Kathleen. *Extraordinary Groups: How Ordinary Teams Achieve Amazing Results* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

Bennis, Warren, and Biederman, Patricia Ward. *Organizing Genius: The Secrets of Creative Collaboration* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

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Plovick, M., Steele, F., and Schein, E. *Expanding Professional Design Education Through Workshops in the Applied Behavioral Sciences* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2011).

Scherer, John. *Five Questions that Change Everything: Life Lessons at Work* (Fort Collins, CO: Word Keepers, Inc., 2009).

Sibbet, David. *Visual Meetings: How Graphics, Sticky Notes, and Idea Mapping Can Transform Group Productivity* (New York: Wiley, 2010).